Building monuments from the forest in the Neolithic (4000-2500 BC)
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Argyll is blessed with many visible signs of our ancient past, in particular the area contains many stone-built chambered cairns and standing stone monuments. These were built by the first farming societies of Scotland. This period of prehistory is known as the Neolithic or New Stone Age and in Scotland this era lasted for over one and a half thousand years (4000-2500 BC or 6000-4500 years ago). The Neolithic in Britain and Ireland is generally recognised as the period when domesticated animals and crops such as cattle, sheep and barley and new technologies such as pottery and stone axes were introduced. The Neolithic is not merely about the spread of new types of animals and technologies, however, but also documents the spread of new ideas about life, death and the world around.

The most visible remains of the Neolithic in Scotland today are monuments for burial and ceremony. In the Earlier Neolithic period (4000-3300 BC) large stone-built chambered cairns were constructed and these can be found throughout Argyll. These were involved in the disposal, display and curation of ancestral remains of dead members of the community. Occasionally, whole skeletons are found in these monuments, but more often scatters of disarticulated bone are found and in well preserved tombs it is clear that human remains were sorted into groups according to body part, age, gender and possibly other categories such as status which we are now less certain of interpreting. Lots of other sites and artefacts of the Neolithic, however, lie buried underground and through careful excavation, much can be learned about this early period of human inhabitation of Scotland.

The chambered cairns and standing stones are an excellent reminder of our Neolithic past and through these monuments we can inhabit the spaces that people built and used over 4500 years ago. However, it is important to remember that the landscape in which these monuments were built would have been radically different to today. It is important to realise that much of the landscape at this time would have been covered with woodland and that despite the
introduction of farming these people were a forest people whose everyday lives were surrounded by the forest. At this time dense forest covered Scotland with species such as oak, elm, hazel, birch covering most of the landscape in differing densities and combinations depending on location, topography and soils amongst other factors. Neolithic people were modifying the forest, creating clearances in the forest with stone axes for cattle and sheep to graze, obtaining firewood for domestic fires and buildings, and hunting and gathering within the woods much like Mesolithic hunter-gatherers had done for millennia prior to the Neolithic. The Neolithic woodland would be unlike any woodland that survives in Scotland today, in places this would have been dense closed-canopy woodland with a range of species such as aurochs (wild cattle), wild boar, fox, lynx, bear, red and roe deer, many of which are extinct or rare in Scotland today (Rackham 1986). This woodland was not just a background to Neolithic lives but an integral part of peoples’ understandings of the world governed through a practical everyday involvement with the woodland.

It’s difficult for us today to imagine what living in woodland is like, but we can get some sense of what it is like to live in a woodland environment from ethnographic accounts of forest peoples. In his classic ethnography of the Bambuti of the Ituri forests of the Congo, Colin Turnbull recounts the occasion when he took his loyal local guide Kenge to the Rwenzori Mountains, the ‘Mountains of the Moon’, on the border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Turnbull describes the fear and incomprehension Kenge experienced encountering the mountain range, as the Bambuti did not have the words in their language or the experiences to deal with these largely treeless landscapes that occurred in the Rwenzori Mountains. They entered the Ishango National Park and started the ascent by car to a viewpoint which gave vistas across Lake Edward and the grasslands around.

“When Kenge topped the rise, he stopped dead. Every smallest sign of mirth suddenly left his face. He opened his mouth, but could say nothing. He moved his head and eyes slowly and unbelievingly. Down below us, on the far side of the hill stretched mile after mile of rolling grasslands, a lush, fresh green, with an occasional shrub or tree standing out like a sentinel into a sky that had suddenly become
brilliantly clear. And beyond the grasslands was Lake Edward – a huge expanse of water disappearing into the distance – a river without banks, without end. It was like nothing Kenge had ever seen before….And then he saw the buffalo, still grazing lazily several miles away, far down below. He turned to me and said, ‘What insects are those?’ At first I hardly understood, then I realized that in the forest vision is so limited that there is no great need to make automatic allowance for distance when judging size. Out here in the plains, Kenge was looking for the first time over apparently unending miles of unfamiliar grasslands, with not a tree worth the name to give him any basis for comparison. The same thing happened later on when I pointed out a boat, in the middle of the lake. It was a large fishing boat with a number of people in it. Kenge at first refused to believe it. He thought it was a floating piece of wood. When I told Kenge that the insects were buffalo, he roared with laughter and told me not to tell such stupid lies. I tried telling him they were possibly as far away as from Epulu to the village of Kopu, beyond Eboyo [places in Bambuti territory]. He began scraping mud off his arms and legs, no longer interested in such fantasies…” (Turnbull 1976: 226-33).

This passage shows the extent to which forest cognition is so radically different to our landscape perception today, and the extent to which the forest has real physical and psychological impacts on how people view and inhabit the landscape.

This is all well and good, but how can we engage with the Neolithic forest through archaeology? As noted above the Neolithic forest is a largely vanished resource and wood by definition decays and disappears over time. There are however ways we can do this. Although this is rarely as an immediate experience as inhabiting a chambered cairn, careful excavation and analysis can reveal much about the forest environment of the Neolithic and the ways in which the forest world was conceptualized.

One of the traditional ways of studying the forested environment of the past is through pollen analysis- taking cores from lakes or bogs and analysing the many layers of pollen that have built up over the millennia (Tipping 1994). This can be quite abstract, however, with diagrams of changing percentages of vegetation the only real way of
interpreting the form of the ancient woodland. A more physical way is through excavation. Tree throws or tree pits, sub-soil features left by naturally removed or humanly cleared trees appear in many archaeological excavations. These have been identified for many decades in excavations, but have often been left unexcavated as they were deemed natural features of little archaeological interest. However, in the last few decades a number have been excavated and shown to date to the Neolithic period and some appear to show the deliberate deposition of Neolithic material culture (pots, stone axes, flint tools, etc). The removal of trees leave hollows in the ground that would form ideal repositories for the disposal of Neolithic remains. This practice is part of a wider Neolithic phenomena of deliberately burying items underground (Evans et al 1999).

