

Investigating the Burnt Mounds of Shetland.

By Lauren Doughton.

As part of my ongoing PhD research for the University of Manchester I have been studying the burnt mounds of Shetland for the last three years. While we may never know exactly what these enigmatic mounds were really used for, I have been exploring the various possibilities that they present in order to try and understand how burnt mounds fit in with the wider aspects of prehistoric life in the islands.

To do this I have carried out field surveys at a number of sites looking at the types of locations the mounds are found in. So far these surveys have raised a number of questions. Burnt mounds are often located in boggy, inhospitable ground, yet they are never far away from other sites of a similar period. What was the relationship between the mounds and these sites, and what can this tell us about what people thought about the types of activities that were carried out at them?

What about the water that is used in them? Burnt mounds can be found in numerous locations. Some, like Cruester, are located close to the coast, but others are located further inland, next to lochs, or close to a burn. Could this varying relationship with water tell us something about the different types of activity carried out at these mounds?

Similarly, while some mounds are very large, others are very small indeed. Some, such as Cruester and Tangwick, contain large complex structures, while others only contain a small tank. Occasionally they contain nothing at all. The mounds themselves are often horse-shoe shaped, but some of them are round and conical, or elongated. In some cases they can even be found banked up against nearby rock outcrops. Does this mean that each of these differences in shape and structure might also represent differences in use and status at each of these sites?

Experimental Firings.

There are a number of ideas about what burnt mounds could have been used for, including cooking, textile production, boat building, skin preparation and brewing. This summer I intend to explore some of these in a series of experimental firings at the reconstructed hearth and tank in Bressay. These experiments are designed to explore whether it would be possible to carry out these activities at a burnt mound, and what sort of structures, locations and water sources would have been needed to do them.

Some of the activities planned are:

- Steam Bending – wood was a precious resource in prehistoric Shetland. Is it possible to use the steam from heating the water to bend pieces of wood, or straighten those which would otherwise have been unusable?
- Skin preparation – could this smelly and unpleasant activity be the reason that burnt mounds are located on the edges of settlement sites?
- Cooking – was the tank a place for boiling food? Would dry roasting be a possible application for sites with no obvious water source
- Wool washing and dying.
- Textile fulling.
- Brewing – with Merry and Graham Dineley. – Experts in prehistoric ale making Merryn (an archaeologist) and Graham (a craft brewer), have been investigating ancient brewing techniques for some years. Between them they will demonstrate hot rock mashing – Bronze Age style, with the hope of creating some Bronze Age ale as the outcome!

If you have any ideas about what burnt mounds might have been used for, or want any more information about my research and the activities I have planned please contact me at lauren.doughton@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk