

# New evidence for Mesolithic settlement on Colonsay

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## ABSTRACT

*Describes the identification, through field-walking and test excavation, of two Mesolithic sites on Colonsay.*

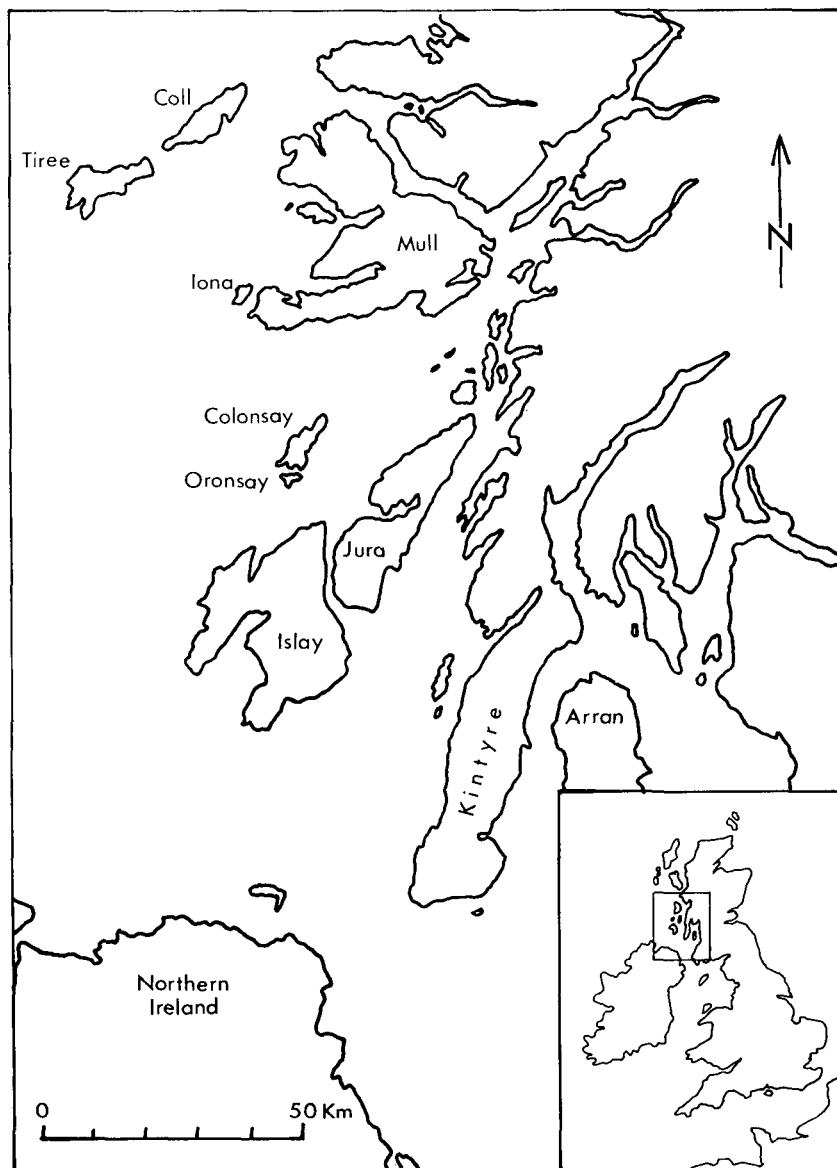
## INTRODUCTION

The shell middens on Oronsay (Mellars 1987) rank second only to Star Carr for gaining an understanding of early post-glacial settlement in Britain. As with Star Carr, however, we can only interpret the middens and use them for reconstructing early post-glacial settlement by viewing them in a regional context. In this light the lack of information concerning Mesolithic sites on the adjacent island of Colonsay and the nearby island of Islay (illus 1), places a serious constraint on the drawing of inferences from the Oronsay middens. Once information from these islands is available it should be possible to integrate it with that from Oronsay, as well as Jura (Mercer 1968; 1970; 1971; 1972; 1974; 1980; Mercer & Searight 1986), to make substantial progress in tackling issues concerning colonization, settlement systems and the transition to farming in the southern Hebrides. As a result a research project has been established in Cambridge to investigate Mesolithic occupation on Colonsay and Islay with the aim of adopting a regional perspective on Mesolithic settlement in the southern Hebrides. This involves survey and excavation on the islands and the development of computer simulation models to help guide fieldwork and interpret results. Elsewhere (Mithen 1988a) I have described some exploratory excavations at a Mesolithic site on Gleann Mor, Islay. Here I report on the possible identification of the first two Mesolithic sites on Colonsay. It is hoped that these will be examined by future excavation. A full report covering the 1988 fieldwork on Colonsay and Islay (Mithen 1988b) is available on request.

