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Archaeology

The museum offers an introduction to the archaeology and land use of South Uist from the earliest time until the 18th century.

Close to the museum you can visit the site of the old farm at Milton, birthplace of Flora MacDonald the famous South Uist heroine who helped Bonnie Prince Charlie to escape, 'over the sea to Skye' in 1746. The site at Milton has been excavated by archaeologists from ARCUS at Sheffield University. Other excavations have taken place at Cladh Hallan in Daliburgh, and at Bornish. The following is an overview of recent archaeological studies provided by a local archaeologist who works closely with the museum as a committee member.

Archaeology in South Uist - Overview by Kate Macdonald

South Uist has been the subject of a comprehensive programme of archaeological survey and excavation over the last fifteen years, with a number of Universities collaborating in the Sheffield Environmental and Archaeological Research Campaign in the Hebrides project. The fieldwork is now at an end and the archaeologists have (mostly) returned to their mainland institutions, but they have produced a detailed insight into the history of settlement in South Uist.

Cladh Hallan

Cladh Hallan is an important place for the community that now lives at the south end of South Uist. As our local cemetery, most people have friends and family buried there. In 2001, however, it hit the headlines across the world, when mummified human remains were found buried beneath a row of roundhouses, built in the Late Bronze Age. The prehistoric mummies of South Uist are unique in northern Europe, and have aroused considerable academic and public interest. The bodies had been carefully preserved and kept for several centuries, before the community at Cladh Hallan laid them to rest at the foundations of their houses. The settlement was occupied for the best part of the next millennium, and the accumulation of successive floors preserved valuable insights into how people organized their domestic life. There was also plentiful evidence that the inhabitants of the Cladh Hallan roundhouses had connections beyond the Hebrides. Broken moulds were all that remained of the bronze swords and spears that had been cast at the site. The raw materials must have been imported, as had the gold-plated hair-ring, which was found just outside the doorway of one of the houses.

[More information on Cladh Hallan](#)

Dun Vulcan

Around the time that Cladh Hallan was finally abandoned, a much grander style of dwelling was appearing in the Outer Hebrides. When the broch at Dun Vulcan was built, in the last few centuries BC, its towering walls would have dominated the surrounding landscape. Excavation concentrated on the area outside the broch, where several centuries' worth of domestic rubbish had accumulated near the doorway. Detailed information about the diet and economy of a prominent Iron Age household had been preserved, alongside a large assemblage of discarded tools and decorated pottery. The inhabitants of the broch had a particular liking for pork, which seems to have arrived at the site already butchered into joints. The jawbones from a badger were an unexpected find: presumably the animal had been brought to South Uist for its fur.

People continued to live at Dun Vulcan for hundreds of years, even though architectural fashions moved on. Sometime between 200 and 400 AD, when the broch was already several centuries old, a cellular house was built in the cramped space inside its massive walls. The excavation left this structure, and the occupation deposits sealed beneath it, intact for future investigations. Since the site was abandoned, a bank of shingle has encroached on the broch, covering it up to the height of the first floor. Walking over the stone lintels that still roof the original entrance passage, it is possible to see the plan of the three rooms of the cellular house.

Ironically, the coastal erosion that deposited the protective shingle over the site will soon destroy it. The broch, which was originally built on an islet in a freshwater loch, now stands on the shoreline of an exposed promontory that bears the brunt of the Atlantic storms. Sea defences, built less than ten years ago, have already been breached. The loss of the impressive Iron Age buildings at Dun Vulcan is inevitable, although timely excavation could salvage the valuable information about the primary occupation of brochs in the Outer Hebrides.

Cille Pheadair Wheelhouse

Tomas Domhnallach © 2006

When the wheelhouse at Cille Pheadair was excavated fifty years ago, the building was almost intact and was an extraordinary sight. The walls still stood to their original height, having been protected beneath the South Uist machair for nearly two thousand years, and only the roof was missing. A hearth lay at the centre of the house, carefully marked out by a horseshoe-shaped line of stones that had been set on edge in the floor. Solid stone walls radiated out from this central space, forming ten small rooms around the edge of the structure. Sadly, once the wheelhouse had been stripped of its protective covering of sand, the walls quickly began to crumble. Today, it is difficult to imagine how grand the building once was, and little can be seen of the original stonework.

