Fortrose & Rosemarkie Waste Water Works

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An area between Fortrose and Rosemarkie on the Black Isle in Easter Ross was investigated before construction of a Waste Water Works. The site (hereafter called FRWWW) contained a number of pits, Bronze Age and Neolithic, as well as a large Bronze Age grain-drying kiln, a small Bronze Age cremation complex, and Medieval and Post-Medieval pits (Fraser 2014).

From the Neolithic pits, evidence of grain production included charred wheat, barley, flax and one grain of oats which may have been a weed. Unusually wheat was more prevalent than barley (though there were a number indeterminate grains), and this is one of the few Neolithic sites in Scotland with evidence of flax cultivation. Small quantities of oats were also found. Elsewhere wheat and flax are known from large timber halls such as Balbridie, but no evidence of such a structure was found. The Neolithic pottery showed long use of the site, including Early Neolithic Modified Carinated Bowl, Middle Neolithic Impressed Ware and Late Neolithic Grooved Ware. The Carinated Bowls were used for cooking. Middle Neolithic Impressed Ware is also known from Kinbeachie on the Black Isle, where, unlike here, settlement remains were found. Charcoal came from alder, birch, hazel and willow, and there was a large amount of hazelnut shells, not unusual for this area or period.

A number of pits were found dating to the Bronze Age, most Middle Bronze Age, usually with a mix of charcoal, hazelnut shell and pottery. Charcoal was similar to the Neolithic, suggesting a largely unchanged landscape. The pottery in the pits were mainly Early Bronze Age beakers, all seemingly funerary types. There were also a few sherds of Food Vessel pottery. Cists in the area at Rosemarkie Manse and Ness Gap, Fortrose also had Food Vessels. The beaker pottery holds out possibility of Early Bronze Age funerary use at the site.

The grain drying kiln was firmly dated to the Middle Bronze Age (1879-1502 cal BC), and indicates cereal processing at the site at this time. This is rare find for prehistoric sites. It was primarily used for barley, although a little wheat was found. Interestingly, the barley was mainly naked barley which is more generally associated with Neolithic sites. Large lumps of charcoal suggest some form of drying platform was above the fire pits.

The cremation complex also dated to the Middle Bronze Age, and provides evidence for burials at this period. There were five pits, two with urned cremations and two un-urned. The fifth pit only had domestic waste or pyre material. One of the urned pits had an inverted, undecorated urn. The urn is unusual in that it shows an attempt to repair it, again very rarely found. It contained the remains of an individual, probably female, suffering from osteoarthritis in the spine and foot. A copper alloy awl, and fired clay beads were included with the burial, all of which had been burned in the pyre. These are the first Scottish examples of copying jet styles in clay. It is unusual to find gravegoods from cremation urn deposits, and those from Scotland are generally fairly unprepossessing, with notable exceptions of faience beads from nearby Ness Gap and across the firth at Findhorn, Moray.

Many of the details from the burials can be paralleled at nearby Ness Gap (MHG54308; Woodley et al 2020), where five cordoned urns were recovered. Together these sites provide a good picture of Middle Bronze Age burial practices on the Black Isle. However, it is interesting that charcoal from the funerary pits at FRWWW is dominated by alder, unlike Ness Gap where oak was favoured.

Finally there is evidence of Medieval and later use of the site, consisting of four large and one smaller pit. Similar pits are also known from Ness Gap. Metal detecting finds have provided widespread evidence of medieval activity in the Fortrose and Rosemarkie area, both of which were important Medieval ecclesiastical sites, first at Rosemarkie then moving to Fortrose.

The site is important in that it provides well-dated evidence for Middle Bronze Age burials, evidence of corn drying kilns at an early date, early cultivation of flax and use of wheat over barley, and the first evidence of copying jet beads in clay. The area is known for its rich agricultural land (Alasdair Cameron pers comm), and was clearly targeted from an early date. The finds of flax, known only in the Neolithic at the large hall sites, is a tantalising hint that a major Neolithic settlement was nearby.

Further information:

Details in a number of monument records:

MHG60799 BA grain drying kiln

MHG60873 Neolithic pit cluster

MHG60800 pit

MHG60801 Pit

MHG60791 Pit cluster

MHG60874 Early Neolithic pit cluster

MHG60875 Urned and Un-urned cremations

MHG60876 post-medieval pits

MHG60877 Pits

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