Feats of Clay: Bronze Age Metalworking around the Moray Firth

In 2008 and 2009 excavations in advance of house building at Bellfield Farm, North Kessock, uncovered Bronze and Iron Age pits and structures. In one of the pits, clay moulds fragments were identified by Trevor Cowie of the National Museums of Scotland. They were used to make late Bronze Age socketed axeheads and spearheads, as well as a variety of tools including gouges, knives awls and sickles. This was a significant find: the first evidence for the manufacture of sickles from Scotland (of which there are only three provenanced examples, one from Dores near Inverness), and evidence of metalworking in the period of which there are few other sites.

Trevor approached Susan Kruse of ARCH and the North Kessock and District Local History Society about creating a project to explore the objects and their context. The local history society saw this as a valuable way to inform and involve people in understanding about the heritage on their doorstep: few knew that they had a nationally important site on their doorstep. Trevor saw this as a way of getting some detailed analysis of the moulds which otherwise would probably not have been part of the post-excavation analysis of the developer funded excavations. Susan saw it as a way to involve local communities in a variety of ways.

A multi-facetted project was set up, with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Highland Council ward discretionary fund, and STEMnet:

* An overview background course on Bronze Age in the Highlands was run by ARCH to provide some context. Trevor came up to do a guest lecture as well.
* A module to investigate clay sources followed the course. Participants drew on local knowledge of sources of clay as well as archive and published accounts. Interestingly the local knowledge provided the best leads. Clay was sampled from a number of locations.
* Orlene McIlfatrick, a potter and archaeologist, took the clay samples and made them into briquettes. These were then analysed by Daniel Sahlén, specialist in scientific analysis, who created thin sections to attempt to match them to the mould and daub fragments from the excavations. A surprising finding was that different clay sources were used for moulds and daub. A likely local source was identified for the moulds.
* An experimental crafting day was organised, with pottery workshops by Orlene and experimental casting of a sickle by Neil Burridge. This was well attended and very informative, providing a number of insights.
* In order to put the objects in context, a new course was run by Susan to show how to compile a corpus of material. All Bronze Age metalwork from the Moray Firth area and environs was catalogued and where possible photographed. The number of objects discovered exceeded expectations.
* A booklet was written by Graham Clark of the local society, Susan and Trevor, which included the corpus of material as well as overviews of the project and an assessment of the significance of the finds. This is available from the local society. A display of the project was also made and has toured at a number of local events.

Altogether the project showed the value of creating artefact biographies: taking the moulds as an example it looked at local production issues, the range of objects made, the use of the objects, and then their final deposition. The catalogue is a valuable reference work, with details available on the local HER where they will inform future planning decisions. The project is also a good example of involving academics, museums, members of the community and schools, producing important new work as well as alerting local people to the importance of a local site.

The work also provided key evidence for this period in the Highlands and elsewhere. It concluded that similar small scale production sites may well be more common in the period, since the evidence is very ephemeral. It provided insights into the range of artefacts a late Bronze Age / early Iron local smith would have made, even where few artefacts survive. The site also shows the survival of late Bronze Age metalworking tradition into what is generally thought of as the early Iron Age, since the mould fragments were found in pits associated with early Iron Age houses. This correlates with the revised dating of Sompting type axeheads into the period 800-600BC (Knight XXX)

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