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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2002

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SUMMARY

The unenclosed Iron Age site at Birnie, Moray, was an important settlement in the region. Two Roman silver coin hoards have been found on the site, providing an unrivalled opportunity to investigate connections with Rome in the late second century. It seems they were part of a policy of "gifts" or bribes to powerful locals to keep the Roman frontier secure and peaceful.

Excavations in 2002 located the edge of the settlement on the southern side. The site occupied a slightly raised plateau on the edge of the gravel terrace, covering an area of some 150 x 120 m. Further evaluation trenches confirmed the dense occupation of the site in both the Iron Age and Medieval periods.

The main thrust of the work was to investigate the area immediately east of the hoards. This revealed two more roundhouses, confirming the hoards lay in the heart of the settlement. It is unclear how much of this occupation is contemporary, although the settlement was obviously long-lived. There was evidence of bronze-working during the Roman Iron Age, another indicator of the site's importance as this was an uncommon craft at the time.

Metal-detecting produced some striking finds, including a Medieval crucifixion scene and a Romano-British enamelled bronze bird. This lay some distance to the south-east of the site. Trial trenching here found the remains of a heavily-damaged ditch, probably a land boundary of uncertain date.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Excavations have been taking place since 1998 on an Iron Age and Medieval settlement at Birnie, in the valley of the river Lossie just south of Elgin on the Moray Firth (fig 1; NGR NJ 210 585). The chance discovery of some Roman silver coins (*denarii*) by local metal-detectorist Hamish Stuart first sparked interest in the field, which was known from aerial photographs to contain a later prehistoric settlement. From the air it looked unremarkable, but the discovery of two Roman coin hoards and a range of other artefacts, including Roman brooches and high-status Iron Age metalwork, indicates this was a site of considerable importance. The coins seem to be a gift or bribe from the Romans to a powerful individual or group in an attempt to keep the peace. This was frontier diplomacy in action, trying to subdue the discontented tribes north of the Forth in the decades before the emperor Severus’ invasion of Scotland in AD 208-211.

The chance to explore the setting of such hoards is very rare – coin hoards are normally casual finds where we know little or nothing of their original context. At Birnie we have been able to excavate the hoards scientifically, recovering a wide range of information which would otherwise be lost, such as preserved remains of leather pouches. We can also explore their setting within a contemporary settlement, in an attempt to understand what kinds of people were dealing with the Romans and why the coins were buried.

The field also contains the remains of a medieval rural settlement. Such sites are rarely examined in Scotland – attention has focused on towns such as Elgin, and on the more visible abbeys and castles like Spynie Palace. This settlement is interesting in itself, but we also want to know what happens between the Iron Age and the medieval period. Did settlement continue, or did it shift elsewhere? If it ends, when did this happen – was it around the time the hoards were buried?

The main research question is to study this link between hoards and settlement, and so to learn more about the relationship between Roman and native in this area. This breaks down into a number of more specific questions, as detailed in previous reports.
• How did the settlement develop over time? How large was it and how did it change?
• What was life like at the settlement? What other evidence is there of the inhabitants' status?
• Why were the hoards buried?
• When did the settlement end? Does it continue into the Pictish period? What is its relation to the neighbouring Birnie Kirk, and to the later medieval site?

The specific aims of the 2002 season were:

• To explore an area east of the hoard findspots matching that examined to the west in 2001, to give a better overall picture of their setting.
• To locate the edge of the settlement on the southern side.
• To test more of the cropmarks visible on the aerial photograph, and to test apparently blank areas.
• To continue the metal-detecting survey, which has revealed finds from the ploughsoil which are crucial to understanding the site.

Excavations took place over two weeks from 14th-28th September 2002 thanks to the support of the farmer, William Mustard. The workforce was mainly composed of a team of local volunteers, including a core group from Moray College who were taught excavation techniques as part of their degree course. The excavation philosophy continued that of previous years. Large areas were stripped to get an understanding of the remains in plan. A selection of the features exposed was then excavated to clarify their nature, and retrieve finds and samples which would tell us about their date and function. Given time constraints, some trenches were simply stripped and planned, with little or no further investigation, but even this provides valuable information on the extent of activity. Five main trenches and a series of smaller trial trenches were opened; their positions are shown in fig 2.
Fig 1  Location of Birnie
Fig 2  Overall site plan with cropmarks and trenches, 1998-2002
2  DEFINING THE SETTLEMENT

Excavations in 2001 defined the edge of the settlement on the east, where the ground dipped away slightly. To north and west, steep scarps mark the edge of the inhabitable area, but the relatively flat expanse of the field to the south gave few clues about the site’s limits. A detailed topographic survey suggested there was a slight dip just south of the power line across the field, and this was tested by a long trench (Q) laid out across it. The trench (fig 3) was 39 m long overall and 4.8 m wide in the northern part, reduced to 2 m in the southern extension. The results confirmed what the topography suggested: as the ground sloped away, the density of archaeological features cut into the subsoil dropped off dramatically, and it is clear that this dip marks the edge of the main inhabited area.

