Chapter 4: The Sites

‘Burial sites are traces of ritual processes – expressions of human ideas’

(Larsson 2005: 99)

One of the main challenges of this study was to obtain detailed information on the depositional context of all finds of human remains dating to the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland. Due to the very variable excavation and recording of archaeological sites in this area, the number of Iron Age human remains found has almost certainly been underestimated. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to examine all possible sources of information, from 19th century journals and archives to modern academic texts and websites, to produce as full and up-to-date a list as possible.

In this chapter a regional summary of the 96 sites found within the study area to have produced human remains believed to date to the long Iron Age (800 BC - 800 AD) is provided. A brief description of the number and type of sites, and the extent of the evidence for each region is given. Numbers in brackets following the names of sites refer to their number in the gazetteer, Appendix 1, where a more complete record of each site may be found. Appendix 3 includes full information on all radiocarbon dates obtained for human remains in this study.

Table 4.1 provides basic data on the total number of sites in each region, divided into the two main categories of domestic sites and formal burial sites (other, less frequent site types such as caves are not noted here), and an idea of the quality of data from each region based on excavation dates and the known whereabouts of
human remains. It will be clear from this table how much the information available from each region varies, largely depending on the two factors highlighted in chapter 3; the amount of antiquarian activity and soil preservation conditions.

Table 4.1: Breakdown of sites by region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>No. of sites</th>
<th>Domestic sites</th>
<th>Burial sites</th>
<th>% dug after 1950</th>
<th>% of remains traceable</th>
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<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
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<td>57</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argyll / Inner Isles</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>80</td>
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4.1 Shetland

Seven sites in Shetland have produced Iron Age human remains (Fig. 4.1): three domestic sites, three inhumation sites and one cremation site. Fortunately, the majority of these were excavated relatively recently, and the extent and quality of the information recovered from them is generally good.

Three of the sites, Jarlshof (1), Old Scatness (2) and Scalloway (5), represent settlements on which disarticulated human remains were found. At the multi-period site of Jarlshof a fragment of parietal bone was recovered from a passageway leading
to dwelling V, described in the original report as ‘Late Bronze Age’ (Hamilton 1956: 33-4, 212-3). AMS radiocarbon dating of this fragment to cal. 530-380 BC (see Appendix 3) has, however, confirmed that it was deposited during the Early Iron Age.

At Scalloway a cranium and mandible dated to the Late Iron Age were placed into a post-broch wall (Sharples 1998: 51-2), and at Old Scatness several isolated bones and one partially articulated set of juvenile remains were recovered from the post-occupation rubble and midden layers of abandoned Middle to Late Iron Age buildings, while other areas of this site were still in use (Tucker et al. 2010).

One of several cremations found at the site of Uyea (7) has recently been radiocarbon dated to cal. 790-410 BC (Sheridan 2003). This cremation was placed in a steatite vessel, and is currently the only known example of the continuation of the practice of cremation into the Iron Age in Shetland.

A further two sites in Shetland, Sands of Breckon (3) and Sandwick (4), have produced Late Iron Age inhumations, and it is possible that both sites represent larger burial grounds. The burial rite at these sites, however, does not seem to be uniform. At the Sands of Breckon two skeletons have been found, both in cists; one was excavated in the 1920’s with relatively little recording and the other had apparently been disturbed, making original burial position difficult to determine (Carter and Fraser 1996: 291). At Sandwick one burial was found buried prone within a kerbed cairn (Bigelow 1984), and another was placed into a simple grave cut into the sand over an abandoned Late Iron Age settlement, and accompanied by artifacts including an unusual steatite disc (Lelong and Shearer 2006).
Fig. 4.1: Sites that have produced Iron Age human remains in Shetland

Finally, the site of St Ninian’s Isle (6) off the west coast of mainland Shetland has produced a series of burials on the site of an early Christian chapel. The sequence of these burials was confused by problems in recording and publishing the results of
the original excavation of this site, but has recently been clarified by a modern excavation and radiocarbon dating program which has revealed that three of the burials date to cal. 670-890 AD. These burials are the only possible examples of early Christian inhumation in Shetland, although the burial rite is not traditionally Christian; one was found prone and flexed in a short cist, one extended in a long cist, and one in a grave cut into a midden layer (Barrowman in press).

