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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2004

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SUMMARY

Trial excavations from 1998-2003 showed that Binnie (near Elgin) was the site of an important, long-lived later prehistoric settlement complex and subsequently a medieval village. The later prehistoric site was a local power centre in contact with the Roman world far to the south – as seen most spectacularly in two hoards of Roman silver coins, and a range of other Roman finds.

Funding has now been secured for a four-year larger-scale excavation, from 2004-2007. The aim each year is to tackle a roundhouse, a medieval building, and one or two other areas. In 2004 the probable medieval building in area P was fully excavated. It was a two-phase structure with very insubstantial foundations, a worn sub-rectangular floor hollow, and a central cooking pit later replaced by an external one. To the north lay an iron-working area, as yet of unknown date.

One roundhouse (area M) was of ring-groove construction, 11.5 m in diameter, with an internal structural post ring. The wall was probably of wattle panels, with a more solid post-built structure flanking the east-facing double door. It had a central cooking pit surrounded by various other features, with a series of radial chambers or small rooms around the edges. The deposits within the building come mostly from its demolition; at this point cattle skulls were placed in it as votive offerings. Notable finds included a clay ingot mould (from the house), a fine Roman brooch and a harness ring of southern Scottish type.

Continuing excavation in the area N ring-ditch house clarified its history. The ring ditch contained a series of layers which probably resulted from the trampling of stalled animals and subsequent attempts to repair this. There were few finds. To the south-west an unsuspected large charcoal-rich spread was uncovered, perhaps another house, but time did not allow further investigation.

Erosion in an old sand quarry on the terrace edge exposed a corn-drying kiln of medieval or post-medieval date, while aerial photography revealed an (undated) field system on the nearby flood plain. Both help to place the site into its wider setting.
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1 INTRODUCTION

From 1998-2003 assessment excavations took place on a cropmark site at Birnie, near Elgin, Moray (NJ 210 585; fig 1), following the discovery of Roman silver coins (denarii) on the site by Hamish Stuart, a local metal-detectorist, in 1996. This presented an unrivalled chance to investigate the connection between Roman coins and a native settlement site. The results were staggering: a long-lived and well-preserved later prehistoric settlement\(^1\) which had been a major local power centre, with a series of spectacular finds. Most important were two hoards of late second century denarii, which were probably a gift or bribe from the Romans to the inhabitants as an incentive to stay peaceful. There was also a range of other Roman goods, notably brooches and an unusual bird mount, while other evidence of the importance of the occupants included imported metalwork and craft activities such as bronze- and iron-working. Over all this lay a later (probably medieval) settlement – a rare and well-preserved example of what would have been the typical settlement of the time, but few have ever been studied.

On the basis of these exciting results, funding was obtained from the National Museums of Scotland and Historic Scotland to allow larger-scale excavations from 2004-2007 which would explore the site’s potential more fully. The research design and excavation strategy are set out below.

The site lies on a gravel terrace above the floodplain of the river Lossie, some 300 m south-east of Birnie Kirk, which was a major early Christian and medieval religious centre. It is sheltered from the south by rising ground, and occupies a slightly raised location, c.150 by 120 m in extent, on the edge of the terrace (fig 2).

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\(^1\) The term "later prehistoric" is used to cover the period from the late Bronze Age to the Roman Iron Age, c. 1200 BC – AD 400. It is planned to obtain a series of radiocarbon dates this year which will give a much fuller picture of the site’s development.
Fig 1: site location
Fig 2: excavation trenches
2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND EXCAVATION STRATEGY

The research design has been slightly modified with the results of each year’s excavations, but the key questions have remained essentially the same. They can be framed in terms of four broader topics.

What was the relationship of the site’s inhabitants with the Roman world?

→ Why were the hoards buried?

→ What other evidence is there of contact with Rome and what was its nature?

→ What effects did this have?

What was the nature of later prehistoric settlement in Moray?

Despite its rich cropmark record, the later prehistoric archaeology of Moray is virtually untapped, and has been classed as a “black hole” in our knowledge (Haselgrove et al 2001, 25). Birnie offers a chance to explore one such later prehistoric settlement in detail, focussing on questions such as:

→ How did the settlement develop over time?