These results give a good estimate of the extent of the site. Figure 2 shows the topography with the archaeological evidence superimposed. The site occupies the highest ground at the edge of the gravel terrace, with steep slopes to north and west and gentler dips (into slightly poorer-draining areas) to south and east. The inhabited area measures some 150 x 120 m. Trench Q also confirms the lack of any defences; there was no sign of any enclosure, such as a palisade, on the crest of the slope, and it seems that, although it was an important and wealthy site, there was no need for enclosure to defend it or mark out its importance.

Within the settled area, a speculative trench (S), 14 x 12 m, was laid out in an area which was blank on the aerial photographs, toward the north-west edge of the escarpment. This showed a dense concentration of features (fig 4). Since the site has only showed up in one year for aerial photography it is not surprising that the picture is a partial one, but this confirms that this higher ground was densely occupied. The remains were planned, but no further work took place.

One of the cropmark blobs visible towards the west was examined. These blobs are potentially one of the most interesting features of the site: the two examined so far have proved to be medieval structures, but similar features elsewhere have turned out to be sunken-floored Pictish buildings (e.g. Driscoll 1997). These could provide the key to linking the Iron Age and Medieval phases, if it exists: given our (admittedly
sparse) evidence from elsewhere in the north-east, it is quite possible that the site was abandoned in the third century and only reoccupied a millennium or so later. Area P (15 by 12 m, with a slight eastern extension) was laid out over one such blob. In plan (fig 5) there was no immediate sign of a roundhouse post-ring; this lends tentative support to it being later, although in the mass of features recovered any patterns could easily be obscured. Sections were part-excavated through the feature, revealing charcoal-rich sediments with a layer of cobbling. However time did not permit them to be completed, and its dating must await further work. A single medieval potsherd from these deposits is suggestive, but not enough to be sure.

Fig 3  Area Q, showing the drop-off in remains at the edge of the site
3 A STOCK ENCLOSURE?

Another cropmark feature, an irregular blob which was interpreted as a possible souterrain, was investigated to the north of the site, close to the scarp. This lay a few metres from its anticipated position, and the layout of spoilheaps made it impractical to investigate it further (it is in the SE corner of fig 6). However the curve of a palisade trench was revealed. This survived well on the southern edge, but faded away where ploughing had caused more damage. Since the feature was gradually being worn away, it was decided to expand the area to examine all of it before any further damage. This revealed a circular palisade 16.5-17 m in diameter (fig 6). It was badly damaged to the north: the palisade slot was up to 0.5 m deep at the south, but on the northern edge survived as a bare scrape in the sand, and over much of the north-east sector it was lost entirely (fig 9, K-L, M-N, S-T). Any entrance must have lain in the east or north-east.

Within the palisade there were very few surviving remains. A pit just south of centre contained some later prehistoric pottery, and there was a scatter of small pits and stakeholes, some perhaps forming arcs or lines. The lack of substantial features makes it very unlikely that the palisade surrounded a house, and it was probably an enclosure for animals. The stakeholes and grooves may be from temporary fence lines for stock management, as may some of the thin linear features outside it. Since there was no boundary round the site to prevent animals from straying, such an enclosure would be vital for keeping livestock. Scraps of later prehistoric pottery from the palisade confirm it is broadly contemporary with the rest of the site: radiocarbon samples will allow it to be dated more accurately. It was a single-phase construction.
Fig 6  Palisaded stock enclosure, area R
4 THE SETTING OF THE HOARDS

Following the discovery of the first hoard in 2000, it was decided to excavate an area of 40 x 30 m around the findspot over two years. In 2001 the western area was excavated, with the discovery of the second hoard. In 2002 the eastern part was examined in a trench 30 by 20 m. While lacking the silver content of previous years, the results were invaluable.

