Build 'N' Burn: using fire to create memorable learning experiences for the public

Kenneth Brophy, Corinna Goeckeritz & Gavin MacGregor



Figure 1. The timber circle on fire during the first 'Burning the Circle' event in summer 2013 (photograph: Steven Watt).

To communicate a sense of what it was like to live in the prehistoric past to broad audiences has always been difficult. In response to this challenge, we have developed a methodology to create memorable and exciting events: 'Build 'N' Burn'. Working in collaboration with local partners and artists, we have designed and delivered three such events in different locations in Scotland. Each has been free for the public to attend and has combined experimental archaeology with entertainment and spectacle. The events involve the building—and burning—of timber structures that either replicate or evoke local prehistoric sites, accompanied by information, storytelling, performance and music. In this way, we have attempted to offer a visceral sense of what Neolithic and Bronze Age ceremonies may have been like, and also generated genuinely memorable and potent spectacles for those who witness them.

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Figure 2. Poster advertising the 2014 event, with branding and sponsorship evident (poster created by Ingrid Shearer).

Archaeologists have long recognised the power and impact of fire on human societies, and this is increasingly the case with Neolithic studies. For instance, Gordon Noble (2006) has discussed the ways in which the burning of timber monuments and buildings during the Scottish Neolithic created 'flashbulb memories' that would have been recalled by individuals and through oral tradition for generations after the conflagration died down. In looking for exciting and visceral ways to engage with the general public, to educate and entertain, we decided to stage experimental firing events to create our own flashbulb memories. To do this, we design and build wooden structures, and then burn them down at dusk in front of a public audience (Figure 1). Participants and spectators learn through bodily and sensory engagement rather than conventional lectures, although factual information is imparted during the lead up to, and the evening of, each event.

Our first two events were entitled 'Burning the Circle' (2013–2014) and took place on the island of Arran (Figure 2). The third, part of a festival to celebrate the Scottish antiquarian Joseph Anderson, was called 'The mysteries of prehistories' (2015), held in Caithness in the Highlands. In each case, the Build 'N' Burn event was the culmination of extensive research and planning, and was preceded by a week of building and preparatory activities involving the public and school children. On the day of each Build 'N' Burn, a

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prehistoric festival was held involving a range of craft specialists, whose work was incorporated into the burning events. The latter permitted experimental techniques such as pot-firing within a cremation-pyre structure (Figure 3), post-carving with replica Bronze Age tools and decoration of wooden posts with natural pigments and dyes.



Figure 3. The morning after … a complete pot fired in one of the cremation pyres during our 2014 event; the pot was made by Graham Taylor (photograph: Kenneth Brophy).

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Figure 4. Pyres being constructed in advance of our second Arran 'Build 'N' Burn' event, in September 2014; this took place within the charred remnants of the original timber circle (photograph: Kenneth Brophy).

Our construction projects also have a 'soft' experimental edge. The timber circle we built on Arran in 2013 was based on one excavated on the island at Machrie Moor, while the pyres we constructed the following year (Figure 4) drew on experimental cremations undertaken by others (e.g. Marshall 2011). In Caithness, a timber façade was constructed that evoked megalithic equivalents in the Yarrows landscape. In each case, we made some use of authentic tools and techniques, but also had to balance this experimentation with time constraints and health and safety considerations. The resulting monuments could not be considered completely authentic, but this does not preclude the possibility of useful observations about the processes of construction and burning. Careful recording of the fire site after the events has also allowed a number of taphonomic implications to be noted regarding the interpretation and excavation of features on prehistoric sites.

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Figure 5. Joseph Anderson (played by Alex Carnes) addresses the audience during our Caithness event in 2015, with the decorated timber tomb façade as a spectacular backdrop (photograph: Gavin MacGregor).

The role of spectacle in creating memorable learning experiences was enhanced by the choice of spectacular building locations: on a hillside overlooking the Firth of Clyde, in the shadow of Goat Fell on Arran and on the shore of the Loch of Yarrows in Caithness. This kind of stage management echoes the way in which monuments were probably located during prehistory. The careful choreography continues during each event, with the fires lit in relation to sunset or the lunar cycle. The burning of cremation pyres at Arran in 2014 was preceded with an hour-long 'walk with the shaman' where the public participated in a journey from the beach to the timber circle, experiencing various performances *en route*. The Caithness façade burning took place after a scripted and choreographed performance involving a shaman on a boat, scientists in lab coats and a local storyteller, while the evening was compered by a team member playing the role of the antiquarian Joseph Anderson (Figure 5).

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Figure 6. The conflagration of the Caithness tomb façade at dusk: creating our own flashbulb memories? (Photograph: Alex Carnes.)

Unlike traditional experimental archaeology, our Build 'N' Burn events are designed specifically to create experiences. We assess the visceral impact of the heat, sound and light that is produced by big burning events lasting several hours on participants and spectators. This is captured through conversation, observation, photography, video, social media coverage and feedback. Such burning events in prehistory would have been redolent with emotion, fear, danger, liminality and chaos—but also anticipation, excitement and exhilaration; all of these were evident in our modern audiences (Figure 6).

The possibility of evoking the power, and creating memories, of burning events—the like of which would have been central to life in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages—suggests that Build 'N' Burn has huge potential as an educational tool, and we intend to continue to evolve our methodology and the scale of our events in the coming years.

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Authors and collaborators

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*Authors for correspondence

- **Kenneth Brophy***
  School of Humanities, Gregory Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK (Email: kenny.brophy@glasgow.ac.uk)
- **Corinna Goeckeritz**
  Countryside Centre, Brodick Castle and Country Park, Brodick, Isle of Arran KA27 8HY, UK
- **Gavin MacGregor**
  Northlight Heritage, Studio 406, South Block, 64 Osborne Street, Glasgow G1 5QH, UK (Email: gmacgregor@yorkat.co.uk)

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