

FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGIES OF MARINE LITTER



*VISIONS FROM BUTE, EIGG, ISLAY AND
ORKNEY*

MARINE LITTER: PRESENT REALITIES



The people who live on Scotland's islands and western shores are the daily recipients of objects discarded or lost by others – flotsam and jetsam from boats and ships, landfill, storm drains and river systems.

Carried by ocean currents and blown by the winds, these items collect in inlets and geos, building up in geological layers of sand, seaweed and marram grass.



Many of them are made from synthetic plastics: the miracle materials of our time, at once durable and disposable.

MARINE LITTER: POSSIBLE FUTURES

Our plastic waste will long outlast us. How might our descendants interpret future discoveries of ancient waste, deposited on our shores in our own time? *Future Archaeologies of Marine Litter* presents four possible futures imagined from Bute, Eigg, Islay and Orkney.



A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM BUTE

BUTE: On 23rd February 2023, Beachwatch Bute organised a beach clean at Ettrick Bay. The tideline was littered with small scraps of soft plastic, plastic film, plastic twine and rope, all knotted together and trapped in the bladderwrack and dune grass. There were also some larger objects – larger sections of rope, plastic roofing materials, bits of broken fish box. Participants chose a selection of these and started to map out one possible future in which they might be seen as archaeological treasures.

ARTEFACTS FROM THE PLASTICS AGE: LIFE ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

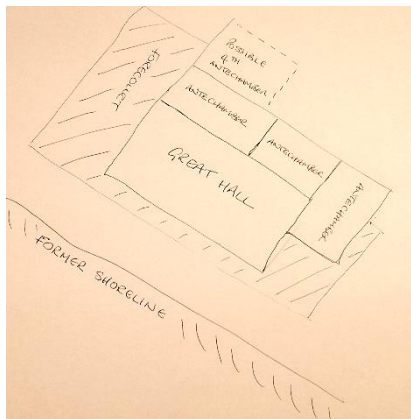
Our Island's remarkable history of continuous human habitation was perhaps most in peril during the Plastics Age. This relatively short period followed closely on the flowering of arts and engineering during the Ceramics Era and was itself at least partly responsible for the Great Schism. It was a difficult period for the region, which saw a dramatic drop in population. Some islands were completely abandoned, while others, such as this, were left with a dwindling, ageing and weakened population. The artefacts in this display help us to imagine how the people of this dark time faced the cycles of disease, war and famine that characterised the pre-Schism years.

THE ETTRICK BAY SQUAREHOUSE

The objects displayed here were discovered during an excavation of the remains of a large, isolated late-Plastics Age structure close to the current shoreline on the west coast of the Island known as the Ettrick Bay Squarehouse.

Like similar Squarehouses found in other regions, this building appears to have been of great cultural significance and was probably used for important communal rituals.

A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM BUTE



It consisted of a spacious hall with three smaller antechambers along the north-eastern and south-western sides. A fourth antechamber may also have been constructed outside of the rectangular footprint. There is evidence of a large forecourt on the north-west side, where members of the community would have gathered.

The presence of the Squarehouse suggests that this was a special site, perhaps imbued with spiritual significance. Its alignment on a north-west/south-east axis, following what would have been the line of the shore at the time of its use, is consistent with the theory that, during the late Plastics Age, the people of the Island laid great importance on the sea and the bounty it provided. Perhaps that importance had grown as the bounty diminished.

THE ETRICK BAY ARTEFACTS

The Etrick Bay artefacts were found outside of the perimeter of the Squarehouse itself. There is ongoing debate amongst the archaeological community as to the nature of the cache. Some contend that the mixed nature of the find, which includes objects of a clearly mundane, domestic nature, indicates a midden. Others argue that the presence of what are clearly ritual objects indicates a shrine or even the burial of an important member of the community.

Whichever interpretation you prefer, it is clear that the artefacts found at the Etrick Bay site can help us to understand the lives of those who lived around the time of the Great Schism. While some

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of the objects will seem familiar to modern eyes, others are more mysterious, reminding us of how alien the Plastics Age was to our own.