The number of sites in Shetland where Iron Age human remains have been found is small, but the practices represented in this area, particularly the deposition of fragmented remains on settlement sites throughout the Iron Age and a few inhumation burials in the later Iron Age, seem to reflect wider patterns of the treatment of the dead in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland.

4.2 Orkney

Human remains dating to the period 800 BC - 800 AD have been recovered from a large number of sites in Orkney (Fig. 4.2), in part due to a high concentration of excavation in this region over the last two centuries. Thirteen of the Orcadian sites included in this study were excavated before 1950, and the information that can be drawn from these investigations is limited. The majority of human bones found during this period were never examined and not retained, and the contexts in which they were found were often recorded only in very broad terms.
Fig. 4.2: Sites that have produced Iron Age human remains in Orkney

The information that can be reconstructed from these accounts, however, does provide some clues to patterns in the deposition of human remains. Almost all of the sites excavated in the 19th and early 20th centuries were focused on a central Atlantic roundhouse. The human remains most often recorded were crania or mandibles, found alone at six of the sites, and in several cases apparently purposefully placed; in the enclosure ditch at Midhowe (19)(Callander 1934: 471), in a guard cell at Lingro (18)(Hedges et al. 1987c: 21-2), built into a pillar at Whitehall (31)(Marwick 1927a: 64) and arranged in a careful formation in the souterrain at Rennibister (24)(Marwick 1927b). More complete skeletons seem to have been placed into the rubble of
roundhouses at Green Hill (12) and Ingshowe (16). At Gurness (13), twelve deposits of disarticulated remains were recovered from the central roundhouse and the surrounding broch village, although contextual information is known in only a few cases (Hedges et al. 1987b).

At Netlater (21) and Oxtro (23) cremated human remains were found. The association of the remains at Oxtro with a reported Pictish symbol stone (Petrie 1873: 78) seems to strengthen the idea that these cremations date to the Late Iron Age. The one antiquarian investigation not focused on an Iron Age settlement in Orkney was that of the urned cremation recovered near Stromness (29) in the 18th century, which has recently been radiocarbon dated to cal. 390-600 AD (Sheridan et al. 2005). Another urned cremation recovered at Sebay (26) during ploughing in the 1960s appears to date to the Middle Iron Age (Sheridan 2006: 205). These findings, along with those of Hermsigarth (14, see below), suggest that cremation continued to be practised in Orkney well beyond the end of the Bronze Age.

Of the more recently excavated Iron Age sites, only three, the Howe of Howe (15), Bu (9) and St Boniface (28), have been focused on Atlantic roundhouses. At Howe, a long-lived Iron Age settlement built over a Neolithic tomb, disarticulated human remains and four apparently articulated skeletons were found deposited in the enclosure ditch, in the broch wall core, in a tank under the roundhouse entrance, in the walls and floors of outbuildings and in post-occupation rubble throughout the site sequence (Lorimer 1994: 260-2). At Bu a human limb was found under the outer skin of the roundhouse, articulated remains in the rubble of the roundhouse entrance, skeletal remains representing at least six individuals in the fill of the earth-house, and a few disturbed skeletons higher up in the roundhouse fill (Hedges et al. 1987a: 123-5).
At St Boniface, in contrast, only one set of remains were found; a pair of apparently articulated lower legs and feet in the enclosure ditch (Lowe 1998: 82).

Late Iron Age inhumation burials have been found at seven sites in Orkney: isolated examples at Skaill Bay (26) and Buckquoy (10), two at Skara Brae (27), three at Hermisgarth (14) and Birsay (8), and larger cemeteries at Newark Bay (22) and Westness (30). At Hermisgarth, evidence for cremation pyres and cremated human bone were found near to the cist inhumation, and it has been suggested that this may mean that the two rites were in use simultaneously in some areas of Orkney during the Iron Age (Downes and Morris 1997). At Skara Brae two cist inhumations were placed into the rubble of Bronze Age settlement layers (Childe 1931: 58-60), and on the nearby beach at Skaill a single long cist burial was discovered which has been dated to cal. 550-680 AD (James 1999). At Buckquoy a cist burial dating to cal. 250-660 AD was found next to a Late Iron Age settlement (Ritchie 1978).

