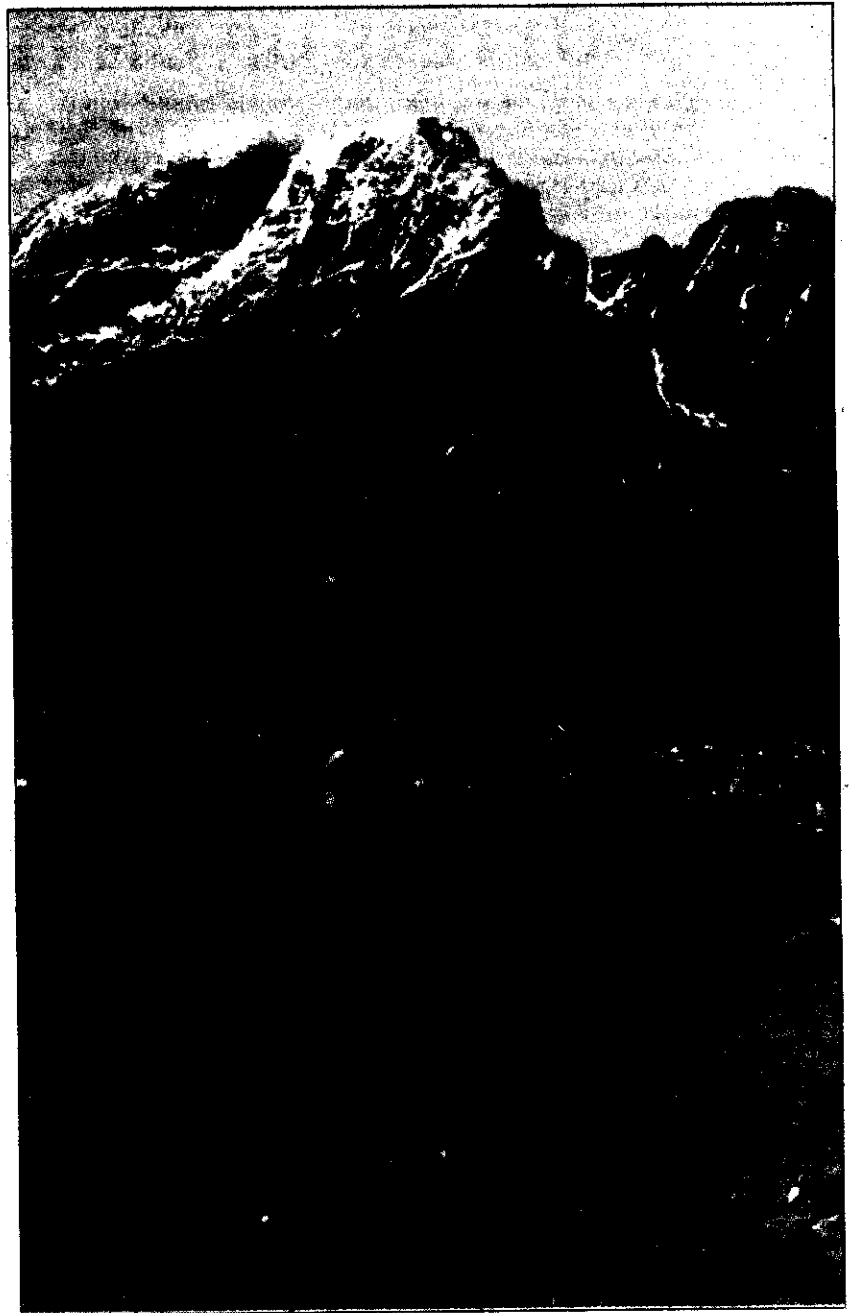


Drawing of unimproved type of pig prevalent in Scotland from the Iron Age to the Early Modern period

HIGH PASTURE CAVE: A window on the prehistory of Strath, Skye



Location of High Pasture Cave with the Cuillin Mountains beyond. Martin Wildgoose standing by the entrance to the cave.

Uamh An Ard Achadh, Cave of the High Field or High Pasture Cave, is located approximately 1 km south east of the township of Torrìn on the island of Skye. The entrance to the cave is situated in a shallow valley on the northern slopes of Beinn an Dubhaich and has extensive views northeast to Loch Gill Chrìosd and Glen Suardal, and northwest to the granite Red Hills of Skye.

