
6 DISCUSSION

6.1 *Distribution*

The burnt mound at Arisaig is the first to be recorded in Lochaber and is therefore an important contribution to our understanding of the distribution of these features.

Hedges (1975, 61) summarised the recorded distribution of burnt mounds within the British Isles as the extreme north (Shetland, Orkney and Caithness) and a large part of the west (Ireland, Wales, Isle of Man, south-west Scotland, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and the New Forest). More recent work has extended this distribution to the Moray Firth (Cressey & Strachan 2003), Cumbria (Nixon 1990; Neighbour & Johnson 2005; Heawood & Huckerby 2002) and the Western Isles (Armit & Braby 2002; Birch et al forthcoming). The nearest recorded burnt mound is at High Pasture Cave, near Torrin on the Isle of Skye (*ibid*).

Although the Arisaig burnt mound is remote from other similar sites, recent excavation and field survey have served to fill in some of the gaps in the burnt mound distribution map in the Highlands (Cressey & Strachan 2003, fig. 7). As well as large clusters in the north and east of the region, this shows small groups and isolated finds dotted along the bays and inlets of the west coast. How much this is a function of the location of commercial developments, and therefore rescue archaeology, is a matter for conjecture, but none of the three recently added burnt mound sites on the west coast, Arisaig, Ceann nan Clachan on North Uist (Armit & Braby 2002) and High Pasture Cave (Birch et al forthcoming), were initially visible in plan. All may therefore have escaped detection without an additional force at work, be that coastal erosion, research excavation, commercial development or infrastructure improvements.

6.2 *Morphology and function*

The results of the excavation concord with many of the widely accepted traits of burnt mounds. At Arisaig, missing features include the lack of a hearth and a formal trough. Both may well be a consequence of more recent fluvial activity and human land use patterns, or the location of these features beyond the limits of the excavation, rather than a deviation from the expected character.

In terms of the morphology of the varied sites containing similar burnt material, few exhibit the classic crescent (*fulachta fiadh*) appearance of Barber's Class 1 (Barber 1990), most of which are dated to the Bronze Age. Often, as at Arisaig,

they have been reduced to an amorphous spread by ploughing, landscaping or erosion and may indeed survive only in underlying negative features and spreads (eg Neighbour & Johnson 2005), without overlying similar deposits and with consequent visibility problems. Whilst the volumes of burnt material being produced at many sites would have prohibited their disposal below ground, it is clear that this material was also deposited in smaller quantities both within and outside settlements.

Two phases of burnt stone deposition are present at Arisaig, both pre-dated and post-dated by fluvial erosion and deposition. The earlier fluvial episode is represented by the modification of a palaeochannel terminal (C049), which may equate to the dumping of deposit C040 by stake-hole C044, although there is no direct stratigraphic link. The second phase post-dates the first by an unknown but short period of time during which the local morphology of the area may have changed significantly, with channels infilling and the deposition of silt and sand. There then followed a period when more extensive volumes of burnt stones were dumped.

Thin-sectioning of the deposits below each deposit of burnt stone has allowed further insight into the processes at work. It is suggested that differences in microstructure reflect the redeposition of the material after burning. The stones were therefore not heated on the sandbank and the location of the hearth may have been at some distance from the dumping site – as with all burnt mounds, there is no expectation of in situ burning.

Burnt mounds have been variously claimed to be cooking places (O'Kelly 1954), saunas (Barfield & Hodder 1987) and, most recently, breweries (Peterkin 2007). This uncertainty stems from the unrewarding nature of burnt mounds in terms of artefacts and as a contribution to our understanding of past processes, facts well highlighted by Russell-White (1990, 59) and Barber. Arisaig is exemplary in this regard. The lithics may be a slight oddity amongst Early Bronze Age burnt mounds, but otherwise the site was sterile and the deposits gave no indication of their original function. Vitrification in some of the charcoal suggests a high temperature, but both the process and intention are unclear.

6.3 *The wider area*

In terms of comparisons with palaeoenvironmental data from the surrounding area, two studies are of relevance. These derive from Mointeach Mhor to the north (Carter et al 2005) and from Carnach to the south-east (Cressey & Verrill 2006). Both suggest

that human influence on the landscape prior to the Bronze Age was minimal.

At Carnach Bog, 1.5km to the south-east, the Early Bronze Age levels suggest sporadic occurrences of disturbed ground. Pastoral indicator species were intermittently recorded and micro-charcoal was negligible. These indicator species expand in the Middle Bronze Age and arboreal pollen declines. There is evidence of hazel expanding into these open spaces.

Three and a half kilometres to the north of Arisaig on Mointeach Mhor, a similar peat core suggests limited woodland usage from the Late Neolithic (3200 BC), when a decline in tree pollen is matched by a rise in micro-charcoal. Taxa associated with disturbed ground increase from 1500 BC.

Mointeach Mhor and Carnach are in less favourable locations than the Arisaig burnt mound. Both are more boggy, Carnach is further from the sea, and Mointeach Mhor is more exposed. Assuming local pollen is dominant in the profiles from these locations, it is likely that they fail to reflect the true extent of settlement in the area, which, if concentrated around Arisaig, perhaps made only marginal impacts in the hinterland. Archaeological evidence for the Arisaig area in the Early Bronze Age is restricted to cairns, artefact scatters and cists. The burnt mound at Arisaig is an important addition to these remains, and to our knowledge of Early Bronze Age habitation along the west coast.