Both cist and cairn burials were discovered at Birsay Bay, along with quantities of disarticulated bone believed to result from further disturbed burials. Three skeletons from this site have been found to date to the Late Iron Age, and others to the Norse period (Morris 1989), a phenomenon found again at the cemeteries of Westness and Newark Bay. Westness has provided the largest number of Iron Age formal burials on one site in Atlantic Scotland - twelve of the burials here have been dated to the 5th - 8th centuries AD (Ashmore 2003). At Newark Bay only two of the burials definitely fall within the period under study, thought three others also probably pre-date 800 AD, and the site was later used for a large Norse period cemetery (Barrett et al. 2000b: 6-8). This continuity of some burial grounds in Orkney into the Norse period may have interesting implications for current debates on the nature of the Norse incursions.
The two remaining sites in Orkney seem to represent unusual or exceptional practices, and both have been identified as specialised ritual sites, a phenomenon previously unrecognised in the Scottish Iron Age. At Mine Howe (20), an apparently formal inhumation with metal toe-rings and an antler iron-working object was found under the floor of a workshop. A second, violently killed skeleton was deposited in the midden outside the workshop, an infant cist burial was placed in the enclosure ditch, and further disarticulated human bones were found in several contexts (The Friends of the Orkney Archaeological Trust 2005).

At the Knowe of Skea (17) human remains representing well over one hundred individuals had been placed under and into the walls, floors, and post-occupation fills of several buildings. Activity seems to have been focused around a long-lived central sub-rectangular building (structure A), and the majority of human remains, mainly neonatal or infant skeletons, were placed into the rubble of a Middle Iron Age sub-circular structure (structure H) (Moore and Wilson 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008). This extraordinary site represents the majority of human remains so far recovered from Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, and its importance cannot be overstated, although detailed interpretation must await the completion of post-excavation analysis and publication, and the human remains were not available for analysis in this study.

### 4.3 Caithness

A total of twenty-three sites in Caithness were included in this study (Fig. 4.3). However, the archaeological data from this region is particularly problematic. 78% of
the sites in this area were excavated before 1950, and for many only the most rudimentary stratigraphic or contextual evidence is available. The retention of human remains has been similarly poor; the human remains originally recovered from fifteen of the twenty-three sites have been lost.

As in Orkney, the vast majority of early antiquarian excavations focused on the remains of Atlantic roundhouses. The deposition of articulated corpses within the rubble of abandoned roundhouses seems to have been a common practice in this area, and is known from ten sites: Achingale (32), Borrowston (34), Brounaben (36), Dunbeath (39), the Hill of Works (41), Ousdale (47), Scottag (48), Thrumster (50), Wester (52) and Yarhouse (54). Though no human remains from these sites survive for modern dating, descriptions and a few associated finds of Iron Age artifacts (Anon. 1873, Anderson 1890, Anon. 1894) suggest that deposition took place not long after the roundhouses fell out of use, probably within the Middle or Late Iron Age.

Fig. 4.3: Sites that have produced Iron Age human remains in Caithness
Disarticulated crania or cranial fragments were also discovered during the excavation of roundhouses at Brimsade (35), Hillhead (42), Kettleburn (44), Old Stirkoke (46) and Whitegate (53). AMS radiocarbon dating carried out for this study gave a Middle Iron Age date for the Whitegate fragment (cal. 210-50 BC) and a Late Iron Age date for the Hillhead fragment (cal. 310-440 AD). The cranial fragment from Hillhead had been carefully perforated three times, presumably for use or display, before deposition in the roundhouse entrance (Tress Barry 1902). At the Wag of Forse two human limb bones, one showing use wear, were found buried below the entrance to the circular dwelling (Curle 1948: 21); both have now been dated to the first few centuries AD (see Appendix 3). Post-cranial bone fragments from a single small individual also appear to have been recovered from the roundhouse debris at Skitten (Calder 1947: 144-145) although these were not retained.

