



Hunter, Fraser. (2001). Excavations at Birnie, Moray, 2000.
Department of Archaeology, National Museums Scotland.
(Unpublished)

<http://repository.nms.ac.uk/35>

Deposited on: 31 March 2010

EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 2000

Fraser Hunter



Department of Archaeology
National Museums of Scotland

2001

SUMMARY

In 2000 a further season of excavations was carried out on the Iron Age settlement at Birnie, Moray. The site is known from aerial photographs, and metal detecting has recovered part of a Roman silver coin hoard. Results so far suggest this was an important site during the Iron Age, with substantial houses and a rich finds assemblage. There was also a sizeable Medieval settlement in the field, perhaps due to its proximity to Birnie Kirk.

Fieldwork in 2000 had three aims – to examine another area of the settlement; to continue the metal-detecting survey; and to try to locate the remainder of the Roman hoard. Stripping of an area some 26 x 27 m revealed the remains of at least four Iron Age roundhouses and a probable workshop. There was also a Medieval building and yard overlying further Iron Age remains. In places the deposits are well-preserved and have not suffered badly from ploughing. Dating these features should be a big help in understanding the development of the site during the Iron Age.

Metal-detecting revealed a range of finds including part of an Iron Age bridle bit, an unusual discovery which points again to the importance of the site. Excavation of trial trenches at the findspots of the two Roman brooches found in 1999 drew a blank, and these seem to be isolated finds.

Plotting the findspots of coins found in previous years showed a concentration in one area of the field. A trench was excavated here and the remains of the hoard were found, still in the pot it was buried in. The hoard contained over 300 *denarii*, ending with coins of Septimius Severus of AD 196-7. Careful excavation recovered organic remains associated with the hoard – a lining of bracken, and fragments of leather and string possibly from a lid or pouch. The hoard is one of a number known from Scotland north of the Antonine Wall, and is best seen as part of a Roman policy of giving gifts or bribes to powerful chiefs in return for their loyalty. Many questions remain, in particular why the hoard was buried there, and further work in 2001 will try to tackle this problem.

Trial excavations beside Birnie kirkyard wall found no sign of an earlier enclosure.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The fieldwork at Birnie was inspired by the discovery of a scatter of Roman silver coins (*denarii*) by Mr Hamish Stuart while metal-detecting on the farm of Dykeside (fig 1). The range and wear suggested they came from a scattered hoard of Severan date (AD 193-211), part of a series of such hoards known from north-east Scotland. They are probably connected with Roman frontier politics in the area, trying to secure peace on the frontier by bribing the locals.

Two things make this discovery so interesting: its location some 300 km north of Hadrian's Wall; and its connection with an Iron Age settlement known from aerial photographs. Most coin hoards are old finds where we know little of their circumstances, or were buried in obscure, out-of-the-way spots. Here we have a connection between a hoard and a settlement, a very rare opportunity to investigate the context of such a hoard. Was this a high-status site, the home of a local leader in touch with the Roman world? Is there any other evidence of contact with the Romans? Why was the hoard buried? Was it for safety, or as an offering to the gods? Was the site even occupied when the hoard was buried? Does the rest of the hoard survive? And how does it fit into the wider picture of Iron Age Moray and the early Christian site at Birnie Kirk? We know depressingly little about this period in Moray, and the excavations should reveal a wealth of information on the house types, economy and lifestyles of 2000 years ago.

Attempting to tackle these questions will take several years, but fieldwork in 1998 and 1999 has already taken us some distance towards the answers. We now know that some at least of the houses were contemporary with the hoard, while the discovery of two Roman brooches shows that the people here had access to Roman goods over some time – the hoard was not a unique event. Other finds, such as a sword fragment and pieces of bronze jewellery and horse harness, suggest the inhabitants were people of consequence. This allows us to start building a context for the hoard. We have also been able to pinpoint more coins from the hoard, giving us an idea of where it may be buried. Finally a later, medieval settlement has been identified on the site, with a range of pottery from fieldwalking and the remains of a blacksmith's workshop excavated in 1999.

