

## The key to ceramic traditions of the western seaboard?

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### *Summary*

*The Udal North, North Uist, dug by Iain Crawford has a continuous structural sequence with artefactual evidence from the late Iron Age to the end of the post-medieval period. All periods produced quantities of handmade pottery, to make it one of the largest rural assemblages in Scotland. This long and remarkable sequence from this one site has the potential to confirm and expand the pottery sequence proposed by Campbell (2002) for the Western Isles. Some of the*

*Udal North pottery was studied about 30 years ago, but the opportunity now exists to date the assemblage scientifically and explore it socially. Research questions include examining the origins of pottery making in the region, the development of pottery making at the site, as well as the continuation of the ceramic tradition to the present day. This paper is an interim summary of what we know to date and what we hope to learn in the future.*

### **The background**

From 1963 to 1994 Iain Crawford excavated at the Udal, North Uist on the west coast of the Udal peninsular, an area on the geographical edge of the British Isles (Figure 1). The largest site, the Udal North, was famous during this time for its very long historical time span from the late Iron Age/Pictish period, through to the end of the post-medieval period (Figure 2), but especially for its evidence of Norse and medieval occupation. The settlement of the site was considered by Crawford to be continuous, with complex and varied structural sequences and accompanying artefactual evidence. All historical periods on this site produced handmade pottery in such quantities that its assemblage is conceivably one of the largest in Scotland. Crawford did not publish this site and the impact he could have had in producing a definitive pottery sequence for the Hebrides, was lost to others. This paper is in part an interim statement on the state/status of the pottery from the Udal North and how further research into it can address some of the issues of testing its long continuity, its stylistic sequence and its dating.

Crawford's reasons for excavating on the machair have been discussed (Ballin Smith 2012), and they included his interests and research in a wide range of subject areas such history, place names, ethnography and archaeology. He dug on two inland sand hills (one being the Udal North) with a number of smaller sites between, using multi-disciplinary approaches, which were rare for the time. His main aim was to look for continuation of settlement using historical

evidence and 'ethnographic survey' to identify likely sites in the landscape, which he confirmed by archaeological investigation. He asserted he had found them in the mounds and relict landscapes of the Udal with an apparently unbroken succession of domestic settlement. He had evidence that modern townships developed on the ruins of earlier buildings that had their ancestry in pre-Viking times, reinforced by radiocarbon dates and datable objects. For the early 1960s his work was innovative.

Crawford aimed to make the Udal a model site by experimenting with new excavation and recording techniques rarely tested in Britain previously. What he did not foresee was the enormous quantities of artefacts and samples, recovered over his thirty years of digging, and the amount of data generated. We must remember that the Udal was a project that was entirely excavated without the use of modern equipment, such as computers or digital cameras, and that the sites during the first half of the project's course were recorded in imperial measurements. Handwritten finds registers and many thousands of finds cards show how much work the finds assistants had to cope with.

Crawford produced annual reports and a few articles but none of the excavated sites were published in full. This includes the Udal North which is tantalising to the academic community because of its Norse presence and the occurrence of contemporary artefacts, including its important pottery assemblage (Crawford and Switzer 1977).

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**Figure 2**  
The Udal North during excavation in 1973

