

# EXCAVATIONS AT CLARKLY HILL, ROSEISLE, MORAY 2011

## INTERIM REPORT

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## Introduction

Clarkly Hill forms the western end of a prominent east-west ridge about a kilometre south-east from Burghead (fig 1). An Iron Age glass bead was found in a cairn on the hilltop, but no other archaeology was known in the area until Alistair McPherson began a metal-detecting survey. Somewhat to his surprise, he found a Roman brooch fragment; more intensive survey over the following years produced a wide range of finds from the fields on the south side of Clarkly Hill, ranging east as far as the minor road to Cummington. Medieval and later finds are widely scattered over this area, but later prehistoric and Roman finds focus strongly along a low terrace at the foot of Clarkly Hill, at an altitude of 20 m. A modern tree plantation obscures the topography, but this terrace sits above the former loch of Roseisle, now drained and converted to agricultural use. Early maps show a channel connecting this loch to the sea; mills along it suggest this was probably an artificial channel from a freshwater loch. The extent of the loch diminishes on successive maps. Its extent in prehistory is unknown; there are no strong grounds for believing that it met up with Spynie Loch to the east, although the necessary research has not been done. However, the low-lying land between the two lochs was probably damp. A number of later prehistoric settlements are known in the area, while the terrace on which the site lies forms the end of a gentle valley between the hills of Clarkly and Tappoch, the latter with a prominent Bronze Age cairn on its summit; a souterrain known higher up the valley represents the nearest known Iron Age site.

The finds from detecting and fieldwalking give us our best overview of the field's history at the moment. This stretches back to the Neolithic period, with a scatter of flints. The oldest metal object is a piece of late Bronze Age horse-shoe-shaped "ring money" (c. 1000-800 BC) in gold-coated bronze, which would have been a body ornament (fig 2). Iron Age and Roman finds concentrate at the south-eastern end of the field. This includes a scatter of *denarii*, Roman silver coins, from a dispersed hoard (fig 3). A weekend of trial excavation in November 2008 recovered many more *denarii* and showed that the hoard had been scattered in antiquity, since they came from an ancient ploughsoil which overlay the archaeological features. Over 60 *denarii* are now recorded, the latest of the 190s AD. Other finds from this layer were exclusively Iron Age or Roman, and included a few Roman bronze coins. Two of these were corroded together, suggesting the presence of a second hoard – silver and bronze are rarely hoarded together, and the bronze coins are older, the latest so far being of Antoninus Pius.

The finds and the trial excavation showed this was a site of major potential. In 2009 and 2010, Dr Tessa Poller and Carmen Cuenca-Garcia of Glasgow University undertook a magnetometer survey of most of the terrace (fig 4). This produced a wonderful picture of what lay beneath the soil. Underneath the traces of medieval rig-and-furrow (forming stripes across the plot) and more recent cultivation, is a series of at least eight circular features. These are interpreted as roundhouses, some with surrounding enclosures. The north-western end of the field is mostly sterile, but it is likely that the settlement extends into the woodland to the south-west of the site (towards the terrace edge), covering an area of c. 400 x 100 m.

These promising results made it very worthwhile to do a fuller evaluation of the site, and thanks to funding from the late Ian Keillar, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the National Museums Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service and the Moray Field Club, excavations took place from 24

July to 7 August 2011. Apart from the importance of the site, it also fits into wider research topics. For over a decade, the National Museum excavated at Birnie, just to the south of Elgin, which appears similar in many respects, with its rich Iron Age finds and evidence of Roman contact. Was Clarkly Hill a comparable site, and if so, what can this tell us about the frequency and nature of these power centres on the Moray littoral? What kind of society gave rise to these? Clarkly also provides a further chance to investigate the setting of a denarius hoard, and help to put these important finds into context. There is also the question of its proximity to the Pictish centre at Burghead: can it help to cast light on developments into the Pictish period?

These concerns frame the broader research strategy. The specific aims of the 2011 season were threefold:

- To investigate the setting of the hoard.
- To confirm if the circular structures were indeed roundhouses.
- To clarify the nature of a major highly-magnetic linear anomaly on the northern edge of the site.

