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FIELDWORK AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 1998

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SUMMARY

In 1996 a number of Roman silver coins were discovered by metal detecting at Dykeside, near Birnie, Moray. The findspot lies in the area of a later prehistoric settlement site known from cropmarks, on a gravel terrace. It is also within 400 m of Birnie Kirk, one of the earliest Christian sites in Moray.

A limited season of fieldwork over two weekends in 1998 was carried out to assess the potential of the area. Artefacts recovered on the Dykeside site indicate activity during the Neolithic/Bronze Age, the Iron Age and the Medieval period. Trial excavation indicated good survival of sub-surface archaeology, including what appeared to be a well-preserved burnt house, and recovered dating samples.

Work in the field immediately east of Birnie Kirk itself produced a much more limited range of material, as would be expected given its low-lying location. The relative lack of medieval finds provides a hint that cropmarks in the field may be pre-medieval. Further work is planned.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1996 Mr Hamish Stuart found 18 Roman silver coins (denarii) in a field at Dykeside, near Birnie, Moray, using a metal detector (NGR NJ 210 585). The find was reported to the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) and claimed as Treasure Trove. It was subsequently allocated to Elgin Museum, where it is now on display.

Study of the coins by Nick Holmes of NMS identified a range from Vespasian (75 AD) to Severus (194 AD). Although found over a wide area of the field on several different occasions, the number, range and wear of the coins suggest this is likely to be a scattered hoard. There have been very few recent discoveries of Roman coin hoards in Scotland, and this presented an ideal chance to examine the findspot of one with modern methods to investigate its context.

The findspot was particularly interesting because it lay in the area of a known later prehistoric settlement. In the course of the Moray Aerial Survey, Prof Barri Jones of Manchester University had located and photographed a number of roundhouses in the field (Jones et al 1993). This close connection with a potentially contemporary settlement is highly unusual, and made this an important target for fieldwork.

Accordingly, work took place over two weekends in February and March 1998 to assess the potential of the site. The field to the west (Paddock Haugh), between the settlement and Birnie Kirk, was also examined (fig 1).
Fig 1  Location map
2 RESEARCH DESIGN

Dykeside

Background

The site lies on a sand and gravel terrace (c. 50 m OD), overlooking the lower-lying land adjacent to the River Lossie, with the Thomshill ridge sheltering it from the south (fig 1). Aerial photography has revealed a prehistoric settlement, with both an open settlement of round houses and traces of a curvilinear palisade to the east. Although the focus of the hoard is not precisely known, the bulk of the coins come from the projected area of the palisade, details of which are not clear on the cropmark. However the house sites are much clearer, and represent an unenclosed settlement of at least six houses and four ancillary buildings covering an area of 125 x 70 m. Some are very clearly defined by circular grooves with entrances; others are revealed as circular or lunular dark patches, the largest some 14 m in diameter.

The coins form an interesting group. The latest one found so far dates to 194 AD, so their burial must post-date this, and they are probably a gift or bribe from the Romans to a local chieftain to keep the peace. The date connects them with the campaigns of the emperor Septimius Severus in the area in 208-211 AD. The tribes of the Maetae and the Caledonians, living in the Forth valley and eastern Scotland, had been causing trouble on the Roman frontier. Severus, accompanied by his sons Caracalla and Geta, led an army of some 40,000 men into Scotland but could not bring the tribes to a decisive battle. He died at York before the expedition was brought to a conclusion, and his sons sealed a peace treaty with the troublesome tribes and headed back to Rome.

The hoard from Dykeside is the northernmost hoard of Severan date yet known. It fits into a pattern both of Severan-period hoards and of a wider picture of Roman silver
coin hoards in eastern Scotland from c. 140 - 230 AD (fig 2; Robertson 1978). These are the residues of frontier politics: the results of a long-lived Roman policy of gifts or bribes to keep the peace. There is a concentration of such hoards in the southern Moray Firth area (mostly old finds with sparse details), suggesting this was an important power centre during the Roman period.

Fig 2  Roman coin hoards north of the Antonine Wall, 140-230 AD (from Robertson 1978, with additions). Large dots are Severan-period hoards.
Questions

The key research aim is to investigate the relationship between the hoard and the settlement. This can be broken down into a number of questions.

