

Lecture Summaries 2003–2004

Ritual and relics in Early Bronze Age Britain

Ann Woodward

Edinburgh, 15 December 2003

Evidence for ritual includes both monuments and artefacts. Around Stonehenge barrows appear to be arranged in groups, rows and arcs in relation to sites that already existed in the ceremonial landscape. It seems that Stonehenge was meant to be viewed from afar – from key points which later became the sites for concentrations of barrows. The famous burial from Bush Barrow, identified by many as a rich ‘Wessex’ chieftain, has served to identify an aristocratic minority, perhaps engaged in the trading of metals. However the interpretation of the fine grave goods as ‘jewellery’ associated with females or ‘weapons and tools’ associated with males is simplistic, and not supported by the available skeletal data.

Recent studies have suggested that some of the items found in graves were ancient when they were deposited, and that such items may have functioned as heirlooms or relics. One instance of such material is the finding of small numbers of spacer plates, originally derived from composite necklaces, found as broken and worn pieces in certain British graves. Such relict spacer plates also reached Germany and Greece, where some were refashioned with central perforations for use as pendants or amulets.

One reason for the curation and survival of small collections of ornaments may be that the beads were made from materials which possessed unusual physical characteristics. Both amber and jet display electrostatic properties when

rubbed, and amber also traditionally possesses medical powers and can be burnt as aromatic incense. These materials, as well as shells and fossils, also may have accrued spiritual powers in relation to their far distant sources. Historical and ethnographical records can be used to demonstrate that beads often did not function as ‘jewellery’ but were important ritual objects, or could be used as aids to systematic religious contemplation (eg medieval rosaries). Artefacts made from bone and stone, often interpreted as tools or weapons, have received little study and may have fulfilled various functions. Other objects from the graves may have been employed in the production of sound and music in a ritual environment. Such items include some composite metal items and bone whistles. Small pottery vessels with perforated walls often show signs of burning and may have been used as containers for producing smoke and fumes from aromatic or hallucinogenic substances.

Special fittings, such as the gold and amber ornaments from the Knowes of Troty, may have been components of costumes used during communal rites. Further evidence for fringed ritual garments exists in the form of graduated sets of perforated bone points. Such garments, and the small collections of heirloom beads and ornaments made from special substances, are similar to the equipment used by the ritual specialists (shamans) of northern Eurasia. Although it is apparent that there was a particular group of graves containing Armorican daggers that was concentrated in the Wessex region, most ‘Wessex Series’ material consists of small caches of material that may have been used in ritual ceremonies. Such grave groups occur throughout Britain, and detailed study of all their components is desirable.

The Recumbent Stone Circles of north-east Scotland: recent fieldwork by RCAHMS

A T Welfare

Edinburgh, 12 January 2004

The recumbent stone circles of north-east Scotland are one of the most distinctive categories of megalithic monuments in the British Isles. A fresh opportunity to examine a large proportion of the surviving examples was offered during the course of the Royal Commission's survey of the catchment of the River Don. This included more than 1600 sq kms of country, stretching from the high mountains of the west, through the Howe of Alford and the Garioch, to the extensive rolling lowlands sweeping down to the coast.

About half of the examples that have been identified in the past fall within the bounds of Strath Don and as the survey progressed it became increasingly clear that many of the plans and descriptions that had been made in the past were deficient and that even the classification itself required rethinking. A standardized methodology and a new glossary were developed as important adjuncts to the study and the survey has now been extended to embrace all the examples that have been proposed in the past.

Time has not been kind to these stone rings and their endurance has often depended upon a reluctance to remove the prodigious amounts of stone that were commonly used in their construction. However, they constitute an easily won source of raw material and their chances of survival were only improved if they were marginalized within an increasingly exploited landscape, or protected by superstition.

Although widely distributed throughout north-east Scotland, recumbent stone circles are absent from the mountainous parts of the region and are most common in the middle reaches of the river-systems, becoming scarcer towards the coast. However, the distribution is uneven and there are noted clusters around Dunnideer,

Durriss and elsewhere. They are commonly found upon the summits of hills, on the crests of ridges, tucked into terraces, on long slopes or broad plateaux – all locations that have a wide outlook and can be readily seen from afar. Such characteristics can be easily transmuted into statistics from which generalizations can be made concerning their relative elevation for instance, or their relationship to good agricultural land.