Trench A (20 x 20 m) was located over the scatter of *denarii*, reopening much of the 2008 trench. Trench B (16 x 20 m) was placed over a circular structure lying to its south-west, which showed signs of a ring-ditch. Trench C (5 x 20 m) ran across the magnetic anomaly (fig 5). All deposits below the ancient ploughsoil were 100% sieved to either 5 mm or 8 mm, and Alistair McPherson metal-detected the trenches during and after stripping, marking targets for excavation. This led to the recovery of large numbers of metal objects, especially from the old ploughsoil.

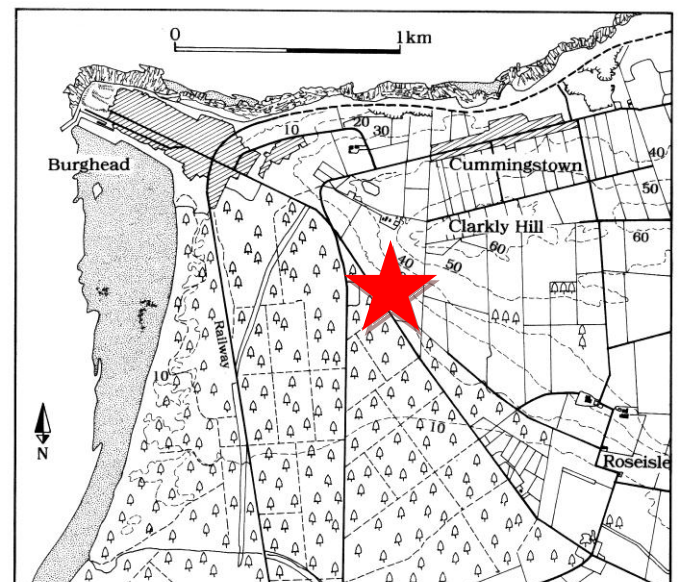
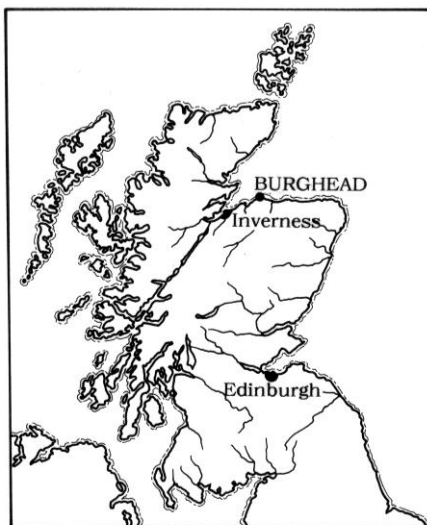


Fig 1: location of Clarkly Hill



Fig 2: late Bronze Age 'ring money'  
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Fig 3: some of the Roman *denarii*

