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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2009

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SUMMARY

The 2009 excavations examined six roundhouses, three of which had burnt down. Several showed signs of later activity. Trench AL looked at burnt deposits uncovered in a previous trial trench. It revealed a substantial ring-ditch house, 16 m in diameter, which had been repaired and rebuilt before burning down, preserving some wonderful structural charcoal. Later activity in the same area included two stone hearths. In the east part of the trench, a small post-ring was located from a house c.7.6 m in diameter. In the SW corner a rectangular erosion scoop, perhaps a yard, was found. Isolated features included one which had a large fragment of a fired clay structure, perhaps from a kiln or furnace, dumped in it.

Further work on the trench D burnt-down house confirmed the phasing from 2008, and added further detail – notably what seems to be a collapsed partition from the reuse of the building. To the east, trench AM produced another burnt-down ring-ditch house, c. 13.5 m in diameter. Again there was evidence of later activity, with a hearth set into the destruction deposits, although with no surviving trace of any associated structure. Trench AN returned to roundhouse N and revealed a complex, lengthy sequence of post-roundhouse use, including hints of an overlying, lightly-built structure around a cooking pit.

An unusual house was revealed in trench AP. This exposed a building which seems to have two entrances. It comprises a ring-groove 10.2 m in diameter, with no internal post-ring for support – the wall took all the weight. Again there was evidence of activity after the house had become structurally unsound. Two further trenches (AO and AQ) confirmed the eastern extent of the site, with a marked fall-off in feature density. AO included an enigmatic small enclosure with a large pit dug through its centre.

Among a rich range of finds, pride of place goes to a Romano-British penannular brooch from trench AM.

In a separate, short season earlier in the year, further work was carried out on the medieval corn kiln on the site’s western edge, while a trial trench down the hill on which Birnie Kirk sits revealed a tantalising wealth of archaeology.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Excavations at Birnie, a long-lived settlement and power centre on the Moray coastal plain south of Elgin, have been running since 1998 (fig 1; NGR NJ 210 585). While there is a thin scatter of earlier prehistoric material, the picture is dominated by the first millennia BC and AD. We know that the site was a powerful place in the late Bronze Age (c.1000–800 BC), with a bronze-casting workshop and the beginnings of the settlement. Details of its evolution through the first millennium BC must await radiocarbon dating of the many houses excavated, but by the Roman period it was a well-connected craft centre, with evidence of iron-smelting, black-smithing and bronze-casting among a range of other crafts. Wide-ranging connections brought in exotic items such as chariot-gear of bronze and jewellery of amber and gold.

This powerful centre attracted the attention of Rome, and evidence of contact with the Roman world for over a century comes from finds of bronze brooches, glass and pottery. Most spectacular are two hoards of late second century AD silver coins – subsidies or diplomatic gifts to secure support in the area at a time of turmoil on the Roman frontier.

More elusive as yet is Pictish occupation in the later first millennium, but it is probably represented by vestigial remains of small sub-rectangular houses and some diagnostic finds. Again we await radiocarbon dates, but it seems there was a gap in the occupation, perhaps due to the disastrous long-term effects of Rome’s interference in local societies (Hunter 2007).

As the excavation phase of the project draws towards a close (with one season left, in 2010), the 2009 work targeted some of the larger remaining problems, so that if any proved troublesome there was scope to return to them. Work continued on the wonderfully-preserved burnt roundhouse (D), and also fully exposed two other burnt-down roundhouses (trenches AL and AM). Two further roundhouses were reopened to resolve outstanding problems (trenches AN and AP), while further trenches looked at the margins of the settlement (trenches AO and AQ). The main season took place from 23 August to 18 September, with a workforce averaging 35. In addition, a short ‘pre-season’ from 26 April – 3 May turned to other periods and places, with further work on the medieval kiln on the western edge of the site and some trial work around Birnie Kirk. Trench locations are given in fig 2.
Fig 3: overall plan of trenches AL and AN. Asterisks (*) mark hearths.
2 AN UNEXPECTED HOUSE (trench AL)

It was Barri Jones’ aerial photos which first revealed Birnie to archaeologists – but such photos can be unreliable guides. Because they only come from a single season, this gives a very partial snapshot. Over the years our excavations have shown unexpected remains in blanks on the cropmark. One of these was explored in 2009, an area to the west of trench N which had been partly explored in 2004. These results had indicated well-preserved deposits with burnt remains of uncertain character. This tantalising combination made them an obvious target – and one made more urgent by the shallow nature of the topsoil in this area, barely 0.1m thick in places. Trench AL (fig 3) was laid out to encompass the projected extent of this feature, and extended south to join trench AP and east to link to the trench N roundhouse (partly reopened as trench AN). Among a range of interesting features, pride of place must go to the deposits glimpsed previously – now revealed as an unexpected roundhouse.

Another ring-ditch house

As first exposed, the house’s form was masked by later deposits which had accumulated over the remains. This meant it revealed its secrets only slowly, but it was clear from the outset that we were dealing with a ring-ditch house, the eroded ring-ditch formed round the northern half of the structure. Time only allowed part of the story to be revealed, but the results were so intriguing that we shall be returning in 2010. We have a house with a complex history, with stages of rebuilding, and with a fiery end which led to remarkable timber preservation.

