



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE 27 OCTOBER 2010

## THE UDAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE – NORTH UIST

Report by Director for Social and Community Services

**PURPOSE OF REPORT** To advise the Committee of the receipt of an initial one year grant from Historic Scotland to enable the post-excavation analysis and dissemination of information from the excavations at the Udal, North Uist.

### COMPETENCE

- 1.1 There are no legal, financial or other constraints to the recommendations being implemented.

### SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Udal, in North Uist is one of the most important archaeological sites not only in the Western Isles but also in the United Kingdom. It has a unique chronological depth which spans the Neolithic (3000BC) to the twentieth Century, 5000 years of continuous occupation and exploitation.
- 2.2 A grant of circa £100,000 has been made available to the Comhairle from Historic Scotland - the exact amount will be determined by the project design. The Comhairle will sponsor University Fellowship posts through the payment of a grant to a University to produce an assessment and further recommendations from the work carried out by Iain Crawford, who undertook excavation works on the Udal, North Uist, between 1963 and 1995. The Lead researcher will be contracted by Historic Scotland. The project will be managed by the Comhairle Archaeologist.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle:**
- (a) **note the Report; and**
  - (b) **agree that a further Report on the future development and resourcing of the project will be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.**

**Appendix 1** The sequence of events, remains and objects at Udal.

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**1. Background Papers:** None

## **INTRODUCTION**

- 4.1 The Comhairle's Archaeology Service has a statutory responsibility for archaeology within the Scottish Planning Policy 2010 and Planning Advice Note 42 (advice on the handling of archaeological matters within the planning process). The service exercises that responsibility and wider community advice and guidance in all works pertaining to the management, conservation, preservation, research and interpretation of the historic environment of the Western Isles.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE UDAL**

- 5.1 The Udal archaeological landscape is unique in the Western Isles, Scotland and perhaps anywhere else in the world. There are not many places which can boast a complete sequence of occupation from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Viking, Medieval, Post Medieval and up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- 5.2 Iain Crawford began excavating the Udal peninsula between 1963 and 1995. During that time he discovered a huge and highly significant landscape of domestic occupation, funerary and ritual behaviour dating from around 3000BC to the modern. He is now unable to carry out any work on the analysis of the material and has made the archaeological archive accessible for the first time since the excavations took place.
- 5.3 A grant of circa £100,000 has been made available to the Comhairle from Historic Scotland, to carry out post-excavation work on this significant site. The Comhairle will sponsor University Fellowship posts through the payment of a grant to a University to produce an assessment and further recommendations from the work carried out by Iain Crawford on the Udal, North Uist. The Lead researcher would be contracted by Historic Scotland.

## **PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

- 6.1 The Comhairle Archaeologist will oversee the project's day to day operation. Responsibilities include preparation of the project design (with lead researcher), project planning, identification of risks, monitoring of costs and timetable, negotiating variations, preparation of highlight reports and maintenance of an issue log (change of project design). The Project Manager ensures that the project produces the work agreed in the project design, provides evidence on which project assurance is based and drafts the end of project report including the identification of future funding bids and the drafting of applications. This role contributes approximately £10,000 (ten thousand pounds) in kind to the project funding.
- 6.2 Delivery of product – Year 1
- Post – Excavation assessment – *Lead Researcher*
  - Digitisation of archive – *Lead Researcher*
  - Fully operational website – *Lead Researcher and Comhairle Archaeologist*
  - Funding secured for further assessment – *Lead Researcher and Comhairle Archaeologist*
  - Community engagement - *Lead Researcher and Comhairle Archaeologist*
  - Resource accounting - *Comhairle Archaeologist*
  - Budget management - *Comhairle Archaeologist*

## **BENEFITS**

- 7.1 Post – Excavation is one of the most significant stages of any archaeological investigation and for the understanding of the Historic Environment.

## The benefits

- Include the preparation, quantification, cataloguing and preliminary assessment of all the material from the site and the records generated through excavation.
- Ensure that information from the excavations are made publically accessible for research over the web.
- Assess the nature of the archive so that further analysis at a later date can take place, e.g. a number of PhDs will be possible once the assessment is carried out, and this will encourage further research and publications into the archaeology of the Western Isles.
- Enable the local community to understand and have a role in managing their archaeological heritage

## **FUTURE FUNDING REQUIREMENTS**

- 8.1 Post Excavation Assessment and analysis are time consuming pieces of work and it takes many years to produce a final product such as a report, but without this first stage of assessment no further work on the Udal is possible.
- 8.2 Future funding needs to be sourced from major funders such as Historic Scotland, Heritage Lottery Fund and Charitable Trusts to:
  - Continue the post-excavation work to report stage.
  - Increase community involvement.