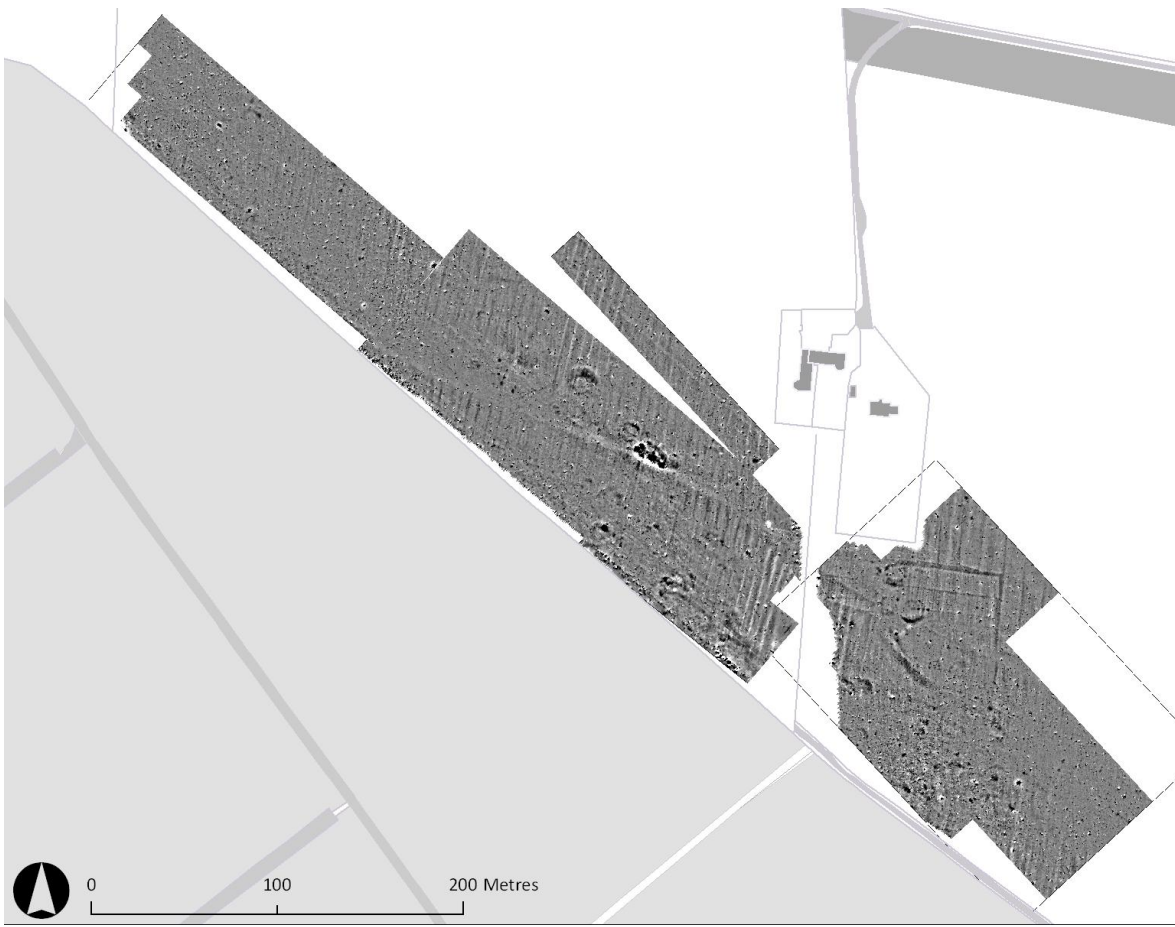


Fig 4: magnetometry survey (by Tessa Poller)

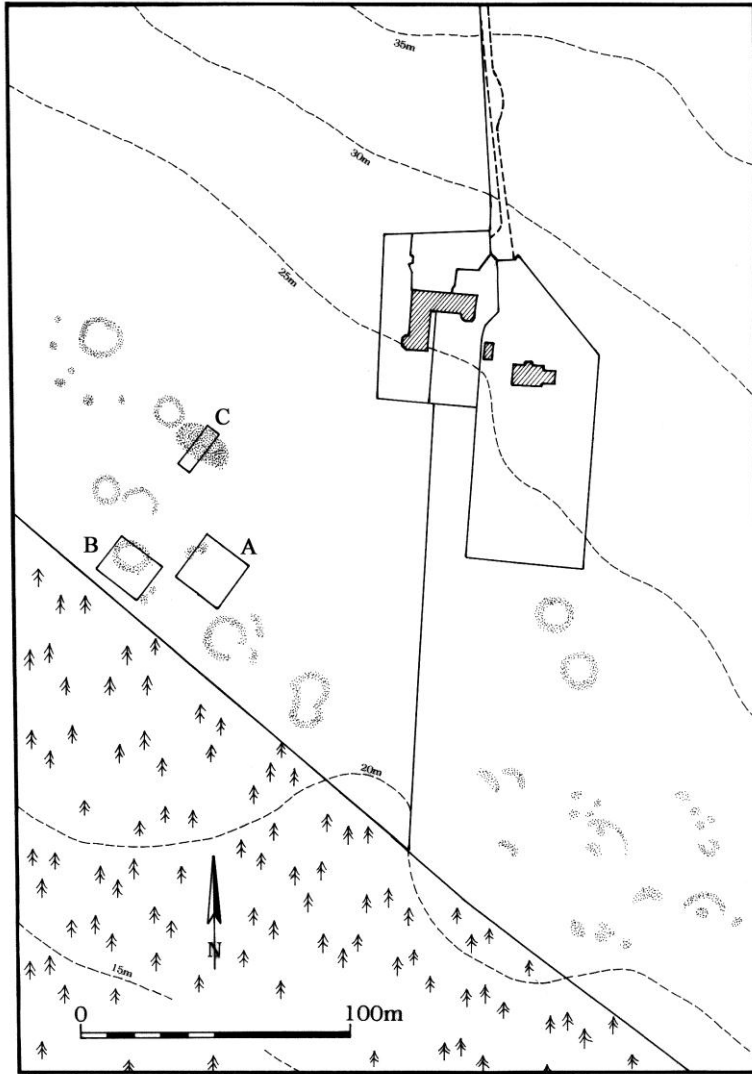


Fig 5: 2011 trench locations (drawn by Alan Braby)

