

Ghosts in the Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities in the Search for Scotland's Palaeolithic People

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Cave palaeontology and Palaeolithic archaeology have been the subject of great public and scholarly interest since the 1800s, including in Scotland. It was in Aberdeen that geologist Charles Lyell delivered his landmark paper defending the 'Antiquity of Man' hypothesis. Despite this early impetus, 19th century scholarship also saw the beginnings of a research paradigm in the United Kingdom (and Ireland) that persistently excluded the possibility of human life in all but the south-east of Britain during the Late Pleistocene. Whether due to continued perceptions of environmental hostility, the side-lining of early proponents of a Scottish Upper Palaeolithic, or emphasis on other foci in Scottish prehistoric research, the evidence for the earliest human habitation in this country has long been contested or simply overlooked. Indeed, the last two decades have seen the region excluded from several large-scale, well-funded projects re-examining human activity in Pleistocene Britain/north-west Europe. Many of Scotland's earliest examples of stone tools – despite similarities to Late Glacial/Late Upper Palaeolithic assemblages in continental Europe – were until recently labelled 'Mesolithic' by most researchers.

The recent recognition of unequivocally Upper Palaeolithic artefacts has thrown down the gauntlet for the study of Late Pleistocene life in Scotland. One new site in particular – that of the Late Hamburgian reindeer hunting camp at Howburn, South Lanarkshire – marked a major milestone, demonstrating clear cultural connections to other parts of northern Europe around 12,000 BC (e.g., northern Germany, southern Scandinavia). Finds from another site, Rubha Port an t-Seilich on Islay, hint at the potential for the recovery of *in situ* remains, as Steve Mithen's contribution to this edition makes clear. Now, with the perceptual barrier of more than a century lifted, objects long held in Scotland's museums have begun to be re-evaluated, including antiquarian collections and atypical 'Mesolithic' and even 'Neolithic' items. As the late, great, ever curious, and intellectually-flexible Caroline Wickham-Jones cheerfully observed in the publication we were co-writing at the time of her death: "The machinations whereby the likely Late Upper Palaeolithic assemblage from Lunanhead was squeezed into the Early Neolithic for publication because of the non-existence of earlier settlement across the country are no longer necessary." (She was also keen to point out that although "the word 'Palaeolithic' does not appear in the [original] publication... 'unusual' is used seven times including in the title".)

Despite these recent advances, the density of conventional archaeological evidence for human activity in Late Glacial Scotland remains low and is likely to remain so. This may reflect intermittent, fleeting occupations but is also likely to be due to the nature of the record itself – Scotland's landscapes are the product of complex glacial (and therefore complex taphonomic) histories. Although Late Pleistocene deposits in the Assynt (Sutherland) 'Bone Caves' are generally considered to be non-anthropogenic (not humanly modified) in origin, in their consideration of evidence from Reindeer Cave during the 1980s, archaeologists Tim Lawson and Clive Bonsall addressed some of the limitations of the Scottish Late Upper Palaeolithic archaeological record that still apply today. They lamented the lack of karstic cave systems in Scotland of the type that yield well-preserved and rich Palaeolithic remains elsewhere. They also speculated that a lack of local flint sources may have led to a greater dependence on organic tools which decay more easily (although others, including Late Glacial specialist Torben Ballin, have since noted other local raw materials could have been used). Finally,

Lawson and Bonsall rightly argued that field work has been intermittent and the pattern of research uneven – something which has perhaps not changed over the intervening years and may be difficult to change, given the sparsity of easily-attributable sites. So, how do we – in the words of Torben Ballin - move ‘beyond Howburn’? How can we begin approaching the archaeology of Scotland’s first settlers when little traditional evidence belies an undoubted human presence?



Artist's impression of life on Deeside in the Late Upper Palaeolithic (© Mesolithic Deeside, artist: Jan Dunbar).

Survey and field work, and ongoing re-evaluation of assemblages, certainly represent important avenues to gaining a better understanding of human activity at the extreme edge of north-west Europe during the Late Glacial. Indeed, these have been recognised nationally as priorities in Scotland’s Archaeological Research Framework. Professional guidelines for the recognition, investigation and preservation of flint scatter sites, which Caroline was commissioned by HES to produce, stress the new found significance being placed on such sites. As highlighted by the successful work at Rubha Port an t-Seilich, with Mesolithic Deeside and at Howburn, there is also a need for long-term sustainable projects involving local community stakeholders working with academic and commercial partners. Commercial archaeological work as part of development and infrastructure projects also has great potential, as demonstrated by the new ancient sites identified during construction of the new Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (Aberdeen Bypass). Finally, there is an emerging need for systematic and well-supported

research initiatives that look beyond Scotland and strive to place the emerging Scottish record within the broader framework of north-west European Late Glacial record.

A further opportunity to investigate Scotland's Late Upper Palaeolithic peoples may lie in the closer integration of archaeology with the natural sciences. Thanks to a rich tradition of research, today we know more about environmental change in prehistoric Scotland than ever before. There are abundant sources of multi-proxy evidence for the palaeoenvironments and palaeogeography of Scotland (and wider north-west Europe) during the last Late Glacial period, the Younger Dryas and the early Holocene – one of the most intensively studied periods of the Scottish Quaternary. Palaeo-glacial and -environmental data have, for more than 40 years, revealed vast ice-free areas and ameliorating climate towards the end of the Late Pleistocene, suggesting conditions favourable for human colonisations. Animal bones from the Assynt 'Bone Caves' attest to the mammalian recolonisation of Late Ice Age Scotland. Considered alongside the new archaeological data, these palaeoenvironmental and palaeontological records allow us to take a bottom-up approach to the problem of the Scottish Palaeolithic – illuminating the living landscape of the Late Pleistocene and early Holocene as we strive to understand better the potentials and limitations of human life at this extreme edge of north-western Europe during the Late Glacial period. Biomolecular approaches, increasingly used in archaeology, also offer the tantalising potential for new, trace evidence for human activity at potential sites. In a world where the existence of a previously-unknown species of human – the Denisovans – is evidenced only by the DNA preserved in tiny (non-diagnostic) bone fragments and in soils of remote caves in Siberia, then perhaps our hunt for the ghosts in the landscapes of Late Glacial Scotland may truly lie in the invisible.



Kate sampling archaeological sediments for ancient DNA at the site of Rubha Port an t-Seilich, Islay, September 2021 (Kate Britton)

Author's note: I prepared this piece in May 2022, four months after the death of my academic collaborator and dear friend, Caroline. From her position as a Scottish prehistorian, and mine, as a specialist in palaeoecological approaches to Late Pleistocene archaeology, we had many

long chats through the course of our friendship (normally over dinner, or a gin) about how to approach the problem of Scotland's 'missing' Upper Palaeolithic. At the time of Caroline's passing, we were working closely in developing grant bids and writing a paper on challenges and opportunities of Late Pleistocene archaeology in Scotland.



Kate and Caroline get down to important business at a project meeting in Edinburgh, June 2021 (Kate Britton)

Find out more:

<https://www.mesolithic.co.uk/blog/2019/08/14/the-nature-of-the-beast/>

<https://www.mesolithic.co.uk/blog/2017/07/22/searching-for-the-scottish-late-upper-palaeolithic/>

<https://www.mesolithic.co.uk/blog/2021/02/10/framework-for-the-past-settlement-of-scotland/>