The house is some 16 m in diameter in its final phase, with an east-facing entrance. The substantial stone-packed doorposts define a doorway some 2.5 m across; only the northern post was investigated (fig 10 OO-PP). Within the interior was a post-ring, probably of eleven posts. This had two phases, an earlier one 7.6 m in diameter and a later one of 6.4 m. The replacement was necessary in part because erosion of the ring ditch was causing structural instability to the posts as it eroded around them; the later posts are set nearer the centre of the house, although by the time of the building’s abandonment, these too were being engulfed by erosion. There had been other structural changes. Apparently after the ring-ditch had begun to form, a slot was dug for a wall on its outer edge – a ring groove with stone packing to hold up a timber wall around 15 m in diameter. Yet in time this too was removed, and the erosion extended beyond it. The story
is seen best in a section through the deposits in the north of the ring-ditch (fig 4 E-F, G-H); around the southern and western part of the house, the ring-groove had been totally destroyed by later activity or ploughing.

Within the area of the post-ring is a scatter of features. These probably represent various stages of repairs, internal features, and cooking or storage pits over the house's long life. A deep pit with a series of sandy fills sealing charcoal-rich ones is probably a cooking pit (F.7414), the sand representing phases when earlier debris was sealed (or fires put out!) and a fresh start made (fig 10 Y-Z, left edge). Adjacent features with fire-cracked stone or rich charcoal deposits may be related to it. Two posts (perhaps a pair?) lay to the west of this, and may represent some internal structure; one was sufficiently long-lived to require replacement at some point (fig 5 O-P).

At the end of its life, the house burnt down. We cannot yet say if this was accidental or deliberate, although it is noteworthy how many houses on the site met such a fate. The nature and preservation of the burnt deposits was very variable; in the central area they survived only in the tops of part-filled features, and towards the terminals of the ring ditch they were thin and unimpressive, but there were rich remains up to 0.4 m thick in the ring ditch at the north. A mottled layer with burnt creamy lenses near the edge includes burnt turfs; its position strongly suggests these come from a turf wall. There were charcoal deposits at the base of the ring-ditch, but most striking was a series of remains on the very top of the burnt layers. This remarkable survival, only 100 mm below the surface, comprised pairs of timbers aligned radially and spaced typically c.1.4 m apart, with associated remains of smaller transverse timbers (fig 6).

The survival of these remains is remarkable in a heavily-ploughed field. It lies near the crest of the hill, and the ploughsoil must have been eroding gradually – there are plough-scars across the deposits. The consistent spacing and arrangement of timber pairs suggests this is a large part of the structure which has collapsed intact. It lies over the remains of the collapsed wall, and must come either from the roof or an upper floor. The paired timbers are an intriguing feature; it suggests an attempt to maximise resource use or minimise weight, since two smaller-diameter timbers lashed either side of a post would act structurally like a single, much heavier beam (T Romankiewicz, pers comm). On a site where we are used to spectacular charcoal, this is a real eye-opener. Such significant components of a structure are rare indeed, and specialist analysis should cast important new light on how such houses were built.
Fig 4: trench AL ring ditch sections
Fig 5: trench AL sections. I-J, hearth 6945; K-L, pit 7087; M-N, pit 7407; O-P, posthole 7805; Q-R, postholes 7564/7565
Fig 6: trench AL, burnt timber in ring ditch

Fig 7: trench AL, detail of hearth 7550

Fig 8: trench AL, stone spreads in top fill of ring ditch

Fig 9: trench AL, F.7087 with fired clay object
After the fire, deposits accumulated over the structure – but there is evidence for reuse of the house stance before this happened. Just south of the central area were two stone-built hearths (fig 3, 5 I-J & 7). Their place in the sequence is a little uncertain; no burnt deposits survived in this area, and they may have been constructed in the (presumably part-collapsed) shell of the roundhouse before the burning took place, or in a cleared area within it after the event; one of them straddled the line of the post-ring. There are no associated structural features, though it is unlikely the hearths were in the open air, and we must assume they were in the ramshackle roundhouse or a building which left no earthfast traces. This evidence of reuse of house plots is a recurring feature of the site; further evidence, in trenches D, AM and AN, is noted below.

In the accumulating deposits in the abandoned ring ditch are partial remains of a cobbled spread (fig 8). Only the bold would attempt to interpret such faint vestiges, but they may be the remains of wall, or field clearance stones piled against a boundary.

_A rectangular yard?_

In the south-west corner of the trench, a dark sub-rectangular spread was exposed within a shallow erosion hollow F.7805, seven metres wide and at least nine metres long before running into the western section (fig 3 & 12). Irregular spreads of stones suggested expedient attempts to limit erosion and create a decent surface to walk on. The soil included dumped charcoal-rich material and ash, suggesting it was domestic or industrial rubbish. The finds do not provide many clues to its date or use; the few sherds of medieval green-glaze pottery were in high, insecure contexts, while a much earlier saddle quern ?rubber (fig 41) had been reused as paving. It will take analysis of samples and finds to cast further light on this feature, but it seems most likely to be some form of bounded yard, as there were no traces of any structures.

_Industrial zone?_

The area to the south of this trench had been excavated in 2007-8, when among other things a scatter of dark spreads and features with notable quantities of industrial debris had been spotted. The focus and date of this activity is unclear; we cross our fingers that it lies just to the west, where we will excavate in 2010. However, there were hints of similar processes in trench AL, with industrial material dumped into pre-existing pits. Charcoal- and/or clay-rich fills had been dumped in three features around the southern edge of the roundhouse (which cannot have been in
existence at this time). Most intriguing was F.7087, a deep, flat-bottomed pit (fig 5 K-L). Its initial phase is interesting enough, for it is one of the few features on site containing iron objects, including a probable saw fragment. But into its infilled top was dumped a charcoal-rich layer containing a large part of a fired clay structure, some 0.38 x 0.36 m in size (fig 9). The nature of this remains open for debate, but it had a series of holes through it. Along the two intact edges these were large and square, suggesting a series of squared structural timbers along the edge. Through the remainder of the ‘floor’ was a series of circular perforations. This looks like part of an industrial hearth or furnace, with a perforated floor to allow heat through but prevent direct contact with the flames. It resembles pottery kilns, which would be possible if it was medieval; but it could equally have some role in metal-working. Post-excavation study and dating should help to cast light on this remarkable feature.