In 2000, excavations took place over two weeks from 25th September – 7th October.
 The work had three main aims.

- To expose another Iron Age house and its surroundings.
- To continue the metal-detecting survey and try to establish the context of some of the finds.
- To investigate the likely burial place of the coin hoard.

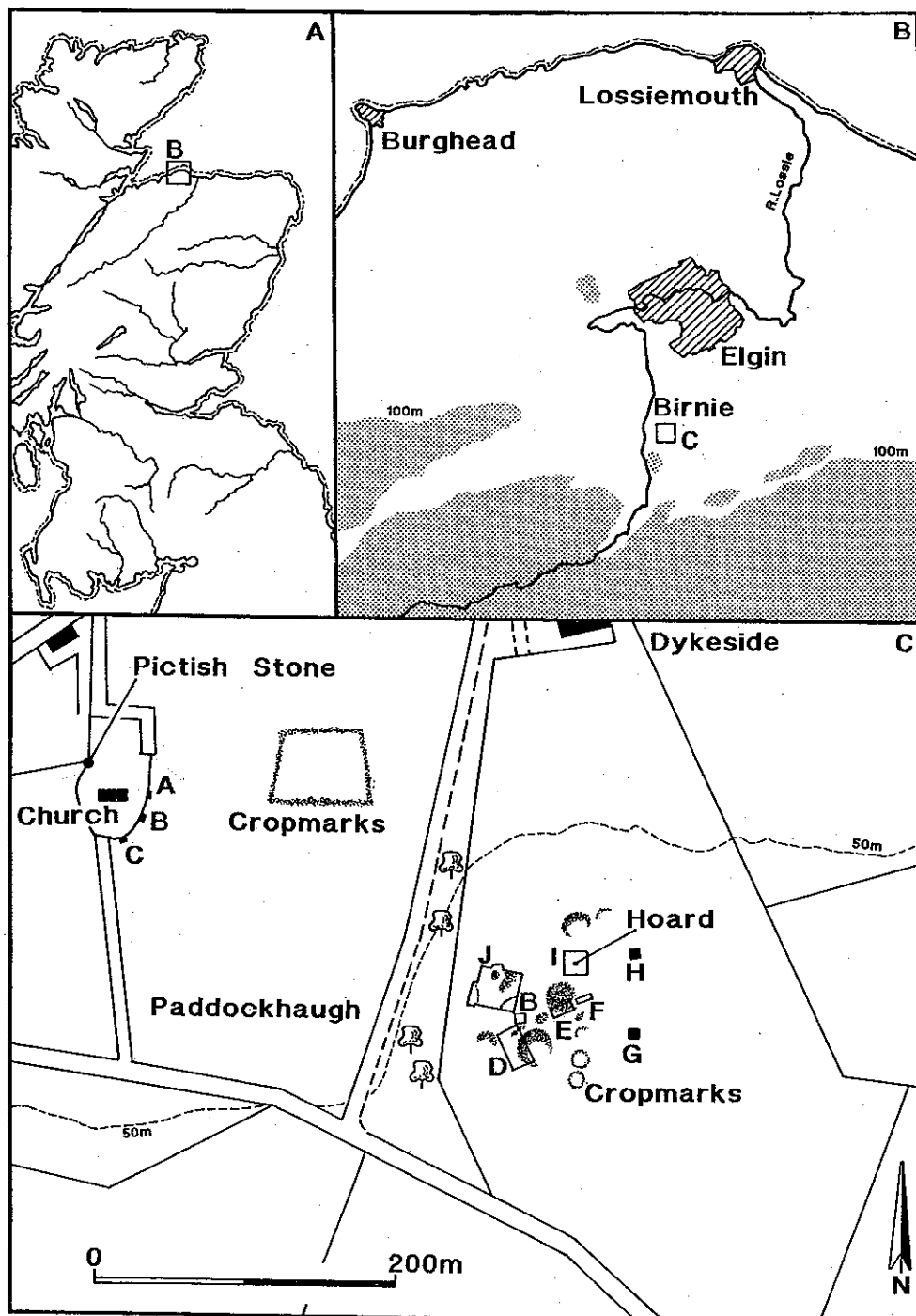


Fig 1 Location map of cropmarks and trenches 1998-2000 at Birnie and Birnie Kirk.

