

Displacement of bone waste by_ seagulls

The dispersal of bone remains by other animals has been discussed, but I am not aware of any record of the following. This comes from an unpublished note of mine dated 1974 and found in the notes of the lectures on animal remains which I used to give to the Edinburgh archaeological students. During my 25 years in Edinburgh I never lost an opportunity to visit any of the islands in the Firth of Forth, boat trips being organised by the Edinburgh Natural History Society.

During visits to the uninhabited islands of Fidra and especially Craighleith, which lies one mile off North Berwick, I found them littered with beef and sheepmeat bones. There were examples of cow and sheep ribs, sheep scapula, tibia, and sections of femur from Scottish gigot chops - all recognisable joints suggesting human occupation. Yet the bones had been brought by the seagulls nesting on these islands, no doubt from a refuse tip on the shore, and carried whilst they still had some meat attached. These domestic animal remains were associated with wild bird and fish bones from prey caught by the gulls, so reinforcing the impression of human food remains actually accumulated on this site. It is useful to be aware of what is possible when faced with the interpretation of unusual or unexpected assemblages.

Another facet of interpretation was indicated by seagull bones: many of these were broken, and some of the breaks were so clean that they appeared like saw-cuts. Finally the name 'Fidra' means 'feather island' and dates from the time when Norse settlers used to 'farm' eider duck to collect the down from their nests.

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