12 Interpretation and discussion
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12.1 Site location

The archaeological site at Camas Daraich lies on sloping land just below the level surface of a Devensian raised beach. It is well sheltered by high cliffs on either side, and near to both fresh water and the sea (Illus 4). To the south the land drops over a series of younger raised beaches to the current sea: the coastline today comprises a small sandy bay enclosed by rocky outcrops. To the north the land drops over similar raised beaches to a peat-filled basin that has, at various times, been inundated by both the sea and fresh, as well as brackish, water. There is a fresh-water burn to the east of the site. Soils in the vicinity of the site are shallow, mainly formed as a result of weathering, with a more recent artificial component due to cultivation.

With regard to the selection of the site, Camas Daraich offered both shelter and varied resources to its inhabitants. The staples of easy access and fresh water were both well catered for. Food could be provided using both local marine resources and the enhanced attractions of the damp, peaty basin. Although apparently restricted in its hinterland, it is likely that a variety of animals and plants, as well as local birds and fish, was available to those who set up home at Camas Daraich. There was ample local stone for stone tools, and contacts further afield are indicated.

Stone tools were found in the ploughsoil and, in addition, Mesolithic cultural material lies *in situ* in the western half of the site, up to a depth of 100 mm below the ploughsoil and on top of the raised beach. Mesolithic material was most obvious in Tr1 where contexts included *in situ* features, both negative (scoops) and positive (a hearth), and contained a classic narrow-blade lithic assemblage. A cultural layer was also observed in TPZ, but the abrupt termination of work in TPW meant that it was impossible to determine whether it was continuous between Tr1 and TPZ, though the evidence would seem to suggest that it is not.

The main focus of cultural material recorded to date lies in a spot that is very sheltered from the wind. This contrasts with the rest of the raised beach which is more exposed. The majority of the stratified material so far has been uncovered from Tr1, but it is likely that archaeological, probably Mesolithic, material extends both up-slope and down-slope of this.

Lithics occurred in the ploughsoil right across the site and not just around the location of the cultural material. This suggests that the archaeological site extends considerably further than the area of excavation and that there may well be more than one focus of cultural material. This would be supported by the observation of more than one black patch in the track as it originally cut down the beach.

The ploughsoil and surface lithics are interesting in that they differ slightly from the contents of the stratified contexts excavated in Tr1. Although classic Mesolithic stone tools are common within the ploughsoil, there is a greater proportion of material with bipolar characteristics, as well as a few small thumbnail scrapers and a barbed and tanged arrowhead. Taken together, these factors suggest that there may be later activity in the vicinity.

12.2 Human activity

The focus of excavation concentrated on *in situ* deposits containing an assemblage of Mesolithic stone tools. The archaeological work was limited, but the evidence points mainly to activity in the mid 7th millennium BC: the early Mesolithic of Scotland. There was a sizable assemblage of flaked stone tools in the soil across a wide area, with many pieces generally characteristic of this period. It is also likely, however, that later stone-using activity had taken place at Camas Daraich. Although no *in situ* cultural material was identified to later prehistory, the ploughsoil did contain lithic artefacts highly suggestive of this.

The Mesolithic assemblage comprised evidence for both the manufacture of stone tools as well as their use, though it was not possible to give precise information on use. Contextual information was limited to the four 1-m squares that could be excavated in Tr1, with some information from outlying test pits and soil pits. None of the latter yielded *in situ* archaeological features, though cultural deposits were recorded in TPZ. It is doubtful, however, whether the material in TPZ is a continuous extension of that in Tr1.

Cultural deposits, therefore, were more limited in distribution than the lithic assemblage, though limited excavation means that further deposits may await discovery. Nevertheless, the cultural material that could be examined does provide clear indication of humanly generated features, in the form of at least two scoops and a stone-ringed hearth. All three sit on (or cut into) the surface of the raised beach in one small area and all would seem to date to the same, Mesolithic, period. It is not possible, therefore, to provide much interpretation of the extent, duration, or overall nature of the activity that took place at Camas Daraich, but people were definitely there, and some information may be gleaned from the stone tools themselves.

