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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2001

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SUMMARY

A further season of excavations in 2001 continued the examination of the unenclosed Iron Age site at Birnie, Moray. Work so far has shown this was an important settlement, inhabited by people of some status who were in contact with the Roman world. In 2000 the bulk of a disturbed late 2nd century Roman silver coin hoard was found, an extremely rare and exciting discovery; this was probably a gift or bribe, part of a wider policy to keep the Roman frontier secure. Fieldwork in 2001 had four aims: to test the presence of a palisade east of the site; examine two further sets of cropmarks; explore the setting of the hoard; and continue the metal-detecting survey.

The palisade had been suggested from aerial photographs, but extensive trial-trenching found no trace of it. This allowed the eastern boundary of the settlement to be established, giving it a sizeable area of some 150 x 110 m.

Two trenches examining cropmark traces revealed the remains of three Iron Age roundhouses. These had unusually well-preserved occupation deposits. Dating these will be important in clarifying the date range and nature of the site.

Examining a large area to the west of the 2000 coin hoard showed that it lay in an area of dense occupation, close to a substantial roundhouse. Owing to the complexity of the remains they were only partly disentangled. Completely unexpected was the discovery of a second Roman silver coin hoard, only 10 m away from the first. This is unparalleled in Scotland, and raises all kinds of questions about how long-lived the contact with Rome was, and why the hoards were buried here. Further work is planned to tackle some of these issues.

Metal-detecting produced a range of finds which expand our picture of the site. Most notable was an intact and unusual Roman brooch, the third from the site, which shows that there was contact with Rome over some time. Finds from the Medieval settlement overlying the Iron Age one were also recovered, including a silver coin and lead spindle whorls. Excavation recovered an important representative range of everyday Iron Age tools and implements.
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INTRODUCTION

Since 1998 excavations have been taking place on an Iron Age settlement at Birnie, near Elgin (fig 1). Its occupants were in contact with the Romans, and in 2000 a hoard of over 300 Roman silver coins was found, an exceedingly rare discovery which emphasises the site’s significance. It was the initial discovery of a few scattered silver coins (denarii) by local metal-detectorist Hamish Stuart which first suggested the site’s importance – although known from aerial photographs, there was nothing to mark it out from scores of similar sites along the southern shore of the Moray Firth. But the discovery of the coin hoard, and other finds such as bronze horse equipment and Roman brooches, shows the site was an important one, perhaps the dominant one in the valley of the Lossie. The coins are best seen as a gift or bribe from the Romans to a powerful local chief in the late 2nd century AD, part of a widespread frontier policy. The latest coin dates to AD 197, and the hoard must have come north shortly before the emperor Severus led the legions into Scotland in AD 208-211 in an attempt to quell rebellious tribes north of the Forth.

The discovery of the hoard gave us a tremendous opportunity, as archaeologists rarely get the chance to excavate such a find carefully and methodically. This revealed a whole range of evidence which is normally missed, such as bracken lining the pot and fragments of leather and string. However its importance goes beyond this vivid snapshot of an event which took place 1800 years ago: there are much broader questions which can also be tackled. It is very rare to find a hoard on a settlement site, and this provides a tremendous chance to study relationships between Romans and locals, a topic of relevance not just to Iron Age Moray but to the wider Scottish picture and indeed beyond.

The main research aim of the project is to investigate the relationship between hoard and settlement, and thus find out about the nature of the site and the relationship between Romans and locals. This can be seen as a number of separate questions.
• How did the settlement develop through time, and what was its nature? For instance, was it a single farm which moved around the field every few generations, or was it a village-style settlement? This will allow us to understand what kind of settlement had such exotic contacts.

• Is there any other evidence that this was an important settlement, such as other contact with the Romans, other impressive finds or substantial buildings?

• Why was the hoard buried?

In addition we hope to get a much better picture of life in Iron Age Moray, an area which has seen far too little work. We also aim to study how the site fits into the local landscape, and its relationship with the important early Christian site at Birnie Kirk.

