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Symposium: A rock and a hard place: perspectives on the archaeology of St Kilda, Scotland

New Horizons: St Kilda and the colonisation of Scottish islands

Tony Pollard

St. Kilda is a place which floats unanchored on the sea of many people's subconscious; they have heard the name, know it is an isolated island, but perhaps couldn't quite place it on a map. This is true of many small islands, all of them with names which conjure images of people marooned, imprisoned or simply existing beyond the rules of the outside world. Tristan Da Cuna, Elba, St. Helena, Pitcairn are all such places.

St. Kilda is firmly anchored some 64 km due west of Harris (in the Outer Hebrides), and is not an island, but a small archipelago consisting of 8 small islands and major stacks. The largest of islands, Hirta, is the only one to have been permanently settled and will therefore be the subject of the discussion which follows.

St. Kilda is best known for the evacuation of its human population, at their own request in 1930, leaving behind them a deserted village, which had undergone some considerable change over the preceding centuries (see Morrison's paper). Also well known are the Soay sheep which now roam free over the main island of Hirta after being released from the small island of Soay onto which they thought to have been introduced by the Norse. The island is also renowned for the special nature of its inhabitants economy, with the capture of sea birds from the tallest cliffs in the British Isles providing the mainstay of the St. Kildan diet, this should perhaps come as no

surprise as St. Kilda represents the largest sea bird breeding colony in western Europe - it is certainly a place of superlatives. Once killed the sea birds were stored in small drystone chambers called cleits, which cover the island in their hundreds, occupying even the steepest of slopes and most precipitous of ledges. The island is today owned by the National Trust for Scotland and in 1986 was designated a World Natural Heritage Site.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evidence for the earliest human activity on the island, the rather unsatisfactory term 'activity' is deliberately used here in preference to settlement as we are still unsure as to when the island received its first permanent population, and indeed this is one of the issues to be discussed in this presentation.

Archaeological interest on the islands did not begin with the Glasgow-Durham project, and recently Norman Emery's 1986-1990 excavations centred on the 19th century village were published. Prior to this work a small scale excavation was carried out by Cottam on one of the so-called 'boat-shaped settings' in the 1980s and I shall return to this briefly later. But it is to the 19th century that we find the first real stirrings of an archaeological interest on the islands, with the excavation of the Souterrain, which sits on the upper part of the raised beach behind the 19th century village, by Sands in 1878.

Sand's writing on the islands falls within a long tradition of travellers accounts, the first and perhaps best of which is Martin Martin's account of 1698. The attraction of the islands to outsiders is an issue which will be given more thought later in this paper. It is unfortunate that Sand's excavation and several others carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were poorly executed and that a later investigation of the souterrain carried out the 1970s was never published. A souterrain, as the name suggests is a subterranean structure well known in various parts of Scotland and generally regarded to be Iron Age in date. It appears that Sands recovered various sherds of pottery, which have been compared to pottery types from other sites in the western Isles. In 1896 Kearton looked again at the site and recovered an iron spearhead, which unfortunately like many of the early finds from Hirta has been lost.

It seems undeniable then, from the architectural form of the souterrain and the finds recovered from within it that people were living on the island as far back as the Iron Age. The challenge to push back the origins of human occupation on the islands, has been taken up by a number of archaeologists since Sand's time. However, the archaeology of St. Kilda is nothing if not challenging, soils are generally shallow and moderately acidic and organic materials survive poorly. Dating sites which at first may appear to have few parallels elsewhere is therefore far from straight-forward. This fact is well demonstrated by the work of Cottam in the mid 1980s.

