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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2008

Fraser Hunter

Department of Archaeology
National Museums Scotland
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SUMMARY

The 2008 excavations at Birnie (Moray) produced a wide range of excitement, both structural and artefactual. The story of the burnt-down roundhouse (trench D) became increasingly clear, with the smaller underlying roundhouse (c.12.5 m in diameter) more fully exposed and the structure of the later ring-ditch house revealed. A key discovery was that part of the building had been reused prior to its destruction, with structural modifications and intense activity in the south-east of what was by then a fairly ramshackle building. After the fire, a cobbled surface was laid over the area; this may have been a focus for the Pictish activity on the site, as later scooped buildings seem to be ranged around this yard.

Trench AH examined a well-preserved ring-ditch house some 15.5 m in diameter. Unusual features included a monumental double-door entrance, one side of which was closed off or restricted, and a partition separating the entrance passage from the ring ditch. At the end of the house's life, a series of pits was dug across the doorway, with burnt material being deposited in them and in the ring ditch. This is probably a symbolic decommissioning of the structure. This trench also produced our best evidence yet for Pictish buildings. The vestigial remains are best interpreted as floor hollows from two buildings at right angles, with associated features suggesting a cruck roof and a central hearth. A range of striking finds in this trench included a painted pebble, a glass marble or pin head and a short dagger in its sheath.

A return to the area west of the coin hoards finally confirmed that a large ring ditch house lurked there too, with the 2000 hoard directly in front of its blocked doorway. Over this was a series of spreads, rich in charcoal and clay, which probably represent demolition debris from an unrelated later structure in the vicinity; the area was subsequently levelled by coppingling. Elsewhere in the trench, a much smaller post-ring building some 5 m in diameter was found.

In a separate campaign, the medieval corn-drying kiln previously sampled in 2004 was more fully exposed and found to be well-preserved.
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INTRODUCTION

The 2008 excavations at Birnie (Moray) took place from 17th August–12th September, with a team of between 26 and 40 people. The site lies in the valley of the river Lossie, south of Elgin, on a gravel terrace east of the river (figs 1-2; NGR NJ 210 585). Three main trenches were excavated, with the following aims:

- Continued excavation of the burnt-down roundhouse and the smaller house which underlay it (trench D)
- Investigation of a cropmark which looked to be a well-preserved roundhouse (trench AH)
- Continued investigation of deposits to the west of the coin hoards, to establish their nature and see if another roundhouse underlay them (trench AI).

In addition, metal-detecting survey continued and an assessment trench (AJ) was excavated to the east of trench D, in a previously unexamined area, to see what lay there. A programme of outreach activities was also conducted.

The main season was preceded by a small-scale excavation on 27th–29th June, when a team of four tackled a medieval corn-drying kiln which had been noted in an erosion section previously (trench X).
Fig 3: trench D roundhouse plan (at end of 2008 season). Inset (top right) shows current interpretation of post-rings for phase 1 (diamonds) and phase 2 (circles).
THE BURNT-DOWN ROUNDHOUSE (TRENCH D)

Excavation of the burnt-down roundhouse has at times seemed never-ending, but in 2008 the western half (segments 4-6) was completed, with all burnt deposits removed, the underlying features exposed and a good sample of them excavated (fig 3). This clarified the structure and history of the two superimposed houses. Work in the south-east (segment 3) was also mostly completed, with the destruction deposits removed, the post-rings traced and most of the features half-sectioned. This made a key discovery: this part of the house had been repaired and intensively reused prior to its destruction. In segments 1 and 2, cobbled noted in 2008 was revealed to be a slumped cobbled surface. Under this the destruction sequence mirrored that elsewhere, with charcoal-rich basal levels; notable features were a series of large stones, interpreted as roof weights, and a possible burnt structural ring beam.

Phase 1: ring-groove house

The existence of an earlier house underlying the large ring-ditch house had been suspected for some time, but was confirmed securely in 2007. The layout was clarified in 2008, with exposure of around a third of the ring-groove which once held the wall and half of the accompanying structural post-ring. The diameter is currently estimated at c.12.5 m; the entrance lies to the south-east, and it appears that the post-ring is eccentric to the ring-groove.

The ring-groove is made up of a series of straight sections some 6 m long, which suggests the use of prefabricated wattle panels. It might also represent use of sleeper beams, but in segment 5 stake holes were noted in the slot in 2007, and where erosion had removed it the line was continued by individual stake-holes into segment 4. This would be unlikely if a sleeper beam was used, as the stakes would be set in the beam rather than in the ground. At the edge of segment 6A, a short area of double-groove suggests a repair. This did not run into the 1999 section, indicating that erosion of the ring ditch had removed it, while gradual truncation erased it in the S and SE parts of the house. On the SW side a radial partition slot was noted.