Post-medieval and recent agricultural history of the Roseisle area

Before looking at the results, it is worth considering the more recent history of the area. The former presence of Roseisle loch is one significant factor in understanding why the site lies where it does. The other notable feature of the area are records of devastating coastal sand-blows in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (which buried the burgh of Culbin, a few kilometres to the west). These rendered the area essentially infertile until William Young bought the Inverugie estate and had it trenched to bring up the good underlying soil. This event is seen in the trenches in a layer of wind-blown sand.

### The history of a house (trench B)

Trench B was placed to look at one of the circular features thought to be a roundhouse – but it took a while to reach this, as the trench revealed a complex history. It was initially stripped onto the old ploughsoil, with two alignments of sand-filled furrows clearly visible. Metal-detecting revealed an exciting range of pre-Medieval finds. Most notable were a Romano-British trumpet brooch (fig 6) and items of Celtic art – a range of Iron Age metalwork including a decorated finger ring and a trumpet-shaped mount. There was also the loop of a so-called button-and-loop fastener, used to fasten horse harness, while an iron sickle lay on the surface of the underlying layer.

Once this layer was removed, a series of small trenches were dug into the underlying deposits to get a sample of the trench's story. This revealed evidence of several phases of activity, although many details remain to be clarified.



Fig 6: Romano-British trumpet brooch during excavation

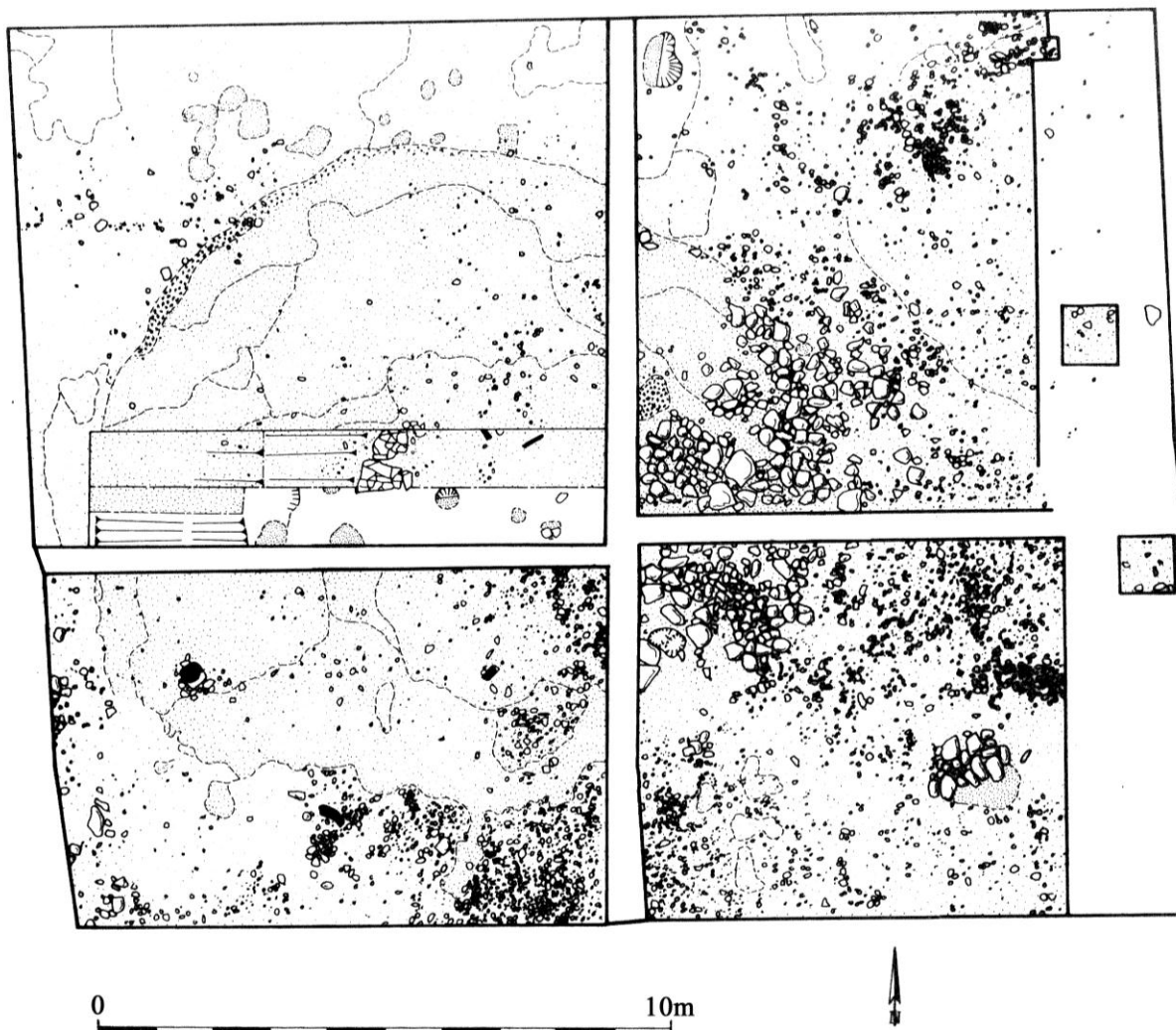


Fig 7: plan of trench B, showing extent of roundhouse and overlying rectangular building and yard (drawn by Alan Braby)

*Phase 1: the ring-ditch house (fig 7-8)*