- What is the date range and development history of the settlement?
- Is there any other evidence that this is a status site?
- Is there any evidence of why the hoard was buried?

In addition information would be expected on a range of other interesting topics, especially on the nature of such open settlements, which are not well understood. As there has been relatively little work on the north-east Iron Age despite its wealth of cropmark evidence, any such information would be useful.

Strategy

- Non-invasive work
  - Fieldwalking and metal detecting, to look at patterns of activity in the field and recover an outline of its long-term history.
  - Geophysical survey to supplement the air photographic record.

- Invasive work (excavation)
  - Assess survival of archaeology in ploughed field.
  - Establish date and nature of palisaded site.
  - Establish date range of unenclosed settlement site.
  - Emphasis on artefact recovery to establish whether there is other evidence of this as a status site.
The project is envisaged as a series of relatively small areas excavated over two or three seasons, rather than a large area excavation.

Paddock Haugh and Birnie Kirk

Background

The general area of Birnie is a significant one for later prehistoric settlement, as indicated by cropmark evidence (Jones et al. 1993). Birnie Kirk itself is one of the earliest Christian sites in Moray. The surviving building dates back to the 12th century and was at one stage the seat of the Bishops of Moray (Keillar 1993, 33). However, the presence of an early Christian handbell and cross fragments of 8th-9th century AD date, now preserved in the church, point to a longer religious tradition on the site (Anderson 1881, 177-8; Allen & Anderson 1903, III, 136-7), as does the outline of the burial ground which has echoes of early Christian curvilinear enclosures (Macdonald & Laing 1970, 140). Aerial photographs show an enclosure in the Paddock Haugh field to the east of the church which may be related to it (Jones et al. 1993, Pl. XI).

In addition, there is a class I Pictish symbol stone in the churchyard, which when first noted was built into the churchyard wall. Although its original site is therefore not known, it is unlikely to have been moved far. Work by Inglis (1987) has suggested that such stones are often located near pre-Christian religious sites, such as earlier sacred sites or watery locations. Here the derivation of the placename Birnie may be significant. Its earliest form is "Brennach", before 1200, which probably derives from the Gaelic for "moist place" (Watson 1926, 189; Ian Keillar, pers comm). At the foot of the hill on which the church stands, in the Paddock Haugh, is a black area of soil, now drained and deep-ploughed but originally most probably a small moss. Such sites are exactly those adopted for Iron Age votive deposition, as work at Deskford, near
Cullen, has demonstrated (unpublished work by the author). The cultivation of this area is likely to have destroyed any traces, but it is worthy of examination.

Questions

The key questions are as follows.

- Is there any structural confirmation that Birnie is a pre-Medieval Christian site?
- What is the nature of pre-Christian activity in the area? Is there any evidence of votive use of the site?
- What is the nature of the cropmarks in the field?

Strategy

- Non-invasive: as for Dykeside, using fieldwalking, metal detecting, and other techniques as appropriate
- Invasive
  - Trenches to characterise the cropmarks in the field, perhaps with wider areas to clarify their function if required
  - Cultivation is liable to have destroyed any archaeology in the former damp area, but a couple of trenches should be excavated to confirm this.
  - The churchyard itself has too many post-Reformation burials to contemplate any excavation, but the line of the putative early enclosure wall could be examined on the outside of the kirkyard, to check for precursors to the modern wall.
3  1998 FIELDWORK

Fieldwork in 1998 was designed as an evaluation exercise to tackle only a few of the objectives above.

- Fieldwalking and metal detecting on both sites to get a feel for the date range and distribution of material.
- Geophysical survey of part of the Dykeside field.
- Limited trial trenching to establish the nature of the surviving archaeology.

On the whole, these limited objectives were successful.

Fieldwalking and metal detecting

378 finds were recovered from Dykeside and 73 from Paddock Haugh. The relative percentages of material types are shown in fig 3. Details are as follows; selected distributions can be found in figs 7 and 9.

Fig 3  Breakdown of fieldwalking finds by material
(a) Dykeside  (b) Paddock Haugh
Dykeside

All the field was walked at approximately 3 m spacing up to the edge of the terrace on the north side of the field.

- **Stone** (62 finds). The most impressive finds were two intact and one broken flint arrowheads of Neolithic date (c. 4000-2500 BC; fig 4, 143, 220 & 321). A range of flint, chert and quartz working waste of Neolithic or Bronze Age date was also recovered. The lack of any concentrations in the distribution indicates this was a background scatter of debris, rather than a specific site. However it does demonstrate use of the area in the Neolithic and Bronze Age.