Work to date has provided initial answers to some of these questions, and more will emerge as the data are analysed. Already it is clear, for instance, that this was indeed a status site in the local landscape, with access to rare and unusual items. Excavations have also revealed a Medieval settlement in the field: this is an unexpected bonus, as our knowledge of Medieval rural settlements is very poor.

The specific aims of the 2001 season were as follows.

• To look for a possible palisaded enclosure which is visible on some photographs to the east of the main site.

• To expose more of the features visible on aerial photographs as cropmarks and obtain evidence for their date and function.

• To expose a larger area around the hoard’s findspot in order to understand its setting better.

• To continue the metal-detecting survey, in the hope of obtaining a range of finds relevant to understanding the site.

Excavations took place over two weeks from 23rd September to 6th October 2001, thanks to the enthusiastic support of the farmer, William Mustard. Trench locations and cropmarks are shown in fig 2. The approach from previous years was modified slightly: emphasis was put on exposing more of the remains in larger trenches, but
digging rather less of them. It is clear that many of the archaeological remains at Birnie are complex and well-preserved. In such a short season there are limits to what can be achieved, and this work is very much an evaluation of the site’s potential. The best way to do this is to expose large areas to see what is there, and then select a small number of key features to be sampled. This should provide a broad outline of the site’s history, significance and potential, and allow a case to be made for greater funding and larger-scale work at this fascinating site.

Fig 1  Location map
Fig 2  Site plan showing cropmarks and trenches excavated 1998-2001
2 A PALISADED ENCLOSURE?

The Birnie aerial photographs are tantalising and ambiguous. The site has only been photographed on one sortie, by Barri Jones in the course of the Moray Aerial Survey in the 1980s (Jones et al 1993, pl VIII). While many of the features show up well, others are less clear. Barri Jones pointed out to the writer a darker area to the east of the main site with hints of a thin curving palisade trench around it. Subsequently two Roman brooches were found in this area. This raised the intriguing possibility that there might be a high-status enclosure with the more visible open settlement attached to it. Clearly this would affect our views of the site, so it was decided to open a trench across the area of the possible enclosure.

Trench K, 76 m long and 4 m wide, was laid out NNW-SSE across the area of the cropmark traces, with a slight extension at one end to expose features which ran into the section. It was clear that there was no palisade (fig 3), and indeed very few features at all. Excavation of a sample of these features showed that many were either rabbit warrens or rabbit-enlarged. The dark patch on the photograph was not archaeological: it was caused by a greater depth of topsoil in this area, which meant the crop ripened more slowly.

These results mean that the “palisade” can be dismissed. Indeed the dearth of features compared to other areas suggests that this lies outwith the main area of the settlement. The ground slopes very slightly downwards here, and it seems the site kept to the main ridge. This trench also confirms the negative results obtained nearby in 2000, when two small trenches were excavated at the findspots of two Roman brooches. It is now clear that these brooches were deposited at the edge of the settlement, away from the houses. They may have been rubbish thrown away from the site, but as they were rare and exotic items they could also have been deliberate offerings. Settlement boundaries were often the focus of votive offerings to the gods, as they represented an area of transition between the domestic world and the wider world. Such offerings are more usual on sites with clear boundaries, such as banks or palisades, but there is no reason why the same could not happen on the edges of unenclosed sites where farmyard gave way to fields. It is certainly striking that some of the best finds conve
from this zone – not just the two brooches from 1999, but a horse harness fastener and a silver ingot fragment.

Fig 3  Trench K plan
3  THE SETTLEMENT

Two areas of cropmarks were selected for examination: area M, south of the hoard, where three blobs were visible; and area N to the north, which appeared to be the post-ring of a roundhouse.