→ What was life like at the settlement?

→ Why were different styles of houses used?

→ How does this relate to other excavated sites in the area? How typical or different is Birnie?

How and why did settlement patterns change over the millennia at Birnie?

Early activity:

→ What is the nature of the early prehistoric activity?

Later prehistory:

→ When did the later prehistoric settlement start, and how did it change during its life?

→ When and why did the later prehistoric settlement end?

→ Was the hoard a final act in the site’s prehistory?
The Picts:

There is a crucial question-mark over the emergence of the groups recorded in history as the Picts. They are often argued to arise from the amalgamation of pre-existing political units to face the threat posed by Rome (Mann 1974). However the evidence is far from certain, and there are a number of flaws in the argument, especially when the archaeological evidence is brought to bear. It could equally be argued that there was a substantial social collapse in the north-east in the mid-third century AD, perhaps as a direct or indirect result of contacts with Rome, with the Picts being the new power-group emerging from this upheaval (see Hunter in press). The site at Binnie presents an ideal opportunity to test these ideas.

→ Did occupation continue into the Pictish period or was there a major change at this time?
→ What was the relation to nearby Binnie Kirk? Did the early Christian missionaries choose this site because it was near an existing power centre?

The medieval period:

→ What is the date and character of the overlying settlement?
→ How does the medieval settlement relate to the church?
→ How does it fit into the hinterland of the royal burgh of Elgin? What was the relationship between town and country?

What is the nature of the “occupation deposits” in the houses?

Dark soil deposits in houses are often called occupation deposits, which implies the inhabitants were living in some squalor as rubbish accumulated; yet it is very unclear how these deposits formed. Do they stem from use, abandonment, or much later deposition? In collaboration with Dr Stephen Carter and Dr Steve Lancaster, detailed studies of the soil will be used to clarify these deposits.
Strategy

The general excavation strategy for each season is as follows:

- Extensive excavation of a later prehistoric roundhouse
- Extensive excavation of a sub-rectangular (probably medieval) structure
- Investigation of one or two other areas of potential, as revealed by assessment (especially the areas around the hoards)

It is neither possible nor desirable to excavate the site fully; but equally, there is a continuing threat to the survival of the well-preserved deposits from attrition by ploughing. The aim in four years is to recover enough of the best-preserved deposits to tell the story of the site, while leaving some material for future generations to study. However it is considered sensible to excavate the best-preserved material now, rather than leave it to suffer further destruction in years to come.

In 2004 the targets were as follows:

- Continuation of excavation of the area N house, focussing on the ring ditch
- Excavation of the northern house in area M (first excavated in 2001)
- Complete excavation of the sub-rectangular structural hollow in area P

Excavations took place from 22 August to 17 September 2004, thanks to the support of the farmer, William Mustard, with a core team of student volunteers from Edinburgh and Bradford Universities and a series of local and more far-flung stalwarts. Thanks to the support of the NMS Access & Outreach team it was also possible to host a series of school visits with hands-on activities and follow-up work at the school. Twelve local classes from across Moray were able to take advantage of this. A successful open day was also held, with over a hundred visitors.
3 AREAS M – RING-GROOVE ROUNDHOUSE & COBBLED AREA

In 2001 a long trench near the eastern edge of the site located remains of two roundhouses with a paved area to their north. The northern roundhouse was selected for detailed examination in 2004, because the earlier work had suggested the floor deposits were extensive in area. An area some 16 x 15 m was opened up, exposing all of the house and a small area around it. An extension to the north (10.5 x 8 m) revealed the paved area, although pressures of time meant that little of this was examined.

As previous work had shown, the roundhouse was defined by a ring groove some 11.5 m in diameter (fig 3). It was notably polyhedral rather than round – the circle was composed of several straight sections, suggesting the walls were made of prefabricated wattle panels. The main weight of the structure was taken by an internal post ring which was only partly exposed. It was c. 7.6 m in diameter, and had been deliberately dismantled.

