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A Brief Overview of Neolithic Exchange In Scotland

The examination of exchange during the British Neolithic is not new. Indeed, there has been a number of studies, many of which have focussed on certain 'core' areas. Notably, these include Wessex, the Yorkshire Wolds and the products of the Langdale axe factories in Cumbria. Scotland, if mentioned at all, is frequently considered only in a peripheral way. This imbalance needs to be addressed if any truly valid reconstruction of not only trade, but also Neolithic society, can be made. The study I am undertaking is an attempt to redress the balance, by producing possibly the most detailed examination of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age trade yet undertaken.

There are several key types of artefact which must be considered when examining trade in Scotland. These include, in addition to stone axes, various other forms of stone weaponry such as battle-axes, adzes, and mace-heads. Other types of artefact include carved stone balls, artefacts made of amber or pumice and those of jet or the jet replicate cannel coal.

There are a number of sources for stone axes which lie outside the boundaries of the area now defined as Scotland and yet their products have been found there. These have been identified predominantly through the petrological study carried out by Clough and Cummins (1988). The first of these is the Langdale axe factory. These axes have been found predominantly in the area to the south west of the Forth-Clyde isthmus. Eastern-Dumfriesshire has also produced a large number of these axes. The majority have been found in close proximity to the coast or rivers, with the density decreasing further inland. This pattern is extremely interesting. It would appear to demonstrate that the axes were arriving predominantly by sea and from there being spread along rivers via hand to hand exchange. Whether it was traders who moved the axes up rivers or local units using them for navigation is unclear, although it is apparent that water played an important role.

This distribution of Langdale axes can be contrasted with the distribution patterns of the axes from Northern Ireland. These are found in the area to the north of the Forth-Clyde isthmus and in coastal areas, again suggesting the movement of external groups via water instead of over land. An image of the distances travelled by either objects or people can be represented by the fact that the greatest percentage of all the County Antrim axes found were located in Aberdeenshire, the area of Scotland possibly furthest from the source (Ritchie & Scott 1988).

Not all Scottish axes seemed to have travelled such a distance. A good example are the axes from the factory at Ceag na Caillich near Killin in Perthshire. These axes only have a comparatively local distribution and are predominantly found in north east Perthshire and western Aberdeen (ibid.). It may be that the 'external' axes were

being brought in to a few key communities by traders and then distributed from there, whereas 'local' axes were distributed directly from the source.

The other forms of stone weaponry dating to this period also follow a similar pattern of the proximity to water and varied patterns of distribution. One artefact type which does not conform to the use of waterways, as trade or exchange paths, is carved stone balls. These objects are found in the largest numbers in Aberdeenshire, leading to suggestions that they had their origins in that area although they are found further afield. The balls are not often found specifically in proximity to either the water or the sea. Indeed their distribution appears to be random. Even in Orkney the small number found have predominantly been found in locations which can only be described as inland. From this evidence it may be suggested that the balls were for a different purpose and as such were moved around the countryside in a different way.

Rare objects such as amber, jet and pumice are far more difficult to examine in relation to trade as they are more scarce, making patterns of distribution harder to see and seemingly random in appearance. They can frequently only be considered in relation to the distance travelled from any potential original source, which in itself can be difficult to trace. It is their scarcity that provides the most information as if the source was readily available then there would potentially be more. One problem associated with this is that the objects may have existed but have either not been found or have been destroyed.

One factor which is constant in relation to the trade of many of the objects, but especially stone weaponry is the significance of water. It is clear that much of the trade was carried out around the coast with inland groups only being involved if there were clear navigational markers such as rivers, or if the trade was hand to hand. Obviously there were exceptions such as the trade of carved stone balls, but it cannot be denied that the environment played a key role in the movement of people and objects around the landscape.

It must be remembered that any study of Neolithic exchange in Scotland has many difficulties. These include the limited nature of the availability of artefact information and the comparative lack of much recent extensive excavation and fieldwork. This is being remedied through new studies authored by people such as Alison Sheridan and several recent RCAHMS inventories. However, more needs to be done and it is only through extensive long term studies that the fullest picture possible of Scottish exchange and society in the Neolithic can be obtained.

Sources:

- Ritchie, P. R. and Scott, J.G. 1988. 'The Petrological Identification of Axes from Scotland' in T. M. Clough and W. A. Cummins (Eds.) Stone Axe Studies Volume 2: The Petrology of Prehistoric Stone Implements From the British Isles. CBA Research Report 67, 85-92.

