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EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2005

Fraser Hunter

Dept of Archaeology
National Museums of Scotland
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SUMMARY

The 2005 excavations on the later prehistoric and medieval site at Birnie, Moray investigated two very different roundhouses. The main focus was a large house (c.16 m in diameter), occupied around the time of the coin hoards, which had burnt down and was very well-preserved. Its full extent was exposed, with an entrance to the south-east, central hearth and internal ring of large structural posts. Preservation was best to the rear, where a ring-ditch lay against the outer wall. In the western half of the building the destruction deposits revealed burnt turfs from the roof and substantial charred timber fragments from the structure of the building. In the eastern half the layers overlying these burnt deposits were removed. Finds included Iron Age yellow glass beads, a sherd of Roman coarse ware (the first Roman pot from Birnie), and two pieces of cannel coal jewellery, another first for the site. These show the inhabitants had connections across the Moray Firth – the nearest source of raw materials is Golspie in Sutherland.

Another house partly examined in 2000 was fully exposed. Any internal features had been ploughed away, but a three-phase ring-groove 13.8 m in diameter was revealed, with an eastern entrance. It is probably a house which was reused as an enclosure.

Excavation of a sub-rectangular feature showed it was the sunken floor of a turf-walled building with no earth-fast foundations. It went through a series of phases, the latest with a cobbled floor. Similar features have been interpreted as medieval, but the finds from this structure suggest a late Iron Age or Pictish date. This is the first hint of Pictish activity at Birnie, but radiocarbon dates are needed to confirm this.

A speculative trench on the west of the site, where the site cabins are normally located, uncovered a very rare late Bronze Age metalworking area. A series of pits contained fragments of clay crucibles and moulds for axes, pins and bangles. One pit contained the charred remains of a large oak object, perhaps a charred tree trunk from use as an anvil. In another pit, saddle quern and rubber fragments had been deliberately buried, apparently as part of a ritual.

A successful series of visits for local schools was held, and around 300 people attended an Open Day.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Since 1998 excavations have been taking place at Birnie, Moray to investigate this important prehistoric settlement (fig 1; NJ 210 585). We were led to the site by the discovery of a scatter of Roman silver coins (denarii) by Hamish Stuart, a local metal-detectorist. The field was known from aerial photographs to hold a later prehistoric settlement. Our work has shown that this settlement was long-lived, and was a major power centre in the Roman Iron Age. This is seen most vividly in the discovery of two hoards of late second-century Roman denarii, best seen as a gift or bribe from the Romans to encourage these local power-brokers to keep the peace. A range of other Iron Age and Roman prestige goods flesh out our picture of this well-connected site. Overlying it is a well-preserved medieval settlement, probably linked to nearby Birnie Kirk which was an important medieval religious site.

During Phase 1 of the project, from 1998-2003, several seasons of small-scale excavation allowed us to follow up the initial coin finds, discover the hoards and get a general idea of the site’s character. This enabled us to secure more substantial funding from the National Museums of Scotland and Historic Scotland for a large-scale second phase of work. Its overall aims are to study how the settlement changed over the millennia, and in particular to understand as much as possible about the time when it was in close contact with the Roman world. It is intended to study one of the roundhouses and one of the sub-rectangular features (thought to be medieval) each year, along with one or two other selected areas. This will be supported by a continuing campaign of metal-detecting.

In 2005 the following areas were targeted (fig 2):

- Reopening and expansion of area D, a burnt-down roundhouse partly examined in 1999. This is known to be of Roman Iron Age date, and specialist study of the soils has shown that the remains were very well-preserved.
- Examination of a sub-rectangular cropmark to the north of this (area Y).
- Fuller examination of a ring-groove partly exposed in 2000 (area Z).
- A random trench to examine an untested part of the field (area AA).
Excavations took place from 21 August to 17 September 2005, thanks to the support of the farmer, William Mustard, and a willing and enthusiastic excavation team drawn primarily from the universities of Cardiff and Glasgow, the UHI Project (Shetland and Moray Colleges) and a range of willing volunteers, both local and further-flung.