## FIELDWALKING AND THE MACHRINS 3 SITE (NGR NR 371 935)

A first strategy for locating Mesolithic sites on Colonsay was to intensively fieldwalk all available ploughed land and dune areas on the island. This took place during Easter 1987 and 1988. Since the amount of ploughed land on Colonsay is limited, and at that time reduced further by wet weather, fieldwalking could only sample a small area of the island (illus 2). That available consisted of small fields dotted irregularly over the low-lying part of the island often with poor surface conditions for the recovery of material.

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ILLUS 1 The southern Hebrides

The 152 pieces of worked flint recovered from the fields have preliminarily been examined by T R G Reynolds (University of Cambridge): tables 1 and 2. They are dominated by an anvil-based bipolar reduction method. In this, beach pebbles were reduced to provide a series of usable flakes which have crushed platforms and usually some damage to the distal flake portion. Included in this collection is a small series of cores and retouched pieces (illus 3). In the majority of fields the flint appeared randomly and evenly distributed, rather than clustering to suggest a discrete site.

Within the collection, however, there was evidence for a second reduction method in which large pebbles were quartered to produce true platforms from which blades and microblades were

TABLE 1  
Lithic material from fieldwalking (see illus 2)

	Chips <sup>3</sup>	Flakes	Bladelets	Cores	Notches	Burins	Scrapers
Machrins 1 <sup>1</sup>	2	26		5		1	2
Machrins 2 <sup>2</sup>	1	4					1
Machrins 3	5	19	6	4			2
Scalasaig 1	3	13	1				
Fada	3	2					
Duntealtaig	4	12		4	1	2	
L Kilchatten	1	4	1		1	1	1
Balnahard		4	1	1	2		
Baleromindubh							1

<sup>1</sup> Also a Porcellanite ground stone axe (see Mithen *et al.*, in press)

<sup>2</sup> Also a tabular gunflint

<sup>3</sup> Pieces of an amorphous character and without distinctive fracture patterns

