

Some interesting pottery fragments from the Shiant Islands in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

The Shiant Islands Project (SHIP) has been proceeding annually since 2000, and its reports can be found on www.shiantisles.net. The Shiants are composed of three uninhabited islands off the east coast of Lewis set amid the often dangerous waters of the Minch. The project began with a comprehensive archaeological survey of the islands, the first ever attempted, and a limited excavation within the shell of a ruined 19th century blackhouse. These activities formed the main historic/archaeological content of the book "Sea Room" by the islands journalist owner, Adam Nicolson.

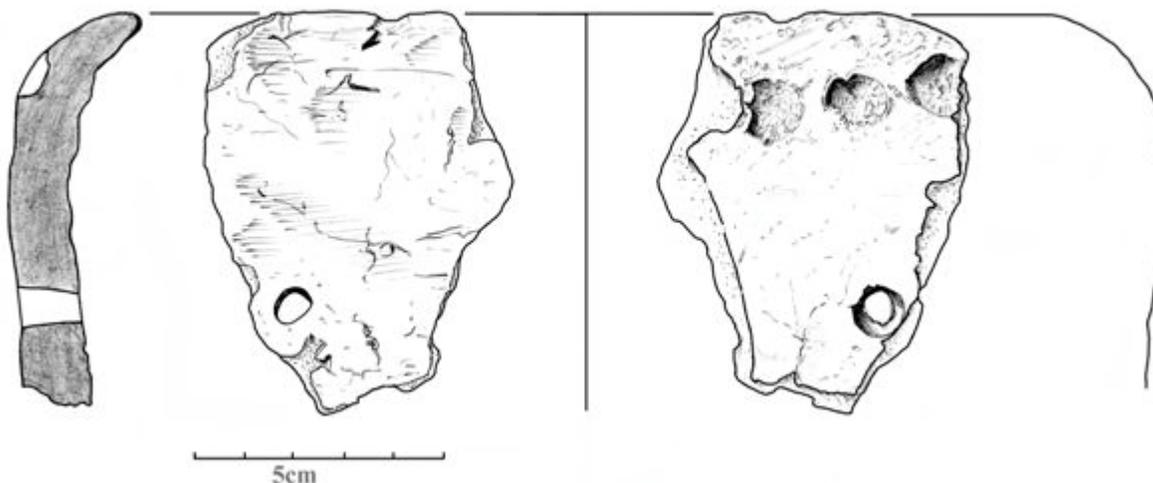
Since then the investigation of the archaeology and environment of the islands has proceeded as an independent research project. The ceramic results obtained so far from a series of excavations, on a variety of sites, have produced a ceramic assemblage covering a wide date range, almost unbroken from the Late Bronze Age to the mid 20th century. This includes important collections of material from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Ages; an assemblage from what is almost certainly an early Christian monastic enclave making and using 7th-8th century Pictish style plain wares; material from a 13th century Late Viking farmstead, and 17th to possibly early 20th century hand-made and factory production wares from early modern settlement and working deposits and features. All of the material from these periods, apart from the early modern/modern table wares and possibly some of the Late Viking material, appears to have been manufactured by the local population on the islands.

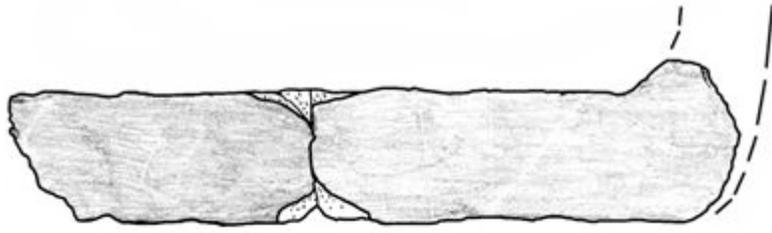
The recovery of such a large and wide ranging ceramic collection from a number of different sites on these islands, which form an almost closed and isolated settlement/working landscape, is of considerable importance in this region of very conservative past societies. The ceramic assemblages, along with other cultural material, has allowed us to see that, while external contacts are clearly active in all the periods present, as illustrated by the differing fashions of form and style, the communities in the various periods display considerable self sufficiency and exceptional conservatism. Although the forms and styles may show, often small and gradual changes, the fabric and potting techniques remain almost unchanged from the earliest to the latest times. Without the assistance of some method of scientific dating, such as radiocarbon dating it is very difficult to accurately date much of this material. However until funds are available it has been possible to allot almost all of the material to various periods and phases. This is almost, apart from the stratigraphical record, solely due to the large quantity of ceramic material obtained from the excavations. By drawing and comparing every single *distinctive* sherd in an ordered stratigraphical series it has been possible to detect the, often quite subtle, changes in form and style. This is not merely an example of over-illustrating and presenting the ceramic material, but a practical solution to a difficult identification situation. This at present forms our basic tentative chronological framework.

Since the beginning of the project there has been a keen awareness concerning the effects of climatic change, which have begun to damage and threaten several of the archaeological sites. One such site (HI 60) is located at the waters edge on the southern end of the western bay of Eilean an Tighe (House Island). Over several years small fragments of crude hand-made pottery, burnt bone and charcoal have been collected from the eroding shoreline, but not in sufficient quantity or in adequately distinctive forms from which we could give the site a possible date. Recently however the severity of the westerly gales and the rate of erosion has greatly increased and last year several large, fresh fragments of a large jar base and a large body to rim tip sherd were found. These have indicated that the site could most likely be dated to a time around the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age transition period. The fabric

and potting technology between this, the Pictish wares and even some of the 19th century handmade wares is very similar, with crude surface finish and the presence of exceptionally large stoney inclusions, but the form of this jar with its inturned rim and deep finger indentaion decoration around the shoulder would tend to place it in the LBA-EIA period. The base fragments are of particular interest since, although it is badly damaged, the impression of a woven ?grass/reed mat can still be seen impressed into the surface clay of the base. The mat appears to be made from individual strands of some tough, grass-like stems, carefully linked to form a cohesive woven mat on which a pot under construction could be easily turned without the moist clay sticking to whatever working surface the pot was being made on.

This is a technique, which I have have considered as an accepted practice, often spoken or refered to but rarely illustrated. Usually I think the reports refer to vessels being turned on thin flat stones or that a thin scatter of sand can be used. Sand is virtually impossible to find on these basaltic islands and even flat stones are not easily found. I certainly have not seen such an example of a grass mat before, however I realise that I have not examined the quantity of material that other members of the group have most likely handled. I would very much appreciate any further ideas or comments and especially if there are any published references to such marks available.





5 cm