Fig 1: location plan
2 THE BURNT-DOWN ROUNDHOUSE (AREA D)

The very first trench we ever excavated on the site in 1998 targeted a roundhouse which showed as a dark crescent on the aerial photos. This proved to contain extensive burnt deposits and a range of artefacts, including Roman glass and an Iron Age spiral finger ring; a radiocarbon date of AD 80-340 was obtained from a burnt timber. More extensive excavation in 1999 opened the western half of this, and confirmed that the building had burnt down (Hunter 2000). It also showed that it had been rebuilt at least once before the fire, while other interesting finds were recovered, notably a broken sword.

Specialist analysis of soil samples taken during this work showed that the burning had preserved the house remains very well, with little later disturbance. It has the potential to give us a very vivid picture of the life and death of a roundhouse. In favourable conditions burnt-down houses can preserve a snapshot of life, allowing us to understand how the building was used, as other examples have shown (e.g. South Shields, Tyne and Wear, and Tormore, Arran; Hodgson et al 2001; Barber 1997, 7-20). What is more, it is the only house so far which has produced evidence of Roman-period occupation, and thus may well be contemporary with the coin hoards – making it a very tempting target for excavation. This will be a big task because it is so well-preserved. Excavations were started in 2005 in the expectation that the work would take more than a single season.

The whole area of the roundhouse was fully exposed, revealing a circle around 16 m in diameter – a very substantial house (fig 3). Preservation is best towards the north; at the southern edge, the deposits are less thick and more plough damage has been done. Because of our earlier excavations, work was further advanced in the western half than in the eastern. In the eastern half, efforts were concentrated on removing overlying layers to come down onto the top of the burnt deposits in the roundhouse. In the western half, a start was made on excavating these burnt deposits.
Fig 3: the area D roundhouse

AREA D

Disturbed area

Edge of Area V
The eastern half

The hollow of the destroyed roundhouse acted as a trap for soil, with a thick layer of ploughsoil lying over the eastern half of the site. In one area some later features were cut into this, while stones sticking through it offered tantalising hints of what lies underneath. Efforts concentrated on removing this ploughsoil, which produced an interesting range of Iron Age finds disturbed from the underlying deposits. These included several yellow glass beads (fig 16 F-H) – suggesting a whole necklace may lie further down. There was also a Roman potsherd, the first recovered from the site (fig 15). It is a body sherd of a cooking pot of Black Burnished Ware (BB1), an import from Dorset of second century AD date (Colin Wallace, pers comm). This is unusual, as Roman pottery on Iron Age sites is dominated by fine tablewares, especially glossy red samian ware. Typically only high-status sites had a wider range of ceramics, including coarse wares such as this one. This provides another clue that Birnie was a site of significance.

These overlying deposits were removed to reveal the burnt deposits of the roundhouse. As in the western half, there was an outer charcoal-rich halo around an inner, ashier area. The ash deposits are quite shallow, while the dark area defines the likely extent of the ring-ditch. A concentration of stones at one end probably marks cobbled near the entrance. Along the south-east edge of the house a number of features could be seen, and the original entrance is likely to lie in this area.

The western half

In the south-west of the house, the thin skin of destruction deposits lay over a series of pits and postholes. These may represent an alcove against the wall, with a pair of posts forming an entrance to a small bay with an oval pit within it. In this area there was a lot of burnt orange ash in the destruction deposits, rather than the usual grey ash. Orange ash typically comes from burnt peat, suggesting a store of peat may have gone up in smoke.

The best results came from the north-west quadrant. This too showed a sequence of grey ashy layers towards the centre, overlying more charcoal-rich layers which were clearest at the outer edge. This broad sequence is due to the way the building burnt down. The upper layers burnt with plenty of oxygen, turning the remains to ash, while
in the lower levels, where there was less oxygen, charcoal was formed. Excavation of the ashy deposits showed that, while this pattern is true overall, there is tremendous small-scale variability, with patches of ash and charcoal intermingled. This is due to the realities of such a fire: there would be lots of localised variations from gusts of wind, collapsing timbers, chunks of roof thatch falling down and so forth. These would create locally oxidising or reducing conditions at various stages, forming the mixed deposits which are left for us to dig.