THE ETTRICK EROTEMES



These fascinating objects are all formed in the shape of an eroteme. This suggests that this icon – so familiar to us as central to our own culture – was already a symbol of power in this distant era. Because they are made from plastics and metals, direct carbon-dating is impossible. However, organic matter has been found in ancient dirt extracted from the intricate carvings that decorate the largest, most stylised object in the group. This suggests a minimum age of 500 years, consistent with burial of the objects during the late Plastics Age.

The three larger objects are likely to have had ceremonial or ritual uses. The fourth, smaller object may well have been used as a personal talisman, carried or worn by an individual to ward off evil spirits.

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As we know, the Great Schism occurred when humanity stood at the edge of the abyss: some chose a new path, based on enlightened principles of critical ethical reflection and reasoning. Others foolishly chose a path of continued consumption, putting their faith in what proved to be unreliable hierarchies of technopower. Perhaps these objects are early material manifestations of our own culture's central tenet: to constantly ask ourselves whether what we are doing is right and good?

EVERYDAY LIFE



Footwear and headgear

Although different in design and material to contemporary footwear, two of the objects are recognisable as shoes. Their size suggests that the people of the late Plastics Age were larger than we are now – a theory that is consistent with our knowledge of the overconsumption that characterised the period. The fine, soft weave of the material forming the upper covering of the black shoe suggests it may have been worn by a woman of some wealth, who did not need protection from the elements. The open sandal may have been worn by a child.

The helmet may have offered protection to miners engaged in the dangerous work of extracting plastics from the pits that formed during the late Plastics Age.

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Metal vessel

The spout on this vessel suggests it was most likely used for holding and dispensing liquids.

Rope and net

These everyday items may seem familiar but they are all fabricated from kinds of Plastic.

FORGOTTEN RITUALS?

Pyramid and carved plastic ball

The purpose or use of these objects remains unknown. However, their shapes suggest continuity with the earlier civilizations of Ancient Egypt and the Northern European Neolithic.



Grass/foilage veneration



These objects are representations in Plastic of local foliage and grasses. They suggest that the people of the late Plastics Age may have venerated such natural organisms, which they would likely have sensed were in danger of permanently disappearing from the biosphere.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER 2023 AD?

The co-creators of the Bute Future Archaeology decided that in 2023, we were looking over the edge of the abyss. We – or at least some of us – stepped back and realised we had to change.

A social movement began to take hold, growing particularly quickly in regions such as the islands which were faced with the evidence of the danger we were in on a daily basis. The never-ending plastics and other rubbish that washed up on our shores were symptoms of the damage we were doing to our planet and thus also ourselves. If you saw them every day, you could not ignore them.

The pioneers of this movement replaced the previously popular mantra of the 3Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle – with just one R – Reject! Realising that reliance on an increasingly venal and ineffectual governing class was pointless, they developed a collective approach to life and community, in which governance through centralised control was replaced by individual and distributed decision-making guided by simple principles of critical, ethical rationality. Members of the movement constantly asked themselves questions: why am I doing this? What will the impact of my actions be? Are my actions contributing to the wellbeing of the planet, my fellow community members and myself? It was thus that the question mark or eroteme – ? – came to symbolise the movement.

Of course, not everyone embraced this approach.

Those that did found themselves inevitably owning less, travelling more slowly and avoiding the use of motor vehicles, and engaging in more physical labour as they dug, sowed, harvested and repaired. Others clung to dreams of technological fixes just around the corner – endless sources of clean power, miraculous

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systems that would extract microplastics from the waters and soils, perfect closed loop recycling systems. Others, still, refused to think at all. Those that wanted to reform society drifted towards the rural and island areas, producing a rebound in what had been collapsing population levels. Those who wanted continued access to the products of 20th and 21st century petro-capitalism moved away from the increasingly poorly-supplied remote areas, concentrating themselves in cities and urban areas. Thus began the *Great Schism*.