Two antiquarian excavations in Caithness focused on Late Iron Age cemeteries, at Ackergill (33) and Keiss (43). At Keiss nine long cist burials under a central mound were recovered, and the nature of the graves, finds and associated symbol stone led the excavator to conclude that these were Late Iron Age in date (Laing 1866). At Ackergill a slightly different rite seems to be represented, with the skeletons of ten individuals inhumed under three kerbed cairns, in a variety of positions and orientations. Again, the nature of the burials was the primary reason given for their identification as Iron Age by the excavator (Edwards 1926), but support for this conclusion was provided by the recent radiocarbon dating of human remains disturbed from this site during modern construction work to cal. 332-408 AD (Heawood 2004). An isolated cist burial thought to be Late Iron Age in date was also found just south of Freswick broch (40) (Morris et al. 1996).
Turning to the few more recently examined sites, the Atlantic roundhouse at Crosskirk (38) was excavated in the 1960s-1970s (Fairhurst 1984), revealing a unique seated burial placed within one of the roundhouse outbuildings, as well as a perforated ‘whorl’ made from a human femur head (now dated to cal. 330-540 AD and cal. 130-340 AD respectively). Fragments of human bone were also recovered from early Iron Age layers at Cnoc Stanger (37)(Mercer 1996: 164, 168). Lower Dounreay (45), the location of the modern Dounreay Atomic Establishment, is thought to have been the site of a Late Iron Age cemetery. During excavations in 1956-8 several cist burials were discovered, along with one perforated cranial fragment, overlying an Early Iron Age settlement (The Ministry of Works 1956). Both the perforated fragment and one of the burials from this site have now been AMS dated to cal. 630-780 AD.

Finally, the broch tower at Whitegate (53) has recently been re-excavated, resulting in the discovery of previously unexcavated chambers and cells, including one filled with animal and human bone and overlain by an articulated human limb and cranium (Heald et al. 2006, 2008). This excavation was carried out as part of the Caithness Archaeological Project, a wider program of archive reanalysis and excavation in this area, which it is hoped will produce more finds of Iron Age human remains and contribute further much-needed modern data from this region.

4.4 Sutherland

Iron Age human remains have been recovered from only seven sites in Sutherland to date (Fig. 4.4), but these sites are relatively well recorded, represent a range of
traditions and divide into three clear groups.

First are the three Atlantic roundhouse sites of Carn Liath (55), Carrol (56) and Kintradwell (59) in south-east Sutherland, all of which were excavated in the 19th century by a team led by the Duke of Sutherland and the Rev. R. Joass (1890). At Carn Liath a partial skeleton, of which only the calvarium was retained, was found in the rubble on the scarcement ledge, and at Carrol two crania were originally recovered, though both have since been lost. The broch tower at Kintradwell seems to have been used for the deposition of human remains over a considerable period of time: skulls and partial skeletons from around 14 individuals were recorded during the excavation, placed within the central tower or in outbuildings (Joass 1890). Four of the crania from this site, and the post-cranial remains of a skeleton found on the links nearby, were identified by the author as those currently held in the Dunrobin Castle Museum, and one of the skulls from the broch interior has now been dated to cal. 80-260 AD.