Within these deposits, towards the middle of the quadrant, was an area of discrete burnt ashy blocks. These seem to be burnt turfs – with their location suggesting they came from the roof rather than the wall. This provides good evidence that there was either a turf roof or a waterproofing layer of dried turf under a thatched roof. A scatter of small stones in the same area may well be from holding down the roof, although their small size means they would need to be held in net bags. At this level vertical charcoal stakes and other substantial lumps started to appear. These provide a tantalising hint of the structural remains which lie underneath, and which must await another season.

Discussion

The 2005 excavations have provided a big step forward in understanding this house. We now have a much better idea of the complex burnt deposits and of how to tackle them, while the removal of overlying deposits in the eastern half means this area is ready for investigation. It is too early to speculate much about the building, but there are hints of interesting patterns in its use. The hollow of the ring-ditch (perhaps a stall for cattle) is restricted to the rear of the structure, around its outer edge, while there are suggestions that elsewhere a series of small bays or rooms lay around the edge. Around the hearth (within the baulk, where some flat stones hint at its location) was a spread of peat ash, sitting in a shallow wear-gully on its northern side. No similar wear-hollows have been noted yet to the south and east, suggesting different parts of the house were used in different ways, with some areas seeing heavier use than others.

The other intriguing issue is the question of what the floor was like. Given the excellent preservation and disastrous end to the house’s life, we expected to find evidence of floor deposits. So far, however, it is only around the hearth that patches of
trampled peat ash survive. Elsewhere there is no sign of a floor between the natural sand and the destruction levels. Yet the pattern of wear hollows in the sand shows that the building was being used. The floor levels might have been cleaned out, although in this case we would expect the peat ash to be removed as well. More likely there was a laid floor surface of organic material such as planks, rushes or bracken. In a typical abandoned house this would simply rot away, leaving little or no soil trace. In a burnt-down house like this one, it would be consumed in the fire, forming an indistinguishable part of the destruction deposits. During occupation this organic ‘litter’ could be cleaned out and replenished regularly, removing any built-up deposits around it; but presumably organic flooring was not used around the hearth because of the fire hazard, explaining the peat ash in this area.

Specialist analysis of the soils has already given some clues, with hints of planking and sedge rushes, perhaps from matting. The excavation of larger areas and study of samples from the base of the burnt layer should help us to understand more about the floor. This model provides one way to explain the enigma of a lack of visible floor deposits, and will be a key idea to test in future seasons — along with fleshing out our picture of how this building looked and worked.
Area Y was targeted on a sub-rectangular cropmark feature lying north of area D (fig 4). Around three-quarters of the feature lay within the trench. A slot trench located its limits, showing that it was about 9.4 m E-W by 5.6 m N-S, and 0.45 m deep. There was a halo of features around it, but little in the rest of the trench apart from the edge of another roundhouse (known from aerial photographs) in the north-east corner. Efforts were focussed on the sub-rectangular feature and the features around it.

The sub-rectangular scooped structure
The scooped feature proved more complex than anticipated, and unfortunately it was not possible to excavate it completely, or to clarify all the links to the surrounding features. It was excavated down to the top of the lowest layer, with a slot trench across it providing a complete section. The interpretation here is provisional: study of soil thin sections will be crucial to understanding the origins of the various layers.

A string of features along the north edge looked initially like they might turn into a wall, but they proved to be too varied for this. As with similar scoops in previous years, there is no sign of any earth-fast foundations. A series of layers had formed within the scoop, which can be seen in the section and may be summarised as follows (fig 4-6).

An east-west scooped hollow was dug to act as the sunken floor for a building. Its sharp contours suggest it was deliberately dug rather than eroded through use. A series of small pits or postholes was dug into the base. The building probably had turf walls, as the scoop was later infilled with what seem to be layers of burnt turfs.

