Shorter Notes

A Mesolithic barbed point from Cnoc Sligeach, Isle of Oronsay, Argyll

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In July 1976, in the course of investigation of the relationships between Mesolithic occupation refuse and raised storm-beach deposits on the periphery of the mound known as Cnoc Sligeach on the island of Oronsay, Argyll (Jardine 1977), a fragment of a barbed point was discovered in a thin occupation layer. The approximate National Grid Reference of the spot at which the barbed point was found is NR 373889. The position of the find in relation to Ordnance Datum (Newlyn), the surface of the ground, trenches opened in 1913 by W H Bishop (1914) and between 1973 and 1976 by the writers is shown in fig 1. The positions of excavations made at Cnoc Sligeach by P A Mellars in 1970 as part of a broader programme of research into the Mesolithic occupation of Oronsay (interim reports: Mellars & Payne 1971; Mellars 1978) are not shown here but will be included in the final excavation report. The barbed point, now in the care of the Hunterian Museum (Cat No A.1979.2), was treated initially in the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow, by being given four surface washes with distilled water, after which three coats of soluble nylon were applied.

The artifact is biconvex in section and consists of bone, possibly part of a rib of a large vertebrate animal such as *Phoca vitulina* L (common seal) or *Halichoerus grypus* (Fab) (grey seal). This is suggested by the distinct, though gentle, curvature of the specimen when seen in profile. The fragment is biserial in form, having two well-preserved pointed barbs along one edge, and one imperfectly-preserved barb together with clear traces of the remains of a second barb on the other edge. On the convex side of the specimen, traces of a groove above the right upper barb (pl 26A) and near, but not precisely on the edge of the fragment, suggest that originally a third barb was present on that edge of the artifact. The worked, bevelled surface at the upper end of the other edge (pl 26B, top right) may be the remains of a groove produced in the fashioning of a third barb on that edge also or, more probably, it may be the lower part of the tapered tip of the artifact. The four barbs that may be identified with certainty are arranged opposite each other rather than alternately on the edges. The tip of the point is missing, and the irregularity and narrowness of the butt end (6 mm compared with a width of 14 mm between the upper barbs), where part of the inner, cancellous tissue is exposed, suggest that an unknown length of the lower part of the original artifact is missing. The total length of the axial part of the existing fragment is c 53 mm, the maximum width of the artifact is c 25 mm and the maximum thickness is c 5 mm; the present weight is 4·61 gm.

Examination of the specimen under the binocular microscope shows that, apparently as a result of natural processes, the surface of the bone, especially on the concave side, is eroded in places into irregular cracks that on cursory examination may have the appearance of representing primitive etched drawings (pl 26B). It also shows that the grooves that define the barbs were cut from both faces of the artifact. In cross-section the grooves vary from a regular V-shape to shapes