Area M (fig 4) was a 42 × 10 m trench cutting across the three cropmarks, of which the central one looked a good candidate for a roundhouse and the other two were rather more amorphous. The central feature did indeed prove to be a roundhouse, with a ring groove for the outer wall defining a floor some 11.8 m in diameter. Over most of this area occupation deposits still survived. A section cut through these gives some idea of their character (fig 5a). Activity within the house had worn a curving hollow inside the wall on the northern half of the building. A number of layers formed in this before a new clay-rich floor was deliberately laid to level the ground. Small fragments of pottery and bone were found on top of this, trampled into the floor surface. Over this was a charcoal-rich layer – perhaps rubbish from the use of the house, perhaps from its final destruction. A broken saddle quern was found in these layers. Apart from the ring groove little of the house structure was revealed, although a small posthole cut into the relaid floor suggests that internal posts held up the roof.

To the north of this lay an irregular cobbled spread. The surfacing included iron-working slag, but the quantities were not as great as in the blacksmith’s workshop excavated in 1999, and it is most likely that iron-working took place elsewhere (perhaps close by), with the waste slag being a convenient source of cobbling. As little of these deposits was excavated it is unclear what date they are. Surface cleaning produced an Iron Age glass bead but no other datable material. While it is unwise to base the dating on a single find, it is possible that this is a yard surface connected with the house: the slight curve to the cobbbling does broadly mirror the house shape.
The cropmark feature to the south was a dark curved charcoal-rich spread which was only partly exposed, but which probably represents another roundhouse. Excavation of a section across this (fig 5b) showed a similar sequence to the other house. The deposits were lying in an eroded hollow: a basal charcoal-rich layer may represent demolition of the building before a deliberate clay-rich floor level was laid down. Again small pot and bone fragments were found trampled into the top of this, under a charcoal-rich layer of occupation or destruction debris. This probably represents another roundhouse of around 13.5 m diameter.

Fig 5  Sections across roundhouse features in trench M. (a) F1009, central roundhouse. (b) F1011, scoop of southern roundhouse.
Trench N (fig 6; 25 x 8 m) to the north of the hoard uncovered the post-ring of another, less well-preserved house. The ring of posts which would have supported the roof was very clear except around the northern arc, where surviving floor deposits partially obscured it. There are 13 posts in a ring 9.1 m in diameter. Little further excavation took place, but there appeared to be a hearth or cooking pit in the centre of the building, along with associated features and a thin spread of cobbled surfacing to the east. Immediately north of the post ring was a more extensive arc of cobbling; by analogy with the trench M houses, this probably lies in an eroded hollow between the post-ring and the outer wall, giving an overall house diameter of some 13 m. Limited excavation in one area showed that the cobbling was densely packed and utilised some reused iron-working slag (including a smithing hearth base). Prehistoric pottery and daub were also found.

Fig 6  Trench N plan
Fig 7  Composite plan of trenches L (2001) and I (2000)
THE SETTING OF THE HOARD

In 2000, excavation of a 15 x 15 m trench had located the plough-damaged coin hoard and showed that it lay in an area of dense settlement. To understand this more fully it was decided to expose an area of 40 x 30 m around the findspot over two years. In 2001 the western half was cleared (trench L; fig 7). The value of this was seen immediately: what had been a small spread of charcoal on the edge of the trench turned into an expanse of occupation deposits which probably represent the remains of a large building. In the NE corner lay another spread of deposits, perhaps the floor of another structure. Elsewhere a number of smaller features were exposed, mostly insubstantial pits and postholes. One of the pits produced a quern rubber in its fill (fig 15, no 1187), and another had been cut by a posthole which reused a broken quern as packing around the post (this lay in the small extension on the northern edge of the trench; fig 8 & fig 15, no 821/1131). A group of features on the eastern edge of the spread, near the 2000 hoard, may represent a doorway (fig 9) to some undefined building. It comprises two deep postholes (with posts 0.65-0.75 m deep and 0.18-0.22 m in diameter), each with smaller support posts around. Between them was a shallow depression which could be interpreted as wear at the threshold. However without further excavation it is unclear which other features could make up this putative structure: sadly it seems to be offset from the axis of the spread of occupation deposits, and cannot currently be related to them.

