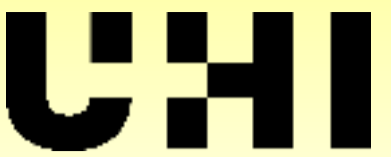


Breaking and Burying: Revealing the Social Practices Behind Two Iron Age Pottery Spreads



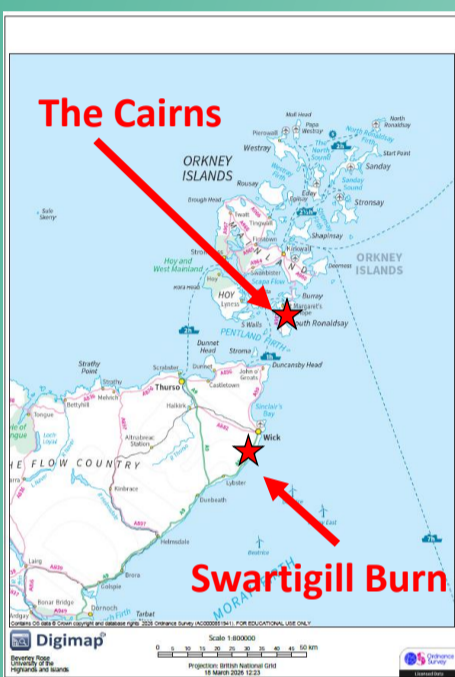
Bev Rose, MLitt student, University of the Highlands and Islands, Archaeology Institute

Background

- How pottery gets to its location is underinvestigated (PCRG, 2010)
- Structured deposition: but by what? (Richards & Thomas, 1984)
- Fragments are active objects in their own right (Chapman, 2000)
- Fragments create new assemblages (Sörman et al., 2024)
- Pieces removed and kept enable people to be part of an assemblage (Harris, 2018)
- Potspreads selected from sites in Orkney & Caithness

Methods

- Sherd catalogue
- Fabric identification & refitting
- Spatial analysis: GIS & photographs



Swartigill Burn



(Aerial image, Bobby Friel. Site plan, Barton & Brend, 2024)

The Site and the Pottery

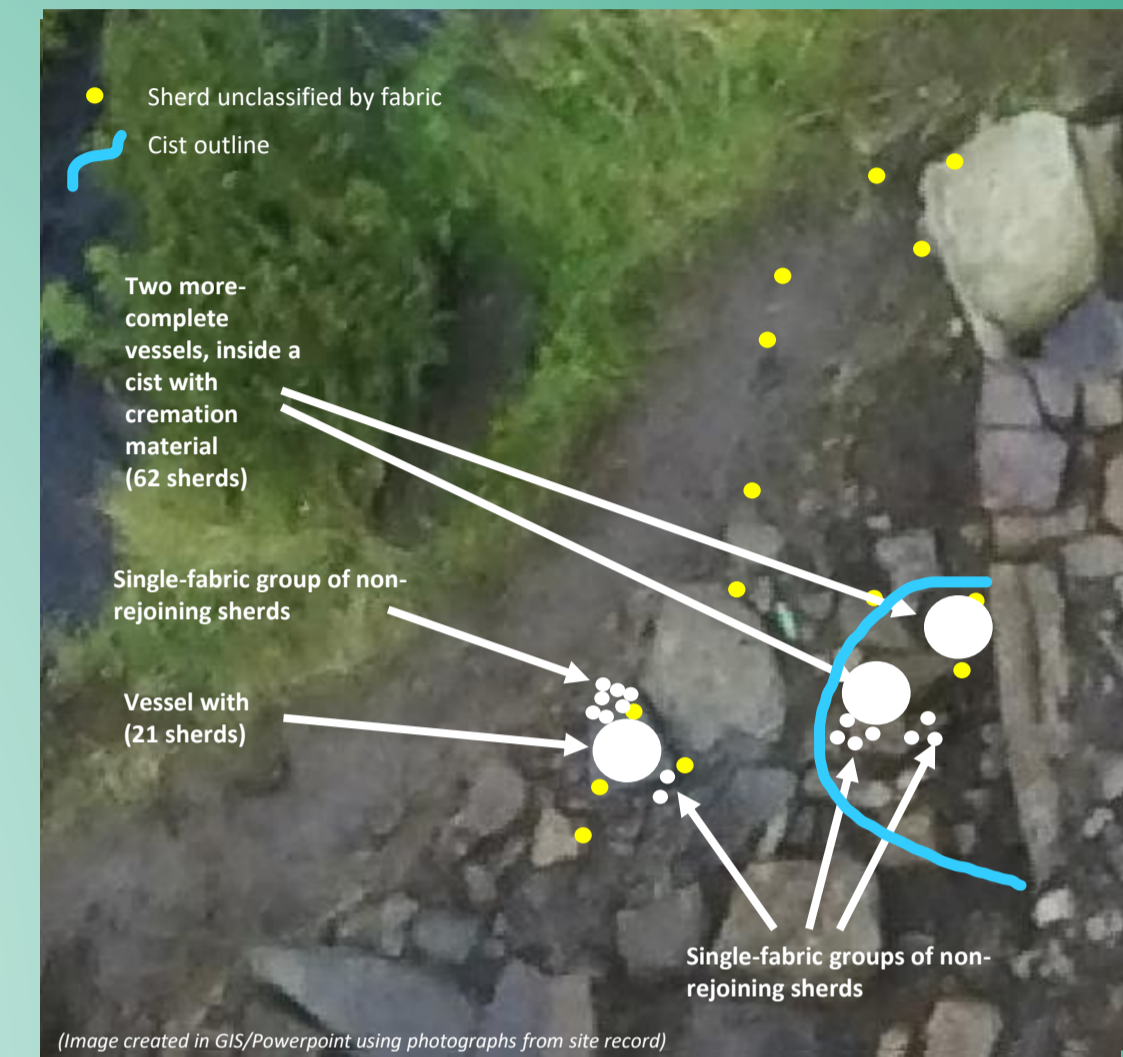
- Early and Middle Iron Age settlement, but not a broch
- Pottery deposited during decommissioning of StrF at end of Early Iron Age (late 3rd BC)

