



## Book Reviews

### **FROM MACHAIR TO MOUNTAINS. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION IN SOUTH UIST. Ed by MIKE PARKER PEARSON**

*Oxford, Oxbow Book: 2012.428 pages, 257 illus ISBN 978-1-84217-451-7, hb, £35*

This interesting and data-packed volume is one of an ongoing series of monographs published as a result of the Sheffield Environmental and Archaeological Research Campaign in the Hebrides project (SEARCH). This wide ranging project has been investigating the archaeology of the Scotland's Outer Hebrides since 1987, with a shifting group of participants, aims and objectives. This long-lived project has covered a good deal of ground, both in terms of space, and time, in part reflecting the skills and interests of those who have worked under the SEARCH umbrella. This particular volume, *From Machair to Mountains*, covers work undertaken on South Uist (and Eriskay) and is admirably edited together from a diverse range of sources and over 20 different contributors. Inevitably, given that the monograph contains multiple overviews of surveys and excavations, and covers evidence from the Mesolithic period to the reaches of oral memory, the content lacks consistency and at times a coherent narrative. But the overall sense is of a lot of very interesting and valuable work being done on an island that has never been as remote as it seems.

The monograph consists of three distinct sections, topped and tailed by incisive summaries, context and synthesis by the editor (and for the opening chapter, Helen Smith). The monograph opens with a comprehensive and readable overview of the SEARCH project, work done on South Uist, and some background on the character of the landscape and the archaeological record. This chapter gives a very good sense of the scope and scale of work done, and offers an insight into the wide range of experts who travelled all the way to South Uist to work on this beautiful island. The evolving nature of SEARCH is reflected on nicely, detailing changes in direction that can happen in a project that spans major changes in archaeological thinking and methodologies. An overview of the SEARCH aims on page 5 outlines the long-term and ambitious nature of the project, with an emphasis on settlement patterns and daily life. It is also clear that this is a project that transcends time periods and looks at patterns of change, and continuity, across millennia.

The first main section of the monograph deals with seven very different survey projects undertaken on South Uist. These represent a broad range of subjects, geographical scope and temporalities, and so they do not flow especially well together, although there is an inherent logic in the way they are organised. One report, on the chambered tombs, has been published in a different form previously (in Cummings & Pannett 2005). Of by far the most significance amongst these reports is Parker Pearson's chunky discussion of the machair survey. This unique and dynamic coastal landscape offered a challenging environment for survey teams, and yet work in the early to mid-1990s discovered over 200 new sites in a landscape that had largely been marginalised by archaeologists. This entailed the development of a field methodology that would seem alien to those working elsewhere in the UK. The amazing survival and depth of the archaeology is discussed in a nice level of detail, with the use of some excellent maps; the value of looking in such landscapes is made clear. The other surveys are a mixed bag, and these suffer slightly from presenting different forms of data in different styles. John Moreland's report on his survey of the mountainous Loch Aoineart area makes nice use of oral tradition and local input, and is elegantly written. John Raven's research on later Iron Age settlement, and shielings, is

presented concisely, although accompanied by illustrations of mixed quality. By contrast, the report on the chambered tombs (Cummings, Henley and Sharples) reveals a poverty of empirical information on the tombs, and much of the paper is concerned with the views *from* the monuments, which is not quite as satisfactory as the other chapters. The final survey report is Rachel Grahame's survey of upland settlement in southern South Uist, indicative of the wide range of material covered in this section. A positive aspect of the survey section of the book is the bringing to publication of a number of pieces of PhD research, from the likes of Henley and Raven.

