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Chapter 1

Introducing Mesolithic Scotland: the Background to a Developing Field of Study

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The development of Mesolithic studies in Scotland is reviewed and set in context. Lacaille's Stone Age in Scotland, published in 1954, can be seen to mark the culmination of the first phase of Mesolithic research. Subsequent changing perceptions and the recent intensification of fieldwork are discussed, with a footnote on the 'Obanian'.

Introduction

'Mesolithic' is the term used to categorize the early Postglacial phase of the Holocene epoch in northern Europe, prior to the adoption of agriculture and associated new cultural and technological practices in the succeeding Neolithic period. Chronologically this means from the conventional start of the Holocene at c.10,000 BP down to a termination flexibly determined in any given part of Europe by the date at which Neolithization can be demonstrated in the archaeological record (Price 2000). During the Mesolithic period people subsisted principally by foraging — hunting, fishing, and gathering — developing distinctive repertoires of material culture, best known generally in the archaeological record in the form of stone, bone, and antler tools. Mesolithic people seem to have been organized socially in mobile or semi-mobile extended family units, the size of group and degree of sedentism tailored to the food and other resources available in any locality and in accordance with prevailing socio-cultural strategies, most of which inevitably remain obscure. 'Mesolithic' — actually an adjective but increasingly used also as a stand-alone noun in abbreviation of 'Mesolithic period/age/times/ etc.' — thus has connotations which are chronological, economic, and cultural (Clark 1980; Mellars 1981; Mithen 1994; Price 1983; 1987).

In Scotland, the study and definition of the Mesolithic period are made potentially less complex than in many other parts of Europe, including southern Britain, by the apparent absence of any antecedent (i.e. Palaeolithic) human occupation. There is certainly no credible surviving evidence for Lower or Middle Palaeolithic presence in Scotland — the few genuine flint handaxes recovered almost certainly represent modern losses (Saville 1997; 1998a) — nor as yet any totally firm evidence for Upper Palaeolithic/Lateglacial human activity (see Saville this volume). Therefore the terminological issues of the use of the labels Late/Final Palaeolithic or Epipalaeolithic versus Mesolithic and the nature and timing of any transition to the Mesolithic (Jacobi 1987, 163; Price 1987) have not been a specific concern in Scotland, where, for the time being at least, the first inhabitants can be regarded simply as Mesolithic.

Equally, at the opposite end of the Mesolithic timeframe there is as yet no firm indication in Scotland that foragers ever adopted pottery while retaining other aspects of their definitive material culture, in contrast to the situation in southern Scandinavia (Fischer & Kristiansen 2002). Since pottery is directly associated with the earliest indicators of Neolithic activity in Scotland, then its presence or absence can serve as a useful gauge of socio-cultural transition. The same could be said of tomb-building or monument construction in general, which — unless shell middens are considered in this latter category — does not appear to have been part of the Mesolithic way of life in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK.

It could also be claimed that part of the reason the study of the Mesolithic in Scotland is in a sense less complex than elsewhere in Britain is the relative paucity of the evidence (Fig. 1.1). Given that people were present in Scotland for some four thousand years or more before the Neolithic period, there are relatively few sites of any consequence which have been located and extensively excavated. Of course, Mesolithic sites, apart from being relatively ephemeral in the first place, are far more vulnerable than those of any subsequent period to the vicissitudes of time and chance. Such factors as changing sea levels and inundation, coastal erosion, alluviation, peat growth, and talus formation have all contributed to the destruction or concealment of the Mesolithic evidence in Scotland.

Where material culture, particularly the lithic artefact component, does survive in some quantity it has not
Figure 1.1
Map of Scotland showing places and finds spots featured in the text. Key: 1 An Corran, Staffin, Skye, Highland; 2 Shieldaig, Wester Ross, Highland; 3 Kinloch, Rùm, Highland; 4 Camas Danaich, Skye, Highland; 5 Risga, Loch Sunart, Argyll & Bute; 6 Ulva Cave, Ulva, Argyll & Bute; 7 Oban (Carding Mill Bay; Druimvargie; MacArthur Cave; Raschoile Cave), Argyll & Bute; 8 Kilmelfort Cave, Argyll & Bute; 9 Newton, Ilay, Argyll & Bute; 10 Oronsay, Argyll & Bute; 11 Shewalton Sands and Stevenston Sands, North Ayrshire; 12 Campbeltown, Kintyre, Argyll & Bute; 13 Auchareoch, Arran, North Ayrshire; 14 Glenluce Sands, Dumfries & Galloway; 15 Barsaloch and Low Clone, Dumfries & Galloway; 16 Starr, Loch Doon, East Ayrshire; 17 Smittons, Water of Ken, Dumfries & Galloway; 18 Cumston, Dumfries & Galloway; 19 Daer Reservoir, Crawford, South Lanarkshire; 20 Fairmington, Scottish Borders; 21 Dryburgh Mains, Scottish Borders; 22 Rink Farm, Scottish Borders; 23 Criagsfordmains, Scottish Borders; 24 Cramond, Edinburgh; 25 Cadger's Brae, Inveravon, Mumrills, Nether Kinneil and Polmonthill shell heaps, Falkirk; 26 Carse of Stirling (Airthrey; Blair Drummond; Meiklewood), Stirling; 27 Morton, Tentsmuir, Fife; 28 Ben Lawers, Perthshire; 29 Banchory, Aberdeenshire; 30 Nethermills, Aberdeenshire; 31 Castle Street, Inverness, Highland; 32 Culbin Sands, Highland.
yet been inventoried and studied in sufficient detail to permit wholly satisfactory regional or chronological sub-divisions (cf. Saville 1998b). Much of the evidence for the Mesolithic in Scotland comes from coastal locations, and this is almost exclusively the case with the palaeo-environmental economic data, injecting another probable bias into the picture.