Another house

On the eastern edge of the trench, another house was unexpectedly revealed. This small post-ring had in fact been partly exposed but not recognised in previous seasons (fig 3). The ten posts formed a ring 5.7 m in diameter (fig 10 AA-NN). A wide gap on the east side suggested this aligned on an entrance, probably represented by two posts 3.6 m apart and 1-1.5 m beyond the ring (although a feature excavated in previous years may be a further post, blocking the apparent gap). This would give an overall diameter of c. 7.6 m for the structure. Preservation was poor, with no surviving deposits and few finds, but a shallow central pit is a good candidate for a cooking pit (fig 10 CC-DD); a posthole near the eastern edge of the post-ring may represent a repair.

Other features

The dark spread in the south-west erosion scoop concealed a number of features. Among these, three complexes were notable. Two intercutting pits contained a concentration of quartz, probably struck and probably early prehistoric, although little of it is diagnostic (A Saville, pers comm). More interesting was a slot running north-west / south-east into the trench edge, tightly-packed with cobbles and ending at the south-east in a deeper pit, where a broken flat stone must have been a post-pad (fig 11-12). The cobbles and pad must represent the foundations of a structural wall, and it is hoped to expose more of this in 2010.
Fig 10: top, sections in ring-ditch house (W-Z); middle, sections in small post ring (AA-HH) and associated features (II-NN); bottom, ring-ditch house entrance complex (OO-PP)
Fig 11: trench AL, features under spread F.7805

Fig 12: trench AL, sections of spread F.7805 and underlying features.
Under the south-east corner of the spread was a linear complex of features (fig 12 S-T). Projection northwards of the series of postulated votive deposits (the two coin hoards, pit with whetstone and pit with decorated pot; Hunter 2008, 27-9) suggested any continuation of this sequence should fall within this complex. Sadly, no such evidence was recovered, although a fragment of a quern had been used as post-packing in one feature.

Conclusions

The highspot of trench AL was the discovery of the large house and its remarkable survival, in particular the structural charcoal. This clearly merits further work, and will be a focus of 2010. The evidence so far suggests a complex history to the building, with a number of phases of rebuilding, destruction by fire, and some further use of the structure before it was finally abandoned. Other discoveries in the trench add valuable detail to the site’s picture. The unexpected small post-ring, the unexplained erosion hollow in the SW, the linear foundation slot, the tantalising evidence of industrial activity, and the fired clay structure all add pieces to the story, although the overall picture remains fuzzy in this area. We hope the neighbouring area to the west will hold the key.
Fig 13: trench D roundhouse plan (at end of 2008 season).
3 BACK TO THE BURNT HOUSE – TRENCH D ONCE MORE

Regular followers of the interim reports will need no introduction to trench D – scene of the first sondage we excavated on the site, and one to which we have returned regularly since, in an attempt to disentangle the complex burnt deposits and extract as much information as possible from them (fig 13). The 2008 results had confirmed four key phases to the trench: an early, smaller ring groove house; a later, larger ring-ditch house; reuse of the eastern part of this building as it became decrepit; and finally its destruction by fire (Hunter 2009, 7-13). In 2009, work focussed on segments 1 and 2 in the north-east of the structure, but a little work was done in segment 3 to clarify the sequence. In addition, an area to the east of the house was opened to see what external features were in the area, although time permitted only limited work here. Little new information on the early phase of the house was forthcoming, but there were significant additions to our knowledge of the later house’s construction, reuse and destruction.

Construction and use

In over half of the area the destruction deposits were all but removed. The ring of underlying posts is starting to poke through, although any firm comments on the structure of the two houses will be delayed until these have been properly examined in 2010. However, the form of the ring-ditch is becoming clearer, with a shallow, lightly-cobbled area at the south-east end beside the entrance becoming deeper towards the west, where it seems to have a double scoop profile. This was seen also in areas excavated to the west, but clarification must await further excavation.

Reuse and repair

One intriguing aspect of the double-scoop form of the ring ditch is that its line seems to correlate with another feature – an area of clay latticework running at an angle across the ring ditch, and interpreted as the collapsed remains of a wattle and daub fence or partition (fig 14). This underlay the destruction deposits, so must have been a ground-floor feature at the time of burning. Perhaps it served to partition the ramshackle interior, dividing safe from less-safe areas, with the second scoop representing additional erosion after the early ring-ditch was closed off.

Other evidence of restructuring and repairing the interior was found. The entrance post exposed in the main E-W section was fully excavated and recorded (fig 15). This confirmed that it had
been replaced with a narrow stone slot running north-south across it prior to the house’s destruction. The 2008 work had shown that some structural posts had been repaired or replaced, and this adds to such evidence.

Further evidence of repair may lie in the large stones within destruction deposits on the inner edge of the ring ditch, which had clearly fallen from a height. They were postulated as thatch weights in the last report, but this seems impractical given their spacing (weights would be expected near the edge). Instead, they may be stones used to prop up unstable posts, presumably on first floor level.