The excavation part of the volume is equally diverse, and again characterised by a lack of consistency in data presentation. Nine excavation reports are included here in all, ranging from Neolithic and Bronze Age settlements, to a church and townships, again indicative of the wide range of work covered in the monograph. In general these reports offer succinct outlines of investigations, with varying levels of detail. Henley and Pannett cover a rather unpromising Neolithic site at Loch a'Choire with admirable positivity (for instance, viewing this as a settlement is perhaps a bit optimistic on the available evidence), and despite essentially not much being found, they are right to stress this is probably the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential for evidence for everyday Neolithic activity on this island. Reports on intriguing Bronze Age settlements at Machair Mheadhanach and Cill Donnain (with the lead taken by Hamilton and Sharples) are nicely described and well-illustrated, and some important synthesis presented. For instance, an overview of Beaker pottery from the Hebrides was undertaken, and territorial settlement patterns explored (a theme returned to throughout the volume). Work at Cill Donnain offers wider context for the nearby long-term settlement mound at Bornais, excavated by Niall Sharples (also published in 2012). Other work in the machair is also reported on, for instance work at mounds to flesh out survey discoveries; such settlement mounds are one of the key archaeological resources on this island. The excavations of a church at Cille Donnain, undertaken in part as a community project, are reported on in chapter 14, while other work includes the exploration of post-medieval townships, and Moreland's work on the prehistoric, early historic and prehistoric sites at Kirkidale. The latter chapter focused on monuments that were part of the aforementioned Loch Aoinart survey.

The final part of the volume consists of two valuable 'historical and geographical studies' which offer a nice context for the archaeological discoveries. Helen Smith's 'ethnography of Hebridean agriculture' (chapter 19) in particular is very interesting and illustrated with amazing photographs of people working within the machair landscape as well as material culture associated with their activities. Familiar concepts like lazy-beds and run-rig are explored afresh, and the movement of people within the landscape brings us back to survey work done on, for instance, shielings. The other chapter by the late Gill MacLean offers an informed and engaging insider's perspective on the Loch Aoinart area in the historical period, again fleshing out the archaeological detail discussed elsewhere in the volume. Finally, the monograph concludes with an authoritative summary of all of the information gathered by SEARCH fieldwork and from other sources. Of particular note here is a comprehensive pottery sequence from the Neolithic onwards, which is of a detail that would simply be impossible for mainland Scotland given the sheer ubiquity of pottery from all periods in the Western Isles. (This section of the text is illustrated by some gloomy greyscale digital reconstruction of pottery styles that makes most of the pottery look the same.) This is followed by an equally important summary of the settlement sequence, a recurring SEARCH theme, and again something we probably have a better grasp of this now in the Western Isles than anywhere else in Scotland. This is in no small part due to SEARCH in South Uist and beyond. This chapter also whets the appetite for further, future revelations on the remarkable Cladh Hallan settlement, also in South Uist and excavated by Parker Pearson amongst others. The monograph concludes with a very useful English-Gaelic glossary of place names.

This is a big monograph that is full of information, and offers an invaluable insight into the lives of people living on the very fringes of the British Isles from earlier prehistory through to living memory with some important insights into later prehistoric and Norse settlement in particular. The editorial input by, and overview of, Parker Pearson ensures this is done successfully. There are minor problems that relate to the style of the book; for instance, multiple projects ensure that the landscape and character of South Uist is explained on multiple occasions. Sites crop up in different survey contexts (for instance in surveys of the chambered tombs, and the southern zone of the island) but there is no real overlap in the ways these sites are dealt with, or acknowledgement that the sites were looked by others. And as alluded to already, the quality of the illustrations varies, with most excellent and very clear, but others pixelated, gloomy or untidy. Yet these are niggles in what is otherwise a comprehensive historiography of a project, the fruits of many experts coming together to explore a marginalised landscape and its people. Not a volume to read from start to finish necessarily, but well worth dipping into.

Recently I attended a pottery class at a college in Glasgow, and one of the other people at the class was from South Uist. When he found out that I am an archaeologist, he immediately asked me: 'do you know Mike Parker Pearson?!' For me, this attested to a key success of SEARCH in South Uist, a concern with being embedded within the local community, and it was clear that the archaeologists had made a big impact on people living on South Uist today. It is frequently noted in the monograph that local opinion was sought, oral history dipped into, and communities engaged with the fieldwork. Perhaps to the surprise of outsiders, this monograph as a whole testifies to a vibrant community, both now, and in the past.

## References

Cummings, V & Pannett, A, 2005. *Set in stone. New approaches to Neolithic monuments in Scotland*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

Sharples, N, 2012. *A late Iron Age farmstead in the Outer Hebrides: excavations at Mound 1, Bornais, South Uist*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

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Review submitted: November 2012

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