With removal of the old ploughsoil, the curve of the roundhouse could be seen in parts of the trench, forming a circle some 12.5 m in diameter. The main feature was a so-called ring-ditch, a curving ditch round the edge of the house, just inside the wall. A trial trench showed that this ditch was up to 0.8 m deep and 2.8 m wide, its steep profile suggesting it was deliberately dug out. It is often argued that these ring-ditches come from the stabling of animals over the winter, with the manure scoured out to use as fertiliser, leaving a developing scoop in the building. Most of the structure of the building was hidden by later activity, but a posthole just beside the ring-ditch probably comes from the ring of posts which held up the roof. The house dates to the Iron Age – a typical yellow glass bead of this period was found low in the ditch fill.

*Phase 2: abandonment of the house and later activity*

Two separate sequences of later activity can be seen, one within the ring ditch, the other in the central area. The ring ditch was filled with a very dark charcoal-rich layer. It did not include large fragments of charcoal, and is probably a dump rather than a destruction layer. This is confirmed by a layer of stones within the ditch associated with a dump of bones and shell, which is probably a rough cobbled surface created to consolidate a soft and unstable deposit.

In the central area, two large, flat slabs were seen but not excavated – might these represent a cooking hearth, or even the cover of a grave? A dark charcoal-rich deposit covered the central area. Its nature is still unknown, but it included some notable finds, Most striking were an intact iron sickle and a steatite lamp which had been laid on its surface (fig 9-10). The lamp had been placed there deliberately, resting on a whetstone, with an iron dagger only 0.4 m away, buried in its sheath within the layer (fig 11). These dramatic finds are likely to be deliberate deposits – probably some form of offerings. They date the layer firmly to the Iron Age.



