

A PREHISTORIC CHIPPING-FLOOR OF AGATES ON THE HILLS OF SOUTH BUTE

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In the course of a geological traverse along the ridge east of Glencallum during the summer of 1970, some specimens of druisy quartz and agate were collected from a scree below an outcrop of agate-bearing rocks on the west-facing slopes and lying about 400m due east of St. Blane's Church on or about the 350ft contour of the One Inch O.S. Map; Sheet 59. The National Grid Reference is NS099.534 to an approximation. Most of the material was found under rockwaste at the head of the scree.

When examined subsequently, some of the agate specimens proved to be artifacts of mesolithic aspect, but at that time information relating to the presence of agate implements in Scottish Mesolithic collections appeared to be wanting. Early in the following year, however, the writer found two minute, retouched, agate implements in association with a typical mesolithic assemblage, worked in flint and radiolarian chert, on a low shoreline of Loch Doon, Ayrshire. Shortly, thereafter, a clutch of agate implements was found on an esker being worked for sand and gravel near Priestland, Darvel, Ayrshire, and these revelations inspired further exploration of the Bute scree between 1971 and 1975.

Judicious removal of rockwaste along the head of the deposit disclosed a scatter of waste chippings together with a significant yield of implements and utilised flakes, all worked in the agate found in situ and all in a sharp, fresh condition. The assemblage is comprised of side and end-scrapers, some based on flakes-of-sorts and others on core-pieces; there are also piercers, and a few bladelets; also a microlithic element and some nondescript flake-tools.

Very few of these implements are edge-retouched and the flaking technique appears to have been influenced considerably by the aberrations of the raw material. On this account many of the implements appear somewhat atypical against the background of those usually associated with flint industries based on the production of blades.

Several of the scrapers and flakes exhibit gloss along the working edges and adjacent surfaces; a feature also present round the points of burins and piercers and other small tools. Apart from this localized glossing, there is no other apparent surface alteration comparable with the white patina sometimes present on flint implements.

The choice of agate for the manufacture of these Bute implements poses interesting questions. Although flint is of rare occurrence on Bute, even on the strandline, chert is present in situ at Dunagoil Bay, a short distance from the scree, and also in the beach shingle nearby, also on the shoreline south of Kilchattan Bay on the east side of the Island. This apparent preference for agate in localities where plentiful alternative raw-material is available is not restricted to Bute, for it has been observed by the writer at a similar scree-site at Glenmuirshaw, Ayrshire and elsewhere at sites where radiolarian chert and other minerals are available in good measure. It is possible that the absence of brittleness and the excellent wearing properties possessed by agate make it pre-eminently suited for certain implement applications and it is not unreasonable to assume that these facts were known on an empirical basis in prehistoric times.

As the site, high and exposed, is a chipping floor it may be logical to assume that the workers took the best of the implements away with them.

At the time of writing, the area covered by vegetation at the head of the scree has not been excavated and may repay investigation.

FINDS

by J. G. Scott

Seventy-nine specimens from the St. Blane's site have been examined. I am grateful to Mr W. F. Cormack for his help in assessing the material, and to Mrs S. Gell for drawing representative examples.

With one possible exception, of flint, all the specimens are of the agate or quartz described by Mr H. McFadzean above. These materials are highly intractable, so that to have attempted the careful secondary working possible with flint must have proved fruitless. Consequently, the amount of waste is large – fifty-seven out of the seventy-nine pieces, whilst few of the worked specimens are readily comparable with the standard scrapers and other implements, known in flint. Mr Cormack is prepared to accept two specimens, nos. B51 and B67, as microliths of the Mesolithic period. All the others are not sufficiently diagnostic to be classified as other than prehistoric, though this is not to deny that some of them might also have been Mesolithic.

Microliths

- B51. Part of a backed blade, 9 x 5mm, broken (Fig. 1).
- B67. Backed blade, patinated, possibly of flint, 17 x 9mm (Fig. 1).

Borers

- B9. 26 x 14mm, with slight retouch to improve point (Fig. 2).
- B75. 33 x 13 mm, with little if any retouch; polished tip shows use (Fig. 1).

Scrapers

- B12. Side scraper, 3.2 x 2 cm, with fine retouch along working edge.
- B13. End scraper, 4.6 x 4.5 cm, with slight but extensive retouch (Fig. 2) (Fig. 13).
- B14. End scraper, 4.5 x 3.2cm, with slight retouch but evident polish of working area (Fig. 2)
- B15. Side scraper, 4.9 x 3.2 cm, with slight retouch to back (Fig. 2).
- B16. End scraper, 4.7 x 3.6cm, slightly hollow edge with retouch.