
6 Discussion by Paul R J Duffy, with Jennifer Miller & Susan Ramsay

The Gearraidh na h'Aibhne excavations and post-excavation analysis have demonstrated that the site comprised a small pit, containing a possible woven hazel wicker lining or basket, created at some point 1000x830 BC, and has posed some enigmatic questions as to the original function of the pit and artefact. At the time the site was created, the landscape of Lewis is thought to have been undergoing increasing modification due to human action. Environmental analysis of a peat core from Little Loch Roag, to the south of Gearraidh na h'Aibhne, suggests that a predominantly treeless landscape dominated by willow scrub and tall herb communities had gradually given way to a wider expansion of pasture, grasslands and heather moor from around 2000 BC, possibly as a result of increased grazing (Birks & Madsen 1979). Although evidence relating to the spread of the blanket peat bogs across the island is more sparse and somewhat inconclusive, paleobotanical remains from the site of Gearraidh na h'Aibhne has demonstrated that the present bog landscape was well established by around 1000 BC in the immediate area. Modern discussions of the local landscape define it as 'extremely oceanic valley mire' (Ratcliffe 1977), marked by the presence of soligenous tracts and soaks containing sedges, rushes, bog pondweed and *Sphagnum* moss, and dominated in drier parts and hummock areas by *Sphagnum papillosum*, heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) and purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*). Macrofossil evidence recovered from contexts 004 and 005 of the Gearraidh na h'Aibhne pit demonstrated the presence of both soligenous vegetation (bogweed and sedges) and hummock-forming vegetation (heathers and mosses) and provides us with a picture of a landscape largely similar to that which we see today.

Into this boggy landscape a bell-shaped pit was excavated to a depth of some 0.85m. The function of the pit is not immediately apparent, but into it a quantity of hazel branches, carefully selected for size and/or age, were placed. Intriguingly, these branches may have originated from deliberately managed woodland, for they are straight and unbranched in form, with the characteristic side shoots of wild hazel notably absent. Although evidence is rare in the prehistoric record, parallels can be found for evidence of prehistoric coppicing practices in both Scotland and Britain. Miller, in a discussion of the paleobotanical evidence from Oakbank Crannog, Loch Tay, proposes evidence for managed woodland from the site (Miller 2002), whilst further afield, similar practices has been suggested from the Iron Age sites of Fengate and Dragaby (Coles *et al.* 1978) and from the Somerset Levels as far back as the

third millennium BC (Rackham 1977; Coles 1987). What is less apparent is a source for this material on prehistoric Lewis. Birks & Madsen suggest that hazel was never abundant on the island and would have grown only as scrub in small, isolated areas (Birks & Madsen 1979). Similarly, a survey of 40 sites on Lewis by Wilkins failed to identify any in situ hazel stumps in ancient peat deposits (Wilkins 1984). The results from the Gearraidh na h'Aibhne excavations suggest either that the resource was more available than has previously been suggested, or that a scarce resource was deliberately utilized as part of the wicker construction. An alternative possibility is that the hazel did not originate on the island at all, but was imported either as unworked lengths, or as a completed artefact. Further paleobotanical study on the island may help to understand this issue more fully.

No distinct artefactual form was recorded during the excavation, although from observation the excavators formed the firm impression that the wood constituted in situ portions of a woven wickerwork, either in the form of a basket or wattle lining. Such an impression appears to be supported by the suggestion that the wood has been deliberately coppiced and selected (see Section 4 – Botanical Remains). Several of the wood pieces also show evidence of anthropogenic modifications, either through longitudinal splitting of the wood (8%) or as a single oblique cut at one end of a branch (7%). These types of modifications are typical of those found in the manufacture of wattle or baskets, with the former particularly reminiscent of modern basketmaking, with longitudinal splitting of branches used to create either the slathe or skiens and single oblique cuts for creating either a slype for working the weave, or as a final trim of the weavers themselves (Crook 2000). Two further pieces (3%) also show signs of twisting. Whilst this figure appears low, it is obvious from an examination of modern parallels that large lengths of constituent branches remain largely unaffected in this way by the manufacture process. Given the relatively short length of the majority of the pieces examined, it is entirely possible that this form of modification would not be expected in any frequency in the analysis of a subsample of material. Additionally, the wood itself remains in a fairly plastic state when wet, and given the waterlogged nature of the site, the sample examined may have shed any evidence of having been woven when the container was broken up.

The balance of evidence, albeit somewhat circumstantial, therefore suggests that the hazel rods within the pit potentially represented some form of woven lining or container. Parallels for both

types of woven construction are not uncommon. From Scotland, evidence for the use of such woven artefacts is found at the mid Bronze Age site of Linshie Gutter (Terry 1995), whilst similar wickerwork has also been identified from Rattray (Murray *et al.* 1992) and Howe (Dickson & Dickson 2000, 98). Several examples of deposition of woven containers in a bog context, within a discussion of bog butter containers from Ireland (Earwood 1997) and Scotland (Hunter 1997) are also known. Further afield, well-preserved baskets have been found in excavations at Glastonbury Lake Village (finds x64 and x90) (Bulleid & St George Grey 1911), whilst a possible wicker cradle is reported from Mere Village (Bulleid & St George Grey 1948). Other examples of such wicker and hurdle work have been found throughout Britain and Ireland (for example Coles *et al.* 1978, 17; O'Sullivan 1998), and a clear picture emerges from these examples of a continuum of construction methods utilizing hazel wickerwork in Britain dating back to the earliest times.