Table 35 Comparison of raw materials between the securely Mesolithic and other contexts

Material	Securely Mesolithic	Mixed surface assemblage	Total
Baked mudstone	9 (3%)	42 (1%)	51
Rùm bloodstone	93 (32%)	1514 (33%)	1607
Chalcedonic silica	157 (54%)	2131 (46%)	2288
Quartz	29 (10%)	920 (20%)	46
Other	1	17	18
TOTAL	289	4624	4913

Some knapping was carried out on site, using Rùm bloodstone that had been transported, some 25 km, from the island of Rùm, as well as more local stones: chalcedonies and quartzes. In addition some stone was brought in from the Staffin area, further away, *c* 75 km, to the north: baked mudstone and possibly other chalcedonies, but these materials were treated quite differently from the more local stones, in that the baked mudstone was not worked locally to any great extent. It seems that tools of baked mudstone were brought in ready for use so that only maintenance had to be carried out on site. Interestingly, there is little difference between the raw materials used in the securely Mesolithic assemblage and those used in the mixed surface assemblage (Table 35). Table 35 shows a possible substitution of more local quartz as opposed to local chalcedonies, but the proportions of other materials are very similar.

Local knapping included a range of techniques that could be adapted to make the most of the raw material. Platform cores were carefully worked and the overall assemblage includes evidence of bipolar knapping which was frequently used to make the most of an exhausted platform core. Bipolar knapping is a feature of West Coast lithics, though it may be more common in later periods: at Camas Daraich there is very little bipolar material in the secure Mesolithic contexts (Section 7). In this way the people of Camas Daraich made many flakes and some blades. These were quite suitable for use without alteration and this is confirmed by the microwear analysis, but a few were worked further in order to produce more complex tools such as scrapers, edge-retouched tools and microliths. The microliths include a range of narrow-blade types such as backed blades, crescents and rods. Microwear analysis of a sample of flaked stone tools indicated that while not all had traces of prolonged use, those that did had been used for a range of tasks.

It is not possible to say whether the different tasks that took place at Camas Daraich were contemporary, or whether they represent repeated visits for different reasons. Some spatial variation was also suggested, and in this respect it is interesting that the microwear analysis has altered perceptions of the spatial differentiation within the site. Prior to microwear it might be assumed that square C2 contained mainly knapping debris with little evidence of use while square B3 had resulted mainly from the deposition of used tools. Work on the microwear showed that though B3 did contain a high percentage of apparently well used tools, less than half of those studied had wear traces and most of those that did had been used in one particular way. In square C2, in contrast, all but one of the pieces studied had wear suggesting use. This is not to diminish the relative importance of knapping debris in square C2, but clearly a more complex pattern of deposition had taken place here, so that used tools also played an important role.

Inasmuch as they can be used for dating, the stone tools indicate a date early in the Mesolithic for the main activity at Camas Daraich. The narrow-blade microliths are very similar to microliths recovered from several West Coast sites (Kinloch, Sand, An Corran: Wickham-Jones & McCartan 1990; Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2003; Hardy *et al* in prep). Most other tools from Camas Daraich may also be paralleled on these sites: the larger scrapers, the flakes and the blades. All of these sites have produced early to mid 7th millennium BC dates, and this is confirmed for Camas Daraich by the radiocarbon determinations on hazelnut shell from the black cultural material uncovered in Tr1. All four determinations point to activity in the mid 7th millennium BC.

It must be remembered, however, that it was not possible to examine the other lithic find spots across the croft and none produced microliths. At the same time there is an element of the general ploughsoil and surface material from CD1 that may be later. It is highly likely that Camas Daraich was also used at other times in prehistory – it is certainly a well favoured spot. The main period of activity excavated to date is, however, Mesolithic.