Formal cist graves have been found in Dairy Park (57) and in the grounds of Dunrobin Castle (58). The cist burials found at these sites are geographically close to each other, related in terms of burial rite (extended in stone cists, and associated with Pictish symbol stones), and probably chronologically close: the Dairy Park skeleton was radiocarbon dated to cal. 525-725 AD (Close-Brooks 1980), and the class 1 symbol stone found covering the double cist burial at Dunrobin Castle (Ross 1854) is thought to be similar in date.
The third pair of sites in Sutherland, and the most recently excavated, are the cairn inhumations excavated by GUARD in 2000 and 2004 at Loch Borralie (60) and Sangobeg (61) in north west Sutherland. At Loch Borralie, two skeletons were placed under a cairn (MacGregor et al. 2003), and at Sangobeg a single flexed inhumation was found (Batey 2005). Again, these burials are geographically close and it seems likely that they represent a related burial rite. The radiocarbon dates for the skeletons from these two sites are also nearly contemporary, focused around the turn of the millennium (see Appendix 3), making these some of the earliest Iron Age formal burials recovered so far from Atlantic Scotland; the only contemporary formal burials from this period are found in the nearby Western Isles (see below).
Though few in number, the Sutherland sites provide an interesting comparison with the Caithness evidence. Cranial fragments and entire bodies are again deposited into abandoned Atlantic roundhouses, but the inhumations found in this area are unusual, the two western cairn burials being among the earliest known in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, and the two eastern cist burials representing an apparently regional rite of isolated cist burial accompanied by a Pictish symbol stone.

4.5 The Western Isles

Iron Age human remains have been recovered from twenty-five sites in the Western Isles (Fig. 4.5), and almost all are from relatively modern excavations. The majority of these human remains have been retained, and radiocarbon dates are available for remains from fourteen of the sites. Iron Age inhumations are particularly well represented in this region, having been found at 15 sites. Clearly, the Western Isles provide a large quantity of useful material on the treatment of the dead in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, and it is unsurprising that this area has been the focus of most previous discussions of this subject (e.g. Mulville et al. 2003, Armit 1996).

The deposition of human remains on Iron Age settlements is again represented in the Western Isles, although this practice does not appear to have been as common as in Orkney and Caithness (Armit and Ginn 2007: 116). The Late Bronze Age to Iron Age site of Cladh Hallan (70), which has provided spectacular evidence for the retention and deposition of human remains in the Late Bronze Age (Parker Pearson et al. 2005) has also produced a few fragments of disarticulated Iron Age human bone. A
greater quantity of disarticulated bones was recovered from the long-lived settlement at Dun Vulan (73) (Parker Pearson and Sharples 1999), and radiocarbon dating of the human remains from this site suggests that some human bones were retained for centuries before their deposition within the settlement (Mulville et al. 2003: 23-4).

Fig. 4.5: Sites that have produced Iron Age human remains in the Western Isles
Disarticulated remains seem to have been more frequently deposited in wheelhouses, a Middle Iron Age settlement form most commonly found in the Western Isles. Three cranial fragments, one of which was perforated, and a tibial fragment were deposited at Cnip (71)(Armit 2006b). Another tibial fragment was found in one of the cells of a wheelhouse at Bruach A’ Tuath (67)(Goldberg pers. comm.) and a single cranial fragment was found in a midden layer at Cill Donnain (68)(Mulville et al. 2003: 25). The remains of several individuals also appear to have been deposited into the rubble of wheelhouses at the Udal (85)(Crawford 1978: 1980), although the data from this site remains unpublished.

A particularly unusual set of human remains were found at Hornish Point (77), a wheelhouse-type structure where the disarticulated partial skeleton of a juvenile was placed in four pits below one of the piers of the building, along with butchered animal remains (Barber et al. 1989; James and McCullagh 2003). The recent excavation of a wheelhouse at Sloc Sabhaidh (82) revealed a further example of human bone deposited alongside faunal material; a human mandible had been placed over a deposit of partially cremated animal bone (Rennell and McHardy 2008: 15). Interestingly, unlike in Orkney and Caithness, complete, articulated skeletons have not been recovered from settlement sites in the Western Isles.