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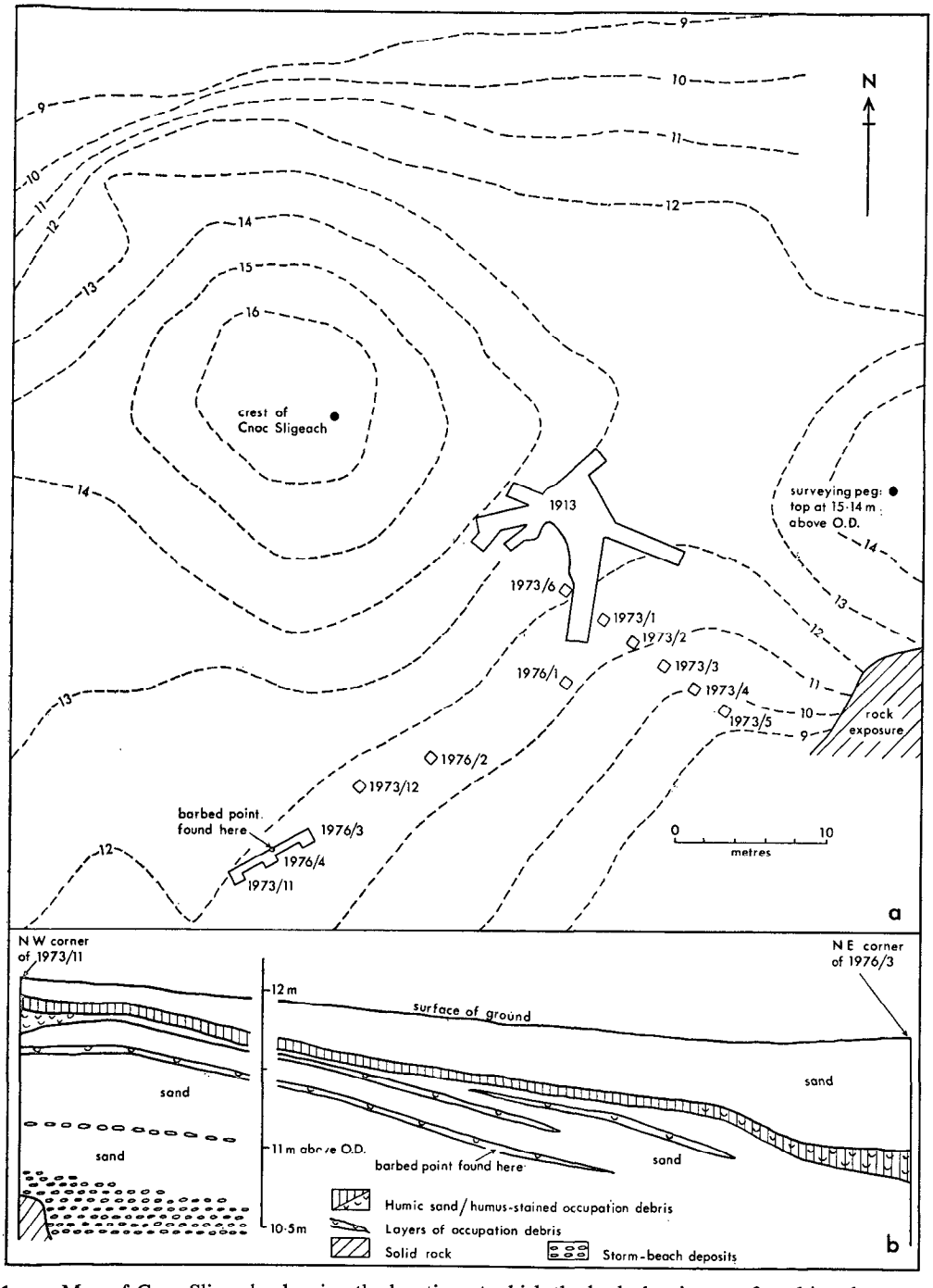

FIG 1 a Map of Cnoc Sligeach, showing the location at which the barbed point was found in relation to the positions of pits and trenches opened between 1973 and 1976 and the approximate position of the excavation made by W H Bishop in 1913. Based on a map drawn from the results of an instrumental survey made by J E Gray in 1970. Contours are in metres above Ordnance Datum, Newlyn

b Simplified representation of the section exposed in the north-western side of pits 1973/11, 1976/4, 1976/3 and connecting trenches, showing the horizon at which the barbed point was found in relation to layers of occupation material and natural deposits. For clarity, the thicknesses of the layers of occupation material are slightly exaggerated; otherwise no vertical exaggeration

in which one side of the groove is planar and moderately-gently sloped, whilst the other side is steeply-sloping and either planar or gently-curved. On the concave side of the artifact, traces of two narrow, parallel straight lines, spaced c 0·25 to 0·50 mm apart, extend along what probably was the centre of the axis of the artifact, from the (broken) tip of the point downwards for a distance of c 16 mm.

