

8. DISCUSSION

The fieldwork at Ness Gap was carried out over three years and provided an opportunity for the study of the distinctive peninsula of Chanonry Ness and its surrounding landscape. The excavations at Ness Gap provide important insights into prehistoric life on the Black Isle, revealing a shift in the use of the site from domestic to funerary. The Neolithic pits indicate early domestic activity similar in nature to that found elsewhere on the Black Isle. Funerary practices at the site begin in the Early Bronze Age and develop through several centuries of prehistory. The differing practices reveal cultural attitudes, adaptations and the power of memory.

8.1 The first activity at Ness Gap

A Mesolithic presence at Ness Gap is hinted at from the limited lithic assemblage, which includes a single Mesolithic microburin from within the fill of Pit 327. Ephemeral evidence of Mesolithic activity was also found at the nearby site at Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works. A Mesolithic flint blade fragment was recovered in addition to a basal layer of a reused pit, producing a radiocarbon date of 7034–6700 cal BC (Fraser 2014: 59; Saville 2014: 39). Significant Mesolithic activity has recently been identified at Tarradale, Muir of Ord, which includes several shell middens on raised beaches (Grant 2018). The excavation of one midden revealed evidence for possible ephemeral structures with two antler T-axes, a biserial barbed antler point, and a red deer antler handle also being recovered (Grant 2018). The identification of Mesolithic activity at Ness Gap fits with the expected distribution of activity around the coastline of the Black Isle.

Three pits (325, 327 and 329), located in the north-east quadrant of the site, represent the earliest features at Ness Gap. The three pits, all of which contain sherds of Carinated Bowl, fit well into the growing corpus of research into prehistoric pits. Pits are a common feature of Neolithic sites in Britain identified at sites in Scotland including Grandtully, Perthshire (Simpson & Cole 1990); Deer's Den (Alexander 2000), Forest Road, Kintore (Cook & Dunbar 2008); Knocknagael Farm, Inverness (Kilpatrick 2016); Granton Road, Forres (Cook 2016); Meadowend Farm, Clackmannanshire (Jones

et al 2018) and Milltimber and Wester Hatton, Aberdeenshire (Dingwall et al 2019). Those at Ness Gap display similar traits, containing a single fill with charcoal, pottery, lithics and charred plant remains (Cook & Dunbar 2008; Smyth 2012; Thomas 2012). The purpose of these pits is poorly understood, although several recent studies have tried to make some sense of these features (Anderson-Whymark & Thomas 2012; Carver 2012; Noble et al 2016). Pits have been interpreted as ritual deposits, with evidence for the material having been selected and arranged within (Thomas 1999; Pollard 2001; Pannett 2012). Alternatively, they are often understood as the remains of domestic activity (Field et al 1964; McInnes 1971; Thomas 2012). The practice of digging pits and depositing material appears to be associated with the lifecycle of the community (Noble et al 2016: 194). The lack of Neolithic settlement evidence makes pits an important resource in understanding developing subsistence practices.

The pits at Ness Gap contain sherds of Carinated Bowls which appeared in Scotland during the first half of the 4th millennium BC (Sheridan 2003; Sheridan 2007: 9). Carinated Bowls are found across the north-east of Scotland, and further afield, with their presence on the Black Isle arguably indicating its participation in the successful development and expansion of farming (Sheridan 2014a: 32; Ray & Thomas 2018; Brace et al 2019). The abrasion on all three sherds suggests they had moved around or been open to the elements at some point, possibly in midden material, before slumping or being placed in the pits. The pottery is most likely the remains of domestic refuse with evidence for its use to contain foodstuffs as cookware. The charred plant remains, which include hulled barley and hazelnut grains, are also consistent with domestic refuse. The pits from Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works also contained carbonised cereal grains and hazelnut shell (Ramsay 2014: 62). The results from both sites indicate that during the Neolithic on the Black Isle, as across much of mainland Scotland, subsistence was based on both agriculture and the gathering of wild resources (Bishop et al 2009).

