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Is there a convincing argument for late-glacial occupation of Northern Britain?

1. Background

It is generally accepted that there were people in Northern Britain at the end of the last Ice Age but it is unclear how long they stayed in the region. Many believe that the first people in Northern Britain were simply hunting groups who travelled to the area and stayed for very short periods to exploit resources. I am investigating the possibility of more prolonged settlement. There are four particular artefacts that suggest more permanent inhabitants; a point found at Shieldaig, Wester Ross, another found at Balevullin, Tiree (fig.1), a point that was recovered from a geological core from the North Sea, and the artefacts recovered by the Submerged Archaeological Landscapes Team (S.A.L.T.), led by Penny Spikins, including a possible long blade (fig. 2). The typology of these artefacts could be an indication that there was an occupation of Northern Britain that predates those recognised so far, that is, during the late-glacial period, up to 10,000B.P. I am defining Northern Britain as the area including Northumberland, Cumbria and Scotland.

Figure 1. Balevullin, Tiree. 2. Shieldaig, Wester Ross

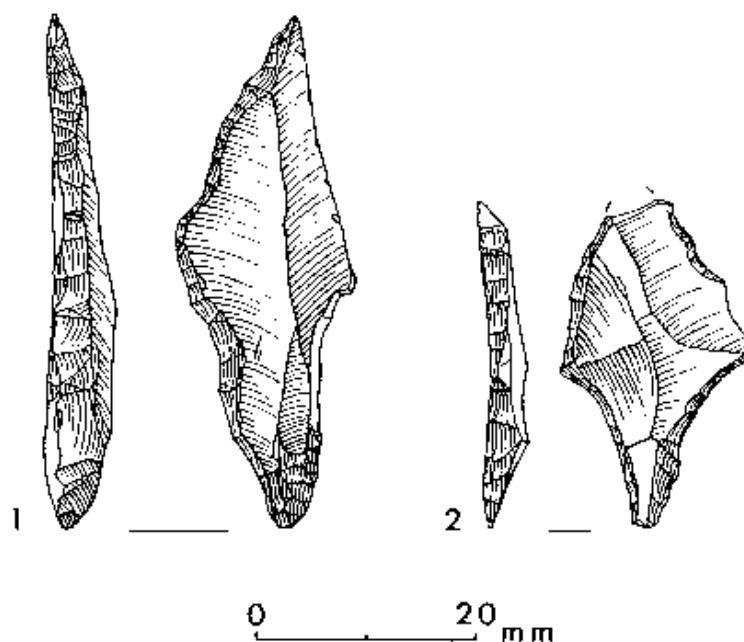


Figure 2. Possible Long Blade recovered by S.A.L.T.



The early prehistory of Northern Britain is a research area that requires some new investigation, and the artefacts recovered up to this point need to be considered in a wider context. Recent work has focussed mainly on certain artefacts or particular sites, and a broader investigation is needed to consider all this evidence together. In addition to discussing and evaluating the existing arguments, I will be offering new evidence in the form of artefacts recovered from submerged sites off the coast of Northumberland by S.A.L.T. These artefacts, which are as yet unpublished, promise to make an exciting addition to the study of late-glacial Northern Britain.

2. Aims and Objectives

The aim of my research is to investigate the evidence for late-glacial occupation of Northern Britain, and determine whether there is evidence for prolonged habitation of the area. In order to achieve this aim I must consider many aspects of colonisation. I will initially consider late-glacial colonisation outside Northern Britain, focussing on South America and Norway. This library-based element of my research will form an integral part of my argument, that there could have been long-term inhabitants of Northern Britain during the late-glacial because there were permanent settlements in less hospitable or less accessible regions of the world.

It is also vital that I investigate the capability of late-glacial Northern Britain to support long-term inhabitants, considering environment, technology and resources. This will establish whether or not humans could have survived in Northern Britain at the end of the last Ice Age.

I will then look at the current arguments for and against prolonged occupation of the area, and evaluate them. This will provide a stepping-stone from what is currently accepted as the first occupation of Northern Britain, to the implications of recently discovered evidence for earlier settlement.

