

# Scotland's First Settlers: an archaeological investigation of the earliest settlement of the Inner Sound.

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## Introduction

Scotland's First Settlers was set up in 1998 by Bill Finlayson, Karen Hardy, and Caroline Wickham-Jones, all Honorary Post-doctoral Research Fellows in the Department of Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, to investigate the earliest evidence for settlement around the Inner Sound. Work at An Corran, Staffin, in the 1990s showed that at least one band of hunter-gatherers settled here about 8000 years ago, and local archaeologists Martin Wildgoose and Steven Birch suggested that there might be other sites in the area. They have joined forces with the Edinburgh archaeologists as well as other locals to investigate the archaeological potential of the area.

The earliest demonstrated settlement of Scotland (the *Mesolithic*) took place after the end of the Ice Age and other sites on Rum and along the western seaboard show that people were well settled here by 9000 years ago. These people were nomadic, they lived by hunting, fishing and gathering, and generally their remains are sparse and hard to find. A handful of stone flakes together with a few burnt stones is often all that survives of a mesolithic site. In a few places, however, richer remains incorporating shell midden dumps have been preserved and these may contain surprising detail of mesolithic life such as bone and antler tools together with shell jewellery. Midden sites are often, but not always preserved in, or close to, caves and rockshelters. Despite the number of rockshelters and caves known around the Inner Sound there has been little research here to look for mesolithic sites and this is something that the project hopes to rectify. In 1999 a pilot study took place for two weeks, and this has demonstrated the great potential of the area.

## Aims

Scotland's First Settlers aims to break new ground by studying the Mesolithic for the first time from a new perspective, that of the sea. The sea was a major resource for the people of the Mesolithic, as both a means of transport and a prime supplier of food and other materials such as skins and bones with which to fashion clothes, coverings and tools. The seascape of the Inner Sound provides an ideal space within which to look at the relationship between people and the sea. The small islands, sea lochs, coastal stretches and deeper water all provide a variety of environments for the mesolithic population. At the end of the Mesolithic, about 6000 years ago, life changed dramatically as people switched to a dependence on farming with domestic animals and crops (the *Neolithic*). Settlements became more permanent, new material goods such as pottery came into use, and changes in religion are suggested by the building of communal chambered tombs and, later on, stone circles. There is, as yet, little detail of the adoption of agriculture in the area and this is also something which the project would like to study.

In addition, as the first millennia after the Ice Age were times of dynamic environmental change the project is concerned to document that change and its influence on the local population. The people of the mesolithic were living through a time not only of temperature change, as the climate warmed and subsequently cooled, but also of great sea level change as waters first of all dropped and then rose due to the complex effects of the rebound of the land as the glaciers melted together with the release of water from the ice sheets. Initially there were numerous small earthquakes to contend with, and later in the period changes in the prevailing winds led to increased rainfall and storminess. Further changes to local coastlines were caused by alterations in erosion and deposition as a result of the rising sea levels and their effect on local rivers and sand banks. This has all been documented for Europe on a global scale, but Scotland's First Settlers aims to pin down the minute details as they affected the Inner Sound.

## Fieldwork in 1999

During two weeks of fieldwork August 1999 three main elements were undertaken: preliminary survey for new sites; test excavations in four previously recognised sites to assess their dates of occupation, size, and levels of preservation; and preliminary environmental work including both the investigation of remains such as shellfish from the middens as well as wider investigation of the coastline.

## Survey work

The nature of the Inner Sound with its many islands and indented lochs means that survey is a huge undertaking so that initial work concentrated on specific areas where the conditions looked promising for the preservation, and discovery of archaeological material. During August 1999, three areas were targeted by the survey team:

- The northern tip of Skye to the area around Kilt Rock;
- The coastline of the Crowlin Islands;
- The coastline from Toscaig, north to Applecross.

Before the project began 12 sites of possible Mesolithic date (including three certain Mesolithic sites) were known in the study area. The 1999 survey resulted in the location of 36 new sites, most containing visible evidence of shell midden. This is an outstanding number of sites, but as yet they can not all be related to the Mesolithic. Rockshelter sites have, of course, been used down the ages, but the signs are that several will be early. All of these sites must now be tested, if possible, and dating samples taken. It is important to remember that the Mesolithic period alone lasted for over 4000 years. The population in the Mesolithic was unlikely to have been great, but individual sites may have been occupied at different times throughout the period. Excavation and dating should help to clarify this. Around Staffin a number of sites comprising only stone tool scatters were also found and this is another important aspect of the project as it has been difficult in the past to see how these related to the midden sites. Hopefully, the location in one area of both midden sites and stone tool scatters might mean that this relationship can be studied in more detail.

### **Excavation work**

Trial excavations were carried out on four sites.

#### **Crowlin 1, Crowlin Isles**

The rockshelter at Crowlin consists of a large overhang sheltering a small level platform with evidence for numerous previous rock falls. Three test pits were opened and the evidence suggested that the visible remains of midden post-date the rock fall events. This midden was clearly a complex accumulation of material with periods of abandonment, and the different episodes of use have apparently left different traces, suggesting that the rockshelter had been used at many different times in the past.