Fig 8: excavations in progress in trench B





Fig 9: the intact iron sickle



Fig 10: the steatite handled lamp

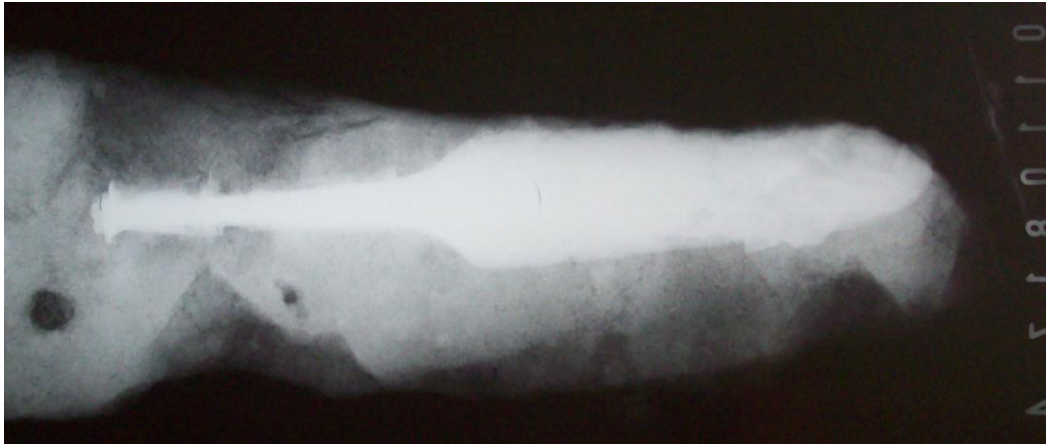


Fig 11: X-ray of the intact dagger

### *Phase 3: features and standing stones*

Cut into this layer were a number of features, most strikingly a series of standing stones. One of them was investigated, and was clearly set into the layer. Another is probably related, and a hole on the opposite edge of the trench might mark where another stone was once placed. These standing stones would have marked out the site of the old house – the stones and the offerings of valued objects suggest it had been turned from a house to a ritual site.

### *Phase 4: a rectangular building platform and cobbled yard*

Just south-east of the trench centre was a rectangular platform (5.6 x 4.4 m) made up of large cobbles. It presumably supported a building. Two possible post-settings were recorded on the northern side, with stones set to form collars for posts some 0.4-0.5 m in diameter. One of them reused a piece of ancient history – a much older cup-marked stone with a rosette pattern, dating back to the Neolithic period. No finds were recovered to give a clue of date or function, apart from a single sherd of later prehistoric pottery. The lack of associated medieval finds makes it tempting to see this as Pictish, but obtaining scientific dating evidence is a priority for future work.

The platform was surrounded by a cobbled surface, made up predominantly of fire-cracked stones. In places a trampled layer survived, showing the yard had seen plenty of use. The cobbles respected the earlier standing stones, and other gaps in their layout might mark areas where there were now-lost features such as wooden structures or turf-built boundary walls.

### *Phase 5: abandonment and ploughing*

Over all this material was an old plough soil. This had disturbed some of the earlier deposits, and dragged finds up into it. The finds ranged from early prehistoric to medieval (with a few sherds of green-glaze); no post-medieval pottery was recovered from secure contexts in this phase, and it seems use of this layer stopped in the medieval period due to the sand-blow.

On the north-eastern side of the trench, under the later sand blow, was an irregular feature, probably a tree-throw or the digging out of a tree. Adjacent to it, a sand-filled pit cut into the underlying levels might have been a stone-robbing hole to remove a standing stone. These are likely to have been attempts to make the area easier to cultivate.

### *Phase 6 and 7: sand blow and Improvement*

This phase of ploughing came to a dramatic end, with a layer of sand being dumped on it by the wind, making it infertile. Attempts to bring the land back into cultivation can be traced in the building of stone drains and the later plough furrows.

### A craft centre (trench C) (fig 12-13)

The geophysical survey showed an intriguing highly magnetic anomaly towards the northern edge of the site. Trench C was positioned to sample this. Underneath the old ploughsoil was a series of dark, charcoal-rich soils packed full of iron-working slag. This is a dump of waste material from the manufacture of iron, and includes both bog ore (obtained probably from the margins of the former loch of Roseisle) and smelting slag. Among the bucketfuls of slag there were also signs of other crafts, notably bronze-casting, as fragments of crucible were found.

These dumps of debris surrounded an industrial structure. A roughly circular spread of clay and stones is likely to be a furnace, although time did not allow full investigation. To one side, a stone setting with a rotary quern built into it this is probably a hearth or another furnace.

The dominant features in the small trench were two hearths with flat slab bases and edge-set smaller stones around the edges (fig 12). One edge of the earlier hearth was reused to build the later one.

Trench C has revealed highly significant remains of an industrial area; dating remains to be clarified, but the disc quern fragments point to a later Iron Age / Early Medieval context. The geophysical remains indicate this was a discrete area of intensive industrial activity; the finds indicate that iron smelting was the main task, with the hearths and the crucible fragments pointing to other activities taking place as well. Such intensive craft activity show that this was a major site with skilled craft-workers.