**Destruction**

The evidence of destruction, a complex jumble of various burnt layers, supports what was seen previously. Some substantial portions of burnt timber were found, lying radially and thus most likely upper floor supports or rafters. Another area of much finer, apparently interwoven fragments may represent a burnt basket. Finds were few, but there were two clusters of burnt bone and a broken curved iron knife (fig 39) from these deposits.

**Conclusions**

The story of this house is gradually unfolding. There were no big surprises this year – the sequence is behaving at the moment – but there was considerable detail to add to the picture. With the excavation of the last of these deposits in 2010, we should finally see the full extent of the underlying houses and associated features – but on past experience, we anticipate further surprises and complexities before the end ...
Fig 14: trench D segment 1 under excavation, showing collapsed clay latticework.
Fig 15: trench D, south-facing section of E-W baulk (segment 2/3), showing entrance posthole
Fig 16: trench AM
4 THE BIRNIE PYROMANIACS – ANOTHER BURNT HOUSE (trench AM).

To the east of trench D, a dark crescentic feature on the cropmark had been sampled in 2001 (trench M), and its western edge part-exposed in 2008 (Hunter 2002, 10-11; 2009, 36-7). Both these exercises had indicated a charcoal-rich fill, and it was decided to expose this area fully. Trench AM, 14 x 15 m, showed that this was a ring-ditch lying in the northern arc of another, smaller, ring-ditch house (fig 16).

This single-phase house was some 13.5 m in diameter, with two substantial stone-packed entrance posts on the east side (fig 17 C-D). Internally was a ring of eleven posts about 7 m in diameter, with traces of a possible stake wall round parts of the ring ditch outer edge. The limits of the ditch stretched beyond the stakeholes, suggesting gradual erosion had encroached on the wall, which was presumably replaced (though any later phase left no trace). A series of features on the inner edge of the ring ditch may represent a partition between the peripheral and the internal space. Inside the house was a range of features, not all necessarily contemporary and some demonstrably earlier or later. They included a central oval pit with burnt layers and sand lenses which is probably a cooking pit or earth-oven (fig 17 E-F). On the western edge in the peripheral area was a further cooking pit with fire-cracked stones in the fill (fig 18). This is an unusual location; fire-places are usually near-central, and one in the periphery of the house would seem perilously close to the potentially flammable roof material, but the stratigraphy indicates it was contemporary with the building, as it was filled with and overlain by burnt deposits.

Once again, the building had met a fiery end. The fill of the ring-ditch was very charcoal-rich, with large charcoal fragments aligned radially. Analysis will assess whether these are from wall or roof; one also had remains of interwoven wattle. Only a sample of the postholes was investigated, but the best-preserved ones showed well-defined post-pipes where the post had rotted in the ground (fig 17 A-B, I-J, K-L). The lower fills were charcoal-free, indicating they had rotted and compacted long before the fire, but the upper fills contained destruction deposits. This suggests the posts were still standing when the fire took place, their bases rotted further, with destruction material filling the space where the part-rotted post base stood.
Fig 17: trench AM sections. A-B, post-ring posthole 7265; C-D, entrance posts; E-F, cooking pit 7604; G-H, later pit 7602; I-J, K-L, post-ring postholes 7271 and 7765; Q-R, S-T, ring ditch
Fig 18: trench AM, hearth F.7260 (upper) and cooking pit F.6923
Before and after

Although the house was the dominant feature of the trench, there was both earlier and later activity. Most intriguing among the earlier material was an inconspicuous sand-filled pit cut by a post-ring posthole on the northern arc. Partial excavation produced quantities of flint flakes, a diagnostic one suggesting a late Neolithic date (A Saville, pers comm).

There was clearer evidence of later activity. Pits were cut into the tops of several postholes, echoing a pattern seen in the trench AB roundhouse, where it was argued to represent closure rituals. Cut into the destruction deposits on the western edge of the house, but underlying a later spread, was a well-built stone hearth (fig 18). This overlay the earlier peripheral cooking pit. The hearth had subsequently been partly demolished, with stones from its southern edge scattered into the overlying layer. Despite our best efforts, we failed to turn the scatter of small features in this area into a structure connected with the hearth; while there were pits, and features which might be small postholes, they cannot plausibly be seen as a building. This emphasises once more the ephemeral nature of these later buildings which lacked earthfast foundations.

Finds

The trench produced some notable finds. Apart from the ?late Neolithic flints and a pitchstone flake, probably also Neolithic, there were some striking finds in the destruction deposits at the ring ditch’s western end: a stone burnisher, a fragment of a Guido type 13 glass bead, and, most excitingly, an intact Romano-British penannular brooch. This lay in destruction deposits on top of stones which had slumped from a small feature on the ring ditch edge. It is discussed more fully below, but this and the bead suggest a first-second century AD date for the building.

Conclusions

Trench AM gave us a detailed picture of a different kind of ring-ditch house from our normal ones – a rather smaller one, with intriguing details associated with the ring ditch, such as the possible partition, and with a useful charcoal assemblage. The finds, especially the brooch, are a major contribution to our understanding of the site, while the evidence of later activity in the form of the hearth is further confirmation of the extended time-depth to the site’s use, the difficulties in finding these late phases, and changes in cooking styles over time.
5 DISENTANGLING OLD FRIENDS – HOUSE N REVISITED (trench AN)

Over the years, we have looked at a wide range of houses. We never have the time to excavate a house fully, concentrating on extracting the key information. But sometimes there are puzzles or questions which draw us back. Two houses with intriguing issues were revisited this year: the trench N ring-ditch house and the ring-groove house from trench L.