A further contrast between this and all later periods is that there is no definitive evidence, in the form of diagnostic artefacts, for Mesolithic human presence in Shetland, the Western Isles, or St Kilda. There is no conclusive prima facie reason why this should be so, especially as Mesolithic presence in Orkney and the Inner Hebrides attests the availability of sea-going craft, and the matter is one of continuing debate (Edwards 1996a and this volume; Edwards & Sugden 2003; Saville this volume).

The first use of the term Mesolithic is generally attributed to Westropp in 1866 (Nicholson 1983, 207; Price 1987, 227), but it did not come into common archaeological usage in Britain until after the First World War (Clark 1980, 3). The first use of the term in a specifically Scottish publication seems to be Lacaille’s (1930) article on ‘Mesolithic implements from Ayrshire’. It was Armand Donald Lacaille who came to be the dominant figure in Scottish Mesolithic studies in the period from 1930 until the publication of his major work The Stone Age in Scotland (1954) and his influence continued strongly thereafter, as reflected by the conference held in Glasgow in 1994 to mark the 40th anniversary of his magnum opus (Pollard & Morrison 1996). Lacaille’s book (Fig. 1.2) provides a convenient marker for subdividing the account which follows.

Studying Mesolithic Scotland: from the beginnings to Lacaille

Though Lacaille’s (1930) article may have been the first appearance in print in Scotland of the designation ‘Mesolithic’ with reference to Scottish artefacts, many of what we now recognize as key Mesolithic sites and finds in Scotland had already been discovered in the 19th century.

Thus Wilson (1851, 33) referred to the whale skeletons and antler implements from the draining operations in the Carse of Stirling, including the earliest recorded finding of what was probably an antler mattock in 1819 at Airthrey (Bald 1819) and another in 1824 at Blair Drummond (Drummond 1824). The best-known Mesolithic artefact from the carse clays of the upper Forth Valley, the Meiklewood antler-beam mattock, was found near a rorqual whale skeleton in 1877 (Turner 1889). Discoveries of highly important midden deposits in caves and rockshelters at Oban, Argyll, coincided with the expansion of that town at the end of the 19th century – MacArthur Cave (Fig. 1.3) was found in 1894 (Anderson 1895, 211) and Druimvargie rockshelter in 1897 (Anderson 1898, 298) – while exploration of the famous Oronsay shell middens started in 1881 (Fig. 1.4; Grieve 1883, 480; 1885, 48; Mellars 1987, 117). Barbed points from one of the Oronsay middens were exhibited at the International Fisheries Exhibition in London in 1883 (Anderson 1898, 307) and the biserial barbed point from the River Dee at Cumnoust, Kirkcudbrightshire, was discovered in 1895 (Munro 1908, 231). The Campbeltown flint assemblages, which were to become so important for the supposed ‘Larnian’ connection with Ireland, were first noted in the 1890s (Gray 1894).

For Wilson (1851) the relics from the carse clays were those of the ‘Primaeval or Stone Period’; clearly of considerable antiquity, but not otherwise classifiable. Turner (1889, 791) supposed the mattocks from the carse clay to be Neolithic, but made a very good guess at
their age being at least 5000 to 7000 years. Gray (1894, 271 & 274) considered his Campbeltown flints to be Palaeolithic, while Anderson peremptory related the Oban and Oronsay finds to:

... a horizon which has not heretofore been observed in Scotland, but corresponding with the intermediate layers in the cavern of Mas d’Azil ... described by M. Piette, and which he has seen reason to claim as filling up the hiatus ... supposed to exist between the palaeolithic and the neolithic (Anderson 1898, 313).

The controversy about the 'hiatus' between the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, which raged in the later 19th century and into the 20th, was not really a local issue in Scotland in the absence of Palaeolithic indicators. Nevertheless, as one of those most prominent in refuting the hiatus concept, Munro (1897; 1908; 1912) made full use of the Scottish evidence from Oban and elsewhere, thereby correctly identifying, as had Anderson, the pre-Neolithic position of the cultural material, though without using the term Mesolithic. The linking by Munro and others of the barbed points from Oban with those from Mas d’Azil in Pyrenean France, while effective in making the general point of pre-Neolithic status, subsequently rather confused the issue of date and cultural affiliation (e.g. Geikie 1914, 298), once the true early status of the Azilien in France, now usually regarded as late Upper Palaeolithic or Epipalaeolithic, became apparent (Rozoy 1978, 320).

Hence Macalister (1921, 516), whose robust introduction of the 'Mesolithic' into his popular textbook was instrumental in establishing this as a definitive term for British prehistory, quite firmly described the Oban and Oronsay material as Azilian. The Azilian designation for this material was also followed by Breuil (1922), Burkitt (1921; 1925), Childe (1925; 1935), Clark (1932), Garrod (1926), and Sollas (1924); these references indicate how widely the Oban and Oronsay finds had permeated the general archaeological literature in Britain by this
time. The distinctiveness of the Oronsay material had been noted by Bishop (1914, 102), who recommended dropping the Azilian tag in favour of the name ‘Oransay [sic] culture’ (cf. Mellars 1987, 129), but this did not find favour any more than Ludovic Mann’s 1920 use of ‘Oransay [sic] man’ (Pollard et al. 1996, 179). McCallien (1937, 203) clearly recognized some of the chronological problems of linkage to the Azilian of France and Spain and proposed the term ‘Scottish Azilian’, but this was not adopted either.

