HIGH PASTURE CAVE: A Window on the Prehistory of Strath, Skye

The cave passages have been formed in the Caradon Breccia 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, Uigach-an-Adachaidh is one of the longer caves on the island with over 500 metres of accessible passages. The cave displays several distinct stages of development and has the appearance of being of greater age than most others on the area, with a graded gravel and quite rocky stream passage. Upon entering the cave down a 3 metre deep excavated shaft, a steep descent along the well-decorated stream leads to a junction where a broader 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 walkers, who were attempting to do some excavations, in order to extend the limits of the known cave. The disturbed sediment contained a wide range of archaeological materials, including a significant amount of animal bone, charcoal, fire-cracked pebbles, coarse pottery tools, pottery sherds and a recircled tree trunk or stick. During previous visits to the cave passage animal bone had been identified, although these were situated 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 three early investigations of the cave context was made with John Wood, the former Archaeologist at Highland Council in Inverness, and Iain Fontaine, the former Inspector of Historic Monuments. These investigations showed the wide implications of the finds and the potential of the preserved 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 Iain Fontaine (Keeper of Iron Age and Roman Mummies at the museum) and Dr Andrew Kitchener (Keeper of Mammals and Birds) studied 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 removed from deposits that were heavily disturbed by the activities of the caves, 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. Bone tools in the form of single or multiple splashed objects are particularly common on the western end of the passage. Many of the larger fragments of bone were also cut and or those included in the living hearth, possibly for the purpose of processing the bone tools.

ON THE SURFACE

A walk around the area revealed the remains of possible stone-structures on the surface above the cave. I asked Martin Wilkinson to visit the site and provide his interpretation of the archaeology. We investigated the plans of these, and the results of the regular level of pasture buildings were revealed. The most obvious structures were the remains of a roundhouse and a large U-shaped pile of stones, a type that we had not seen before during our archaeological landscape survey on Skye. None of the archaeological features, none of the structures in the surrounding fields were identified. It was revealed in detail, and the results were completed during the course of 2004. The results of this survey revealed a complex archaeological landscape, created over a long period of time.
Excavated entrance
Kilbride, Isle of Skye
NG 504107

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.

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Based on comparison with the structure of possible perinatal data on the surface, the cave passages below and the archaeological material they contained, presented new questions regarding 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 thrown up at a midden from a former settlement? Could the high-level passage have been used as a natural route by the people living in the mussel shell on the surface? However, there are other plausible explanations for the material in the cave, that of础atic behaviour. Special Trestles, walls and stone shafts in the ground, are known to have had a special significance to both Celtic societies, where access to the ‘underworld’ could be secured and offerings made to the gods. Although sites such as these may be difficult to identify in the archaeological record, these sacred places have often been located by prehistoric or, in our case, in our context. When we excavated in detail the plan of the surface structures and the route of the cave system below at High Pasture, the passage containing the archaeological deposits seemed to terminate in a large, extensively cut shaft directly below the large, upshafted structure. Could this monumental structure have been a site for excursions in the ancient entrance to the cave and the ‘underworld’?

While Double Axes

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 pigs 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 to the other animals increased, especially towards the end of the Iron Age. The significance of pig in the diet of the inhabitants of the north-west and north-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 in Dun Ardchuir on Bute also produced comparatively high ratios of pig remains, 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 suitable for sheep. The comparative increase in pig remains from Brodick and Dunvegan has resulted in suggestions that the people living in such dwellings led a high status way of life and included a sector that was fond of hunting.

It was during this back-handed phase of research that I encountered Peter Bowler-Conway, the University of Durham, whose research interests include the architecture of the pig. After consultation with Preas Hunter at the National Museum of Scotland, Peter carried out a repeat sample assessment of the bone assemblage from High Pasture Cave, June 2003. He confirmed that 60-90% of the bone assemblage came from pig, an unusually high percentage compared to the 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 excellently 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 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 consequences for our understanding of Iron Age social identity, including that of Clan MacKintosh.

Clan MacKintosh

Clan MacKintosh is among Scotland’s most ancient clans and is thought that they received their present name from Shee from Robert the Bruce, after the battle of Bannockburn. The MacKintosh crest commemorates the head of a wild bear with the hag of a deer in its mouth, a crest which relates to the slaying of a bear on the shores of Loch Lomond by the MacKintosh of the 15th century. The importance of this symbolism to the clan was reinforced when a decorated slab of stone was discovered during restoration work on the church at Gillan Chest on Skye in 1939. MacKintosh recovered the stone, possibly a portrait of an ancestor from an arch in the original church on the site, from the wall of the present church enclosure where it had been used in earlier rebuilding work. Although the head of the animal carved is relief on the stone was deeply incised, there was no doubt that it was a depiction of a bear. The possible link here between the High Pasture Cave site and the MacKintosh Clan are obviously speculative and may be coincidental. However, the environment of Strath Snodarach during the Later Prehistoric and Early Historic periods may have been suitable for wild bear and domesticated pig, and it is just possible that the early ancestors of the MacKintoshes of Skye may have been hunting bear in the woodlands of the glen, or were hunting 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 resting cows, the cow being one of the most popular and easily accessible on Skye. Therefore, further archaeological surveys, excavation and stabilization work will be carried out in the cave during 2004. A new corridor and door have been fitted to the cave entrance to reduce the risk to livestock and a sign will be installed behind the hatch covering the entrance to the site to warn of the threat to the archaeological deposits. This will hopefully reduce 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 for the opportunity to study and interpret domestic and ritual life during the late prehistoric period.

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Timmer & Bone

Smalllith labels, 4 Upper Bealach, Isle of Skye

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

Survey of archaeological features showing the surface and the cave passages running below ground!