Around half of the accompanying post-ring has now been identified in segments 3-6. It was c.6m in diameter and comprised an estimated eleven posts; three are predicted
to lie in segments 1-2, seven have been located (although the segment 3 ones are not certain) and one has been lost due to later erosion of the phase 2 ring ditch. Where excavated, the presence of a post-pipe implies the posts were left to rot in situ rather than being removed (fig 4 I-J, K-L; fig 5 Q-R). It is unclear which internal features can be related to phase 1 as opposed to phase 2.

**Phase 2: ring-ditch house**

The dominant feature of the trench has long been the ring-ditch roundhouse which burnt down. More of its underlying post-ring (c.12 m in diameter) is now visible, with ten of an estimated 13 posts revealed. The entrance is in the E, with a likely doorpost identified just S of the main E-W baulk. Excavated posts all have post-pipes, implying they rotted in situ, with no evidence of replacement or repair (fig 4 E-F; fig 5 U-V, W-X, Y-Z). The presence of the ring ditch suggests a reasonably long life; it is best interpreted as an erosional feature, not least because it wore away much of the sand foundations around all the posts in the western area, leaving only the base of the post in the ground (fig 5 W-X, Y-Z). As noted above it is hard to tie internal features to specific phases, but one small pit produced a glass bangle fragment of first-second century AD date (fig 5 S-T; fig 20a).

**Phase 3: reuse of the ring-ditch house**

Excavation in segment 3 this season revealed why this area had such a rash of pits in contrast to the western half of the building: it had been reused. The full extent of this must await excavation of segments 1-2, but segment 3 saw intense pit-digging predating the destruction horizon. It had been thought this was linked to the main use of the building, but this was problematic as the features appeared to block access to the entrance. The key lay in the long-awaited excavation of enigmatic stone structure F.6271. This was finally half-sectioned, and proved to be a platform set in a scoop which cut into the top of a post-ring posthole; in turn it was overlain by destruction deposits (fig 4 E-F). This implies the posthole of the ring-ditch house rotted and became dangerous, necessitating its replacement with a stone setting (presumably a solid foundation pad for a replacement post). This took place before the structure burnt down.
Fig 4: trench D segment 3 sections.
A-B, phase 3 pits (F:6231, 6246 & 6263)
C-D, phase 3 pit (F:6062)
E-F, phase 2 posthole cutting phase 1 pit, overlain by phase 3 stone setting (F:6271, 6279, 6703)
G-H, phase 3 cooking pit (F:6063)
I-J, phase 1 posthole (F:6251)
K-L, phase 1 posthole (F:6274)
Fig 5: trench D segment 5-6 sections
M-N, phase 1 ring-groove F5269 & earlier feature F6402
O-P, phase 1 ring-groove 5269 and slot 6667
Q-R, feature complex 6671, 6673, 6685 & 6689, including phase 1 posthole
S-T, pit F6690
U-V, phase 2 posthole F6612
W-X, phase 2 posthole F6418
Y-Z, phase 2 posthole F6606
The stone setting over the posthole indicates the complete replacement of the post. Its neighbour to the south also went out of use but was not replaced, with a series of pits dug through it. Contrastingly, other excavated posts show no replacement or destruction. This might imply the roundhouse did not have a classic ring-beam linking its posts, as its integrity would be compromised if one post was entirely replaced and one was lost. Does this indicate a different structure type, such as a ridge-pole construction? Or does this represent reuse of only part of the house, after much had already collapsed?

The nature of this activity is unclear, but involved the digging and re-digging of lots of pits (e.g. fig 4 A-B, C-D). Only in one case can an interpretation currently be suggested: F.6063 was a cooking pit, with fire-cracked stone in its fill, and it was routinely accessed from the W, where an erosion hollow was created by habitual use (fig 4 G-H).

Phase 4: destruction of the house
The destruction levels have been the main focus of work in the last few years. This was finally completed in segments 3-6 in 2008. In segments 1-2, which are at a much higher level, the burnt turfs of the roof were excavated. Under this a linear charcoal feature may represent a collapsed ring beam from the roof, while a series of near-equidistant substantial boulders resting within the roof turf on the inner edge of the ring ditch are interpreted as roof weights.

Phase 5: a later yard
In 2007 it was speculated that vague cobbled alignments noted in segments 1-2 were the vestigial cobbles foundations of a rectilinear building. In the event, this proved fanciful: they were simply the upper edges of a more extensive cobbled surface which had slumped into the ring ditch. This is interpreted as a yard surface laid after the destruction of the underlying building. As the underlying turf layers are artefactually barren, finds from this cobbling ought to date from its deposition and use; examples from previous seasons include a sherd of Roman pottery and yellow glass beads, suggesting a Roman Iron Age date. Its extent is inevitably unknown, as it is only preserved in patches where it has slumped into earlier deposits. However, it is notable
that the sub-oval (?Pictish) buildings tend to focus around this area – perhaps this was the central courtyard of the settlement.

Conclusions

The sequence in the burnt-down roundhouse (trench D) is becoming clear. There is a little earlier activity, but the key phases are as follows.