The fragment resembles six of the seven fragments of barbed points found at Cnoc Sligeach in 1913 (Bishop 1914, 96–8 & fig 38) in consisting of bone, and is similar to four of the five better-preserved of these specimens (Lacaille 1954, 225–7 & fig 97) in being biconvex in section. It differs, however, from the five specimens from Cnoc Sligeach illustrated by Lacaille in the arrangement of the barbs opposite each other rather than alternately along the edges. In this respect it also appears to differ from two of the three barbed points found on Oronsay at Caisteal nan Gillean (I) between 1879 and 1882 and illustrated by Anderson (1898, figs 16–18) although, as mentioned in the description above, a third (uppermost) barb may have been present on one edge without being matched by a barb on the other edge (cf the uppermost barb on one of the points found at Caisteal nan Gillean I, Anderson 1898, fig 18).

In addition to the one example found at Caisteal nan Gillean I, there appears to be only one known specimen of a Mesolithic barbed point from a coastal site in which the barbs are arranged opposite each other – the artifact found at Whitburn in NE England, in which there also is present an unmatched uppermost barb (Mellars 1970, pl XXXIII) – although it should be noted that two of the ten barbs on the point found in 1938 at Shewalton, Ayrshire (Lacaille 1939), are more nearly opposite than alternate in their arrangement, and in one of the barbed points found at the MacArthur Cave, Oban (Lacaille 1954, fig 81, no 9), two of four pairs of barbs are arranged opposite each other rather than alternately.

The discovery of the fragment of a Mesolithic barbed point at Cnoc Sligeach in 1976 adds to the evidence of the use on Oronsay of points that were biserial in form and the majority of which consisted of bone rather than antler, compared with the use of both uniserial points of bone (Druimvargie Cave, Anderson 1898, figs 1, 2) and biserial points of antler (MacArthur Cave, Anderson 1895, figs 11, 12, 13) at Oban. The ages of the occupation sites at Oban are not known accurately because, as yet, no radiocarbon age determinations have been applied to suitable occupation material from these sites. On the evidence of radiocarbon assay of fragments of charcoal, occupation of sites at Cnoc Sligeach, Caisteal nan Gillean II and Cnoc Coig on Oronsay occurred between c 5640 ± 80 and 4920 ± 400 radiocarbon years bp (Jardine 1977, table 1), a time that is considered to belong to the later Mesolithic occupation in Britain. The dates of site occupation on Oronsay may prove to be younger than those of the Oban sites. If so, the evidence of the barbed points found at Cnoc Sligeach and Caisteal nan Gillean I may support the claim by Clark (1956, 92) that there was a progression from the use of antler to that of bone, from the points found at MacArthur Cave, Oban, to those found on Oronsay.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The investigations at Cnoc Sligeach between 1973 and 1976 were undertaken as part of the environmental studies that are important additions to current archaeological excavation by Dr P A Mellars (University of Sheffield) of the Mesolithic occupation sites on Oronsay. Dr Mellars, together with Mr A Morrison of the University of Glasgow, is thanked for numerous stimulating discussions concerning the Mesolithic sites on Oronsay and at Oban. Fieldwork on the raised beaches on Oronsay was generously financed by the Natural Environment Research Council and the University of Glasgow. Mrs Margaret Leeper drew the map and section. Mr Douglas

MacLean prepared the photographs. Lord Strathcona, the (former) owner, and Mr Andrew Macneill, the tenant of the island, kindly permitted and encouraged the undertaking of the excavations on Oronsay.