It was Movius (1940; 1942) who first classified the Oronsay/Oban material as Obanian, but still without disengaging from the Azilian:

It seems probable … that the Azilian harpoons, characteristic of this [Obanian] culture, represent a development from the Early Azilian influence at Victoria Cave [Yorkshire], reinforced by later arrivals from Southern France (Movius 1942, 198).

Movius had a rather flexible view of the Obanian, accepting the Ardantrive Cave on Kerrera with its Neolithic/Early Bronze Age relics (Lethbridge 1950, 7–8) as a part, simply on the basis of being ‘early’ prehistoric and in the right location (Movius 1953, 96). Movius did subsequently recant on the Azilian connection (1953, 99), which was also more effectively dismissed by Lacaille (1954, 95; see also Thompson 1954, 206). Despite this, the Azilian connection languished in the Scottish literature for a while afterwards (e.g. Atkinson 1962, 4; Clark 1956, 98–103).

However, if in his 1954 book Lacaille attempted to remove one major confusion about the Mesolithic in Scotland, he was responsible for bolstering others. The most serious problem was the proposition, expounded in his chapter on ‘Man with Mesolithic culture arrives in Scotland’, that the earliest Mesolithic in Scotland was a version of the Irish Larnian. Both Lacaille and Movius (1942), whose lead Lacaille followed, seem to have envisaged actual settlement taking place from NE Ireland to SW Scotland, as indeed became the generally accepted explanation for the Mesolithic in SW Scotland (e.g. Childe 1946). This proposition hinges on the
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(with hindsight very curious) significance attached to lithic finds in association with raised beach deposits at Campbeltown, first reported by Gray (1894). These finds were seized upon by the Abbé Breuil when he visited Edinburgh in 1921 as one of the few potentially pre-Neolithic lithic assemblages in the National Museum which was more ‘Magdalenian’ than ‘Tardenoisian’ (Breuil 1922), though other scholars were more cautious (Garrod 1926, 176).

A new Campbeltown location was investigated in 1935 by McCallien, who rather grandly opened his publication with the sentence: ‘The flint implements of the Campbeltown raised beach are well known to scientists all over the world’ (McCallien & Lacaille 1941), presumably an hommage to Breuil. The three locations at Campbeltown – Dalaruan, Millknowe, and Albyn Distillery – have produced a variety of struck flints, including a few genuine microliths and microburins. At the Millknowe exposure, Gray observed the flints in a deposit with charcoal and bones, including fish bones, but without shells. Otherwise, there is the distinct impression of rather mixed assemblages, with rolled and fresh material in perhaps redeposited situations, all overlying the raised beach.

Nevertheless, McCallien and Lacaille (1941, 88) equated the Campbeltown material with Movius’s newly defined Early Larnian. Movius (1942, 320) agreed with the Early Larnian designation, but thought this a more developed facies than in Ireland, since it had Tardenoisian and Forest Culture affinities. While Lacaille (1954, 311) persisted with the view that the Campbeltown material demonstrated that the Mesolithic was introduced into SW Scotland from Antrim by Early Larnian immigrants, rather cleverly separating the Dalaruan-Millknowe material without microburins as earlier than the Albyn Distillery finds, Movius (1953, 87–9) became more cautious on this point.

It was left to Coles, who reassessed both the Campbeltown and Antrim material, to demonstrate conclusively the fallacy of the Larnian link and to cast doubt on any Mesolithic contact between Ireland and Scotland:

…the overall and basic differences in tool forms are so great that it seems better … to avoid describing the Scottish material in terms of the Irish Mesolithic (Coles 1963, 92).

Virtually no subsequent evidence for contact between Ireland and Scotland before the Neolithic has come to light, and this peculiar episode in the history of Scottish Mesolithic studies can now be seen as a temporary aberration (cf. Saville 2003a; 2003b).

With the benefit of hindsight it can now be seen that another error in Lacaille’s approach was to regard much of the best lithic evidence for the Mesolithic in Scotland as being in effect post-Mesolithic in date. This was predicated upon a culture/time-lag model only credible in an era before radiocarbon dating (Saville 1996). This assumption, shared by most authorities at the time, was bound up with the perceived external relations of the Scottish lithic industries.

Mesolithic lithic tools, in particular the diagnostic microliths, had begun to be observed and recorded in Scotland early in the 20th century. The first illustrations of Scottish microliths may have been those of Scott (1895, plate 2) and Smith (1895, fig. 56), both in the final decade of the 19th century. Scott’s microliths were from Craigsfordmains, Berwickshire, and he described them as ‘flint implements of a peculiar type’, while Smith’s were from Stevenston Sands, Ayrshire, and he similarly was unable to grasp their true significance. He lumped together the Stevenston microliths, piercers, and leaf-shaped arrowheads as ‘brogs’, some ‘… so delicately pointed that one is apt to think that they have been used for tattooing and surgical purposes’ (Smith 1895, 31).