Unlike other rings, the classic recumbent stone circle is distinguished by a 'Recumbent Setting', a large horizontal block flanked by a pair of tall stones positioned in the southerly quadrant of the circuit – with a series of graded orthostats defining the remainder of the figure. The most striking element is the recumbent stone, which was purposefully chosen and arranged to impress an external observer through its character and size, regardless of the scale of the monument. This is well seen at Kirkton of Bourtie, where the recumbent takes the form of a gigantic natural boulder (estimated at more than 45 tons), or at Old Keig where it is represented by a massive block only slightly smaller in size and weight. Elsewhere, the impact is made in other ways: by the remarkable smoothness of a sheared face, as at Balquhain, by the exceptional luminescence of a rock, as at Auchlee I, or by extraordinary geological inclusions, such as the regular cists of feldspar at Easter Aquhorthies, or the veins and bands of quartz that contrast so boldly with the matrix of the rock at Ardlair. The tall flankers share many of these characteristics, although generally in more muted form; but unlike the recumbent, there is sometimes a hint that beneath the thick blanket of lichen, their subtle, conventionalized outline has been enhanced by human intervention. Excavation shows that their bases were frequently trimmed – a characteristic they share with some orthostats, which apart from a consideration of their size were otherwise chosen with less rigour.

One notable feature is the contrast that often occurs between the internal and external faces of a stone in a ring. This is particularly true of the

recumbents but is also reflected in many of the flankers and also some of the orthostats. Again, this serves to emphasize how the design of these rings was influenced by the understanding that they were to be viewed from outside.

The colour of the stones in the ring was plainly important, but an assessment of this characteristic is once more frequently hindered by lichen. Nevertheless, striking combinations have been noted, including the contrast between the grey recumbent and the red stones that make up the ring at Sunhoney and the combinations of greys and pinks that occur at Castle Fraser.

The new plans have proved informative, demonstrating not only a wide range in size and number of stones in a ring, but also how many of these are flattened in the arc of the recumbent setting – further emphasizing this most striking element of their design. Sometimes this is hardly perceptible, as at Sunhoney, but at Tyrebagger and elsewhere it is much more distinct. This arc can be characterized as a façade and the apogee of its development is reached at Aquhorthies and Colmeallie, where the arc of the ring in this sector is configured into a forecourt. The orthostats forming the ring at Aquhorthies are unique in being interdigitated with a second circuit of independently graded stones; but as elsewhere, the grading is designed to carry the eye round to the recumbent setting – the focus of external interest.

The ring is often set on a platform, which frequently encloses a cairn of stone. This is well-illustrated at Sunhoney, where the platform has been emphasized by a later rig-system, but similar features can be observed at Loanhead of Daviot and elsewhere. A diminutive ring-bank at the edge of the platform running from one stone in the ring to the next, is analogous to that excavated by Coles at Garrol Wood. It helps sharpen the boundary of the monument and demarcates the limit of approach.

The grass-grown mound encircled by the platform at Sunhoney expands in the southern quadrant and links to the rear of the recumbent setting. This is a common characteristic, but

usually one that is denoted by a kerb of boulders, the grading of which mimics the ring. These cairns, which are usually relatively low and flat-topped, can be divided into two groups, namely those with an open interior and those consisting of a solid mass of stone; but in practice, it is rarely possible to distinguish between them by field observation alone. However, their variety and complexity has been demonstrated in their excavation. This emphasizes that the recumbent stone circles are not necessarily an homogenous group – a fact that can be readily appreciated if the plan of that at Sunhoney is compared with those of Aikey Brae, Blue Cairn, Cothiemuir Wood, Easter Aquhorthies, Montgoldrum or North Strone, to name but a few.

A striking number of sites have been examined with the spade, but most of these excavations were undertaken in the 19th century and our knowledge of them remains poor. Finds were evidently scarce, but burnt earth, stone, bone and charcoal were sufficiently common to lead these researchers to interpret them as funerary monuments. Excavations in the 20th century retrieved similar material, but this came to be accepted as the residue of funerary pyres.