The trench N roundhouse was first exposed in 2001 and more fully examined in 2003 and 2004. This left some unresolved questions which were targeted in 2009:

- Where were the post-ring postholes in the eastern part of the building?
- What was the nature of the spread of features in this area?

Trench AN (8.8 x 6.8 m) was laid out to cover the eastern part of the house, extended to the south to join onto the corner of trench AL (fig 3 & 19). The history of this area can be split into five phases: pre-house activity; construction of the house; use of the building; demolition; and post-house activity.

Phase 1: pre-house activity

There was limited evidence of pre-house activity. A large spread of discoloured sand fills a shallow hollow (the irregular light mottled area on fig 19), and may be a natural feature. A slot running N-S from the cooking pit was also shown to be early, while the finds include disturbed sherds of Beaker pottery from one of the house postholes (fig 36 P-Q).

Phase 2: house construction

We are now sure the house had thirteen posts, with a broader gap at the ENE facing the entrance. Small postholes between the doorposts and the post-ring may represent partitions cutting off the peripheral space from the doorway. There was no convincing trace of a wall.

Phase 3: house use

Apart from the central cooking pit (dug in 2004), few features can be securely linked to the house’s use. However, the erosion of the ring ditch in the northern half of the building does
relate to its use. The postholes are only of one phase, although the cooking pit showed three phases of use (Hunter 2004, 7-8, fig 5 E-F).

**Phase 4: house demolition**

The house was deliberately demolished, with the posts being dug out of the postholes (fig 20 A-B). The western trench edge provided a lovely section through the ring ditch and post-ring (fig 20 C-D). This clearly showed destruction deposits over the top of the emptied and infilled postholes, with the cobbling noted in previous years set into this. In other words, the cobbling has nothing to do with the use of the ring-ditch; it postdates the house’s demolition, and is probably part of a broader spread, only surviving here because it has slumped into the ring ditch.

**Phase 5: post-house activity**

The cobbling is part of an extensive suite of evidence for later use of the house stance. Its nature is unclear, although as some features intercut it must have some time-depth. A few features may be singled out for comment. A large erosion hollow in the NW of the trench may be the eroded floor of a small building. There were no other certain building traces, but a cooking pit was set into the top of one posthole, and a scatter of stakeholes to its north may represent the remains of a shelter; a short slot to the SW of this, aligned north-south, may be connected (fig 21).

There was also an unusual posthole – a stone-packed pit with a circle of stones forming a post setting. This unusual feature echoes a pair of carefully stone-set posts excavated in trench O (Hunter 2003, 13, fig 9 C-D); these were much deeper, but again post-dated a roundhouse, and it seems this careful packing is a feature of later activity on the site. In the current case, the effect is more that of a post-pad than a posthole, but it is unclear what it relates to.

**Conclusions**

We now have a much better picture of this house – and our picture has changed dramatically. Our understanding of the ring-ditch sequence was wrong; the deposits in it represent later activity. Indeed, later activity is a recurring theme, with pits, scoops, and hints of structures. The dating of these will be crucial to understanding the history of the site – such vestigial remains are all too often overlooked, but are vital to building a picture of the less visible periods of the past.
Fig 20: trench AN sections. A-B, posthole F.7146; C-D, ring ditch F.7727 and posthole F.7146; E-F, cooking pit F.7421, F.7145 and post-ring posthole F.7420; G-H, I-J, complex around post-ring posthole F.7238.
Fig 21: trench AN, selected phase 5 features in the SE of the former building - a structure?
Fig 22: plan of trench AP
6 A HOUSE WITH TWO DOORWAYS (trench AP)

The 2000 excavations in trench J had uncovered part of a ring-groove house with a door facing north-west. This is unusual, as doorways on the site are habitually oriented approximately east, and this intriguing feature made it worth a second look (fig 22). The area of the building was stripped, extending to south and west to join other old trenches (1999 trench D and 2006 trench AC). The dominant feature was the ring-groove house, some 10.2 m in diameter, but other features were also present. A cobbled spread ran out of the trench in the north-east corner; time did not allow any work on this. Among a scatter of features to the south were patches of heat-affected sand, perhaps related to the industrial activities found in trench AC to the west (Hunter 2007, 24-5). In one case, a pit with a burnt sand fill was cut by the house wall, suggesting that such features are likely to predate the house (fig 23 G-H).

Another tantalising aspect was a cluster of small features south of the building, which looked like they wanted to turn into a four-post structure. Sadly, they proved on excavation to be divergent in form, fill and depth, and this idea had to be abandoned.

The ring-groove building does indeed seem to have two entrances. The groove itself is increasingly vestigial, with ploughing taking its toll over the years, but the northern part of the north-west entrance had looked convincing in 2000, the southern end destroyed by a pit cut across it. This may have been deliberate, as the east entrance too had various pits and scoops cut across it. It was an altogether larger and more complex affair, with substantial posts for a door frame around an opening three or four metres across (there is some uncertainty over which posts form pairs). The northern post, and perhaps the southern one, were replaced, narrowing the door to c. 2.5 m wide (fig 23 I-J, K-L).

Intriguingly, after the structure of the door fell from use there was still activity in the area, with pits dug and a series of scoops worn over and between the abandoned posts. The pits may relate to rites of decommissioning, as noted elsewhere on the site, but the scoops are best seen as erosion hollows, suggesting the wall was still standing and the building stance saw continuing activity – again, an increasingly common feature of the site.