Fig 8 Section of pit F1232 showing posthole F954 cut into it with quern fragments used as post-packing
Fig 9  "Doorway" feature – plan and sections
This extensive and complex spread of deposits was the dominant feature in the trench. In the NW corner was a cobbled surface which merged imperceptibly with a series of ash and charcoal-rich deposits. These were rather amorphous, but on the western edge were contained by a curving slot which is best seen as a poorly-surviving ring-groove. The relationship between the cobbling and the other deposits could not be established in the time available, although the invisibility of the ring groove to the north suggests the cobbling overlies it.

These deposits are undoubtedly complex, but the ring-groove suggests they include the remains of a roundhouse. In the time available it was only possible to cut an L-shaped section through the likely house (fig 10a). This showed that the deposits survived in a scoop up to 0.25 m deep, probably created by activity in the area. In summary the sequence was as follows.

- Erosion of a hollow into the natural sand. From the sections this seems to have been a central hollow with a concentric scoop outside it; it seems to be circular. A number of features cut into the sand at the base of the hollow represent the earliest phases of activity (fig 10b): one was excavated to retrieve dating samples but in such a small trench they could not be understood.
- Formation of some thin layers over the natural sand and the early features.
- Laying of a floor surface.
- Use of this floor, with pits being cut into it.
- The outer zone of this floor continued to be eroded, and stones were laid in the hollow to form a harder surface.

The eroded hollows and the ring groove suggest this is a large, complex, long-lived roundhouse. It is impossible to see the details because the occupation deposits obscure the structure, and there are probably later deposits over the top (such as the cobbling). However it appears to be a substantial house around 15 m in diameter. This becomes of some significance when other discoveries in this trench are considered.
Fig 10 Detail of the deposits in the roundhouse. (a) Sections through the deposits. (b) Plan of basal features cut into natural sand.
5  A SECOND HOARD

After the excitement of the coin find in 2000, it seemed that 2001 would be something of an anti-climax – lots of good, complex archaeology but lacking the drama of a coin hoard. We need not have worried. On the first day of full excavation, while machine-stripping the topsoil in the north-east corner of trench L, the JCB exposed the top of a complete pot buried in a small pit. This was recorded and excavated with a mounting sense of disbelief – and proved to be a second pot full of Roman silver coins, only 10 metres from the first (fig 11).

The hoard was lifted intact in a soil block; conservation work is still underway, so only limited information is yet available. However it should ultimately tell us more than the first hoard because it had not been disturbed and scattered before discovery. The top of the pot was broken by the JCB but the sherds were recovered and show that the vessel was a typical Iron Age globular jar with an everted rim. It was actually standing proud of the subsoil, and it is amazing that deep-ploughing had not damaged it. It had been buried in a small pit, just big enough to hold it, with some stakeholes around it, and lay right beside a posthole 0.4 m deep which held a 0.15 m diameter post. Intriguingly the 2000 hoard was also found beside a post, and it is tempting to see them as markers (or even wooden statues....), although we can’t yet tell whether hoards and posts were contemporary.

The pot had only been half-filled with coins, with a cover of leather placed over them; the top half of the pot contained the same soil as the pit, suggesting there was no lid over the neck. From initial observations it seems the pot was again lined with vegetation. As the coins were all left undisturbed in the pot none have been identified, but they seem to be late 2nd / early 3rd century denarii.

This discovery of two hoards on the same site is unique in Scotland, and there are few parallels from the whole of Britain: some of the implications are discussed below. There were concerns that the discovery of two hoards might lead to unwanted attention at the site over the winter, but thanks to the support of White’s Electronics it was possible to scan the field with a deep-seeking metal detector (White’s TM 80$): this indicated that no more hoards were present.
Fig 11  The second hoard
The metal-detecting survey, carried out by Hamish Stuart, once more produced an interesting range of finds. Most striking was another Roman brooch, found 8 m west of trench L (fig 12, no 801). This was virtually intact, with even the pin still in place, and is made of copper alloy decorated with enamel and silver. It probably dates to the 2nd century AD, although it is proving hard to parallel - there are certainly none like it from Scotland, and it is an elaborate and unusual example. This is further evidence, along with the two brooches from previous years, that the inhabitants of the site had access to good-quality Roman goods quite regularly. It shows the coin hoards were not isolated events but part of a pattern of contacts built up over the years: the Romans had dealt with these people before.