Until recently, the current model was that largely developed by Aubrey Burl, who defined the earliest element as the stone ring, which was utilized for rituals that culminated in the conflagration of funerary pyres. However, this has been challenged by the results of Richard Bradley's excavations at Tomnaverie, Cothiemuir Wood and Aikey Brae, where it has been shown that the sequence was essentially the reverse. The debris from the pyres was first gathered and then the ground surface carefully prepared, before the area was enclosed within a tiered construction made up of both the platform and the central cairn. After a pause of unknown duration, the stones forming the ring were inserted into the platform and the kerbstones of the central cairn were re-aligned to link with the recumbent setting. The final act was the placing of the recumbent stone, by which

the earlier usage of the site was physically and symbolically foreclosed.

Thus, the recumbent stone circle does not locate an area where activity *continued* to take place, but rather one where activity had *already* taken place. The recumbent setting can be understood as a portal that leads to this numinous space, but it is one that has been blocked with a massive stone door. And the expansion of the cairn to the rear of the recumbent setting created a symbolically blocked passageway – a feature that is generally marked by the largest of the kerbstones, although the paired slabs behind the recumbent at Ardlair and Easter Aquhorthies also connote this.

The southern emphasis that is not only embodied in the architectural elements of these monuments, but also in the distribution of the petroglyphs and artefacts they sometimes contain, signifies an important geographical dimension to the rituals played out at these locations. However, in their completed form, recumbent stone circles can seldom have lent themselves to celestial observations and there is no convincing evidence that they enshrine alignments on any lunar event. An orientation is a common characteristic of religious structures and these usually seek to provide an acolyte with a point of reference that reflects the traditional focus of a cosmographical story. As such, it would be perverse to seek precision in the orientation of every ring.

The initial use of so many of the sites for pyres provides an explanation of why elevated positions were often chosen. Modern studies necessarily focus on the monuments themselves, but this places undue emphasis on their outlook. In fact, such locations permitted the flickering flames of a pyre at night to be seen from a great distance.

The results of the Royal Commission's fieldwork are consistent with the excavated evidence. In its completed form, the architecture of the recumbent stone circle was designed to impress all who might later approach with a desire to engage with the past.

'The collection was, indeed, a curious one': Sir Walter Scott, Abbotsford and the National Museums of Scotland

Trevor Cowie, Colin Wallace and Hugh Cheape

Edinburgh, 9 February 2004

In the autumn of 2000, the society organized a very successful conference on *Abbotsford and Sir Walter Scott: the Image and the Influence*. Drawing on a quotation from *The Antiquary* for the title, our lecture started life as an informal leaflet intended for conference delegates wishing to locate Scott-related objects on display in the Museum of Scotland. The writers were later invited to contribute to the proceedings of the conference, edited by Dr Iain Gordon Brown and published in 2003, and subsequently to address a meeting of the Society. Given this slightly topsy-turvy order of events, and the availability of much of its content in published form (Cheape et al 2003), we have only sketched out a few of the main themes of our lecture here. However, this summary provides an opportunity to add a few new touches to the canvas set out there and in our published paper.

In his ground-breaking book *The Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, published in 1851 – less than twenty years after Scott's death – Daniel Wilson, the English-speaking world's first modern archaeologist, was moved to comment:

'The zeal for Archaeological investigation, which has recently manifested itself in nearly every country of Europe, has been traced, not without reason, to the impulse which proceeded from Abbotsford.'

Even if it had been coloured by a romantic view, what Wilson had in mind was Scott's interest in and enthusiasm for a 'national past'. Scott was instrumental in the break away from the prevailing view of the past, which was one

heavily influenced by the world of Classical Antiquity. Drawing, by way of illustration, on objects that once belonged to Scott or with which he was associated, our lecture focused on his role as antiquary and archaeologist, an aspect of his life that has received surprisingly little attention. Scott's huge literary reputation tends to overshadow the fact that he was as much alive to the significance of material culture to the historian, as he was to that of conventional sources. We looked into how he acquired his collections and what he thought of them and how he made use of objects in his literary work. We concentrated mainly on archaeological finds but we also drew attention to some of the historical artefacts, then in the collections of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, from which he drew inspiration and to which he made direct reference in his writings.