This initial building seems to have been destroyed by fire, with the burnt turfs from the walls being pushed into the scoop to form a new floor for a second phase. In one area there was a patch of cobbles, but otherwise this new floor did not see heavy use. Iron-panning within this layer suggests it was poorly drained and the decision was taken to raise the surface by covering it with a thick dump of material. Another floor then formed on top of this.
Fig 4: Area Y, showing uppermost cobbled surface in the sunken feature
It seems this upper surface also had some problems, perhaps from wearing out, and it was replaced by a more substantial cobbled surface, with the cobbles concentrated along the centre of the building. This cobbling also included lumps of iron slag. Slight bulges on either side are thin layers which were probably trampled in at doorways, suggesting the building had opposed, near-central doors. Debris built up over these cobbles, which were trampled down into the soil. The east end of the building was not fully clarified, but the apparent curve at the end is probably due to an underlying earlier feature.

Discussion
In its extended life the building will have undergone many changes, but it is worth speculating on what it may have looked like. We have noted already the absence of postholes or other earth-fast foundations, and the suggestion of turf walls. Other clues come from the latest phase. The thin opposed layers on either side of the building suggest trampling in opposed doorways, close to the middle of the building. There is one large stone set firmly into the upper cobbled surface which lies on the building’s central axis and may have been a support for a post to hold up the roof. The ends of the building are only partly visible, with the south-east end obscured by other features and the south-west end unexcavated. However the north-east corner is markedly angled, and the north-west end shows similar hints. This suggests it may have had angled gables, which would imply a hipped roof.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this building is its date. Previous work, especially the smiddy excavated in 1999, suggested these sub-rectangular buildings were medieval. Yet all the datable finds from the area Y building are earlier: the pottery (recovered from the two upper floors) is later prehistoric, including vessels with everted rims (fig 15 C, D, G). This is a typical Roman Iron Age type (as in the second Birnie hoard pot) which may have continued into the Pictish period. There was also some residual earlier material, including a fine Bronze Age barbed and tanged arrowhead (fig 16E).

Although they have seen very little study, there is evidence elsewhere for sub-rectangular Pictish sunken-floored buildings (e.g. Driscoll 1997). This provides a hint that the area Y building might be Pictish – although radiocarbon dates are needed to
confirm this tantalising possibility, as it could equally be an ancillary building associated with the area D roundhouse. Dates are eagerly awaited, but this is the first hint of a Pictish presence at Birnie, and could fill something of the gap between the Roman Iron Age and the later Medieval activity.

Fig 5: area Y scoop at end of excavation, showing lowermost deposits and scoop edge

Fig 6: sections across the area Y structure
Fig 7: area Z

- Palaeosol
- Victorian rubbish dump

Area Z

- Stake holes
- Entrance
- Cooking pit
A RING-GROOVE STRUCTURE (AREA Z)

Area Z was placed to catch two features: the full extent of the ring-groove structure noted on the edge of Trench J in 2000 (Hunter 2001, fig 2); and one or all of a series of three irregular sub-rectangular features noted on aerial photos at the field edge. This led to a rather irregular trench, with the main southern area (c. 17.5 x 15 m) exposing the ring-groove and a northern extension (c. 10.5 x 11 m) which revealed one of the cropmark features (fig 7).

A major factor in this trench was the plough-damage it had suffered. It lies on the crest of the slope, where the remains are heavily damaged – as discussed below, at least 250 mm of subsoil has been lost in the area of the ring groove. Downslope preservation was better, with the survival of an old ground surface. Here the irregular cropmark feature was exposed as a shallow sub-oval blob of material lying in a hollow in the old ground surface. A section cut across it rapidly revealed its nature – a late nineteenth-century rubbish dump, full of glass sherds, nails and roofing felt, where the deeper soil had preserved it from the plough. This suggests that the other features in the same area are likely to be similar recent dumps. There was nothing else of interest in the northern half of the trench, but to the south lay the ring groove and a series of other features.

The ring-groove structure
The ring-groove was some 13.8 m in diameter and up to 0.7 m wide, with a blocked entrance on the east. The immediate surprise was the lack of internal features. There was no trace of the pits or postholes expected in a house, with only two solitary stakeholes. From surface indications it was clear the groove was multi-phase, and a series of slots across it showed that it had gone through three phases, all on roughly the same alignment. The evidence can be reconstructed as follows (fig 7-8).

Phase 1: a deep, U-sectioned slot up to 0.54 m deep. Traces of post-pipes were found in two locations, of diameter 250-300 mm.