A second bronze ring was found (fig 13, no 973). It is broken, but very similar to the bridle bit ring found in 2000. It was found not far from the first ring and may indeed come from the same object, suggesting perhaps the deposition of an intact bridle bit which was subsequently broken by the plough.

The other notable finds from the metal-detecting relate to the Medieval use of the site. They comprise lead spindle whorls (fig 13, nos 806, 817) and a silver coin of Edward I or II. One of the whorls (817) was probably made on site, as it is has a casting flash which has not been removed.

Fig 12 Roman brooch (801); yellow glass bead (974)
Excavation also recovered a range of Iron Age finds, including pottery (fig 13, 1042) and a yellow glass bead (fig 12, 974): such beads were manufactured at the Culbin Sands (Henderson 1989, 69-71). There was also a number of coarse stone tools – natural pebbles and cobbles which had been modified for some function. People tend to see these as rather workaday and uninteresting, but this rather unattractive material includes a wide spectrum of tool types (fig 14). Some are simple hammerstones – cobbles which fitted nicely in the hand with a battered and broken end from being used as hammers (949). Others are more complex – a large flat cobbles (1041), for instance, has an angled flat face worn at one end from use as a grinder; its size suggests it was used in two hands, perhaps for smoothing leather or some similar function. A smaller flat pebble is a multi-purpose tool (864). One end is worn from use as a polisher or grinder, but it also has a shine on part of the surface. Similar shine is found on flints used for working grass or straw (so-called “sickle gloss”); this suggests the pebble’s flat face was used for rubbing vegetation, perhaps to soften grass or nettles before twisting them into string. 936 is a fine whetstone, the surface polished from handling and use, and dished from hours spent sharpening iron tools.
The specific functions of such tools are very hard to reconstruct, partly because the traces are hard to interpret but also because they have seen little serious study beyond the rather sterile construction of typologies. However, while we do not fully understand them, it is clear that they were an important and varied part of the inhabitants' toolkit which merits more attention.

Fig 14 Stone tools
For the first time querns were found on the site (fig 15). It had been something of a worry that in three previous seasons no querns had been discovered, given that the field is good arable land today. This famine was replaced by a feast in 2001, with no fewer than five quernstones and a grain rubber (1187) being recovered. All are saddle querns, flat slabs which became dished as the slug-shaped rubber was pushed endlessly backwards and forwards over them. Indeed one example was a trough quern which had been used so much that a hollow 100 mm deep was worn into the stone before the bottom broke: fig 15 no 821/1131 shows two joining fragments of this quern (which was reused as post-packing) with the centre broken through. Other examples are much less worn (e.g. 1151). Four of the querns were found in final occupation or abandonment levels of the houses; all were broken. Since it is rather difficult to break a quern accidentally, it is tempting to see this as the deliberate destruction of this crucial domestic implement when the house was abandoned.

It is worth noting that no rotary querns have yet been recovered (although given the total dearth of querns before this season it is unwise to draw wide-ranging conclusions at this stage). This might indicate an early Iron Age date for many of the houses, although arguing from absence of evidence is dubious, while we know that saddle querns continued in use after the more efficient rotaries were introduced.