Whereas the eastern doorposts had been replaced, the wall itself showed no clear evidence of repair. Its wavy outer edge represents the position of structural posts, spaced some 0.5-0.6 m
apart. These were not set particularly deep but would have provided structural integrity to the building, as it had no internal post ring. The continuous curve of the inner edge suggests the wattle or plank wall was set on this edge, resting against the posts.

Inside the building, the 2000 excavations had located a cooking pit, but it was difficult to identify other features certainly associated with its use, and there were no clues to its function from the finds. Although double entrances are unusual, they are not unknown, and there was nothing in the material to suggest any special purpose to the building.

Within the building were two deep postholes with flat stones at the base, probably post-pads. This is an unusual architectural form on the site, and they probably form a connected structural pair some 2.8 m apart (fig 22; 23 M-N, O-P). They sit at an angle to the building, and are unlikely to be connected to it.

Conclusions

Trench AP provided valuable insights into an unusual building (fig 24). The double entrance is a curious feature, but the construction (with all the weight taken by tight-spaced posts around the circumference) matches that of other houses on the site, in trench Z and the northern part of trench O. Indeed, it raises the question as to whether the 'palisade' recorded in trench N could be the remnants of a similar house. The evidence of what may be abandonment rites (in the digging of pits across the door) adds to evidence from other trenches, as do the signs of continuing use of the stance after the building became decrepit. As with so many of our houses, it is the question of dating which remains the intriguing one, and which is needed to help build the picture further.
Fig 23: trench AP sections. A-B and C-D, postholes on ring groove; E-F, slot and pit associated with groove; G-H, feature cut by groove; I-J, K-L, east entrance; M-N, O-P, postholes with post pads.
Area AP

Fig 24: reconstruction of house AP (by Alan Braby)
Fig 25: trench AO
THE EDGES OF SETTLEMENT (trenches AO and AQ)

Two of the 2009 trenches aimed to test our assumptions about the site’s limits. Trench AO targeted an elusive cropmark, while AQ lay east of the main site in an area which had produced metal-detecting finds.

Chasing shadows – trench AO

In 2002 attempts were made to trace an amorphous cropmark blob. This proved elusive, but led us to a large circular enclosure instead (Hunter 2003, 9-10). The southern trench edge had an area of darker soil – perhaps the cropmark feature? This was reopened on a larger scale in 2009 (fig 25), but to no avail. If the feature ever existed (it may just have been varying soil depth), it is lost to the plough. Instead, a thin scatter of features, probably of varying dates, show something of activities towards the site’s edge. At the south-west corner was a highly vestigial cobbled surface, the last traces just about resisting the plough. This is a valuable reminder that such surfaces could have been much more extensive – we usually see them only where they slump into earlier features. Underlying features included a pit with a concentration of burnt bone (fig 26 C-D). Elsewhere were a charcoal-stained cooking pit and another feature filled with fire-cracked stone, either another cooking site or the dumping ground for debris from the fire (fig 26 A-B). A two-phase teardrop-shaped pit is unusual, but its purpose remains elusive (fig 26 E-F, G-H).

A large blob near the northern edge, surviving as a dark halo around a light sandy core, proved something of a nightmare to understand – not least because large parts of it collapsed after heavy rain. It was a test of the excavator’s patience and the supervisors’ experience, but eventually revealed some secrets – a small oval enclosure defined by a V-sectioned slot, cut by a later, deep pit. Their function is enigmatic, but a midden had been dumped on top of them, producing notable quantities of later prehistoric pottery.

Off the edge – trench AQ

The other, more speculative trench lay to the east of the main settlement, partly overlapping 2000 trench G, where a Roman brooch had been found (fig 27). Under a considerable depth of topsoil, a couple of scattered features were located, but nothing to indicate any substantial activity. This confirms our views about the site’s extent in this area.
Fig 26: trench AO sections. A-B, cooking pit; C-D, pit complex with burnt bone; E-F, G-H, teardrop-shaped pit complex; I-J, post-exavation profile of annular ditch & deep pit

Fig 27: trench AQ
As a more leisurely prelude to the main season, we returned in May to the Medieval corn-drying kiln eroding out of the quarry on the edge of the site (fig 28). A few days’ work revealed the feature in much greater detail, both in terms of stonework and timberwork, the latter preserved by its fiery fate which had charred the superstructure. The preservation is remarkable – one naturally curved timber, probably the main longitudinal beam for the floor, is 1.3 m long. There are remains of the vertical poles for the turf superstructure, major timbers such as this prop, and smaller transverse roundwood timbers from the floor. The upper part of the fills was unburnt, suggesting the surviving remains of the fire-ravaged kiln were knocked into the bowl. Before this was done, a small pit was dug into the remains, its purpose unknown.
Fig 28: corn kiln (trench X)
Fig 29: Trench locations around Birnie kirk
AROUND BIRNIE KIRK

The church on the hill at Birnie has been a constant reminder to think about the wider landscape (fig 29). We have tickled this a little, with fieldwalking in Paddockhaugh in 1998 and some excavations of medieval remains to the south in 2005. In 2008 we noted a tempting swathe of lush green vegetation encircling the west of the mound in the Glebe Field, and aerial photos by Moira Greig confirmed that this looked like the line of an enclosure. It could be matched with earlier aerial photos by Ian Ralston of Paddockhaugh which showed a dark line on the same concentric alignment. Was this the remains of an early monastic enclosure around the church? In May 2009 we took the chance to find out.

