LORN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

RESCUE EXCAVATION OF THE OSSUARY REMAINS AT RASCHOILLE CAVE, OBAN

an interim report by

KENNETH D. CONNOCK

(This report has been prepared in order to provide basic information about the excavation in advance of the receipt of specialist reports)

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(fig.1 is based, with permission, upon a diagram originally prepared by Mairi MacDonald F.S.A. Scot.)

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INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of May 1984, at Glenshellach Road, Oban, (O.S. map ref. NM 855 289), during operations by a mechanical digger to remove scree from below a cliff face in order to increase the area of ground around a newly constructed house, a previously unseen and unknown cave was revealed. The vaults of three human skulls were observed by the operator of the digger who reported the matter to the police. The Secretary of the Lorn Archaeological and Historical Society, Margaret Kay, having also been informed and realising the possible archaeological significance of the discovery, immediately contacted the Ancient Monuments Division of the Scottish Development Department. The area inspector, Patrick Ashmore, visited the site at the beginning of June and having assessed the situation – the cave being close to a road, highly exposed and liable to suffer disturbance – asked the Society to undertake a rescue excavation as a matter of urgency.

It was fortunately possible to assemble a small team of experienced members who could undertake this without delay. The excavation extended over a period of 26 days during June and the first half of July. The site is locally known as Raschoille and this name has been applied to the cave.

SITUATION AND NATURE OF THE CAVE

The cave is situated on the North West side of Glen Shellach on the edge of what in prehistoric times would have been an inlet of the sea. (Fig. 1). The specialist geological report describes it as a natural sea cave excavated by erosion in the Easdale Slate series at the level of the lowest (8 metre) raised beach. A minor fracture running parallel to the major fault forming the North West side of the Glen has been enlarged by marine action. A small area of the raised beach still exists on the South East side of the Glen and is observable at a point almost opposite the cave.

In shape the cave forms an inverted V being about 4.25 m. wide at the front narrowing to about 0.2 m. at an inward distance of 4.00 m. (Fig. 2). A very narrow and inaccessible fissure extends for at least the same distance further inwards. The cave fracture also extends upwards on the N.W. side possibly to the cliff face above. Some minor stalactitic and stalagmitic formations had arisen within the cave due presumably to the removal of calcium carbonate in solution by percolation of water through limestone bands in the roof.

The nature, size and shape of the original cave entrance is not clear. The excavation by the mechanical digger had obviously affected this to some extent as there were fresh fractures of the rock visible at a number of points. It seems to be likely that the original opening may have been somewhat smaller than that presently revealed. There is no indication of the nature or extent of any talus which may have existed in front the digger having removed material in depth almost right up to the entrance. A considerable amount of scree must have originally covered and concealed the opening and the removal of the base of this scree had apparently caused sufficient landslip to reveal the cave mouth.
EXCAVATION OF BONE AND ASSOCIATED MATERIAL

In addition to the three skull vaults observed by the digger operator a quantity of other obviously recently disturbed human bone was visible. This was distributed partly at the mouth of the cave and partly amongst the sloping rubble in front. None of this material could be regarded as being stratified and it had been collected together very soon after the discovery. No exact recording had been undertaken at this stage other than to maintain a degree of distinction between the general areas of distribution.

At the commencement of the excavation proper it was obvious that there was a further quantity of undisturbed bone lying exposed within the cave. Because of the very real danger of damage being caused, either unwittingly or by vandalism, it was decided, with the permission of the owner of the ground, to erect a metal grille and gate across the entrance to provide protection at least until the completion of all investigations. No funds for this purpose could be obtained from official sources and the project only became possible through the anonymous generosity of a member of the Society in paying for the materials, the labour costs being met out of limited Society funds. Donations received as the result of the establishment of a local Excavation Fund assisted with this and other necessary expense including the preparation and publication of this interim report.

Two distinct and different, although contiguous and to some extent overlapping, types of cave material were initially evident:

1. Extending across most of the width of the front of the cave was a mound of fairly loose stone and earth the surface material being for the most part smallish fragments of slate. Some larger stones were visible within the mound particularly towards the base.

2. Behind this was an area of breccia with some slight stalagnitic protuberances corresponding to larger stalactitic formations in the roof above. Some looser fragments of stone, mostly small, lay on the somewhat uneven surface of this. A small slab of quartzite somewhat oddly stood on edge rested close to the N.W. wall.

Because of the relative instability of the frontal mound it was deemed necessary to completely excavate this before dealing with the more solid area behind which would be likely to present difficulties owing to the nature of the material and the lack of adequate working height.