Phase 2: a V-shaped recut, generally rather shallower than the phase 1 slot.
Phase 3: a shallow U-sectioned groove, overlying the phase 1-2 cuts except at the east side, where it lies slightly outside them. Where the groove itself is lost, the bases of stakeholes continue the line in places.

Matters are complicated on the west side, where cleaning on the final day revealed a two-phase groove with the narrower one (phase 3?) on the inside. This did not tie in with the probably phase 3 slot in adjacent sections or with neighbouring stakeholes. There are two main possibilities: the stakeholes may represent repairs to the wall; or the inner alignment represents a heavily-truncated phase which does not survive elsewhere.

Figure 8 shows the sections through the ring-groove, all orientated the same way, with the different phases shaded. This also shows the damage, with the remains on the north-west side 250 mm shallower than the best-preserved areas. The upper fills on the east side were much more charcoal-rich than those elsewhere, suggesting either this area had burnt down or material from a nearby fire had been incorporated in the filling. Time did not allow the entrance to be fully disentangled, but it had clearly been blocked or constricted at some stage, and the phase 3 shallow gully lay forward of the earlier lines. There were no diagnostic finds.

The key question is what the ring-groove was for – a house, or an open enclosure, perhaps for animals? The problem with the house interpretation is the lack of internal features. It is possible that these were destroyed by ploughing – a similar ring-groove house in trench O had postholes barely 0.25 m deep (Hunter 2003, fig 9). However we might have hoped for some hints in the southern sector, where plough-damage was less severe.

The phase 1 and 2 slots are very deep, and it is possible they could have held an outer wall solid enough to take the weight of the building with only a shallow internal post-ring. This is unlikely for phase 3, and suggests the use of the structure changed. It may have been a building in its first two phases which was reused as an enclosure when it fell into disrepair. At this stage the entrance was blocked to control access for animals.
Fig 8: phasing of ring-groove sections (all orientated with inside on the left)

Area Z

- Phase 1
- Stake holes / post pipe
- Phase 2
- Phase 3
Other features

At the southern edge of the trench was a substantial pit (F.3563) with a charcoal-rich lower fill which contained a dump of fire-cracked stones (fig 9). This identifies it as a cooking pit, with hot stones used either to heat water in a trough or to act as an oven when the pit was covered over. Hot-stone technology is typical of Bronze Age ‘burnt mounds’, suggesting this may be an early feature on the site. Among the fill were a probable saddle quern and rubber. Another smaller cooking pit was found to the south-east of the house, this time with some bones preserved in its base; there were no clues to its date.

Fig 9: sections across cooking pit F.3563

Discussion

The work in area Z was useful in allowing us to dismiss some of the cropmark features in this area. It also serves as a vivid reminder of the variation in preservation across the site – the contrast between the circular structure here and the burnt-down roundhouse in area D is immense. Yet these truncated remains still serve a valuable function in revealing shadows of a complex history. Hopefully radiocarbon dating will allow it to be fitted into the site sequence. The cooking pit to the south is a hint of earlier activity, perhaps dating to the Bronze Age; here too, dates will help us to fill in another part of the story.
Fig 10: area AA, with details of F.3634 (quern pit) and F.3655 (carbonised object)
It is an archaeological version of Sod's Law that the best finds lie under the spoilheap or just beyond the trench edge. One area we have never investigated is the western edge of the field, where the site huts normally sit. To remedy this a 10 x 10 m trench was randomly positioned in this untouched and unknown area. This proved a good strategy, as a rash of features was revealed — many containing mould and crucible fragments from late Bronze Age bronze-casting (dating to c.1000-800 BC), a rare and exciting discovery.

A metal-working zone

Some 27 features were exposed, of which eleven were excavated (fig 10). Eight of these contained metal-working debris. In some cases the material may have been lying on the surface and found its way into open hollows, but many of the fragments are relatively unworn, suggesting they were not lying around for long before burial, and it is likely that most of the features are linked to metal-working. Most were small pits, perhaps used as casting pits. The area examined is too small to see any associated structures, and it is intended to open a larger area.

