



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



FROM MACHAIR TO MOUNTAINS: ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY AND EXCAVATION IN SOUTH UIST. Edited by Michael Parker Pearson. Pp. 480, Illus 257. Oxbow Books 2011. Price: £35.00. ISBN 978 1 842174 51 7.

This is the latest volume from SEARCH (Sheffield Environmental and Archaeological Research Campaign in the Hebrides), a project started in 1987 to explore the rich archaeology of the Hebrides. The volume reports on the results of extensive surveys and small-scale excavations that have identified hundreds of new sites on South Uist. It comprises of twenty chapters that cover a wide chronological range of sites from Early Neolithic chambered cairns to post-medieval townships.

The publication is split into three parts. Part 1 (Chapters 2–8) covers extensive survey work carried out on South Uist. Part 2 (Chapters 9–17) provides an account of a series of small-scale excavations, and Part 3 (Chapters 18–19) sets the results of the project within an historical and geographical context. The structure of this volume is logical and individual chapters build upon one another to provide both a broad assessment of the archaeology of South Uist and detailed accounts of the complexity of individual sites. Survey work was carried out within the three distinct ecological zones of South Uist: the grassland machair, the peaty blacklands and the mountains. The surveys demonstrate the wealth of sites identified. The machair is filled with hundreds of settlement mounds, occupied from the Beaker period, four thousand years ago, until a few centuries ago, while the blacklands demonstrate evidence of blackhouses and medieval settlements, lochs containing duns, brochs and crannogs, and the mountains contain the upstanding remains of shielings, Iron Age wheelhouses and Neolithic chambered cairns. The excavations reported are small-scale, with the results of the large set-piece excavations of Cladh Hallan, Dun Vulcan, Bornais, Cille Pheadair and Airigh Mhuillin to be published in future monographs. The nature of the excavations reported does make this section of the volume read rather piecemeal and lacking in focus. However, the uniqueness of sites investigated, and the quality of the archaeological work undertaken, makes up for any shortfall in focus.

Chapter 19 provides a detailed and thought-provoking account of the ethnohistory of Hebridean agriculture. What strikes me upon reading this account is not only the breadth and quality of evidence of agricultural practices from the Hebrides, but the almost total absence of evidence presented for fishing. This is perhaps an unfair comment for a chapter on agriculture, but it does strike me that in a book that focuses upon an island, that the role of fishing is not discussed in more detail, even if only to demonstrate that fishing played a minor role in the lives of past islanders. Related to this point is that, in a volume that explores the archaeology of an island landscape, little attention is actually

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given to Uist as an island. Rather than engaging with the growing body of work on island archaeology, the approach adopted in this volume could equally have been applied to a land-locked mainland landscape.

This volume deserves wide readership. It helps define a continuing research agenda for South Uist, thus raising the archaeological profile of these islands. The strength of this book is that, by bringing together the results of survey and excavation, it successfully provides a detailed account and assessment of the archaeology of South Uist which will be invaluable for future researchers.

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