

Lecture summaries 2000–2001

Preparing for the afterlife: the human experience of death

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Our caring for the dead and their remains is something at the core of our humanity, a practice which is not found among primates although it seems to be a behavioural trait that we share with elephants. This caring for the dead has taken many forms and can be identified well back into the Palaeolithic, arguably as long as a quarter of a million years ago if not earlier. Our living with the knowledge of death has been considered by some as the muse of philosophy and religion, the source for human motivation, achievement and aspiration.

We all want to know what happens when we die; archaeological and documentary evidence suggests that we have been asking this question — and seeking answers to it — for a very long time indeed, long before the legendary Gilgamesh set out on his quest for immortality. Even from prehistory we can grasp something of ancient peoples' beliefs and faiths because these creations of the mind were, to a certain extent, materialized in funerary, architectural and iconographic form.

This paper explores the earlier part of that human journey into death by examining the material remains of the practices and institutions which formed past understandings of what happened to the dead. From Palaeolithic cave burials to Neolithic skull cults to Pharaonic monumentality to the temples, mosques, synagogues and churches of the world religions, every age has constructed its images of the afterlife in earthly acts and material forms which are often the most lasting monuments of those cultures.

This paper takes the approach that past religions developed in relation to their material conditions and that elaborate rationalisations of what happens after death have been central to religious belief. The historical circumstances and nature of today's world religions are very different from those of the 'deity/hero' cults of Egypt and Mesopotamia in previous millennia which, in turn, differ from the ancestor cults of the Neolithic. Notions of Neolithic goddess worship along the lines of an ancient 'world religion' are here considered as inappropriate back-projections of contemporary conceptions of religion. This paper focuses on evidence primarily from the Near and Middle East because this crossroads of the world, between Asia, Africa and Europe, has been a seedbed of innovative conceptions about death and the afterlife, probably from the Middle Palaeolithic to the first millennium AD. Out of this extraordinary region have come ideas over the millennia that have changed the world.

The circumnavigation of Scotland by Agricola's fleet in the early AD 80s: possible evidence from Dun Ardtreck, Skye

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Edinburgh, 8 January 2001

The question of whether early historical evidence can be successfully amalgamated with prehistoric archaeological data was considered, using the example of Tacitus' account of the circumnavigation of Scotland by Governor Agricola's fleet in the early AD 80's during which a safe harbour, *Trucculensis portus*, was found. The location of this place, otherwise unknown, has never been firmly established.

One interpretation of the Latin text suggests that there were actually two voyages, one up the west coast in 81, during Agricola's fifth campaign in south-west Scotland, and one in the autumn of 83 (after the battle of Mons Graupius which ended his seventh campaign) which sailed up the east coast and round the north of Scotland. The circumnavigation would thus have been completed in two separate years and the safe harbour, visited on two occasions, would have been somewhere far up on the north-west coast.

Loch Broom was an early suggested identification. However the two prominent Iron Age sites on its south shore, Dun Lagaidh and Dun an Rhiroy, have both been excavated and, though both provided clear evidence for occupation in the first century AD, not a single Roman object was found at either site.

A fleet of war galleys and sailing ships coming up the western seas in 81 — following coasts which are mostly rugged and inhospitable-looking — would probably have relied on sightings of brochs to tell them where to land for supplies of food and water. If there were war galleys in the fleet (unable to carry much cargo) the number of men needing regular sustenance could have been considerable. The first place with many coastal brochs is the north-west part of Skye and a fleet approaching from the south would soon have identified the wide bay of Loch Bracadale as a likely safe anchorage; the narrow Loch Harport opens to the east of this and is known as a good anchorage in modern sailing manuals. At the outer end of this loch, and overlooking Loch Bracadale, is Dun Ardtreck a broch-like Iron Age stronghold standing on a cliff-top in a very strong naturally defensive position. Excavated in 1965, the finds from this site can now be re-interpreted as providing support for the idea that that the dun was visited at least once by the Roman navy and that *Trucculensis portus* may have been in Loch Harport.