Results and Interpretations

- Seven vessels: all minimally abraded, i.e. recently broken
- Vessels' sherds found in discrete locations (see image, right)
- Unclassified sherds were more abraded and scattered

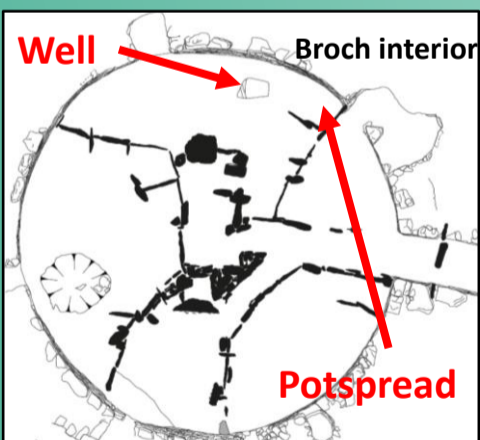
Three distinct types of deposition:

- Abraded, scattered sherds possibly part of midden backfill material
- Whole pots with cremation material
- Small groups of sherds from vessels freshly-broken elsewhere



(Image created in GIS/Powerpoint using photographs from site record)

The Cairns



(The Cairns broch aerial image, Bobby Friel. Other images from The Cairns site record)

The Site and the Pottery

- Iron Age settlement centred on a broch
- Pottery deposited when broch decommissioned: end of Middle Iron Age (early 3rd AD)
- Decommissioning included older female jawbone within hollowed whalebone vertebra
- Potspread overlain by large slab (see image, right)
- Initial thoughts: slab was used to crush one or two upturned pots in-situ

Results and Interpretations

- Nine vessels: varied abrasion levels, under and outwith the slab
- Some broken here, others deposited & kept elsewhere first
- Some sherds stacked around the slab: same location as broken stone lamp & tools
- Fresh broken rims absent, abraded (sometimes decorated) rims present

More complex than expected:

- Abraded sherds collected here
- Unabraded vessels broken in-situ (perhaps by the slab)
- Fresh-broken sherds repositioned around the slab
- Other broken artefacts deposited above these

Incised cordoned rim sherd



Stacked sherds outwith the slab



Discussion

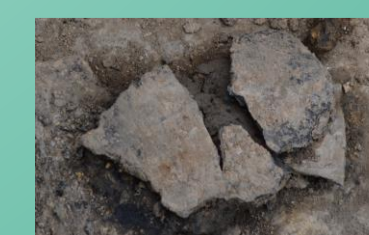
- **Structured deposits** bearing aspects of ritual, habit, and utility
- Ceramic material permits practices of **fragmentation & assemblage**: easy to break, creating durable fragments
- Fragments connect people, places, objects, events
- Sherds reiterating links to ancestral dwellings and people
- Single-fabric groups of non-rejoining sherds: perhaps a few sherds from fresh-broken pots were a means for households to contribute to decommissioning StrF at Swartigill
- Absent and present rims: perhaps rims were exchanged. Previously broken abraded ones being "given" to the closed broch, and newly broken ones removed and kept
- Charred grains suggest cooking vessels: their absence from daily life would cause their broken fragments within the buildings to be remembered
- Abraded sherds and freshly broken vessels deliberately used to contribute to new assemblages i.e. closed buildings
- Fragmentation events helped strengthen Iron Age communities at moments of social change.

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