A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM EIGG

EIGG: On 12th February, 2023, a series of objects were collected at Singing Sands and during a beach clean at Laig on the Isle of Eigg. Participants in the clean talked of possible futures where the problem of marine plastics had been solved. The following day, the children of Eigg Primary School added their ideas into the mix.

THE EIGG HOARD

The Eigg Hoard was discovered on the Isle of Eigg in 2123 by local youngster Ali Sarwar. A violent storm on the night of the 11th February, 2123, swept sand away from the dunes on a beach known locally as Singing Sands. Ali had gone to the beach the morning after the storm and had spotted some unusual objects scattered on the wet sand.



The Hoard contains over 100 objects and is one of the richest such finds unearthed in Scotland. It includes 43 bottle tops (whole and partial), 38 shotgun cartridges, 7 pieces of cartridge wadding and various small plastic objects of unknown use.



Some of the objects are highly decorative, such as the flower on the left. Others are plain but nevertheless intriguing, such as this translucent sphere of diameter 1.5 cm .



Others again are intricate but do not appear to be representational.

GUARDIANS OF THE HOARD

Significantly, the Hoard contains two small figurines attired in the dress we know was worn by members of the land-based military forces at the time. One of these is complete and stands about 3cm high. The other has suffered some damage.



It is likely that these two figures were included to protect the precious objects that make up the Hoard.



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOARD

The objects in the Hoard date to the years 1990-2020. It is clear, however, that they were collected together and buried shortly after the end of this period.

This historically well-understood period was a time of significant political and environmental upheaval.

Europe was once again ravaged by war. Russia, which until recently had been thought of as, in the parlance of the time, a “superpower”, had turned on neighbouring Ukraine in a rash act of aggression that triggered a long and brutal campaign of attrition. This resulted in significant disruption to pan-European trade, including supplies of food, fuel and agricultural workers.

At the same time, the impacts of Climate Change were beginning to be felt across the globe. Extreme weather events were becoming more frequent, with floods occurring across Europe and wildfires breaking out even in what had been until then famously temperate regions such as Scotland’s Western Isles.

The resulting “oil shock” – a dramatic increase in the price of petrochemicals that provided the raw materials for the creation of

A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM EIGG

plastics – accelerated an already-present movement in society to end reliance on hydrocarbons and particularly plastics.

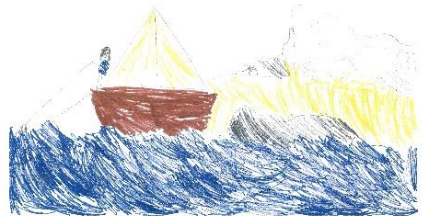
It is against this background that the story of the Eigg Hoard – and the other, less significant, Hoards that have been found in the region – must have unfolded. Because the material that surrounded the Hoard had been damaged over its years of burial in abrasive sand, we are unable to use the remnants of organic matter that were found on some of the items to obtain a more precise date for the Hoard's burial than 2020-2028. We are thus unable to say for certain whether it was gathered together and hidden before or after the United Nation's Convention on Plastics (agreed in 2026) or even the Treaty on Plastic Pollution (agreed in 2024).

What we do know is that the objects in the Hoard were perceived by their owner as having great value. It is possible that they were buried in an act of propitiation, as natural disasters such as the First Global Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020-2022 and the Great Turko-Syrian Earthquake of 2023 competed with the above-mentioned military, economic and climate crises to create a sense of impending doom among a significant fraction of the population. It is also possible that the owner foresaw that private ownership of plastics was about to be made illegal and that all plastics would be taken into state control; or that they were seeking to protect their treasures from the gangs of plastic thieves who soon started to patrol the country after the private ownership ban was enacted.

LIFE ON EIGG IN 2123

The pupils of Eigg Primary School in 2023 wanted Ali to find the Eigg Hoard in 2123. They envisage this time as one in which certain things have changed:

Boats are powered by solar cells and the wind. Solar panels are now really light, so it's easy for boats to carry them. Some boats have decks made of solar panels. Some have sails, and some have wind turbines on board. People use oars as well, of course.