THE VISIT

The cave passages have been formed in the Cambrian Durness Limestone, one of the older rocks present on Skye that has been significantly altered by later volcanic events. Discovered by students from the University of London in 1972, Uamh An Ard Achadh is one of the longer caves on the island with over 320 metres of accessible passages. The cave displays several distinct stages of development and has the appearance of being of greater age than most others in the area, with a gently graded and quite 'roomy' stream passage. Upon entering the cave down a 3 metres deep excavated shaft, a steady descent along the well-decorated streamway leads to a junction where a boulder slope on the right leads up into a dry high-level passage.

EXCITING FIND

It was in this passage in May 2002, during a routine visit to the cave, that the author discovered disturbed archaeological deposits. The material had been cast aside as spoil by visiting cavers, who were attempting to do some excavations, in order to extend the limits of the known cave. The disturbed sediments contained a wide range of archaeological material including a significant amount of animal bone, shellfish remains, charcoal, fire-cracked pebbles, coarse pebble tools, pottery sherds and a socketed iron adze or axe. During previous visits to the cave passage animal bone had been identified, although they were sealed below a layer of calcite.

Knowing that High Pasture Cave was one of the more popular and accessible caves on Skye, and having observed the wonderful preservation of the disturbed archaeological material and considered its potential importance, it was decided to make a thorough investigation of the cave passage. The finds were carefully removed from the cave, after which they were washed and allowed to air-dry. They were then placed in labelled bags.

Throughout these early investigations of the cave contact was made with John Wood, the Senior

Archaeologist at Highland Council in Inverness, and Noel Fojut, the Area Inspector with Historic Scotland, to discuss the wider implications of the find and disposal of the recovered archaeological material, some of which required immediate conservation. This resulted in the material being deposited with the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, where Dr Fraser Hunter (Curator of Iron Age and Roman material at the museum) and Dr Andrew Kitchener (Curator of Mammals and Birds) stabilised the finds. During my initial analysis of the finds, in particular the animal bones, it soon became apparent that of the 4000 or so bones recovered, a significant proportion was from wild boar or pig. There also seemed to be the bones of cattle, and deer in the assemblage, with large amounts of deer antler.

Although the bones had been recovered from deposits that were heavily disturbed by the activities of the cavers, it was still possible to identify concentrations of bone within the passage. The types and frequency of bone recovered within these deposits would suggest that the remains of some of the animals, especially the pig, had arrived in the cave passage relatively intact. A significant proportion of the bones also revealed evidence of butchery and food preparation, including the splitting open of long bones to extract the marrow. Butchery marks in the form of single or multiple v-shaped grooves are particularly evident on ribs, vertebrae and limb bones. Many of the antler fragments had also been cut with a heavy bladed instrument, possibly for the purpose of manufacturing bone tools.