Fig 12: the two hearths in trench C

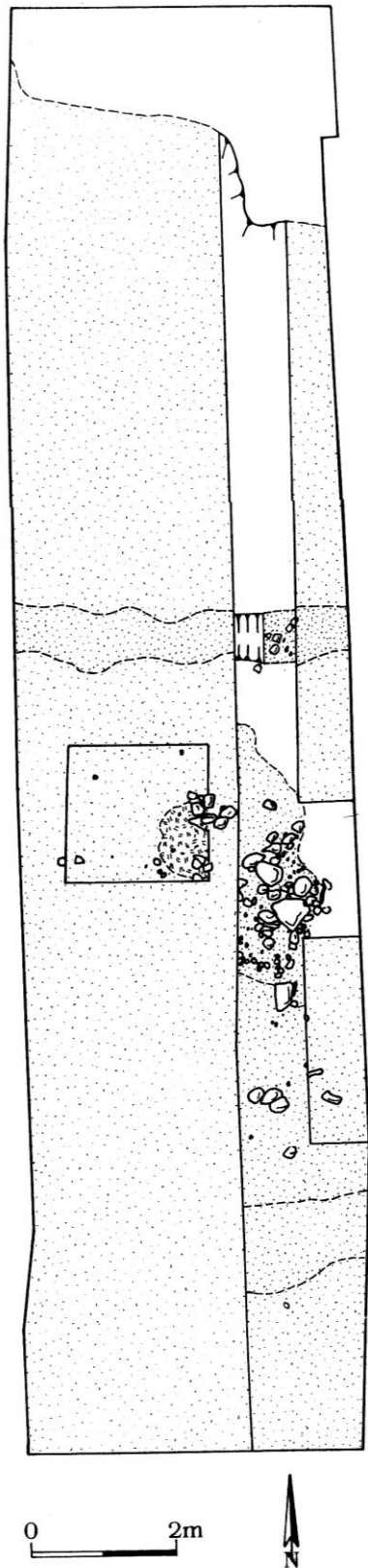


Fig 13: trench C

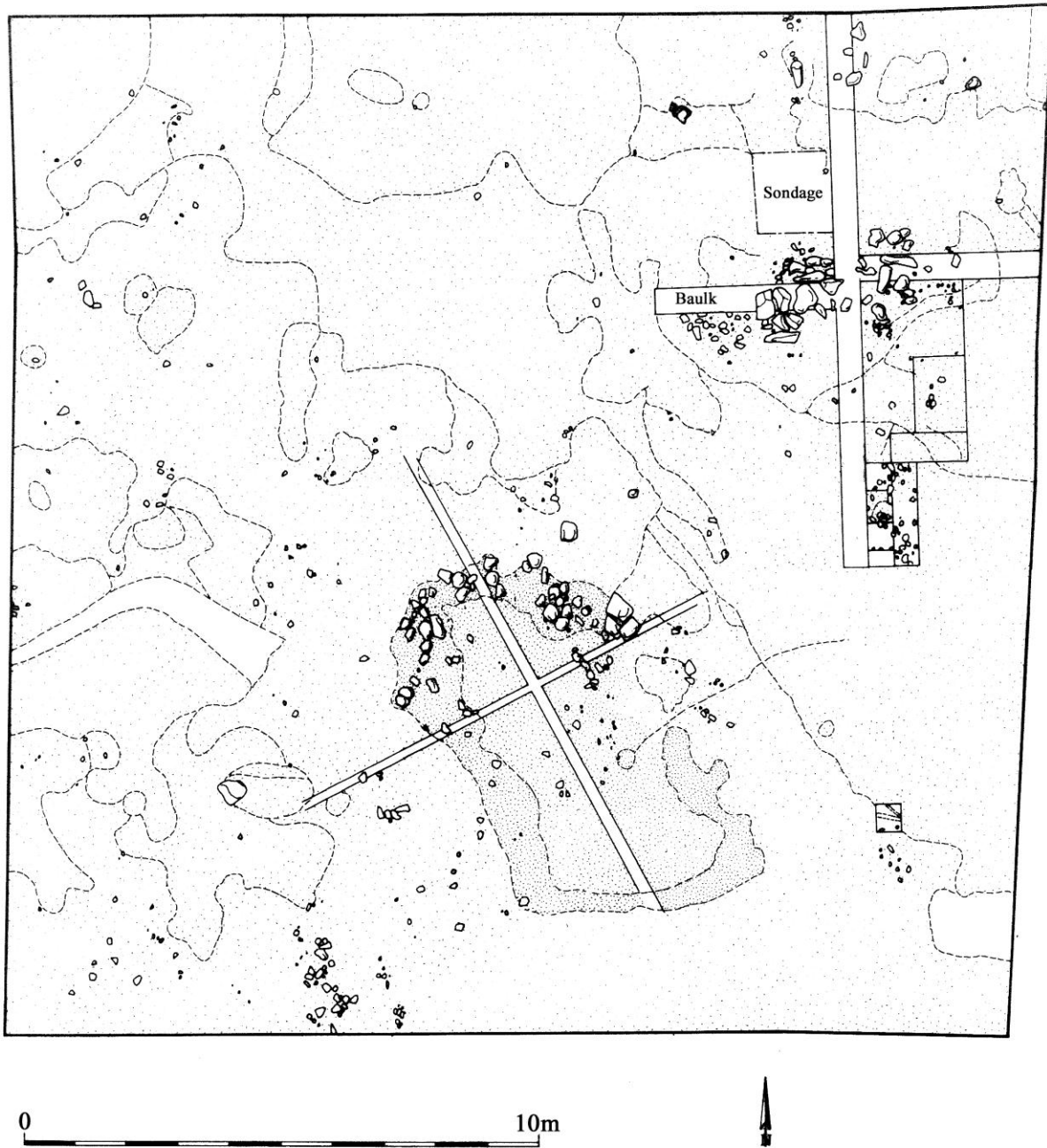


Fig 14: plan of trench A (drawn by Alan Braby)

Around the hoard – a Pictish settlement? (trench A)

Trench A covered the area where the Roman coin spread focussed, and included most of the 2008 trench (fig 14-15). The main aim was to characterise the likely setting of the hoard. The 2008 work had shown that the deposits in this area were well-preserved, and a section through them to the subsoil

confirmed this: under the modern ploughsoil were remains of the wind-blown sand layer, its base corrugated from ploughing; below this was the dark ancient ploughsoil, also with an undulating base from cultivation; beneath this a grey palaeosoil overlay the natural sandy subsoil. Most of the trench was stripped to the level of the ancient ploughsoil, though in places another dark layer was observed.

Upon stripping, three main stone features were visible as well as some variation in layers. Work focussed on the stone features and layers in their vicinity. These layers were very difficult to dig, as they had become homogenised and disturbed by later ploughing; some of the differences were very subtle. The link to the layers showed that the three stone features were not all of the same date.

In the north-east corner of the trench was a structure made up of stones set on edge, running into the trench edge. It was not fully exposed, so was not examined in detail, but its form suggests a cist or a corn-drying kiln. South of this were the remains of a heavy stone floor – an irregular area of large flat slabs with the remains of a hearth on one edge. The floor had been partly robbed out, probably due to later ploughing, and there were no walls to go with it.

The earliest of the stone structures was a U-shaped stone setting, first exposed in 2008. It contained what is probably a rather damaged hearth. The working interpretation is that this is a rectangular building with solid foundations at one end but was otherwise built of (and founded on) turf. Its extent is unclear without further work.