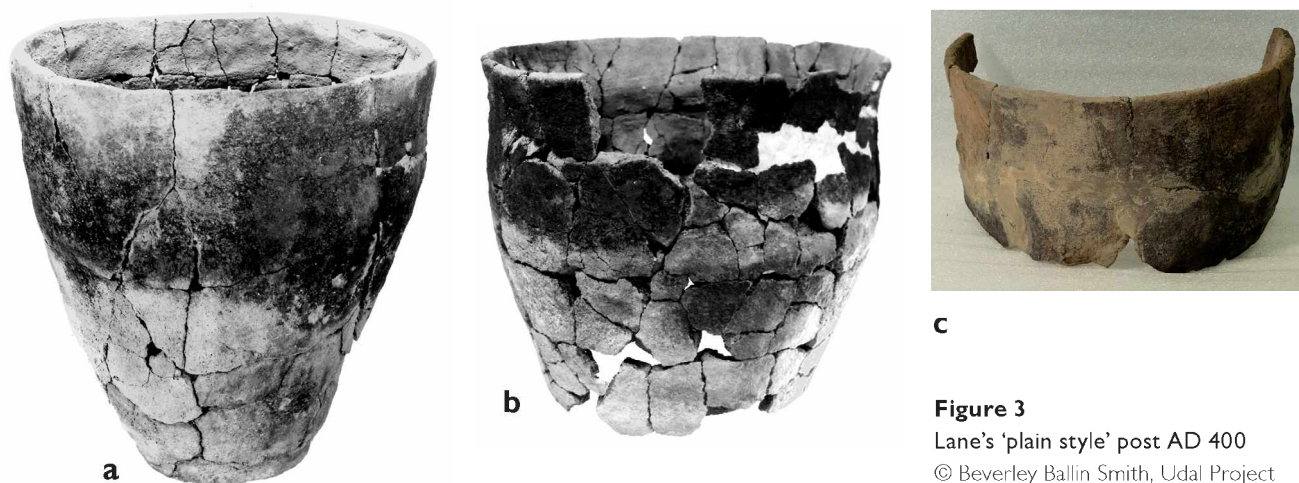
## A new beginning

The full Udal archive was made available to the author by the Crawford family for research and publication. With funding from Historic Scotland and the Western Isles Council, a small team of professional archaeologists began a two year assessment of the archive in 2011 which culminated in a post-excavation research design.

This was the first time the collection had been unpacked and looked at as a whole but this paper is concerned only with the coarse-ware ceramics from the Udal North and especially that of the later Iron Age and medieval phases (or ‘levels’ as Crawford called them). Pottery manufacture on the Udal began in the later Neolithic and can be demonstrated to have continued into the Iron Age through the excavation of the Udal South (US) – a large hillock of sand and wheelhouse structures. However, the most significant collection of ceramic came from the largest sand mound of the Udal North (UN), situated north of US, but within clear view. The copious structures and middens from this site produced more than a quarter of a million sherds from the late Iron Age/Pictish period, through the Norse and medieval periods to at least the 18th century, which in volume is equivalent to over 2000 litres of pottery.

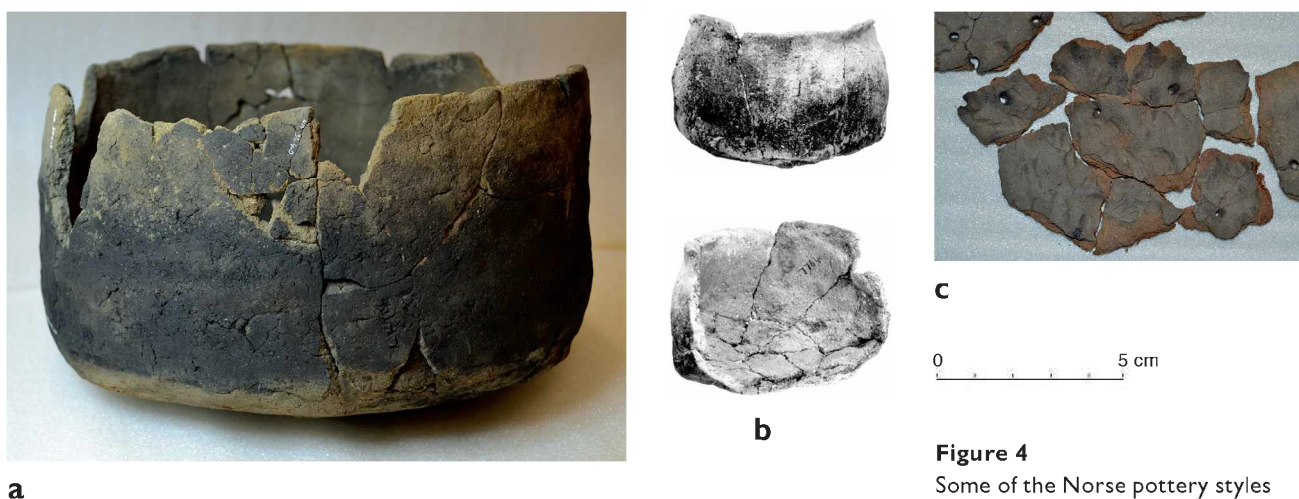
This large assemblage was partly studied by Alan Lane for his doctoral thesis (1983) after digging during the summer months on the site as a student. He analysed and researched the pottery from the earlier phases (levels) of the assemblage, a study that was considered important at the time for identifying wares made by incoming Scandinavians, and for demonstrating the continuation of locally produced pottery into the medieval period. Lane produced a number of papers on the Udal material but the detail of his doctoral thesis has never been published (Lane 1990, 2007), possibly as a result of the conditions imposed by Crawford who had strong ideas on the order of the overall site publication.

