Bronze Age Cemetery at Seafield West, outside Inverness

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In the 1990s, in advance of development, a large area on the eastern outskirts of Inverness was investigated. Fieldwalking had previously shown prehistoric activity in the area, and an aerial photograph showed a circular pattern. This turned out to be a ring cairn, containing a variety of Bronze Age burials, and further investigation showed further burials in the nearby area (MHG3944).

The site shows the value of modern excavation techniques combined with good post excavation analysis. Within the ring cairn there were two log coffins, one hollowed out and one made of planks, identified only by stains. Prehistoric wooden coffins are extremely rare in Scotland, and this is important evidence of what must have been a more common practice. Preservation was poor, but phosphate analysis suggested an inhumation in the plank-built coffin. It also contained a food vessel of Irish type and flint tools. The log coffin contained degraded bones and a bronze dagger, with traces of the organic scabbard made from thin laths of oak and an outer layer of animal skin, tied by sinew thread, evidence which again rarely survives.

There were a variety of other burial traditions, including cists and pit burials, some in the ring cairn and some outside, some inhumation and some cremation. Grave goods included beakers, arrowheads, an antler pin and a bone toggle reminiscent of one found in burials from nearby Raigmore. Even with poor preservation, it was possible to identify some gender and age ranges, and the presence of degenerative joint disease. The cemetery is likely to have been used over a long period, although detailed phasing is not possible.

While few of the objects survived in a state for exhibition purposes, much can be told about them. The scabbard information has already been highlighted. Metallurgical analysis of the dagger indicated Irish parallels as did the Food Vessel in the plank coffin. This fits also the pattern of other Highland finds such as the identification that a man buried at Culduthel came from Ireland (MHG3776).

Some of the radiocarbon dates did not correspond to accepted typologies, leading to reanalysis of some of the material (Sheridan 2004). There was also residual Mesolithic material in the fill, showing the need for careful analysis and sampling.

The excavation of the Bronze Age cemetery was also noteworthy in the good environmental sampling. Charcoal came primarily from hazel, but also oak, birch, cherry, alder, pine and apple. Plant remains included naked and hulled barley, fruit and seeds from wild plants, some possibly from the fuel for burning. Pollen analysis indicated primarily bracken spores in the log coffin near the dagger, perhaps part of the burial tradition, and a variety of grasses and plants on the floor, possibly relating to a mat. As such this analysis helps to build a picture of burial traditions.

If this site had been excavated 70 years ago, only a fraction of the information would have been recovered given the poor preservation. The site is important because of the information it has provided on Bronze Age burial traditions and local context.

Cressey, Michael and Sheridan, Alison 2003. ‘The excavations of a Bronze Age cemetery at Seafield West, near Inverness, Highland,’ PSAS 133, 47-84.