1. Construction and use of a relatively small post-ring roundhouse with a partially-surviving ring groove (c.12.5 m D)
2. Construction and use of a large ring-ditch roundhouse.
3. Reuse of the south-east part of the building prior to its destruction, with structural modifications and intense activity. This suggests partial repair and reuse of one area.
4. Burning down and collapse of the building.
5. After the fire, a cobbled surface was lain over the area; this may have been a focus for Pictish activity on the site, as various small oval structures congregate around it.
Fig 6: trench AH plan
Fig 7: trench AH, sections of roundhouse baulks (A-D) and scoop in SE corner (E-F)
Fig 8: trench AH sections

G-H, F6519, 6520, 6522 posthole sequence which produced painted pebble

I-J-K, F6503, 6373, 6333, 6374 post-ring posthole and other features

L-M, F6530 pit which produced gold and glass bead

N-O, F6511 ring ditch

P-Q, F6008 hearth

R-S, F6510 slot
3 FROM IRON AGE ROUNDHOUSE TO PICTISH BUILDINGS
(TRENCH AH)

Aerial photographs reveal a solid circular disc interpreted as a well-preserved roundhouse with overlying deposits masking its structure. This suggestion of good preservation made it a key target for excavation prior to further plough damage. Trenches C (1998), E (1999) and Y (2005) had previously exposed (but not excavated) parts of it, showing that it was not burned and confirming good preservation conditions. Trench AH was positioned to take in all of this feature and a good sample of the surrounding area, extending to the south-east to incorporate the western end of a cobbled hollow previously exposed but never completely sectioned at the north edge of trench M (excavated in 2001 and 2004).

The aims for this trench were:

- to expose the full extent of the house and sample sufficient to establish its construction style and history.
- to expose (but not explore in detail) the surrounding area, in order to assess what features might be related.
- to section the cobbled spread to the north of roundhouse M.

The trench lay directly south of trench AI, the two being conjoined to allow an overall view of a larger area of features in the vicinity of the coin hoards (which lay in area AI). Trench AH measured c. 26 x 26 m (fig 6).

Excavation focussed on the house and the spread in the SE corner; neighbouring features were planned but not excavated. Four distinct phases of activity were identified: a series of early sand-filled pits; construction and use of the roundhouse; acts connected with its abandonment; and Pictish activity.

Phases 1: early sand-filled pits (?early prehistoric)

The first phase of activity in the area, predating construction of the roundhouse, was marked by a series of irregular discoloured sand patches. Where tested by excavation, they proved to be large pits filled with mottled redeposited sand. A number were sampled in the course of excavating the entrance of the later roundhouse, which cut
them. Their function is unclear; one directly in front of the doorway contained a layer of stones suggesting deposition of cooking waste (fig 8 X-Y). Similar surface mottling was identified elsewhere: dating evidence is as yet vague, but where related to other features they clearly pre-date them, and flint from one hints at an earlier prehistoric date. Occasional stray finds of Neolithic pot from the area provide a possible context.

**Phase 2: construction and use of the roundhouse**

The main feature in the area is a ring-ditch roundhouse some 15.5 m in diameter, with an eight-post ring and an east-facing entrance. Its western margin had been slightly truncated. On stripping, the site was revealed as a slightly irregular disc of surviving deposits, but with natural subsoil visible in places; given the solid cropmark on the aerial photo, this suggests some plough-damage in the intervening 20 years, although the southern edge recorded in 1999 matched that exposed in 2008, indicating minimal damage in this area over the last 10 years. A set of cross-baulks was laid out; work concentrated in the east and west quadrants, although some work was done in all of them. None was fully excavated, and there is undoubtedly more information to extract from the house, but the 2008 work successfully established a sequence and constructional details.

The post-ring (8.5 m in diameter) comprised eight postholes, arranged in pairs around an axis of symmetry through the entrance. (Two postholes in the northern arc were only tentatively identified, poking through the overlying spreads, but enough was located to establish the original layout.) Three postholes were excavated; they had only a single phase, and the substantial posts (0.5-0.8m in diameter and 0.4-0.75m in depth) had rotted in situ, implying the house had stood for some time (fig 8 IJK).

The entrance faced east, with two substantial posts forming a doorway some 3.5 m wide; the southern post had been replaced at some stage (figs 9-11). This grand entrance was a complex one: a slot ran from the northern door post to a small central post, suggesting a double doorway with the northern half either blocked or comprising a wicket gate rather than a swinging door. Internally a further slot ran from the northern post to the post ring, closing off access to the end of the ring ditch (fig 10).
Fig 9: trench AH, sections of south entrance post, earlier pit and recuts
Fig 10: speculative reconstruction of the AH roundhouse doorway
Fig 11: trench ΔH, plan of phase 3 pits in doorway and sections of north entrance post
There was no surviving evidence of a wall, although a series of small (unexcavated) features concentric and almost contiguous with the deposits on the southern side may represent a series of posts; no similar features were located elsewhere. The extent of the house was defined by a ring ditch in its northern half and a narrower erosion hollow in the southern area. The ring ditch was up to 2.9 m wide and 0.24 m deep, petering out towards the door and the back of the house (fig 7 C-D, 8 N-O). Along the southern side of the house was a much narrower, less pronounced erosion hollow; its variability suggests different use (humans rather than animals?) and may indicate a series of rooms in this area.