It seemed likely that at least some of the smaller stone rubble on the surface and at the edge of the frontal mound might have been deposited during the exposure of the cave and the first stage of excavation involved the removal of this. Some bone, which could not be regarded as being securely stratified, was recovered during this procedure. The remaining material was somewhat more stable with stones of varying sizes, some quite large, lying at many different planar angles. The interstices between the stones were mostly filled with a mixture of soil and small particles of stone. Whilst a small number of the stones may have fractured and fallen from the roof the majority
seem likely to have been deliberately brought into the cave. The angles of some of the stones suggested that they might have tumbled from a more vertical position. This was particularly evident towards the left hand (N.W.) side where some large flat stones, including a long quartzite slab, might originally have been vertically placed with the uppermost edge resting against the sloping cave wall to form a triangular shaped and almost enclosed cavity. Some smaller slabs of quartzite were also found close to the right hand side and these could perhaps have been parts of a larger slab which had been similarly placed. No slabs of the same material were found in the central part of the cave. Geological opinion attests that the quartzite slabs, although veins occur in the cliff face close to the cave, cannot have been present in or have fallen from the walls or roof.

Bone in accumulations of varying quantity was present throughout, fresh amounts being revealed whenever practically any stone was removed. Whilst some small amounts of bone could have slipped down into gaps between the stones, most occurred in apparently separate deposits some of which, particularly in the upper layers, were quite dense. Human skull material was frequently present being represented in a number of instances by complete vaults.

At the very front of the rubble mound a small fresh cut through the material had obviously been made by the scoop of the mechanical digger. (Fig. 2). This cut had caused only slight damage to the material of the mound although a small quantity of bone found in line with it amongst the frontal rubble must have been dragged forward from the base. The cut had also penetrated the material beneath the mound to a depth of between 20 – 25 cm., and this had revealed a layer of generally horizontally aligned small stones in contrast to the multi-angled array of stones of varying sizes above. This quite obviously represented a different archaeological layer the surface of which, after removal of the mound above, proved to be the apparent terminus of the bone deposits. Upon this surface were the slight remains of three superimposed fires represented by thin ash deposits with some minute flecks of charcoal and a few tiny fragments of burnt bone. (Fig. 2). A further small area a short distance away to the S.E. with a minimal hint of ash may just possibly be evidence of another fire. From material on the same surface, but further to the rear, a small flint arrowhead, triangular in shape and with possibly a broken tang, was recovered and this has been provisionally assigned a Bronze Age typology. Its position stratigraphically well sealed beneath the mound deposits provides a terminus-post quem for these. (Fig. 2).

The area behind the frontal mound presented some considerable difficulty in excavation particularly because of the very restricted headroom allowed by the slope of the cave roof towards the S.E. side. The foremost breccia, which varied from about 5 cm. to 15 cm. in thickness, could be removed without too much difficulty but further to the rear the deposits were much
more solid having been permeated to a much greater degree, up to a depth of about 25 cm., by the calcium drip from the roof. This had also caused some cementation of the floor deposits to the wall along a large part of the S.E. perimeter. (Fig. 2). Firmly embedded within this concreted material was some significant bone including some long bones and skulls the top of the vault of one skull being attached fairly firmly to the wall. It was only possible to remove this material in several separate blocks by careful chipping and prising, a process which was fortunately accomplished with only minimal damage to the bone. Stratigraphy in this area could not be accurately assessed or recorded and some disturbance of materials beneath undoubtedly occurred. Some small amounts of loose bone, including skull fragments, from immediately beneath the concretions may be regarded as being associated with them.

Beneath the thinner foremost breccia the materials proved to be very similar to those in the frontal mound but with somewhat larger stones the interstices between which were less densely filled. The bone deposits still continued but less concentrated in distribution, smaller in quantity and containing possibly a somewhat higher proportion of animal bones. Very large quantities of minute bones resulted from sieving and the greater part of these appeared to be from fish. Close to the N.W. wall a band of somewhat wetter soil and stones was present and this was no doubt due to some slight penetration of water through the ascending fissure in the roof above.

A very distinctive feature of the rear area of the cave was the presence of two very large stone blocks resting one behind the other transversely across a large part of the width. (Fig. 2). Specialist geological opinion on these confirms that they could not have reached their position as the result of natural processes and must therefore have been deliberately placed in their particular position. They apparently rested on the same surface as that which represented the terminus of the frontal bone deposits their weight having caused a degree of sinking into this.

Another interesting feature was the presence, at the furthest and almost inaccessible inward extremity of the cave and at the narrowest point of the fissure, of a human skull complete except for mandible. This rested completely exposed on the surface, with no other bone in immediate association, facing the inward extension of the fissure. (Fig. 2). As far as could be ascertained no bone had been deposited further beyond this point.