The ring groove was absent on the eastern third of the building. However it seems this was due not to erosion but a change in building style. Here six substantial posts defined the wall line, flanking a substantial double-doorway some 2.7 m wide. The post to the south of the door proved an intriguing one. It seems a large pit was dug to remove it (fig 4, section G-H, I-J), with a cattle skull then placed against its side. Bone rarely survives at Birnie because of the acidity of the sandy soil; here it seems the sheer bulk of the skull raised the pH levels enough to preserve it. Any associated smaller bones would have dissolved, but the way the skull was placed suggests it was put there on its own, as a decapitated head.

Within the house was a central cooking pit, some 1.7 m in diameter and 0.6 m deep (fig 5, sections B-D, E-F). The upper fills included a clay mould (discussed below) and another cow skull. Surrounding this was a dense concentration of small pits which were only partly excavated (fig 3 and 5, section A-B). Their function is unclear, but it seems that this central area of the house was much more intensively used than the peripheral areas between the post-ring and the ring-groove.
Much of the interior was covered with homogenous deposits rich in charcoal and clay, concentrated over the north and west of the interior. Initial work in 2001 suggested these filled a ring ditch. However the 2004 results indicate that this was not a continuous feature, but rather a series of hollows worn between the posts of the post-ring. Not all these deposits could be removed in the time available (c. 40% was dug), so the complete pattern is uncertain, but this suggests that the hollows formed from use-wear in small chambers defined by radial partitions from the posts, rather than a continuous ring ditch. What is certain is that these were not floor deposits: they overlay the post holes, and in places the ring-groove, and are best seen as destruction deposits arising from the deliberate demolition of the building – a process which involved the removal of the posts and the placing of cattle skulls in key features.

Little work was done on the northern paved area because the house proved more time-consuming than expected, but in cleaning it a Roman brooch was found which had fallen between the stones of the surface. It is discussed more fully below, but indicates the paving is Roman Iron Age in date. Iron-working slag had been incorporated in the paving, proving this was taking place on site in the Iron Age.

Fig 4: section of south door post complex (G-J) and radial section (K-L)
Summary

The 2004 excavations have produced a much more coherent picture of the area M roundhouse (fig 3, 6). It was structurally based on a post-ring, with an external ring-groove holding an outer wall of prefabricated wattle panels, shifting to a (more impressive?) post-built construction around the substantial double-door. There was a central cooking pit surrounded by pits and gullies, while the periphery was probably made up of a series of small compartments off the central area. The building was deliberately demolished, and cattle skulls were placed in the central pit and near the southern door post as offerings when the house was abandoned. The saddle quern found in the destruction deposits in 2001 was probably another such offering. The paving to the north was in use in the Roman Iron Age; radiocarbon dates will be needed to show whether this was contemporary with the house.

Fig 5: sections of central cooking pit complex
Fig 6: speculative reconstructions of the area M house

(a): a minimalist view

(b): this more ornate version emphasises how much we might be missing
This house, visible on aerial photographs as a post-ring, had been studied briefly in 2001 and more extensively in 2003. The aim in 2004 was to complete the excavation of the key features. In the event this proved impossible with the labour force available, but substantial progress was made in disentangling the ring ditch. A trench some 20 x 20 m square was opened over the house with an extension to the south-west to study related features (fig 7).

Although the whole area of the house was reopened, attention was focussed on two main areas: the ring ditch and the entrance area. The general picture from 2003 was confirmed, with details clarified. It seems the inner post ring was about 8.7 m in diameter, and comprised 13 posts. The ring ditch lay in the north-west third of the building, to the rear; it gives an overall house diameter of around 16.0 m. It was completely excavated in some sections, but there are still deposits to be removed as an extensive sampling programme (to assess any spatial variation in its use) slowed down the excavation (see fig 8, E-F for a partial section). However the sequence is best understood as follows:

- Erosion of a hollow in the sand, associated with a dark charcoal- and ash-rich layer
- Laying of small cobble scatters in the hollow to inhibit erosion.
- Accumulation of further charcoal- and ash-rich material over this, with evidence of trampling disturbance.

