ScARF Scottish Archaeological Research Framework

Regional Archaeological Research Framework for Argyll

Chapter 3. Panel Reports



High Morlaggan under excavation © Morlaggan Rural Settlement Group

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Contents

3.1 A Summary of Argyll's Archaeology 3

3.2 Chronological Time Frame 3

3.3 General Themes 4

3.3.1 Community Interests and Priorities 4

3.3.2 Identity and Contacts 4

3.3.3 Heritage Management 4

3.3.4 Archaeological Threats 5

3.3.5 Environmental Data 5

3.3.6 Archaeological Research 5

3.4 Bibliography 5

3.1 A Summary of Argyll's Archaeology

There is a proliferation of physical remains in the modern-day administrative region of Argyll and Bute, ranging from prominent upstanding monuments to ephemeral sites. The region contains some of Scotland's most important heritage, some of which is also of international importance. Sites and monuments from the earliest periods of prehistory include what might be one of the very first sites of human occupation in Scotland following the last glaciation, at Rubha Port an t-Seilich on the Isle of Islay, and the Mesolithic shell middens on Oronsay. The prehistoric and ritual landscape of Kilmartin Glen, which includes one of the earliest Beaker Graves in Britain, the early medieval Royal centre of Dunadd and the early Christian centre of Iona, are all internationally significant. There are hundreds of fortified sites including duns, crannogs, brochs and forts in the region. These constructions which were occupied from the Iron Age onwards, some well into the medieval period and speak of power, status and often, of conflict driven times. Later, castles were built, including Castle Sween, one of Scotland's earliest. The warlike nature of society during the medieval period is also reflected in the hundreds of West Highland carved grave slabs depicting warriors found at a number of ecclesiastical sites.

What we know about the past of the region through archaeology is as a result of generations of activity, from the endeavours of antiquarians, who began working in the area as early as the 1600s to later archaeologists working on both developer-funded projects and research programmes, all of whom have contributed vast bodies of valuable knowledge. The work of amateur archaeologists and community groups has also been crucial with Marion Campbell of Kilberry perhaps most prominent of these through her extensive surveys of Mid Argyll which were published in the 1960's (for example, Campbell, M and Sandeman, M L S 1961 Mid Argyll: A field survey of the historic and prehistoric monuments, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*).

Throughout much of the region's history, the strong influence of the sea is apparent. From earliest prehistory and up to the modern period, the sea was the foremost means of connection until overland transport links were developed. How people living here used the relationship between the sea and the land to their advantage is a key feature of Argyll's past. The maritime environment, coupled with a spirit of independence, has forged a distinct identity that is also reflected in the landscape remains and material culture. This identity is still evident in the region today. Although there have been many changes in the way of life and landscape of Argyll over the last 100 years, farming remains an important element in the economy, as it has for nearly six thousand years. Today the region is considered remote but at varying times in the past, Argyll was a cultural crossroads, with wide ranging contacts and at the forefront of technological developments and social innovations. The archaeology of Argyll has an extremely important contribution to make in understanding all periods of the past of Scotland.

3.2 Chronological Time Frame

The RARFA follows the broad time period divisions (Figure 4) adopted by ScARF, which are also generally accepted time period divisions in Scottish Archaeology.

- Palaeolithic and Mesolithic: *c* 12,500 BC–*c* 4,000 BC
- Neolithic: 4,000 BC – 2,500 BC
- Chalcolithic and Bronze Age: 2,500 BC–800 BC
- Iron Age: 700 BC–AD 500
- Medieval: AD 400–1600
- Modern: 1500 onwards

The use of time periods is intended to facilitate thinking, rather than act as a constraint.

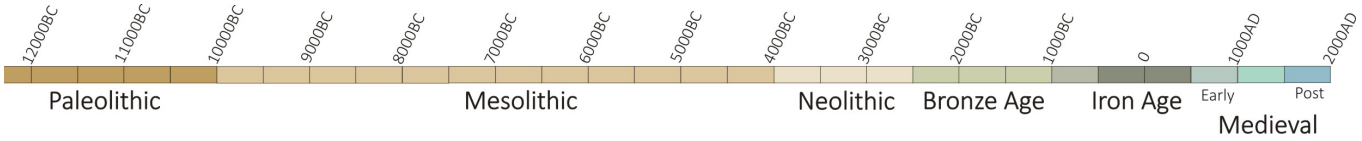

Figure 4: Illustrative timeline identifying the different time periods discussed in the RARFA © Kilmartin Museum

