**Remains of a Multi-Period Burial Site at John O’ Groats**

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In 1989, building work at a factory site in John O’ Groats disturbed a significant quantity of human bone. Human remains had been reportedly found in the area as long ago as the 1850s and Archaeology Projects Glasgow consequently carried a rescue excavation. This concentrated on an area 6m by 5m, where the concentration of bones had been densest and a burial ground comprising a mass of disarticulated human bone and six poorly preserved articulated burials was discovered. It was apparent that the articulated burials were not all contemporary, with two distinct periods of burial represented.

2242 fragment of bone were recovered from just below the turf. The layer they came from was between 0.10-0.25m thick and the copious amount of bone within it was distributed in a jumbled and random fashion. In one area it was clear that the long bones and skulls had been stacked up however, so the displacement of these bones had clearly been intentional. The significant amount of human bone from such a small area indicates a pattern of very dense burial; estimations of the minimum number of individual was determined to be 71 adults and 13 children. Intensive burial on this scale is likely to have been the product of continuous burial over a period of time extending to centuries, and in this context, the management and clearance of parts of the burial ground, probably to make space for new burial, seems likely.

Careful cleaning of the disarticulated material revealed four articulated, extended burials within the random bones, which were still very close to the surface. Due to this, they had suffered considerable damage and two of the burials in particularly were in very bad condition, being less than a spade’s depth below the turf. No grave cuts were distinguishable, but the bodies were laid with their heads to the west and feet to the east. Analysis of the skeletons has determined that two were mature adult males, one was a mature adult, possible male, and the last was adult, sex unknown. Radiocarbon dating of two of the bodies produced two dates spanning the 10th-13th centuries. These burials then seemed to be contemporary with the disarticulated material, from which a radiocarbon date centred in the 13th century was produced, indicating that this cemetery was in use in the medieval period.

Below the burials and scattered human remains, an extensive area of flagstone paving was revealed, which was interpreted as representing structures on or near a settlement. Bronze and Iron Age pottery sherds and flint flakes between and below the flagstones indicated that it was prehistoric, but beyond this, little more could be said apart from that a long history of prehistoric settlement at John O’ Groats was indicated by the depth of the soils below. In one place, it was clear that flagstones had been removed, and two burials, one on top of the other, had been inserted below the level of the slabs. These were extended, but they were orientated with their heads to the east, and thus clearly represented a different burial rite to the other burials. Due to the deeper depth, these two interments were initially thought to be the earliest burials on site; however, radiocarbon dating proved them to be the latest burials, dating to the 16th-17th centuries.

It has been suggested that the mass of articulated bone and the earlier four articulated burials represent the use of a cemetery site spanning the 11th to 13th centuries. The orientations of the four articulated burials indicate that it was a Christian cemetery, and it seems likely that this marks the approximate location of a chapel, to which this burial ground was associated with, nearby. The two later articulated burials do not represent continuous use of this burial ground into the 17th century, but does at least suggest an awareness of this site as a place of burial at this time, which was probably marked by the chapel. The unconventional burial postures of the two later burials, opposite to the typical Christian burial rite, also pose some interesting questions about the social group they belonged to; were they perhaps foreigners, non-conformists or criminals?

There is also potential for further post excavation analysis on the existing assemblage. Detailed analysis of the disarticulated bones was not seen as worthwhile at the time, but as the remains represents what is likely to be the local medieval population of the area, such a study could glean significant information about the demographic and health of this local medieval population. Further radiocarbon dating of more individuals too would clarify the duration of the use of the cemetery. Moreover, since the initial excavations thirty years ago, newer scientific techniques of analysis are becoming routine, such as stable isotope analysis. Where such older excavation assemblages can be tracked down and the survival of the remains are good enough, valuable information about the diet and origin of individuals can be learnt. In the case of John O’ Groats, isotope analysis, if possible, of the two 17th century burials may offer insight into why they were buried in a cemetery that had gone out of use, and why they were buried in unconventional burial postures.

Only a small area of the site was excavated and the true extent of it remains unknown. Part of the site was definitely destroyed during the prior development work which removed the shallow archaeological deposits via the removal of the topsoil and levelling of the ground surface. However, the site extended beyond the trench on the three sides which were not disturbed by the excavation. Further work in the area, including geophysical surveys and trial trenching, has found no further trace of this site which indicates that the extent of cemetery (and earlier settlement) must be confined within a relatively small are. This area, and the potential archaeological remains surviving there, has yet to be targeted for further investigation.

Further Information:

Site plans available on the Highland HER records.

MHG39354 and EHG996. See also MHG598 and MHG1708.

Driscoll, S. T. 1993. Rescue excavations of a prehistoric settlement and Viking Age / Medieval cemetery at John O'Groats 1989. *Glasgow Archaeol Journal.*  16: 29-37

<http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=MHG39354>

<http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=EHG996>