Roman finds were on the site in Phase 2 (primary occupation) and included a probable whole jar of Severn Valley ware, a bronze needle, a melon bead and an iron axe-hammer of military type (though this was found in Phase 3 deposits). A remarkable iron door-handle was found in the entrance passage which could be an import. Several other small bronze objects look exotic but have not yet been positively identified. Phase 2 was ended by a fierce fire inside the dun, followed by the substantial demolition of its walls. From this fairly clear archaeological evidence a case might be advanced for two naval visits to the site, a friendly one in 81 and a hostile one in 83 when the dun was stormed and thrown down.

The genesis of photography in Scotland

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Edinburgh, 9 April 2001

Photography was discovered in 1839 in two forms, each subsequently championed as having priority by nationalist schools of historians. The French process, named after its inventor, was the daguerreotype, a single, fragile, reversed image, but with a beguiling mirror-like reflection of reality. The English invention, the calotype (from the Greek, meaning 'beautiful picture') became the ancestor of all forms of modern photography, consisting of a negative and as many positives as desired. Produced after many years of trials by the Wiltshire landowner and amateur scientist, William Henry Fox Talbot, the calotype was rushed into the public domain because of the French announcement of success; yet was almost immediately hedged around with protective patents and licences — but only in England.

Fortunately, Scotland at this date had a separate (and expensive) patent system. Talbot corresponded with the St Andrews author and scientist, David Brewster, and in this way news of his invention spread to the north. However, although historians have previously stressed this link, news of various forms of photography — and indeed new varieties — came to and were practised in Edinburgh even before the advent of the famous partnership of D O Hill and Robert Adamson, which was formed in May 1843. This was because Edinburgh had at this period a flourishing tradition of chemistry teaching — essential for the successful practice of calotyping — together with accessibility to new knowledge as a centre for the publication of learned journals, scientific works and serials. Under the auspices of a variety of societies, but especially the Society of (the useful) Arts for Scotland, a number of photographic pioneers emerged.

Andrew Fyfe, an extra-mural chemistry lecturer, was by March 1839 able to follow and reproduce Talbot's process from his printed description, although he had problems with fixing the positive image. He tried a number of different fixing agents, and also, importantly, produced a significant practical application of photography to lithography — the first successful application of photography to a printing process.

Another pioneer was Dr Douglas Maclagan, who was able to produce for public inspection, examples of 'photogenic drawings' — these were negative impressions of items, such as lace or botanical specimens. More importantly, a lawyer named Mungo Ponton delivered a lecture in May 1839 which described a photographic process which used no silver salts. The discovery that sunlight renders potassium bichromate insoluble forms the basis of nearly all photo-mechanical processes, including the production of printed circuit-boards.

The French daguerreotype process was not described in full until August 1839, and the first examples of this were exhibited to an interested Scottish public in October by James Howie, who opened a studio on the rooftops of Princes Street in 1841. Not many provenanced Scottish daguerreotypes have survived, although it is known that a number of people were successful with the process. However, the daguerreotype was technically a dead-end, whereas the calotype proved to be more versatile, and could produce a multiplicity of images from a single negative. In the hands of the Adamson brothers in St Andrews learning to use the new process, a number of successful images of the ancient city survive, demonstrating this fruitful marriage of science and art.

