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Cladh Hallan prehistoric village - Machair, South Uist





What lies beneath: the mysteries of the Cladh Hallan mummies

“Cladh Hallan is one of those remarkable archaeological sites whose investigation provides archaeologists with discoveries which upset our conventional understanding of prehistoric life”. (Prof. Mike Parker Pearson, Cladh Hallan excavation director)

Under the floor of one of the houses, archaeologists made the very unusual discovery of two mummified bodies – male remains, dated to around 1600BC, and a female who died around 300 years later. But the surprises didn't stop there. Radiocarbon dating of the remains and charred grain on the floor of the house suggests they spent hundreds of years out of the ground before being buried under the roundhouse.

The delayed burial is thought have been to be part of a ritual belief or severance to ancestors. Ethnographic studies outside Europe have shown that preserved human remains of prominent people or ancestors were sometimes stored and retrieved for particular ceremonies or festivals. The treatment of the Cladh Hallan bodies after death suggests ancestor worship was also strong in prehistoric Europe. Could it be that these people were important ancestors, leaders, rulers, or prominent in their community for some other reason?

The skeletons were still articulated, indicating that skin and sinew were holding them together when they were buried – something not possible in the damp climate of South Uist without some form of artificial preservation. It is thought that the bodies had been preserved in a peat bog shortly after death (it is estimated this would have taken between 6 and 18 months), but not then buried until about 1120BC – some 200-300 years later. After this extended period above ground in a preserved state, they had then been carefully placed under the floor of one of the roundhouses as it was constructed (this is sometimes referred to as a 'foundation deposit').

But a number of mysteries remain. Why was one body made up of different individuals? And why were they eventually buried in the floor of this particular house? Both skeletons were intact, and arranged in a tight foetal position. Intriguingly, the woman had two of her teeth removed and placed in her hands after death. The male remains are even more puzzling – the torso and limbs of one man, the skull of another, and a jawbone from a third. The three had died over a span of 150 years.



The Cladh Hallan community and the sands of time

Archaeologists believe that a community of farmers built this series of small but substantial roundhouses around 2000BC, during the Early Bronze Age. Partially dug down into the sand, this type of building became quite common in the Western Isles during later periods. A large round hole would be excavated before being lined with big stones to prevent it collapsing inwards. The roof would then be spanned, probably using driftwood, before being thatched using marram grass from the nearby sand dunes.

An incredibly detailed understanding of Bronze Age life at Cladh Hallan has emerged through meticulous excavation and recording of material from the floors of these houses. We have learnt how food was prepared, where craft activities took place and where the inhabitants slept at night.

Bronze artefacts were unearthed, as well as tools for cutting and scraping out of chipped flint and quartz. Their pottery was decorated with fine lines and indentations, known across Europe as Beaker ware. There was also evidence of the community using ash, household waste and peat mixed with the machair sand to improve the fertility of the soil around their settlement, to help grow crops such as barley.

Cladh Hallan is located on the Daliburgh Machair on the island of South Uist. The Machair is an area of low-lying arable or grazing land formed near the coast by the deposition of sand and shell fragments by the wind. The machair at various points along South Uist contains a complete cross-section of settlement history from 2000 BC to AD 1300. Numerous sandy hills can be spotted indicating the location of former settlements where the wind-blown sand has accumulated, preserving them for thousands of years. The alkaline nature of this sand has also allowed for a high level of preservation of materials such as bone which, in more acidic areas, would be much less likely to survive.

The outline of the Cladh Hallan roundhouses has been restored in stone and can be seen today by following the track out to the Hallan Cemetery.

Sources:

The Prehistoric Village at Cladh Hallan, Mike Parker Pearson, Peter Marshall, Jacqui Mulville and Helen Smith (www.shef.ac.uk/archaeology/research/cladh-hallan/index)


BBC News: *Scottish prehistoric mummies made from jigsaw of body parts*, 22 August 2011 (www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-14575729)

Cladh Hallan Roundhouses (www.isle-of-south-uist.co.uk/what-to-do/cladh-hallan-roundhouses)

Antiquity Vol 81 No 312 September 2007: *Further evidence for mummification in Bronze Age Britain* (www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/parker)

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/108429/south-uist-cladh-hallan>
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<http://www.shef.ac.uk/archaeology/research/cladh-hallan/index>



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