Microlithic implements from the west of Scotland, akin to the ‘so-called “Pygmy Flints” of other countries’ (Anon. 1911, 831), were exhibited by Mann at the 1911 Scottish Exhibition of Natural History, Art and Industry in Glasgow, and Callander (1911, 177) referred to ‘pigmy’ flints from Culbin, Glenluce, and Shewalton Sands. Paterson (1912; 1913) noted examples from near Banchory in the Dee Valley, NE Scotland, expressing her delight that ‘[i]n a mole-hill … I found my first pygmy’ (1913, 104), and illustrating some indisputable microliths with the caption: ‘Scottish pygmy flints of Indian type’ (Paterson 1913, fig. 1). In later publications, Paterson recorded how she actually found the mole-hill ‘pygmy’ flint in 1906, and she recounts the anecdote that it was sent to Dr Joseph Anderson at the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh – at the time Anderson was a disbeliever in microliths in Scotland – who was thereby won over (Paterson 1929; Paterson & Lacaille 1936, 420). Corrie (1916) illustrated and described a collection of ‘pigmy’ flints among his finds from Dryburgh, Berwickshire. He was followed by Callander (1927a), also with finds from Berwickshire, and Lacaille (1930; 1931) with finds from Ayrshire, who both reviewed occurrences elsewhere in Scotland; and by the Masons (1927; 1931) with more Tweed Valley finds.

‘Pygmy (or pigmy) flint’ was a widely accepted early designation for a microlith, still current in the 1920s (Callander 1927a; 1927b; Burkitt 1925, 19; Macalister 1921, 535; Paterson 1929). Lacaille referred both to ‘pygmies’ and microliths in 1930, but microlith is the
preferred usage by the time of his 1937 overview of 'The microlithic industries of Scotland' and 'pygmies' do not feature in the 1954 book, though some non-specialists continued to use both terms (e.g. Simpson 1943, 12; 1963, 68). Interestingly, though Childe (1925, 3) favored the term microlith early on, he still referred to 'pygmy flints' as an equivalent in a note published in 1942, presumably indicating it remained a current term for local archaeological society members.

Lacaille (1935; 1942) also took a lead in Scotland by realizing the significance of the microburin as a diagnostic Mesolithic waste product from microlith production, presumably following Clark (1932, 97-103; see also Childe 1942).

Most publications of these 'pygmy' flints referred to them as Tardenoisian, a term derived from the finds from the French locality of Fère-en-Tardenois, which was applied very loosely to designate all microlithic industries, though especially those with evidence for use of microburin technique. The term was widely used in general works (e.g. Burkitt 1921; Macalister 1921; Childe 1925), so that Callander (1927a) was able to feature Tardenoisian in the title of his article without explaining its origin or significance, though this appears to be the first specifically Scottish usage. (The term Tardenoisian was used by Geikie (1914, 314), though not with reference to Scotland, and Breuil (1922) used it tangentially in describing Scottish material.) It became the common term for microlithic industries in Scotland in the 1930s (e.g. Childe 1935, 20; Edgar 1939; Lacaille 1931) and 1940s (Childe 1946; Movius 1942; Simpson 1943) and was extensively employed by Lacaille in his 1954 book.

One of the problems with the use of these labels was that, in the French context, Azilian industries pre-dated Tardenoisian ones. Thus, if the Oban and Ornsay material was considered Azilian, but somehow late, then the microlithic industries identified as Tardenoisian elsewhere in Scotland would be even more recent. For Movius (1942, 193), the pre-existing presence of the Obanian in the north and west ‘... prevented ... [Tardenoisian] infiltration into the Highlands except on the east’. This kind of phasing by association is part of the explanation for Lacaille's (1954) relegating his microlithic industries to 'post-Mesolithic developments'. Movius too saw the Scottish Tardenoisian elements as coeval with the Neolithic and Bronze Age in southern England (1953, 93).

The Tardenoisian equation in Britain was reviewed by Clark in 1955, who recommended the replacement of Tardenoisian by Sauveterrian (after the finds from the French locality of Sauveterre-la-Lémance), since it had become obvious that the most diagnostic element of true Tardenoisian assemblages in France, the microlithic trapeze, was absent from British Mesolithic industries altogether. Affinities with the Sauveterrian microlithic industries (which were pre-Tardenoisian in France) were seen as far more appropriate for the British material, without necessarily implying non-indigenous origin. Although Clark (1955, 20) specifically reclassified the Banchory and Dryburgh finds as Sauveterrian, this application never really caught on in Scotland, other than being discussed by Mulholland (1970, 103–10) with reference to the Tweed Valley assemblages and by Mercer (1968; 1970) in the first two publications of his Jura finds.

Another problem for workers in Scotland was the apparent absence of any equivalent to the earlier Mesolithic Maglemosian or Forest Culture of the Baltic area (Childe 1931; Clark 1932; 1936). The antler-beam mattocks were seen as the most telling evidence for Baltic links, but chronologically it was felt these related to the post-Maglemose Ertebølle horizon (Clark 1956, 105; Lacaille 1954, 175). The absence of any regular Maglemosian 'heavy flint industry', especially axeheads, meant clenching at straws to identify traces of comparable lithic techniques (Lacaille 1954, 149). Claims for the so-called core-tool from the Albyn Distillery site at Campbeltown being Maglemosian were, to say the least, wildly optimistic (McCallien & Lacaille 1941, fig. 6, 70; Movius 1953, 86 & 93; Saville 2003b).

It has been felt that Lacaille's magnum opus of 1954 was already anachronistic when it was published and yet, because of its comprehensiveness, that it may have had a numbing effect on subsequent Scottish Mesolithic studies (Morrison 1996, 14; Woodman 1989, 4). Lacaille's book, both by his own admission (1954, xix) and by any comparison, was modelled closely on that by Movius (1942), which resulted from the Harvard Archaeological Expeditions to Ireland of 1932–6 and more particularly from Movius's 1937 doctoral thesis. The survey of the Mesolithic in Scotland which Movius's book included (1942, 176–98) was itself comprehensive and rather innovative, leaving little in the way of additional data for Lacaille to cover.

