

PAST

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Registered Office: University College London, Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY

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Spectacular Neolithic finds emerge from the lochs of Lewis

Chris Murray, a sport diver, has been making some remarkable discoveries of Neolithic pottery on the beds of several lochs in the Isle of Lewis. The pottery is very similar to other finds of Hebridean Neolithic pottery, for example the assemblages from Eilean an Tighe and Eilean Dòmhnuaill (Loch Olabhat), both in North Uist. At least one Unstan Bowl – a specific vessel type shared between the Hebrides, Orkney and north mainland Scotland – is included among the finds.



Large Hebridean Neolithic jar being lifted from Loch Langavat (photo: Chris Murray).

By a lucky coincidence, it has proved possible to obtain radiocarbon dates from encrusted organic residue from three of the vessels (all large decorated Hebridean Neolithic cooking pots) from three of the lochs. Mark Elliott, the Conservation Officer at Museum nan Eilean, Stornoway, who tragically died on New Year's Eve, had drawn the finds to the attention of Alison Sheridan. In collaboration with Hugo Anderson-Whymark and Duncan Garrow, these samples (plus three from residues on pottery from Eilean an Tighe) were dated at the Oxford Radiocarbon Accelerator Unit as part of the *Stepping Stones to the Neolithic* project (http://www.neolithicsteppingstones.org/_/Home.html). Sadly, Mark did not live to see the results, but he would have been delighted to learn that the pots date to between c. 3600 BC and c. 3300 BC, in line with expectations. Full details will be published in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* in 2015 and in the *Stepping Stones* project's planned

radiocarbon dating paper. Furthermore, Bristol University's Richard Evershed has kindly agreed to analyse the sherds to identify the pots' former contents. The dates give no reason to suspect the presence of marine lipids. Interestingly, however, one of the only two Neolithic pots in Professor Evershed's recent NERC-funded project, *Changing Patterns of Marine Product Exploitation in Human Prehistory via Biomarker Proxies in Archaeological Pottery* (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24523264>), to have produced evidence for marine lipids was a Hebridean Neolithic pot from Bharpa Langais, South Uist.

As with the North Uist finds, the Lewis discoveries point towards the existence of Neolithic settlements on islets in lochs. The state of preservation of the pottery is superb and there is every chance that other well-preserved waterlogged settlement evidence is present. However, there are currently no plans to excavate since, in order to do justice to the sites, a vastly expensive operation would be necessary – including a major programme of waterlogged organics conservation, for which Scotland is decreasingly well-equipped.



Unstan Bowl emerging from the waters of Loch Arnish (photo: Chris Murray).

Alison Sheridan (National Museums Scotland),
Chris Murray (diver), Duncan Garrow (University of Reading) and Hugo Anderson-Whymark (University of York)