The evidence of extensive trampling is consistent with the presence of animals in the building; indeed, similar disturbed sediments and attempts at cobbling can be seen in many modern field gates. The restriction of the ring ditch to one area of the house suggests that stalling of animals took place only in this area; there is no convincing evidence that the remains were truncated elsewhere. Unlike the area M house, it seems clear that these deposits are contemporary with the use of the building, not least because they respect the inner post ring.
Fig 7: plan of area N
The entrance area was partly excavated, but again was not completed. Both entrance posts had been deliberately removed when the house was abandoned, a sequence found also in the post-ring postholes examined in 2003. The line of the wall is not totally certain in this area: projecting the circumference from the back of the ring ditch, the door posts may have lain on the wall line but could have projected slightly in a small porch, and their size and shape could have accommodated two posts (fig 8, section C-D).

Within the doorway area a complex series of deposits survive. What is probably a posthole from the post-ring is visible in plan, so the deposits must predate this or (most likely) be contemporary with it. Something of the complexity is seen in the one feature which was sectioned. This proved to be a complex of two overlapping pits, each with a series of recuts (fig 8, section A-B). Somewhere in this complex should lie a post-ring posthole, but typically it appears to lie in the unexcavated half, so the relationship between the pits and the house construction is unknown.

Area N

![Diagram of Area N]

Fig 8: sections of selected features in area N
Finds were sparse from this trench, although from the ring ditch came lots of tiny fragments of pot, daub and burnt bone, suggesting it was trampled domestic material.

In clearing the area outside the ring ditch, a series of features associated with burning was revealed, and a charcoal-rich area was noted immediately south-west of the house. In an attempt to characterise this the south-west corner of the trench was extended. What was initially thought to be a small, discrete feature rapidly expanded into a substantial area of charcoal-rich soil. An area 6.5 x 7 m failed to find its limits, and slot trenches were excavated to the north, south and west to find the edges. These revealed a charcoal-rich area some 14 m east-west and 15 m north-south. Its shape was not clearly revealed, but in one area it appears to have a curvilinear edge (overlain by later features) which suggests it is another well-preserved roundhouse. Little excavation was undertaken, but an iron object was recovered from it.

Fig 9: speculative reconstruction of the area N roundhouse.
Summary

The area N ring ditch house was some 16 m in diameter with an internal post-ring around 8.6 m in diameter. It was a single-phase construction which saw extended use: a ring ditch was worn, patched, and then trampled, while the central cooking pit went through three incarnations (fig 9). The deposits in the ring ditch suggest the stalling of animals, while the cooking pit indicated people were also living in the building. When the building was finally abandoned it was demolished, with the post-ring timbers and doorposts being removed. There are no finds to indicate where in the later prehistoric sequence it fits, but plenty of dating samples were taken. Another probable roundhouse was identified immediately to the south-west.
5 A R E A  P – M E D I E VA L  B U I L D I N G  A N D  I N D U S T R I A L  A R E A

Area P was opened over a sub-rectangular blob which appeared on the aerial photograph. It was first examined in 2002, when only limited excavation was possible, and was then sectioned in 2003. The results from this suggested it was the sunken floor of a non-circular building, post-dating the Iron Age, but failed to provide definite evidence of its date. It was thus a good candidate for full excavation.

A trench some 15 m square was opened over the feature, with an extension of c. 13.5 x 9 m to the north to investigate features noted at the trench edge (fig 10). Work was focussed on the hollow and its immediate vicinity; little else was excavated.

The most visible remains of the building are its sunken floor – an east-west sub-rectangular hollow, 7.0 m long and 1.9-2.3 m wide, deepest in the centre, with its ends turned slightly southward. The hollow is up to 0.2 m deep, and shows evidence of two main phases (fig 11, sections A-B, C-D). In the first phase there was a sub-oval pit in the middle of the hollow, probably a cooking pit. This was infilled and covered over by an ash-rich layer, apparently a laid floor for the second building phase. A sub-oval pit filled with animal bone and fire-cracked stone (fig 11, section E-F) was probably the cooking pit for this phase; it lay outside the hollow to the south.

The construction of the building remains problematic, as foundations are all but absent. Despite a careful search, only four small postholes were located, forming an irregular quadrangle around the central area of the scoop (fig 10). Where a sequence could be observed, these tied in to the later building phase: it is not at all certain that all the postholes were in contemporary use, but the pair adjacent to section C-D are plausible candidates from their positioning.