8.2 The Early Bronze Age

In the Chalcolithic to Early Bronze Age, the land at Ness Gap was used for both domestic and funerary purposes. A medium-sized pit, Pit 182, which was radiocarbon dated to 2290–2050 cal BC (95.4% probability; SUERC 64615) contained an assemblage of domestic Beaker pottery. Domestic Beakers are not as well understood as their funerary counterparts, as when they are discovered they are commonly found in pits with few associated features (Allen & Maltby 2012; Sheridan 2012). A large assemblage of domestic Beaker at Culduthel Mains Farm is probably the best recently identified and analysed assemblage of domestic Beaker in Scotland (Hatherley & Murray forthcoming). In total 24 beakers, most of which were thin-walled and fine, were identified and comparable to those retrieved from Ness Gap (Sheridan forthcoming). Beaker is well represented locally, with a complete example from a cist at Blackstand, Rosemarkie (Stevenson 1948–9) and sherds from around 19 vessels at Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works (Sheridan 2014a). At Ness Gap, the function of the Beaker pits was unclear, with their positioning in a landscape seemingly dominated by funerary activity poorly understood.

The earliest funerary features on the site consist of a group of three short-cist burials. The complete tripartite Food Vessel (V1), placed inverted in Cist 030, was similar to a tripartite Food Vessel discovered in the early 20th century in the neighbouring village of Rosemarkie (Walker 1903–4: 26). This example was decorated in a similar herringbone pattern but with whipped rather than twisted cord. Scottish Food Vessel dating would suggest a typological date for the vessel from Ness Gap of 2200–1520 cal BC (Sheridan 2004: 249). However, the radiocarbon date from oak charcoal in the cist is unexpectedly early (2440–2130 cal BC; 95.4% probability; SUERC-61665). The early date may be due to old wood effect, as the sample measured may derive from the heartwood, or the dating of residual material. The dating of Food Vessels is not conclusive, nor is our understanding of their relationship to other Bronze Age ceramics (Sheridan 2007). As such, the date from Ness Gap still makes an important contribution to the dating of Scottish Food Vessels and dated Bronze Age burials.

The lack of human remains within the cists limits any assessment of the placement of the vessel within the cist. There is some evidence to suggest that upright Food Vessels placed next to the head were 'possibly meant to hold food or drink to accompany the deceased' (Arablaolaza 2013: 11). While the vessel contained within Cist 030 was used for cooking or containing foodstuffs, it was inverted within the grave. The lack of human remains with the cist is not unusual, with a range of taphonomic processes accounting for their loss. There were traces of burnt bone in both cists at Ness Gap. However, there was not enough to conclude the presence or absence at one time of human remains buried within them. The contamination of Cist 417, evidenced by fragments of glass and hammerscale in the upper deposits, indicates a disturbance which could account for the loss of the remains. Empty cists have been found throughout Scotland, including at Dalmore, Alness, Ross-shire (Jolly & Aitken 1879). A metaphysical interpretation of empty cists has also been proposed, with empty funerary contexts functioning as cenotaphs (Allen 1981; Downes 2006; O'Donnell 2016). The empty cist may represent people whose remains could not be recovered, such as the 'boat-shaped' cists found at St Kilda for those lost at sea (Arablaolaza 2014: 16).

The condition of the sherds of pottery contained within Cist 417 is suggestive of being burnt, which may associate them with a funeral pyre prior to deposition within the cist. At Sannox Quarry, Isle of Arran, the cracks and poor condition of base sherds were explained by excessive heat, potentially from proximity to the funeral pyre (Arablaolaza 2014: 12). This is not the only example where funeral pyres have been related to pottery. It has been theorised that small accessory vessels were made for the funeral and fired on the pyre, accounting for their variety and, at times, hastily made appearance (Gibson 2003: 284). Whether or not the cists were intended for, or indeed used as a burial place for an individual, it is certain that they contain evidence of funerary rituals of the period.

The small amount of both domestic and funerary activity taking place during the Chalcolithic to Early Bronze Age does not paint a large enough picture to understand the potential overlap in Food Vessel and Beaker use, and it is unclear whether activities relating to each type represent concurrent or

consecutive activity. The location of Ness Gap on the shoreline of the Moray Firth may have gained greater significance from the Early Bronze Age onwards. During the Early Bronze Age, the Migdale-Marnoch period of bronze working in north-east Scotland flourished. From the Moray Firth along the Great Glen to Ireland was a major transport route and it is theorised that copper was transported from Ireland to the bronze workers of the north-east of Scotland (Curtis & Wilkin 2012: 240). During this period graves overlooking passes were monumentalised to be visible to people travelling along shores and crossing firths (Curtis & Wilkin 2012: 247). While there is no evidence for monuments over the graves at Ness Gap, the positioning of the graves may have echoed the importance of such locations along major routeways.

