

UWTSD Assignment Title: Excavation operations at Uamh an Ard Achadh (UAA), 'High Pastures Cave', Strath, Isle of Skye . . . a missing lyre? -- a case for further enquiry?

Introduction: summary of the Skye operations, original discovery, schedule of excavations, etc.

To quote part of the public information given on one of the UAA investigation official websites . . .

‘This report presents the results of field survey, excavation and preliminary analysis undertaken at Uamh an Ard Achadh (High Pasture Cave), in the Parish of Strath, Isle of Skye (NGR NG 5943 1971), carried out between March 2010 and May 2011 by West Coast Archaeological Services and Archaeological & Ancient Landscape Survey.’ [1]

By this time a firm set of objectives had been established, listed as follows. . .

Objectives 1.2.1 The aim of the fieldwork undertaken during 2010 was to complete our evaluation of the site including assessing the extent and preservation of the remaining archaeological deposits in the deep natural hollow outside the entrance to Bone Passage (Trenches 2, 15 and 21), and other ancillary structures and complex deposits identified at the surface around the cave and stairwell entrance. In addition to fieldwork carried out within the core area of the site, trial excavation of potential prehistoric hut-circles, based on a detailed survey of the archaeological landscape of Strath Suardal [2]

Objectives 2.3.1 The High Pasture Cave Project was initially instigated as a survey and rescue excavation to remove archaeological deposits at risk from the use of the underground cave passages by visiting cavers. The cave is the most popular in the region and is easily accessed. However, the fieldwork conducted between 2003 and 2010 has revealed a complex sequence of archaeological deposits in the cave including the excellent preservation of organic materials; material often absent on prehistoric sites in Skye and the Scottish west coast due to the acidity of the soils. Therefore, it was decided that the investigation of deposits in Bone Passage should be carried forward in parallel with survey and trial excavation of the stone built structures and features identified at the surface. Such a course of fieldwork, guided by research criteria, would allow more informed interpretations to be made regarding the function of the site and to enable recommendations to be made regarding its future management. 2.3.2 A detailed Project Design was submitted to Historic Scotland in 2005 presenting a project appraisal, method statements and organisational information in support of the High Pasture Cave Project. The document included details relating to archaeological fieldwork, post excavation analyses, data collection

and dissemination of information, and put forward a provisional timetable of work including cost projections covering the years 2006 to 200 [3]

An artist's interpretation of the site's entrance in its possible original environs is given below. And of course we are considering something which has apparently an external man-made structure as reception to an underground natural phenomenon but of course accessed by the stone passageway.

Precinct and steps leading down to cave interior



[4]

An initial reaction to this image might well take the form of a structured transition from the world of light and sunshine to an environment of gloom, 'the underworld', possibly some contradiction from life to death, or the afterlife, to put it in simplistic terminology. Other reflections might refer to a veneration of some form of spirit-world as imagined by that society. A classical Mediterranean parallel to this possibility is offered by Britannica encyclopaedia service, a seemingly apposite possibility . . .

‘In Orphism, a Greek mystical religious movement, it was believed that the newly dead who drank from the River Lethe would lose all memory of their past existence. The initiated were taught to seek instead the river of memory, Mnemosyne, thus securing the end of the transmigration of the soul. At the oracle of Trophonius near Lebadeia (modern Levadhia, Greece), which was thought to be an entrance to the underworld, there were two springs called Lethe and Mnemosyne.’ [5]

This kind of explanation is probably worthy of some further consideration even though it might not be absolutely comparable. However, the Orphic cult seems to surface again in Roman Britain, found in the tessellated floor imagery in the rural villas of the wealthy landowners in particular. In the case of the UAA environment, there is an obvious acoustic advantage in the possibility of echoing sound emerging from the depths. A musical instrument used in such an environment would seem quite extraordinary to the mundane life experience of those visiting the site.

A non-technical introduction to the project was disseminated by the AOC Archaeology organization as follows:

High Pasture Cave is renowned for having yielded a spectacular wealth of evidence about the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age occupation through a comprehensive programme of excavation and analysis. Situated in a dramatic location under the slopes of the Cuillin Mountains on Scotland's Isle of Skye, this cave and its monumentalized environs were a focus for specific and special activities throughout the Iron Age - a venue for spectacular and extensive ceremonies featuring feasts, fire, crafts and the symbolic deposition of a plethora of artefacts and environmental materials, as well as human remains.