Though preservation at Camas Daraich was limited to inorganic materials, the piece of used pumice provides an important reminder that lithics were only part, probably a small part, of the suite of everyday artefacts of its inhabitants. Abrasive tools like pumice would have played a vital part in the manufacture of many tools of bone and antler. Surviving artefacts from other sites with better preservation, such as An Corran (Hardy *et al* in prep) and Sand (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002), give a good idea of the range of material that is missing from

Camas Daraich, even if the specific tools varied from site to site. Pumice would also have been useful as an abrasive in other ways, for example in the preparation of hides, in which case previously used pieces may well have been broken up. The presence of pumice, even apparently small and un-used pieces, is always an important indicator pointing to activities that may leave little trace in the archaeological record.

12.3 Nature of the Mesolithic and the role of the site

The Mesolithic was a time of great mobility when settlements tended to be transient and activity oriented. People lived in small, nomadic groups, and life in West Coast Scotland revolved around the tasks of the hunter-gatherer-fisher (Wickham-Jones 1994; Finlayson 1998). Excavated sites vary greatly in their nature (Mithen 2000). Unfortunately, neither the extent of excavation nor the preservation of artefacts provide any detail as to the size or nature of the site at Camas Daraich. There was no organic preservation, and the cultural material was neither bottomed nor fully revealed in its lateral extent. It is impossible, therefore, to provide much interpretation of the way in which Camas Daraich fitted into the Mesolithic world. Was it the site of short-lived activities as at Fife Ness? (Wickham-Jones & Dalland 1995). Or could it have been the site of a larger base camp, as, perhaps, at Kinloch on Rùm? (Wickham-Jones 1990). Or something in between? All that can be said is that a range of tasks was carried out on a variety of tools with no evidence of the tool specialization that was present at Fife Ness, and that there was, on balance, little evidence for the extent of occupation revealed at Kinloch. At the same time, it is unlikely that activity involved the harvesting of marine resources, especially shellfish, on the scale seen at Sand (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002), as there is no indication of a shell midden, despite the proximity of the sea.

The evidence that would fit Camas Daraich into the broad Mesolithic spectrum might be lacking, but the excavations have shown that considerable information may still be gained, even with limited excavation and relatively limited outlay. The people of Camas Daraich certainly looked out at a wider world than that afforded by their immediate environs at the Point of Sleat. One good indication of this lies in their use of stone resources that must have come from further afield, and the basis is now laid for further work on site, or in the vicinity, that would add greatly to the broader picture.

12.4 The wider Mesolithic world

Camas Daraich was discovered at a time when considerable research has been revealing much about the Mesolithic world of West Coast Scotland. Though little detail was available about the site itself, Camas Daraich is undoubtedly of interest in regard to its wider setting. The mobile world of the Mesolithic has meant that those who study it have moved away from considerations of any individual site to examinations of the wider Mesolithic world, and the location of Camas Daraich is crucial here. It lies at the tip of the Point of Sleat, right at the south-east corner of Skye, and it provides an important link between the island of Rùm some 25 km away and the enclosed marine area of the Inner Sound to the north, around which a number of Mesolithic sites are currently being studied by the Scotland's First Settlers project (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002, 2003). Seaborne transport is likely to have been crucial in the Mesolithic, and Camas Daraich lies at the centre of a web of routes, both sea-based and overland.

Rùm was the source of a useful raw material – Rùm bloodstone. Tools of Rùm bloodstone are found on Mesolithic sites around the Inner Sound and elsewhere (Clarke & Griffiths 1990; Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2003). As yet there is not enough detail to speculate on the ways in which bloodstone was procured and distributed, but Camas Daraich is an important first step in this study in that it shows that nodules of bloodstone were brought here to be worked locally. At the same time, the people of Camas Daraich were able to obtain tools of baked mudstone from Staffin to the north and these seem to have been brought in more often as finished goods.