In the central space few features can be securely linked to the house’s use, although further investigation would undoubtedly reveal more under the post-abandonment spreads. There is no central hearth or cooking pit. Instead, a near-central pit complex contained two successive post-pipes (fig 7 A-B). While this cannot be certainly linked to the house, its location suggests it is a structural posthole to support an upper floor—a similar feature was located in roundhouse AB. The replacement of this post (unlike those of the post-ring) suggests a concern with structural stability; while the post-ring posts were held fast by a ring beam even when no longer earth-fast, the free-standing central post had only pressure from the floor to support it, and would be safer if well-founded.

*Phase 3: destruction and abandonment of the roundhouse*

At the end of the house’s use, parts of its structure were dug away and burnt material was deposited. These acts focussed on the entrance and the ring ditch. Both entrance posts were dug out, although the packing stones from the posts were left in the pits, and charcoal-rich soils were deposited in them. A series of three pits was also dug across the entrance way, two directly in front of the entrance posts and one in the middle, all with charcoal-rich fills. Two contained animal jaws. This may be interpreted as deliberate symbolic closure of the building by removing and blocking its entrance (fig 11).

The burnt deposits connect these features to the fate of the ring ditch. In plan a burnt halo was noted around the ring ditch; this proved to be a series of burnt deposits, dumped while still hot (fig 8 N-O). The carbon-rich fills in both the ring ditch and
entrance suggest they are part of the same event connected with the decommissioning of the house.

An intriguing discovery which may be related came from another posthole; in the top of the consolidated post-pipe fill a painted quartzite pebble had been deposited (fig 8 G-H; fig 12). Although often seen as Pictish, such painted pebbles had a long life from the late first millennium BC into the later first millennium AD (Ritchie 1998). In this case, it seems clear it was a purposeful deposit, connected with the abandonment of this post, and thus presumably a larger structure – but which? It was not an obvious structural part of the roundhouse, such as the post-ring. Beside it lay a stone setting (a slumped stack of stones) plausibly connected with a phase 4 building discussed below. The layer which contained these stones overlay the posthole with the pebble, suggesting the pebble predates the later structure and is most plausibly linked to the roundhouse.

Phase 4: Pictish activity

After the abandonment of the house, soil accumulated over it. Stratified within this was a series of features which seem to form a coherent phase. To these, other features can be added more tentatively; stratigraphic information and limited investigation does not allow for certainty (fig 12).

The most coherent features, clearly set into later spreads, were a stone-built hearth (fig 8 P-Q) and a pair of shallow stone settings, probably for posts or a timber cruck. Centrally between these was a pit which contained a gold-in-glass bead, suggesting an Early Historic date (see below; fig 8 L-M). Beyond this an erosion hollow with cobbling had worn into the abandoned ring-ditch (fig 7 A-B).

The simplest reconstruction sees the two stone settings as bases for a single cruck central to a small house with the hearth and pit on its longitudinal axis and cobbling in an erosion hollow which formed at its southern end. This would give a structure some 4 m wide and at least 6 m long. The lack of any visible walls is unsurprising, as earth-fast foundations were the exception rather than the rule at this period. We have excavated several buildings elsewhere on the site which are represented solely by
erosion scoops. The deposition of cobbling in the hollow after some erosion and soil build-up indicates an extended life for the building, as is common on the site.

At right angles to its southern end is a further erosion hollow with cobbling set into it. This was not investigated beyond initial cleaning, but it is probably the floor of a further building. An unexcavated posthole on its edge may be structurally related. From this spread came a knife of typical later first millennium AD form, while a short dagger came from the ring-ditch fill beyond its west end (fig 25).

A further candidate for phase 4 is an east-west slot. Its relation to the earlier ring-posts is not clear, but spatially it is unlikely to be connected; time prevented full examination (fig 8 R-S). Finds from it were unhelpful, comprising both slag and a single sherd of Neolithic pot.

This evidence can most economically be interpreted as two small sub-oval structures set at right angles to one another to form an L-shaped structure, the 0.6m gap between them representing the likely wall thickness (fig 13). The slot to the north may define a boundary or may be unrelated. Alternatively, a more ambitious structure could be created, using the slot as the northern wall and the stone settings plus an unexcavated stone-packed posthole adjacent to the E-W spread to form a southern support. This would create a nearly square structure at least 6 x 6 m, although any wall could lie outwith the putative post lines. This seems markedly more speculative; the southern "wall" in particular is rather concave. Reconstruction as two smaller buildings is preferred here, their spatial relation to one another suggesting they were contemporary.

