

Ooodles of archaeological finds are on their way back to islands

By Katie Macleod

‘Udal’ was an extraordinary excavation that lasted 30 years, an ongoing archaeological activity led by Cambridge historian Iain Crawford that remained in the minds of the North Uist community long after it ended in 1994. The question on everyone’s lips was: Where did the artefacts disappear to?

“I was used to the dig going on when I was young,” remembers North Uist Councillor Uisdean Robertson, who has been closely involved in the resurrection of the Udal collection. “I was conscious of it happening, but I wish I had taken a bigger interest in it, of course.”

The issue “kept being raised in meetings in North Uist,” he says. “Where had all this gone? There were all kinds of stories, rumours of it being in a shed in Cambridge, but the bottom line was we didn’t know.”

Fifty years after the dig began, the Udal collection has again come to light and, as Museum nan Eilean now has legal title through Treasure Trove, is to be returned to the region at a time when the site is being recognised as one of the most significant of its kind in Europe – and one of the most important in the whole of the UK.

“The specific value of the Udal site is its 5000 years of continuous occupation,” Uisdean explains, noting that the timeframe runs from the Neolithic to Post-Medieval age. “That’s its huge selling point, which is unusual in European terms. From that you can glean a huge amount of information.”

In October the Comhairle made an official request to the Scottish Archaeological Finds Allocations Panel (a specialist group which gives advice on whether historical finds should be acquired on behalf of the nation for allocation to a Scottish museum), asking that the Udal artefacts be returned. Last month it was announced that the request had been successful, and the extensive collection is now the responsibility of Museum nan Eilean.

“It’s the biggest project of its kind ever undertaken in the UK,” says the Comhairle’s Regional Archaeologist, Deborah Anderson, who has been managing the post-excavation assessment for the past three years. Working with Lead Researcher Beverley Ballin Smith, she has combed through 40 cubic metres of archaeological material and at least 20,000 small finds – items such as bones and hair pins – that were unearthed at the site in Grenitote, North Uist.

Many of these artefacts were housed for years in Iain Crawford’s basement in Cambridge - stored in boxes, biscuit tins, and tea chests - before being passed on to Beverley when he was unable to continue working on the project.

“Once we got in we realised it was a massive, unwieldy project,” says Deborah. Beverley echoed these sentiments in a recent lecture at the Society for Antiquaries in London, describing the assessment as “a major job” where everything was “completely unknown”. Partly because of the scale of the task, they have been busy working on a strategy that will aid in moving the project forward.

Now that the post-excavation assessment has been completed, Deborah and her team are in the second phase of detailed assessment. They are waiting to learn if they will receive funding from Historic Scotland for this, which will inform the next phase of work: the analysis itself. It’s a process which could take up to eight years, including final publication of the findings.

It’s an important aspect of the project. Beverley feels that “by achieving publication, something Iain unfortunately could not do, we would bring closure and satisfaction to the family, the local community of North Uist, and to the wider archaeological world.”

The next step in the story is to carbon-date the artefactual and environmental evidence from the site on the Grenitote peninsula, testing the 5000-year continuous sequence so dates can be confirmed for the finds. “Once we understand how the site was formed, we can create links between that and the dating,” explains Deborah.

“What’s interesting is the environmental evidence,” she continues. “Over these 5000 years you will be able to see the changing climate;



you can see how people in the past adapted to climate change, and that can inform models presently. Archaeology shows that past communities adapted to a changing climate, changing social structures and the development of ideas and new technology, and we will be able to demonstrate that from the evidence found at Udal.”

The detail – particularly environmental - that can be derived from Udal is nothing short of amazing. A preserved Petryl, a bird now only found in the South Atlantic, was found at the site, as were the remains of a Great Auk, the last of which was killed in St Kilda in the 19th century.

Over 50 human remains were also unearthed, and can give an insight into a way of life long gone. “What can we tell from these human remains?” asks Deborah. “Were they from this area or were they moving in? What was their diet? What sort of disease or ailments did they suffer from?”

“It’s not simply archaeology, but looking at the links between archaeology and the environment. The overlap between climatology, ecology, and archaeology – that’s where the interesting questions are.” Eventually, it is hoped that a resource centre will be located in North Uist, offering opportunities for both the public and academics, with specific links to environmental research.

The Udal is of enormous significance for archaeology more generally. There has been wide academic interest in the project, and Deborah is developing a consortium of universities around the Europe who would be able to provide specialist knowledge. As she points out, “The whole archaeological community are keeping an eye on it. Once the dating sequence is established at Udal, other archaeological finds can be dated.”

For those currently resident in North Uist, who remember helping Crawford shovel sand from the dunes, there is great pride in their historical environment. A recent HIE-sponsored survey revealed that 97% of locals wanted the Udal finds to return to the community, and with the Comhairle’s successful bid, these hopes are being realised.

After decades where little information was available, last year saw a selection of artefacts were displayed in Lochmaddy. In 2011 talks were held by archaeologists – including Deborah and Beverley – to explain their work and the Udal artefacts; and workshops were held



with students at Carinish and Lochmaddy Primary Schools.

A community Steering Group has also been set up in North Uist, including members of the local grazings committees and townships. “The community is driving the project – that’s what makes the project so interesting. The entire islands want it. It is community archaeology at its finest,” says Deborah.

“The Western Isles has one of the most visible archaeological landscapes in the whole of the UK.

Local communities want to do something with the assets they have, interpret them, and promote them, and as a council we support our local communities to do that.”

With 15,000 recorded archaeological sites in the Western Isles, it’s no surprise that archaeology visits to the islands contribute millions to the local tourist economy every year. The resurrection of the Udal collection could give it an even higher profile, as an upcoming workshop at the Scottish Parliament on the Udal and archaeology’s links to wider environmental research attests.

“There is a general interest in it from the Butt to Barra,” says Uisdean of the islands’ archaeological heritage. “The community is hugely behind it; we have something special here.”



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