Modern radiocarbon dating has resulted in an increasing number of inhumations have being assigned to the Iron Age throughout the Western Isles. Isolated cist burials have been recovered from Barvas on Lewis (66), Griminish (75) and Vallay (86) on North Uist and Druimsdale Machair (72) and Cille Pheadair on South Uist (69). The Cille Pheadair skeleton was buried under a square kerbed cairn, comparable to examples from Caithness and further south on the mainland, and appears to have
been disturbed after burial, with the sternum removed (Mulville et al. 2003: 25-6). At the sites of Ardvichar (65), Habost (76), Pollochar (80), Scarista (81) and Swainbost (84) uncistred burials have been discovered eroding out the machair, and a single juvenile burial accompanied by Iron Age pottery was found at Stornoway Airport (83)(Armit 1996: 153). All except this last burial were identified as Iron Age only by radiocarbon dating, and the date range represented is wide, spanning most of the long Iron Age from the 4th century BC to the 8th century AD (see Appendix 3). Isolated inhumation seems therefore to have been a long-lived, if infrequent, tradition.

Small groups of inhumations have also been recovered, from Galson on Lewis, Northton on Harris (79), A’Ceardach Ruadh on Baleshare (62) and An Corran on Boreray (63). The association between burials discovered at different times at A’Ceardach Ruadh is unclear (Macleod 2001; James and Duffy 2003), and only two entire individuals were represented at Northton (Simpson et al. 2006) and An Corran (Badcock and Downes 2000), though the former site contained the partial remains of two further individuals placed into one of the graves. The site of Galson (74), however, has produced enough individual inhumations (at least eleven to date) to be called a cemetery, the only known example in the Western Isles during the long Iron Age. Six dated burials from this site all fall into the first half of the first millennium AD (Neighbour et al. 2000).

Cremation burials believed to date to the Middle Iron Age have been recovered at Barvas (66) along with an inhumation burial (Macleod 2000), suggesting a similar contemporaneity of the two rites to that found at Hermisgarth in Orkney. Two disturbed cremation burials, originally placed in cists, were also found at Loch Paible in North Uist (78) in 2005, and have been radiocarbon dated to cal. 790-410 BC (Toolis
2006), and it is also possible that the human teeth found in a ‘burnt mound’ at An Dunan (64) represent the results of cremation of the dead (Gilmour 2002: 59).

The data-set from the Western Isles is undoubtedly the strongest in Atlantic Scotland, with 96% of the 25 sites in this area producing good, usable information. Whether inhumation was truly more widespread in this area, or whether it simply appears this way due to the greater extent of modern excavation in the region is a difficult question. Many of the practices represented in the Western Isles, such as deposition of fragmentary remains on settlements (in the Western Isles especially on wheelhouses) and an overlapping variety of inhumation traditions moving into the first millennium AD, can still best be examined within the wider funerary landscape of Atlantic Scotland.

4.6 Argyll, Skye and the Inner Isles

Argyll, Skye and the Inner Isles represent a large and diverse geographical area, but are examined together in this study largely due to the rarity of finds of Iron Age human remains. Just ten sites are known from this region (Fig. 4.6), and these provide very varied evidence. The soil conditions in mainland Argyll are not conducive to the preservation of human bone (Ritchie 2002: 84), and this may partially account for the lack of finds in this area – only cremated remains have survived from the mainland sites.
Fig. 4.6: Sites that have produced Iron Age human remains in Argyll and the Inner Isles
The only Atlantic roundhouse settlement included from this area is Dun Mor Vaul on Tiree (89). A deposit of disarticulated human bones placed within the broch tower some time after the abandonment of this structure (Mackie 1974: 214) has recently been re-dated to cal. 650-780 AD, and it is possible that a second skeleton found higher up in the rubble may also date to the Late Iron Age. Fiskavaig (90), a rock shelter on Skye, has produced a single perforated cranial fragment similar to the examples from Cnip, Lower Dounreay and Hillhead (Birch 2009).

Iron Age cremation burials have been found at three sites. The charcoal from a cremation in Morvern (93) was dated to the Middle Iron Age (Ritchie and Thornber 1988), and a cremation pit dug into a Bronze Age burial mound at Cleigh (88) was found to be Late Iron Age (Gilmour and Henderson 1997). Two urned cremations were recovered at Sanaigmhor on Islay (94), one in a cist and one under a cairn, and the human bones from these contexts were dated respectively to cal. 409-210 BC and cal. 250-530 AD (Cook 1999). These finds suggest that cremation may have continued to be practised in some areas of Argyll and the Inner Isles throughout the Iron Age, and raise the possibility that further examples have been missed.