- **Ceramics** (186 finds). Some burnt daub and later prehistoric pottery was recovered (fig 4, 186/2). The quantities were too small to show clear patterns, although most came from the area of the open settlement, with a slight eastwards spread. Most of the pottery was Medieval, much of it the typical later Medieval green-glazed wares (figs 5-6). Its distribution concentrated over and around the earlier cropmarks, although with a wide scatter over the field; this may suggest there was Medieval occupation in the same general area.

- **Metal** (41 finds). This was almost all recovered by metal-detecting. The key finds were two further *denarii* from the hoard, of Vespasian (for Titus) and Commodus. A fragment of thin sheet bronze with a punched rivet hole is most likely Iron Age or Medieval (fig 4, 180/1) while a number of hand-forged iron nails may relate to the Medieval use of the site, but cannot be closely dated. The bulk of the finds were clearly post-Medieval; their distribution shows a broad scatter over the field.

- **Industrial waste** (67 finds). This included both slag and clinker. At first it was assumed this was introduced from later manuring, but the distribution is not random, as would be expected in this case: it concentrates on the area of the earlier settlement and putative Medieval site. This suggests at least some may be linked to industrial processing at one of these periods. From initial inspection both tap slag and smithing waste are present, implying both smelting and smithing of iron. Clarifying the dating and nature of this will require excavation.
Fig 4  Finds from Dykeside. Scale 1:1 (except pottery, 1:2)
(143, 220, 321, flint; 163, 180/1, 316, copper alloy; 186/2, pottery)
Fig 5  Medieval pottery from Dykeside. Scale 1:1
Fig 6  Medieval pottery from Dykeside. Scale 1:1
Fig 7  Distribution of fieldwalking finds at Dykeside.
(a) All finds
Fig 7 (cont.) Distribution of fieldwalking finds at Dykeside.

(b) Struck lithics, (c) Ceramics
Fig 7 (cont.)  Distribution of fieldwalking finds at Dykeside.
(d) Metal,  (e) Industrial waste

DISTRIBUTION OF METAL

DISTRIBUTION OF INDUSTRIAL WASTE
Paddock Haugh

Only a part of this field was walked, as marked on fig 9a, on approximately 3 m spacing. Much smaller quantities of material were recovered than at Dykeside and its nature was clearly different, notably in the much smaller proportion of ceramics and greater proportion of metal. The latter may be because less metal detecting had previously taken place on this field, which is why more interesting non-ferrous finds were made, but the small amount of Medieval ceramics suggests a real lack of substantial Medieval activity. It is likely that some of the material derives from activity around the church which has gradually been moved down the slope. The results of some trial fieldwalking in 1997 are incorporated in the more extensive material from 1998. It is notable that none of the finds distributions (fig 9) correlate tightly with the cropmark enclosure. There is a general concentration in the centre of the field, east of the Kirk, with a notable fall-off to north and south.

- **Stone** (18 finds). One tool was found (a Neolithic or Bronze Age scraper; fig 8, 7), and a sparse scatter of working debris, enough to indicate activity but insufficient to suggest there was a site there. Two fragments of cannel coal working debris (fig 8, 64) and two fragmentary chipped stone discs were also found (fig 8, 65 & 70); such finds are most common on Iron Age sites. Three of these Iron Age finds were close to the cropmark enclosure boundary, although given the numbers involved this need not be significant.

- **Ceramics** (11 finds). The sparsity of ceramics compared to Dykeside is notable. All were Medieval except for a single daub fragment and a possible prehistoric rim sherd. There is no pattern to their distribution.

- **Industrial waste** (18 finds). A small assemblage of slag and cinder was recovered. The quantities do not indicate any substantial metalworking activity, if indeed they are not from later spreading; their distribution does not show any significant concentrations.

- **Metal** (26 finds). A more interesting range of metal artefacts were recovered than at Dykeside, probably because the field has been less intensively metal detected in
the past. Their distribution concentrates around the west side of the cropmark enclosure and the area to the west. The iron finds were primarily hand-forged nails, which cannot be closely dated. However, non-ferrous finds included a Medieval lead spindle whorl and a rim fragment from a copper alloy bowl (fig 8, 36 & 44), which has Early Historic - Medieval parallels (Hunter 1994, 57-62).