New sources of information continue to appear. The building and furnishing of Abbotsford in the period 1813–25 is acknowledged to have been an important impulse for Scott's collecting. Scott's own account of the house and library, his *Reliquiae Trocusienses – or the Gabions of the late Jonathan Oldbuck, Esq. of Monkbarns*, makes no reference to any of his prehistoric and Roman objects and only one or two of the artefacts make an appearance in the later published works cataloguing the contents of Abbotsford – notably the well-known pony mask or chamfrein from Torrs, Kirkcudbrightshire. An edition of the *Reliquiae* was published for the first time in 2004, and this fictionalized guidebook can be seen, in the words of Professor David Hewitt, for the 'playful, complex and ambiguous text' it is: a work of literature that deserves a place alongside the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels. Hewitt and the work's editors, Gerrard Carruthers and Alison Lumsden, discuss at length Scott's whimsical term 'gabion', whereby a figurative meaning seems to have been given a renewed definition by Scott himself, as: '... *curiosities of small intrinsic value, whether rare books, antiquities, objects of the fine or of the*

useful arts'. We may simply note here that it is typical of the novelist's imagination and his zeal for words. The collector's motive and purpose was the 'quest' and the prize was the 'gabion'.

In our paper (Cheape et al 2003, 56), we noted that 'Scott's interest in the objects in the growing national collections, though no doubt considerable, may have been tempered by the presence of David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan, the founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland', towards whom Scott harboured rather ambivalent feelings:

'Lord Buchan is dead, a person whose immense vanity, bordering upon insanity, obscured, or rather eclipsed, very considerable talents.'

We observed that Scott's affinity for the past appeared to be at odds with Lord Buchan's Caledonian triumphalism, and equally the statistical appreciation of the past promoted by Scott's other *bete noire* the 'enthusiastical' Sir John Sinclair. The political context was not something that we had considered when reviewing Scott's low level of involvement with the Society before the 1820s, and it is therefore worth noting that a case has recently been made for the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1780 being 'on one level nothing more than an attempt to strike a blow against the hegemony of the Dundas despotism, which was steadily gathering most of the intellectual institutions of Edinburgh under its sway by the judicious use of patronage' (Sweet 2004, 113).

Finally, since the original paper was written, we have learned more about another Borders archaeological find of which Scott had heard but which in the end eluded him. This was the splendid Anglian-period gold ring, which has long belonged to the Faculty of Advocates and is currently on long-term loan for display in the Museum of Scotland. The ring belongs to the small but significant amount of ninth-century Anglo-Saxon material from modern Scotland (Webster & Backhouse 1991, 237). Little was known of its circumstances of discovery beyond

the fact that it was found near Selkirk in 1808. However, we are most grateful to Mr Frank Harkness for letting us refer to recent research by him which has shed light on its provenance and confirmed a long suspected, but vague, connection with Scott (see Cheape et al 2003, 88, footnote 100).

Mr Harkness persuasively links the ring with a find mentioned by Scott, writing as sheriff depute to the sheriff-substitute in May 1808 (*Letters*, II, 1808–11, 67). The ring came from Carterhaugh, which is the land at the confluence of the Yarrow and the Ettrick Water, near Bowhill, some 3km south-west of Selkirk and the haunt of Tam Lyn, famously commemorated in one of the ballads collected by Scott in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* a few years before. In addition to legal matters, Scott wrote that

'The Chief Baron [of the Court of Exchequer in Scotland] has issued a precept from Exchequer respecting the gold ring found in Carterhaugh now in the possession of the worthy Advocate Currie. You will see the propriety of taking his examination yourself about it and making the proper return to Exchequer. I was much surprised to hear it but find it has been lately done in similar cases.'

The 'worthy advocate' would appear to have been George Currie of Selkirk, who died in 1816, but we cannot yet trace how the ring came to be in the Faculty of Advocates rather than being treated as Treasure Trove, in the manner at which Scott seems to have been hinting. It may have slipped through the legal net. Ironically, it is only a month after Scott's letter that we have the first clear record in Scotland of a donation of Treasure Trove finds to a museum (Alan Saville *pers comm*).