The insubstantial nature of these structures is unsurprising given their ephemeral construction, but their remains are more coherent than elsewhere on the site because they slumped slightly into the earlier deposits. They are of considerable importance, as such buildings are very rare in Scotland as a whole. Radiocarbon dates will greatly assist the chronology, but the finds (the knife and bead) suggest a later first millennium AD date.
Fig 13: speculative reconstruction of the phase 4 Pictish buildings
A yard surface

Excavation of trench M in 2001 and 2004 identified a dark charcoal-rich cobbled spread to the north of roundhouse M and near-concentric to it. Only partial sections across this had been possible, one producing a Roman brooch. Its exposure in trench AH allowed a full section to be excavated, although it runs at an angle across the spread (fig 7 E-F). This showed the feature was an erosion hollow into which cobbles and slag were dumped over a period of time to limit erosion and provide a surface to walk on. Additional features located on its edge hint at some complexity. Pulling the plans from several seasons together suggests a curving feature slightly eccentric to roundhouse M but probably connected to it, the sharp outer boundary of the hollow suggesting the former presence of a fence or other boundary around a cobbled yard.

Finds

The finds connected with the Early Historic structures have been noted above: the knife, the dagger, and most unusually, the gold-in-glass bead (fig 17g & 25). The painted pebble has also been discussed above (fig 22h); it is the first from the area, and one of only two from the east coast south of Caithness. Other notable finds included a small glass gaming piece or pin head and a piece of Iron Age horse harness, a copper alloy button and loop fastener found during stripping (fig 21d & f) – they are discussed further in section 7 below.

Conclusions

The trench AH excavations were a great success. The plan and history of the house was recovered, with a number of interesting features such as the slot across the doorway, the partition within the entrance and the central post. There was clear evidence of deliberate decommissioning of the structure when it was abandoned. Perhaps of greatest interest was the vestigial traces of the ?Pictish buildings; always a rarity, it was even more remarkable that diagnostic finds accompanied them.
A HOUSE BESIDE THE HOARDS – AND LATER ACTIVITY (TRENCH AI)

The area opened in 2008 as trench AI had proved tantalising for a number of years. It lay immediately west of the 2000 coin hoard, and in excavating it in 2001 (trench L) the second hoard was uncovered. The results of area stripping and sample excavation that year suggested a ring-ditch house underlay later spreads, but were insufficient to clarify its nature. In 2007, area AF reopened the NE quadrant with the aim of confirming the house interpretation but, while plausible, there remained elements of doubt. Thus in 2008 it was decided to tackle this issue again, as it was key to understanding the setting of the hoards.

Trench AI was situated to include all of the putative house. A key secondary aim was to expose and map more of the settlement surface, so a substantial area was stripped to the west of the house to explore the blank area between this and 2007 trench AB; to the south the trench was joined up with neighbouring trench AH. The resulting trench (excluding AH) was some 29.4m N-S by 30.1m E-W (fig 14).

The main aims for this area were to excavate and sample the overlying charcoal-rich deposits in order to clarify their nature and sequence, and to expose more of the putative underlying house. Where coherent feature groups could be identified outside this area, they too were targeted.

The spreads (fig 15)

In 2001, an extensive spread of cultural material had been located in the north of trench L, with traces of a house visible on its edges and concealed beneath it. The spread ran beyond the extent of the putative house into the northern trench margin, and may be linked to the charcoal-rich feature located in an extension to trench N (Hunter 2005, 18, fig 7). Partial reopening in 2007 showed that the spreads were less extensive than in 2001, and this was confirmed in 2008; the southern margin is markedly reduced. This will have been made worse by repeated stripping, exposure and backfilling; consideration of earlier plans suggests some of these deposits were in fact residual topsoil or an interface layer. However, traces of modern plough furrows
in the surviving spreads confirm once more the need to rescue these deposits prior to attrition and destruction.

The irregular layout of baulks (fig 15) was imposed by previous trenches. To the north, radial baulks were used; to the south, strips through the spreads were excavated. These revealed a complex series of deposits, including cobbles, clay and charcoal, overlying an earlier roundhouse. A soil had built up after its abandonment. Over this were charcoal-rich soils, including substantial charred timbers in some areas, while in one area was a spread of clay. There were no hints of a structure, and this seems to represent dumping and spreading of demolition debris from events somewhere in the vicinity. In turn, these charcoal-rich deposits were overlain in the northern area by dumped soils containing lots of fire-cracked cobbles. These filled and spread over the hollow left by the earlier ring-ditch, and seem to be deliberate levelling up of the area to create a surface to walk on.

In the absence of any clear related structures, the focus of this activity presumably lies outwith the trench to the north. It is tempting to connect it to a twin-post doorway structure located in 2001 (Hunter 2002, fig 7 & 9), which is clearly not related to the underlying roundhouse, but any linked structural remains are elusive; hopefully, excavation to the north will clarify matters.

Dating the spreads must await radiocarbon evidence. Finds include a range of industrial waste and burnt clay (including a remarkable piece of squeezed clay covered in finger-prints from an adjacent feature; fig 23w), quem fragments, stone tools and a yellow glass bead; the absence of medieval material suggests a pre-medieval date.