Like Movius, Lacaille used 'Stone Age' in his title, even though his intention was specifically to chronicle the Mesolithic and any possible precursors, not the Neolithic. Despite its cumbersome format – not until page 140 of his book does Lacaille start to describe the Scottish archaeological material – it was undoubtedly very influential, particularly in perpetuating the notion of degenerate late Mesolithic traditions persisting till the Neolithic and Bronze Age in outlying regions (Saville 1996). Movius's subsequent updated review of the Scottish Mesolithic, written at the same time as
Lacaille’s book, showed him to be even more uncritical than Lacaille, for example following Lethbridge (1950, 8) in seeing ‘... Mesolithic people still occupying the Oban region as late as “Beaker” times’ (Movius 1953, 101), or even seeing the skeletal remains from a site at Galson, Lewis, as ‘... exhibiting many very striking Upper Palaeolithic features’ (ibid.).

Despite all its shortcomings, however, Lacaille’s book is still useful as a compendium of the Mesolithic evidence available up to about 1950, as a guide to the source literature, and generally as an indication of the contemporary state of Mesolithic studies in Scotland, to which, up until that date, Lacaille was himself unquestionably the leading contributor (Graham 1978, 301; Morrison 1996).

Studying Mesolithic Scotland: after Lacaille

Since the publication of Lacaille’s major work on the Mesolithic, the Scottish database for this period has, slowly but surely, continued to expand. Although there is hardly a mention of anything Mesolithic in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland between Clark’s Obanian article of 1956 and Mercer’s first Jura paper in 1968, it would be wrong to over-exaggerate the degree to which Lacaille’s book had stifled other research. In particular this was not so in the SW, where Trickett (1962) drew attention to much new material, while we have already seen that the review by Coles (1963) was significant in disengaging the local Mesolithic from the Larnian so beloved of Lacaille. Cormack’s excavations at the scatter sites of Low Clone and Barsaloch were published (Cormack 1970; Cormack & Coles 1968), as were Mulholland’s researches into the Tweed Valley surface scatters including important localities such as Craigsdordmains, Fair linton, and Rink Farm (Mulholland 1970). Further important finds came from rescue work at Kilmelfort Cave, Argyll, in 1956 (Coles 1983a; Saville 2003a & this volume).

Excavations of Mesolithic sites after the Second World War were small-scale, ad hoc affairs in general, but completely new ground was broken by the investigations at Morton Farm in Fife – begun in 1963–7

**Figure 1.5**

Excavations at Morton, Fife, in 1970 (site B, trenches 50/59/60 from the NW), showing the midden in section. (Photo: John Coles)
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by Candow (1989), the amateur enthusiast who had discovered the site in 1957 – and then taken up by Coles in 1969–70 (Fig. 1.5). Speedy initial publication of this important site, together with its radiocarbon dates, in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society (Coles 1971) – the first and only Scottish Mesolithic site so far to appear in this journal – ensured its classic status. Paradoxically, this status has been confirmed by subsequent attempts at amplification and reinterpretation of the Morton evidence (Bonsall 1988; Clarke & Wickham-Jones 1988; Coles 1983b; Myers 1988; Woodman 1988; 1989; Saville 2003a), since the excavated evidence itself continues to be tantalizingly problematic. Because it was at the time the only well-published site exhibiting a wide range of artefactual, environmental, structural, and chronological data, Morton was unsurprisingly seized upon as a key to understanding the Scottish Mesolithic, without heeding the intricacies of its evidence. Thus the fact that there were separate sites and a probable palimpsest of intermittent occupations spread over a very long timespan (Coles 1971, 293) tended to be overlooked, and the inadequacies of the samples used for radiocarbon dating – the dates from which would not now be regarded as reliable – were ignored. Also, the publication was just in advance of a very significant shift in British Mesolithic studies in terms of nomenclature based on lithic artefact typology.

By the mid-1970s, the linkages with Continental industries had essentially been abandoned in favour of a simple ‘Early’ (for the former Maglemosian) and ‘Later’ (for the former Sauvetterian) classificatory scheme for the British Mesolithic (Jacobi 1973; 1976; 1978; Mellars 1974). The separation date between Early and Later was adopted as during the first half of the 9th millennium BP (c.8700 BP), and the defining characteristics were essentially that Early industries had mainly simple, relatively large microlith types made on ‘bread’ blades, while Later ones had more elaborately retouched ‘narrow-blade’ microliths, including small ‘geometric’ and rod forms.

Coles was aware of the above distinction but at the time felt forced to conclude that it was ‘a little difficult to make definitive statements about the cultural affinities of the Morton assemblages’ (Coles 1971, 317). Subsequently, however, the fact that the Morton evidence seemed to include predominantly Early Mesolithic microlith types in an ostensibly Later Mesolithic context, put it at the centre of debate about the existence and timing of an Early Mesolithic in Scotland (Saville this volume).

Also in the 1960s a truly remarkable campaign of excavation to study the Mesolithic began on the Isle of Jura. Starting with the excavations at Lealt Bay in 1966 (Mercer 1968), this research by the Mercers continued for 16 years until John Mercer’s premature death in 1982 (Searight 1984). Mercer’s (1979) ideas about the Jura Mesolithic sequence, which were not fully substantiated by radiocarbon dates, have never received wholehearted support, but it does appear that both Early and Later Mesolithic industries are represented.

