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The Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age in Argyll, Part 1: archaeological work (from antiquarian activity onwards) undertaken to date

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Note: for the purposes of this document, ‘Argyll’ covers the current Local Authority Area of Argyll & Bute.

Compared with some other parts of Scotland, the region is relatively well served in terms of archaeological survey, fieldwork and research, extending back at least as far as the early 20th century with Professor Thomas Bryce’s excavations of several chamber tombs on Arran and Bute in 1903 (Bryce 1904). Bryce’s work followed on from earlier, antiquarian investigations, principally by Canon Greenwell (who excavated the Clyde cairn at Nether Largie in Kilmartin Glen, among other sites in Argyll and elsewhere: Greenwell 1868; Kinnes and Longworth 1985). Significant contributions to survey, fieldwork and research during the third quarter of the 20th century were made by female archaeologists, namely Marion Campbell of Kilberry, who collated information about archaeological sites in mid-Argyll in the 1950s and early 1960s (Campbell and Sandeman 1962); Audrey Henshall, whose magisterial survey of the megalithic monuments – part of a nationwide survey of such monuments (Henshall 1972) – remains the key source of information on these sites; Dorothy Marshall, who excavated several Neolithic and Bronze Age sites on and near Bute, including the very important Early Neolithic shieling-like settlement at Auchategan in Glendaruel (Marshall 1978), and who worked tirelessly to promote and research the archaeology of Bute (e.g. Marshall 1978); and Elizabeth (Betty) Rennie of the Lorn Archaeological and Historical Society, who has undertaken field survey and excavation and has enthusiastically promoted the prehistoric archaeology of Lorn (e.g. Rennie 1993). The survey and excavation work undertaken by Graham Ritchie and his Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) colleagues in preparing their Inventories of on the sites and monuments of Argyll, principally during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. RCAHMS 1988; cf. J.N.G. Ritchie 1977), not only synthesised the results of previous work but also very substantially added to our understanding of specific sites and types of monument, most notably the closed megalithic chamber and simple passage tomb of early Neolithic date at Achnacrebeag (J.N.G. Ritchie 1970); kerb (and other) cairns (J.N.G. Ritchie et al. 1975); and the Early Bronze Age settlement at Ardnave on Islay (J.N.G. Ritchie and Welfare 1983). Further influential research into megalithic monuments in the region was undertaken by Jack Scott between the 1950s and 1970s: not only did he define Clyde cairns as a regionally-specific type of chamber...
tomb (J. Scott 1969a), he also undertook excavations at the Clyde cairns at Brackley (J. Scott 1955) and Beacharra (J. Scott 1964) and at the Temple Wood stone and timber circles in Kilmartin Glen (J. Scott 1989); work at the latter sites included an investigation of the circles’ possible archaeoastronomical orientation. Archaeoastronomy features prominently in the study of prehistoric sites in Argyll, with Alexander and Archibald Thom having made claims for various orientations and observational devices as a result of their investigations from the 1960s to the 1980s (e.g. Thom and Thom 1990); Gerald Hawkins discovering a fallen standing stone in Kilmartin Glen, and discussing the orientation of several monuments in the Glen (Hawkins 1983); and Clive Ruggles producing a measured critique of previous work both here and elsewhere in Britain, and demonstrating the lunar orientation of the short stone rows of western Scotland (Martlew and Ruggles 1996; Ruggles 1999). Interest in this aspect of prehistoric monuments in Argyll continues with Douglas Scott’s observations of solar and lunar orientations of monuments in Kilmartin Glen (D. Scott 2010) and elsewhere.

Much other survey, fieldwork and synthesis work has taken place in the region. Caves in Argyll have been investigated by Christopher Tolan-Smith, Clive Bonsall and the Lorn and District Archaeological Society (Tolan-Smith 2001; Bonsall et al. 2012; Connock 1985), with Bonsall et al. demonstrating that a shift in their use can be discerned during the early Neolithic period, when in this part of Scotland they began to be used for funerary purposes (Bonsall et al. 2012). Argyll’s rich and varied rock art has also received much attention, its location and meaning being explored in Richard Bradley’s Rhind lectures publication, Altering the Earth (Bradley 1993). More recently, excavations by Andrew Jones at Torbhlaren in Kilmichael Glen shed new light on the possible date of rock art, and experimentation there by Hugo Anderson-Whymark demonstrated how such designs had been created and how they would have appeared when new (Jones et al. 2011). The timber circles of Argyll have been considered as part of Kirsty Millican’s survey of prehistoric timber monuments in Scotland (Millican 2007); and locational (and other) aspects of Argyll chamber tombs were discussed as part of Shannon Fraser’s study of Neolithic monumentality in the west of Scotland (Fraser 2004). The prehistoric (and other) archaeology of Bute has recently been explored in depth in the Discovering Bute Landscape Partnership Scheme (Duffy 2013; see in particular Finlay 2013 and Sheridan 2013) – an initiative that included updating the sites and monuments records in a community co-production initiative by RCAHMS (Geddes and Hale 2010) – while a synthesis of the Neolithic to Bronze Age prehistory of Kilmartin Glen has been presented by the current author (Sheridan 2012a).