There were some indications of earlier activity on the site, with the discovery of two early prehistoric flint scrapers (fig 13, nos 910, 962) and two sherds of early Neolithic pottery (fig 13, nos 898, 915), one from a small pit. However there is still nothing to indicate any substantial early prehistoric activity.
Fig 15 Saddle querns and quern rubber
DISCUSSION

The second coin hoard
The main point for discussion is the second coin hoard. This was totally unexpected because it is completely unparalleled: there are no other examples of two coin hoards from any site in Scotland. Looking at the wider Romano-British picture, while major town or fort sites may produce several hoards, to find two in such close proximity is exceedingly rare. Of the few examples of similar date listed by Robertson (2000, 464-5), they tend to be one large hoard buried in several pots, as far as the rather poor records can tell us. It is not clear if this is the case at Birnie, although the interpretation will become more obvious once the coins have been studied. Was this one hoard which was buried in two caches? Or are we dealing with hoards of different dates, suggesting that a series of payments were made to the site’s inhabitants? These are intriguing possibilities which will be assessed as work progresses.

One major issue is why were the hoards buried where they were? We are perhaps a little closer to answering this with the expanded area investigated. It is now clear that there is a complex sequence of activity in the area, notably immediately west of the two hoards. This requires much more extensive excavation to characterise it, but as a working hypothesis there seems to be a sizeable roundhouse in close proximity. We do not know whether this was a house, a communal meeting place, or some special-purpose building – or even whether it was contemporary with the hoards. However it is tempting to see the hoards being buried in the shadow of one of the main buildings on the site – the chieftain’s hall, perhaps, or the communal centre. This is speculative, but can be tested by further excavation. The exposure of an equivalent area to the east of the hoards in 2002 will provide a much better picture of their setting.

The reasons for their burial remain unclear, whether for safety or as a religious offering. If the hoards prove to be of different dates it may strengthen the argument for them as offerings. To bury two hoards at different dates in the same “safe place” and fail to recover either of them seems a little unusual, although of course all manner of scenarios can be created to explain this: the storage of both hoards with burial later than the latest coins indicate; the splitting of one big pile of money into two pots to split the risk of it being found by undesirables; or a list of other possibilities. However
the presence of each beside an isolated post is noteworthy, and a priority is to get these posts dated. If they were contemporary (as far as archaeological means can tell), this would argue strongly against a safekeeping interpretation and towards a votive one, since it would imply the hoards were marked in some way, or perhaps even buried at the foot of wooden statues. Of course we will never know the full story behind these discoveries. However what makes these so exciting and valuable is that we have the chance to explore such questions and gather more evidence than has ever been possible before. This should support or deny some of the possibilities, even if we cannot arrive at a single final answer.

Something of the background to Roman coin hoards in Scotland was presented in the last interim report (Hunter 2001). The map (fig 16) is an updated one of all Roman gold and silver coin hoards from north of Hadrian’s Wall in the period up to AD 250. While some are connected with Roman sites (the open circles) most are not; these are likely to be hoards which came into native hands. As outlined in the last report, literary references indicate a policy of “buying peace” during the reign of Severus, a policy which the date of the first Birnie hoard supports nicely. However, seductive as this is, it should not blind us to the wider picture. Many of the coin hoards are old finds which are poorly dated, and previous studies often tried to pull all these into the Severan period to fit the sparse literary sources (e.g. Robertson 1978, 192). In fact, if we critically assess the hoards, it is clear that they run over a much longer period, from the reign of Antoninus Pius to Severus and beyond, a span of around 80 years (fig 17). This was a long-lived aspect of frontier diplomacy, and it was not solely a Scottish phenomenon but a common pattern across the north-west frontier from Ireland to Russia (e.g. Bateson 1971; Berger 1996; Lind 1981). The literary sources have constrained our interpretations – they provide a model for what is happening, but give no indication of the length of the policy. We need to use both history and archaeology to understand these events beyond the frontier, not just in Moray but on a wider European stage.
Fig 16 Distribution of Roman coin hoards north of Hadrian’s Wall (to AD 250).

- Roman sites
- Other

Fig 17 Hoard deposition dates (by latest emperor) north of Hadrian’s Wall to AD 250. Finds from Roman sites are in white, and others in black.
The Iron Age settlement

Our picture of the Iron Age settlement is getting clearer each year. The long trench (K) has now given us an eastern boundary to the site, and while the edges to the south have not been examined, this and the natural topography give us a settled area of some 150 x 110 m. Within this we now know of some 11 circular buildings from excavation or aerial photography; datable carbon samples from most of these will give some idea of the site’s development.