Tree throw or tree pit found in excavations in Perhshire. This is defined by two crescents of silt with a cleaner gravel fill in the centre.

The most obvious way of examining the significance of trees and woodland in the Neolithic is probably through studying the ways in which people built monuments and sacred architecture using very large trees and timber and the lengths that people in the Neolithic went to in order to build monuments of timber. This is a less obvious
aspect of Neolithic archaeology in the modern landscape, but in the Neolithic standing timbers and chambers made of wood would have been as common, if not more common, than the stone-built monuments we see today.

Timber monuments is most commonly identified through aerial photography. The timbers of these monuments have long since decayed away, but they leave traces in the subsoil below the modern ploughsoil and these traces can often be seen from the air. The first Neolithic timber monument discovered was Woodhenge near Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain (Gibson 1998). In 1925 a RAF pilot Squadron Leader Insall noted ‘white chalk marks in the centre’ of the banked enclosure. The site was excavated 1926-8 by Maude Cunnington who found that the marks in the soil related to rings of pits in the subsoil that upon excavation were interpreted as having held posts. The site was dubbed Woodhenge as it was thought to be a timber version of the famous stone circle at Stonehenge.

Well before Neolithic, however, people had been building monuments of wood. Excavations 1966 in Stonehenge car park revealed three substantial pits with the shadows of posts clearly visible upon excavation. These were dated to the late 9th and 8th millennium BC, i.e. over 10,000 years ago. These may have been totem poles or some other form of timber monument and were erected by hunter-gatherers some 4000 years before the Neolithic. However, monuments of this type are rare before the Neolithic period and when the Neolithic began there was a real explosion in the number of ceremonial monuments built of timber.

A variety of timber monument traditions were built in the British Neolithic. These included circles of timber posts, standing posts, and burial chambers built of large split timbers. Perhaps on of the most spectacular example found has been Haddenham long barrow southern England (Evans and Hodder 2006). This was partially preserved in the peats of Cambridgeshire and this preservation gave some fascinating detail on the form of Neolithic timber building. This monument was a coffin-like box which held at least 5 people buried inside- 4 adults and 1 child. The majority of the structure was built using one tree, but not any old tree. This was one of the giants of the forest, an oak tree with a trunk diameter of over 1.5m and at
least 300 years old. To cut down this tree it may have taken at least 150 hours to chop down the oak using stone axes. In constructing the chamber nearly all the planks that were split to form the chamber were placed with their heartwood facing inwards and bark towards outside and were reassembled with the base of the tree as the direction of entrance. In this respect the monument would have resembled a giant fallen tree trunk and going inside would have been akin to entering the trunk of a tree. Similar monumental forms as this have been found in Scotland and in other areas across NW Europe, although none as well preserved as this (Noble 2006: Ch.4).

Other Neolithic timber monument traditions included mortuary enclosures, timber circles, lines of standing timbers and a whole variety of other forms. Many early monuments were deliberately burnt down and this practice may have mimicked and used some of the techniques of forest clearance. In the Later Neolithic timber monumentality was taken to extremes with the construction of monuments that covered vast areas and used hundreds of trees to build. One monument like this has became the recent focus of a University of Glasgow Archaeology Department research project. Last summer (2006) a huge Later Neolithic (c. 3000 BC) enclosure was excavated as part of the departments SERF project (http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/serf/).
The Neolithic enclosure at Forteviot. The red dots mark the position of the timber enclosure as identified through aerial photography. The enclosure is around 265m in diameter and has an entrance avenue to the north (top of picture). The smaller circular features are Neolithic ‘henge’ monuments (ceremonial monuments for gathering and feasting), the one inside the timber enclosure has a timber circle around the henge.
This monument was identified by aerial photography in the 1970s and shown to consist of a huge circular enclosure over 250m in diameter (the area of around 7-8 football pitches), defined by over 100 pits. Our excavations targeted the entrance avenue of this enclosure which showed that the pits were the remains of massive postholes which had held timbers, some of which were almost a metre in diameter and may have stood as much as 5-6m high (i.e. whole tree trunks). The entrance avenue was defined originally by 18 massive timber posts. The avenue was only around 4m wide, yet gave access to this huge enclosure. The construction of this monument would have required the clearance of large areas of forest. Enclosures of this type are assumed to be large-scale ceremonial enclosures for very large scale gatherings. Very little in the way of artefacts were found during the excavations, it is clear that the avenue at least was kept very clean. Around and within the enclosure aerial photographs have shown many smaller monuments that can perhaps be compared to the family chapels in a medieval cathedral. Excavations in 2007 and beyond will target some of these additional monuments. More information on this monument can be found on the project website: (http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/serf/2007season/palisadedenclosure/).
One of the postholes of the entrance avenue of the timber enclosure under excavation. This image gives an idea of the scale of this monument.
Conclusions

The Neolithic in Scotland and in Northwest Europe generally was a forest world and this should not be forgotten when studying this period of prehistory. These people were relating with the forest in new ways, clearing the woodland for crops and animals, but they continued to have an important spiritual connection to the woodland as evidenced by the practices of depositing material in tree pits and the construction of elaborate ceremonial enclosures using and mimicking the woodland. The trees and woodland of the Neolithic is present in the archaeological record in a variety of forms and careful excavation and analysis can let us examine what is largely an invisible aspect of this period.

Further reading:


References:


