
13 GENERAL DISCUSSION, by Alan Saville and Karen Hardy

Other than a few fragments of pottery dated to around 100–150 years ago, there is no clear indication of the date of the uppermost layers, which also contained a number of hearths. However, as with many caves and rockshelters in Scotland, it is to be expected that An Corran saw use as an expedient temporary shelter, workshop or dwelling by people throughout history (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2007; Leitch & Smith 1997; Saville 2004b; Tolan-Smith 2001). The virtual absence of Iron Age to modern finds indicates that such use was never intensive and that, for example, it was never used for metal-working, as was the case at Rudh' an Dunain Cave, Skye (Scott 1934b), and caves in Argyll (Tolan-Smith 2001, 169) and on the Applecross peninsula (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2007). In this regard, however, it must be remembered that only a relatively small part of the rockshelter was sampled by excavation, and thus the picture obtained of activities at any stage of its use could be misleading.

The next temporal indicator occurs in context C17. A copper-alloy pin was found on the surface of this context. The pin has provisionally been dated typologically to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age (*c.* 800–400 BC) and is the first of its kind from Scotland. No other artefacts were found between C17 and C30, nor were there any other indications to suggest the use of the site at this time. However, the bone point from C36 which has been radiocarbon dated to 336–78 cal BC is a clear sign that other activity was taking place at An Corran during the Iron Age.

If the date of 1517–1219 cal BC obtained on the burnt pig bone from C41 is discounted as probably spurious (see the section on radiocarbon dates above), then the only indications of earlier Bronze Age usage of the site are one of the bevel-ended tools and a human bone, with dates of 2274–1881 and 2566–2146 cal BC respectively, and possibly another bevel-ended tool with an age of 2621–2301 cal BC, which is on the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age cusp (Table 36).

On the basis of the human bones which have been radiocarbon dated, it is assumed that almost all of the human remains at An Corran relate to the Neolithic period. It is further assumed that they signify inhumations which have been deliberately intruded into the pre-existing deposits within the rockshelter, or that the remains have become incorporated by natural processes following more superficial disposal of cadavers on the ledge (cf Hellewell 2011). As such they fit very neatly into the emerging pattern of evidence for Neolithic cave and rockshelter burial practice, particularly during the 4th millennium cal BC, throughout Britain (Cham-

berlain 1996; Saville 2005, 358), but also locally on the west coast of Scotland (see especially the dates for human remains from Carding Mill Bay and Raschoille; Milner & Craig 2009, 175). There are other instances of later re-use of middens for burial, both in Scotland (Connock et al 1992; Milner & Craig 2009; Pollard 1990; Saville & Hallén 1994) and further afield (e.g. Bjørnsholm, Denmark: Andersen 1991, 78). Since this mode of Neolithic burial is very widespread – indeed quite normal – there is no reason to think that the association here with a Mesolithic midden site has any bearing on questions of the continuity of human groups across the millennia (cf Armit & Finlayson 1992, 668–669). Whether Neolithic people used this rockshelter for purposes other than funerary must remain obscure without any other specific cultural indicators from this period, such as pottery or flintwork. In this respect it is of interest that none of the bevelled tools has been shown to date to the same mid-4th millennium cal BC period to which most of the human remains belong, but that they reappear, typologically unchanged, in the 3rd millennium cal BC (Table 36). This technological resurgence, which could be argued to reflect particular types of locally conditioned subsistence practices started in Mesolithic times, comes – at An Corran at least – after too wide a chronological gap for any conclusions to be drawn from it about continuity or transition.

The most recently dated of the An Corran human bones, at *c.* 2566–2146 cal BC, relates to the Early Bronze Age period, and suggests there may have been at least two separate phases of burial. Cave and rockshelter burials of this period are less prolific than in the Neolithic, but they do occur, as at Carding Mill Bay, Oban (Connock et al 1992).

The semi- or sub-circular setting of stones found abutting the cliff-face at the top of C30 has no ready functional interpretation since there was nothing to differentiate the fill from the deposits surrounding it (illus 15 and 22). Whilst an interpretation as a hearth would seem the most feasible, there was no actual evidence in the form of charcoal, ash or burning of the stones to support this. The shape and diameter of this feature compare almost exactly with those of the stone settings from Lussa Wood, Jura (Mercer 1980; Wickham-Jones 2004; see also Hardy et al 2010), but in the An Corran case there is no evidence to indicate an association with Mesolithic activity.