2 THE SETTLEMENT

In 1999 the complex remains of a well-preserved roundhouse were examined. This was a wonderful opportunity, as we had not expected the remains to survive so well in a ploughed field. The strategy in 2000 was to examine another roundhouse visible on the aerial photograph to the north of the 1999 house (see Jones et al 1993, pl VIII, furthest right). This showed as a circular series of blobs which were interpreted as the posts supporting the house; a larger blob lay at one terminal. The remains were predicted to be less well-preserved than in 1999, since there were no overlying deposits from the floors and roof. While there would be less data, it was hoped this would allow us to examine a house in its entirety. We could then use this information to guide our approach to the better-preserved houses.

This was the theory – the reality proved rather different. When the area was stripped no roundhouse was visible, just a dense scatter of unconnected features (fig 2). The large blob was there, confirming we were in the right place, but there was no post-ring. However as the trench was expanded, remains of other houses started to appear, most noticeably the wall grooves of two roundhouses which had not shown up at all on the aerial photograph. This experience gives a useful warning of how misleading aerial photographs can be. The “roundhouse” was an accidental conflation of a number of unconnected features which appeared circular when photographed at an angle from the air. However the true settlement density is much greater than the photos indicate, since remains of at least four roundhouses were recovered in an area where only one had been suspected.

When the area was stripped, cleaned and planned, the remains of four or five round buildings and a scatter of various pits, postholes and ditches were revealed cut into the subsoil (fig 2). On the north side of the trench the archaeology survived better, and here soil layers from buildings remained. Experience from 1999 suggested that many of the isolated features would produce little information, and it was decided to concentrate our efforts on coherent groups of features.