3. Methods and Materials

A lecture given by Steven Mithen in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh in November 2003, provided an excellent starting point for my research. This highlighted what work has already been done in Northern Britain, and so helped me recognise what research is needed. A large portion of my research is library based, requiring the use of books, papers and reports. This demands the use of the inter-library loan system and the Internet. Inter-library loans have proved an efficient way of obtaining copies of papers and books that would otherwise have been difficult to get a hold of. The Internet has allowed me to order certain reports, such as the Strategic Environmental Assessment Consultation Report, on CD ROM. It has also allowed me easy access to journal articles and reports, complimenting Inter-library loans.

A significant part of this dissertation cannot be fulfilled by library-based research, and demands the consideration of artefacts and sites that have not been published, such as the artefacts recovered by S.A.L.T. The fact that no formal suggestions have been made regarding the age and origin of these artefacts presents me with the opportunity to be one of the first to study the typology of the pieces, and consider them alongside artefacts that have already been published and discussed.

There are several academics that have offered me help and advice since I began my research, particularly the members of the Submerged Archaeological Landscapes Team who have guided me through the beginnings of my first research project. Also, Nyree Finlay, from the University of Glasgow, allowed me to attend a lithics workshop that she organised in November 2003. This gave me the opportunity to meet Allan Saville and Torben Ballin, leading specialists in the Prehistory of Scotland, and get some hands-on experience with lithics that are associated with the earliest occupation of Northern Britain. I hope to consult Nyree, Allan and Torben again before my work is completed and get their opinions on how my research has progressed, and how they think I might build on it. I have also been invited to consult Caroline Wickham-Jones, a Scottish Archaeologist who has worked extensively in the field of Prehistoric Scotland.

I hope to visit some of the sites where artefacts that suggest late-glacial occupation have been recovered. Some of these sites are submerged and although I will not be qualified to excavate, I expect to have gained enough diving experience to allow me to visit the sites. This will contribute to my understanding of the type of work involved in underwater archaeology, the contexts in which artefacts are found, and the landscapes they are recovered in. The diving training I am receiving is a direct result of my research, and will be a skill that I can use during further investigation of submerged sites in Northern Britain after this dissertation.

4. Chapter Outlines

I expect to present my findings in six chapters, each with several subheadings (Appendix A). An Introduction of the topic will be first, stating the background to the project and the aim, objectives, methods and materials.

The second chapter will be concerned with Colonisation. Within this chapter the challenging aspects of researching colonisation will be addressed, along with the colonisation of Norway and South America. The chapter will be concluded with a look at the coastal colonisation of Britain. This chapter will provide the reader with a background to global colonisation and go on to focus on coastal settlement in Northern Britain. It is important to consider the colonisation of regions outside Northern Britain because there are certain similarities that suggest an earlier occupation than is currently accepted, such as the typology of lithics found in Norway and Northern Scotland.

Chapter Three will consist of a brief investigation into late-glacial landscape development in Northern Britain, considering geomorphological change and marine biomass in particular. This chapter will investigate the likelihood of human survival in the late-glacial period, and go on to introduce the sites currently believed to represent the first occupation of Northern Britain.

The fourth chapter will introduce the Evidence for Late-Glacial Settlement in Northern Britain, with a section dedicated to each of the key artefacts; the Shildaig Point, the Balevullin Point, the Viking Island Point, and the artefacts recovered by the Submerged Archaeological Landscapes Team. Here each of the artefacts will be analysed before the The Implications of Evidence for Earlier Settlement of Northern Britain are discussed in chapter five.

Chapter five will draw from all of the preceding chapters to form a renewed argument for the colonisation of Northern Britain. The importance of underwater research will be discussed in regards to the settlement of Northern Britain, and a prediction of submerged sites on the coasts of Northern Britain will be offered.

The final chapter will summarise the Conclusions reached within the body of the dissertation and highlight the potential for further research, including that which I hope to carry out myself during my postgraduate studies.

On submission I expect to have provided an original investigation into the first occupation of Northern Britain. I intend to present the first broad look at the evidence for late-glacial occupation for several years, and bring a new element to the argument in the form of the artefacts found by S.A.L.T. I hope to prove that there were people in Northern Britain up to 10,000B.P. by considering the material culture of the region, and considering the area in a wider context, that of global colonisation. By proving that humans had settled in Norway and South America around 10,000 years ago, and providing artefacts from Northern Britain that are typologically similar to those found in Norway, I believe I will be able to demonstrate that humans were present in Northern Britain for prolonged periods at the end of the last Ice Age.

Appendix A

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4. Evidence for Earlier Settlement of Northern Britain
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 - i. Summary of Results
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