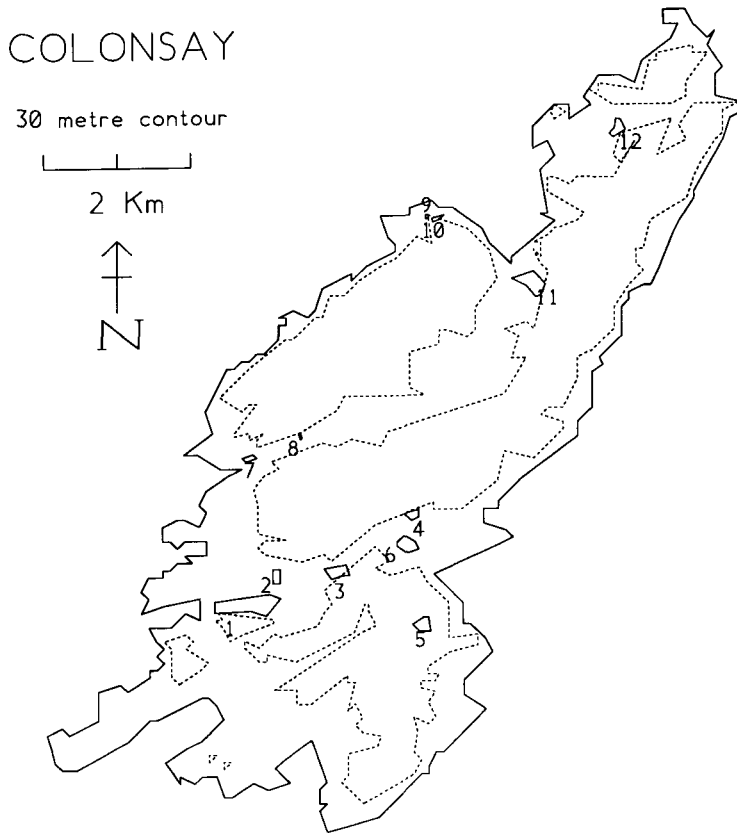
TABLE 2  
Cores

	Single platform core	Micro blade/ flake	Bladelet	Core/ scraper	Fragment	Flaked pebble
Machrins 1	1	2	1	1		
Machrins 3		1	2	1	1	
Duntealtaig	2	1				1
L Kilchatten						1
Balnahard				1		

detached. This technique was particularly found in the assemblage from the field known as Machrins 3 (NR 371 935) in which there was a relatively dense and discrete concentration of flint in the central area. This material included two fine microblade cores, a series of bladelet fragments and scrapers (illus 4). Owing to the spatial concentration of this material, and the close resemblance to Mesolithic material from sites on Jura, Islay and Rhum, it can be suggested that a Mesolithic site has been identified at this location.

#### TEST EXCAVATION AND THE SCALASAIG BAY SITE (NR 396 942)

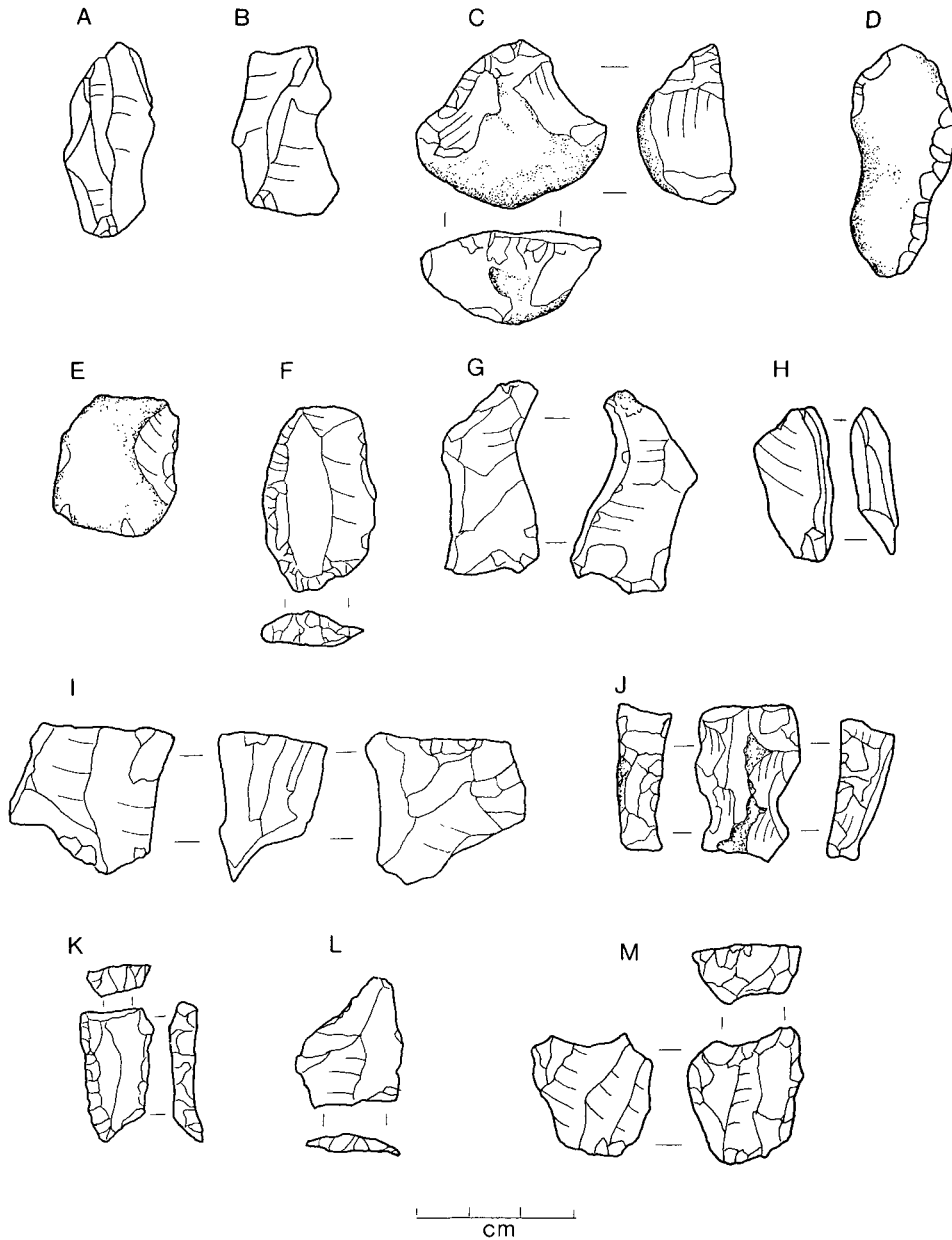
A second strategy to locate Mesolithic sites was to predict where they might be and to make test excavations in that area. This method is necessary for exploring settlement patterns in the highland zone but is one that may require a considerable investment of time and labour (eg Bang-Andersen 1987). Such predictions were made on the basis of the location of Mesolithic sites on other islands in the Hebrides. A regular pattern can be seen of settlement at between 10 and 20 m OD, on the east coast of the islands at the head of large lochs and bays. The height reflects the higher post-glacial sea level. The maximum marine transgression has been suggested to lie at 12–15m OD on the east coast of Jura (Mercer & Searight 1986) and at 5–9m OD on Oronsay (Jardine 1987). Such locations were chosen by the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers on Jura (eg Lealt Bay, Carn Bay, Lussa River: Mercer 1968; 1971) and on Rhum (Wickham-Jones & Pollock 1985). It is an understandable choice in that such locations would provide shelter and landing places. On Colonsay there are two locations which meet these characteristics, the bay at Scalasaig, and that slightly south called Loch Staosnaig. The former would have been larger under the higher sea level of the early post-glacial and provides entrance to a principal route across the island, as do Glengarrisdale and Lealt Bay on Jura (Mercer 1971; Mercer & Searight 1986).