The modern historian of archaeology Alice Kehoe has portrayed Scott as a 'focal point of transition' from aristocratic to bourgeois archaeologists, prefiguring the Chambers brothers and Daniel Wilson (1998, 4–8). Her Scott is almost entirely a text-based archaeologist; both in our lecture and our published paper, we attempted to demonstrate that he was much

more than that. In sum, Scott's archaeological and antiquarian activities, rooted in observation and collection, amount to a motif of his whole life from boyhood – but they tend to have been ignored in the predominantly literary assessment of the 'Wizard of the North'.

NOTE

The lecture was to have been delivered by Hugh Cheape and Trevor Cowie, but, owing to ill health, Hugh Cheape had to stand down and his place was taken by their co-author Colin Wallace.

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From Aberdeen to the Alps: the story of the Amesbury Archer

A P Fitzpatrick

Edinburgh, 12 April 2004

In the spring of 2002 a routine excavation was undertaken in advance of the building of a new school at Amesbury in Wiltshire. By the end of the excavation the richest Beaker, or Early Bronze Age, burial yet found in Britain had been discovered. The dead man was buried not far from the great temple of Stonehenge, which was

being built at this time. He was a man who owned and could work what were then new and magical metals. And he had come from central Europe.

This lecture followed the story of the excavation and unfolding discoveries about the man now known as the Amesbury Archer. He lived to be 35–45 years old and was disabled for much of his life as the result of a traumatic injury to his left knee. He was buried in a timber chamber that probably had a small barrow raised over it. At his death, between 2,500–2,300 BC, his mourners buried him in the way that was typical of the time, on his side and slightly curled up, as if he were asleep. The offerings placed beside him were the accoutrements of a hunter or warrior and other symbols of status, and they are also typical of the time. They are found in burials from Aberdeen to the Alps.

Some of the objects hint at how he was dressed or adorned when he was buried. On his forearm a black-coloured sandstone wristguard protected his arm from the recoil of the bow and acted as a symbol of status. Next to the wristguard was a bone pin that may have held a cloak, perhaps of leather. Partly covered by his torso was a copper knife that had been placed by his side or worn in a sheath on his chest. Behind the man's back lay a Beaker pot, boar's tusks, and a cache of flints. With them was a black stone, a so-called 'cushion stone', which was a metalworker's tool. The copper knives are the earliest yet found in Britain.

In front of the man's face lay another two almost identical Beakers, more boar's tusks, an antler spatula for working flints, another cache of flints, and a second copper knife and a nodule of iron found in the grave to start fires. A Beaker had also been placed by the dead man's bottom, and another by his feet. This is the largest number of Beakers found in any burial in Britain, and the decoration on the last pot is of a type mainly found in the north-east of Scotland. Around the archer's waist and legs were 15 arrowheads, suggesting that a quiver of hafted arrows was scattered over the man's lower body and legs. The bow had long since rotted away. At

his knees was another wristguard, this time in a red stone, a third copper knife, a shale belt ring, and two gold ornaments that may have been tress ornaments. The gold ornaments are the earliest gold objects yet found in Britain.

The Amesbury Archer was given the richest burial of his age not just in Britain, but in Europe. Part of this explanation for this may lie in the importance ascribed to his skills as a metalworker. That he brought these skills with him from continental Europe is shown by the results of Oxygen Isotope Analyses. These provide a chemical fingerprint of where people were brought up. The Archer's teeth show that as a child he lived in a colder climate than that of Britain today, in central Europe, and perhaps close to the Alps. This is the first time that the long distance travel of individuals in prehistory has been identified. The fact that the metals out of which the copper knives were made, and perhaps the knives themselves, comes from France and Spain hint that the Amesbury Archer travelled through western Europe before arriving in Britain.

In Britain he raised a family. The examination of the skeleton of a younger man buried nearby showed that they were related. This man was also buried with gold ornaments. The two men were buried a few kilometres from Stonehenge, prompting intense speculation as to whether the discovery of the wealthiest burial in Britain so close to one of the greatest temples in Britain was a coincidence. Was the Amesbury Archer a king of Stonehenge?

An architectural approach to 'standing archaeology'

Charles McKean

Edinburgh, 10 May 2004

This paper underlined the extent to which our interpretation of manuscripts is influenced by the climate of ideas of our time and suggested that a

thorough architectural examination of a building can provide primary evidence to challenge accepted wisdom or manuscript evidence. Historians as much require to accept input from architectural evidence as do architectural historians the evidence of historians. Both need to be up to date with current scholarship. If building archaeologists use standard historical texts unquestioningly as the foundation against which to interpret their building information, they may be led seriously astray.