Another concerted campaign began in 1970, with Mellars’ project to reinvestigate the Oronsay Mesolithic shell middens, and continued until 1979 (Mellars 1987). At the same time, excavations at a mainly Bronze Age site on Islay were incidentally uncovering an underlying flint assemblage, which first indicated the potential of this island for Mesolithic research (Burgess 1976). The 1970s, in retrospect a busy decade for Mesolithic excavations in Scotland – for example Walker’s work at Shieldaig, Wester Ross (Ballin & Saville 2003; Walker 1973) – finished with a major fieldwork campaign in 1978–1980 at Nethermills Farm, Crathes, on the north bank of the River Dee in Aberdeenshire (Kenworthy 1981). A major disappointment from this period was that the work of the Council for British Archaeology’s Mesolithic Sub-Committee did not come to fruition in Scotland (Saville 1998b), so that the resulting gazetteer covered only England and Wales (Wymer 1977).

The end of the 1970s also saw the start of a campaign to investigate the enigmatic shell heaps (comprised predominantly of oyster shells) of the Forth Valley, focusing particularly on the most prominent example at Nether Kinneil (Sloan 1982; 1993). There are perhaps 20 or so of these ‘middens’, mostly along the southern shore between Falkirk and Bo’ness, but with a few on the north side in Fife and Clackmannanshire (Ashmore & Hall 1996; Sloan 1989; 1993). The size of some of the ‘middens’ is extraordinary. The best known are those at Inverarvon (Fig. 1.6) – at least 27m and probably considerably longer (Grieve 1872; MacKie 1972; Sloan 1993); Mumrills – 43m to 50m long (Bailey 1992; Sloan 1993, 418); Polmoothill – possibly 155m long (Stevenson 1946); and Nether Kinneil – over 150m long (Sloan 1982; 1993, 70–101).

There are two major problems, apart from their sheer size, with these puzzling accumulations of shells – their origin and their date – both of which have been the cause for considerable debate. Grieve (1872) was adamant they were not natural, though perhaps not much earlier than Roman in date. Support for their artificial nature has included reports of lenses of burning at Inverarvon (Sloan 1993, 103) and Polmoothill (Stevenson 1946), and the stone-built hearths, banks, and other features recorded at Nether Kinneil (Sloan 1982; 1993). Their anthropogenic origin has continued to be doubted, however, on the basis that the traces of human activity may relate to later re-use of what are in origin naturally formed shell banks (Jardine 1984, 4–5; Kinnes 1985,
The radiocarbon dates from Nether Kinneil, a site which has anyway produced pottery and domesticated animal bones, and from another nearby site at Cadger's Brae, lie in the 5th–4th millennia BP (after marine reservoir effect correction), but there are earlier dates in the 6th millennium BP from the 'middens' at Mumrills, Inveravon, and Braehead (Ashmore this volume). Thus a Mesolithic date for some appears probable, though their status remains unclear since it is still the case that no Mesolithic artefacts have been recovered from any of the Forth Valley shell heaps.

Work on the Mesolithic in the 1980s was dominated by the important excavations at Kinloch, Isle of Rùm, from 1984 to 1986 (Wickham-Jones 1990), which did so much to rekindle wider academic and public interest in the archaeology of the period, but much was happening besides. Numerous new Mesolithic locations were reported from the SW (Edwards et al. 1983); rescue excavation at Newton, on Islay, produced a large flint assemblage (McCullagh 1989); two newly recognized rockshelter shell middens at Carding Mill Bay I and Raschoille Cave, Oban, were salvaged (Connock 1985; Connock et al. 1992); Tom Affleck excavated at several sites in the SW, including Starr and Smittons, and at Auchareoch on Arran (Affleck et al. 1988; Edwards 1996b); a project to record and selectively to excavate caves and rockshelters in Mid Argyll ran from 1985–1991 (Tolan-Smith 2001); excavations which still continue were started at Ulva Cave on the small island of Ulva, west of Mull, in 1987 (Bonsall et al. 1991; 1992; Russell et al. 1995); while a major campaign – The Southern Hebrides Mesolithic Project – of survey and excavation on Colonsay and Islay, was launched in 1988 (Mithen 2000a & this volume). Nor was work entirely focused on sites and artefacts, as shown by the review of early Postglacial vegetational history by Edwards and Ralston (1984), by the excavations at Castle Street, Inverness, which led to the identification of a Mesolithic tsunami horizon on the east coast (Dawson et al. 1990; Wordsworth 1985), and by many other palaeoenvironment-oriented contributions by Edwards (e.g. 1989) and others, raising issues which are still subject to lively debate (Edwards 1996a; Tipping 1996; and this volume).
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Since Lacaille’s book (1954) and Movius’s final survey (1953), various overviews or summaries of the Mesolithic in Scotland as a whole have been published – Piggott and Henderson (1958), Atkinson (1962), Woodman (1978, 196–8), Mountain (1979), Ritchie and Ritchie (1981), Morrison (1980; 1986), Smith (1992), Wickham-Jones (1994), Finlayson and Edwards (1997), Finlayson (1998), and Mithen (2000a) – and some regional summaries have appeared (e.g. Bonsall 1997; Coles 1963; Kenworthy 1975; Mercer 1979; Ritchie & Ritchie 1972; Saville 2000; Scott 1966; Wickham-Jones & Firth 2000), of which those of the SW by Morrison (1981; 1982) were the most substantial. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland has also included several useful summaries of the Mesolithic evidence in some of its survey volumes, in particular the surveys of Stirlingshire (RCAHMS 1963, 18–20), the southern Inner Hebrides (RCAHMS 1984, 2–5), and eastern Dumfriesshire (RCAHMS 1997, 94–6). But probably of most significance has been the review by Woodman (1989), written at the invitation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. In subtitling his article ‘a plea for normality’, Woodman was referring to the past tendency to regard the Mesolithic in Scotland as marginal, late, obscure, and somehow irregular in comparison with the rest of mainland Britain. This criticism was justified to a degree, especially following the influence of Lacaille’s work, but perhaps overstated the case by concentrating too much on the ‘Obanian’ question.