8.3 A 'special place' in the Middle Bronze Age and beyond

In the Middle Bronze Age domestic activity on the site ceases, with the land becoming part of a wider funerary landscape. Seven cremation burials, both urned and unurned, were discovered at Ness Gap, which contained diagnostic human remains accompanied by high-status objects. The palaeoenvironmental analysis suggests that oak, principally from the trunk and major branches, was preferentially selected for the pyre in Bronze Age cremations at Ness Gap. The use of oak may have been preferred as it burns at a high temperature. The dominance of a single taxon in prehistoric cremation assemblages has been observed at various sites including: Radley Barrow Hills (Thompson 1999) and Rollright Stones (Straker 1988) in Oxfordshire, and Templenoe in County Tipperary (O'Donnell 2011).

The funerary complex at Ness Gap does not exist in isolation, with four cremations, two urned and two unurned, discovered 600m to the north-west at Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works (Fraser 2014: 65). The presence of funerary activity at both sites may even indicate that the landscape was considered a 'special place', perhaps due to its location on the distinctive Chanonry Ness. No evidence was retrieved during excavation to suggest the use of visible markers over the burials to indicate their location in the wider landscape. However, there

may have been some indicator as to their location. This is inferred by the proximity of V4 to V5 and V6, as the differences in pit shape and depth do not suggest they were deposited at the same time. The close proximity of features seems deliberate and would have been difficult to achieve without prior knowledge of the location of V5 and V6. The use of markers is presumed at the larger-scale cremation cemetery site at Skilmafilly, Aberdeenshire where 41 pits were recorded to have little evidence for re-cutting or disturbance (Johnson & Cameron 2012).

8.3.1 The urns and the deposition of burial goods

The cremations at Ness Gap were contained within Cordoned Urns, which are not as numerous across the Moray Firth region as further south in Aberdeenshire and the Lothians (Waddell 1995: 120). Cordoned Urns can date between 1880 and 1500 BC (Sheridan 2003: 207; 2007: 169) and their use in the cremation burials at Ness Gap helps define this burial practice. The combined radiocarbon dates retrieved from the Ness Gap pottery fall between 1755 cal BC and 1450 cal BC. The Cordoned Urns discovered at the nearby cemetery at the Waste Water Works produced a date range of 1870–1620 cal BC (Fraser 2014: 34). The potential of earlier activity at Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works may indicate that the use of this cemetery began before that at Ness Gap, although both could have been in use at the same time. The range of dates, spanning the use of the Cordoned Urns across Scotland, and the variation between vessels at Ness Gap, demonstrate the complexity of the tradition echoed elsewhere (Waddell 1995).

The presence of metal items in five of the cremations at Ness Gap suggests that the occupants of these graves had been afforded a high status in society. The association with Cordoned Urns (in the case of vessels V2, V4, V5 and V6), and the presence of probable razors in urns V4 and V5 accords with a pattern noted for Cordoned Urns, both in Scotland and in Ireland (Kavanagh 1991; Waddell 1995). The dates obtained for urns V4 and V5 is in line with the currency of Early Bronze Age razors. In Scotland, for example, there have been recent finds of razors associated with Cordoned Urns at Hill of Tuack, Aberdeenshire (Sheridan et al 2016), Broich Road,

Crieff, Perth and Kinross (Sheridan 2014c) and Kilmagadwood, Perth and Kinross (Sheridan et al 2018); the first two are associated with radiocarbon dates comparable with those for urns V4 and V5 (see Brindley 2007: 371–2 for dates for Irish razors).

The deposition of specific types of metal objects in male and female graves is well established in the Bronze Age. Razors are almost invariably with males (Kavanagh 1991; Waddell 1995; Jockenhövel 1980: 30), making the apparent association with females at Ness Gap intriguing. The remains from both V4 and V5 were identified as *probably* female, introducing the possibility that they are in fact male. Yet the putative razor from V4 has been interpreted as potentially being for female use as it is smaller and thinner than ordinary Early Bronze Age razors. The small and thin razor found in an Early Bronze Age grave at the Mound of the Hostages, Tara, County Meath has been interpreted in this manner (Sheridan et al 2013). As for the putative handle-mount found in V4, this is unparalleled among British Bronze Age razors, and so its identification as such needs to be regarded as tentative.