A long evaluation trench was excavated south from the kirkyard wall to the road, continuous on the hill and intermittent over the flat ground. Time only allowed cleaning and planning of the remains, but the results are intriguing (fig 30-31). At the southern end, on the flats of Paddockhaugh, are the remains of ditches, apparently at right angles to one another. These are likely to be boundaries of an early field system. The top of the hill was badly scalped by ploughing, although hints of features remained. The most intriguing area was towards the base of the hill, masked and protected by hillwash deposits. These had smothered a post-medieval stone dyke marked on early maps which included a much earlier saddle quern (fig 41) in its makeup. To either side of it and running up the lower slope were rectangular dark features, probably the remains of buildings, while a peat deposit in the area of poorer drainage at the foot of the hill probably masks the early enclosure ditch – in one area stones poking through suggest a stone-filled feature.

The results are necessarily tentative, but intriguing. There is clearly high-quality archaeology beyond the current kirkyard wall and traces of an outer enclosure line, with likely building remains both within and beyond it. What remains to establish is the date. Are these linked to the medieval site? Or to a Pictish monastery? And do the old field boundaries recorded on an estate plan of 1769 fossilise the lines of older features related to the church (fig 32-33)? Only further excavation, intended for 2010, can help us here.
Fig 30: Plan of trenches near the kirk
Fig 31: plan of trenches in Paddockhaugh, further from Kirk
Fig 32: Speculative reconstruction of former boundaries of church complex (from excavation, cropmarks and map reconstruction)
Fig 33: speculative reconstruction of Birnie Kirk in the eighth century (by Alan Braby)
The Birnie bell

One of the indicators of an early medieval presence on the site is the Ronnel Bell, the iron early Christian handbell kept in a cage in the chancel. Thanks to the Minister and Kirk Session, the chance was taken to examine and draw it (fig 34). Such bells are typical of the eighth-ninth century AD, a liturgical habit introduced from Ireland (Bourke 1983). The Birnie bell was made from a single sheet of iron, coated on its outer face with a layer of copper alloy (the yellow colour where it is worn might suggest it is brass) and then riveted together.

The bell shows traces of a long life. The current handle is a replacement, and it has seen other changes. Most of the copper alloy sheet has been lost and the edges worn down, while a dent in the middle comes from centuries of vigorous striking. A later modification was the cutting of a hole in the top for a clapper (it was originally rung by hand with a stick).

This marvellous survival is an intriguing and technically complex piece, with fine iron-working and complex coating techniques. It is also a tantalising reminder of the earlier history of this lovely building – a history we hope that the spade can cast more light on.
Fig 34: the Bimie bell (drawn by Alan Braby)
2009 produced a good crop of finds. There were more signs of Neolithic activity, although still limited in scope – flint flakes from a pit in trench AM, a blade of pitchstone imported from Arran in the same trench, struck quartz from a pit in trench AL, and a fine flint arrowhead from the later ring-ditch there (fig 37 W-Z). Hints of early Bronze Age activity were seen in sherds of Beaker pottery from two features in trenches AL and AN (fig 36 P-R).

The everyday finds of later prehistory were well-represented. We are building an impressive range of Iron Age pottery in a wide variety of forms and fabrics (fig 35-36). Such pottery remains all too scarce in the area, and the Birnie evidence should provide valuable markers for understanding the region’s pot sequence. Other finds included the usual range of querns, primarily saddle querns with a few fragments of rotaries, an unusually-shaped ?quern rubber (fig 41), a range of other stone tools, and locally-made glass beads, both the simple yellow ‘polo-mint’ form and a fragment of a spiral-decorated Guido (1978) type 13 (figs 37-38, 40-41).

This spiral-decorated bead came from trench AM, which also produced the undoubted star of the show – a complete Romano-British copper alloy penannular brooch of Fowler (1960) type A3 (fig 39). It came from the destruction deposits in the ring ditch and overlay stones slumped from an adjacent feature. The way the pin was lying showed that it was not attached to cloth when it was buried. Was it put there deliberately, as an offering when the house was burnt? Or was this an unfortunate loss? The former might seem more likely, given the rarity of other finds from the trench, but as ever we can only speculate over past motives. Such brooches are a Romano-British type, imported from the Roman province. This adds to the wide range of Roman brooches from the site, and is the first of its type from the area.

Suggestions of less direct Roman impact are seen in the local pottery – not imports, but stylistic influences. One sherd has part of a foot-ring, a technique alien to local ways but typical of Roman ones (fig 35 D), suggesting some emulation of Roman styles in local ceramics.

Among other metal finds, the season also produced a good haul of iron, often scarce on the site (fig 39); the drawings are schematic outlines from X-rays, as conservation is still in progress. From the trench D destruction deposits came the curved blade of a knife, a typical Iron Age style – the convex edge was the sharp one. The trench AL roundhouse produced a fan-headed linch
pin, a rare type paralleled only at Culduthel (Inverness-shire), and further evidence of the presence of chariots on the site. Pit F.7087 in this trench, which had the fired clay structure dumped in top of it, also produced a quantity of iron objects from the primary fill, including a saw fragment (fig 39).

Our evidence of bronze-working was also expanded, with a further crucible fragment and what is probably a crucible lid (fig 37 S, T). We now have a scatter of crucibles and moulds from across the site, suggesting that bronze-casting was carried out occasionally on a small scale, rather than representing a major industry.