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2 The illustrations in the 2003 interim (Hunter 2004, fig 7-8) indicate an opposed pair of posts on the drawn section but the supposed post, shown as incompletely excavated, turned out on further examination in 2004 to be a rabbit burrow. Note that in the 2003 plan the excavated section is wrongly positioned; it actually lies one metre to the east.
Fig 10: plan of area P
This near-total lack of foundations makes the overall building plan uncertain. Are we dealing with the total floor of the building, or simply the worn central area of an ailed structure based perhaps on sill-beams or post-pads? We have no way of knowing – although the down-turned ends of the hollow (fig 12) suggest the wearing of access routes at these points, which favours arguments for an ailed building, as it would be structurally challenging to have two doorways in the one side of a building the size of the hollow. This remains a matter for debate, and the excavation of similar features elsewhere on the site should help clarify matters.

It seems that, in contrast to the earlier roundhouses, we are dealing with a building with minimal earthfast foundations. Indeed, had it not been for the easily-eroded sandy subsoil leading to a worn floor area, the building would have been all but invisible – a scatter of insubstantial features making no readily comprehensible plan. This is a worrying case-study of the difficulties in tracing Early Historic and medieval houses, as these periods seem to have specialised in houses with little or no foundations. No diagnostic artefacts were recovered from the excavation of this building, but samples should provide plenty of datable material.

Fig 11: sections of features in area P
A deep pit was excavated to the north-west (fig 11, sections G-H-I, J-H-K), but its function and date are unclear; it may not be related to the use of the building.

On the northern trench edge an area of dark soil and burning was noted in the stripping. The trench was expanded northwards to explore this, exposing an extensive area of charcoal-rich soil with plentiful evidence for in-situ burning, including a pit with plentiful burnt clay and slag in its surface. This, and other surface finds of slag, indicate this is one of the iron-working areas long hinted-at by the discoveries of slag in other areas. It is a key target for excavation in the seasons to come. There was no certain indicator of its date, but the presence of two saddle querns in the surface may suggest a later prehistoric rather than medieval date (fig 21).

Summary
The area P “blob” is the eroded floor of a sub-rectangular building of at least two phases. There is little trace of the foundations, but this may be the central part of a rather larger aisled building, perhaps of sill-beam or turf construction. In its earlier phase it had an internal central cooking pit; when a new floor was laid, this was replaced by a more southerly, perhaps external pit. To the north an iron-working area was uncovered, its date uncertain.
Fig 12: contour plot and three-dimensional view of area P hollow
Upper, N to top left; lower, N to L. Created by Steven Orr
To the south-west of the site, on the edge of the gravel terrace, lies an area of scrubby woodland. Eating into the terrace edge, but now largely overgrown, is a disused sand quarry. Harry Clyne and David Addison independently noted stonework protruding from the eroding section face, and a small investigation was mounted (area X). The section was cleaned up, revealing the end of a substantial pit lined with coursed stone. The pit contained a series of charcoal-rich fills and a notable quantity of large charred timbers (fig 13).

This is the chamber of a corn-drying kiln, a well-known feature of the medieval and post-medieval landscape (Yeoman 1995, 74; Dixon n.d. 51, 53-4). These were stone-lined keyhole-shaped features sunk into the ground, with a timber framework supporting a roof of clay or thatch (see fig 14 for a reconstruction). A wooden platform would be constructed over the bowl, with a permeable structure, perhaps of wattle or matting, laid on it; onto this would be laid the sheaves of corn to be dried. A fire was lit in the flue of the kiln and the heat drawn back through the bowl to dry the grain – in theory. In practice this was a constant fire risk and often, as at Birnie, the process ended in disaster and the framework and superstructure burnt down.

Corn-drying kilns were a medieval innovation in Scotland. For most of prehistory, up to the twelfth century, corn was ground by hand using querns. In the medieval period larger-scale mills were set up by landowners. To work effectively the corn had to be properly dried. This combination of new technology and increased scale meant that more effective systems of drying the grain were needed; hence the appearance of these kilns. They were also used in brewing, to malt the barley; it is tempting, but unproven, to think that here in the heartland of whisky country some of the malted barley may have been destined for the still rather than the brewer's vat...