ON THE SURFACE

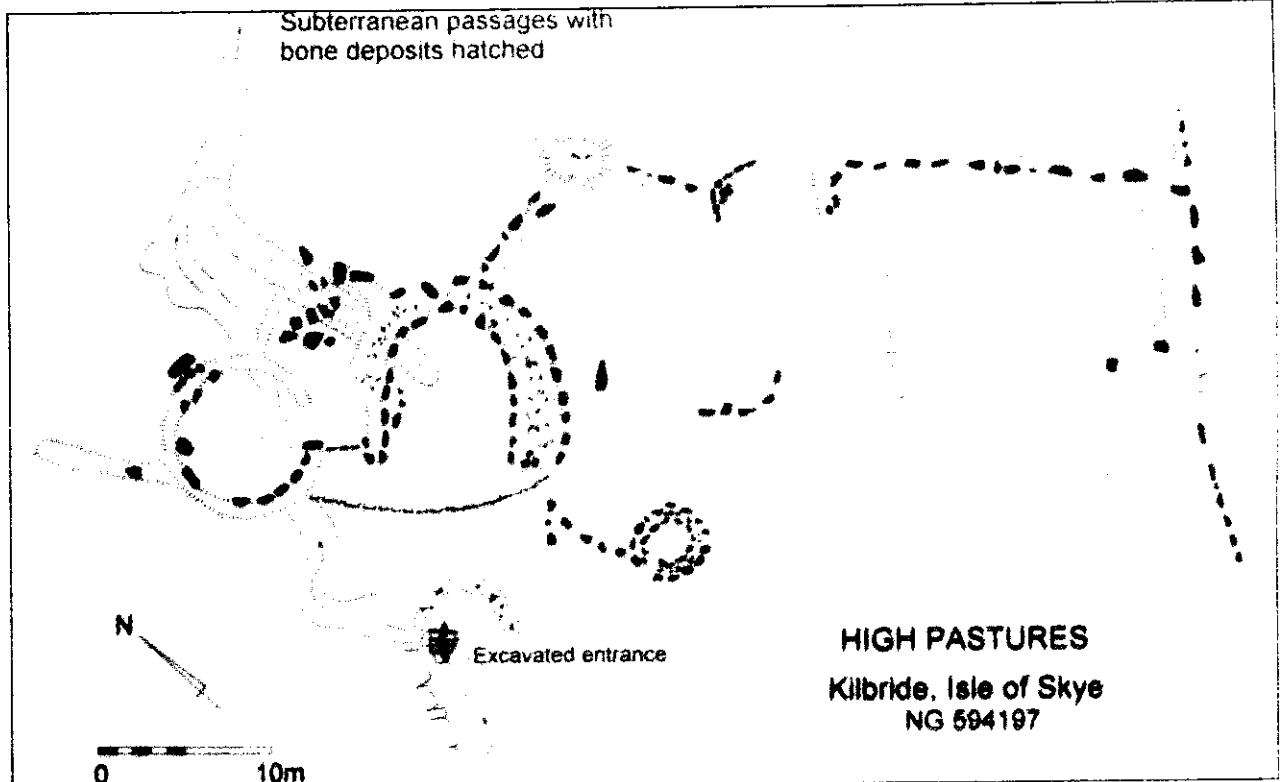
Aware that there seemed to be the remains of possible stone structures on the surface above the cave, I asked Martin Wildgoose to visit the site and provide his interpretation of the archaeology. We investigated the piles of stone, and gradually the more regular lines of possible buildings were revealed. The most obvious structures were the remains of a roundhouse and a large u-shaped pile of stone, of a type that we had not seen before during our archaeological landscape surveys on Skye, or within the archaeological literature. Stone dykes and smaller cell-like buildings were also identified. The area was surveyed in detail, and this work was completed during the autumn of 2003. The results of this survey revealed a complex archaeological landscape, created over a long period of time.



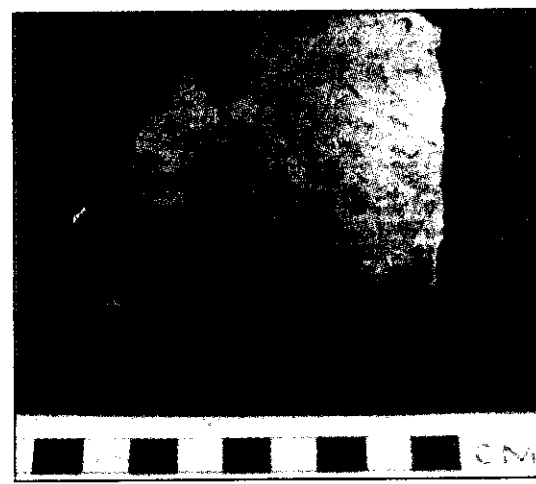
The excavated entrance of High Pasture Cave, Strath.



The main streamway of High Pasture Cave looking downstream, opposite the junction to the high-level fossil passage.



Survey of archaeological features showing the structures on the surface and the cave passages running below ground.



Two fragments of decorated Iron Age pottery from the cave, from the same vessel (scale = 1cm sections)



Crania fragments of pig from High Pasture Cave (scale = 1cm sections)

A MYSTERY

Viewed in conjunction with the structures of possible prehistoric date on the surface, the cave passages below and the archaeological material they contained, presented new questions including how the cave may have been used by the prehistoric inhabitants of the area and how the archaeological deposits entered the cave. Was the material merely dumped as midden down a former sinkhole? Could the high-level passage have been used as a natural souterrain by the people living in the roundhouse on the surface? However, there is one other possible explanation for the material in the cave, that of ritualistic behaviour.

Special springs, wells and votive shafts in the ground, are known to have had a special significance with early Celtic societies, where access to the "underworld" could be secured and offerings made to the water deities. Although sites such as these may be difficult to identify in the archaeological record, these sacred places have often been found surrounded by an earthwork, or ditch. When we examined in detail the plan of the surface structures and the route of the cave system below at High Pastures, the passage containing the archaeological deposits seemed to terminate in a rubble-filled shaft directly below the large u-shaped structure. Could this monumental structure have been some form of enclosure encircling the entrance to the cave passage and the underworld?

