

Kilmartin Glen

When we think of pots used as grave goods we usually associate them with civilisations such as Egypt. However, earlier this year I visited Kilmartin Glen in SW Scotland and learned about a prehistoric people who engaged in the same practice.



For thousands of years people have lived in the Kilmartin area gradually shaping the extraordinary landscape seen today. In a six mile radius there are more than 350 prehistoric sites: burial cairns, rock carvings, standing stones, stone circles, mediaeval castles and ancient grave stones depicting warriors, early Christian crosses, deserted croft houses and the fortress of the earliest Scottish Kings. The survival of so many prehistoric features scattered over such a wide area owes something to frequent flooding. Peat was formed protecting the sites.

Many of the stones were discovered when people began digging out the peat for fuel. In the huge cairns are chambers called cysts in each of which many people were buried with pots, arrows, jewellery and other artefacts for the afterlife. Some of the cairns are piles of rounded stones and some are piles of shells added to over the years. Surrounded by standing stones these circles suggest a space for meeting, dancing, praying and celebration.



Pottery started here about 6,000 years ago when people became settled and needed containers. They were hand coiled and decorated with marks made by horn, wood and bone. The pots were designed to fit the function intended – round bottomed pots to nestle on uneven floors, pots with shoulders to enable covers to be secured, pots for pouring and pots for carrying. They were probably first fired in the domestic hearth. Later small pits and clamps were used for firing.

Food vessels were similar to examples from Ireland with a three part shape and finely decorated bases. Some had small lugs so they could be suspended. The most well known types from this period were the Beakers which were found all over northern Europe from about 2,500 to 1,500 BC. The finest pots were returned to the earth with the dead.

The artefacts found in the burial chambers are on display at the excellent Kilmartin House Museum. Here an audio-visual time travelling experience called the 'The Valley of the Ghosts' sets the scene before viewing the wealth of artefacts. There was a fabulous display of cooking pots, small beakers and large burial urns. Some of the beakers had the remains of a sticky honey like substance suggesting a drink for the afterlife. The large burial urn contained the skeleton of a woman and a child.

Out of the museum window could be seen the large cairns where some of them were found; stunning.

Jane Gibson 2011

www.kilmartin.org