We don't know what the people who lived in the wheelhouse used all the different rooms for, but they had stored their peats in one. When the house was excavated, it was found to be remarkably clean, as if the last occupants had tidied up and swept the floor before they abandoned it. They did leave something particularly interesting behind though. A bronze brooch, beautifully decorated with coloured enamel, had been placed in one of the cupboards. It must have once been a treasured possession, since the badly worn clasp had been skilfully repaired. This particular style of brooch was in fashion around AD 150, and is usually found on Roman sites in England. We can only guess how it came to be brought all the way to South Uist, or why it was left in the empty wheelhouse all those centuries ago.

Kilpheder is just one of around thirty wheelhouses that have been found in the Outer Hebrides. Although these peculiar Iron Age houses were also built in Orkney and Shetland, more are known in the Uists and Barra than anywhere else. Why wheelhouses should have been so popular here is still a mystery. Unfortunately, most of the sites have suffered the same fate as Kilpheder, leaving little for people to see. The only example that is worth a visit is on the east coast of Grimsay, although this involves a soggy walk across the moors.

Cille Pheadair Norse Farmstead

The Norse farmstead at Cille Pheadair was recently destroyed during a particularly severe storm. Fortunately, the unique sequence of four stone-built longhouses had already been excavated. Occupied between the 10th and 13th centuries AD, the well-preserved floors in the dwellings provided a rare opportunity to glimpse the details of everyday life. It has been possible to identify where people had sat around the long central hearth and cooked, spun yarn, or sharpened tools. Christianity was clearly an important part of Norse family life, and when one of the earlier longhouses was abandoned, the occupants left a small bone pendant, carved into the shape of a cross, at the edge of the hearth. Other artefacts show that the people that lived in this small farmstead had access to commodities from a wide area. They wore copper alloy pins from Ireland, and some of their pottery had been made in the south-west of England. A thin strip of decorated gold was an unexpectedly opulent find.

Just a few miles to the north of Cille Pheadair, another Norse settlement revealed a different aspect of life in South Uist during the early Medieval period. Bornais had a long history, having been founded over the remains a wheelhouse, which dated from the early centuries of the 1st millennium AD. People continued to live at the site during the Pictish period, building a cellular house. A fragment of bone inscribed with ogham letters is tantalizing early evidence of literacy in the Uists. When the Norse put down roots in the area, around 1000 AD, the community at Bornais expanded, eventually occupying five farmsteads. It went on to become a settlement of some importance, and is one of the most significant sites of the period to have been excavated in Scotland, with over twenty houses and byres. Like Cille Pheadair, the artefacts from Bornais show that the inhabitants were part of an extensive economy. The bone collar of a flask, decorated with a carving on an animal in the Ringerike style, was probably manufactured in Scandinavia. This, and other items, can only have come to the island through a trade network that spanned the North Atlantic. The site has also produced the earliest evidence for an intensive herring fishery in Scotland.

Howmore

The ruined chapels and churches at Howmore, on the other hand, are visible monuments to the remarkable past of South Uist. The buildings have not been excavated, but geophysical and architectural survey has unravelled the story of how this important ecclesiastical site has developed over the last thousand years. The earliest phase was a small monastery, built between 1000 and 1150 AD. One of the four stone chapels still survives, virtually intact, with two of the others visible within the walls of later structures. Some of these buildings appear to have been designed to house either monks or holy relics, rather than as places of communal worship. With the introduction of the parochial system in the 12th century, Howmore took on new significance as a religious centre for the island community. This change was marked by the conversion of one of the original chapels into a church, decorated with Romanesque carvings. Teampull Mhoire, the grandest building at the site, was erected toward the end of the 13th century, when a larger church was needed. Only one wall remains standing, but the impressive Gothic windows show that Hebrideans were not so isolated in the Medieval period that they could not keep up with architectural fashions.

Further Reading

Parker Pearson, M., Sharples, N., Symonds, J., Mulville, J., Raven, J., Smith, H. & Woolf, A. 2004 South Uist: Archaeology and History of a Hebridean Island. Stroud: Tempus.