A particular problem is the Scottish legacy of self-referencing socio-architectural interpretation, beginning with Robert Chambers' portrayal of Renaissance Scotland as a rude, primitive and barbaric place by comparison with England. A defensive 'castle' perspective was consequently adopted by MacGibbon and Ross and, through Thomas Ross to Douglas Simpson, and contemporaneously through Mackay Mackenzie to Stewart Cruden. Yet before 1707, a more fruitful comparison would have been with northern Europe, since clients and architects in Scotland were using designs and motifs produced in Europe the year they were published. The traditional argument of Scotland's isolation (with a consequence architectural time-lag) is not credible.

The terminology needs revisiting. L-plan and Z-plan categorizations are almost valueless, since country seats were rarely built in that form but only evolved like that over generations. The term 'tower-house' appears to be a later 19th-century one, save in the hearth-tax where it is reserved for truly diminutive structures. The term 'chateau' was in use for flamboyant Scottish country houses 'in the French manner' at least by the early 18th century.

Few Renaissance houses could have been adequately defended castles, for they were at the centres of functioning estates, environed with the courts, gardens and yards essential for their survival. There is very little evidence of hand-to-hand fighting in these yards and gardens. When issues of defence were tested in the civil wars, the house was won or lost at the entrance to the

outer yard or court. Thus we have to understand their architectural decoration as metaphorical rather than functionally defensive/aggressive. Equally, we have to understand the process of refashioning, when these houses were converted into 'British' houses in the 18th century.

Masons/architects were astute and clever, thought in three dimensions with a firm use of proportion, used an economy of means, and built logically. Until c 1700, the principal floor on Scots houses was the first floor above a floor of stone-vaulted cellars and kitchen (rarely more than 20 feet wide). Walls do not normally (as in England) get thinner as they go higher. Thickness of walls was likely to be consistent for any single building campaign, and walls became thinner as structural ingenuity developed. Variations occurred according to the height of buildings, the presence/absence of chimney flues, and the available stone. Principal windows tend to be to proportion of 1:2 and align above each other, storey upon storey. Much architectural history is based on building campaigns theoretically lasting decades, yet contracts imply that houses were built much more speedily. A mason or architect's 'hand' can be spotted in a consistent detail or a way of planning.

Principal variations between seats were caused by differences in location, rank, wealth of the occupant, purpose and the reign during which they were built. Analysis must begin with assessing the function/role a house played within its family's life: whether the ancient paternal seat, the fashionable dwelling, hunting lodge, seaside pavilion, house for the heir or the dowager, travelling house, villa or town house. There is not only a typical siting, setting and orientation, but a tremendous continuity in the use of the same site. A centuries-old cut-down Renaissance country seat frequently lies within a Victorian farm, and Timothy Pont's maps provide a first-rate guide as to where to search.

Robert Rowand Anderson stated that the detailed study of buildings was as important to an architect as the study of anatomy was to a doctor. We need diagnostic principles, a diagnostic

procedure, and some exemplary symptoms. The organs of the Renaissance country seat were the original tower, state apartment, service corridor, the gallery, porter's room, guest chamber/tower, public staircase/private staircases, privy garden, library, foretries, courts and yards, service buildings and chapel.

It is important to know what matters. Significant building diagnostic signals include seeming aberrations in the logic of the building design, and particularly variations in masonry details, building materials, wall thickness, and alignment and floor levels. A detailed examination would flag up cracks, squint passages, variations from historic illustrations, remains of harling, asymmetry in, for example, window splays, oddities in roofs, and remains of detail and decoration. A raised perron/front paddock is frequently a signal of an older property.

The diagnostic process begins with a detailed examination of plans and elevations – often to the extent of redrawing them, or checking them on site. From that, an evolutionary plan emerges. A Schedule of Curiosities listing all aberrations, absences, and illogicalities is drawn up and inspected against the building. The Schedule is then revised or added to, from which a working hypothesis emerges. That is then integrated with written/documentary history, and considered against prototypes/typology: ie comparable buildings elsewhere. A model is then devised which is tested against the building and revised as necessary. A final operating hypothesis then emerges – as in the study of the architectural evolution of the House of Innes.