In general, Udal specialists such as Lane were only able to study a proportion of the total assemblages as more was excavated and recovered in subsequent excavation seasons. In addition, specialists could only relate assemblages to broad site levels or phases, which were the product of on-site stratigraphic organisation and interpretation, and not to evidence-based post-excavation analysis, interrogation and dating. The lack of a coherent stratigraphic sequence and narrative for all the Udal sites prevented specialists from publishing their own researches.

**Figure 3**

Lane's 'plain style' post AD 400

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**Figure 4**

Some of the Norse pottery styles

## The Udal North pottery

The Udal North coarse pottery assemblage has only recently been examined after it had lain largely untouched for 25 or more years. It has been re-boxed, but presently not re-bagged to modern standards because of other priorities. The pottery is generally well-preserved but some of the partly reconstructed vessels have collapsed and are in need of conservation. Our current detailed knowledge about the on-site location (phase, feature or structure) of any of the reconstructed vessels is somewhat limited, due to the lack of a stratigraphic report. We have, however, completed an initial database from the thousands of pottery finds cards, which is one of the largest of the Udal project.

Lane's (1983) work identified several different styles of pottery at the Udal North. The earliest vessel types were his 'plain style' vessels dating to post AD 400 (Late Iron Age), with flat bases, flaring rims and sometimes with shoulders. They are of slab and coil construction with simple rims but are relatively well made (Figure 3a, b and c). A new style of pottery came in *c* AD 900–1100 (Norse), which was different in construction and form.

It included one large cooking pot, small freely-formed vessels, and platters or bake-plates (Figure 4a, b and c). These vessels are however, not necessarily as technically well-manufactured or finished as the earlier wares, demonstrated by their uneven shapes and rims, but were utilitarian and functional in form.

The recognition by Lane of platter fragments for the baking of flat bread or bannocks was important for Viking and Norse pottery studies in Scandinavian Scotland. Significant fragments of only a small number of examples have been located in the assemblage and are likely to derive from 11th/12th century levels associated with a Norse longhouse. Their Norwegian steatite equivalents are dated to the beginning of the 12th century (Forster 2009, 60). Lane suggested that the grass marking of the base of platters was a distinctive Norse attribute, as was what he considered to be a change in the method of joining coils/slabs forming vessels – from a traditional 'H-shaped' join to one that was 'N-shaped' (Lane 2007, 9).

Lane's work on the Udal and his subsequent work at Bornais (2005 and 2012) emphasises how important

the Udal North collection is, not just in quantities of sherds but also in its varieties of style and manufacturing technique. It indicates that the link to the stratigraphy is all the more important in clarifying issues of dating and introductions and longevity of use of different vessel forms. However, Lane's own analysis stopped chronologically at the end of the Norse period on the Udal North but the occurrence of pottery did not. Possibly as much as one third to one quarter of the pottery derives from later levels of the site. As far as can be ascertained, none of this has been looked at by a specialist. It should include elements of Crogan or Craggan type wares typically found elsewhere in the Hebrides into the 20th century (Figure 5) (Cheape 1988 and 1993).

The Udal North is also important for the occurrence of ceramic objects other than domestic vessels for food. A number, of presumably locally made, moulds and crucibles for the working of metals form an interesting sub-assembly. Samples of clay both from this site and the Udal South collected by Crawford indicate that a suitable resource was utilised in the near vicinity of the project area for the manufacture of clay pots but also for specialised uses in metal working. A preliminary assessment of this material (Sahlén 2012) has been undertaken which suggests the need for scientific analysis of clay and ceramic materials (see below).

