Eilean na Marbh Micromorph report – Synopsis for Point Community council (PCC)

The results of the micro-morphological study of the burnt deposits found upon Eilean na Marbh have been returned and are of great interest. The study has answered most of the questions we had posed, confirmed some of our ideas and moved our interpretation of the prehistoric activity upon the stack significantly further forward.

The main findings of the report are:

1. Peat was the main fuel brought to the stack to make fire. Wood was rarely used.
2. These were repeated fires with intervals in between burnings.
3. The last (uppermost) deposit had probably been burnt in situ, ie was not swept from elsewhere. Others below that *had* been 'dumped' from elsewhere.
4. The burning was sufficiently hot enough in places to Burn bone, and this burnt bone was present in all contexts, implying that the fires specifically included either animal or human remains.
5. The burning was sufficiently hot enough in places to form Calcined bone – between 450 and 650 degrees centigrade, and "phytolith slag" from the silica contained within plants, specifically over 550 degrees centigrade.
6. The bone present was often crushed in situ, after being deposited within the burnt material, strongly indicating human traffic over these deposits, ie trample from human feet in between burnings.

These results confirm that the site was used over a significant amount of time – it was not a one off occurrence. The temperatures reached are on the higher side of typical for a peat fire:

(https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/1497/peat?sequence=3)

Suggesting a large, purposefully set and tended fire, especially when it is clear that all the fuel must have been transported to the stack. The common occurrence of bone would indicate that the fire was not merely a beacon but had the intended consequence of burning either human or animal remains. This still leaves us with the possibility that the fire was domestic, although the micro-morphologist's observation of a high degree of trampling between fires would not seem to fit with this interpretation.

Clearly this information is not conclusive, but it does add a lot of detail to our understanding of what took place upon the stack, and also sharpens the focus for further research.

We can surmise the results of the micro-morph study by saying that we can now conclusively state that large peat fires were repeatedly lit atop Eilean na Marbh, burning either human or animal remains, around 2,000 years ago. Periods of time elapsed between burnings during which people walked over and trampled the remains of the burnt bones within the ash and also swept ash from some places to others.