The main features of the trench were two roundhouses (fig 7). The northern house, which was the smaller one at some 9.2 m in diameter, was of two phases. One used a penannular ring-groove, up to 0.5 m wide and 0.3 m deep, to hold the wall and take the weight (fig 9, E-F, G-H). The other phase used eleven small posts (see sections, fig 9, O-P, Q-R) in an internal ring 5.3 m in diameter to support the structure; there was no surviving trace of the wall, which was perhaps stake-built. This post-ring is off-centre to the ring-groove, indicating there were two phases, although it is not clear which came first. They could be contemporary, with the groove forming an enclosure round the building, but given how close the posts and the groove come on the south side it is more likely that they are separate building phases. A scatter of prehistoric pottery was found over the floor area, and there were a number of features in the interior including a cooking pit, but these were only partly investigated. The entrance lay just south of east; the wall on either side had been replaced, perhaps because of wear or perhaps from reuse of the entrance in the second phase; this might imply the post-ring was the later.

The southern house was based on a larger ring of more massive posts. Later deposits obscured some, but there were probably twelve posts in a ring 8.0 m in diameter. Curving lines of stakes which formed the outer wall were preserved in places, giving an overall diameter of about 12 m. The posts themselves were substantial affairs: when the house was abandoned the stumps were left to rot, preserving their shape in the postholes, and they were some 0.3-0.4 m in diameter, buried 0.45-0.6 m deep (fig 9, A-B, W-X). There were a number of internal features, but it is not clear which relate to the house and which to later activity.
Fig 7  Area O. The key (top R) shows its relation to other trenches around the hoards
To the north-east, a curving scoop surfaced with cobbles contained the distorted remains of a clay tuyère, a bellows shield used in metal-working. A sherd of typically Roman Iron Age pottery from the scoop suggests it is broadly contemporary with the hoards; surface cleaning nearby produced a fragment of a bronze-working crucible. These finds are discussed below (section 6).

The south-east side of this house was concealed by later deposits which had survived the ploughing. This included two deep stone-lined postholes (fig 8; one is shown in fig 9, C-D), and the deposits may be from the floor of a rectilinear structure. There was also a stone-built hearth (fig 8). North of this were parts of the upper and lower stones of a rotary quern, the first from the site (fig 15). It seems this was not just reuse of handy broken stones, however, as the fragments had been carefully laid with the grinding surfaces uppermost and the central hole pointing east. Querns are often found in the abandonment deposits of houses, and it is likely they were put there for a reason. They were very personal items which were connected with the everyday life of the house, “the daily grind” to prepare the flour for baking. When a house was abandoned the quern was often buried, or broken up with parts left in the house it served and parts perhaps taken for luck to the new house. The very deliberate positioning of the Birnie quern hints at beliefs like this.

The other main target was to look at more of the stray features in the area of the hoards. Only a few could be excavated in the time available, but these produced some intriguing results. Immediately east of the 2001 hoard was a pit with lots of sherds from a broken pot; finally a stake was stuck into it. Given that most features produce no finds, this was quite surprising. Even more striking was a pit behind the northern house which produced an upside-down saddle quern (fig 9, U-V; 14). This quern was intact, and would still have been useable. Perhaps it too was deliberately buried when the house it served was abandoned.
More needs to be done on the setting of the hoards, but there are hints that a lot of the pits and postholes in this area had unusual histories, with objects being buried in them. This may add weight to the idea of the hoards being buried as offerings rather than for safe-keeping, although a lot more work is required before we can reach any firm conclusions.

Fig 8  Detail of the later deposits over the southern house
Fig 9 Sections across selected features
AROUND THE SITE

As discussed below, the metal-detecting produced a range of interesting finds. One of these was an enamelled Romano-British bird mount, found some 100 m south-east of the edge of the site. Because this was such an unusual find we decided to open a trial trench (T) in this area, and another nearby (U) where a simple bronze mount was found (fig 2). We had done this in previous years where Roman brooches were found, and drawn a blank – because, as we now realise, we were off the main site. Rather to our surprise, trench T did produce some archaeology – notably a ditch running north-south (fig 10). Slot-trenches to the north found no trace of it, but it is not clear whether it ends or has simply been ploughed out. To the south, it curved slightly westwards. A section across it (fig 9, I-J) showed it was a shallow scoop, and it is probably a land boundary of uncertain (arguably medieval) date. It is unlikely to be a rig line, as no traces of rig cultivation have been noted previously, while a drain would be unnecessary on such free-draining subsoil. There is not necessarily any connection between the feature and bird mount, which may simply be another off-site find. However there are rumours that illicit metal-detecting in this area produced a Roman brooch, so it is possible there is another activity focus away from the main site. This awaits further study.