**MATERIALS FROM THE EXCAVATION**

1. **BONE**

The total amount of bone excavated weighed about 17 kg. It consisted of almost 2,000 pieces which could be readily identified plus a large number of bits which, although not identifiable during the preliminary sorting process, may yet be recognisable in the course of specialist examination. Much of the bone was fragmented but some anatomical parts were complete.
No bones were found in articulation most of the skeletal material being in a very jumbled state. Human skull material was much in evidence and, whilst an exact statement of the total number of skulls represented cannot yet be made, the quantity of separate deposits with substantial skull amounts suggests a figure of probably around 21 (not including the three original skulls found when the cave was first revealed). (Fig. 3). Mandibles were somewhat rare in comparison to the number of skulls and none were found in a position where they could definitely be assigned to a particular skull. Teeth were also somewhat less in number than might have been expected. Although the larger skeletal bones were fairly well represented, the smaller bones, particularly those of hands and feet, were somewhat scant in number. Preservation of the bone was on the whole quite good and it seems to be unlikely that the apparent discrepancies in the skeletal material can be substantially accounted for by erosion.

Only comparatively few of the larger bones were definitely recognised as being non-human but the bones of smaller animals were fairly abundant, rodents, amphibians and birds being well represented. The myriads of fish bone appeared to be for the most part from fairly small species although some larger bones were noticed. The only immediately recognisable species was wrasse a number of pharyngeal plates being found.

2. SHELLS

Shells of marine molluscs occurred throughout the deposits, sometimes distributed quite densely. A total weight of about 11 kg. was recovered. The species provisionally identified are: edible periwinkle, filet periwinkle, limpet, cockle, scallop, mussel, oyster, whelk, pullet carpet shell. By far the greatest proportion of shells (almost 50% of the total quantity by weight) was of edible periwinkle.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly there did not appear to be very many shells of land snails. It is possible that greater quantities of very minute shells will be evident from the soil samples.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL MATERIAL

Many soil samples were taken during the excavation the policy being to provide material from each apparently significant area of deposit. It is hoped that subsequent analysis might not only provide a picture of the total environmental spectrum during the period of the cave deposits, but might possibly also be able to indicate any slight differences between different areas. Control samples were also taken from newly exposed areas immediately outside the cave mouth.

A few beech and hazel nuts were found within the deposits one or two appearing to have been gnawed and others to have been slightly charred. Rodent action must surely account for their presence and they may have been deposited fairly recently.
Charcoal was found in one or two places among the deposits but only in very minute quantity. Only one area yielded sufficient for a possible C.14 dating. This sample, being well sealed beneath the bone deposits and the breccia may furnish an important dating terminus.

4. ARTEFACTS

The only definite artefact identified was the arrowhead referred to above. A few other items which could not definitely be categorised were retained for expert examination and opinion.

RECORDING METHOD

Because of the large number of apparently separate accumulations of bone and the nature of their distribution, it was regarded as being important to treat each, even if quite small, as being individually significant. Accordingly each deposit was separately dealt with throughout the excavation being assigned a unique identification number, (Arabic numerals being employed), under which it was recorded and processed. Additionally each identifiable piece of bone from a deposit was separately marked and recorded under a second number. Closely associated material from a deposit was given the same number, each different category of material being separately bagged and recorded.

A number of datums were set up and marked on the cave walls providing both horizontal and vertical reference points from which the positions and relationships of the deposits could be measured and plotted. (Figs. 2 & 3). A total of 109 separate deposits or areas of deposit were recorded some of which were later amalgamated.

Each deposit was assigned to a somewhat arbitrary layer, the nature of the cave material being such that clearly defined and distinctive archaeological layers were not generally present. Roman numerals were employed in designating the layers.

A brief description of the principal arbitrary layers is:

Layer I  The loose surface material on and around the frontal mound.
Layer II  The breccia and associated material in the rear area.
Layer III The main body of the frontal mound.
Layer IV  Immediately under the breccia in the rear area.
Layer V   The lowest levels of the bone deposits.
Layer VIII A small area at the very front of the cave on the S.E. side.
Layer X   A small area at the very front of the cave on the N.W. side.
(Layers VIII and X were removed to allow erection of the gate).
Two further layers VI and VII will be referred to in the next section.
No layer was designated IX.