Archaeological cinefilms by the late Anne S Robertson

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Edinburgh, 14 May 2001

In her entry in *Who's Who*, Professor Anne Robertson (1910–97) cited photography as one of her interests. This included the making of cinefilms from the early 1950s to her retirement in 1975. Early films are in black-and-white, later films in colour; there is no soundtrack. Professor Robertson recorded her own excavations at the Roman forts of Castledykes, South Lanarkshire (1953–5), Kirkintilloch, East Dunbartonshire (1953–61), Birrens, Dumfriesshire (1962–9), Cardean, Angus (1968–75), and small-scale work along the Antonine Wall, as well as the excavations by Dr Horace Fairhurst at the Iron Age fort of Meikle Reive, East Dunbartonshire (1954–5) and of Dr Euan MacKie at the broch of Dun Mor Vaul, Tiree (1962–4). She also recorded the CBA Scottish Regional Group summer schools at Dumfries (1953) and Aberdeen (1954), attended by archaeological luminaries including Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Sir Ian Richmond, Stuart Piggott, Robert Stevenson, F T Wainwright, Brian Hope-Taylor, John Gillam, and W Douglas Simpson, and many of our present Fellows. The films are now important historical documents in their own right. The excavation at Cardean was left unpublished at her death, but is now being worked up for publication; thus the film has an additional significance. Her film of the Antonine Wall, made in 1956–60, records the entire length of the monument at a fixed date, before motorways, housing and industrial developments swept away long stretches; the film serves too as an interesting sociological record of rural Scotland at the time, and includes film of excavations in progress at Polmont, Mumrills and at Rough Castle.

A diet of limpets? New work by the *Scotland's First Settlers Project* on the early settlement of the Inner Sound, West Scotland.

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The *Scotland's First Settlers Project* (SFS) was set up in 1998 to investigate the early settlement of the Inner Sound area between Skye and the mainland. It aims to break new ground as a seascape project looking at the relationship between the early inhabitants of the area and the sea. Work is concentrated on the coastal areas, taking into account both current and ancient coastlines, in order to gather information on the lifestyle of the nomadic Mesolithic dwellers who used these coasts 9000–5000 years ago.

The work of the project comprises three main strands: coastal survey; test-pitting; and excavation. At the time of speaking, survey work has found an astonishing 131 new sites. These comprise 100 caves and rockshelters, 22 open lithic scatters, and nine open shell middens. Of the newly found sites 48 have been test-pitted, in order to assess preservation and date. Although some sites have yielded stone tools, suggesting a prehistoric date, not all of the test-pitted sites are

Mesolithic. At the last count 10 sites had finds that definitely suggested a Mesolithic date. As part of the survey work a small amount of shovel-pitting has also been carried out, mostly around Applecross Bay, and it has resulted in the location of two new open air sites with stone tools of uncertain date.

So far detailed attention has concentrated on the rock-shelter site of Sand, just to the north of Applecross. This was found in 1998 and test pits in 1999 showed there to be a limpet midden which was dated in that year to c 6500 BC. It was thus earlier than many shell midden sites. Sand was therefore selected for detailed excavation in 2000. The site comprises a shallow rock-shelter, facing east. There is no apparent archaeological preservation within the shelter, but midden material is preserved immediately in front of the shelter at the upper end of a grassy apron. The shell midden lies only a few centimetres below the surface turf and extends for approximately 4 by 5 m. It is a deeply stratified midden made up mainly of unconsolidated dry limpet shells, but other shellfish, together with fish bones as well as animal and bird bones were also found. Excavation yielded a variety of tools of bone, stone (including narrow blade microliths) and antler, together with waste from tool manufacture. In addition, there were artefacts of worked shell, including fine cowrie shell beads and cut scallops. Unlike other midden sites, there was no evidence for structures within the area excavated, neither within the midden, nor alongside it. Away from the midden excavation showed that, as expected, organic preservation deteriorated rapidly, but there were still quantities of flaked stone.

Detailed post-excavation work is only just starting, but a few general points may be made. Shell middens can now be seen to occur throughout the Mesolithic and are not as rare a feature of the Scottish Mesolithic as once thought (though there are clearly different types of shell midden, so that differentiation through time may well be found). SFS has also documented several lithic scatter sites with early potential so that the database of Mesolithic information has been greatly extended. With regard to the artefacts: microliths have been shown conclusively to occur on midden sites, both in association with the midden and away from it. Further work will take place on both the bone and antler tools as well as the working of shell.