While there has not been as much developer-funded excavation as in some other parts of Scotland, several sites of key importance to our understanding of the periods in question have been excavated over the last 40 years, either as rescue or research projects. The rescue excavations carried out from 1982 to 2005 in the gravel quarry at
Upper Largie highlighted the wealth of non-megalithic prehistoric monuments in this part of Kilmartin Glen, with finds including an Early Neolithic post-built cursus, a timber ‘avenue’, a timber circle, a Continental (arguably Dutch)-style Beaker grave and an Early Bronze Age grave yielding a unique, Irish-and-Yorkshire style of Food Vessel (Cook et al. 2010; Sheridan 2008; 2012b). Just outside Argyll & Bute, but geographically integral to our narrative, Alison Haggarty’s excavations on Machrie Moor, Arran (Haggarty 1991), revealed that this complex of stone circles had been preceded by a Late Neolithic timber circle associated with Grooved Ware pottery – a rare find in this part of Scotland – and the current author was able to draw out the broader significance of these finds in terms of a southerly spread, from Orkney, of the use of this kind of circular monument and of Grooved Ware around the 30th century BC (Sheridan 2004a).

Important information about prehistoric settlement and land use, particularly during the Bronze Age, was provided by Colin Burgess’ (and others’) excavation of an Early Bronze Age settlement at Kilellan on Islay (A. Ritchie 2005) and by John Barber’s excavations along a transect across part of Arran (Barber 1997). These latter revealed the attempts made by prehistoric farmers to deal with the issue of peat expansion during a second millennium climatic downturn. Most recently, Oliver Harris’ excavation of the Cladh Andreis Clyde cairn, Ardnamurchan (Harris et al. 2014) and Vicki Cummings’ excavation of a Clyde cairn at Blasthill on the Kintyre peninsula have produced some valuable new chronological data for this type of chamber tomb (Cummings and Robinson 2015), while the Forestry Commission recently commissioned a measured survey of the chamber tombs on its estates on Arran (http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/survey-arran).

In addition to the site- and area-based work mentioned above, there has been a considerable amount of research on the artefacts and human remains found in Argyll, some of it undertaken as part of more geographically-extensive corpora. Thus, for example, the small number of Early Neolithic axeheads of jadeitite found in Argyll (e.g. at Appin) have recently been analysed and published as part of a major international French-led research project, Projet JADE (Sheridan and Pailler 2012), while the similarly-rare, later Neolithic carved stone balls found in Argyll were listed in Dorothy Marshall’s nationwide corpus (Marshall 1977). Torben Ballin’s recent research on the use of Arran pitchstone (Ballin 2009) has documented the increase in its use and in the distribution of pitchstone artefacts during the Neolithic. The Beaker pottery of Argyll was covered in David Clarke’s nationwide corpus of funerary Beakers (Clarke 1970) and in Alex Gibson’s corresponding study of non-funerary Beakers (Gibson 1982); and the region’s Vase Urns and Collared Urns featured in the corpus by Trevor Cowie (1978) and Ian Longworth (1984; see also Waddell 1995 on Cordoned Urns). The Irish connections of many of Argyll’s Food Vessels were highlighted by Alison Young’s study of Tripartite Vase Food Vessels (Young 1951), and the daggers of Argyll (including an example with a gold pommel-band from Blackwaterfoot on Arran) were catalogued by
Audrey Henshall (Henshall 1968) and Sabine Gerloff (Gerloff 1975; see Sheridan and Cowie 2003 for a more up-to-date distribution of Scottish dagger and knife-dagger graves). Needham and Cowie’s recent study of a probable representation of a halberd on a decorated slab from the Ri Cruin cist has discussed the significance of halberds more widely (Needham and Cowie 2012), and further discussion of the halberd hoard from Largiezean on Bute can be found in Sheridan’s review of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age in Bute (Sheridan 2013). The Early Bronze Age jewellery of jet and jet-like materials is the subject of ongoing long-term nationwide research by the current author (e.g. Sheridan and Davis 1995; Sheridan 2013), while the Bronze Age gold finds of Argyll were dealt with in George Eogan’s corpus of Irish and British gold (Eogan 1994). The remarkable Late Bronze Age wooden figure found at Ballachulish featured in a broader study of prehistoric British wooden figures by Bryony Coles (Coles 1998), while the remarkable and very rare Late Bronze Age bronze flesh-hook from Inveraray was discussed in Stuart Needham’s and Sheridan Bowman’s study of this specific class of artefact (Needham and Bowman 2005). As for other artefact studies, Jack Scott, following Isla McInnes (1969), attempted to characterise the Neolithic pottery of this part of Scotland, coining the terms ‘Rothesay style’ (J. Scott 1977) and ‘Beacharra Ware’ (J. Scott 1964) for specific types of Early to Middle Neolithic pottery. (See also Sheridan 2004b for a more recent summary of the development of Neolithic pottery in western and south-west Scotland). Scott also discussed the distribution of imported Antrim flint, of porcellanite axeheads from Antrim and of tuff axeheads from Great Langdale in Argyll, comparing the pattern with that of Dumfries and Galloway (J. Scott 1969b). Further research into imports of Antrim flint, by Alan Saville, was triggered by the discovery of a large hoard at Auchenhoan in 1989 (Saville 1999).