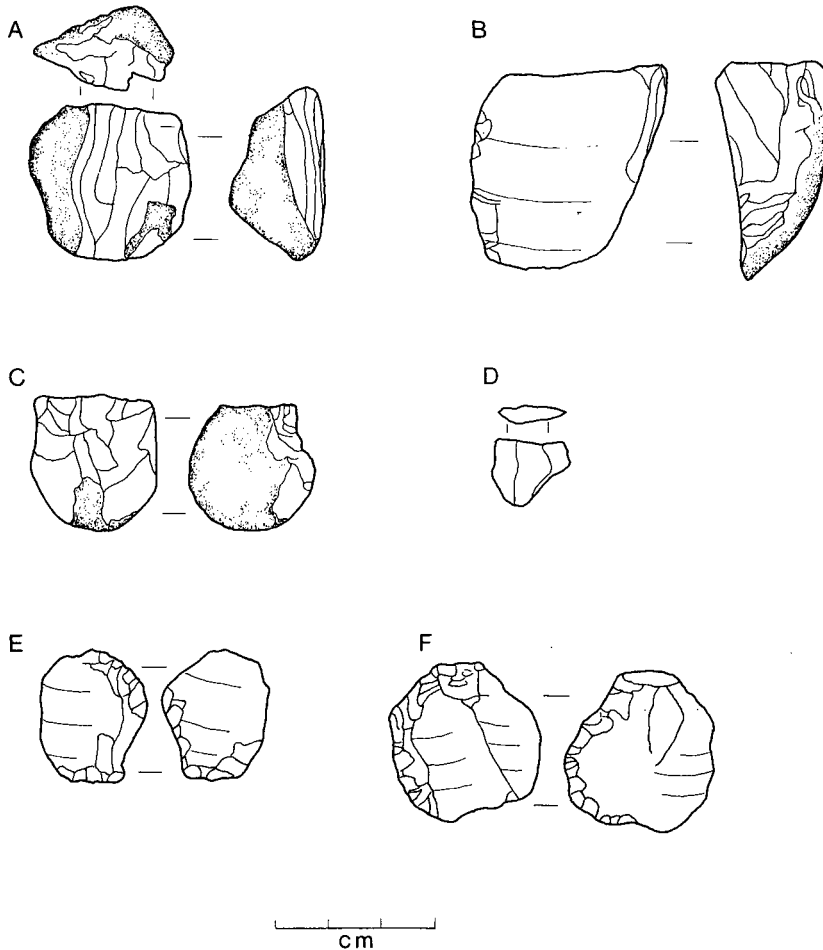
ILLUS 2 Areas fieldwalked on Colonsay, 1987–88: 1, Machrins 1; 2, Machrins 2; 3, Machrins 3; 4, Scalasaig 1; 5, Baleromindubh; 6, Na Dromannan; 7, Lower Kilchattan; 8, Fada; 9, Duntealtaig; 10, Uragaig; 11, Kiloran; 12, Balnahard