Ring-ditch house

Earlier excavations had suggested a large roundhouse lay under these spreads. Given its proximity to the coin hoards, we clearly needed to confirm this and gain a better understanding of it. Although the full floor plan was not revealed, excavations confirm that a ring-ditch house did indeed underlie the spreads, with a ring-groove for the wall surviving on the western side. The wall diameter is c. 17.5m. In the northern half of the house is a shallow eroded ring ditch, infilled with later deposits and
cobbling (fig 16 R-S). A plausible internal ring some 9m in diameter, comprising an estimated 13 posts, can be interpolated from excavated and observed examples. The two best-preserved posts had post-pipes (c.0.35-0.5m in diameter and 0.2-0.45m deep), indicating a single-phase structure whose posts rotted in situ (fig 16 D-E, F-G). The post-ring has a larger gap on the eastern side which opens onto a linear pit complex examined in 2000 and 2007. This can now be recognised as the doorway, perhaps with a small central post for a double door. As with trench AH, the doorposts are cut by a series of features which may represent blocking or destruction. Intriguingly, the 2000 hoard lies directly outside this entrance; radiocarbon dates will help to establish whether it could be contemporary with the building's use or abandonment.

A small roundhouse
Towards the west of the trench a circle of 11 small postholes was identified; the two excavated ones were both small and shallow (0.4-0.5m D, 0.2m deep) with no evidence for a postpipe (fig 16 J-K; fig 17). Its diameter is 3.4 m; typical ratios (Hill 1984) suggest a wall diameter of c. 5 m. An unexcavated four-poster structure lies to the south-east; its position suggests it represents a porch with sides 1-1.2 m long. No dating evidence or secure datable material was recovered from this structure.

Fences?
In the south-west corner of the trench a possible curving line of features disappearing into the southern baulk was recognised. Their spacing is regular (1-1.2m apart on a slight curve), but not absolutely precise, suggesting they are not a post-ring; they are best seen as a fence line or enclosure. A second, sinuous fence line was tentatively identified, running broadly NNW-SSE just inside the eastern boundary of the trench and arguably cutting across the southern part of the large roundhouse; it may continue into the NE corner of trench AH. The eye of faith can always pick out straight lines and other patterns from random assortments of features, but only these two are considered plausible on grounds of spacing and (in the first case) similarities in excavated section (fig 16 N-O, P-Q).
Fig 16: trench AI sections
D-E, F6094 complex
F-G, F6119 post-ring posthole
H-I, F6159, 6172, 6714 Neolithic pit group
J-K, F6181, posthole from small post ring
N-Q, P-Q, F6150 & 6157, ?fence line
R-S, ring ditch
inset: hearth & pit F6194
Fig 17: trench AI, detail of small roundhouse
Isolated hearth (fig 16)

To the west of the ring-ditch house were the remains of a small hearth (0.5m in diameter), comprising a layer of close-packed stones (one a possible quern stone) and clay; this capped an infilled small pit 0.25m deep. The exact correlation of hearth and pit indicates one directly replaced the other, though the pit’s function is unclear. The lack of any furnace lining or slag indicates the feature was a hearth rather than a furnace.

Neolithic pit complex

To the west of the ring-ditch house, an intercutting pit complex produced prehistoric pottery during stripping. Upon excavation, this proved to be a series of three single-fill inter-cutting pits (fig 16 I-I). The eastern (latest) and western (earliest) contained substantial sherds of early Neolithic pottery (fig 23 o); the central feature contained only small pot fragments which are likely to be derived from the other two features. Burnt hazelnut shell and flint were also found.

Conclusions

The main objectives of the season were successfully completed. The spreads (which had sustained plough-damage since their first investigation) were extensively excavated, with considerable quantities of charred timbers recovered; these are probably the demolition debris from an unknown (post-house) event and subsequent levelling and cobbling. Under these spreads was a large ring-ditch house with a ring-groove wall. The linear feature complex excavated in 2007 is the blocked doorway for this house; the 2000 coin hoard lay directly outside the door, but scientific dating is required to understand the relationship.

As well as the large house and overlying deposits, other components of the settlement were recovered. Notable among these were a small post-ring structure with a four-post porch and possible fence lines. A series of Neolithic pits provides further structural confirmation of activity at this date, its nature still elusive.
Trench AJ was positioned between trenches D and M, clipping the latter’s south-west edge. The aim was to investigate the area east of burnt-down roundhouse D. This 10 x 10 m trench revealed a wide range of possible features (fig 18). A large charcoal-rich spread with plentiful heat-cracked stones correlates with a feature sampled at the southern end of trench M in 2001. An extension eastwards from the south-east corner confirmed the spread’s position and extent, its E-W dimension some 9.5m. It may represent a roundhouse, although when the plans from the two seasons are put together it seems more sub-rectangular, and may be a later structure. It is an intriguing target for further excavation.