One feature was particularly intriguing (F.3655). This was a substantial pit which held the carbonised remains of a wooden object about 0.45 m in diameter, with only its outer edge (c.20-30 mm thick) preserved. It is a single piece of wood with no surviving base, and may either be a decayed and burnt post or a burnt wooden vessel made from a hollowed tree trunk. The burning makes it very tempting to link it to metal-working. If a post, it could have been an anvil or the support for a hearth; if a vessel, it may perhaps have acted as a trough. A small piece of fired clay had stuck to the inner surface, but there is not enough evidence to suggest it was clay-lined.

The metalworking debris itself comprises a range of material (fig 11-12). There are fragments of large open crucibles with flat or rounded rims, a type known from other later Bronze Age sites (e.g. Banchory and Kintore, Aberdeenshire; Eildon Hill North, Roxburghshire; Spearman 1992; Cowie & Hunter 2000). The surviving fragments from the two-piece clay moulds are small (since the mould was broken to remove the object), but initial study shows they were making axes, blades, pins and bangles.
indicating a late Bronze Age date. Later Bronze Age metalworking sites are rare in Scotland, and this is a valuable addition with great potential for further work.

Fig 11: late Bronze Age crucibles (A-C) and moulds, including the mouth of a mould (F) and part of a pin mould (G)
Fig 12: selection of late Bronze Age mould fragments. A and H have indents which provided keying to fix the two halves of the mould together. B is part of a bangle mould, F from an axe mould (with the curve of the blade edge at the bottom) and I part of a pin mould with the two halves still stuck together. The other fragments are less diagnostic.
Fig 13: speculative reconstruction of bronze-casting, showing the stages involved (by Alan Braby)
Other features

Two other features are worth commenting on. One is an unusually-shaped sub-rectangular late Bronze Age pit which produced crucible and mould fragments. However it also held three quern fragments (fig 17 D, 18 A; one not illus). This does not look like simple rubbish disposal. One large fragment of a saddle quern lay on its (broken) edge along the central axis of the pit, with a smaller fragment of a different quern set vertically at its end and a grinding stone positioned against the grinding surface of this vertical quern. At the other end of the horizontal quern was another feature, either a posthole or a hole dug to remove something from the pit.

The alignment of the querns and their careful setting within the pit indicate they were not casually disposed of. There is a purpose behind this arrangement; indeed, the unusually-shaped pit may even have been dug to hold them. Querns were intimately tied in to people’s lives, objects they would use in the home every day. It has been argued this gave them a significance beyond their everyday use – that these associations with the home and with food preparation meant they were more than just tools, but were seen as having a power and significance (Barrett 1989). This might explain why querns were often disposed of in unusual ways. Perhaps the life-cycle of a quern was linked to that of a household, with the quern discarded when a house was abandoned, or deliberately broken and its fragments buried with care in the old house or incorporated in the new one. At Birnie we see evidence of this with both saddle and rotary querns. One intact saddle quern was buried upside-down in a pit behind a roundhouse in area O (Hunter 2003, 13), while most of the houses excavated to date have produced fragments of querns in their abandonment deposits. Rotary querns have been far fewer, but three fragments were found in a post-roundhouse structure in area O, deposited with their grinding faces uppermost and the perforations pointing to the east, an arrangement unlikely to occur by chance (ibid). This all suggests that querns were indeed seen as significant objects at Birnie, and the burial of querns in the area AA pit was probably a symbolic rather than a practical act.

The other feature of interest was a large sub-oval complex of intercutting pits in the north-east corner, which could not be fully examined in the available time. There was no metal-working debris, and very few finds at all. However a cluster of sherds in the upper fill form a large part of a pot which must have been complete when buried.
(fig 14). It is a plain vessel with near-vertical sides angled inwards close to the base. This has similarities to plain domestic Beakers of early Bronze Age date (Dr A Sheridan, pers comm); however, given how little we know of local Iron Age pottery styles, it could also be Iron Age, as similarly fine pottery (though not this shape) has been found on the site before. There have been two stray finds of decorated Beaker sherds found in previous years (Hunter 2001, fig 6 no 459; 2003, fig 13 no 4), but further study and dating is required before we can be sure about this enigmatic vessel.