In 2008, AOC's survey team undertook laser scanning on behalf of the High Pasture Cave & Environs Project, scanning the entrance stairwell, the Bone Passage and the junction with the main streamway. These elements of the cave would have been very difficult to record through standard, measured hand-drawing, so laser scanning was selected as an efficient and effective way of creating a highly accurate record. [6]

Amongst the 'plethora of artefacts' the investigators rescued what appeared to be part of a musical instrument, the form of which is traceable back in a variety of forms to ancient antiquity in the Middle East and Mediterranean cultures.

A 'musical instrument' fragment. . . a lyre component?

Several authorities within this field of study now conclude that it is more than a possibility that the item under discussion is indeed related in some way to musical sounds. But it has to be asked whether the subsequent attempts at reconstituting a contemporary musical instrument as referred to below is viable. As there was a considerable degree of interest at the time of recognition of this possibility, several notable authorities in this area of antique instrumentation stepped forward and got to work on projects possibly in as much as to confirm their authoritative places in the artistic and educational sphere. A personal preliminary set of critiques follows. But it should be added that as this assignment paper has been composed in an extremely restrictive timescale, this can only be regarded as a brief, cursory

commentary. Greater depth and extent of comparable material is necessary, hence the title of the assignment.

An image of the fragment is shown below. The hole at the side remains largely uncommented on as far as can be ascertained at this time. That is to say the question remains whether there could have been any important functionality associated with this aspect of the form. Right side of the item is missing and can be envisioned in its original complete form by simply turning the fragment through an 180 degree angle:



[7]

Critique 1:

Dr Graeme Lawson of Cambridge Music Archaeology

Reconstruction or recreation of a conjectured integral lyre example, bridge and associated structure

This was one of the earliest attempts, working in liaison with the site team. Dr Lawson was well known in the field of study and stepped forward to attempt a working model. This is still available as an internet demonstration (reference below). Possibly this demonstration may have been premature, although meant in good faith. What emerges from the video demonstration and explanation is probably more in keeping with events some thousand years later than an earlier Iron Age estimate by the UAA team, and what Dr Lawson is seen to be doing is strumming on an instrument with a design closely aligned to that found in the tomb of the Scandinavian-style ship internment in the Sutton Hoo tumulus, excavated in 1939, containing the personal possessions for the occupant's afterlife. In other words Dr Lawson's reconstruction reflects a style of manufacture and design traceable back to Dark Age east Anglia and other gravesites within a seventh century time frame. At the date of the activities at UAA, there appears to be no obvious connexion between that community and the communities that spawned the later Anglo-saxon stringed instruments, i.e., what the Roman Empire referred to as *Germania* , inclusive of tribal areas outside and bordering the limits of the Latin culture. [8]

Critique 2:

Simon Chadwick

A notable performer, researcher and instrument maker concentrating on early harp types predominantly of Gaelic origins

Closely following the work on the lyre reconstructing by Graeme Lawson, Simon Chadwick came forward with a number of presentations to maintain some professional kudos in the field of study. Unfortunately again, an almost identical design emerged but with less scope as Mr Chadwick did not regard the remaining 50% as being entirely undamaged in itself, resulting in a limited reconstruction of a complete item. Furthermore, because of the lack of string grooves resulting from this, two strings at one point were directed through the same groove. Apart from this, Simon Chadwick seemed to have been thinking in terms of a medieval Irish harp string-type with bronze as a major material and the whole reconstruction had eventually to be abandoned in favour of a different 'stringing' arrangement in the second video presentation. In this, the bronze was abandoned in favour of what seemed to be nylon. In the time of the later Iron Age it would be reasonable to expect of course not nylon (a product emerging from the USA in the 1930- 40s) but something more in keeping with the pastoral communities of the UAA countryside: that is, animal gut strands. However, the major form and function remained: that of an essentially early English, Germanic-influenced instrument found in the burial sites alluded to earlier. Also found in German sites of course. [9]

