

Island Heritage: The Neolithic Felsite Knives and Axes of Shetland

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While it is likely that Shetland has been inhabited since the Mesolithic, the strongest evidence available to date, suggests the main occupation of the islands dates to the Neolithic Period (4000-2000BC). Similar to other locations in northwest Europe during that era, suitable lithic sources were exploited for the production of stone axes and other artefacts. The most iconic evidence for which are the polished stone knives and axes made from Felsite, a grey/blue stone which, when ground and polished, presents in a wide range of visually highly distinctive forms; the geological processes which lead to its formation produce examples which are plain, banded and spherulitic. The last of which seems to have been preferred for knives over axes.

This presentation will discuss the current ongoing research project into these artefacts, noting the use of a range of methodological approaches underused in archaeological research; experimental replication and testing, comparative and quantitative analysis. From this we hope to gain a better understanding of the interplay of ideas, actions and the properties of the material itself and the multiple roles, both ritual and/or utilitarian, these objects took in prehistoric Shetland. It will also further our research/knowledge on the importance of islands and prominent locations in prehistory and address an interesting observation related to the trade and movement of these objects.