



PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT

Archaeology has retrieved an astonishing amount of information about life in the past, but every site is different and each has the potential to alter or add to our understanding. For Scotland, plant and animal colonisation began in earnest after the final retreat of the ice sheets around 12,500 years ago, somewhat later than the rest of Britain for climatic reasons, and human settlement was a similarly gradual process for which our earliest evidence is around 8,500 BC. By then the landscape was clothed with birch, hazel and, later on, pine woodland. With a lower sea level, a mosaic of dry land and marsh extended far beyond the present day coastline. The lives of the first settlers followed a yearly rhythm set by the harvests offered by the wild forest, shore and moor and by the movements of migrating game and fish. People would come together, seasonally, in large groups when and where food was abundant and forage in smaller bands over wide areas when food was scarce.

Most sites of this period (Mesolithic) have been found in coastal or river valley locations and it was assumed that this pattern reflected the ease of water transport, using logboat or skinboat, but evidence is increasing to show that people also camped far inland and in upland areas. Generally only flint tools, and debris from making such tools, survives to show us where these people once lived, but where the seasonal camps were more substantial or more frequently used, the ground plans of rounded, tent-like, wooden-framed structures have been found. Caves and rock-shelters were also used as ready-made campsites.

More permanent houses began to be built when farming was adopted, and a more settled life-style was possible in the Neolithic period from about 4000 BC. By this time the forests included elm and oak, but humans were already felling and burning the forests to create open arable land and, even in the Northern Isles, crops such as wheat and barley were common. Domesticated cattle, sheep and pigs had been introduced into Britain from Europe, but hunting wild animals and managing herds of wild deer were still important, as were fishing and collecting shellfish. This period can be characterised by the prolific development of building styles serving the needs of housing, ceremony, and burial. Houses survive sometimes as clustered stone-built villages (as in Orkney) or as single buildings that were oblong, oval or square in plan. The largest domestic building discovered was situated in what is now Aberdeenshire, was rectangular, and measured 26m (85ft) long. Roofs would have



Life for the earliest settlers of Scotland was not all work. During autumn and early winter, food resources were abundant and there was plenty of time for socialising, exchanging gifts, and arranging marriage partners.

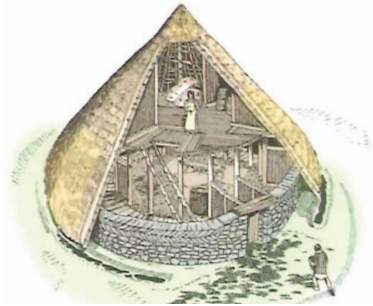
consisted of a combination of wooden rafters, coarse basketry and thatch.



This ring of stones is all that survives above-ground of a stone-built roundhouse © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

Around 2500 BC, people began to build round-houses, perhaps for reasons connected with their view of the physical and spiritual world. The walls were still made of timber or stone, and these houses were built singly or in groups according to the size of the community. The houses provided shelter and warmth, but also storage space, workshop areas, and even byres. There is also evidence for external hearths, threshing areas and other activities, so seasonal activities connected with everyday domestic life and mixed farming would migrate across the threshold as the weather permitted. Timber houses are visible today as cropmarks on aerial photographs or, in areas less affected by recent ploughing, as circular platforms levelled into a hillside, while those with stone walls can even survive above ground level as low stony rings (hut-circles).

In the Western Isles and Shetland, a distinctive type of stone house known today as a wheelhouse was favoured for a period during the last centuries BC and the early centuries AD. All these roundhouses vary in size, but can be up to 15m (50ft) in diameter, and it is likely that some had an upper floor. Stone piers, like the spokes of a wheel, buttressed



Some roundhouses were quite grand and would be seen as places of wealth and power within the community.

the roof or upper floor, thus creating an open central area surrounded by radial rooms. Most houses seem to have been designed in a certain way, with their doorways generally facing the rising sun. Deposits of animal or human bone may be found inside these houses, indicating ritual activity, religious beliefs and everyday life were thus interwoven.