Iron Age human remains have also been recovered from two cave sites, one in Argyll and one in Skye. At MacArthur Cave in Oban (92) the remains of at least four individuals were recovered (Saville and Hallen 1994). The clearing out of this site occurred in the 19th century, and it is no longer certain whether the skeletons were articulated. Several bones from this site show gnaw marks (see Appendix 2) and the skeletons may therefore have lain unprotected and been disturbed. Human bones from this site have been radiocarbon dated within a wide range in the first millennium BC (Saville and Hallen 1994: 719).
At High Pasture Cave on Skye (91) a quite different depositional event occurred. The body of a woman, radiocarbon dated to cal. 50 BC-230 AD, was placed onto the stairway before the cave was sealed, along with the remains of a neonate and a foetus, and further neonatal remains were recovered from the stairway lower down in the cave (Birch 2006). These unusual cave deposits are perhaps most easily compared with finds of Iron Age human remains in other British caves, such as the Late Iron Age decapitated human remains found in Sculptor’s Cave, Covesea (Armit and Schulting 2007, Armit et al. in press).

As one of the first centres of Christianity in Scotland, it might be expected that Argyll and particularly the Inner Isles would produce early Christian churchyard burials, but the poor preservation of human bone in this area has to date made the identification of such burials difficult. The three most convincing examples are St Ronan’s on Iona (96) (O’Sullivan 1994) and Ardnadam in Argyll (87) (Rennie 1984), where dug features identified as graves (although with no surviving bone) surrounded early churches, and St Ninian’s Point on Bute (95), where a variety of inhumations were found around an early Christian chapel. The excavator of St Ninian’s believed that some of the burials were pre-Christian based on the burial rite, but interpreted the stratigraphically later west-east inhumations as those of Christians (Aitken 1955). Although these three sites represent likely pre-800 AD churchyards, the lack of surviving bone for modern dating unfortunately means that the date of the earliest Christian burials in Atlantic Scotland remains unknown.
4.7 Summary

In total, Iron Age human remains have now been identified at 96 sites in Atlantic Scotland. This number of sites, and the remains of the over 300 individuals recovered from them, can obviously still only represent a tiny minority of the dead of Atlantic Scotland over the 1600 year period under study. These sites are also widely and unevenly dispersed both geographically and chronologically, and seem to represent an extraordinary variety of funerary treatments and uses of human remains within the landscape. Nevertheless, these sites provide a much more extensive data-set than previous discussions of the treatment of human remains in the long Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland would suggest.

Nearly half (47) of the sites included are domestic sites on which human remains were placed, either as disarticulated remains or as entire skeletons, during the construction or use of the site or after it had been abandoned. This practice is found throughout the long Iron Age, and throughout the study area. Four further sites - Mine Howe and Knowe of Skea in Orkney, MacArthur Cave in Argyll and High Pasture Cave on Skye - reveal a tantalising glimpse of Iron Age ritual life beyond that shown on domestic sites, and suggest that human remains, in these cases generally entire bodies, were again a vital part of these activities.

Inhumation burials have so far been recovered from 35 sites. These mostly date to the 1st millennium AD but stretch over a long period and show little uniformity even at a regional level, and there is no evidence that this burial rite bears any relation to the introduction of Christianity to Atlantic Scotland in the late 6th or early 7th century AD. Finally, cremations probably dating to the Iron Age have now been identified at 12
sites in Atlantic Scotland, and it seems likely that many more examples have been missed due to a lack of direct dating and the assumption that cremation was not an Iron Age tradition.

To make more sense of this mass of sites and data, it is first necessary to look more closely at the evidence offered by the human remains themselves. Who were the individuals whose remains were deposited on settlement sites, used in domestic or non-domestic ritual, inhumed or cremated? What might have occurred in their lives or deaths that made them suitable candidates for these very different and apparently minority funerary rites? What more can their bones reveal about the way these individuals were treated upon and after death and deposition? These questions will be the focus of the following chapter.