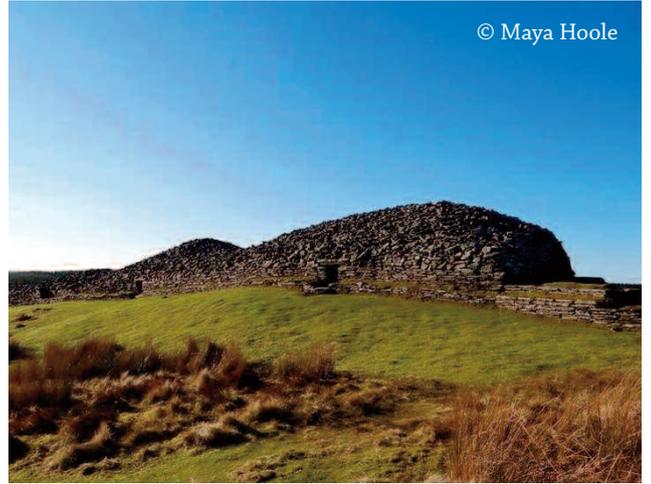


Neolithic

c. 4000 – c. 2500 BC

The Neolithic (or ‘New Stone Age’) was a period of huge change. People moved from hunting and gathering food from the landscape to keeping animals and planting crops. This led them to establish permanent homes, building on a large scale, and using pottery – all for the first time. DNA and artefact evidence suggests that these new ways of doing things were brought by new people arriving in Scotland from the continent.



© Maya Hoole

Camster Cairn in Caithness

Evidence for substantial buildings has been discovered, though not yet in the Highlands. In mainland Scotland large post-settings for timber buildings over 20 metres long have been found. In the Orkney Isles complicated stone structures at Skara Brae and the Ness of Brodgar have been excavated. However, settlement evidence is still quite rare for this period, which may be because more common small timber buildings have left little or no trace.



© Michael Sharpe

Stone macehead from the Heights of Brae, now in NMS, Edinburgh

Bones from domesticated animals and burnt cereal grains show that people were farming and eating sheep, cattle, wheat and barley. Analysis of pottery has shown that milk or cheese was being stored and presumably eaten.

Although still made of stone, tools changed and large flint axes as well as leaf-shaped arrowheads are common Neolithic finds. The stone axes are sometimes polished giving them a smooth shiny surface - something that takes a long time but does not seem to make them any more useful. Polished stone maceheads are also associated with this period. Fragments of pottery are frequently found in Neolithic sites, often in pits. Enigmatic carved stone balls have been found throughout Scotland and are known to have been made in this period, but their use remains a mystery.

Burial monuments also appear in Scotland for the first time. These take the form of large stone cairns or earth barrows with stone-lined passages inside for human bones to be stored. Tombs like the Grey Cairns of Camster are used to house the remains of many people. It is thought that the bodies of the deceased were laid out until only the bones remained. These would then be gathered and placed into the cairns, sorted by bone type rather than separate individual.

Things to think about:

How long did this period last?

What might the elaborate objects and monuments tell us?

See also:

Box 1 object sheets: Stone Axes, Scrapers, Carved Stone Ball, Leaf-shaped Arrowheads, Flint Blades, Prehistoric Pottery
Additional Images: Polished Neolithic Stone Axeheads, Carved Stone Balls from the Highlands

The Experimental Archaeology: Learning about Craft and Technology in the Past project was funded by Historic Environment Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund).

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