3.3 General Themes

A number of general areas of interest and concern were highlighted during the symposium discussions and RARFA consultations, which cut across the chronological periods described in Sections 5–10. These areas of interest can be broken down into the following general themes:

3.3.1 Community Interests and Priorities

Research frameworks, by their very nature, may not prioritise a specific site type, period or theme if it was felt that this was an area already understood, but for local groups those very same sites/themes may be regarded as of very high value in understanding an area's and people's link to the past. During the consultation period which produced this RARFA, the opinion that all research frameworks needed to involve and interact with local communities and be mindful of local archaeological research interests and priorities was voiced (see Case Study 2: High Morlaggan, Arrochar). This is acknowledged by the authors and we have attempted to incorporate views of community groups who responded to the consultation.

3.3.2 Identity and Contacts

Linked to the local interests and priorities are the important concepts of identity and contact (within and outwith Argyll) across all periods. At different times in its past, Argyll was a 'melting pot' with diverse connections. Repeatedly throughout the symposium and RARFA discussions it has been stressed that we need to better understand the relationship of communities to the sea and how the sea – as a resource, transport link and communications highway – has carved Argyll's identity through to present times. This is also reflected in many of the following sections, but particularly Section 4. Common to many of the periods discussed and described in Sections 5–10 is the fundamental question of whether there is evidence of an influx of new people in any given period and what influence these new people had over any subsequent cultural changes?

3.3.3 Heritage Management

A large number of archaeological sites across Argyll already enjoy a level of conservation and management provided by organisations such as Historic Environment Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, Forestry Commission Scotland (see Case study 3: Heritage Management), Kilmartin Museum and various community based organisations. Many of those sites also benefit from interpretation (for example, information though leaflets, on site interpretation boards and/or interpretive centres). However, there was a general feeling that more was needed across all period sites in Argyll, but particularly on early prehistoric and chapel sites. The need to manage and promote other sites is also mentioned in Section 5 where it is highlighted that Argyll is home to some of the most important Mesolithic sites in Scotland, but for various reasons, they have not received any form of heritage management or interpretation. Linked to this necessity for heritage management is also the desire for greater public dissemination and it was felt that Kilmartin Museum should have a role to play in this.

3.3.4 Archaeological Threats

It cannot be stressed enough how much developer-funded archaeology (see Case Study 4: Dunbeg and Glenshellach) has contributed

to the knowledge and understanding of Argyll's past, but during discussions a concern was raised that certain types of heritage sites (predominantly unrecorded sites and/or largely ephemeral sites) were being threatened and/or destroyed by certain types of development and/or land use change that often fell outwith planning control. Although it was appreciated that change was inevitable and sometimes a necessity, it was considered that the RARFA could help and support decision-makers to ensure that archaeology was a material consideration in such development. National and local land use policies already exist to minimise the impact of development and land use change on significant heritage remains (be they known or as yet unrecorded). One suggestion, which sparked much discussion, was that there perhaps was to create maps showing 'areas of potential' with supporting evidence (in particular for ephemeral sites) which could help supply information to and support decision-makers in relation to land use change.

3.3.5 Environmental Data

As also highlighted in Section 4, there is a need for more environmental data across all periods. Section 4 describes and lists the main areas of environmental investigation and research that still need to take place. The following areas could perhaps be added to that list:

- More palaeoenvironmental investigation to assess the vegetation, vegetation changes and climate in all time periods
- A study of intertidal peat deposits.
- The identification of sites and 'pockets of preservation' to environmentally core that could contain preserved past palaeoenvironmental remains

3.3.6 Archaeological Research

The following areas were identified as just some of ways we could identify and better understand the heritage and landscape (see Case Study 7: Carnasserie Farm Survey) of Argyll.

- make more use of Museum Collections in research projects
- amalgamate and review the history of archaeological research in Argyll (see Case Study 5: Jack Scott's excavations at Ardnacross II chambered tomb and later associated structures, near Peninver, Kintyre)
- conduct programmes of aerial reconnaissance to identify new sites
- write biographies of artefacts, places and landscapes (see Case Study 6: Artefact Biographies)
- encourage and promote interdisciplinary studies, especially those including archaeology and the geosciences
- encourage the adoption of new techniques, especially in the geosciences, which could be fruitfully applied to Argyll.

3.4 Bibliography

Cook, M, Ellis C and Sheridan, A 2010 'Excavations at Upper Largie Quarry, Argyll and Bute, Scotland: New Light on the Prehistoric Ritual Landscape of Kilmartin Glen', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 76, 165–2012