Advances in technology also allow some boats to be steered using a keyboard, instead of a wheel or a rudder.

Farmers use ploughs pulled by horses, and tractors are powered by poo. Poo is also used to fertilise the land, so there are tractors that are fitted with hoses and sprays.



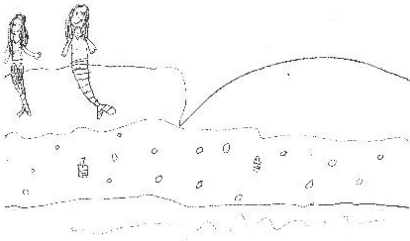
Plastic bottles are used as construction materials: there are fences and even houses built out of them. Some houses are underground, like hobbit houses, to keep them safe from violent storms, make them easy to keep warm, and give more space for the sheep.

A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM EIGG

People don't use money and instead get what they need and want by bartering and trading. For example, they might swap beer for beef, or apples for wool. Apples are worth more when they are out of season, so you can get more in exchange for an apple in April than you can in August.



Some houses have horns to scare away ghosts and evil spirits. Some houses also make more use of technology, for example having tables with carpet on top that are lowered into the floor when they're not in use, to make more space inside.



There are different kinds of animal on Eigg, compared to 2022. There are squirrels and vultures.

There have been some changes to the weather, too, so that it is warmer and sunnier in summer and colder in winter – in fact, it snows a lot in winter now and every Christmas is a white Christmas. The tides have also got bigger, with higher high tides and lower low tides.

A FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY FROM ISLAY

ISLAY: *In mid-March, 2023, several objects were collected on the shores of Loch Indaal just north of Bowmore on Islay. Together with the Islay Development Initiative Youth Development Officer, the young people attending the Youth Groups on Saturday 17th March discussed these and selected some for inclusion in a Future Archaeologies exhibit. They imagined a post-apocalyptic future in which humans had fairly recently emerged after having to live underground.*

SURVIVORS FROM THE SYNTHETIC AGE

We know, of course, that our ancestors were capable of creating materials that exceed the bounds of Nature. The peoples who lived before – and probably caused – the Twin Terrors were in possession of scientific secrets, and masters of alchemical process, that allowed them to create materials that had never before existed on our Planet, most famously the Synthetic Plastics. We know that they worked with these just as we work with stone and metal, creating and forming objects of both practical and ritual significance. But until now, it was universally believed that all such objects were destroyed in the era of the Twin Terrors, when the Dragon battled with the Kraken, when humanity fled for the safety of the Underland.

Indeed, when our forefathers emerged to repopulate the Surface some 200 years ago, they found a devastated landscape, blasted by the Dragon's fires and eroded by the Kraken's floods. The great stone and synstone structures created by our ancestors were reduced to piles of rubble; the landscape was coated in the dust of runaway plastifires and glazed with nurdelglass, the seas rimmed with a scum of plastiglomerate.

Despite their command of the secret powers of polysynthesis, our ancestors had been unable to protect themselves or their civilization from the destruction wrought by the two monsters. Indeed, we believe that the Dragon and the Kraken were

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incarnations of our planet's anger – Nature's way of fighting back against humanity's folly. Plastics were crushed, burned or melted in the melee, leaving us with the familiar plastiglomerates, nurdelglass, nurdelstone and plasti-ash. Through the Dragon and the Kraken, Nature sought to wipe out all traces of man's attempt to exceed Her limits. Thus it is all the more surprising to find what we display here amongst the remnants of the Plastic, or more precisely Synthetic, Age.

The objects in this collection are remarkable, perhaps unique, survivors from these times. Found in a single region of one of the newly re-explored western regions, they raise as many questions as they answer.



REMARKABLE RELICS

The objects in this collection were found as our scientists and scholars continue to explore the Surface, pushing further west and north along the fringes of the ocean.

