
4 Absence or Invisibility?

The modest nature of the archaeological record for Arisaig inevitably raises the question of whether this reflects a genuine scarcity or simply a problem of invisibility. Rixon, attempting to describe the prehistoric period in Arisaig and Morar, deals with this question in the following terms:

There are two ways to look at the prehistoric period in Arisaig and Morar: either as an almost blank chapter in which we can do no more than list those prehistoric monuments which have been discovered to date; or as an unopened treasure-chest for the future (Rixon 2002).

Arguments in favour of genuine absence include the fact that the area is dominated by unimproved land where the destruction and levelling of archaeological sites is unlikely to occur: sites, if present, should be visible. The area has been examined by archaeologists, although not subject to recent systematic archaeological survey (as similar areas in Argyll have, for example by RCAHMS), and it seems unlikely that any additional major upstanding monuments exist. Absence of archaeological sites also matches our perception of this area (the 'Rough Bounds') as marginal and capable only of supporting a small human population.

The counter argument for invisibility can draw on the presence of widespread peat deposits, potentially

masking prehistoric houses and enclosures, as has been recognized elsewhere along the west coast of Scotland (Ritchie *et al* 1974). It is also supported by recent high spatial resolution palynological studies in West Affric that have demonstrated the presence of prehistoric farming communities in upland landscapes where no surface archaeological evidence for their former presence has been detected (Davies & Tipping 2005). This finding requires us to accept that the archaeology of the uplands (or marginal lowland areas) need not be visible, despite the presence of extensive tracts of upstanding prehistoric archaeology in the Highlands of Scotland, or even detectable by conventional archaeological techniques of field survey and excavation.

Weighing up the opposing arguments, it seems likely that neither is wholly correct. The landscape of Arisaig is not uniform and must have offered varying potential for settlement and use by earlier inhabitants. The clustering of recorded archaeological sites correlates with what is currently the better agricultural land so it seems reasonable to propose that there is a real focus of past settlement around the current village of Arisaig. Moving out from this core area into what is currently bog or very rocky grazing land it is reasonable to propose that the absence of archaeological sites is real.