Radiocarbon dating will establish the date of the Birnie kiln, but it is probably of the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries AD, as it was later than a layer containing a sherd of medieval red ware. It would have been an integral part of the thriving medieval settlement which earlier work has indicated, and is also a tantalising hint of what lies hidden in the scrub on the edge of the terrace. Its discovery also drew attention to
another feature of the medieval period. All the buildings suspected to be of medieval date lie on the western part of the terrace (areas D, J, P and V), and this is also the area producing most of the medieval metal-detected finds, including the pilgrim badge (Hunter 2003, 18, fig 12). It seems that the medieval site was focussed on the western edge of the terrace, directly overlooking the church, in an area about 90 m in diameter, while the prehistoric settlement spread much more extensively over the terrace.

Fig 13: corn-drying kiln, plan (upper) and section

Area X

Fig 14: speculative reconstruction of the corn-drying kiln
Unusually for Birnie, most of the striking finds this year came from excavation rather than metal-detecting. Pride of place goes to a further Roman brooch from area M (fig 15). This was found lodged between the stones of the cobbbling to the north of the house, and probably dropped off someone's costume as they crossed the paved area and got lost in the mud gathered on the surface.

The brooch has a tapering bow decorated with an enamelled lozenge pattern in blue and red. The arms and foot also have subtle cast decoration, while the bow was further ornamented with three applied knobs – literally a brooch with knobs on... It is of late first-second century AD date. This is an unusual type, and like the other Birnie brooches is rather better than the average Romano-British brooch. It suggests that the inhabitants were able to pick and choose their material, or that they were seen as worthy of gifts rather better than the norm.

Fig 15: the Roman brooch.
Area M produced some other striking finds. Most notable was a copper alloy terret (fig 16) – a ring which fitted onto the yoke of a chariot to guide the reins, preventing them from getting tangled. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, terrets imply chariots, the high-status runaround of choice for the discerning Iron Age elite. Evidence of them is exceedingly rare in north-east Scotland – this is the first such terret from north of the Mounth – but taken with previous finds of horse harness from Binnie, it shows that the inhabitants were people of importance. Secondly, it is not a local product. This style of terret is a product of more southerly areas, from southern Scotland or even further south, and again shows the contacts available to the people at Binnie. It probably dates to around AD 1-200, and was found in topsoil, as was a fragment of copper alloy finger ring.

Fig 16: the terret

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3 A strap fastener was found in 1999 and part of a bridle bit in 2001 (Hunter 2000, fig 8; 2002, fig 13); metal analysis has shown that the ring found in 2000 and thought to be another bridle bit ring is actually post-medieval in date (Hunter 2001, fig 6).
Further finds from area M included additional evidence for non-ferrous metalworking. A crucible fragment came from a surface within the house; analysis showed it had been used for casting copper alloys, probably leaded gymnias, an alloy only used from the Roman Iron Age onwards. A similar crucible fragment was found slightly to the north, in area O (Hunter 2003, 19, fig 13). More unusual was a fired clay ingot mould from the upper fill of the central cooking pit (fig 17). This was used for casting discs, probably of copper alloy, about 60 mm across and 20 mm thick. Such ingots were raw material for hammering out into sheet metal objects such as cauldrons or cups. As with the brooch and the terret, these metal-working finds confirm Birnie's importance, as there are very few sites with evidence of bronze-working at this period – it was a rare and restricted craft, available only to a selected few.

Fig 17: the clay ingot mould
Another important find was made – or more accurately rediscovered! While looking over finds from previous years, a glass sherd found in the very first excavation trench in 1998 caught the eye (fig 18 D). It looked like a piece of Roman glass which had not been noticed at the time – a suspicion confirmed by Dr Dominic Ingemark of Lund University when he visited NMS to study Roman glass. It comes from a shallow bowl formed in a mould, with a series of ribs on its surface; the intact example (fig 19) gives an idea of its original impressive appearance. This would have been high-status tableware at the time, used for eating or drinking. It came from the destruction deposits of the house in area D, which will be a target for examination in 2005.