In V6 the remains of a probable adult female were deposited with an awl, a bone bead and a faience bead. Early Bronze Age awls and beads are predominantly associated with female graves (Thomas & Ellwood 2005). A nearby contemporary parallel for the presence of both beads and an awl can be cited from the Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works cemetery. There, a bipartite urn was found to contain the remains of a probable female, along with an awl and fired clay beads, all of which had passed through the pyre (Sheridan 2014b). The calcined condition of the bone bead at Ness Gap indicates that it also passed through the pyre.

The faience bead does not show the extreme signs of heat alteration occasionally seen in burnt faience beads, for example in a segmented bead from Stoneyburn, South Lanarkshire, whose hole had become fused shut (Sheridan 1995). Nevertheless, the variable condition of the faience beads found across the Moray Firth at 102 Findhorn (Sheridan & McDonald 2001: illus. 8.24), together with experimental work by the author, makes it clear that some faience beads can pass through a pyre without incurring serious heat-damage. The loss of most of the glaze from the Ness Gap bead, the presence of probable cuprite specks, and the ancient loss of

two small spalls from the larger fragment, all point towards some degree of heat damage consistent with the faience bead having been worn during the cremation. It seems likely that both beads found associated with urn V6 had originally formed part of a single piece of jewellery such as a necklace that may well have been worn by the deceased.

Cordoned Urns are the commonest urn to be associated with faience beads in northern Britain (Sheridan & Shortland 2004). The radiocarbon dates associated with the Ness Gap beads fit well within the overall date range of faience beads in Britain and Ireland (Sheridan & Shortland 2004: illus. 21.1). The faience bead joins the regional Moray Firth cluster of such beads, the best known of which are the 22 segmented, two star-shaped and one quoit-shaped bead that made up the 102 Findhorn Necklace (Shepherd & Shepherd 2001). Other members of this cluster comprise a handful of segmented beads, also from Findhorn, found by local resident Michael Sharpe. In addition, a dozen segmented beads and four star-shaped beads were found on Culbin Sands, just across the bay from Findhorn (Shepherd & Shepherd 2001). As at Ness Gap, the 102 Findhorn Necklace had been associated with the remains of a woman along with a neonate or third-trimester foetus (Shepherd & Shepherd 2001: 106). Indeed, wherever the sex of the deceased associated with faience beads has been reliably determined, it has consistently been female (including in cases where more than one individual's remains are present), with the notable exception of a male youth at Tara in Ireland (Sheridan et al 2013).

There are stylistic differences and similarities between the beads from 102 Findhorn and Ness Gap. As at Ness Gap, several of the Findhorn segmented beads have traces of the internal corrugation caused by wrapping the paste around a straw (Sheridan et al 2013: Illus 10). The segments on the beads from 102 Findhorn were created by jabbing a sharp tool at several points around each bead (Sheridan & McDonald 2001: 116), whereas the segments on the Ness Gap bead were created by scoring around the bead. The analysis of the 102 Findhorn beads revealed that they had almost certainly been manufactured locally, with seaweed ash being the probable fluxing agent (Sheridan & McDonald 2001: 119; Sheridan et al 2004). While the Ness Gap bead has not yet been analysed, it is at least likely that it too was

made locally. The difference in the technique of forming the segments, a feature also noted on the other Moray Firth segmented beads, confirms the impression that these were made in small numbers, probably by metalworkers (who would have had access to the copper/copper-based glaze colourant and who knew how to heat materials to a high temperature). The distinctive concentration of finds from around the Moray Firth, particularly Culbin Sands, has led to the suggestion that the area was key to long-distance sea trade (Bradley et al 2016: 25).

The bone fusiform bead finds a parallel in a bead found with cremated remains of four individuals (two adults including one male,

one adolescent and an infant) in a Collared Urn at Eweford West, East Lothian (Lelong & MacGregor 2008: 109). Closer to Ness Gap, the Early Bronze Age cemetery at the Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works site has produced two fusiform fired clay beads plus an oblate bead of the same material. The proximity between the two sites, the similarities in cremation deposits, and the suite of radiocarbon dates make it likely that the cemeteries may have been linked and broadly contemporary. The sites may form part of the 'tight little knot of Cordoned Urns from the Laigh of Moray' described by Shepherd and Shepherd (2001: 110).