Other notable features were a large oval ?pit measuring c. 1m (N-S) by 2.5m (E-W) filled with a dark brown sand in the south-west of the trench and a charcoal-rich feature with cobble inclusions in the north-west corner. A curving line of sand-filled pits may represent a pit-circle or post-ring, its extent obscured by a layer of darker sand at the northern edge of the trench. However, a possible ring-groove was an illusion created by ploughing and burrows!
Fig 18: trench AJ
RETURN TO THE MEDIEVAL CORN-DRYING KILN (TRENCH X)

In 2004 stonework was noted eroding out of an old sand quarry on the south-west edge of the site. Brief investigation showed it was a medieval corn-drying kiln, with substantial charred timbers protruding from the section. Apart from ongoing erosion, it was also being affected by rabbits, and was clearly worth further investigation. A weekend’s excavation in June 2008 had the aim of establishing how much of the kiln was left (fig 19).

It was soon clear that only a little of the bowl and much of one side of the flue had been lost; the bulk of the kiln was intact. It was keyhole-shaped, some 4.6 m long, its flue pointing south. The kiln was cut into natural sand and lined with stones. Its fills were only partly explored, but large quantities of substantial charred timbers indicate it met a fiery end. This destruction deposit was overlain by demolition debris, comprising structural stones and turf. The bowl is around 2.4 m in diameter, with a flue c.2.4 m long and c.1.4 m wide.

Discussion

The kiln is well preserved, and provides a valuable addition to our knowledge of the medieval phase of Birnie (several sherds of medieval pottery confirm its date). It is clearly at risk from further erosion and burrowing damage, the latter already extensive, and further excavation is a priority. The fiery end which the kiln experienced is not unusual for such structures, but although charcoal has been noted in other examples there has been surprisingly little detailed recording of it. The aim in excavating this example would be to apply techniques used in the burnt roundhouse, with detailed field recording of relationships and dimensions and block lifting of fragments. This should allow a much greater understanding of the detailed structure of such a kiln.
Fig 19: trench X, corn-drying kiln
Fig 20: finds. A, glass bangle 8264, tr.D; B, Guido 13 glass bead 7547, tr.AI; C, Romano-British brooch 8230, N of AI; D, button and loop fastener 6821, tr.AH; E, yellow glass bead 6808, tr.D; F, glass gaming piece 7523, tr.AH; G, gold in glass bead 7846, tr.AH
As in previous years, metal-detecting was an invaluable adjunct to excavation. Three further denarii from the partly-dispersed 2000 hoard were recovered, along with a further Romano-British brooch (fig 20c). This is fragmentary and in poor condition, but appears to be an enamelled zoomorphic brooch, a type rarely found on Iron Age sites. In stripping the trenches, an Iron Age square-headed button and loop fastener (Wild 1970, class VI b) was recovered in area AH, although not in association with any sub-surface feature (fig 20d). This fits with a range of horse harness recovered in previous seasons; a terret was found in neighbouring trench M in 2004 (Hunter 2005, 28).

A rich range of finds came from the excavations as well, notably from area AH. Apart from the button and loop fastener, this produced a glass marble decorated with inlaid spirals (fig 20f). A small socket suggests it was originally attached to a shaft or peg, suggesting a role as a gaming piece or (less probably, given the size of the perforation) a pin head. Its phasing is not certain; it came from the spreads over the house in the south quadrant, but beyond the area of the later Pictish building, and could be linked to either main phase. A few similar examples with a wide distribution are known (fig 21), and they seem to be of Roman Iron Age date. From Aberdeenshire there is a stray find from Jericho (Culsalmond) and two examples from a cache of charms at Monquhitter; further down the east coast they are known from Iron Age sites at Hurly Hawkin (Angus) and Traprain Law (East Lothian), while beads with similar spiral decoration are known from Mochrum Loch (Wigtownshire) and Culbin (Moray) (Ralston & Inglis 1984, 41; Stevenson 1967; Henshall 1982, 231-2, fig 13; Curle 1915, 179; Stevenson 1976, fig 1/5; Elgin Museum, unpun). Also from AH came a painted pebble which had been deliberately deposited in the top of an infilled posthole, most probably linked to the roundhouse (fig 22h). Such pebbles, probably charmstones, are best known from the north, from Sutherland to Shetland. This is the first from Moray, and one of only two from south of the Moray Firth, the other being a rather idiosyncratic and perhaps unrelated piece from Hallow Hill, Fife (Ritchie 1998; Proudfoot 1996, 418-9, illus 12). Ours is a very nicely-painted example in contrast to some and seems to have been repainted, as some motifs
Fig 21: distribution of decorated glass balls (solid dots) and related beads (open circles)
are much fainter. This has been noted on others, and might suggest these were amulets or charms which were handled regularly.

A series of unusual finds are linked to the Pictish structures in AH – a gold-in-glass bead, an iron knife and an iron dagger. The bead is an unusual type, with a fine gold foil encased in the glass (fig 20g). Such beads first appear in the Roman period – there are examples from Newstead – but they are very rare in Scotland, becoming more common in the later first millennium AD (Campbell 2005). However, they were always unusual, and indicate people of some significance on the site at this date. The iron knife has the angled tip typical of later first millennium AD examples (fig 25). Details of the dagger must await conservation (the drawing is from a measured field sketch; fig 25), but it has a simple copper alloy hilt guard, and had been deposited in its leather sheath.

