Mesolithic bloodstone artefacts from Camas Daraich, Skye

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Bloodstone is a form of jasper (chalcedony) which outcrops on the island of Rum, to the south of Skye. It was used in prehistory, particularly in the Mesolithic period, to knap into tools. Given the lack of flint in the area, the abundance of Rum Bloodstone cobbles at and near the source made it an important raw material, as evidenced by the number of sites to make use of it. In addition to its significance in the past, it is also a significant material for archaeologists today as it provides a useful indicator for mobility around a very specific region of the west coast.

Bloodstone objects were found at Camas Daraich, southern Skye, a short sea crossing from the source. In the 7th millennium BC, a lithic working site was situated on the raised beach. A small excavation and surface collection in 2000 recovered almost 3000 lithics, as well as charcoal and carbonised hazelnut shells; unburnt organic materials did not survive. The artefacts included a number of microliths, scrapers, points and a great deal of debitage from knapping. Raw materials consisted of 46% chalcedonic silica, 33% bloodstone and 19% quartz, with small amounts of other material; due to the similar geologic components it is possible that some of the chalcedonic silicas are also bloodstone.

There has been a great deal of discussion on the chronology of broad and narrow blade microliths. The examples from Camas Dariach vary in width from 4 to 21 mm, with no distinction by raw material. Overall the dimensions compare fairly closely to Kinloch, Rum, a Mesolithic site composed predominantly of local bloodstone lithics. Microwear analysis was carried out on the lithics, providing a useful insight into use. Of the artefacts examined, over half of the bloodstone pieces had visible traces of use, perhaps suggesting preferential selection for tasks; however, microwear is easier to see on bloodstone and finer-grained materials. Some unretouched flakes and blades also showed evidence of use, something that has been widely evidenced elsewhere and an important insight for those who assess the significance of any lithic assemblage.

The radiocarbon dates show activity in the 7th millennium BC, part of a growing number of sites in the area showing human activity at this early period including Kinloch, Rum, An Corran and Loch a Sguirr rockshelter on Skye, and Sand, Wester Ross. There are hints that later activity took place, including into the Bronze Age, again not unusual in other Highland Mesolithic sites. While most bloodstone artefacts appear to date to the Mesolithic, there are also examples of the use of this material later on, in the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

Bloodstone artefacts are found in an area of c. 80 km from Rum, with a few outliers. Lithics from sites closest to source, such as those on Rum itself are predominantly made of bloodstone, while the proportion generally tapers off with distance. Some of the lithics at Camas Daraich were made from baked mudstone, another raw material with a distinct source, in this case at Staffin on the north coast of Skye, some 70 km away.

Most of the worked lithics at Camas Daraich show remains of cortex, suggesting they were knapped from pebble nodules. This suggests that the raw materials were imported as unworked pebbles, rather than prepared cores. However, the bloodstone objects show less cortex than other, more local materials, indicating that some testing and selection occurred before transport from source.

The evidence from Camas Daraich, and other Mesolithic sites in the area, for example at Sand, Wester Ross and An Corran, Skye, show that raw materials were collected and transported around a relatively limited area. At this point in time there is no clear evidence for exchange networks, though they cannot be ruled out, and many different mechanisms by which stone and other resources may have been procured and moved around the different communities in the area are possible. The limited size of the area over which Bloodstone was distributed contrasts with other raw materials such as Arran pitchstone which may have spread hundreds of kilometres. Whether or not the distribution of bloodstone formed part of the same community system as that of baked mudstone from northern Skye remains uncertain.

These finds are important for several reasons. The site provides good evidence for early activity in the Mesolithic. It shows the movement of raw materials by boat from the island of Rum at this period. It also shows the value of microwear analysis which is not as common as it ought to be.

The finds are in the Museum of the Isles, Armadale Castle

Further information:

Ballin, Torben Bjarke 2018 ‘The procurement of Rhum bloodstone and the Rhum bloodstone exchange network – a social territory in the Scottish Inner Hebrides’, *Archäologische Informationen* 41, 2018, 241-254. (available to download online)

Wickham-Jones Caroline R 2009 ‘5 Lithic raw material use around the Inner Sound’ in Hardy, Karen and Wickham-Jones, Caroline (eds) 2009, ‘Mesolithic and later sites around the Inner Sound, Scotland: the work of the Scotland’s First Settlers project 1998-2004’, *Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports* 31. archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/sair/contents.cfm?vol=31

Wickham-Jones, Caroline R and Hardy, Karen 2004. ‘Camas Daraich: A Mesolithic Site at Point of Sleat, Skye, *Scottish Archaeological Internet Reports* 12 archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-310-1/dissemination/pdf/sair12.pdf.

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