Scalasaig Bay (NR 396 942) was chosen therefore for the first investigations. One small field, Scalasaig 2, was pinpointed for an initial test-pitting exercise (illus 5), following the find of a retouched blade/flake from the section cut by the river flowing through this field. Forty 0.5 m<sup>2</sup> test pits were dug on a 10 m-grid and a contour survey was made of the field. No stratigraphy was apparent in any of the pits. The soil depth varied from 17 cm to greater than 72 cm in the deepest, which could not be bottomed. Below the soil lay either a very compact sandy gravel deposit, at levels below 14.0 m OD, or a pebbly gravel at levels above this.

Eleven of the pits contained worked stone, which has also been examined by T R G Reynolds, some of which is illustrated in illus 6. As can be seen from the plan (illus 5) and table 3 (fiche 1:A4); those which contained worked stone tended to cluster in the north-east corner of the field upon a small terrace at between 11 and 15 m OD. Included in this material were numerous bladelet fragments, a micro-core/scrapper and a backed bladelet with a small plain platform. While this microlith is the only culturally diagnostic piece, the attribution of a Mesolithic label to this flint scatter is supported by the similarity of the microblade technology, which includes extensive platform



ILLUS 3 Worked flint from Colonsaig acquired by fieldwalking (see illus 2): a, A flake-blade with a shattered platform, Machrins 1; b, A flake-blade with a shattered platform, Machrins 1; c, A nosed core/scrapper, Machrins 1; d, A pebble backed, crushed platform blade with a scraper retouched on the left margin, Machrins 1; e, A plain platformed, pebble backed edge damaged flake with a retouched notch, Lower Kilchatten; f, An irregularly retouched 'horse hoof'-shaped scraper on a plain platform, Lower Kilchatten; g, A double burin on a flake, Lower Kilchatten; h, A multiple burin, Duntealtaig; i, A single platformed, micro-flake/blade core, Duntealtaig; j, An abruptly retouched, opposed double notch on a medial flake fragment, Duntealtaig; k, A double arrete, bilaterally retouched bladelet fragment, Scalasaig 1; l, A truncated distal flake, Scalasaig 1; m, An inversely retouched notch on a distal flake fragment, Duntealtaig

