

## **Changing People Changing Landscapes: excavations at The Carrick, Midross, Loch Lomond**

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Located approximately 40 kilometres to the south-west of Oban, as the crow flies over Loch Awe and then Loch Fyne, you reach the west shores of Loch Lomond. Here, Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) undertook a programme of archaeological works between 2003 and 2005, on behalf of De Vere Hotels and Leisure Ltd, in advance of the development of the Golf Course at The Carrick, Midross. This article highlights some of the most important discoveries which have been made through the excavations and subsequent post-excavation analysis. We will briefly explore some of the ways that the landscape has changed, from about 10,000 years ago, and encounter evidence of how people have also changed: either through the arrival of different groups in the region or by ways in which individual people were at times transformed through mortuary rituals.

The earliest evidence at the Carrick dates to about c. 8000 BC and comprised a series of pits and hearths, relating to the activity of groups of hunter, fisher and gatherers during the Mesolithic period. This activity occurred after the retreat of the Loch Lomond re-advance Ice Sheet, which covered much of the Western Highlands between c. 9450 – 8550 BC (Evans & Rose 2003). It is possible that the people at Loch Lomond at this time were amongst the first to return to the region after the retreat of the ice sheets. They would have probably encountered birch hazel woodland. Evidence suggests people returned intermittently to the same location over the next 4,000 years. During this time, sea levels rose and resulted in Loch Lomond changing, becoming the northern part of a sea loch extending from the Clyde estuary from about c. 5000 – 3500 BC.

There was evidence from the Carrick for activity during the fourth millennium BC. People deposited broken pottery and blades of Arran pitchstone up against a large glacial erratic stone. It suggests there were early farming settlements in the vicinity, perhaps with cereal being cultivated and livestock tended in close proximity. People may have been clearing oak and hazel woodland on the loch side at this time; several stone axe heads have been found in the general vicinity. At broadly this time, the large timber hall at Claish, located c. 25 kilometres to the north-east at Callander, was being used by people (Barclay et al. 2002). Whether this

activity relates to local populations adopting new technologies or due to the presence and influence of incomers is debated.

We next get substantial evidence for people's activities at Midross during the second millennium BC. At two locations small numbers of deposits of cremated human bone were placed in the ground in urns. Prior to this individuals (or at least parts of them!) would have been placed on a pyre to produce the cremated bone. After the pyre had cooled the bone would have been collected.

At another location, towards the end of the second millennium BC, a timber round structure was built, Fig 1. It had the same form as domestic houses, however, when one entered the structure, one would find the interior held a number of 'odd' deposits. One of these was a setting of five stones, amongst which was scattered cremated human bone. The other 'odd' deposit comprised a stone lined pit (much like a cist), which incorporated a cupmarked stone into its construction. The pit had then had a deposit of cremated human bone placed within it. The arrangement of features in the interior suggests that these 'odd' deposits were not simply closure deposits relating to the rites associated with the abandonment of a domestic dwelling. Rather the structure would appear to have been used specifically for ceremonial or ritual purposes: a cult house or shrine perhaps!



Fig. 1. The timber round structure.

By the end of the first millennium BC, we have evidence for a small farmstead at the Carrick. Close by was a bloomery for iron working, also contemporary with the settlement. Palaeo-environmental evidence from pollen cores suggests that at this time there was the most substantial clearance of woodland. This clearance probably created a far more open landscape character, with dispersed small settlements (such as the farmstead at the Carrick) and associated fields. The farmstead site was preserved *in-situ*, with only limited portions being excavated to characterise the remains. This however, produced some intriguing results, with evidence which suggest metalworking may have been taking place on the settlement. Notably amongst the metalworking waste, were fragments of burnt human bone!

Perhaps, the most spectacular discovery at Midross is the evidence relating to activity from the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. A ditch-defined enclosure was built, Fig 2, within which was at least one rectangular timber building: perhaps a timber hall or possibly a church.



Fig. 2. The early Historic Period enclosure

The evidence suggests that the enclosure may have been a focus of craft activity during the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, including woodworking, shale working and metal working. Indeed, there was a discrete industrial area related to iron working, located 50 metres south of the enclosure.

As well as the substantial evidence relating to the enclosure, there were slighter archaeological traces in the wider landscape. These included small groups of pits and post-holes, which probably represent the locations of small domestic dwellings dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD. The palaeo-environmental evidence suggests that woodland had regenerated to a certain extent and may suggest that settlement was more nucleated, perhaps concentrated at particular parts of the landscape.

Perhaps most striking was that over eighty burials had also been made within the enclosure. The earliest phase of burial appears to date to the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, with another phase taking place in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The earliest burials were generally orientated south-west to north-east and grave goods had been deposited in eight cases. In four cases, the graves contained small knife blades, variously associated with a notched stone, a small blue glass bead, and a whetstone from Norway. In the other four cases people had deposited a shale bangle, shale finger ring and copper alloy bracelet in one; a child's shale bangle (Fig. 3) in another; an elongated slot headed tool and decorated copper fragment in a third; and an Anglo-Saxon coin (Aethelred I of Wessex) in the fourth.





Fig. 3. Shale bracelet

It is notable that there is some evidence for Norse activity in the region at this time. The seat of the Briton Kingdom, within which Midross belonged, was Alt Clut (Dumbarton Rock), some 12 kilometres to the south. Excavations at Dumbarton Rock revealed two probable Norse artefacts, a sword hilt and a lead and glass bead, and accounts suggest it was sacked by the Norse in AD 870 (Alcock & Alcock 1990). Also of note is that, about six kilometres to the north of the Carrick, the Hogback stone in the Church Yard at Luss may suggest another later Norse influence or presence. Most striking perhaps, was the discovery of a possible Norse burial close to the Carrick (Stewart 1856). In this context, the presence of the Norwegian whetstone at the Carrick raises some interesting questions about the identity of who it was buried with. Was the individual an incoming Norse or a member of local Britonic populations?

Overall, the excavations at Midross have given a remarkable insight into the changing character of human activity in the west of Scotland but also a reminder of some of the major changes which people encountered in the character of their landscapes during the past 10,000 years. The results of excavation and analysis are currently being produced as a volume, which it

is hoped will appear as a *Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* monograph later this year.

### **Bibliography**

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