They are the only surviving examples of formed, worked plastics and syncretes known to date. It is clear they are formed from the same materials that now cover the Surface as plastiglomerate, nurdelglass and nurdelstone. Yet they retain their original forms – some familiar, others more alien. We do not know how these items came to be saved from what we had previously understood to be the total destruction of plastic artefacts during the Twin Terrors.

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The lost art of plasti-creation



Vessel for storing and pouring liquids. Possibly used in alchemical generation of synthetic materials. It is believed that the inscription "BRU" refers to a witch's brew; the meaning of "IRN" is unknown.

Copper pipe: part of alembic or other distilling equipment used in syncrete or plastic production, possibly crushed in the mayhem of the battling Dragon and Kraken.

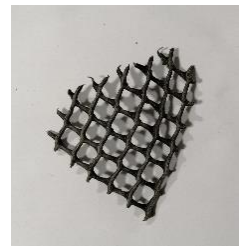


Wheel: combined metal and a synthetic material that imitates the sap from certain trees. Its utility as part of a transport system is doubtful due to its diminutive size. Some scholars contend it was used in the alchemical processes of plasti-creation.

War or ritual?

Helmet and chainmail: these fragile pieces would not withstand much force in battle. It is therefore more likely that they had a ceremonial or ritual purpose.

The purple colour of the helmet has been the preserve of royalty in many cultures for many centuries.



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Symbols of love – or coercion?

Knots have been used throughout human history to symbolise love and family ties. These objects, formed out of precious synthetic plastic, are likely to have significant sociocultural significance and may have been exchanged as tokens of deep commitment.



Rings have often been exchanged in ceremonies that bind the participants into a pairwise unit or “marriage”. This example has a deliberate break, signifying the end of the pairing.

Thorn bracelet: it has been suggested that such devices were used to control the wayward or those seeking liberation from the marital bond.



THE CAUSE OF THE FALL, OR EVIDENCE OF AN EMERGING AWARENESS OF THE NEED TO CHANGE?



The final items in this exhibition are perhaps the most mysterious and hotly-debated. Do they demonstrate our ancestors’ ultimate disrespect for Nature, simultaneously replacing and caricaturing Her beauty with an insultingly more durable simulacrum? Or are they evidence of a nascent resistance, the beginnings of a movement that felt a need to return to the Natural?

THE APOCALYPSE AND AFTER

The discoveries in the *Survivors from the Synthetic Age* exhibition have been made following some kind of apocalyptic episode in our own future.

In this future, something happens that forces the entire human population to flee to the relative safety of life underground. By the time we reach the future in which the museum is set, memories of this dramatic and destructive episode have turned into the story of a violent battle between two monsters, one wielding fire and the other water as their weapons. The monsters lay waste to the earth's surface as they fight each other, destroying cities and infrastructure incidentally, rather like scenes from *Godzilla vs Hydra*.

The need to live underground results in the depopulation of islands like Islay, which only have small bunkers to hide in rather than the extensive underground networks of sewers and underground transportation systems found in the big cities of the world. Initially, people survive on stores of tinned and dried food. When these run out, they subsist on a diet of rats, worms and bats.

Ultimately, this inadequate diet forces the return to the surface of the human population. The world that greets them is quiet – the two fire- and water-breathing monsters have long gone, leaving behind them a landscape strewn with rubble and the smashed up, melted and burned remnants of 21st century life. Very little has survived undamaged. It is thus a truly remarkable discovery when some of the intrepid explorers who are re-mapping the now unpopulated west find almost perfectly-preserved relics from this period.

ORKNEY: *The objects in the Plastlantis! collection were gathered during a beach clean at Scapa Bay Beach on 18th February, 2023. The beach clean was organised by Greener Orkney and attended by members of the group, local members of the public and a radio journalist. It was a beautiful, sunny day. Despite the fact that Greener Orkney organises regular cleans, more than 40 kg of litter were collected. After the beach clean, a group of us chose both a selection of objects to include in the exhibit, the future that the exhibit would belong to, and some of what happened between now (2023) and that future (approximately 4-5000 years away).*

PLASTLANTIS! A LOST CIVILISATION IN THE UNDROWNED ISLES

It is not often that a new discovery can truly be said to shake long-held beliefs about human history. However, it is no exaggeration to say that the objects in this exhibition do just that. These items, recently uncovered in archaeological excavations in the northern Undrowned Isles, hint at the existence of a previously unknown civilization – and perhaps also at the truth at the heart of the Plastlantis myth.