Unstratified material was recorded as Layer 0 with subdivisions a,b,c,etc., according to provenance.
UNEXCAVATED MATERIAL

At the commencement of the excavation the Society was prepared to undertake only the investigation, recording and removal of the bone deposits. It was considered that any more extensive investigation would be outside a rescue context and might more appropriately be undertaken as a research project by some specialist. Accordingly operations were halted at the apparent terminus of the bone deposits which proved to be the surface of the layer exposed in the narrow cut made by the mechanical digger which was described above (page 3). In order to confirm that this layer (layer VI) indeed marked the cessation of the human bone deposits a section was cut through it across the datum line C-D. This showed that the layer was practically sterile containing only a few bones of small animals and some shell fragments. At the base of layer VI the surface of another layer was revealed over part of the cave width. This was firmer, of lighter colour and with surface flakes of charcoal and could represent a period of activity some time before the commencement of the bone deposits above layer VI. This layer was recorded as layer VII but not investigated.

It is not possible to estimate the amount of material which may remain unexcavated but it could be quite considerable especially towards the S.E. side where the deposits seem to slope quite sharply beneath the roof overhang.

To guess at the possible nature or period of any lower deposits is hazardous but, considering the situation of the cave which closely parallels the other well known Oban caves and perhaps has considerable affinity to the not too distant Druimvargie Rock Shelter, there would seem to be a degree of possibility that the lower levels might bear traces of Mesolithic activity.

OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS

Any discussion of the cave materials or attempt to interpret their significance must for the moment only be tentative and views may well have to be modified in the light of forthcoming specialist reports. It is possible nevertheless to put forward some provisional ideas and propose possible directions in which the present evidence is pointing.

The bone material, forming the greater part of the cave contents (and being the reason for the excavation), merits a degree of detailed analysis and discussion which will only be possible in a later report. Some features of the depositions can, however, be commented upon now. A number of factors seem to be important: the mixed nature of the deposits; the occurrence of bones in apparently separate accumulations; the lack of articulation; the relative absence of smaller bones especially of hands and feet; the shortage of jaws and the lack of teeth. These all strongly suggest the deposition of excarnated bones after exposure of the body evidence for such practice being well attested from Neolithic and Bronze Age contexts. Inhumation cannot be entirely ruled out and there may be some reason to suspect this at the
sides of the cave where, as was suggested earlier, enclosed cavities could have been formed with vertically placed slabs of stone. In these areas skulls and long bones were more closely related than elsewhere with some slight degree of orientation. Although there was no sign of proper articulation this might just be the result of later disturbance. The two large stones across the cave might also possibly have sealed off an area of inhumation the bones behind being somewhat less in quantity and not present in such distinct concentrations. It is hoped that a detailed analysis of the bone distribution may assist in later clarification of this. The large stones perhaps also suggest at least two periods of burial the earlier being to the rear and the later in front. It is intended if possible to obtain C.14 dating from bone samples from each area which may confirm this interpretation.

The shells in the deposits raise problems in explaining their presence. It seems to be fairly certain that they must have been humanly imported and the preponderance of edible periwinkle suggests that they may represent food remains. The possibility that the shells are the results of habitational use of the cave seems to be unlikely and two alternative explanations may be considered: 1. that the shells are the remnants of funerary feasts; 2. that they may be ritual offerings placed with the bones at burial. The occurrence of the shell throughout the deposits and also intermixed with them seems to support the latter.

The multitude of fish bones is difficult to explain. The large number of bones of small species of fish may indicate importation by fish-eating birds and the presence of some agglutinated masses of small bones, possibly bird pellets, somewhat supports this idea.

The position of the solitary skull at the furthest inward point was somewhat strange giving rise to some speculation. There can be little doubt that it was placed deliberately in the position in which it was found and this perhaps just conceivably might suggest ritual placement maybe as a kind of totem guarding against supposed supernatural forces beyond.

The important question as to a possible date for the bone depositions cannot yet be answered. The only dating evidence at present available is the flint arrowhead and although this suggests a possible Bronze Age date, in theory the bones above it could have been deposited at any time afterwards. The sealing of some of the bones in and under the breccia, which is likely to have taken a very long time to form, is however indicative of fairly great antiquity. C.14 dating will, it is hoped, provide more definite indications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Society wishes to thank all those who have contributed in any way to the excavation especially the team of members which carried it out. A detailed list of acknowledgements will be included in the final report.
RASCHOILLE CAVE, OBAN

FIG. 1

LOCATION & RELATION TO OTHER CAVES

1. Raschoille Cave
2. MacKay Cave
3. MacArthur Cave
4. Distillery Cave
5. Gasworks Cave
6. Druimvargie Rock Shelter

O Other Caves
--- Former Shore Line
© Site of Crannog

M. MacD. / K.D.C.
FIG. 2

Plan & cave sections after removal of bone deposits showing position of datums & prominent features.

- Concretion joining wall & floor
- Estimated outline

Section through G - H

Section through C - D

Base of gate

Isolated skull

Large stones

Arrowhead

Possible fire

O B

C-D

A-B

K

GH J-K

M.

0 1 2 3

Ft.

0 1 2 3