Fig 14: the pot from area AA – perhaps a plain Beaker?
The most exciting find of the season was the discovery of the late Bronze Age (LBA) metalworking debris (fig 11-13). There are only a dozen or so finds of such debris from Scotland, and this is the first from Moray. Elsewhere in the north-east, there are fragments of sword mould from a settlement at Seafield West, near Inverness, and from the earlier cremation cemetery at Loanhead of Daviot, Aberdeenshire, while a later Bronze Age crucible was found at Kintore, Aberdeenshire; there may be similar finds from Green Castle, Portknockie, Banffshire (Cowie & Hunter 2000; Spearman 1992; Kilbride-Jones 1936, 290, 302-3, fig 10C). However such evidence remains extremely rare – and the bangle moulds from Birnie are unique for Scotland.

Hopefully further excavations in this area will reveal more debris. However already we can say something about its significance. Bronze was a powerful metal in the Bronze Age, a sign of its owner’s importance. The manufacture of bronze objects was apparently seen as special, even magical, and sometimes took place at older ritual sites such as Loanhead of Daviot, which probably had an aura of significance about them. It also took place on important settlements, such as the major hillforts of Traprain Law (E Lothian) and Eildon Hill (Roxburgh) (Burley 1956, 153-4; Spearman 1992). This suggests Birnie was already marked as a special site by c.1000-800 BC. Apart from the rare chance to study such a metal-working site, a key question for further work is whether Birnie remained a powerful place through the intervening centuries to the Roman Iron Age, or whether we are seeing the extraordinary highlights of an otherwise ordinary site.

Thanks to the assistance of Hamish Stuart, the programme of metal-detecting which has been so vital was continued. Spoil heaps were searched on a regular basis, trenches were scanned, and large parts of the rest of the field were covered. The vast bulk of the finds were post-Medieval, but two further stray denarii from the first hoard were found, bringing the total from this hoard to 317.

Further evidence of the site’s Roman contacts was provided by a sherd of Roman coarse ware (BB1), the first Roman pot from the site (fig 15). As noted above, it is normally fine tablewares such as samian which are found on Iron Age sites. Coarse
wares are very unusual, and are normally found only on higher-status sites with a wider range of Roman imports. Birnie would certainly fit this pattern.

Fig 15: Iron Age (A-E, G) and late Bronze Age (F) pottery, with the sherd of Roman pottery (BB1) below. C, D and G came from the area Y structure, A and E from the area D roundhouse, B from cleaning in AA and F from the AA pit with the carbonised wooden object. The Iron Age pottery has everted rims, while F’s flat rim is typical of the late Bronze Age.
This year’s excavations also provided the first clear evidence for contacts across the Moray Firth, in the form of a ring pendant fragment and an unfinished bead of cannel coal and oil shale (fig 16 A-B). The nearest source for this is Golspie in Sutherland. The unfinished bead shows that both products and raw materials were being imported.

Other kinds of jewellery were also found, with several yellow glass beads from the area D house. This type is already known from the site (Hunter 2002, fig 12), and is a product of the north-east (fig 16 F-H; Guido 1978, 73-6, Class 8).

Fig 16: cannel coal pendant and bead from area D (A-B); early prehistoric lithics (C-E), including a Bronze Age arrowhead from area Y; yellow glass beads from area D (F-H)
Otherwise a range of typical domestic material was recovered. There is a good selection of pottery from the site, much of it with the everted rims typical of the Roman Iron Age but which may continue into the earlier Pictish period (fig 15); the area Y sunken-floored structure produced a number of sherds. There was also a good range of stone tools, especially saddle querns and rubbers (fig 17-18), along with a range of other stone tools such as whetstones, grinders and pounders (fig 19). The stones used all came from local sources.

There were also hints of elusive earlier activity (fig 16 C-E): a redeposited flint barbed-and-tanged arrowhead in the area Y structure, and some other flint objects, but earlier prehistoric activity remains a background scatter rather than anything more substantial. The possibility that the area AA pot (fig 14) may be a plain Beaker is intriguing but as yet unproven.