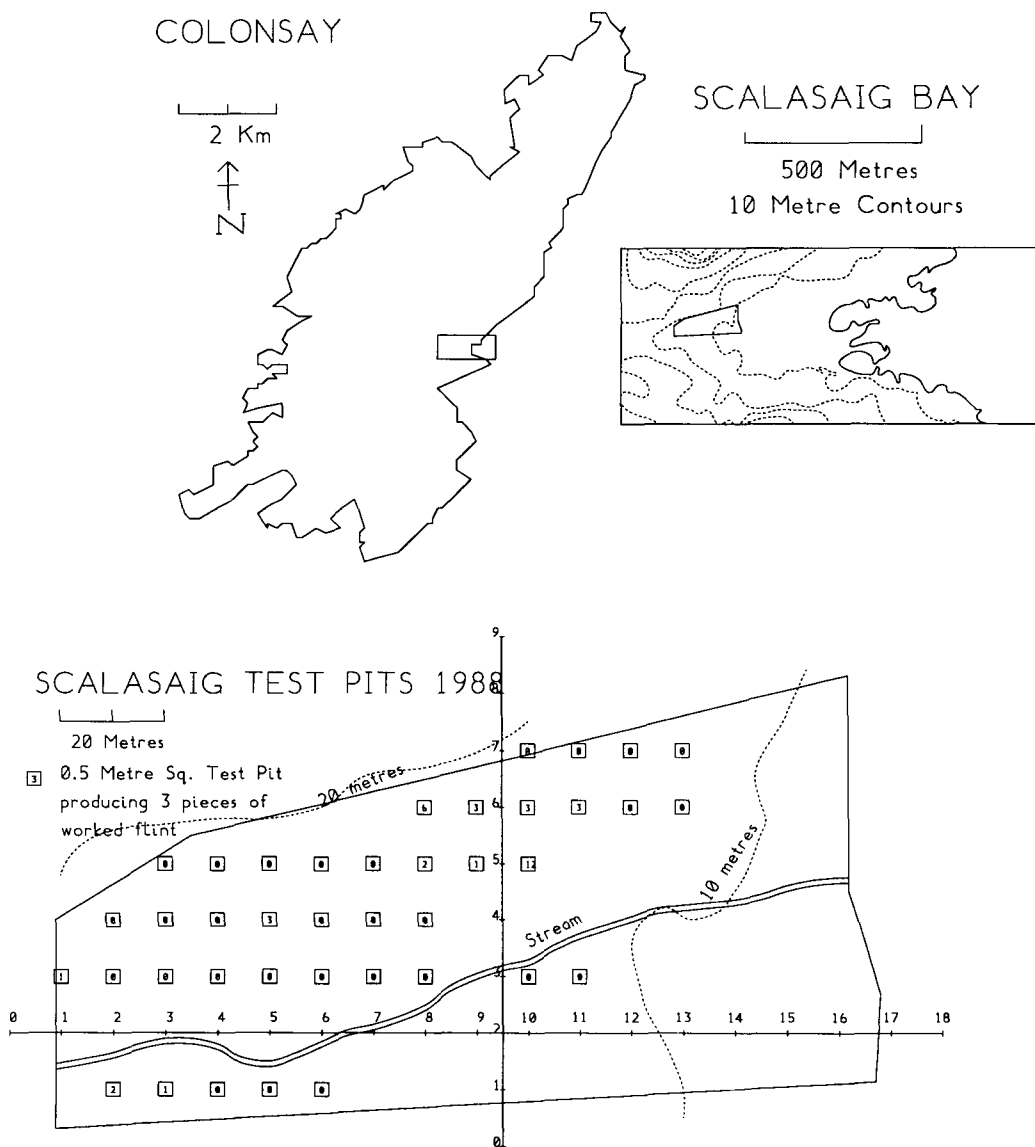


ILLUS 4 Worked flint from Machrins 3, Colonsay: a, A pebble backed, single platformed bladelet core; b, A quartered pebble core with two bladelet removals; c, A single platform micro flake core; d, A double arrete medial bladelet fragment; e, An alternatively retouched plain platformed flake scraper; f, A 'horse hoof'-shaped core/scraper

preparation, to that from Mesolithic sites on Jura, Islay and Rhum. The location of the site also meets that predicted for Mesolithic settlement. Whether this scatter warrants being called a 'site' is of course contentious. It cannot be ascertained at present whether the test pits have located a small, ephemeral scatter containing a low density of flints, or the edge of a more substantial site.