The majority of the diameters of the examined fragments from Gearraidh na h'Aibhne range between 9mm and 20mm. In this light, it is hard to envisage a light construction, and it is probable that the wickerwork was sturdily built, although in the absence of quantified botanical data it is difficult to assess the dimensions of the weave of the basket. Excavated examples from Glastonbury Lake village do, however, give some idea of scale. Here the branches utilized in the construction of basket x64 ranged from 9mm to 12.5mm, allowing a construction estimated to be some 700mm in width and 480mm in height. Artefact x90 was constructed of similar sized branches and was estimated to be some 330mm in width and 480mm in height (Bulleid & St George Grey 1911). Such evidence suggests that the woven object from Gearraidh na h'Aibhne could have been of substantial size in its original unbroken form, and certainly large enough to substantially fill the 650mm wide by 850mm deep pit.

Other than this, we have little evidence to suggest the original form of the artefact, as the remains of the wicker artefact were, for the most part, not in situ and had been disturbed and broken. The processes by which the artefact had become broken are unknown, and lack of archaeological evidence renders any suggestions as to the causes of the breakage entirely speculative, beyond the suggestion of natural taphonomic processes or deliberate human activity. This action must, however, have taken place prior to the formation of the later peat layer (002), and may have resulted in the pitched and disturbed nature of the overlying stones (008). The only additional evidence as to the form of the artefact comes from the observation that it had been held in place within the pit. A single example of hazel was identified that had been fashioned into a rough point at one end through numerous cut marks, and of several vertically embedded pieces of hazel were observed in the sides of the cut. The presence of a number of stones at the base of the feature, underlain by further

hazel twigs, may also be seen as a further measure to maintain the position of the structure within the pit.

In terms of functionality, it is clear that the site was created to contain *something*, but the nature of the contents remains elusive. In its final visible form the pit was apparently capped with a number of flat slabs of Lewisian Gneiss placed at the surface from where the pit was cut, which later subsided into the top of the feature. As such, it is tempting to see the slabs as deliberate markers for the pit, suggesting the contents were intended to be retrieved at a later date. Evidence from the excavation was not, however, definitive and the alternative possibility that the slabs are later than the pit, possibly added to cover the 'soft spot' in the surface, must be acknowledged. Furthermore, as the disturbed and broken nature of the hazel rods found sealed within the pit suggests that material within had been largely removed, few clues were left as to the original contents. The presence of rootless examples of common heather, cross-leaved heath and *Sphagnum* moss is considered to have been an intentional deposition but, given the presumed abundance of such plants, it seems somewhat unlikely that the pit would have been dug specifically for their storage. Both plants have a long association with Scottish basketry and may have been used as additional weavers either for decoration or as reinforcement of the structure, or alternatively as some form of packing or cushion for now decayed contents.

Although the morphological characteristics of the wattle-lined 'firebaskets' from Rathtinaun (Crannog 61; O'Sullivan 1998, 89) and the remains from Gearraidh na h'Abhne do not bear close comparison, such sites remind us of the varied possibilities of function. If we are to consider the plant material within the pit to be part of the structure, however, then perhaps the most obvious possibility is as a storage place for the water from the bog itself. Parallels can be seen in the later examples of such structures, most strikingly from the Iron Age site of Dragonby, where a hazel wattle-lined well was found associated with domestic structures (May 1970), although the motivations for storage of water within a wet bog are somewhat more obscure. In this light, the mosses and heathers contained within may be a rough 'filtration' system to exclude organic material from the surrounding bog. If packing was the function of these plants, however, closer parallels for the site can be drawn from the numerous 'bog butter' depositions from Britain and Ireland. Finds of this fatty, pungent material have been recorded from pits cut into the wet peatlands of the British Isles since antiquarian times, and it is frequently found in containers, including wicker baskets (Earwood 1997). Recent work has suggested that the material can be composed of both animal fats and lipids (Berstan *et al.* 2004), although the reason for the deposition of the material in bogs is still a source of debate. Such sites generally have a provenance from the mid-Iron Age onwards, but their

origins and the motives for deposition are poorly understood. Hunter, in a review of such sites from Scotland, suggests a possible votive explanation for such deposits, linked to agricultural fertility (Hunter 1997). More significantly, it is apparent from the associated gazetteer that examples of associations between bog butter, wooden or wicker containers and wetland environments have previously been identified, and are predominantly distributed in the north-west of Scotland. Whilst no direct evidence of the 'butter' was found from the site of Gearraidh na h'Abbhne, it is clear that the contents of the pit have been disturbed, most obviously during the retrieval of the contents, and the 'clay' or waxy substance identified in the uppermost layer of the pit perhaps hints enigmatically at the last vestiges of these, or similar, organic contents.

In summary, the fragmented and partial nature of the wooden remains from the pit frustratingly only

hint at the possible form and function of the site. The excavator observations, evidence for coppicing practices, anthropogenic modification of the branches and parallels from several sites in the region and further afield do, however, suggest that some form of wickerwork was buried in the peat bogs of Gearraidh na h'Abbhne, in the late Bronze Age. Tentative hints of bog butter deposition, the proximity of the site to the Calanais stones, and its location within the wider Calanais landscape may entice further discussion of the site in a socio-religious or votive context. In time, further excavated parallels may also help to elucidate more fully the function of the site. More immediately, the site serves to remind us of the archaeological potential contained within the blanket bogs of Lewis, and indeed Scotland, and the potential of such sites to enhance our knowledge of past human practice through the study of the organic material preserved within.