Cottam selected for excavation one of the so-called boat shaped settings situated on the lip of the corrie-like feature known as An Lag Bho Tuath (or the hollow to the north). He placed a single, small trench across the feature, represented by a low arrangement of stones protruding through the turf. Excavation revealed little more than that the stones had been set into a shallow scoop, with nothing in the way of cultural material to indicate the date or function of the feature. The use of the term boat-shaped setting to describe this and other features is generally frowned upon as prescriptive and indeed it was an opinion which I at one time shared. However, if one looks at these features closely, of which around twenty are known, there can be no doubting the similarity of at least some of these to boats, the real thing being rarely absent from the waters of Village Bay which is overlooked by An Lag. Although the islands are known to have been at least visited by the Norse, with a couple of brooches found, a scattering of Norse place names and a TL date from pottery of 1135 +/- 70 AD, the temptation to see these features as Viking or Norse period burials has generally been resisted. This is not to say that burials from this period are absent from the island, as an intriguing description by the island's Minister, MacKenzie in 1911 suggests: 'In clearing the glebe I removed a mound in a little field, and found in it a long and narrow whetstone, an iron sword and, a spear head, and various other pieces of iron, mostly of irregular shape, and the use of which was not obvious.' What MacKenzie had uncovered may have been a Norse burial within a mound, with acid soils ensuring that no human remains in the form of bones survived.

That Cottam's feature did not represent a Norse burial, which in any case contained no evidence for a burial within it, was further suggested by the radiocarbon date recovered from an organic sticky horizon which provided a date of 1807 BC.

However, care must be taken in the use of this date as the relationship between the dated material and the feature is uncertain - although a case can be made for it forming after the construction of the feature and the date therefore representing a terminus ante-quem for this event. The feature may therefore represent a Bronze Age structure of unknown function.

Some further suggestion of activity stretching back as far as the Bronze Age can again be found in earlier writings, with MacKenzie, once more in the late 1830s, describing 'here and there, and very numerous, were green mounds...which were looked upon as the abodes of fairies. These were all removed in the course of agricultural improvements. They were composed of stones mixed with a little earth to a depth of two or three feet. At some distance below this layer were stone coffins formed in two different ways. At times they were formed by four flat stones covered by a fifth. At other times both the sides and roof were formed of several stones set in the same way. These were seemingly of different age from the former. In a few of them bones were found, and in nearly all of them pieces of earthen vessels.'

The remains of one of these latter structures, which bares some similarity to the corbelled cist at Rosinish, Benbecula can be seen on the raised beach toward the shore road. This sunken feature may at one time have been covered by a cairn similar to those described above before being removed as the land was given over to agriculture.

In 1991 attention returned to An Lag once with the initiation of the Glasgow and Durham project, an important aim of which was to locate evidence for the earlier occupation of Hirta. As much of the previous archaeological fieldwork on the island had concentrated on the village area, where evidence for prehistoric activity is likely to have been removed by later activity related to the development of the village or through the work of antiquarians.

Following an initial survey, which demonstrated the archaeological landscape to be somewhat more complex than the previous Royal Commission survey had suggested, a number of sites were selected for excavation. These included a pair of 'boat-shaped' settings, which would be investigated in order to shed more light on these enigmatic

features of potential Bronze Age date. The other feature was a rectangular lipped platform which was initially thought to represent some form of house platform.

As ever on St. Kilda reality bore little resemblance to expectation. The pair of stone settings were found to be far more complex and extensive than surface remains had suggested. The elements visible above the ground, the 'boat-shapes', were actually the central settings of much larger structures. The central settings were found to be encompassed within outer settings which represented the kerbs of low lying cairns. The larger and more westerly of the two features excavated impinged upon the smaller eastern example and appeared to post-date it. Although of much rougher construction these monuments bare a superficial similarity to platform cairns on the mainland west coast in Morvern and even closer at Valtos on the west coast of Lewis, which on a good day can be seen from St.Kilda.

When it became apparent that we were dealing with what appeared to be funerary monuments the central area was targeted in an attempt to locate evidence for burial. A deposit of rubble was removed from the central area to reveal a highly mineralised subsoil into which a series of small pits had been dug. These contained silty fills with no trace of artefacts or human remains - although the acid nature of the soils may have dissolved un-burnt bone the Ph levels were not low enough to have done the same to cremated bone, although heavy leaching in the wet conditions may have assisted in this process.

