

ScARF Palaeolithic & Mesolithic Panel

Search of Highland Sites & Monuments Record for Useable Mesolithic Information

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Introduction

At the first ScARF Palaeolithic and Mesolithic panel meeting, held at the RCAHMS on Wednesday 13th May 2009, Alan Saville provided a brief introduction to the question of what data is available regarding known Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites in Scotland. Alan's searches of the RCAHMS CANMORE website returned a limited data set, while he also flagged up issues of access and content. During the following discussion it was agreed that a reasonable understanding of the current state of knowledge relating to known archaeological sites of Palaeolithic and Mesolithic age would be necessary to provide the necessary framework of early prehistoric holdings in Scotland.

Results

Initially, basic searches were undertaken on the RCAHMS CANMORE site during August 2009, which can be found online at <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/>. Searches of the National Sites and Monuments Record were made covering all of Scotland using basic keywords and the results are shown below.

<i>Keyword:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
"Mesolithic"	30
"Microlith"	110
"Lithic Scatter"	92
"Lithic Working Site"	65
"Mesolithic Midden"	1

The basic search of the CANMORE database using the keyword "Mesolithic" produced 30 results, which can be broken down into the following site types:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Result:</i>
Occupation Site/Settlement (Mesolithic)	7
Lithic Scatter/Flint Scatter (Mesolithic)	12
Lithic/Antler Implement (Mesolithic)	7
Midden (Mesolithic)	1
Cave (Mesolithic)	1
Misc. (Mesolithic)	2

The following searches of the Highland Sites & Monuments Record were made using the HER resource online at <http://her.highland.gov.uk> during the month of August 2009. A typical search would include the following keywords: **"Mesolithic" + "All Periods" + "All Areas/Parishes"**

<i>Keyword:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
"Mesolithic"	56
"Microlith"	9
"Lithic Scatter"	66
"Lithic Working Site"	20
"Mesolithic Midden"	11

Investigating the results obtained from the searches of the Highland Sites and Monuments Record in more detail, we can also see a wide variation in the types of site represented.

Results for "Mesolithic" – 56:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Cave/Hearth/Midden/Shell Midden	9
Rock Shelter	1
Stone Working Site/Quarry	3
Lithic Scatter/Lithic Working Site	6
Occupation Site	4
Burial Cairn	2
Burnt Mound	1
Broch	1
Building	1
Cup Marked Stone	1
Wood	1
Findspot	5
Other (generally by site name)	21

Results for "Microlith" – 9:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Shell Midden	2
Stone Working Site	1

Lithic Scatter	1
Burial Cairn	1
Findspot	4

Results for “Lithic Scatter” – 66:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Cave/Midden	1
Stone Working Site	2
Lithic Scatter/Lithic Working Site	17
Artefact Scatter	4
Findspot	1
Other (by site name)	41

Results for “Lithic Working Site” – 20:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Stone Working Site	4
Lithic Scatter/Lithic Working Site	15
Iron Working Site	1

Results for “Mesolithic Midden” – 11:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Cave/Hearth/Midden/Shell Midden	11

Results for “Flint Scatter” – 16:

<i>Type of Site:</i>	<i>Results:</i>
Stone Working Site	1
Lithic Scatter/Lithic Working Site	3
Flint Scatter	4
Artefact Scatter	5
Findspot	3

A detailed analysis of the results of the search for “**Mesolithic**” revealed a wide range of records including the following:

Mesolithic sites (C14 dated)

5

Possible Mesolithic site based on artefact typology	14
Multi-period sites containing Microliths/Mesolithic indicators	9
Post-Mesolithic sites	9
Shell midden of unknown date	9
Faunal/Plant remains (unknown date)	3
Quarry sites (multi-period)	2
Findspot (Mesolithic type artefact)	2
Findspot (unknown date)	6

A detailed analysis of the results of the search for **“Microlith”** produced the following records:

Mesolithic sites (C14 dated)	2
Possible Mesolithic site based on artefact typology	2
Multi-period sites containing Microliths/Mesolithic indicators	4
Findspot (Mesolithic type artefact)	1

Conclusions

The searches undertaken within the National Sites & Monuments Record at CANMORE and the Highland HER maintained by Highland Council in Inverness have clearly shown the problems in accessing and identifying the data set relating to known Mesolithic sites and find spots of Mesolithic type artefacts in Scotland. The results display significant anomalies between the two data sets, while Mesolithic records and sites in general are under represented.

Results from the CANMORE database included some of the ‘key’ Mesolithic sites in Scotland including Morton, Daer Valley, Shieldaig, Fiskary Bay, Redkirk Point, Camas Daraich and Druimvargie Rock Shelter. However, there are also major omissions including Kinloch, Bolsay Farm, Staosnaig, Sand Rock Shelter, An Corran Rock Shelter, Cramond and the Oronsay Shell Middens.

Keywords such as “Mesolithic” and “Microlith” provided limited results within the Highland Council HER database, while some of the records displayed under these keywords did not relate to Mesolithic sites, or sites containing Mesolithic-type indicators (microliths, microburins etc). Where the search engine has identified keywords within individual site records, such as “Mesolithic”, this may have been used to define the potential duration of a site (for example, Mesolithic – Iron Age), rather than a specific Mesolithic site that has been securely dated. Therefore, some of the records identified and opened, that were flagged-up as potential Mesolithic sites, often had no direct relationship with early prehistoric sites in Scotland. Some of the sites displayed included an Iron Age Broch and a burnt mound of unknown date.

The search of the Highland Council HER was followed up by a telephone conversation and email correspondence with Sylvina Tilbury, who is now responsible for the management of the HER system. Using the more powerful search parameters and filters available to her on the Highland Council computer system, Sylvina returned a total of 54 records using the period **“Mesolithic”**. Sylvina then expanded her search of the database to include undated records of the following types:

Lithic Scatter
Flint Scatter

Occupation Site
Shell Midden
Lithic Working Site
Flint Working Site

The result of this search, with some manual filtering of irrelevant records, was a total of **107** Mesolithic, or possible Mesolithic sites. This is quite telling as it means that more than half of the potential Mesolithic records are undated. Sylvina said that this is usually the case with records imported from the National Monuments Record of Scotland database and unfortunately all of the records created from the NMRS for the *Scotland's First Settlers Project* fall into this category. This probably accounts for the few Mesolithic sites recovered during my initial searches of the HER. Silvina suggested that my search would only have picked up sites that have been indexed as monument records.

Picking up on my conversation with Sylvina, it is obvious that there are problems with access to data within sites and monument records. Academic institutions generally do not have ready access to the 'grey literature', so unless a well-resourced HER has managed to keep up to date and index all of this data fully on their HER then there will be sites that cannot be readily discovered by querying the database. Conversely, and equally problematic, HERs are frequently not kept up to date with current academic research in their area and often pick up details of new research only when it is finally published (and this is assuming that the HER has the resources to purchase all of the relevant journals and go through them for new information). If in the meantime a particular site comes under threat from land management practices and development, then without up to date information the local authority archaeologist is hampered in their role.

I think that this has been a very useful exercise, which demonstrates the problems of accessing raw data in sites and monument records, on a national and local level. It also demonstrates, however, that with a little input from somebody familiar with the dataset there is a great deal of information to be found in a local HER.

P.S. I have attached the list of records that Sylvina recovered from the Highland Council HER using the advanced search engines and filters available to her. Some of the records appear more than once in the list due to multiple site types. We can discuss these results further at our next ScARF meeting on the 30th September, including the coverage of this data and whether there are any glaring omissions.

SAB 14/09/09

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