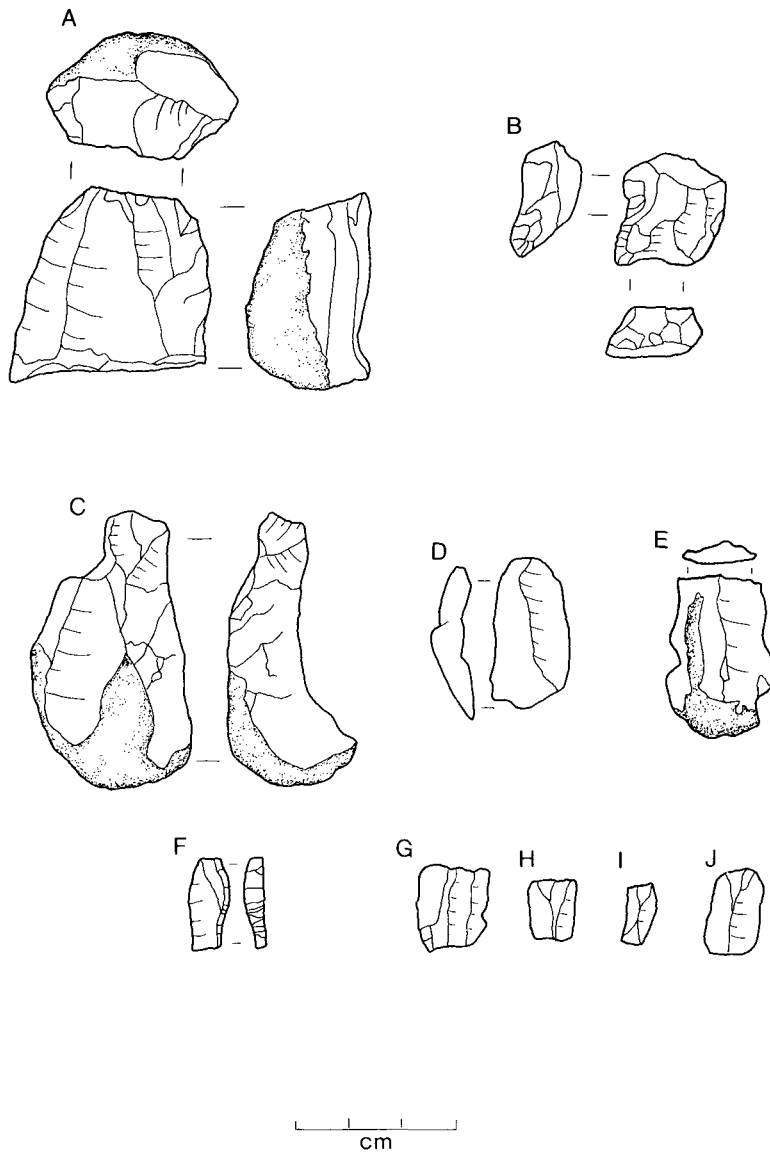
#### FUTURE WORK

The immediate need is to make further explorations at these two locations. By these a larger sample of the lithic material would be acquired, spatial patterning in flint distribution investigated and samples taken for environmental analysis and absolute dating. Such data may have considerable



ILLUS 5 Scalasaig Bay test pits 1988

implications for the interpretation of the Oronsay middens. Are these Mesolithic settlements on Colonsay, if indeed that is what they are, contemporary with the middens and hence part of a single subsistence-settlement system? If so, what sort of site do they represent? Might one of these be the location of a base camp from which hunter-gatherers made special visits for seal-hunting, fishing and shell-fish gathering on Oronsay? If, following excavation of these sites, a substantial microlithic component is found in the lithic assemblages this may increase the probability that there were red deer on Colonsay during the early post-glacial, which is currently a contentious issue (Grigson & Mellars 1987). Our interpretations of the Oronsay middens would also be furthered if these Meso-



**ILLUS 6** Worked flint from Scalasaig Bay test pits (see table 3 – fiche 1:A4): a, A single platform blade/flake core, pit (1, 3); b, A micro-core/scrapper on a distal flake fragment, pit (9, 6); c, A large plain platformed plunged flake with cortex on the butt, pit (8, 6); d, A quartz flake, pit (2, 1); e, A transversely snapped, single arrete distal flake fragment with some cortex on its butt, pit (8, 6); f, A microlithic proximal backed bladelet with a small plain platform, pit (10, 5); g–j, Bladelet fragments, pit (10, 5)

lithic sites on Colonsay prove to date earlier than the middens and be contemporary with sites such as Lussa River, Jura and Newton, Islay, ie sixth millennium BC. This may add weight to the view that the late phases of occupation at the Oronsay middens are the traces of a relict group of hunter-gatherer-fishers surrounded by populations practising a Neolithic lifestyle. As these questions and speculations



imply, now that possible traces of Mesolithic settlement on Colonsay have been located, excavation at these sites will allow substantial progress to be made in our understanding of Mesolithic settlement in the southern Hebrides.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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