There are rare entries in the finds registers to small numbers of glazed pottery sherds, presumably found in the upper layers of most of the Udal sites. To date only one unstratified sherd and one heavily sea-worn piece from Udal North have been identified in the collection. The location of other sherds of this type remains a mystery, but the general absence of glazed pottery from Udal North poses its own questions.



**Figure 5**  
An unstratified example of Crogan/Craggan ware from the Udal

## The future

Although the pottery from the later Iron Age and Norse levels at Udal North was studied by Lane, many of the questions he posed have still not been answered and much of the Udal North ceramic assemblage remains unanalysed. The opportunity exists to quantify the assemblage, link it to the stratigraphy, formulate research questions, and to assess much analysis and publication will cost.

## Stratigraphic analysis

During the two years of the assessment the project team gained insight into Crawford's methods of excavation, finds retrieval and his thinking about recording and phasing. One of the main tasks is to analyse the field records of the Udal North in order to reconstruct sequences and events, and provide a stratigraphic narrative that will be of value to specialists and others. Joining together pottery and stratigraphy information will go a long way in testing Crawford's ideas of phasing and dating. It will also bring about a modern understanding of the *tell* and its importance in the local area and wider region, by comparison with more recently excavated sites.

The amount of pottery found at the Udal North is a reflection of a variety of factors including its long time sequence, and the approximately 50 structures that were excavated including cellular late Iron Age buildings, a Norse long house, and a post-medieval tacksman's house. With so many structures and the detailed recording that took place, it should be possible with modern analytical methods and dating techniques to produce a reasonable pottery sequence across the whole of the timescale for this site.

## Social resonances and the origins and traditions of pottery making across the project area

The Udal North cannot be studied in isolation. As described above, pottery manufacture on the Udal area started in the Neolithic period with examples of well-known types of prehistoric pottery being found prior to settlement on the Udal North (Table 1), and this long tradition of pottery use makes the Udal a unique study area. We cannot divorce pottery from people and given the amount of the former at the Udal North, it suggests that at times there may have been a substantial number of the latter living and working in what may have been a small township. Although a few artefacts were imported during the Norse and Medieval periods, there is a distinct paucity of imported pottery. With pottery spread across the project area and especially the Udal North, we have the opportunity to widen research and scientific analyses to include the exploration of technological (the bonding methods applied to coils

**Table 1** Pottery types by site and period across the Udal

site	RUX6	RUX1	US	UN	UN	UN
period	Neolithic Bronze Age	Bronze Age	Iron Age wheelhouses	Late Iron Age / Pictish	Norse	post 1100
pottery type	Beaker	cordoned wares	incised cordons impressed wares	'plain style' shouldered pots	new style plain platters, bowls and cups	continuation as Crogan/Cragan wares

and slabs) and stylistic changes (vessel shapes, decoration, plain wares) of the pottery traditions over time. How much these are distinctive to specific time periods can be assessed by examining all pottery from all sites and periods using carefully considered and tailored analysis proformas and databases.

The availability and utilisation of local clay, sand and stone, indicates that pottery manufacture was one of the main crafts of the site fulfilling immediate local needs. However, we cannot rule out at this stage, that pottery surpluses may have been made for trade or exchange within the neighbouring geographic area. We must also contemplate the nature of the Norse settlement, its politics and contacts, its location and whether it looked to the Atlantic sea-board, or to the Sound of Harris and the sea routes between islands and the Minch. With the lack of contemporary steatite found in the Udal area the reliance on pottery at this time must have been an economic necessity.

In the future we should be able to date some vessels and begin the exploration of the possibilities of shared ceramic traditions, and therefore contact, between the Udal, other Hebridean sites, the Isle of Man and Ireland.

### Scientific analysis

Since Crawford's time at the Udal, technology has moved on to such an extent that he would not have been able to have foreseen the scientific analyses it is now possible to use. However, Crawford collected everything he could from his excavations, including many clay and sand samples, with a view that they were there for the future. Until we undertake further investigation we are not entirely sure where the samples came from stratigraphically but some were certainly dumps of clay, whereas others may have been small isolated samples from floors and buildings. With Crawford's foresight we have the opportunity to use these samples and compare them to fired clay from not only the pottery assemblages but also to crucibles and moulds. To examine all the ceramic materials as well as raw materials provides an opportunity to undertake valuable technological and provenancing analyses.