Finds from other trenches were less spectacular, but included a range of everted rim Iron Age pottery, glass beads and stone tools, including a fine miniature whetstone from the burnt roundhouse (figs 22-24). This also produced a yellow glass bead (fig 20e) and, most unusually, a fragment of a glass bangle (Stevenson 1976, type 1), with stripes of opaque red and yellow glass over a translucent blue-green core (fig 20a). This is an import from southern Scotland. The rarity and value of such finds in the area is seen in the attempts to reuse it after it broke, with both ends being modified to take collars. As with the ‘marble’, there is a parallel from the Monquhitter hoard of charms, and it is likely this bangle was seen as a significant object, perhaps a charm or amulet.

There were also indications of earlier activity on the site, with a pit containing early Neolithic carinated bowls and a stray find of a middle Neolithic lugged bowl, both from AI (fig 23o & x), as well as a thin scatter of flints, mostly stray finds. All told, these finds confirm once more the key role of Birnie in setting an agenda for artefact studies in the north-east.
Fig 22: stone finds. H, painted pebble 7914, tr.AH; I, stone palette 8056, tr.D; J, small whetstone 7889, tr.D; K, pounder 6051; L, polisher 7012, tr.D; M flint scraper 8228, tr.AI; N, gunflint 6884, tr.AI
Fig 23: larger stone objects.
AC, large pounder 7139, tr.D
AD, grinding surface 6802, stray
AE, quern rubber 6977, tr.D
Fig 24: pottery (later prehistoric unless noted). Q, 8130, tr.AI (Neolithic); P, 7018 tr.D; Q, 7477, tr.D; R, 7532 tr.AH; S, 7867, tr.D; T, 7292, tr.D; U, 7293, tr.D; V, crucible 7984, tr.D; W, clay with fingerprints (Fp) 7720, tr.AI; X, 8125, tr.AI (Neolithic); Y, 7904, tr.AH; Z, 7902, tr.AH (Neolithic); AA, 6834, tr.AH; AB, 7189, tr.AH
Fig 25: L, field drawing of dagger 7161, tr.AH (original still undergoing conservation)
R, Early Historic knife 7949, tr.AH
As in previous seasons, engaging with the local public has been a key aspect of the project, with visitors encouraged and an educational programme for local schools organised: over 300 pupils from eight local schools (both primary and secondary) visited during the fortnight of this programme, learning about their past and about archaeological techniques, including hands-on experience with sieving. The Dingwall Young Archaeologists’ Club also visited for a day, and had the chance to experience a range of techniques, including cleaning trench AJ for photography and planning. An Open Day on September 7th was a great success, with over 300 visitors receiving site tours, viewing the latest finds, trying Iron Age-style crafts and participating in face-painting (not just the kids). This was accompanied by an art project – landscape artist Sarah Foqué worked on evoking the three-dimensional space of roundhouse D under excavation, making a thought-provoking commentary on the uses of long-vanished space and its modern rediscovery.

A range of local groups came along for guided tours, including the Moray Field Club, the Moray Society and the Lossie Over-50s Walking Group, while a lecture in Lossie Library to bring people up to date was very well attended. Press coverage in the Northern Scot, the Press and Journal and the Times and an article on the BBC Scotland website took word further still.
The 2008 season has been a tremendously useful one, with major advances in our understanding of the site on several fronts. The sequence in the burnt down trench D roundhouse now seems clear, with a smaller ring-groove structure underlying the large ring-ditch house. Its complex destruction deposits now seem to be behaving, while important evidence was uncovered that the building saw a change of use towards the end of its life, with part of it being repaired and used for extensive pit-digging, although the exact reason is unclear. After the fire the site was covered over with a cobbled surface, and it is possible this served as the focus of Pictish settlement, which apparently clusters around this area.

Trench AH produced a further substantial and well-preserved ring-ditch house with a number of unusual features such as a central post and a split doorway. Most striking, however, was the all-too-rare evidence of two Pictish structures, their dating confirmed by a range of unusual finds.

To the north in trench AI, the deposits around the coin hoards finally revealed their secrets. The remains of a large ring-ditch house were partly revealed – with the 2000 hoard buried directly outside its doorway. Post-excavation analysis will consider whether the two are related. Over this was a series of spreads, apparently dumps and perhaps linked to the demolition of a nearby structure, with a subsequent phase of cobbleding to level the area up. Other noteworthy finds in this area included a small roundhouse only some 5 m in diameter, and a pit with Neolithic pottery.

Looking forward, the burnt-down house now seems under much better control, and work in 2009 will focus on the last of the burnt deposits in segments 1 and 2. Elsewhere, two targets are planned – the burnt deposits to the north of AI and south-west of area N; and another cropmark feature, either one noted E of trench AH or a return to one of the ?Pictish/medieval buildings previously sampled.
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