Fig 15: building remains in trench A

## Conclusions

The 2011 work was a highly successful fortnight. It showed that the site is a significant later prehistoric settlement with a considerable depth of history. Survival is excellent because the wind-blown sand layer has masked the earlier remains. Unusually, the soil conditions also allow bone to survive, so we should get a picture of the kinds of animals being kept.

There are remains of two different settlements. One is a settlement of roundhouses, perhaps starting in the late Bronze Age and certainly occupied in the Roman Iron Age, when the inhabitants had privileged access to valued Roman goods. There is a later, more fragmentary settlement of stone buildings. Their dating is still uncertain, but they are sealed by the ancient ploughsoil which in turn is sealed by the post-Medieval wind-blown sand layer. Thus they are medieval at latest, and may be Pictish.

The good survival has also allowed a glimpse of a complex post-occupation sequence of the roundhouse which was examined. There are clear indications of unusual activities, such as the erection of standing stones, which suggest that the old house was turned into a monument or a ceremonial centre. Such activity has only been seen in fragmentary form on other sites, and merits detailed examination.

The puzzling high-magnetic anomaly is an industrial zone on the edge of the settlement, most likely of Iron Age date. Finds indicate both iron smelting and bronze casting, and this seems to be a dedicated industrial area. It is of considerable potential for understanding craft activity at the time.

Work so far has confirmed initial suspicions that this is a significant site, similar to Birnie but with notable differences as well. A second season of fieldwork is planned for July 2012 to obtain more detail of the site sequence.

## Acknowledgements

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