THE NURDELIUM BOUNDARY LAYER

Scientists and historians have long studied and debated the nurdelium boundary layer. Although some have clung to theories that claim an



earthly origin, in recent decades, the weight of scientific opinion has come down on the side of the so-called plastiroid explanation, which suggests that the globally-observed layer of nurdelium – a material confined exclusively to a narrow epoch between around

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5000 and 4500 years ago – was brought to and deposited around the world by an interstellar object. The objects in this collection do not resolve the mystery of the origins of nurdelium. Its contents are, nevertheless, startling, suggesting a civilization that flourished and faded in what we might now call the Nurdelic Age.

THE UNDROWNED ISLES



The Undrowned Isles as they are today (left) and as they would have been when sea levels peaked (right).

For centuries, these remote, uninhabited islands remained almost completely unexplored. Sailors shunned them and tales of their malign influence were handed down from mother to son and father to daughter. In the modern era, the old beliefs faded, but the treacherous seas and complex topology of the underwater landscape meant they remained largely inaccessible. However, as more of the planet's waters are locked into polar and highland ice, falling sea levels have remodelled the islands' coastlines and, perhaps counterintuitively, created more navigable passages and safer landings.

The first archaeological exploration of the Isles commenced just two years ago and within months was producing unexpected finds.

THE “NURDELGLASS” LAYER

The retreat of the oceans has revealed a previously-drowned landscape, including dramatic features such as the Coloured Cliffs. These spectacular geological features, which have been eroded by the ocean currents during their period of submersion, show the narrow, parti-coloured strata that are characteristic of the nurdelium boundary layer. However what is unique to this region is the occurrence of seams of “nurdelglass” – a vitrified form of nurdelium that scientists believe must have formed during extreme heating events.



While nurdelglass has been identified in many locations, it has until now always been in fragmentary form, often mixed in with other materials such as compacted soils and sands. The Undrowned Isles are the only place in which extensive deposits have been found.

EVIDENCE OF A LOST CIVILIZATION

More astonishing than the nurdelglass deposits are the intricate, ornate objects that have been found within a few metres of each other, preserved in the soft sandstone at the same depth as the nurdelium boundary layer. They are made of nurdelite – a form of nurdelium that has been processed and shaped. They provide definitive evidence that the human society living at the time the nurdelium boundary layer was deposited had the knowledge and skills required to work with it in order to create ritual objects of great value. Could this long-ago drowned culture be the origin of the myth of the ancient city of Plastlantis?

GRAVE GOODS OF A GREAT AND POWERFUL LEADER

It is likely that these objects were entombed along with the body of a powerful person – a king or religious leader who was buried with precious symbols of wealth and power.

Nurdelite vessels

The collection includes a sealed vessel, the lid of a funerary urn and distinctive disc-and-ring marked vessels.



The decorative geometric holes in some of these vessels render them useless for day-to-day uses such as holding liquids or foods. This reinforces their interpretation as ritual objects – most likely reflecting the wealth of their owner.

Carved nurdelite ball



This intriguing object appears to have been woven out of thin nurdelite strands. The geometric pattern, while different to the circles decorating the pot bases, is further evidence that the people of the Nurdelic Age placed great importance on number and form.

Jewellery

The decorative buckle and armband indicate the wealth of the wearer.



Orb and sceptre



These two objects are perhaps the most definitive evidence that the collection as a whole is associated with a person of great power and significance. As with all the other objects displayed here, the orb and sceptre are formed entirely from nurdelite. Note the traces of a design that may once have covered the orb. A cat-like silhouette may be a representation of the spirit animal associated with a particular clan or family. The marks below this shape appear to be some sort of script. The orb and sceptre have been symbols of power for millennia, and the perfect symmetry of both these objects suggests that the person who held them wielded great power indeed.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER 2023 AD?