An important feature of SFS is also the broader picture that may only be obtained through the study of a geographical area such as the Inner Sound. Individual sites do not exist in isolation and this is nowhere more true than in the Mesolithic: a time of nomadic and sophisticated use of the land. Initial information linking sites, and documenting contact and movement is coming from various aspects of the project, but the analysis of the lithic raw materials promises to be especially interesting. The project has documented certain very specific outcrops of good knapping stone, all of which were used in prehistory. Baked Mudstone from Staffin and Bloodstone from Rum are among the two most specifically sourced and best known. Along with other materials such as Chalcedonic Silica, flint, quartz, agates and chert these stones were used in differing amounts on individual sites and the patterns of use should help to build up a picture of the networks of contact within in the Mesolithic.

The project is also concerned to document environmental change in the early Holocene, and the human responses to this. Detailed work on sea-level change, pollen analysis, and soil development is underway. The use of the abundant shellfish remains have a part to play here for they are an important indicator of changing marine conditions and they may also help with information on the seasonality of the various sites.

A basic web-site for the project has already been developed and it is hoped to keep this up to date with new information as work develops: www.moray.ac.uk/ccs/settlers.htm

Event and process in the Scottish Viking Age

Alex Woolf

Edinburgh, 12 November 2001

Central to the understanding of the Scottish Viking Age, the period, between c AD 800 and 1100 lies the question of the disappearance of the Picts. From a position as the dominant power in northern Britain at the beginning of the period they seem to have disappeared completely by the 12th century both in subjective terms (there was no group surviving who identified themselves as Picts) and in objective terms (their language and any distinctive aspects of their material culture had also disappeared). In the north of the region a Scandinavian cultural zone emerged and in the south the Gaelic kingdom of Alba emerged. To what extent the kingdom of Alba was built on Pictish foundations remains a moot point. Whether scholars choose to see the transformations as event-centred or as the result of long drawn out processes depends to a great extent on differing disciplinary approaches to the evidence.

The emphasis of traditional histories on dynastic origins and deeds and their failure to comment on cultural transformation has provided an insurmountable barrier to understanding the questions that prove most intriguing to modern scholars. Some evidence can be retrieved, however, that contemporaries, in the years about 900, saw the kingdom of Alba as a continuation of the pre-Viking Age kingdom of Dál Riata, Gaelic Argyll, rather than of Pictavia, despite the fact that the appearance of a Gaelic dynasty in Pictavia in the mid ninth century was not perceived as a dramatic break with the past. The recently fashionable model of language replacement via a process of elite emulation can be shown to be inherently implausible, and difficult to demonstrate as having ever taken place anywhere in the world.

In the late eighth and early ninth centuries the meagre evidence suggests that Pictavia was developing in parallel with other monarchies in the developed Christian west of Europe. The symbiotic relationship between Church and King, symbolized in Pictish art by the prominent use of Davidian imagery, had developed to the extent that kings increasingly operated their government out of monastic centres, *Klosterpfalzen*, which had, for various reasons outstripped secular lordships in their capacity to extract revenues and resources from the land. Elsewhere in Europe in the later ninth and early 10th centuries the response to the pagan attacks of the Vikings, Magyars and others frequently took the form of the appropriation of monastic lands in order to endow a military caste answerable directly to the king. Huge swathes of monastic estates were redistributed in this fashion from Italy to England and the Church leaders did not question such redistribution until after the pagan threat receded in the years around 1000. The apparent decline of the Pictish ecclesiastical centres responsible for producing the great collections of Class II monuments and the rise of the ascetic Céili Dé movement to the apparent exclusion of all others in 10th- and 11th-century Alba strongly suggest that a similar process took place here and explains, in part the collapse of the late Pictish cultural system.