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Middle Iron Age

Pottery that can definitely or probably be dated to the Middle Iron Age (Figure 11.13) was found in Trench U in mound 27 (associated with a probable wheelhouse) and Trenches W and X in mound 16. Once again, only a small amount of pottery was found (namely 41 sherds and three fragments from around four pots from Trench U, two sherds from one or two pots from Trench W, and 10 sherds from around six pots in Trench X). This pottery is significantly thinner and finer than the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age assemblage and is mostly of a hard, slightly sandy fabric.

The most diagnostic pottery comes from Trench U, where a decorated rim and neck sherd from a large globular pot with an everted rim (Figure 11.13.55; SF1708 from 206) can be paralleled closely among material from the Site B (Periods B1 and B2) wheelhouse at Sollas, North Uist (Campbell 1991: illus. 17). The Sligeanach sherd has incised decoration arranged as vertical lines immediately below the rim and an arcaded and fringed design on the neck; it is thin-walled (7mm) and the estimated rim diameter is c.200mm. It is of a hard, slightly gritty fabric; its outer surface has been very carefully smoothed and buffed to a very low sheen, while the interior shows signs of probably having been scraped to achieve its thinness. The presence of a thin black encrustation on a belly sherd confirms that this had been a cooking pot, and there is a small base sherd (Figure 11.13.58) which confirms that it had had a flat base. Also present in Trench U is a belly sherd from another pot that might have the remains of a detached cordon (Figure 11.13.57; SF1702 from 202); again, this feature can be paralleled among pottery of the same phase at Sollas. A third pot, represented among SF1098 from 204, has an upright, pointed rim with horizontal stab decoration below (not illustrated).

The only sherd of note from Trench W comes from the wall-base junction of a thin-walled (7.5mm), fine pot of hard, slightly sandy fabric resembling that seen in Trench U. The base is flat and the wall splays slightly (Figure 11.13.59); the sherd is too small to estimate base diameter, but the pot is likely to have been a large vessel comparable with the Middle Iron Age pots from Sollas.

Little can be said about the few sherds from Trench X, other than that they range in thickness from 6mm (among SF1719 from 242) to c.12mm (among SF1722 from 241) and are generally comparable in hardness and fabric with those from Trenches U and W. One, from among SF1719, has a corrugated exterior with a trace of organic material in one of the corrugations. If the latter does not represent subsequent rootlet growth, then this may be an example of the dung tempering as observed elsewhere in the Hebrides by Ewan Campbell (1991: 150) — although it should be emphasized that the possible organic impressions are only on the outside surface, and do not pervade the body of the sherd. (In this respect the sherd is closer to Norse grass-marked pottery than to the Iron Age grass/dung-tempering as discussed by Campbell [ibid. and 2002: 140]).

Some time depth among the Middle Iron Age pottery from Sligeanach is suggested by the radiocarbon dating evidence from Trench X and by the comparanda for the Trench U vessels. The former suggests activity within the time bracket of the last one or two centuries BC and the first century AD (which, incidentally, is contemporary with Campbell’s period of Iron Age grass/dung-tempering at Sollas), whereas the latter suggests a second or third century AD date for the pottery, and the wheelhouse, in Trench U (Campbell 2002: 141).

Copper alloy awl

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A copper-alloy awl (SF1506; Figure 11.14) was recovered in an environmental sample from a ploughsoil (18) in Trench A, mound 18. The awl was broken at both ends but appears to be a double-pointed awl (Class 1D; Thomas 2005: 221). Similar awls are well known from Early Bronze Age burial contexts in southern Britain and in Scotland (Ammble and Simpson 1964; Clarke 1970) and, in Scotland, they are normally associated with Food Vessel burials. The Sligeanach example is unusual in coming from a settlement context and is also relatively small.

1506, A/18. A small copper-alloy point. It thickens in the centre but is broken at either end. The cross-section is noticeably rectangular to one side of the waist but becomes circular on the other side. It is probably a double-pointed awl (Thomas 2005: 221, class 1D) but there remains a slight possibility that the rectangular side is a tang (Thomas 2005: 221, class 2C). The awl was analysed by Phil Parkes using a Camscan maxmix 2040 Scanning Electron Microscope with Oxford Inca EDX analysis software. This revealed that the approximate composition of the alloy was 60% copper, 35% tin, 4% arsenic and 1% silver. Length 11.3mm, dia. 0.9mm.