

A NOTE ON MESOLITHIC SITES IN BUTE

by W. F. Cormack

Hitherto, evidence of mesolithic occupation of Bute has been scanty, but the discovery of a small chipping site, with one or two microliths in agate, near St. Blanes in 1984, increased the probability that pre-neolithic sites existed. Accordingly the writer, with his wife Sheila, and Jack Scott, all familiar with coastal mesolithic sites in Galloway, spent a day or two in April 1986, walking over ploughed fields on the suggestion of Miss D. Marshall.

During the mesolithic period the land was some 40 feet lower than at present and the sea cut an erosion scarp which now appears as a low bluff at the inland edge of the raised beach. In Galloway, the favoured occupation sites were on the top of this bluff adjacent to a small stream cutting through the bluff and allowing access to the shore.

Such a site was found on Little Kilchattan at about NS 105565 on the 50 foot contour. A discoloured patch extending perhaps 75m. along the top of the bluff yielded about 180 flints and one piece of blue green chert. The flints, from small nodules, have generally a white or blue patination often stained with dark blotches. The industry consists of scrapers, cores, and the usual flakes and blades, some utilized. Two geometric microliths were also recovered.

At Ardnahoe, a field with a similar relationship to the bluff and a stream was unploughed but a small worked-out core, patinated and stained, was found in the adjoining field at about NS 070575. This is likely to be a stray from a mesolithic site about 070574, again on the 50 foot contour.

At Glecknabae, in the north west of the island, the neolithic chambered cairn at NS 008682 is built on a shell midden long suspected to be mesolithic. During a visit to the cairn, a flint core was picked up from among the shells eroding from the midden. About 35mm high it has the chalky white patina and bladelet scars characteristic of mesolithic cores. Such a continuity between mesolithic and neolithic occupation of a site is quite consistent with evidence elsewhere, particularly in Denmark.

The date of these new sites in Bute should perhaps be about 5000 B.C. in calendar years. The finds, which are in Rothesay Museum, may form the subject of a fuller paper in a future number. In the meantime, it is hoped that field walking on Bute by Society members and others will yield more mesolithic sites, some of which may be suitable for excavation in future.

THE ENIGMATIC CUP MARK CARVINGS ON BUTE

Dorothy N. Marshall

Cup marks are small shallow hollows on average 38mm (1½") across, made on stones, earth fast boulders or rock outcrops. They were made by Bronze Age men around 1800-1500 BC. When the cups are surrounded by one, two or three rings and when several of these symbols are on one stone they can be impressive and well earn the term of Rock Carvings or Petroglyphs. They are more common in the S.W. of Scotland than in the N.E. and in the North of England than in the South. Cup and ring carvings are found all over the world right South to Australia and New Zealand. The greatest concentration however is in North Britain. As yet no-one knows their meaning.

Twenty three years ago I would have said that we had no cup and ring marks on Bute and no cup marks apart from those long known on the standing stones at Craigberoch and Dunagoil and one cup mark recognised by Ludovic Mann about 1918 on Dunagoil Fort. Then, when digging the Neolithic Burial Cairn at Glenvoidean (Henshall But 1) a stone with 9 cups was recognised beside the track leading up to the Cairn. Another stone with 8 cups was found higher up the hill above the Cairn. Once members of the Society became "cup conscious" other carved stones were found. Ian Hopkins while out bird watching found two big stones beyond the Bull Loch. Two farmers' wives, Elisabeth Johnston and Irene Speirs, spotted stones with cup and ring marks when out looking for sheep. Jessica Middleton found a cup and ring stone on Inchmarnock and more stones on Kilmichael farm. Dan Boag, retired farmer from Inchmarnock, ranging the hills of Bute has brought the total so far known to 59 carved stones, 11 of them with cup and rings.

We have no great spreads of these carvings — nothing like the 100 cups with 3 or 4 rings each as at Auchnabreck near Lochgilphead or at Cairnbaan near the Crinan Canal.

R. B. W. Morris in his book 'Prehistoric Rock Art of Argyll' puts the carvings somewhere between 1800 and 1500 B.C. No artefacts have been found beside the stones to date them but in Argyll 1 in every 20 Bronze Age Burial Cists have the symbols cut on the inside of one of the slabs. The stone in the Bute Museum is a splendid example of this.

At one time it seemed as if they were connected in some way with metal working, but as more and more stones were found in areas outwith metal bearing rocks that theory was abandoned. There is no workable copper on Bute.

What they mean and why they were carved is a mystery. I heard Mr Morris give a lecture on these enigmatic petroglyphs. He showed