To guard against thieves and wild animals, some settlements were enclosed by timber stockades, stone walls, ditches or earthen defences (banks or ramparts), but many were simply scattered among their arable fields and pasturelands. Other features surviving near houses may include middens, hearths, butchery areas, burial places, field-banks, small piles of stones cleared off the arable fields, traces of narrow rig cultivation and land boundaries in the form of banks and ditches. The whole landscape was utilised, with fields close to houses being intensively cultivated for crops and pasture. On aerial photographs, long lines of pits can be seen in some areas (pit alignments), which seem to be boundaries, but it is not certain whether the pits held large posts or were simply quarries for material to construct a continuous bank.



A typical location for a burnt mound beside an ancient water course. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

Common features of the marginal land beyond the settlements are mounds of burnt and shattered stone. These 'burnt mounds' are often low and crescent-shaped and situated near a source of fresh water. They are very common in the far north and in the south-west, dating from before 2000 BC until well into the first millennium AD. The burnt stones are the by-product of heating large quantities of water: stones were heated on hearths and dropped into tanks, rapidly bringing the water to boil, and the cracked stones were then discarded. The purpose was probably to cook communal meals, perhaps after hunting or on feast days (although some may have been roofed to serve as saunas).












From about 1200 BC, the climate had begun to deteriorate, becoming colder and wetter. Areas of less favourable arable land were abandoned and, possibly as a result, thin blankets of peat began to invade the many upland areas that had formerly been cultivated. This contraction in the extent of good land may have been the context for, and even one cause of, an increasing social differentiation. There are signs of more distinct hierarchies, of more explicit displays of individual wealth and power, as well as social instability and unrest. Between about 1000 and 500 BC, most places in Scotland saw the development of a variety of sophisticated defensive structures with many regional variations (see the Prehistoric Defences leaflet for information).

It is likely that at this time, larger and more cohesive tribal units were forming, and it is to this period that the roots of much of the present day's basic pattern of rural land use and settlement can be traced.



This artist's reconstruction of a burnt mound suggests that this was one way in which people could gather together for social occasions. The feast included joints of meat boiled in troughs of water.

TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age Wildlife colonises land Mesolithic hunting settlers		12,500	
		8500	Flint scatters Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers		4000	Chambered tombs and houses Cupmarked rocks
		3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)		2000	Burial mounds and short cists Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating Fortifications begin		1000	Burnt mounds Hillforts
Iron-working technology		500	Crannogs
		200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		BC ▲	
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
		400	
Introduction of Christianity Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians		600	Long cist graves
Start of the Viking Age		800	Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
Emergence of Scottish nation		1000	Pagan Viking graves and settlements
		1100	
First burghs		1200	Stone-built churches
		1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		1600	Tower-houses
Agricultural improvements & Industrial Revolution		1800	Deserted villages and farms
		1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		2000	Gun batteries and airfields

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

A multi-period archaeological landscape in Angus. The remains of hut circles, small cairns, banks and huts are visible from the air. The use of these uplands has changed since the climate deteriorated in prehistoric times, ensuring the survival of this ancient settlement. © Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

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Historic Scotland is an agency within the Scottish Government and is responsible for administering the legislation that protects ancient monuments (buildings, ruins, archaeological sites and landscapes). It provides general advice on the conservation and protection of Scotland's heritage.

Historic Scotland's Education Service encourages the use of built heritage as a learning and teaching resource.

Over 300 historic properties are looked after by Historic Scotland and are open to the public for enjoyment and education. For further information, including free leaflets, telephone 0131 668 8600.

Our data service website contains details of scheduled Monuments and has GIS datasets available to download:
<http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:

Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers

Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage

Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments

Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with Archaeology Scotland)

Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers

The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection

Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law

A leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes*, on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available. Catalogue from and orders to:

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