All in all, the finds add greatly to our picture of the site — throwing some light on the murky depths of deep prehistory, providing the debris of daily life in the Iron Age, and giving insights into status activities through the Roman brooch and the linch pin. Such discoveries add up to paint a vivid picture of life at the time.
Fig 35: later prehistoric pottery. A, sf.9498 (tr.AL); B, 9360 (AL); C, 9060 (AO); D, foot ring 9338 (AL)
Fig 36: pottery (from trench AL unless stated). E-O, later prehistoric pottery. (E, sf.9341; F, 9816; G, 8809 (AO); H, 8724 (base with finger grooving); I, 8908; J, 9493; K, 9235; L, 8933; M, 9780; N, 8730; O, 8728). P-R, Beaker pottery (sf.9101 (AN), 9102 (AN), 10064).
Fig 37: assorted finds. S crucible (sf.9184, tr.D); T crucible lid (sf.8561, AL); U lead whorl (sf.8487, AL) 
V Medieval pot handles (sf.8540 (top, D), 8502, AL); W-X retouched flint tools (sf.9224, 9337, both AL); 
Y flint arrowhead (sf.8907, AL); Z pitchstone blade (sf.8971, AM); AA-CC yellow glass beads (sf.8652, D; 9779, D; 8968, AM); DD Guido 13 glass bead fragment (sf.8596, AM)
Fig 38: stone objects. EE whetstone (sf.9444, tr.D); FF, GG hide rubbers (sf.8976, AM; 9007, AM); HH pounder / working surface (sf.9916, D); II hammerstone (sf.8715, AL)
Fig 39: penannular brooch (sf.8980, tr.AM) & reconstruction; iron linch pin (AL),
saw (AL) and knife (D) (outline from X-rays)
Fig 40: saddle querns and other large stone finds (all from trench AL)
Fig 41: unusual quern rubber, sf.10045, tr.AL (from cobbling in SW erosion hollow); saddle quern, sf.8419, from old glebe boundary wall, Paddockhaugh
11 REACHING OUT

As ever, we endeavour to keep people informed about our work, both locally and further afield. A series of school visits saw over 200 children from across Moray and beyond visit the site, while the Open Day attracted 200 visitors, and a steady trickle of individuals and groups visited on other days. Local papers were generous in their coverage, and even STV came to see our latest finds. The web page (www.nms.ac.uk/ironage_scotland) is a valuable asset in attracting attention to the site.

We think it is vital that people locally should be able to hear the latest news on the site and see the latest finds. Thanks to our ongoing partnership with Elgin Museum, the display case in the museum is refreshed each year with the latest discoveries, while a handling box of replica finds for schools helps to enthuse young generations about their past. The enthusiasm and enquiries of our visitors are a constant source of support and encouragement – we can only hope they enjoy the spoils of our labours.
2009 was a good year. We now have an abundance of burnt-down houses, with their wealth of information on the structure of these buildings – the collapsed woodwork from trench AL was of particular importance. Returning to houses already sampled has been very profitable, building a detailed picture of their history. It is interesting how many house stances show signs of continuing use after the house itself had collapsed or decayed. Of course, it may be that we are just getting better at spotting this subtle evidence, or that the fragile remains survive because they slump into the soft deposits of the earlier houses; or it may be that these older houses were preferred for later use, providing shelter in their remains or a degree of ancestral legitimacy.

These scant traces are invaluable indicators of activity at periods when people were not building big, impressive houses with solid foundations. This is one of the perennial problems of the Pictish and Medieval periods – finding rural settlements. While we must await radiocarbon dates to confirm where our remains fit, we are building the raw materials to tease this topic apart.

We also began to look beyond our site, with trial work around the Kirk. This can only be a small-scale exercise given current funding and timescales, but it shows something of the potential and provides a comparison for understanding our Pictish and Medieval remains. We are optimistic that further small-scale work will help to add detail to this intriguing area.

The finds once more offer other avenues into the site, with their traces of earlier prehistoric activity, their markers of everyday routines, and the discoveries, such as the penannular brooch, which lift us out of the ordinary and back to the period of contacts with the Roman world.

And what of our final season? We have, of course, much still to do. Trench D will puzzle and frustrate us until (and beyond) our final day, and trench AL beckons us back to resolve details of it. We also aim to look at the area to its west, to see if we can trace the source of the elusive industrial evidence and the purpose and nature of the rectangular spread in its corner. Other trenches tantalise – perhaps a return to the Pictish evidence in trench AB, to disentangle the complexities there, or perhaps to one of the other ‘blobs’ which we have only partly investigated. What we can say with some confidence is that the site will have surprises yet for us.
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It is the labours of the workers which drive the project, and the (mostly) uncomplaining masses from the Universities of Cardiff, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Paris, Aberdeen and the UHI, along with a wide range of long-suffering volunteers, bear the burden admirably. They are kept (mostly) in shape by the supervisory team — Dave Anderson, Alan Braby, Peter Cowburn, Lynne Gardiner-Jones, Lachlan McKeggie, Michael Marshall, Hannah Measham, Steven Orr and Tanja Romankiewicz. Angharad Evans and Lachlan McKeggie shouldered the burden of educating the young, and of dressing up for the Open Day. The formidable post-exavation task was whipped into shape in Edinburgh by Lisa Brown and Gemma Cruickshanks, with able assistance from Kirsty Bennell, Lynne Gardiner-Jones, Lachlan McKeggie, Jess Parish and Theresa Rapior. To Alan Braby, for great support during the dig and great tolerance during the post-exavation process, my particular thanks.

One name remains to be honoured — Mrs Mustard, and her Olympian efforts in the cake-baking field, which ensured that no-one lost any weight, despite the strenuous exercise ...
References to previous interim reports are not given in detail; they are dated the year after the excavation. Sets are available in the libraries of the National Museum, the Royal Commission, Elgin Museum, and Elgin library. Other references used are as follows:


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