#### **Sand 1, Applecross**

The rockshelter at Sand lies above what appears to be a late glacial coastline. It consists of a shallow, but wide overhang, with a large terrace in front. In the terrace a mole hill had previously been found to contain much shell and lithics, including a small arrowhead characteristic of the early settlers. A series of test pits were excavated to sample the midden, locate its extent and determine whether there was evidence for activity beyond the midden limits. A small number of additional test pits were also excavated in front of a nearby shallow rockshelter, and between the two shelters. Within the main rockshelter there appear to be no surviving deposits, but the terrace in front of the shelter has a discrete midden deposit containing well preserved organic remains and tools. In addition there appears to be evidence for activity around the midden in the form of a lithic scatter and fire shattered rocks.

#### **Loch a Sguirr, Raasay**

This is a substantial rockshelter with a large platform above the sea cliff at the north-western tip of Raasay. Inside, the floor is very level, with some shell visible towards the back of the cave. A number of test pits were excavated both within and without the shelter, and the only trench to produce significant material was located in a small area almost entirely surrounded by boulders. The absence of significant quantities of shell midden material anywhere on the site suggests that occupation was never major.

#### **Ashaig 2, Skye**

The midden associated with the early church site at Ashaig was sampled outside the churchyard enclosure. There was a considerable depth of midden, but there was no indication that this was prehistoric.

### **Environmental work**

Environmental information is vital to a rounded picture of the early settlers and the world within which they lived. A very preliminary study of the area confirmed that various relict shorelines relating to earlier, higher, sea levels do survive but as they vary in height it is not easy to reconstruct sea level change in the study area and so far only initial work has been undertaken. In places the main post-glacial shoreline is clearly visible and it is here that many of the Mesolithic sites are likely to be found.

Environmental samples were also taken from all of the excavated sites. Preliminary sorting showed that there was good preservation of both shell fish and fish bones together with species such as crab, as well as animals such as red deer and pig, and birds. Fragments of bird egg shell had survived at Sand and there was also some charcoal from most sites. In general the material suggested that a range of local environments, including both deep water and sheltered coastal locations, were being exploited.

A total of fourteen samples have been sent off for radiocarbon dating and the results should arrive in the spring. This will enable a more accurate assessment of the ages of the sites.

### **The Artefacts**

The excavation of the different sites produced many artefacts: tools made of stone and bone.

#### **Bone Tools.**

Eight pieces of worked bone and one fragment of bone with cut marks were found. Six pieces of worked bone and the cut marked fragment came from Sand while there was one bone point from Crowlin and one from Loch a Sguirr. Most of the bone tools are bevel ended and pointed tools which are common in the west of Scotland, and are thought to be associated with the processing of marine resources and other things.

#### **Stone Tools**

A total of 667 pieces of flaked stone were recovered. These came from a combination of both excavated and surveyed sites and they can tell quite a lot about the lifestyle of the sites' inhabitants as well as help to age the sites.

Stone is by far the most common and longest lasting of all materials used for tool making throughout human history. During the Mesolithic people were making and using microliths, tiny pieces of flaked stone that would have been slotted into hafts of bone, antler or wood to make a variety of tools. These pieces, and the technology by which they were made, do not occur on more recent sites, so the presence of microliths, at Sand for example, is an indication that a site must have been in use between 10,000 and 6000 years ago.

Study of the raw materials of the tools is also a vital part of the project. The early inhabitants of the Inner Sound used a variety of raw materials that may be traced to distinct sources, and by identifying these sources it is possible to reconstruct the networks within which people operated. The mesolithic population was highly mobile, so it is important to get an idea of the distances over which people had contact. The most common stone is a Baked Mudstone from An Corran, Staffin, in north east Skye. Quartz is the second most common raw material and is thought to be common throughout the study area. Next is a Chalcedonic Silica similar to pebble nodules of volcanic silicas that are found in the Staffin area and elsewhere in the locality. Finally, there are some artefacts of Bloodstone. The only known source of Bloodstone to have been used is on the island of Rum, where early Mesolithic settlement has already been discovered.

### **Site Protection**

The project has a twofold role in that the identification of sites, and their dating will help to understand the Mesolithic occupation of the area. Equally important, however, is that by locating and studying the sites, it is possible to afford them some protection. In order to preserve the sites it is important that they are valued and understood by everyone. The support of the local community is vital to this, and we shall also be working with Historic Scotland. In this way, it is hoped that one of the lasting benefits of Scotland's First Settlers will be the identification and protection of sites throughout the study area.

### **Fieldwork in 2000**

Fieldwork in 2000 will be centred around the Applecross peninsula between 15<sup>th</sup> April and 17<sup>th</sup> May. The main excavations will take place at Sand, to investigate the size of the main midden and the relationship between the midden material and other remains around it. Small, trial excavations will assess other rockshelter and cave sites in Applecross and Toscaig. Survey work around the peninsula will complete the record of potential sites, and, finally, preliminary sorting and analysis will study the shells, bones, and stone and other tools that are recovered from the middens. At the end of the field season all finds are taken back to Edinburgh in order to assess the detailed analysis that lies ahead. Further field seasons are planned for 2001 and 2002, concentrating on the Skye side of the Inner Sound. In the long run this leads to considerable specialist analysis before final academic and popular accounts of the work may be written. At the end of the project all finds have to be submitted to the Treasure Trove Panel who decide on an appropriate location for them to be stored and exhibited.

The excavation team for 2000 is still being finalised, but as one of the things that made 1999 a particular success was the involvement of local people, we are hoping that local interest will, once again, be raised. Towards the end of the field season there will be an Open Day with an opportunity to visit the excavations and meet the archaeologists as well as view some of the finds. In addition, a programme of local talks is planned.

Information about these activities will be posted locally when it is available, and the project address is given below.

**Finally**

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