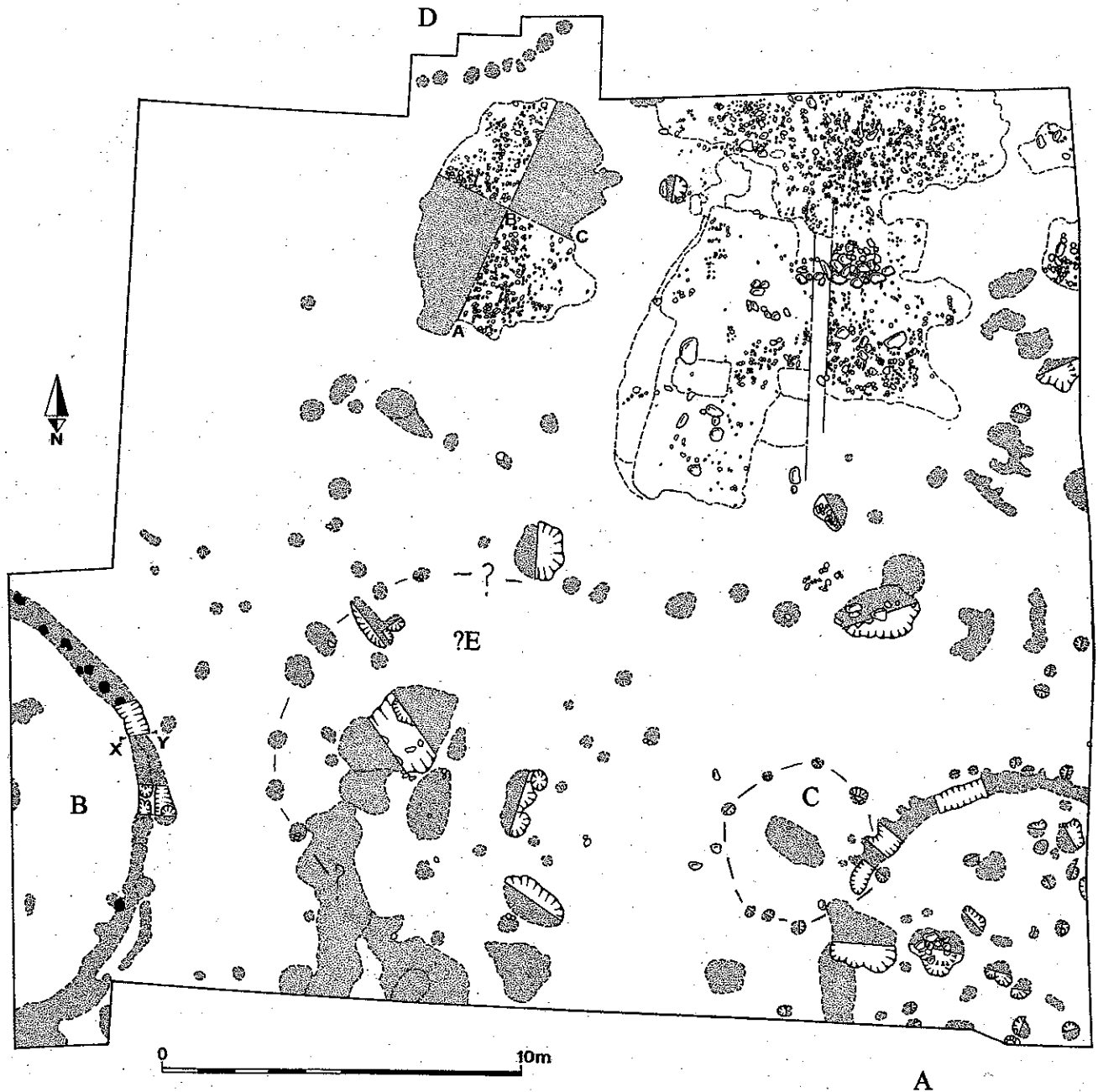


Fig 2 Plan of trench J

The roundhouses

The buildings show two distinct architectural styles. Two of them (A and B) have a groove dug into the subsoil to hold the outer wall; the others had walls constructed from freestanding posts.

Both the ring groove houses had a continuous wall trench 0.4-0.55 m wide. House A was some 11.2 m in diameter. A gap on the NW side could be a doorway, but survival

in this area was poor and it may have been destroyed by ploughing. There were lots of internal features including a number of postholes which probably formed a supporting structural ring. The complexity suggests that rebuilding and repair had taken place – indeed the wall seems to have been repaired, with a series of small postholes along its outer edge. There is a cooking pit full of fire-cracked stones towards the western edge of the house.

Structure B was much better preserved. It was 12.8 m in diameter, with the wall trench up to 0.35 m deep still showing remains of the structural posts, 0.15-0.20 m in diameter and spaced 0.6-0.8 m apart. The building had been repaired at least once (fig 2 & 4a), as two new lengths of wall trench were dug with a gap between for an east-facing doorway. This building lay very close to the field edge which slopes sharply down to the Paddock Haugh field, suggesting the settlement was quite densely packed.

Of the two post-ring structures, one (structure D) only appeared at the very northern edge of the trench as a curving arc of posts, and was not investigated further. If it is a building rather than a fence line, its post ring would be c. 9.6 m in diameter. A small circle of posts overlapped structure A, although the relationship between them is unclear. It was only some 4.4 m in diameter, with two more substantial posts to the east perhaps marking the entrance. Given its small size it seems unlikely to be a house, and it may have been a store. What is probably much of another post-ring structure c. 11 m in diameter lies E of structure B.