The paper concluded that old history can be a very misleading guide to interpreting buildings unless updated by current scholarship; and knowledge, records, databases and interpretation must equally be kept updated. We should treat buildings with the care comparable to that with which we treat manuscripts. We should never ignore architectural evidence where it is at odds with a preconception, for the building has usually been there longer than the preconception.

Faience in Bronze Age Britain and Ireland: scotching a myth

Alison Sheridan

Edinburgh, 14 June 2004

Faience is a glazed, glass-like substance that was invented in Egypt and/or Mesopotamia during the fifth or early fourth millennium BC and was made in large quantities there during the third and second millennia. Superficially there are similarities between some Egyptian segmented beads of the 18th Dynasty (14th century BC) and those found in Britain and Ireland, and since as early as 1812 this has been taken as an indication that the Bronze Age faience beads and pendants found here had been imported from Egypt. The question of whether this jewellery had indeed been imported or was made locally has been debated ever since Ludovic Mann argued, in 1906, that Scottish examples were made in Scotland; and in some quarters the idea that faience had been imported from Egypt or elsewhere in the Mediterranean lingers to this day.

This lecture described the results so far obtained by a major international research project, led by the National Museums of Scotland, that has been designed to resolve this issue for once and for all. A brief history of the debate and of previous research was presented, and the point was made that a previous attempt to produce a definitive *corpus* of British and Irish faience in the 1970s had failed (although this was subsequently achieved for Ireland in the 1980s). The background to the NMS project was presented: it was explained that interest in faience had been rekindled by the discovery, in the late 1980s, of a necklace of 25 faience beads, associated with the cremated remains of a mother and baby, in a large Cordoned Urn at Findhorn, Moray (see Shepherd & Shepherd 2001). The principal aim of the NMS project has been to investigate the location, method and mode of production of all Bronze Age faience in Britain, Ireland and the adjacent

coast of north-west Europe, and to present the results, together with colour photographs, line drawings and detailed descriptions of every bead and pendant, and an overall discussion of the dating, associations and significance of faience, in a definitive corpus (to be published by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, jointly with NMS).

Thanks to the University of Groningen, the advent of the technique of AMS radiocarbon dating of cremated human bone has allowed a clear picture of the currency of faience use in Britain and Ireland to be formed. It is clear that faience started to be used here far earlier than the 1400 BC as suggested by the 'Orientalist' hypothesis: it appears to have been in use from as early as the 20th century BC, and to have continued in use throughout the first half of the second millennium. This alone disproves the hypothesis that faience had been introduced by traders from the Near East or Mediterranean during the 18th Dynasty (for which no supporting evidence exists in any case).

Compositional information, along with bead shapes and details of their method and mode of manufacture, also rules out the 'Orientalist' hypothesis. The high tin content noted in the British and Irish (and Breton) beads by previous analysts such as Stanley Warren and Arnold Aspinall, which differentiates these beads from others made in Europe and the Near East, was borne out by fresh analyses for the NMS project, and the uneven distribution of tin over the body of a bead was demonstrated using scanning electron microscopy. Variability in the shape and size of individual types of bead and pendant, and in their method of shaping and glazing, points towards production being a small-scale, localized affair, perhaps undertaken by bronzeworkers (who would have had access to the raw materials for the copper-based glaze colourant).

A new model for the introduction of faience-making knowhow to Britain and Ireland was proposed. According to this, the technological knowledge was acquired through contacts with

central Europe at a time when the movement of tin from Cornwall and Devon was being reorganized and intensified by the elite in Wessex. Those responsible for the remodelling of Stonehenge may well have controlled the supply of tin from south-west England to elsewhere in Britain, Ireland and continental Europe, and this last link operated as a conduit for the transmission of novel prestige objects and ideas between elites. Faience-makers in central Europe had in turn acquired the knowhow from their contacts with the Near East (specifically Troy) during the mid third millennium, again thanks to the movement of tin.