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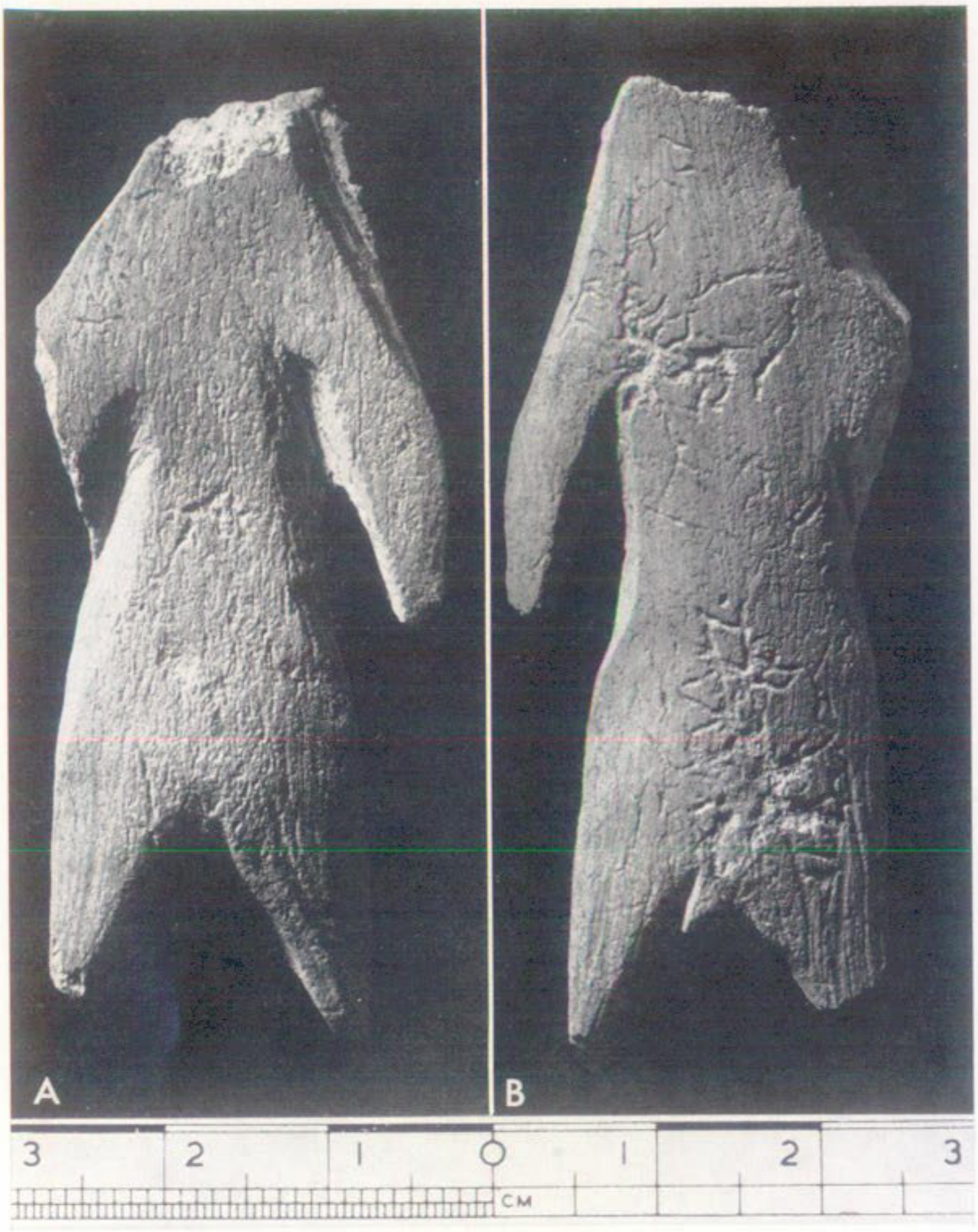

The barbed point found at Cnoc Sligeach in 1976. A, The convex side, showing two well-preserved barbs and possible remains of a third barb on the right edge, one well-preserved barb and the remains of a second barb on the left edge. B, The concave side, showing two well-preserved barbs on the left edge, one well-preserved barb and the remains of a second barb on the right edge and natural erosion of the surface of the bone