It is also clear that many of these houses preserve occupation deposits in the eroded hollows of the floors. This is all too rare in the British Iron Age, and presents us with a tremendous research resource. For once we do not just have the truncated remains of the building plan, but the floors, occupation and abandonment deposits to go with them and the artefactual remains of daily life to flesh out the picture. Preliminary soil micromorphological analysis indicates that the deposits have not been disturbed and mixed by later activity or worm action, which means they have tremendous potential. Full excavation of these would not be cheap or quick, but would greatly increase our knowledge of the Iron Age. Indeed without further work on some of these houses, notably the complex to the west of the hoards, it will be impossible to understand the context of the coin hoards.

What makes the site particularly rewarding is that the structural remains are associated with a plentiful artefact assemblage. Much of this is the pottery and stone objects which were the everyday tools of the inhabitants, and will allow us a much better insight into their activities. As yet we have little evidence of craft activities: we know they were working iron from the slag recovered, but have not yet found the workshop; we have no evidence of any bronze-working or similar activities. However we can suggest the inhabitants were of some status from the finds. There is evidence of prestige horse equipment, of ornaments such as beads, and from 1999 of weaponry, a broken sword. There is also evidence of extended contact with Rome: not only the coin hoards but now three brooches, two of which probably predate the coins. This points to contacts with Rome over some time. With further excavation we could hope to recover a wider range of other items to accompany these finds; so far few of the relevant deposits have been excavated.
The Medieval settlement

In the excitement of the Iron Age picture, it is important not to overlook the Medieval settlement on the site. This was first suggested by quantities of Medieval pottery from fieldwalking, and is now supported by a range of evidence.

- The blacksmith’s workshop excavated in 1999
- The building, perhaps a byre or house/byre, exposed in 2000
- Other sub-rectangular cropmarks noted on the aerial photo
- Medieval pottery, mainly green-glazed wares of 13th-15th century date
- A silver coin of Edward I or II
- Other metal finds – lead spindle whorls, fragments of sheet bronze vessels, and a bronze tripod cauldron leg

Combining the cropmark and excavation data suggests at least five buildings date to this phase. An intriguing possibility is that some of the cropmarks could represent earlier buildings, spanning the gap between the Iron Age and the Medieval: similar rather amorphous sub-rectangular remains in Fife turned out to be Pictish, some of the few excavated Pictish buildings in eastern Scotland (Driscoll 1997). This merits examination, as it could both reveal rare examples of this type of building and provide further chronological links to the development of the church site at Birnie Kirk.

This all remains to be explored. It is clear however that the Medieval remains are well-preserved and have the potential to give us a vivid picture of life in a small rural settlement of a type which is rarely examined. This would be particularly valuable in Moray: recent excavations have sketched a picture of the archaeology of the Medieval town (Hall et al 1998) and the ecclesiastical power-base of the Bishop’s Palace at Spynie, but we know nothing of the rural settlements which supported this infrastructure. Further excavations at Birnie would be of great value in rounding out this regional picture.
Future work

It should be clear from the above that Birnie is a site with considerable potential. Funding has been secured to carry out another short season in 2002 which will complete the evaluation of the site. Key targets will be:

- Exposure of a sizeable area to the east of the hoard.
- Examination of another roundhouse to obtain dating samples.
- Examination of two or three more cropmarks, including some of the sub-rectangular ones, to assess their character and date.
- Excavation of a trench to confirm that there is no enclosure round the site, since this is of considerable importance in evaluating the site’s nature.

The data from these evaluation excavations will give us a broad picture of the site’s development and nature. However they also highlight its potential, and the need for further work on a much larger scale to answer some of the questions which the discoveries so far have raised. These are questions of importance not just to the study of Moray but to much wider research topics in Scotland and beyond. Hopefully the tantalising evaluation results will prove sufficient to raise the substantial funds required.
8 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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