We aim to build or reopen links with academic institutions that can undertake geochemical (ICP-MS, XRF), STM-EDX, thin section petrography and lipid and other organic residue analyses on the pottery but also on the clay samples. A combination of scientific techniques, including radiocarbon dating of residues, sampling and interpretation may be able to provide answers – so long as we pose the right research questions.

### The pottery sequence

The pottery from all levels of the Udal North can give us a *c* 1500 years or more of understanding of pottery traditions from that site, but we can extend that sequence further back in time if we consider the evidence from all the Udal sites. Crawford argued for a continuous occupation across his excavated areas (Crawford and Switsur 1977, 124), and although this has yet to be put to the test, the Udal may contain enough evidence to produce a definitive pottery sequence, reinforced by radiocarbon dates, from the beginning of settlement in North Uist to its demise on the Udal North. As Campbell (2002, 144) says at the end of his paper on the clarification of pottery styles for the Western Isles 'the establishment of a basic sequence of pottery types is very much a traditional approach to pottery studies, but it is essential to the study of any area.'

The study of pottery is usually difficult because of the small size of assemblages and short time spans that they cover. To provide an account of pottery over a much longer time period and one that is valid across the region would be a significant step forward in pottery studies in the Hebrides. The Udal North, may be able to provide some answers to the continuation of pottery making and the development of craggan/crogan ware into modern times from its earliest beginnings.

We will need to explore the technology of pottery production at this place, the economic and political forces in play, the contact with other peoples, and try to explain the changes over time and the role of specialist potters. The Udal is a unique site: it has produced an unparalleled amount of pottery on a peninsular that was on the edge of the western seaboard and it has provided evidence of the persistence of the ceramic tradition in a constantly changing world.

## Acknowledgements

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## Résumé

Le site d'Udal North (île de North Uist/Hébrides) sur lequel Iain Crawford a réalisé des fouilles est structuré selon une séquence continue, avec des artefacts témoins allant de la fin de l'Âge du Fer jusqu'à la fin de la période post-médiévale. Des quantités de poterie artisanale provenant de toutes les périodes ont été mises à jour, ce qui en fait l'un des plus grands assemblages ruraux de toute l'Écosse. Cette longue et remarquable séquence sur un seul site permet potentiellement de confirmer et d'élargir la séquence de poterie proposée par Campbell (2002) pour les Hébrides. Si la poterie d'Udal North a été étudiée en partie il y a une trentaine d'années, l'opportunité se présente désormais de dater scientifiquement l'assemblage et de l'explorer sur le plan social. Parmi les questions à élucider, citons les origines de la production de poterie dans la région, le développement de la production de poterie sur place, ainsi que la tradition céramique qui s'est transmise jusqu'à nos jours. Synthèse intermédiaire, ce papier rassemble ce que nous savons à l'heure actuelle et ce que nous espérons apprendre à l'avenir.

## Zusammenfassung

Die von Iain Crawford ausgegrabene Fundstätte von Udal North, North Uist, besitzt eine durch Artefakte von der späten Eisenzeit bis zum Ende der nachmittelalterlichen Periode belegte durchgehende strukturelle Sequenz. Alle Perioden erzeugten beträchtliche Mengen von handgetöpferter Ware, was den Fund zu einer der größten ländlichen Assemblagen in Schottland macht. Die lange und bemerkenswerte Sequenz von einem einzigen Fundort hat das Potenzial, die von Campbell (2002) für die Töpferware der Western Isles vorgeschlagene Sequenz zu bestätigen und zu erweitern. Ein Teil der Töpferwaren von Udal North wurde vor etwa 30 Jahren genauer betrachtet, aber nun besteht die Möglichkeit, die Assemblage wissenschaftlich zu untersuchen und sie im gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhang zu erkunden. Die von der Forschung zu untersuchenden Fragen sind die Ursprünge der Herstellung von Töpferware in der Region, die Entwicklung der Herstellung von Töpferware am Fundort, sowie die Fortführung der Töpfertradition bis zur Gegenwart. Dieser Artikel ist eine vorläufige Zusammenfassung dessen, was wir bis heute wissen und was wir in der Zukunft herauszufinden hoffen.