Fig 10 Area T

0 5 m
As is becoming traditional, the most spectacular finds came from Hamish Stuart’s metal-detecting survey. From the topsoil around the first hoard came another denarius, making a total of 314; given that it was plough-scattered, it is inevitable that a few more strays lurk in the ploughsoil awaiting discovery.

More dramatic was the discovery of a small enamelled bird mount (fig 11). The style and the enamelling are typical of Romano-British metalwork of the late first and second centuries AD. This provides further evidence of Binnie’s Roman contacts, and confirms the importance of the site: it is unique in Scotland and unusual in a wider British context. The bird sits on a ring, with the wings and head decorated with red and yellow enamel; the eyes are made in white enamel with a blue core, mimicking the iris and pupil, while to add to the natural effect the tiny feet are depicted in detail, complete with claws. It is a wonderful piece of small-scale art which probably came from an elaborate box or something similar: the ring (with its broken attachment tang) probably acted as the hoop for a hinge.

Fig 11 Romano-British enamelled bird mount
The other dramatic metal-detecting find comes from the medieval period, perhaps providing a link to Birnie Kirk. This is a crucifixion scene (fig 12), with Christ on a T-shaped (tau) cross, depicted in a loin cloth with crossed legs. The cross is set in a rock, with bones and a skull (representing the skull of Adam) at the base. He is flanked by two figures, probably the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist (Ross 1996, 58-60). Further study is required to put this remarkable find in context, but it is of medieval date, probably 13th-15th century; its flat profile suggests it was a mount.

Fig 12 Medieval crucifixion scene
The finds from the trenches are less dramatic but no less interesting. Further evidence was uncovered of early prehistoric activity, all from disturbed deposits: another sherd of Beaker pottery (fig 13.4) to go with one found in 2000 (Hunter 2001, fig 6 no 459) suggests there may be a disturbed burial in the area, while more flint implements were found (fig 13.6-7 shows an arrow tip and a scraper). Early prehistoric finds are still sparse, but there was clearly activity in the area.

Iron Age finds were more plentiful. A range of pottery (fig 13.1-3) includes typical Roman Iron Age everted rim forms (fig 13.2). The example illustrated came from the scoop which also produced the tuyère. This unprepossessing lump of fired clay turned out, after conservation, to be a bellows shield: a D-shaped thick clay slab with a hole in the centre which was slotted into a metal-working hearth or furnace. The nozzle was put through the hole, with the clay protecting the bellows from the heat. It had seen heavy use, with thick metal slag attached to it, and had finally failed and collapsed under the heat. It could have been used for either copper alloy or iron working.

To add to this evidence of metal-working was a fragment of a typical Iron Age crucible, found in surface cleaning a few metres away (fig 13.5). Analysis of metal traces on the interior showed it was for bronze-working. This was a very restricted craft in the Iron Age – it was a jealously-guarded secret, since bronzesmiths produced the fine decorative metalwork so prized by powerful people (such as the bronze horse harness found in previous years). Indeed this is the first site in Moray to produce Iron Age bronze-working evidence – a further indicator of the site’s importance.

The other notable finds were the querns: the intact saddle quern from behind the northern roundhouse, dished from heavy use (fig 14) and fragments of a rotary disc quern from over the southern house (fig 15). This is made of a mica schist from the Grampians. While saddle querns had been in use since the Neolithic period, the more efficient rotary querns were only introduced during the Iron Age. However saddle querns stayed in use during much of the Iron Age, perhaps because they were better for particular functions.
Once again the finds broaden our picture of the lives of Birnie's ancient inhabitants – and once again the metal-detecting finds have added crucial new information to the picture. Without them our view of Birnie's past would be much poorer, and it is a salutary warning about the dangers of digging without a metal-detector: how many rescue excavations miss this kind of crucial evidence? On the evidence of Birnie, systematic metal-detecting should be a must on all Iron Age sites before the topsoil is removed.

Fig 13 Various finds: pot (1-4), crucible (5), flint (6-7)
Fig 14 Intact saddle quern

Fig 15 Rotary quern fragments
Work has been proceeding on the two coin hoards. Conservation of the second hoard is still ongoing, but the results so far have been striking. Excavation of the soil block in the lab revealed that the coins were contained in two leather pouches, one with 150 coins, the other 160 (fig 16). The latest coins date to AD 193, a few years earlier than the first hoard. This suggests we are seeing a repeated relationship with Rome, perhaps with a pay-off every few years. I would argue this came directly from the Romans because of the similarities in the number of coins in the two hoards, 310 in one and at least 314 in the other, which smacks of Roman bureaucracy. The pots are Iron Age: the one from the 2001 hoard is less well-preserved, but seems to have been a steep-sided jar (fig 17, B); the pot holding the 2002 hoard was intact bar a few sherds lost in machining, and is a typical Roman Iron Age globular jar with an everted rim (fig 17, A). The state of the rim suggests it has been scraped by the plough before – it has led a charmed life.