The NMS project has been able to explore other aspects of faience, including its use in funerary rites: in some cases, the jewellery had been kept apart from the corpse during its cremation, but in others, we have been able to demonstrate that the faience must have been on the body on the pyre.

The probable amuletic significance of faience as an aspect of Bronze Age 'supernatural power dressing' was also proposed, with the high tin content acting not only as a facet of conspicuous consumption by the Wessex elite, but also, possibly, as a way of maximising the jewellery's magical efficacy: both tin and faience involve magic-like transformations from raw materials to finished objects, and the knowledge of how to effect this transformation was probably restricted to a small number of people.

The content of this lecture was subsequently published, in extended form, by Sheridan & Shortland in the Society's recent publication, *Scotland in Ancient Europe* (2004).

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Shetland, Steatite and Trade in the Norse North Atlantic: 800–1400

Amanda K Forster

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The paper presented the conclusions of an investigation into the role of steatite as an article of trade in the Viking and early medieval periods in the North Atlantic region (see Forster 2004). Steatite is a well-known commodity in Norway, used increasingly during the Merovingian period for the production of vessels and completely replacing ceramics by the onset of the Viking Age. Within Scandinavia, the dispersal of steatite goods is widespread, implying some degree of organized production and transportation. Substantial numbers of steatite goods from both Kaupang and Hedeby indicate movement of items to market sites and their recovery from throughout Denmark indicates some level of redistribution. During the Viking Age, the production of steatite vessels is seen as an important Norwegian industry.

The expansion of Norse peoples westward during the eighth and ninth centuries AD marks the beginning of the Viking period in parts of the British Isles and across the North Atlantic region. The Scandinavian settlement of these areas introduced objects and ideas that characterized a distinctly Norwegian material culture. The utilization of steatite artefacts throughout the region during the early medieval period can therefore be linked to Norwegian settlement and has been taken to be an indication

of long-distance trade. Although generally seen as incidental to the movement of luxury cargo, the organized exchange of a commodity such as steatite over long distances merits further study. In addition, the presence of steatite quarries in the newly established Norse settlements in Shetland and Greenland means that such a trade need not be a purely Norwegian concern.

The motivation behind this study stems from the concept that steatite quarries in Shetland may have enhanced the economic status of the islands during the Viking and later Norse periods. If demonstrated that Shetland steatite was exported throughout the North Atlantic region, the notion that the archipelago was merely a peripheral outpost of the Orkney Earldom could perhaps be questioned. In order to ascertain the extent of Shetland's involvement in the steatite trade, the nature of the movement of steatite goods across the North Atlantic region from 800 to 1400 has been fully investigated. Study of the 'displaced' steatite assemblage has highlighted the fact that the presence of steatite as imported goods does not necessarily reflect trade. Typological assessment of vessels and other objects has been used as a method of source identification allowing consideration of redistribution trends. In addition, assessment of the artefacts has provided greater definition of the quantity of goods involved and comparison of individual site assemblages allows consideration of relative access to imported goods across the North Atlantic Region.

Through examination of the use of the material over a long time period, the progression of steatite use in the North Atlantic region has been studied from the development of common usage c AD 800 to its demise c AD 1400. Steatite use was discussed in three chronological phases: initial settlement (800–900), established settlement (900–1100) and, finally, the Medieval phase (1100–1400). Assessment of site assemblages and individual finds has allowed consideration of use on an individual site basis, a regional basis and across the region as a whole. Each phase sees different trends within the steatite assemblage with

reference to both typological forms present and the possible distribution mechanisms operating. Observation of such trends has implications for various aspects of the Viking Age and early medieval period beyond the initial focus of the study.

The common interpretation of steatite as a traded commodity is seen as overly reliant on the assumption that imported goods are trade indicators. Although during later phases the most likely distribution mechanism is trade and exchange, during the initial settlement phase a large proportion of the steatite assemblage could have been distributed with the movement of people. Through the examination of the displaced finds assemblage the nature of trade and exchange throughout the region has been

investigated. Through assessment of the group over an extended period, the study also holds implications for the organization of exchange in a chiefdom-orientated society and the later development of market orientated economies. The study has therefore addressed the extent of Shetland's involvement in steatite distribution during the Viking and later Norse period alongside discussion of the role of steatite in Viking and early medieval trade networks.

REFERENCE

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