There is now a series of 7th millennium BC, and earlier, dates for human activity from sites in the vicinity of Camas Daraich (Kinloch: Wickham-Jones 1990; Sand: Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2001; Loch a Sguirr: Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2000; An Corran: Saville & Miket 1994; Table 36) and more will, no doubt, follow. It is impossible to say how far afield the people of Camas Daraich ranged as part of their annual round, but comparison with other hunter-gatherers (both modern and ancient) suggests that a range of 70 km in any direction from the site would be conservative (Mithen 2000; Brody 2001). This would encompass the sources of all the raw materials found on site (and these must give a minimum distance) as well as the actual sites listed above themselves. There would, no doubt, have been many other sites in the Mesolithic round. Though the coast was undoubtedly important to the local economy at the time (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002), people also looked elsewhere for resources: the red deer of the high moorlands; the salmon and trout of the rivers; nuts and berries in woodland. Archaeology has been relatively successful at finding the coastal sites, attention must now turn to finding sites elsewhere (for example inland sites, as in work further south on the west coast; Mithen 2000). As an individual site Camas Daraich may not yet have yielded much, but as a part of a wider system it is invaluable.

Table 36 Radiocarbon determinations from the Small Isles, Skye and the Inner Sound relating to the 7th and 8th millennia BC. Calibrations taken from OxCal 3.5 (Stuiver *et al* 1998; Bronk Ramsey 2000)

Site	Lab code	Sample	Age BP	dC13	Cal date BC 1 sigma	Cal date BC 2 sigma
Camas Daraich	OxA-9782	hazelnut shell	7670 ± 55	–24.2	6590–6440	6640–6420
Camas Daraich	OxA-9783	hazelnut shell	7985 ± 50	–25.1	7060–6820	7060–6690
Camas Daraich	OxA-9784	hazelnut shell	7545 ± 55	–25.4	6460–6260	6470–6240
Camas Daraich	OxA-9971	hazelnut shell	7574 ± 75	–27.2	6480–6260	6570–6230
Loch a Sguirr	OxA-9305	charcoal (Betula)	7620 ± 75	–26.6	6590–6390	6640–6250
Loch a Sguirr	OxA-9255	bone, deer (bevel-ended tool)	7245 ± 55	–21.6	6210–6020	6230–6000
Sand	OxA-10152	bone, mammal (bevel-ended tool)	8470 ± 90	–22.1	7600–7370	7750–7200
Sand	OxA-10384	bone, mammal (bevel-ended tool)	7855 ± 60	–21.1	6980–6590	7050–6500
Sand	OxA-10175	bone, mammal (bevel-ended tool)	7825 ± 55	–21.1	6750–6510	7050–6450
Sand	OxA-9343	charcoal (*Betula*)	7765 ± 50	–24.6	6650–6500	6680–6460
Sand	OxA-9281	bone, deer (bevel-ended tool)	7715 ± 55	–21.3	6600–6460	6650–6440
Sand	OxA-9282	bone, deer (bevel-ended tool)	7545 ± 50	–20.8	6460–6260	6470–6240
Sand	OxA-9280	antler	7520 ± 50	–21.8	6440–6260	6460–6240
An Corran	OxA-4994	bone, red deer (bevel-ended tool)	7590 ± 90		6600–6230	
Kinloch	GU-1873	hazelnut shell	8590 ± 95	–24.9		8000–7350
Kinloch	GU-2040	hazelnut shell	8560 ± 75	–25.1		7780–7480
Kinloch	GU-1874	hazelnut shell	8515 ± 190	–23.8		8200–7000
Kinloch	GU-2150	hazelnut shell	8310 ± 150	–25.7		7650–6800
Kinloch	GU-2146	hazelnut shell	8080 ± 50	–25.0		7310–6820
Kinloch	GU-2039	hazelnut shell	7925 ± 65	–25.3	7060–6569	7050–6650
Kinloch	GU-2147	hazelnut shell	7880 ± 75	–25.1	7050–6493	7050–6500
Kinloch	GU-2145	hazelnut shell	7850 ± 50	–25.0	7026–6495	7050–6500
Kinloch	GU-2149	charcoal	7570 ± 50	–25.3	6554–6230	6500–6250