

## 9. DISCUSSION

The investigations at North Barr River established that even with the impact of forestry operations there are archaeological remains preserved on the terrace, primarily on the western side due to protection by colluvial deposits. On the terrace itself archaeological deposits, indicated by one potential but unexcavated negative feature, appear to have been subject to bioturbation. At two locations, evaluation suggests that the lithic assemblage is distributed throughout a number of different sediments, primarily as the result of biological and erosional soil processes. In the case of Tr5, on a marked terrace at the foot of a slope, potentially *in situ* archaeological deposits are preserved beneath colluvium. The concentration of stones set within the subsoil defines the edge of break in slope at this point. That the arrangement is anthropogenic, with set upright stones, is clear and it could be structural in nature, although questions

remain as to its exact character and chronology. While the range of Mesolithic structures is diverse (Wickham-Jones 2002) and includes stone settings (for example Lussa Wood, Jura (Mercer 1980; NMRS no.: NR68NW 4)), the likelihood is that this relates to post-Mesolithic activity, given the very mixed character of the lithic assemblage and dates.

The overall impression is of an extensive background lithic scatter in which several discrete phases of Mesolithic and later activity are represented. The closest Mesolithic site is that of Barr River (Mercer 1979; NMRS no.: NM65NW 5). It is clear that here the artefacts were present in hill wash, and some clearly derived from further upslope and in rather rolled condition. Test excavation did not recover *in situ* remains. Detailed information is limited but the assemblage of around 80 pieces was also heavily patinated or burnt. Four geometric microlith fragments and a



**Illus 4** Aerial photograph, North Barr River site in centre (© FCS Photography by Caledonian Air Surveys)

microburin were found. Several bipolar pieces are illustrated (Mercer 1979, fig 2), but no mention is made of the character of the debitage and whether blades are frequent, and the whereabouts of the assemblage could not be established. Therefore it seems likely that the North Barr River site represents further evidence of quite widespread occupation along this coast, although at present the extent and character of that activity cannot be elucidated further. Nonetheless, the site is an addition to understanding the character of regional Mesolithic occupation. Located on the northern coastline of Morvern on a terrace with extensive views across Loch Teacuis, it is part of the wider 'fluid seascape of the west coast' (Birch 2006: 135) (Illus 4 and 5).

This fluidity is not only in terms of people's movement via water but also in terms of the sea level change, as evident through the raised beaches representative of former shore lines. The region would have been affected by the ice sheets of the Loch Lomond Readvance (Ballantyne 2004: 28–9, see fig 2.1). As Ballantyne discusses, following ice-sheet deglaciation the Western Highlands may have experienced significant levels of landslides through earthquakes due to glacio-isostatic uplift and tectonic stress (*ibid*: 34). The early Holocene sea level changes culminated in a Main Post Glacial Shoreline of about 10m (*ibid*: 37, fig 2.6) at some point between 7200 BP and 6000 BP in the region, and as the sea level rose above the Main Late Glacial Shoreline it may have sealed many early Mesolithic sites. This was followed by continued regression of the shoreline. Due to these complex dynamics it is not possible, in the absence of more detailed geomorphological study, to suggest a date for the Barr River Mesolithic activity relative to its shoreline position.

Research undertaken on Mull (for example, Bonsall et al 1991; National Museums Scotland 1993; Mithen et al 2006; Mithen & Wicks 2009) and Ardnamurchan (for example, Crerar 1961; Thornber 1974b and see also Pollard 1996; Pollard 2000) document the presence of sites with similar assemblages.

The use of a relatively diverse range of raw materials, in particular Rùm bloodstone and baked mudstone, the latter possibly from the source at Staffin, north-east Skye, documents the wider interconnections and regional networks in

operation (Wickham-Jones & Hardy 2004; Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2008; Saville et al 2012). The geometric microlithic component finds wider regional parallels at sites with fragments recovered at Mercer Barr River site, as well as those further afield like Kinloch, Rùm (NMRS no.: NM49NW 3) and sites in the southern Hebrides (Mercer 1979; Wickham-Jones 1990; Mithen 2000). In the absence of firm dating it is difficult to consider this in more detailed terms, especially as several phases of activity are represented and especially given the wide date range currently available for such assemblages.

While the evidence is partial from Barr River, together with a wider body of evidence, it has been sufficient to inform an artist's speculative illustration of Mesolithic activity in these 'fluid seascapes'.

### 9.1 Later prehistoric and Early Bronze Age activity

While the absence of deposits and radiocarbon dates which directly relate to the Mesolithic were disappointing, the results of excavation and analysis do give an unintended insight into another era of activity in the second millennium BC. That there was subsequent activity at this location is no real surprise, not least due to the previous discovery of a barbed and tanged arrowhead and the evidence of a later charcoal-burning platform at the site. The charcoal dating to the second millennium BC may simply be the result of intrusive material migrating down the soil profile, but with the later lithic assemblage component it may represent a distinct phase of deposition. This may relate to increased erosion on the slope due to changing vegetation (potentially as forest clearance) and perhaps in combination with changing climatic conditions, as well as signalling more occupation/craft activity in the vicinity – perhaps more than might be suggested simply by a taskstation or lost arrow.

At a range of other Mesolithic sites there is evidence that suggests such locations were similarly favoured in the Bronze Age, including Camas Daraich, Skye (Wickham-Jones & Hardy 2004; NMRS no.: NG50SE 27), Kinloch, Rùm (Wickham-Jones 1990; NMRS no.: NM49NW 3), Sand, Applecross (Hardy & Wickham-Jones





**Illus 5** Illustrative drawing (© FCS by Dave Powell)

2008; NMRS no.:NG64NE 5) and further afield, as at Oliclett, Caithness (Pannett & Baines 2006; NMRS no.:ND34NW 43). These are all Mesolithic sites where barbed and tanged arrowheads and other Bronze Age knapping episodes are documented. North Barr River contributes to the growing body of evidence documenting certain types of Bronze Age activity taking place at such previously favoured locations in the landscape, perhaps part of wider deliberate practices of earlier site reuse also seen in the first millennium BC (for example Hingley 1996; Lelong & MacGregor 2007).

In conclusion, the limited programme of archaeological investigation at North Barr River has helped clarify the character and extent of some of the deposits present and has identified further traces of Mesolithic and later prehistoric activity at this location. There are, however, several outstanding questions,

such as the exact nature of the buried features and potential for in situ Mesolithic preservation. The survival of comparable deposits elsewhere uncovered in the context of forestry plantation, as also seen in the Southern Uplands (Ward 2005: 134), highlights the importance of pursuing investigation of these often discrete sites and fortuitous opportunities.

The location of North Barr River on the shores of Loch Teacuis, and the presence of a range of raw materials which had to be obtained elsewhere, inevitably means that the people using this site were situated in a wider network of relationships which may have extended by water into the inner Hebrides and beyond. In this respect the site contributes to the study of these spatial networks, while the late prehistoric activity and potential reuse in the second millennium BC also serves to remind us of the wider temporal networks at play in the past.