Radiocarbon-dating programmes by Rick Schulting (Schulting 2004), by National Museums Scotland (as reported annually in Discovery and Excavation in Scotland since 2005, and more occasionally between 1997 and 2003) and by the Beaker People Project (Sheridan et al. 2007) have clarified the currency of Clyde cairns and of Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age ceramic traditions, while Clive Bonsall’s dating of human remains from Raschoille Cave near Oban has demonstrated their Early Neolithic date (Bonsall et al. 2012). Isotopic analysis of human remains by Rick Schulting and Mike Richards (e.g. Schulting and Richards 2002; Richards and Schulting 2006; Schulting 2013) has made a major contribution to the debate concerning the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition, demonstrating a contrast between the terrestrial-based diet of Neolithic coast-dwellers and the strongly marine-based diet of the Late Mesolithic inhabitants of Oronsay. Other isotopic analysis, undertaken on Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age skeletal material from Argyll as part of the Beaker People Project (and, before that, as part of Janet Montgomery’s doctoral research) has confirmed that people’s diet continued to be overwhelmingly terrestrial in nature. It has also highlighted the non-local origin of the young man buried with an early, All-Over-Cord Beaker at...
Sorisdale on Coll (Jay et al. 2012; Parker Pearson et al. in press), contrasting with the more local origin of the somewhat later young woman who had been buried wearing a spacer-plate necklace of jet and jet-like materials on Inchmarnock (Sheridan 2013). Other research into human remains from the region has confirmed a rare case of trephination (i.e. ‘surgical’ removal of bone from the skull, thereby perforating it in an attempt to heal an illness) at Mount Stuart, Bute – another case of a young woman buried wearing a spacer-plate necklace, this time mostly of jet (Kranioti and Sheridan 2012).

Some important palaeoenvironmental research has been undertaken in Argyll, most recently involving a detailed reconstruction of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic landscape around Torbhlaren rock art site (Tipping et al. 2011; see also Tipping et al. 2012 and http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/44-landscape-environment-climate for a more general assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the palaeoenvironmental record in Scotland, and for some interesting suggestions concerning climate change during the period in question.

Finally, the contribution of community-based (and community-orientated) archaeology cannot be overstated. The region is blessed with highly active Societies, museums and individuals with a passion for archaeology; their activities have greatly contributed to enhancing understanding and awareness of the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Age (and other) archaeology in this part of Scotland. The Discovering Bute Landscape Partnership Scheme (Duffy 2013) demonstrated just how much can be achieved through community co-production; and that is also a theme of much of the work undertaken by Northlight Archaeology (e.g. in its experimental construction and burning of a timber circle on Arran http://northlight-heritage.co.uk/conc5/index.php/whatwedo/burning-circle/) and by the Forestry Commission on its estates, led by Matt Ritchie (http://scotland.forestry.gov.uk/news/1216-archealogy-and-art-in-woodlands [sic]).

References


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