## **CONCLUSION**

- 9.1 Historic and archaeological sites are tangible, physical links with the past and constitute an important local resource. If effectively managed, archaeological sites can deliver considerable community benefits. On the basis of their environmental, educational, cultural, recreational and economic value, the interpretation, protection and management of archaeological remains presents a strong opportunity for sustainable development.
- 9.2 The Udal presents a complete phase of occupation dating from the Neolithic through to the Post Medieval and is therefore atypical and highly significant. This sequence of events, remains and objects can give us a complete picture of occupation and as a result other sites in the Western Isles can be given a more accurate date. This is the project that archaeologists working in the Western Isles have been waiting for, for over 40 years. The importance of this site cannot be articulated enough. See Appendix 1 for a summarised timeline of occupation.
- 9.3 The project has the backing of the Culture Minister, Fiona Hyslop who has written to the Convenor.

## THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS, REMAINS AND OBJECTS AT UDAL

- 1 Evidence from the earliest period was discovered when a freak perihelion tide played havoc in the Western Isles in 1974. The Udal and a mound close to the shore was scoured to reveal deep archaeological layers.
- 2 The earliest Neolithic layers consisted of a line of stones with a large upright nicknamed the Great Auk stone because of its resemblance to the bird and a deep shaft containing quartz pebbles and capped by a massive whale vertebrae.
- 3 The later Neolithic layers consisted of houses similar to Skara Brae in Orkney and a house from an even earlier period, which included a working area with the lumps of clay still waiting there for the potter to work with. This period was pre or proto machair.
- 4 The first archaeological horizon to have been formed on the machair was the Early Bronze Age or the Beaker period. This is the most enigmatic of sites consisting of about 70 pits which have no obvious function. They appear to have been cut and then immediately backfilled with turf and there are also a number of giant post holes and a large standing stone.
- 5 Later phases of the Bronze Age contained a cairn with a very fine skeleton, a broken standing stone, a small cist burial within a heel shaped barrow containing a double burial of a human being and a deer.
- 6 Iron Age remains consisted of a number of wheelhouses and a souterrain which is taken to be dated from the early Iron Age as there was little slag and metal work found, but a certain amount of painted pottery and five painted pebbles, which have previously in other areas such as Orkney been considered Pictish, but in this context they were certainly Iron Age.
- 7 In close proximity to these remains were also cremation platforms made from stone and up to 2m wide on which there were deposits of cremated human and animal bone. These platforms were on the edge and in an Iron Age arable field system.
- 8 Above these platforms was the jelly baby settlement (so called as it resembles the jelly baby sweet). This type of settlement dates from around AD300/400 to the coming of the Vikings in AD 800. These jelly baby houses were located below the following phase of Viking settlement.
- 9 The evidence for Viking occupation appears as a stripy effect in the sand. The Viking houses were built from turf, a tradition which they probably brought from their homeland, but were totally unsuitable for the machair environment. Viking pottery of a distinctive form which looks like a pizza base, probably for baking bread, was discovered at the site - now called Udal Platter Ware. This type of pottery has since been discovered on numerous sites in the islands. The other types of objects from this period include beautifully ornate bone combs and pins and dress accessories, of a quality unknown in settlement context.
- 10 A rectangular longhouse building, which survived up to gable height, was one of the surprising discoveries during the excavation. This longhouse bridged the little known gap of knowledge between the Vikings and the Later Medieval period and was dated to around AD1200 to 1250.
- 11 The Udal was a tacksman's township during the Later Medieval period. The village consisted of 5 mounds marking the five houses of the village. One of them was Tigh Mor where the tacksman lived, the others were presumably for servants. The last reference for this village is in 1685 which is probably close to the final year of occupation as in 1690 the Harris Estate papers mention a sandblow which caused widespread devastation. The village was then moved to Grenitote. During the excavation 15 metres of accumulated sandblow was measured over the top of this village.
- 12 There were further shieling remains and kelp kilns dating from the 18/19<sup>th</sup> centuries recorded and a sawpit, for sawing up boat wrecks from the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, but never again was there to be permanent occupation on this piece of machair.