Analysis of the leather from the first hoard suggests it comes from a Roman pouch. The two pouches from the second hoard are made of a much thinner, finer leather and are much better stitched. Each is made from a rectangular strip stitched onto a circular base, sewn up one side and tied at the top. These are unparalleled in the Roman world (where leather work was more mass-produced) and are likely to be local products (Dr Carol van Driel-Murray, pers comm). This suggests interesting differences between the two hoards: some of the 2000 coins perhaps in the pouch they arrived in, while the 2001 coins had been transferred to local money-bags. This gives rise to all kinds of speculation, but until the analysis is complete it would be unwise to venture much further.

Analysis of the environmental remains from the pots is proceeding at Glasgow University, where Diane Currie and Prof Jim Dickson have been studying them. The first pot was lined with bracken; pollen from this showed that the inhabitants were growing cereals and raising stock at the time the hoard was buried. The second pot had no deliberate lining, but pollen and scraps of vegetation (including sphagnum moss) which were accidentally included will provide valuable information when fully analysed.
Fig 16 The 2001 hoard as excavated in the lab

Fig 17 The pots which contained the hoards: A, 2001; B, 2000
The setting of the hoards is now clearer. Combining the 2001 and 2002 excavations (fig 18) shows that the hoards lay in the heart of a densely-settled area. We do not yet know what date all this activity is – some will undoubtedly be earlier, some contemporary, some perhaps later – but in time the disentangling of this will allow us to put the hoards back into their ancient setting.

Fig 18 Overall plan of the area around the hoards
8 DISCUSSION

The 2002 Birnie results have added substantially to our picture of the site. They have confirmed the density of settlement, and defined its extent much better. The hoards were in an area of intense activity, and disentangling this is a key topic for future work. We also know more about the activities taking place on the site: the bronze-working remains are further valuable evidence for Birnie’s importance. Hopefully the full examination of this area will produce more such finds.

Examination of the area around the hoards has started to reveal tantalising hints of other unusual activities – a pit with broken pottery, a quern buried upside down … It may be in these odd deposits that clues to the burial of the coin hoards lie, but again more work is required.

Work in 2003, on a similar scale, is intended to disentangle some of the complexities of the metal-working area and the deposits over the southern house. It is hoped also to look at one of the other houses and evaluate more of the cropmark traces. While funding is still being pursued for the larger-scale project so vital to disentangle the complex remains at Birnie, the results from this small-scale evaluation are providing more and more hints of Birnie’s former importance, and raising new questions about the Iron Age and its links to Rome.
9 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again my main thanks are to the farmer, William Mustard, and his family for their support in carrying out this work. As will be clear from the report, the continuing collaboration with Hamish Stuart is vital to the project — metal-detecting is providing crucial evidence of the site’s history. For assistance in the field I am grateful to my site supervisor, Andy Heald, and to site assistants Grant Lock, Jenny Marshall and Steven Orr, while Rachel Pope’s roundhouse expertise, both on- and off-site, was crucial to excavating and understanding the remains. Hamish Clark’s JCB skills were invaluable, allowing us to open large areas. The project could not operate without the willing volunteers, both local and not so local, who so willingly give their time to toil in the sand, and I am enormously indebted to them. The 2002 excavations benefited from a team from Moray College who were present throughout the dig to learn excavation techniques, and I am grateful to them, and to Simon Clarke who organised this. Ian Keillar and the Moray Society were once more bastions of support, both practical and moral, while Kenny Williamson’s ability to arrange scaffolding at short notice was again invaluable. Loftus Lock’s hospitality at start and finish kept our spirits up, as did the supply of cakes from Mrs Mustard and the various visitors who came to call. For assistance in post-excavation, I am grateful to Laura Yeoman for working on the archive and to colleagues in NMS, especially Tom Bryce, Jane Clark and Alex Quinn in Conservation, and Nick Holmes for his numismatic guidance and attempts to prevent my wilder interpretations. Carol van Driel-Murray kindly offered some initial thoughts on the pouches. The illustrations were expertly produced by Alan Braby.

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