Upper Pasture Project – update on progress and future priorities

This project started out with no preconceived set-in-stone ideas of what the structure's dating might be, though one possibility – given its earthwork from and size – was that it would prove to be an early medieval shieling. Such sites do not produce ceramics and there was no expectation of finding any artefacts at all. However, it was hoped that some charcoal might be recovered from which a secure date could be obtained. It was equally accepted that we might find nothing at all and that we would not be able to interpret the structure with any certainty.

We were on site for eleven days in all and achieved a good deal, despite what the heavens threw at us. It is time to reflect on what we have achieved and to consider where we go from here.

Where are we at?

1. The first and most fundamental point to make is that it has been by no means a simple site to work on and to interpret. It has been a challenge, archaeologically.

2. We have a rectangular building with a possible threshold stone on the south-east elevation, with walls made of dry stone construction. It was built directly onto buried limestone pavement and had a floor laid on top composed of compacted clay. There has been a considerable amount of slippage of walling slabs into the building, though the line of the walls is clear as are three of the corners. The walls survive to a maximum height of about 700mm, though on the eastern elevation only large base slabs are still in place.

3. Excavation of the site was run as two trenches with a narrow baulk between them but, as luck had it, the baulk was hiding what may be a key feature – a possible internal dividing wall – so part of this was removed on the last day.

4. The first dating evidence to come out of the trenches was a mass burial with the remains of thirteen lambs buried in the early 1980s. The initial thought was that this may have compromised the archaeological integrity of the site ... but happily not so.

5. Over the dig a sizeable assemblage of chert lithics was recovered, with two pieces of flint. At the time of writing, 57 have been logged, mainly waste material from knapping but with several cores and two blades. Tentative examination of the lithics suggests they may be Early Neolithic rather than Mesolithic. The vast majority were found among the slabs that had slipped from the walls and only two were sitting on the floor.

6. As the floor surface was identified and cleaned off samples of charcoal were found impressed into the clay – 16 samples have so far been logged, of which 7 have so far been identified as particular species (ash, hazel, alder, hawthorn-type). Five samples are suitable for AMS radiocarbon dating, but others still await examination.

7. Within Upper Pasture five burial mounds were tentatively identified by field walking this week – such mounds could either be Neolithic or Bronze Age – as well as a hut circle, several banked enclosures and a possible D-shaped enclosure.

8. A part-buried piece of sandstone (none occurs naturally in the general area) was revealed within the flooring material and it looks to have been subjected to excessive heat. It was excavated yesterday but showed no clear signs of having been part of a hearth.

Ramifications

The findings so far raise a number of critical issues.

1. Two (possibly three) charcoal samples are being sent off for AMS radiocarbon dating. There is no guarantee that sensible dates will be obtained. If the dates do make sense, they could either put the building in the early medieval period or in the Neolithic, or indeed anywhere in between. Whichever is the case, this will be a building of great importance in the archaeology of this part of the Yorkshire Dales as there are so few firmly dated pre-modern buildings of this type. However, if it proves to be prehistoric, it will be of exceptional and ground-breaking significance, such that the committee are desperately trying not to think of this possible outcome. In the same area, in 1936, a female burial was found within a limestone pavement gryke, dated to the Neolithic, and unrelated to that was a Neolithic hand axe, while pollen found not too far away proved Neolithic activity in this area, so a contemporary date is not out of the question.

2. The distribution of lithics within the building presents a problem, though. Only two were found on the floor. All the rest were within wall tumble. Does this mean they cannot be contemporary with the building's occupation? If they are contemporary, why are they mostly within the tumble? Two possibilities that cannot be discounted at the moment are that whoever built it cut turves nearby to stuff into wall cervices as an insulator and these happened to contain lithics (most are very small); and/or that the building was roofed with turves that happened to contain lithics. However, a few pieces – cores – are too large for this. Also, no one has any idea of exactly what a turf roof was like in detail in England. There is simply no archaeological or documentary evidence to confirm how thick the individual turves were.

3. If the dates prove not to be Neolithic, we would then have to explain the concentration of lithics on this site. This would lead to the logical conclusion that there is an as yet unidentified Neolithic site in the immediate vicinity.

4. Recent work in North Craven has suggested that there is a close correlation between the existence of early archaeological sites and the presence of a type of wind-blown post-glacial deposits called loess, which is easily worked, well-drained and non-acidic and thus favoured by farming communities in the past (and by rabbits today). Two small pits dug a few metres from the building confirmed the presence of deep deposits of what looks very much like loess. This, too, awaits examination.

5. As stated earlier, the walls appear to have been built with a single, inner skin with the outer side having been banked with stone of varying sizes. At the moment this is mere supposition. Staying with walls, we do not yet know the relationship between the base of the walls and the surrounding bedrock.

6. We believe that there may have been a doorway where the largest flat stone slab lies firmly embedded, on the south-east elevation – again this is hypothesis.

Future strategy

Given all the above, it is clear that much more work is required to fully understand and deconstruct this site. We cannot and will not shut the site down with so many questions unanswered. Therefore ...

1. Phase 1 of the excavation work ended yesterday, having tied up a number of obvious loose ends, and the site is being temporarily closed down but left open protected by electric fencing provided and erected by the landowner, Natural England.

2. Phase 2 will commence when (if!) we get a guaranteed spell of dry and calm weather. This will have three specific aims:

a. to extend Trench 1 to the south-east from the postulated doorway to investigate whether or not there is a paved area which one would expect to see outside the entry point to a domestic building.

b. to extend Trench 1 to the west, cutting a one metre-wide section through the wall to the interface with bedrock to see how the wall was constructed, to identify any evidence of phasing of construction or rebuild, and to see if the distribution of chert extends beyond and below the wall, which latter would put the lithics at an earlier date than the building.

c. to investigate the clay floor around the burnt stone's position which is still showing as a positive anomaly.

3. Phase 3 is scheduled for 2012 and will be targeted in two ways: digging a series of test pits, systematically distributed across a marked grid, stretching across the plateau on which the building sits, designed to identify the full spatial distribution of lithics; and, secondly, digging a second series of smaller test pits to define the spatial extent of loess deposits (or silt, if it is not actually loess).

Finally ...

It is a fascinating site, with a full complement of teases, and it is proving to be far more complex and rewarding than ever envisaged.

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