Other features outside the central settings may have held funerary deposits, with a small cist-like box built into the southern edge of the westerly cairn. Again these were found to be empty with phosphate levels no higher than the surrounding background levels.

Although artefacts were absent from the central settings a couple of course stone tools of dolerite were recovered from the surface of the cairns where they appear to have been dropped or placed. It has been argued by Fleming and Edmonds that this type of artefact are prehistoric, and their association with these monuments would certainly be in keeping with such a suggestion. However there can be no doubt that identical

tools were used on the island as late as the 19th century, as suggested by their integration within the walls of many cleits.

There seems little reason to doubt that these features are monuments of some sort, and their form would strongly suggest a Bronze Age date. However, the total absence of human remains or the artefacts, such as pottery, which usually accompany Bronze Age burials is rather puzzling. I have suggested elsewhere that these may not be funerary monuments at all but cenotaphs dedicated to those whose remains were not available for burial, and given the location of St. Kilda in an exposed part of the Atlantic it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that loss at sea was the reason for this absence. It is here that we should perhaps pause and consider the maritime aspect of the island.

It has already been noted that on a good day, which it has to be said are fairly few and far between, the main islands of the Outer Hebrides can be seen from St Kilda, which can be seen stretching long and low across the horizon to the east. The same is obviously true from the other side, with the St. Kilda archipelago visible as a dark speck on a horizon otherwise occupied by open, empty sky. It is here that St. Kilda appears in its most isolated guise; small, distant and beyond the experience of most people. Because of this it has been a place which lodges itself within people's imagination, somewhere to be visited and as importantly, if not more so, that visit to be talked about on the return. These urges are very noticeable in people who visit the islands today, two weeks working on a National Trust work party is for some a life's ambition fulfilled. Just as people desire to get to St. Kilda they wish to leave their mark on the place before they leave. This is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than on the ceiling of the pub, where for years people have inscribed their names and other graffiti in almost ritual fashion, usually on the drink fuelled night before their departure.

Although it has been suggested that the boat-shapes and related settings may represent cenotaphs they may have nothing to do with the dead, perhaps they were simply built to commemorate a successful voyage to the island, hurriedly built by a boat's crew prior to departure for home. This, of course, assumes that as late as the Bronze Age

people were not living on the island on a permanent basis. It can be argued that the presence of more traditional burials on the raised beach terrace below, as suggested by 19th century accounts, provide evidence for a permanent population of the island, with people dying on the island and being buried close to their settlements. We have little idea what house from this time may have looked like - although some of the standing structures within the village - in particular Glen Mor's house - may bare some resemblance to what the first buildings may have looked like.

However, I have argued elsewhere that the use of islands specifically as places of burial, as evidenced by a number of medieval and earlier cemeteries on small islands in Scotland, may have extended back into the prehistoric period. With Mesolithic shell middens on Oronsay containing human bones which suggest the excarnation of corpses on sites all too commonly regarded merely as food waste. St. Kilda, occupying the fringes of the known world during the Bronze Age may have been similarly regarded as the domain of the dead, set back from the world of the living.

Despite this, it would appear that people were at least visiting the island as far back as the Neolithic, as evidenced by a number of pot sherds found eroding from the low cliffs which fringe the shoreward edge of the raised beach. As yet these have only been identified as Neolithic through typological examination, and sourcing pottery to period by this technique in the Outer Hebrides is notoriously difficult, with early type forms remaining in circulation and production long after their first appearance.

However, if we assume that the pottery is as old as the Neolithic then we should be prepared to accept that the island became at least semi-permanently settled relatively early on, with temporary visits during this early period transforming into colonisation by at least the Bronze Age. It should here be noted that the erosion of the raised beach cliff may indicate that this low lying area, ideal for agriculture may have been much more extensive in the past, but we have little idea as to how much of this has been lost to the sea since the Neolithic.