Fig 18: a, stone disc; b, whetstone; c, microlith; d, Roman glass; e-f, medieval pot

Fig 19: a Roman glass bowl of the type found at Birnie (fig 18d)
Other discoveries were less spectacular but no less interesting. A stray find of a flint microlith takes the Birnie story back several thousand years, to around 6000-4500 BC (fig 18 C). It is a type of blade used in the mesolithic period, before the advent of farming, and would have been used with several others to create the barbed or serrated edge of an arrow or blade. At the other end of the chronological spectrum was a range of medieval pottery (e.g. the handles in fig 18 E-F) and a silver coin of Edward I, the most spectacular of the year’s metal-detecting finds. This is the second Edwardian coin from the site, and shows that some wealth was coming into the hands of the medieval inhabitants.

For the Iron Age, apart from the glamour finds of the brooch, the glassware and the terret, the picture was dominated by everyday stone: a wide range of tools made from cobbles and pebbles. These included a number of whetstones, vivid reminders of the iron blades which so rarely survive in the acid sandy soils (fig 20, E-F) and a large number of grinding and pounding stones which would have been used to grind grain, prepare food, crush clay for pot-making or pigment for decoration, and so forth (fig 20, A-D, G-H). There were also a number of saddle querns, including two reused in the iron-working area in area P (fig 21, A-B). Sinclair Ross kindly examined a number of the stone finds from this and previous years. The inhabitants had been drawing on a range of stone sources in the immediate area, including pebbles from coastal beaches. Most of the more distant stone types could have been glacially transported but, as noted in last year’s interim, one find suggests contacts into Banffshire (Hunter 2004, 19).

While the structures provide the setting for the Birnie story, it is the finds which breathe life into it, allowing us to imagine the inhabitants as they went about their daily lives, grinding their grain, preparing their pigments, drinking from Roman tablewares, wearing Roman brooches, thundering around the field in chariots ... It is to be hoped that these larger-scale excavations will continue to produce striking finds from the houses themselves, to show in more detail how different buildings were used and how life changed through time.
Fig 20: selected coarse stone tools
Fig 21: saddle querns (a-b) and a rubbing stone (c)
8 OTHER NEWS

Two other Birnie-related topics merit a mention. The first is an addition to the site's context. Thanks to the good offices of Andrew Sayers it was possible to obtain aerial photographs of both the site and its environs. This revealed, in the long shadows of the evening sun, the cropmarks of an ancient field system lying to the north of the site, on the edge of the Lossie floodplain north of Dykeside, between Nether Birnie and Duffushillock. The location is shown in fig 22: although the details are not entirely clear, it includes a series of enclosure ditches and droveway down to the floodplain, as well as other, less clear remains. Some may be relatively recent field boundaries, but others look like they may be of greater antiquity. Investigation of these would be very worthwhile.

The other topic is more of an advert. In a partnership between the National Museums of Scotland and Elgin Museum, the two Birnie hoards are now on long-term display in Elgin Museum, along with a range of other finds. This major highlight for the museum will allow people locally to see the results of the work before they are fully published. It is planned to update the display every year with recent finds – assuming there are finds worthy of note!
Cropmarks

Fig 22: location of the cropmarks (which are shown as an interpretative sketch)
This first larger-scale year of the Birnie project has been a big success. The extra time and resources allowed a much more extensive examination of the buildings, and while neither of the two roundhouses was fully excavated, both gave up far more of their secrets than had been anticipated previously. The total excavation of the probable medieval building provides a rare example of post-Iron Age architecture from this area, and further analysis and dating will be of great value. The discovery of an iron-working area to its north provides a great resource for fuller investigation in years to come, while the corn-drying kiln has added another dimension to the medieval site and drawn attention to its spatial layout, more tightly focussed than the prehistoric one.

The finds have once more been a revelation, with unexpected and indeed unique items which both confirm the site’s importance and add new facets to our understanding of it. The evidence of Roman contacts and of other widespread connections is made clearer, as is the role of Birnie as a production centre for metalwork. Finally, and as a fitting showcase for the site, the display of the finds in Elgin Museum will allow many more people to see the material first-hand and ask themselves what it all means – a question we hope to answer for ourselves in the coming seasons.
10 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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