Conclusions and suggestions in relation to the foregoing

One overriding question seems to emerge from this brief appraisal of the work undertaken at UAA: is there a case for a more extensive, wider study of such so-called instrument components of various material composition (bone, wood etc.) discovered at this site and, on a much wider corroborative level, at other sites within the UK (or possibly UK and Eire) from a predominantly later Iron Age perspective onwards in order to ascertain whether a viable plucked stringed instrument might be reconstituted in the first instance on a hypothetical level in relation to a site such as UAA? And is a wider and more embracing study required to trace some organological sequence through the centuries from the close of 1st century BC through to the earlier medieval up to the time, say, of the immediate post Norman invasion to a figure such as Giraldus Cambrensis, an authoritative source of musical instrument categorization and data reflective of the British Isles as a whole, including Ireland. At

this stage, we could be considering a tradition or traditions relating to pre-Norman society as much as anything else, particularly from the Irish standpoint.

Topographical and geographical scope

Possibly Iron Age sites of major community organization, e.g. hillfort structures, defensive promontories, Romano-British civilian communities associated with military, any known major power centers associated with post-Roman local chiefs and their successors. For a competent effort, a total inclusive geographical survey would be recommended to include Eire.

Methodology

What follows can only be a basic outline due to time constraints. A critical path method might for example include some or all of the following elements:

Re-examine the items found alongside the UUA bridge fragment to establish any further connexions with reconstituting a working model, for example any small non-perishable items found at the site. As this list is a long one, this might take a considerable period of work in excess of a few weeks.

Comparanda with any existing archaeological reports or museum exhibits in the UK, or, on a wider platform, UK and Eire.

Possible expansion of the project into a greater scope of involvement of socio-political consideration. As Graeme Lawson suggests in his contribution to the 'Berlin Studies' publications (see bibl.)

' . . . Whether one looks at ancient poets in the Classical literature or in the vernacular, whether one contemplates their historical narratives or their surviving poetical works, it is difficult to escape the impression that a skill in verse and music carried with it a certain political advantage, at one level or another, an advantage with the potential to enhance a poet's individual prestige and status within a community, undoubtedly, but also to carry the more ambitious into proximity with power and authority' [10]

Important Note

The information included in this assignment can only be considered as a structure to build on . . . a skeleton or fundamnetal framework. Important overall considerations would include time-planning and funding as two vital components. Funding in terms of supporting travel, accommodation etc. would be substantial. Estimated costs and

timeframes would be subject to reappraisal according to potential scope: the greater the scope or coverage, the higher the costings.

Text notes

- 1 URL [librarylink highland.gov.uk](http://librarylink.highland.gov.uk) 2010 - 11 Data Structure Report p.9 [ac'd December 25, 2021]
- 2 *ibid.* Section 2. 2
- 3 *ibid.* Section 2. 3
- 4 'Visualising High Pasture Cave' aocarchaeology.com [ac'd December 27, 2021]
- 5 'Lethe' (Greek Mythology) Britannica online [ac'd 28 December, 2021]
- 6 'Visualising High Pasture Cave' aocarchaeology.com [ac'd December 27, 2021]
- 7 [bbc.co.uk scotland-highland-islands](http://bbc.co.uk/scotland-highland-islands), 28 March 2012
- 8 goddesschess.blogspot.com (31/03/2012); 'Replica Lyre Played' [ac'd December 31 2021]
- 9 URL simonchadwick.net [ac'd December 24, 2021]
- 10 Graeme Lawson, *Musical Finds and Political Memory: Archaeological Connexion Between Lyres, Poetry and Power in Barbarian Europe* p.263
- .

Bibliography and URL listing (December 2021 to January 2022)

Lawson, G. *Musical Finds and Political Memory: Archaeological Connexion Between Lyres, Poetry and Power in Barbarian Europe* in Eichman, R. Howell, M. Lawson, G. Music & Politics in the Ancient World; Berlin Studies of the Ancient World Series, #65 (Berlin: Edition Topoi. 2019)

URL aocarchaeology.com 'Visualising High Pasture Cave, Isle of Skye' (30 October 2021)

URL goddesschess.blogspot.com

URL [librarylink highland.gov.uk](http://librarylink.highland.gov.uk): '2010 - 11 Data Structure Report'

URL simonchadwick.net