Nevertheless, and partly in direct response to Woodman’s comments on the priority which should attach to the Oban area, detailed survey work has been undertaken (Macklin et al. 1992; 2000), another newly located rockshelter (Carding Mill Bay II) has been salvaged (Bonsall pers. comm.), and open-air Mesolithic locations have been located and sampled (Bonsall & Robinson 1992; Bonsall et al. 1993). The new excavations at Risga in Loch Sunart (Pollard 2000; Pollard et al. 1996) and salvage recovery of material from a rockshelter at An Corran, Skye (Fig. 1.7; Saville & Mket 1994), have contributed to new perspectives on the Obanian (Bonsall 1996; 1997), while a major new survey project to examine the ‘northern Obanian’ on eastern Skye, the adjacent mainland, and the islands

\[\text{Figure 1.7}\]

An Corran rockshelter, Staffin, Skye, from the south during excavation in December 1993. (Photo: Roger Mjet)
Figure 1.8
Daer Reservoir site 1, South Lanarkshire, during excavation in August 2000. (Photo: Alan Saville)
between, has already made important advances (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2001; 2002; 2003), as have research projects focused on the east of Scotland (Finlayson & Warren 2000; Warren 1998; 2001) and Caithness (Pannett 2001; 2002; Pannett & Baines 2002; Wickham-Jones & Firth 2000). The fascinating implications of the apparent discovery by the Ben Lawers Historic Landscape Project of a Mesolithic hunting camp – radiocarbon dated to c.8045 BP – at 780m above sea level in the mountains above Loch Tay, Perthshire, have yet to be assimilated (Dennison 2001a).

With the switch to mainly developer-funded rescue excavation in the 1990s, the prospect of serendipitous discovery of Mesolithic sites, including inland examples, has increased. Significant new finds have already been made in this way in the SW (MacGregor & Donnelly 2001; Pollard 1993; RCAHMS 1997, 96) and in Fife (Wickham-Jones & Dalland 1998), while systematic fieldwalking in areas such as the Scottish Borders and South Lanarkshire is also affording new insights (Barrowman 2000; Stuart 2003; Ward 2000b), especially in the case of the important new sites around Daer Reservoir in the Lowther Hills (Fig. 1.8; Ward 1995; 1997; 2000a). Amateur and local investigation continues to be the origin of significant advances, as at Crumond, where the Edinburgh Archaeological Field Society uncovered a small feature which has yielded the earliest radiocarbon dates so far for the Scottish Mesolithic (Ashmore this volume; Denison 2001b), and at Camas Daraich, Skye, another early site from the first half of the 8th millennium BP (Birch et al. 2000).

Apart from fieldwork, there has been a developing interest in various Mesolithic topics involving Scotland, particularly the questions of the earliest colonization and the transition to the Neolithic. On the former, attention has focused on the one hand on the possible implications of mainly chance finds of so-called ‘tanged points’, which might provide a link to Lateglacial traditions elsewhere in NW Europe (Morrison & Bonsall 1989; see Ballin & Saville 2003 for a recent review), and on the other on the significance of early, potentially anthropogenic, disturbance indicators in the pollen record (e.g. Edwards & Mithen 1995; Edwards & Tipping this volume). The transition to Neolithic economy and culture has been seen as of particular fascination in Scotland, particularly on the west coast, because of the apparent evidence for Obanian persistence and the relative absence of early Neolithic activity. One view has seen the west coast evidence as reflecting the emergence of complexity among Mesolithic people, who undergo gradual indigenous economic and social transformation (Neolithicization) while retaining many aspects of their

![Figure 1.9](image)

"Bender"-type temporary tent structure, Seaton Den, near Arbroath, Angus, date unknown. (Photo: Angus Council Cultural Services)
Mesolithic economy and settlement mobility (Armit & Finlayson 1992; 1996; Finlayson 1995; Mithen 2000b). The evidence for any emerging complexity has, however, also been disputed (Murray 2000).

Renewed recognition of possibilities for relevant ethnographic parallels for aspects of life in the Mesolithic from Scotland’s recent past has followed new academic and popular interest in the travelling people or ‘tinker folk’ of the 19th and earlier 20th centuries (e.g. Neat 1996; Williamson 1994). These people are well known for having made use of caves and rockshelters, both for living and for work (Leitch 1987; Leitch & Smith 1993; Leitch & Tolan-Smith 1997; Martin 1984, 122–7; Tolan-Smith 2001, 168–9), and for having temporary, moveable shelters and tents (Fig. 1.9; Leitch 1989; Ritchie 1997). The latter seem to have coped with the Scottish weather and yet would leave virtually no archaeologically detectable traces once removed, offering a perspective on the interpretation of Mesolithic sites otherwise recognized solely by concentrations of stone tools. Similarly, some elements of pre-modern foraging and fishing practices can offer insights into traditional ‘ways of doing’ appropriate to Scottish conditions and circumstances which may well have relevance to Mesolithic economy and technology (Fig. 1.10).

