

RURALIA XIII CONFERENCE: STIRLING 2019

Seasonal Settlements in the Medieval and Early Modern Countryside

This September, Scotland is hosting the Ruralia XIII conference at the University of Stirling. Ruralia is an international association for the archaeology of medieval and post-medieval settlement and rural life. Discussions and research at the conference have the potential to further unlock the secrets of Scotland's seasonal settlements.

Today we are very aware of the impact of our actions on the environment. This was also true of the medieval period. If you put too many animals on some pasture you exhausted the grasses and flocks or herds suffered too. To obtain access to grazing with an increasing population in the late medieval period the rural community had to look at higher and less accessible ground. In mountainous areas like the Highlands of Scotland, they could only benefit from the grazing at the right time of year when the grasses grow – in late spring and summer.

In many areas of highland and upland Scotland, good farm land was limited to small valley bottom or coastal fields. Crops could not be rotated to allow some of the fields to be put to pasture as they were needed for vital crops such as barley and oats. Few settlements had the luxury of more than one field. This made summer grazing even more important as domestic animals had to be removed from the farmland in spring once it had been sown. This process of moving seasonally is known as 'transhumance' and involved the whole farming community.



Fig 1 Coastal fields at North Town, Harris, with the rough grazing on the hills beyond. ©HES DP 110522

The removal of the animals from the animals in this way was not just a negative practice but a positive process. To manage the herds and flocks before the days of enclosed land that we have today, they had to be accompanied by shepherds and cowherds who stayed with them at all time. The cows and ewes taken out onto the moor would produce calves and lambs. Milk could be preserved by making cheese, which was used to help pay the rent as well as providing staple food.

The herdsmen were made up by the families of the village tenants, who built shelters or huts known as shiels or airigh (Gaelic), giving a name to the practice 'shieling'. The huts are what archaeologists find when prospecting for sites in the uplands - the most visible remains of a lost practice. They stand out from the surrounding vegetation in moorland because the ruined hut is often highlighted green by the rich grass that surrounds it. Even after 200 or more years the dressing of manure around the huts still enriches the soil.



Fig 2 Shielling huts highlighted by green grass at Dun Othail, Lewis. ©HES DP111247

Excavations in the Highlands on the slopes of Ben Lawers by Glasgow University have found evidence of late medieval occupation of shieling huts as well as later occupation in the 17th and 18th centuries. Unusually at sites like this they produced a wide range of artefacts and also environmental evidence for these seasonal activities.



Fig 3 View of shieling huts under excavations at Meall Greigh, Northlochtayside showing the mountainous location. © Piers Dixon

The huts were built in groups near to a source of water and usually set on better drained ground close to the grazing that they wished to use. Most were built with walls of turf and only used wood for the superstructure, but stone could also be used as a base for the turf or to line the internal walls.



Fig 4 Excavation at Meall Greigh, Northlochtayside, showing turf and stone walls. © Piers Dixon

They were small often no more than about 2m wide internally and just high enough to stand in the middle with a stone hearth for a fire and space for beds of heather on the floor. Utensils were few and often of wood or leather rather than metal and pottery vessels not very common either, while stones used as cheese presses have also been recovered.

Seasonal settlements are less well researched than permanent ones. Over 7000 shieling sites have been discovered across Scotland. Yet few have been excavated and fewer dated to the later medieval period as opposed to the more recent past. Indeed only a handful have been excavated since the turn of the 20th century when antiquarians first took an interest in exploring these strange sites, and modern scientific methods have only just begun to be applied to them.

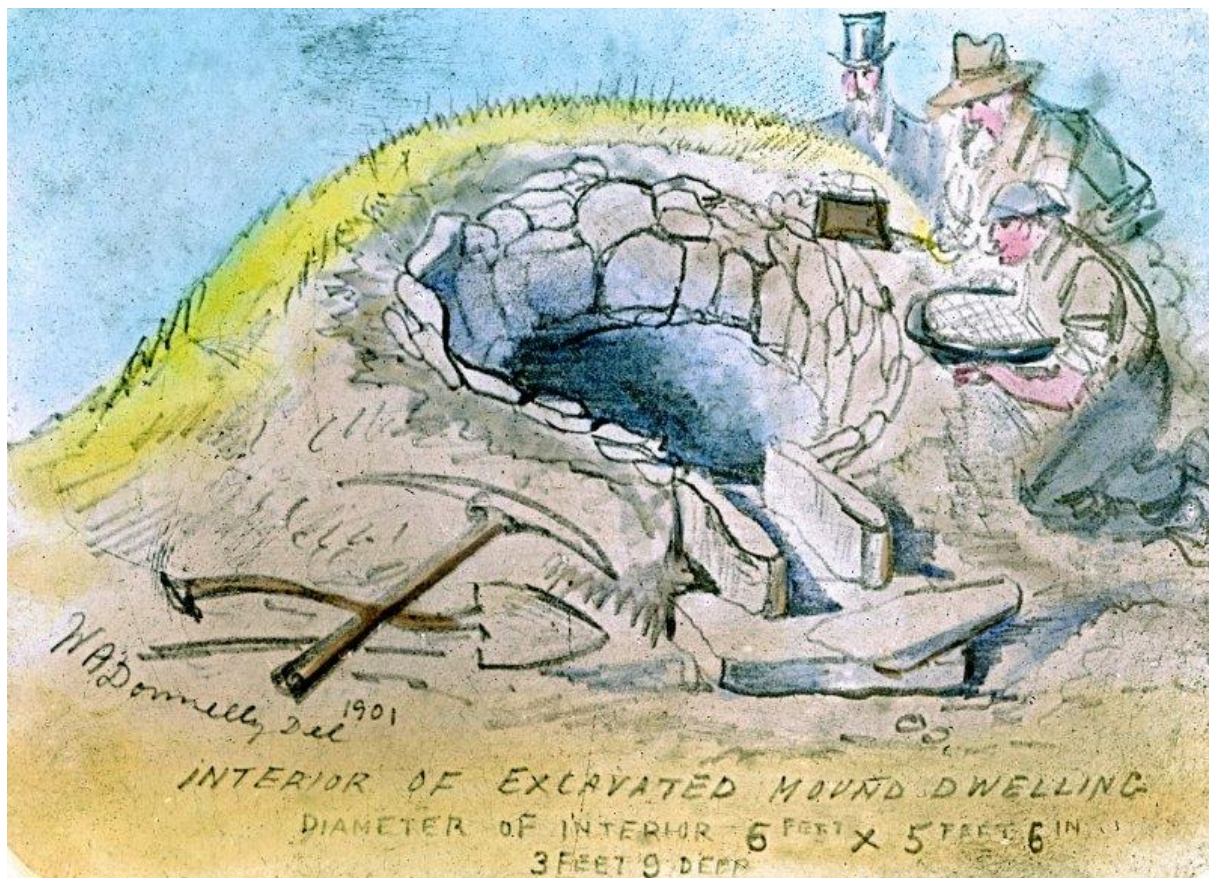


Fig 5 Painting by W A Donnelly of late 19th century excavation of a shieling hut at Auchengaich Burn, Argyll and Bute. ©HES SC1331832