

**Book Review****High Pasture Cave:****Ritual, Memory, and Identity in the Iron Age of Skye.***by Steven Birch and Jo McKenzie*

with additional contributions from 50 specialists.

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High Pasture Cave (Uamh an Ard Achadh) was discovered in 1972 by cavers from the University College of London Speleological Society who were prospecting for caves in the Durness Group limestones north of Beinn an Dubhaich on Skye. During the early explorations of High Pasture Cave by UCLSS and the Moldywarps Speleological Group, the cavers had noted the presence of scatters of calcited bone on some of the passage floors, but it was not until 20 years later that the archaeological importance of the site was recognized fully by Steven Birch. Then, after another decade had passed, Birch and the late Martin Wildgoose started formal archaeological investigations of the site in 2003, in collaboration with Historic Scotland and the National Museums of Scotland. An initial evaluation and rescue archaeology exercise revealed the abundance and quality of the archaeological evidence preserved at the site. The project developed and expanded into a much larger seven-year excavation programme, which was followed by another decade and a half of detailed post-excavation analysis of the excavated materials, documentation and archiving of the finds, and preparation of the results for publication. The resulting monograph is a testament to the combined efforts of more than 50 researchers, supported by numerous students and volunteers whose contribution was essential to the success of the archaeological project.

The first part of the book provides the background to the discovery of the cave and explains its geological and geomorphological setting. This is followed by a detailed account of the archaeological evidence including the sequence of structural modification and episodes of human activity at the cave in prehistoric times. Based on detailed studies of artefacts, augmented by radiocarbon dating of organic materials, the researchers were able to recognize eight consecutive phases of activity at High Pasture Cave. These started early in the Bronze Age, at around 2000 BC, with the deposition of pottery and stone tools outside the cave entrance and in the Bone Chamber, a section of side passage perched above the active streamway that later became a focus for the repeated deposition of materials in succeeding time periods. Following a 500-year hiatus, more-continuous and intense activity recommenced at the cave during the Iron Age, from around 800 BC, when a stone-built walkway with retaining walls and a descending stairwell was built to provide a formal access route into the cave. Later in the Iron Age there were successive structural modifications to the stairwell and walkway as well as the building of a massive enclosure wall around the precinct to the cave entrance, and throughout the Iron Age large quantities of ceramic, stone and metal artefacts,

animal bones, hearth ash and midden material were deposited inside the cave. Blocking-deposits were emplaced in the Bone Chamber in the Late Iron Age, around 100 BC, followed soon afterwards by deliberate back-filling of the stairwell, which closed off access to the underground chambers and signalled the end of ritual activities at the cave.

As this book serves as the main document of record for the archaeological excavations, the bulk of the text is taken up by the results of the analysis of the finds. The description and analysis of the remains of plants and animals that make up the environmental assemblage takes up about 100 pages, while over 200 pages are allocated to descriptions and interpretations of items of material culture. The bulk of these artefacts are typical of those found in Iron Age domestic contexts, including fragments of nearly 400 pottery vessels and over 500 worked stone objects such as hammerstones and fragments of querns. Despite most of the assemblage dating to the Iron Age the collection of iron objects that were recovered from the cave was relatively small and only five items could be identified as weapons such as spearheads and daggers. One of the more fascinating discoveries described in this section is a small, delicate, arched object of finely worked wood that has been identified as the bridge of a stringed musical instrument: most probably a seven-stringed lyre. A specialist in archaeomusicology states that it is by far the earliest example of this type of musical instrument to have been found in Europe, and the authors make the reasonable inference that, because the lyre is universally associated with song, this underscores the importance of oral traditions in the maintenance and transmission of knowledge in a pre-literate society. Overall, the book provides a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the members of an island community more than 2000 years ago, and illuminates their connections with wider Iron Age society across Britain and Europe.

Review by: Andrew Chamberlain.