**High Pasture Cave**

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The excavations at Uamh An Ard Achadh (High Pasture Cave) on Skye have transformed our understanding of ritual sites in Iron Age Scotland. Originally discovered by cavers in 1972, the underground passages and above ground remains were then excavated by Steven Birch and Martin Wildgoose with considerable community involvement, between 2004 and 2010. The enhanced preservation of archaeological deposits across the site has provided a more complete picture of activity than remains on most other Highland sites. An extensive radiocarbon dating program including Bayesian statistical analysis has allowed detailed phasing to be established within a robust chronological framework.

The excavations have revealed the importance of investigating non-domestic sites, and have confirmed the importance of underground sites and especially natural caves for religious practices. Although activity at the site extends back to the Early Bronze Age, it is through the Iron Age that High Pasture Cave became a site of important ceremonial focus. Beginning in the Early Iron Age, around 820-755 cal BC, a sequence of structural modifications took place which gradually transformed the natural cave and its entrance into a ritual complex.

Structures identified at the surface included a sequence of paved walkways and associated stone stairwells that provided access to the cave entrance through the Iron Age. These formal access arrangements were enclosed by a succession of stone walls of increasing complexity, defining a space where a wide range of activities took place. Within the enclosure a sequence of 12 hearth settings were revealed, most superimposed one above the other, which generated significant amounts of residues including ash, charcoal, fire-cracked stone and the butchered remains of a wide range of animals. The midden deposits across the site also contained significant assemblages of fish bone, shellfish and burnt processed barley grain. Outside the cave entrance, the accumulation of these materials reached a depth in excess of 5 metres.

The large assemblage of artefacts recovered from the site (including 427 coarse stone artefacts; 268 worked bone, antler and tooth artefacts; 54 iron artefacts; 22 copper-alloy artefacts; lithics, glass beads, worked wooden objects and a wide range of vitrified materials) represent a wide range of activities and crafts including food production, hide processing, metalworking, weaving and textile production, and the manufacture of objects in bone, antler, cannel coal/shale and steatite (soapstone). Some of the different types of objects recovered from the site and in particular caches of objects such as cobble tools and steatite spindle whorls display various stages of life and use-wear, including objects that have not been finished, while others have been repaired and re-used. These objects have their own biographies and were potentially curated over many generations. They may also have been connected with specific events that took place elsewhere in the landscape, or related to an individual or special craft skill.

Many other types of artefacts were recovered from High Pastures including glass beads, fragments from burnt wooden objects, and even a small lump of pine resin; but one of the most enigmatic and important items was the wooden bridge and potential wooden fragments from a stringed musical instrument; most likely a lyre. Representing the earliest evidence for a stringed instrument in Western Europe, the manufacture of the bridge displayed a high-level of craftsmanship, while the technological input and structural adaptations evidence sophistication in musical technique.

Most artefacts recovered from the High Pasture Cave complex, with the exception of three iron spear-heads and two antler spear points, could be classed as domestic, utilitarian objects. However, the composition and ritual treatment of the assemblage as a whole, along with their deposition within and around the cave (rather than a domestic structure), makes them stand out as unusual.

Disarticulated human remains of at least seven and possibly twelve individuals dating over several centuries were deposited in the complex, suggesting carefully chosen and curated bones deliberately selected for placement in the cave. The final event to take place at the High Pasture Cave Complex centred on the formal closure of the site between *cal AD 25-90*, which included the placement of human and animal remains in the top of the previously backfilled stairwell. These remains provide key evidence for human burials and rituals.

The project also looked at the wider landscape, to gauge where the population who came to the cave may have lived and worked. Some sites were identified, but no high status ones such as Culduthel on the east. The catchment area for the cave remains an interesting question, and may have changed over the years.

The investigations carried out at the High Pasture Cave complex have produced compelling evidence for the repeated deposition of selected artefacts and organic materials at the site, the preparation and display of human remains, and the creation and curation of a sacred space formed not only from rock and stone but also from ash, bone and earth. The rich and complex stratigraphy of the site illustrates its recurrent use as an arena for such performances, and has the potential to tell us much about the cosmology of later prehistoric communities, as well as the social structures which supported the creation and curation of such places as ritual foci.

Studies of later prehistory have often regarded landscape as playing an active role in the structuring of society, culture and ritual and as ethnographic evidence can demonstrate, people routinely comprehend their surroundings in relation to myths and history. Indeed, different places within the landscape are likely to have functioned as points of reference and would probably have embodied social identities and genealogical histories. It is therefore possible that the use of locales such as the High Pasture Cave complex, the modification of its physical appearance and symbolic nature, and the deposition of culturally significant materials at the site, would have made it increasingly distinguishable from other natural caves in the wider landscape.

Although High Pasture Cave with its wealth of deposits and construction is so far unique in the UK, other cave sites in the Highlands are providing evidence for the occupation of caves and rockshelters, and more unusual activities. These include the Fiskavaig Rockshelter (Wildgoose and Birch 2010), the Covesea Caves (Armit and Büster 2020),caves near Rosemarkie ([www.spanglefish.com/rosemarkiecavesproject/](http://www.spanglefish.com/rosemarkiecavesproject/)) and a number of sites in Wester Ross identified by the Scotland’s First Settlers project (Hardy and Wickham-Jones 2009). There are other special cave sites identified in the UK and especially elsewhere in Europe.

High Pasture Cave must have been an important place for gathering, exchange, feasting and veneration, and probably for negotiation of status and forgoing new relationships and identities. It provides key evidence for the importance of caves sites, seen as special and unusual in the society.

Further Information

The High Pasture Cave website <http://www.high-pasture-cave.org/> provides a wealth of information uploaded over the years. The final report is in production and eagerly awaited (Birch et al forthcoming)

Image: Request from Steven Birch