WILD BOAR ON SKYE

The high incidence of pig bones in the assemblage recovered so far from the cave also contrasts considerably with other excavated archaeological sites in the Hebrides and within the wider context of the United Kingdom. Most sites investigated in the Hebrides showed pig to be fairly low in number, with cattle and sheep being more prominent. However, during the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age in Scotland, the relative frequency of pigs compared with the other animals increased, especially towards the end of the Iron Age. The significance of pigs in the diet of the inhabitants of the north and west of Scotland during the Iron Age has recently been looked at again, especially in the light of recent excavations in South Uist, where pig remains accounted for 22% of the recovered assemblage. The excavations carried out at Dun Ardreck on Skye also produced comparatively high ratios of "wild" pig bones, along with red deer, suggesting that the environment around the site may still have had a significant coverage of woodland in the Iron Age, such conditions not

being so suitable for sheep. The comparative increases in pig remains from brochs and duns has resulted in suggestions that the people living in such dwellings led a high status way of life and included a society that was fond of hunting.

It was during this desk-based phase of research that I contacted Dr Peter Rowley-Conwy of the University of Durham, whose research interests include the archaeology of the pig. After consultation with Fraser Hunter at the National Museums of Scotland, Peter carried out a rapid scan assessment of the bone assemblage from High Pasture Cave, in June 2003. He confirmed that 80-90% of the bone assemblage came from pig, an unusually high percentage compared to archaeological sites investigated elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Therefore, the archaeological deposits discovered in High Pasture Cave on the island of Skye and the associated structures on the surface, constitute a site of considerable importance. The organic remains from the cave are extremely well preserved and the bone assemblage in particular is unusual in several respects. The high incidence of pig remains within the assemblage, possibly one of the highest ratios yet discovered on an archaeological site in Scotland, is also of note, while the implications of a possible ritual context for the material requires further investigation. The data gathered from further work at the site would complement our rapidly expanding knowledge of Late Bronze Age and Iron Age society in the region at a time when significant environmental changes were taking place on a national scale. However, the discovery of the pig remains in High Pasture Cave may have connections that carry over into later periods of Strath Suardal's history, including that of Clan Mackinnon.

CLAN MACKINNON

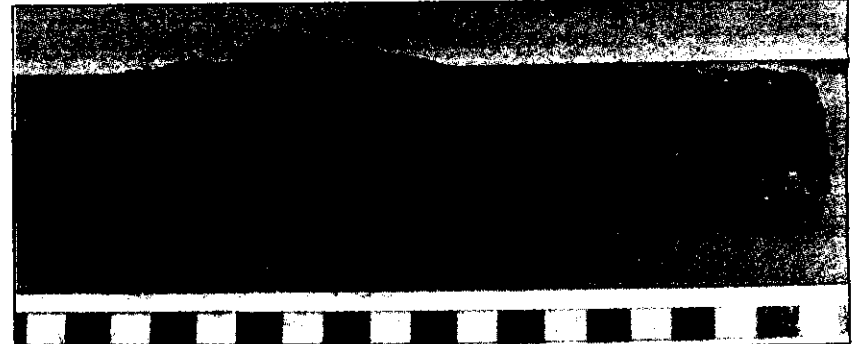
Clan Mackinnon is among Scotland's most ancient clans and it is thought that they received their great estate on Skye from Robert the Bruce, after the battle of Bannockburn. The Mackinnon crest comprises the head of a wild boar with the leg bone of a deer in its mouth, the story of which relates to the slaying of a boar on the shores of Loch Savaig on Skye by the Mackinnon in the 14th century. The importance of this symbolism to the clan was reinforced when a decorated slab of stone was recovered during restoration work on the church at Cill Chrìosd in Strath. Martin Wildgoose recovered the stone, possibly a keystone from an arch in the original church on the site,

from the walls of the present church enclosure where it had been used in earlier rebuilding work. Although the head of the animal carved in relief on the stone was degraded, there was no doubt that it was a depiction of a boar. The possible links here between the High Pasture Cave site and the Mackinnon Clan are obviously speculative and may be coincidental. However, the environment of Strath Suardal during the Later Prehistoric and Early Historic periods may have been suitable for wild boar and domesticated pigs, and it is just possible that the early ancestors of the Mackinnons of Strath may have been hunting boar in the woodlands of the glen, or were herding semi-domesticated animals through this landscape.