New work, exploiting the initial results from analyses of stable isotope data from the small number of Mesolithic (Richards & Mellars 1998) and early Neolithic human bones available from western Scotland has indicated a sharp contrast in dietary habits between the largely marine diet of the Mesolithic ‘fish-eaters’ and the almost wholly terrestrial diet of the Neolithic ‘meat-eaters’. This has been taken along with other strands of evidence to suggest the possibility of a complete cultural break at the end of the Mesolithic, with Neolithic culture introduced by new colonists (Schulting & Richards 2002). Another perspective on this has been taken by those suggesting that a widespread change to drier climatic conditions at c.5000 BP was the catalyst for the adoption of agriculture by indigenous (Bonsall et al. 2002).
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Thus, in conclusion, the current state of Mesolithic studies in Scotland, with research being undertaken both on new finds and the re-examination of old ones at an unprecedented rate, is extremely healthy. The number of new Mesolithic sites recorded by just two recent campaigns alone, the Southern Hebrides Project (26 sites on Colonsay and Islay; Mithen 2000a, 597) and the First Settlers Project (up to 30 in the Inner Sound; Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002), is both exciting and daunting. The view it was possible to express not too long ago, that the Mesolithic population of Scotland was little more than two people for each modern county area (Atkinson 1962, 7), now seems preposterous. While it is very unlikely that the Mesolithic period in NW Europe witnessed a continuous growth in population – in fact the reverse could be the case (Price 1999) – it seems unlikely that the population in Later Mesolithic Scotland could ever have been fewer than several hundred people at any one time, and perhaps much greater (Ashmore & Edwards this volume; Gamble 1999, table 1).

Already by the time of Woodman’s (1989) review the situation as regards the chronology of the Scottish Mesolithic had changed remarkably, particularly with the sequence of radiocarbon dates from Kinloch, Rùm, and the accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) determinations on bone and antler artefacts (Ashmore this volume; Bonsall & Smith 1990; Bonsall et al. 1995; Saville this volume). A significant effect of these radiocarbon dates, and all the others coming on stream, has been to demonstrate more clearly that there is a considerable time-depth to the Mesolithic in Scotland. With the substantiation that for some four millennia Scotland was inhabited by Mesolithic foragers – and inhabited more extensively than previously appreciated – has come a new interest in the period and a determination to treat Mesolithic evidence more seriously. Workers from many disciplines have begun to focus on the Early Holocene to achieve an understanding of the processes behind the formation of the environments and habitats in Scotland today (Smout 1993). Mesolithic studies, by elucidating the anthropogenic factors involved, have a major role to play in this aspect of Quaternary investigation and their future looks sound.

A note on the Obanian

As already explained, the term Obanian was coined by Movius (1940; 1942) – and elaborated upon by him (1953) and by Lacaille (1954) – as a cultural designation for the coastal, bone- and antler-tool using, apparently non-microlithic, facies of the Scottish Mesolithic, represented at sites in and around Oban, at Risga (on Loch Sunart), and on Oronsay. Until recently it was still possible to regard the Obanian as a localized, atypical, and rather late manifestation of coastal, niche-adapted foraging groups – ‘strandloopers’ – who did not manufacture microliths or other ‘refined’ tools but ‘made do’ with a scalar-core flake industry. Nobody, however, was really comfortable with this concept (cf. Woodman 1989) and with hindsight, had the finds from the early 1920s investigations on Risga been published (Pollard et al. 1996), the problems could have been resolved much earlier.

Several separate developments have allowed a more satisfactory reappraisal. Firstly, the direct radiocarbon determinations which have been made on Obanian bone and antler tools have revolutionized understanding of the duration of the Obanian, which now extends from at least c.8340 BP to ostensibly well beyond 5000 BP. Not only is this echoing almost the full known extent of the Mesolithic in Scotland, it is the Obanian dates themselves which contribute substantially to infill this timespan. Secondly, the excavation of open-air sites both at Oban and on Colonsay has demonstrated the existence of conventional microlith-using Mesolithic groups in close geographical proximity to the classic Obanian sites (an association which had always seemed a possibility from the evidence at Risga). Thirdly, a rockshelter site with a midden deposit with Obanian-type bone points and bevelled tools (one dated to c.7590 BP) was found at An Corran on the NE coast of Skye (Saville & Mikel 1994). Together with the evidence from Ulva Cave, off Mull (Bonsall et al. 1992), and now that from the First Settlers Project in the Inner Sound region (Hardy & Wickham-Jones 2002), this considerably extends the geographical range of the Obanian up the west coast from Oronsay to the north of Skye. In addition, the An Corran Obanian boneyard was apparently associated with a rich lithic blade industry with microliths.

In combination, these factors now make it highly plausible to see the Obanian as distinctive from the rest of the Scottish Mesolithic only in that: a) conditions for preservation of boneyard are enhanced at the shell middens; b) the middens result from specific processing tasks only appropriate in certain coastal locations; and c) those processing tasks require a specialized toolkit, not the full artefactual repertoire. This position, which has recently been thoroughly examined by Bonsall (1996; 1997), effectively reunites the Obanian with the rest of the Scottish Mesolithic; it is a time-transgressive functional variant, not a cultural offshoot. This being the case, it may be acceptable, if required, to continue using the term Obanian in a limited sense with reference to the classic west-coast
midden sites and their material culture, but certainly not in the former sense of an archaeological 'culture' (cf. Mithen 2000a, 622). However, even such limited usage is made more problematic by recognition of the continuation of an element of the classic Obanian tool-kit – the bevel-ended implement – into much more recent periods (Saville this volume), with the implication that, contrary to Movius's view of Mesolithic continuity as such (see above), there is a situation whereby an aspect of the basic technology suited to life on the west coast shows a persistent longevity through the Neolithic and Bronze Age and into the Iron Age and perhaps beyond. The conclusion must be that, except in retrospective survey, the days of archaeologists referring to an 'Obanian' without inverted commas are over (cf. Mellars this volume).

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