Three parallel pressures result in a build-up of plastics on the Islands.

On the one hand, the Islands are forced to stockpile an increasing quantity of plastic appearing in the waste-stream generated locally. Food and drink, clothing and household goods manufacturers and suppliers are not interested in adapting their production, packaging and distribution models – which seem to work in densely-populated areas with good transport connections – to suit minority, quirky Island contexts. The fishing industry is now dependent on plastics, and transport and farming are too. The amount of plastic arriving on the Islands in order to satisfy the needs and demands of the islanders increases, in spite of the efforts of some parts of the population to avoid plastics altogether.

At the same time, fuel and transport costs soar as a result of the war in eastern Europe and the series of earthquakes that disrupt supply lines and oilfields in Syria and the middle east. These rising costs prohibit the collection and transport of plastics between the Islands by an already cash-strapped council. The notion of shipping plastics to recycling facilities in the south rapidly becomes laughable. Although a local plastic recycling facility that takes waste plastic and converts it into nurdles for re-use is mooted and eventually funded, there is no consumer interested in buying the recycled plastic pellets, exporting them and using them to produce new plastic items or packaging when the same materials can be obtained more cheaply from local sources, without the expense associated with sourcing them from the Islands.

The third cause of the build-up of plastics is the status of the Islands as innocent and unwilling recipients of much of the plastic that reaches the north Atlantic ocean, whether from the east or

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west shorelines. Predominant winds and currents carry increasingly large amounts of increasingly small plastic fragments to the north-western coasts of the UK, and the Islands, with their south-west facing bays and inlets, collect much of this driftplastic. Removal (and in some cases, sorting and re-use) of marine litter plastics has depended on volunteers for years, but this becomes unsustainable, both because beach cleans would need to be carried out on an almost daily basis and because larger objects break up into ever smaller scraps and fragments which get embedded in seaweed and sand and are impossible to dig out.

Global climate change causes sea levels to rise, reducing the area of land that the plastics can be distributed over. It also results in more frequent extreme weather, so that strong winds and tidal surges bring the plastics further and further inland.

In time, the most north-eastern of the Islands become uninhabitable and are evacuated according to the Islands Council emergency plans. In 2038, the Islands Council makes the heart-wrenching decision to use the abandoned islands as “storage sites” – a polite term that everyone knows saves them having to identify them as dumps. This is perhaps the only possible solution for the huge volume of tyres that have built up in various locations around the Islands – tyres that have been critical to both agriculture and transport, but for which there has long been no economically viable disposal route. All the Islands’ waste plastics are shipped there. And with no one to clear the beaches and pick plastics from the tidelines, the winds soon ensure that these islands are covered in an almost unbroken layer of plastic.

Increasingly hot spells of weather start to trigger fires, especially in the tyre dumps. These spread easily through the grasslands of the Islands, resulting in a layer of “vitrified” plastics that coat the ground where the plastic deposits have developed most thickly. A similar phenomenon develops elsewhere across the globe, but

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these Islands have the distinction of remaining uninhabited – and practically unvisited – for centuries. The combination of tyre dumps, peat soils and rhizomes means that fires, once lit, can smoulder for decades, giving rise to toxic fumes and earning the Islands a reputation as a poisoned, cursed place. Initially people stay away for practical reasons – no one wants to wade through melting plastic or risk being caught in one of the sudden more dramatic blazes. Over time, as 21st century civilization crumbles, these rational concerns are replaced with a fear of the Islands themselves, and the dark spirits they harbour.

The ideas and work presented in this booklet depended on creative and practical support from Beachwatch Bute, the Isle of Eigg, the Islay Development Initiative and Greener Orkney.



Future Archaeologies of Marine Litter is a collaboration between the University of Glasgow, the Scottish Islands Federation Marine Litter Working Group and the Solway Firth Partnership.



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