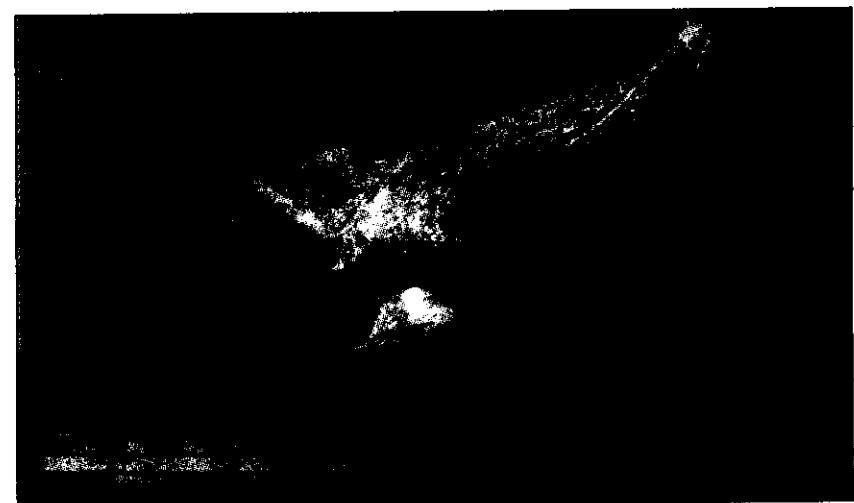
The archaeological deposits remaining in the high-level passages of High Pasture Cave are subject to a continuing threat from visiting cavers, the system being one of the most popular and easily accessible on Skye. Therefore, further archaeological surveys, excavation and stabilisation work will be carried out in the cave during 2004. A new surround and door have been fitted to the cave entrance to reduce the risk to livestock and a sign will be installed below the hatch-cover informing cavers visiting the site of the threat to the archaeological deposits. This will hopefully restrict the amount of traffic entering the high-level passage during the next phase of work. A limited amount of funding has been secured from Historic Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to assist with the fieldwork, and it is anticipated that further grants will be pursued for work in 2005. In addition to the archaeological survey and excavation within the cave, it is anticipated that test excavations of the structures on the surface will be conducted in the future, allowing us the opportunity to study and interpret domestic and ritual life during the later prehistoric period.

We would like to acknowledge the assistance of our sponsors Historic Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; Fraser Hunter and Andrew Kitchener of the National Museums of Scotland; Noel Fojut, Patrick Ashmore, Cole Henley and Ann MacSween of Historic Scotland; John Wood and Kirsty Cameron of Highland Council Archaeology Services; and Peter Rowley-Conway of the University of Durham. Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to Mr. Norman Stoddart of Kilbride House, Strath, for his permission to undertake the fieldwork at High Pasture Cave and for showing such an interest in this most intriguing site.

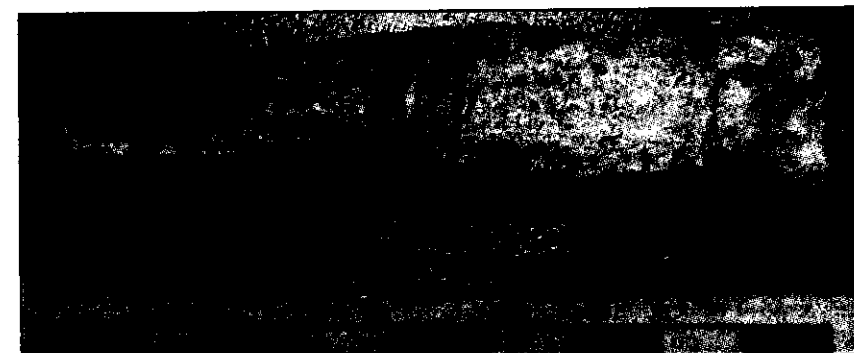
STEVEN A. BIRCH
Sealladh Alainn, 4 Upper Breakish, Isle of Skye



The socketed iron adze or axe recovered from the disturbed deposits in the cave (scale = 1cm sections)



Red deer antler beam showing fragments of skull attached and butchery marks, possibly to extract raw material to manufacture tools (scale = 1cm sections)



Artefact of unknown function recovered from cave deposits, comprising an antler tine with helical grooving (scale = 1cm sections)