Conclusion

This exercise highlights the value of fieldwalking. For a small investment of time and effort, a basic outline history of each field was produced. Both fields show activity in the Neolithic and Bronze Age, although no signs of substantial habitation. There are clear traces of Iron Age occupation at Dykeside and hints of activity at Paddock Haugh, while the Medieval is well represented at the former and notably poorly at the latter.

This is a technique which is very suitable in the arable lowlands of Moray, although so far little used, and its use should be encouraged. This is an area where local enthusiasts can make a major contribution to knowledge.
Fig 8  Finds from Paddock Haugh. Scale 1:1
(36, copper alloy; 44, lead; 64, cannel coal; 65, 70, stone; 7, flint)
Fig 9  Distribution of Paddock Haugh finds. Dashed lines indicate limits of fieldwalking. Church and cropmark enclosure marked.

(a) All finds
Fig 9 (cont)  Distribution of Paddock Haugh finds.

(b) Stone  
(c) Ceramics
Fig 9 (cont)   Distribution of Paddock Haugh finds.

○ Non-ferrous
● Ferrous

(d) Metal
(e) Industrial waste
Geophysics

A resistivity survey was carried out over part of the open settlement at Dykeside by a team from the Department of Art History and Archaeology, Manchester University. Patterns in the data are confused by noise, notably from a pipeline across the site. However a number of low-resistance anomalies were identified (fig 10), including a circular feature c. 15 m in diameter which correlates well with one of the houses on the aerial photograph; this was confirmed by excavation (see trench A below).

Fig 10 Resistivity results. Significant low resistance features highlighted.
Excavation

Three trenches were opened at Dykeside (A-C; fig 1) to sample the sub-surface archaeology. Trenches A and B were intended to examine house sites, while C was placed to cross the approximate line of the palisade.

Trench A

This was started as a 4 x 4 m trench, and expanded to 8 x 4 m based on initial promising results (fig 11). Under the topsoil was a curving spread of charcoal-rich soil, extending beyond the trench edge; over this in areas was a brown loam. The charcoal-rich soil, where sampled, produced pieces of charred timber up to 500 mm long and 50 mm in diameter. It also produced a copper alloy spiral finger ring (fig 4, 163 & 316) and a sherd of prehistoric pottery.

These remains are interpreted as the burnt remains of a house, with the brown loam representing the remains of a later ploughsoil surviving in the hollow of the destroyed house. There is a good depth of topsoil which has minimised damage by the plough, although a few plough scars were noted. Any deep ploughing would do substantial damage to what are currently well-preserved remains. The chance to investigate a burnt house is rare in arable sites, and there must be a reasonable possibility of preserved floor levels and the remains of the collapsed walls and roof. The timbers will provide a radiocarbon date for the structure, but in the meantime the spiral finger ring provides an approximate chronology; although a long-lived type (Clarke 1971), most examples date to c. 1st century BC – 4th century AD.
Trench B

This 4 x 4 m trench failed to hit the intended house area. Two small pits were found, with no indication of date or function.

Trench C

This 1 x 10 m trench was intended to locate the palisade line visible on the aerial photographs. Under a considerable depth of topsoil an area of intercutting features and stone packing was located (fig 12). However a larger area needs to be investigated to clarify its nature. These results do at least confirm the survival of archaeology in this part of the field.

Fig 12 Trench C (west end)
4 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{DISCUSSION}

The 1998 fieldwork has succeeded in revealing an outline history of the two fields. Dykeside shows activity in early prehistory (notably the Neolithic), although no clear signs of habitation areas of this date were discovered. The visible cropmarks date to the Iron Age, as confirmed by the discovery of the finger ring, and there is also extensive Medieval activity, revealed by finds but not yet in structures. Paddock Haugh produced very little material, with hints of early prehistoric and Iron Age activity; the relative lack of Medieval material may indicate the rectilinear enclosure seen on the aerial photographs is pre-Medieval.

This evaluation has demonstrated the potential of the site to answer the questions posed in the research design above. The archaeology appears to survive well and the burnt house in particular has potential to provide invaluable information on a well-preserved building in association with later prehistoric artefacts. Further work is planned.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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