Immediately below this setting lay the upper midden layers. These layers were all initially thought to be Mesolithic, based upon the artefacts present, but as previously explained the radiocarbon dates have shown the situation to be more com-

plicated. Within the 'Mesolithic' horizon (C31–41) there are two different types of deposit. The upper layers (C31–39) are midden deposits, in that they are spatially restricted, variegated areas of shelly matrix with contained lithic artefacts, human and animal bones, bone tools, charcoal and some organic plant remains.

Contexts C40–41 and the basal part of context C36 do not fall into this pattern. Based upon the area excavated, they seem to be extensive horizontal layers which might spread across the whole ledge. The contents, particularly of C40–41, are quite different from the upper midden layers. They contain very few shells, have no bone tools and contain only a small amount of animal bone, much of it burnt. Between them they contain some 50 per cent of the lithic assemblage and most of the microliths and microburins.

The upper layers (C31–39) thus appear to represent a shell processing and lithic working site with an abundance of bone tools, while the lower layers (C40–41) predate the shell processing phase(s) but clearly relate to activity involving the manufacture and use of lithic artefacts. Taking the most diagnostic lithic artefacts, there are 32 microliths and 14 microburins in the An Corran assemblage (Table 11). Nine microliths and three microburins come from the midden contexts C31 and C36. Three microliths and one microburin come from the horizon at the base of C36, which lies directly below the midden. The remaining 20 microliths and 10 microburins come from the basal layers C40–41. Of the microliths from C31 there are two scalene triangles, one crescent, one bilaterally edge-blunted fine point and one unclassifiable fragment, and the microliths from C36 are a crescent and two unclassifiable fragments. The basal horizon of C36 contains two obliquely blunted points and one unclassifiable fragment, whilst the microliths from C40–41 are almost all broad blade, with the majority being obliquely blunted points, and including only one scalene triangle, from C40. Although it is not possible to make any rigid stratigraphic, typological or technological separation within the lithic assemblage, which is likely to be a palimpsest of material produced at times separated by centuries if not millennia, there is a distinct possibility that the basal layers contain 'Early' Mesolithic artefacts predominantly (in the case of C41 this could be expressed as a distinct probability), and the midden layers contain 'Later' Mesolithic predominantly.

Recent work has shown that in east-central

Scotland Mesolithic assemblages of Later Mesolithic, narrow blade type, are present by *c* 8400 cal BC (Saville 2008). In the west, the earliest date for the Later Mesolithic so far is rather later, around the middle of the 8th millennium cal BC at Kinloch, Rùm (Wickham-Jones 1990), and the earliest date in association with a shell midden is much later, at *c* 7050–6500 cal BC (7620 ± 75 BP; Ashmore & Wickham-Jones 2007), at Sand, Lochalsh (NB the initially announced early date (OxA-10152) for a bevelled tool from Sand of 8470 ± 90 BP (7750–7200 cal BC; see Ashmore 2004, 102; Hardy 2001, 125; Saville 2004a, table 10.2) has now been withdrawn, see Ashmore & Wickham-Jones 2007). A bevelled tool from Druimvargie rockshelter, Oban, another midden site, is dated to *c* 7580–7180 cal BC (7890 ± 80 BP; Bonsall et al 1995), but it is not associated with any microliths. The earliest dates from An Corran are another millennium later, in the mid-7th millennium cal BC, and can be seen as in acceptable potential correlation with parts of the lithic assemblage, whilst accepting that the dated bone items could represent completely different phases of activity from those which produced the lithic artefacts.

Typologically, however, it can be argued that at least part of the lithic assemblage, most notably the obliquely blunted microliths, are out of character for such a late date, since comparable material has not been dated so late anywhere in the UK. All things being equal, it can be suggested on typo-chronological grounds that this Early Mesolithic, broad blade element of the An Corran assemblage is most likely to predate the mid-8th millennium cal BC, and possibly to predate the later 9th millennium cal BC date of the Cramond assemblage. Whilst some parallels can be seen in the Early Mesolithic microlithic assemblages from excavation and surface collection at Morton Farm, Fife (Candow 1989; Coles 1971), these contain a significant element of large isosceles triangle microliths, of which An Corran has only two. In some ways it is perhaps more similar to the microlithic inventory of Early Mesolithic North Yorkshire sites such as Flixton (Moore 1950, fig.4), which would align it with the so-called Star Carr assemblage type (Reynier 2005), dated to the middle of the 9th millennium cal BC or earlier.

In the absence of any dating evidence from layer C41 it is difficult to substantiate any further speculation on this point, but there does seem to be a strong chance that part of the An Corran assemblage represents the earliest Early Mesolithic type of lithic finds from Scotland.