The other features on St. Kilda, including the lipped bank turned out to be artificial mounds of soil used to support arable agriculture. Pollen analysis of samples removed have been found to contain 5% cereal grain pollen, a figure which strongly suggests that cereals were grown in the area and perhaps on the terraces themselves.

The presence of what appears to be a sherd of 19th century pottery from one of these features suggests that they relate to later activity, with the sherd introduced through the application of midden fertiliser brought up from the village below. It is uncertain whether agriculture was practiced in the vicinity at the time of the construction of the monuments discussed above. It is interesting to note however that the boat-shaped monuments are to be found on the fringes of land suitable for agriculture, a factor which may indicate that the land was given over to agriculture at that time.

Clearly then our understanding of the earliest occupation of St. Kilda is still very sketchy. We have yet to locate the sites of the earliest settlements and this is an important aim of the on-going programme of work on the island. It is not beyond the bounds of reason to suggest that people were visiting St. Kilda as early as the Mesolithic, between around 7,000 and 4,000 BC. One of the earliest known Mesolithic settlements in Scotland, dated to around 6,500BC was excavated on the island of Rum, some 80km to the southeast of St. Kilda. Although no definite evidence, in the form of artefacts or structural remains, have yet been recovered from the outer Hebrides, their presence on Rum and on islands like Oronsay and the Orkneys strongly suggests that they were in possession of boats capable of getting them to St. Kilda. These very early visits may have been few and far between, and the reasons which motivated them having little to do with the desire to colonise (sea canoists - Everest). We should then perhaps expect little in the way of physical evidence for these first visits.

If we are to seek out prehistoric settlement sites, which may go back as far as the Neolithic, where are they most likely to occur, or at least be preserved? For as long as Hirta has been the subject of archaeological interest the attention of travellers has been drawn to the structures in Glenn Mor, a low lying valley situated on the other side of Conachair mountain, to the north. Among the numerous cellular and horned structures which occupy the valley floor is the so-called 'Amazon's House'. Although superficially these structures may bear some similarity with prehistoric cellular buildings as found in the Outer Hebrides and Orkney, albeit much smaller, historical accounts and even photographs portray their role as lambing pens and sheiling sites used during the summer months. This form of transhumance commonly involved women and girls, hence the term 'Amazon's House'.

Although the structures today visible in Gleann Mor were at least used into relatively recent times their architectural form may suggest earlier origins. A number of these structures have also been constructed on mounds which were presumably formed through the presence of earlier structures on the site, and as such effectively represent small 'tells'. More obviously than anywhere else on the island Gleann Mor therefore appears to have good potential for providing evidence for settlement, perhaps stretching back into the prehistoric period. However, despite the fact that two sites have been targeted for excavation, there are serious logistical difficulties related to physically excavating these sites. Archaeologists based in the village must climb over a small mountain and down over the other side to reach the sites, and then return to the village at the end of the day. This factor clearly makes work in Gleann Mor impractical for a traditional work party, which is usually constituted of people of varying ages and physical capabilities. It is therefore hoped to use fully professional team of diggers to enable work in this area at some time in the future.

One feature of the Gleann Mor structures are the horned enclosures, which presumably enabled the collection and penning of sheep, with at least some of the small chambers at the rear used for lambing. Only one 'horned enclosure' exists on Hirta outside Glean Mor, this being on a terrace situated on the slopes of Mullach Sgar, to the south-west of the village. This year the opportunity was taken to carry out limited excavation of this feature in order to evaluate its character and also to assess for the presence of stratigraphic depth, something which has been generally lacking on excavated sites located outside the village. The results of this work were extremely promising and several trenches, within and outside the structure revealed a number of phases of construction, with the horned enclosure itself representing only the latest of these.