Fig 17 (next page): saddle querns and grinding stones. A and E were reused as post-packing in area D; B is from the possible Bronze Age cooking pit in area Z; C is from the surface of the area Y structure; D and F are from AA features.
Fig 18: saddle querns; A comes from the structured deposit in the area AA pit
Fig 19: stone tools. A, rubbing stone, area Y; B, pounder, area D; C, grinder, area Y; D, whetstone from area D destruction deposits.
In 2005 we also found out more about the wider setting of the site. In advance of tree-planting, three evaluation trenches were excavated on the steep hill slope south of Paddockhaugh, the field which lies between the site and the church (fig 20). Two, on slight terraces on the slope, drew blank, but a trench at the base of the slope proved very worthwhile. Under a metre or more of topsoil which had washed down the hill, remains of buildings were uncovered – a shallow gully, wall foundations and some shallow pits (fig 21). Scraps of pottery date these to the medieval period, and this is confirmed by topsoil finds of a sherd of medieval pottery reused as a spindle whorl and a possible architectural fragment (fig 22). A large area around these remains was left free of trees to protect them. While the trench was too small to understand the remains in detail, it indicates there was an extensive halo of medieval activity around Birnie Kirk – not only close to the church and up on the Birnie terrace, but in the arena of flat ground around the Kirk.

There are other hints of activity in the Paddockhaugh field itself. Aerial photos show a series of ditches which have been interpreted as a rectangular cropmark, although they are quite indistinct (Jones et al 1993, pl XI) and other interpretations are possible. In the dry conditions of 2005 a sub-rectangular parch-mark was noted in the field, and its extent plotted (fig 1). This lies south of the recorded cropmark site, and provides a tantalising hint of the activities taking place around the Kirk.
Fig 20: location of the Paddockhaugh trenches

Fig 21: plan of the Medieval remains in trench 2
Fig 22: Trench 2 finds – spindle whorl made from a reused Medieval sherd (above); possible architectural fragment (below)
Thanks to funding from NMS, a programme of educational visits for local schools was arranged by Jane Miller of the NMS Access & Outreach Team. The funding allowed the schools’ transport costs to be covered and paid for an educational assistant to conduct the visits. In total 21 classes from 13 schools visited, ranging geographically across Moray from Cullen to Alves and in age terms from P3 to S1. Pupils were given an introduction to the site and shown a range of finds before visiting trenches to see archaeologists at work, and finally helping out by sieving spoilheaps. The range of finds in topsoil gives a glimpse into the history of the field, and it allowed the children to get a much better understanding of archaeological evidence. Notable finds included a fragment of a cannel coal pendant (only the second cannel coal object from the site) and medieval pottery.

Birnie also provided inspiration for art workshops held in Alves and Lhanbryde primary schools by Sean Harris, a Welsh-based artist. The children made collagraph prints of warriors who may have lived at Birnie for use in an animated film being developed by Mr Harris. The feedback from both events was overwhelmingly positive.

An Open Day was held on the 11th of September, with tours every hour, alternately for adults and children. A team of re-enactors from Archaeolink Prehistory Park provided an additional attraction, educating visitors in prehistoric craft practices. Around 300 people took the chance to attend, and there was extensive positive coverage in the local press.

The key finds from the excavations, including the two hoards and most of the Roman objects, are now on display in Elgin Museum, and this provides a chance for people to see at first hand the results coming out of our work. The display is refreshed each year with recent finds, and for 2006 some of the late Bronze Age metal-working debris will go on show.
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The results from the 2005 excavations were very positive. The excavation of the area D house is a big job which will take another one or two seasons, but already it is shedding invaluable light on life in this roundhouse. The area Y structure presents the intriguing prospect of a Pictish building, and scientific dates for this are a priority. But perhaps the most unexpected discovery was the late Bronze Age metalworking area. Further excavation will hopefully produce more evidence, but this suggests that Birnie was already an important centre by around 1000 BC.

For 2006 we intend to complete the western half of the area D roundhouse, and to reveal more of the LBA metalworking area. Another target is to go back into the area where the hoards came from and complete the excavation of this area over two seasons. Finally, if time and workforce allows, either the iron-working area north of area P or the well-preserved medieval building in area J would be valuable targets. Birnie continues to produce surprises, and we can but hope that more lurk beneath the stubble for the coming seasons.
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