Roundhouse at Rhiconich, northwest Sutherland

Author: Susan Kruse

In most periods we know little about what was happening in the northwest Highlands. Fortunately excavations at Rhiconich (MHG12143) provide evidence of roundhouse construction and activity in the Middle Bronze Age and then in the Early Medieval Period.

The ground surface before the house was built preserved pollen of alder, birch and hazel, a not-uncommmon woodland cover for the Highlands. The landscape is exposed, with nearby peat cuttings from which ancient wood, fir cones and hazelnuts have been found. Several clearance cairns are in the vicinity. Evidence of Neolithic occupation in the area consists of chambered cairns.

At some point before construction, a small cairn was built, perhaps for clearance, in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. Then in the Middle Bronze Age a round house c. 8.5 metres in diameter was constructed. The house had an entrance to the southeast, with a stone spur jutting outwards to the south whose function is unclear. However, other roundhouses in the Highlands such as at Kilphedir (MHG9856; Fairhurst and Taylor 1970-1971) and Lairg (McCullagh and Tipping 1998), Sutherland also have elaborate entrances. The walls at Rhiconnich were well built with a stone core rather than earth.

Unlike many Highland roundhouses, there was good evidence of occupation levels inside. Slots were found which may have been used to support screens or partitions. The lower fill of one produced a Middle Bronze Age date and talc-tempered pottery which has parallels with Lairg. Outer postholes also produced radiocarbon dates in the Middle Bronze Age, and within one a flint thumbnail scraper. Little evidence of cereal production was found in these deposits.

A central rectangular hearth was above the lower floor layers, and had paving around it. Remains in this upper layer included undiagnostic pottery, worked quartz and a flint flake, whetstones, coarse stone tools and an iron plate. Finds over the paving and around the hearth included flint flake, pottery and a cannel-coal toggle without clear parallels; the toggle may have been made by recycling another artefact. The dating of this upper fill material is somewhat uncertain, and could be between Middle Bronze Age and Early Medieval Period.

Fill within and around the hearth contained pieces of charcoal and cremated animal and probably human bone; the fill dated AD 424-642 AD, suggesting a later use, and possibly funerary in nature. More substantial macrofossil remains survived from this period, including carbonised barley grains, both hulled and naked varieties. The main woodland species remained as earlier, although blackthorn also began to occur. By this stage the postholes had been filled in and could not have supported a roof, and it is unclear what supported this Early Medieval structure.

Patches of burning suggest intermittent human activity after this time, with the pollen indicating farming in the landscape, as well as exploitation of fish and hazelnuts. A late find was a gunflint.

The function of a small outhouse structure overlaying the southwest walling of the roundhouse is also unknown but might be later. In other roundhouses reuse as lambing pens or adaptation for shieling activities are postulated. However, no dating evidence was recovered for its use.

This excavation is important for providing housing and landuse activity for this area of the Highlands, both for the Bronze Age and the even less well known Early Medieval Period.

Source: Donnelly et al 1997