It is now clear that a range of building traditions were in use at Birnie, probably at different dates. Samples were taken of carbonised post remains in structure B for radiocarbon dating, and this should give us an idea of the date range of the site. The large number of other pits and postholes point to a wide range of activities taking place around the houses, as would be expected in what were primarily farms.

The blob

When the topsoil was cleared off the north of the trench it revealed a large blob of dark, charcoal-rich soil – the remains of occupation deposits which had been destroyed elsewhere by ploughing. This showed up as a shapeless dark feature on the

aerial photograph. Features like this are often ignored in cropmarks, but the Birnie evidence suggests they may be crucial, as they can represent areas where the survival of the archaeology is better.

As the area was cleaned, features started to appear. Most noticeable was a cobble spread running out of the trench with a rectangular shape attached to its south and a discrete oval spread to the west. One quadrant of the oval shape was fully excavated (fig 3 & 4b). This showed that it was a scoop, 6.6 x 4.8 m and up to 0.4 m deep. It consisted of a series of dark charcoal-rich layers interspersed with rather angular cobbled surfaces. This is best seen as the floor of a building, with cobbling laid down every so often to provide a firm surface. The cobbling included slag, but the quantities were too small to suggest this was a blacksmith's workshop – it was simply a convenient flooring material. There was no trace of the superstructure, but the well-defined shape of the scoop suggests there were originally flimsy walls to demarcate it. It is likely to have been a workshop of some sort – this would cause wear which would require new floors to be laid. A number of finds were recovered (fig 6, 517, 587-9), including an unusual knife with a spiral handle which might be a razor. A triangular bead of clear and yellow glass was also found: this is typical of the north-east of Scotland and dates to the 1st-2nd century AD (Guido 1978, Class 13), suggesting the structure is Iron Age.

Fig 3 Plan oval scoop F743

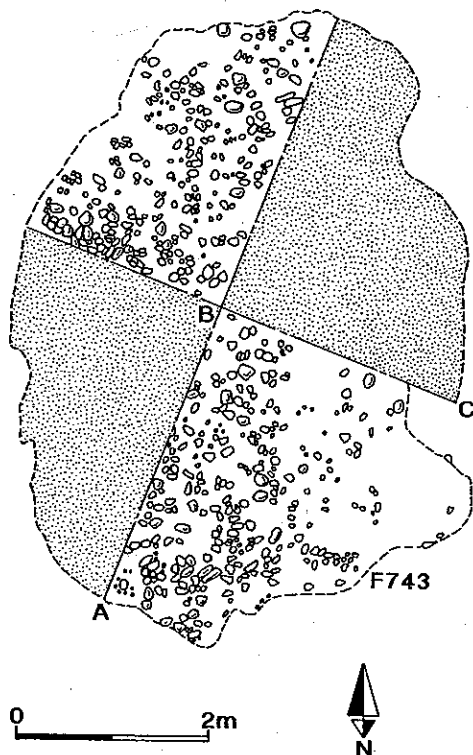
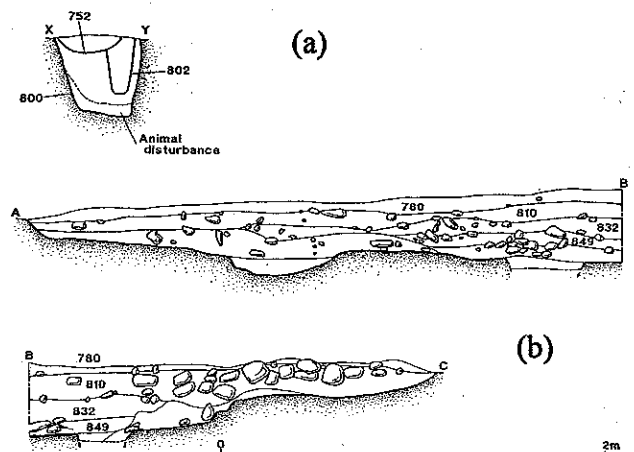


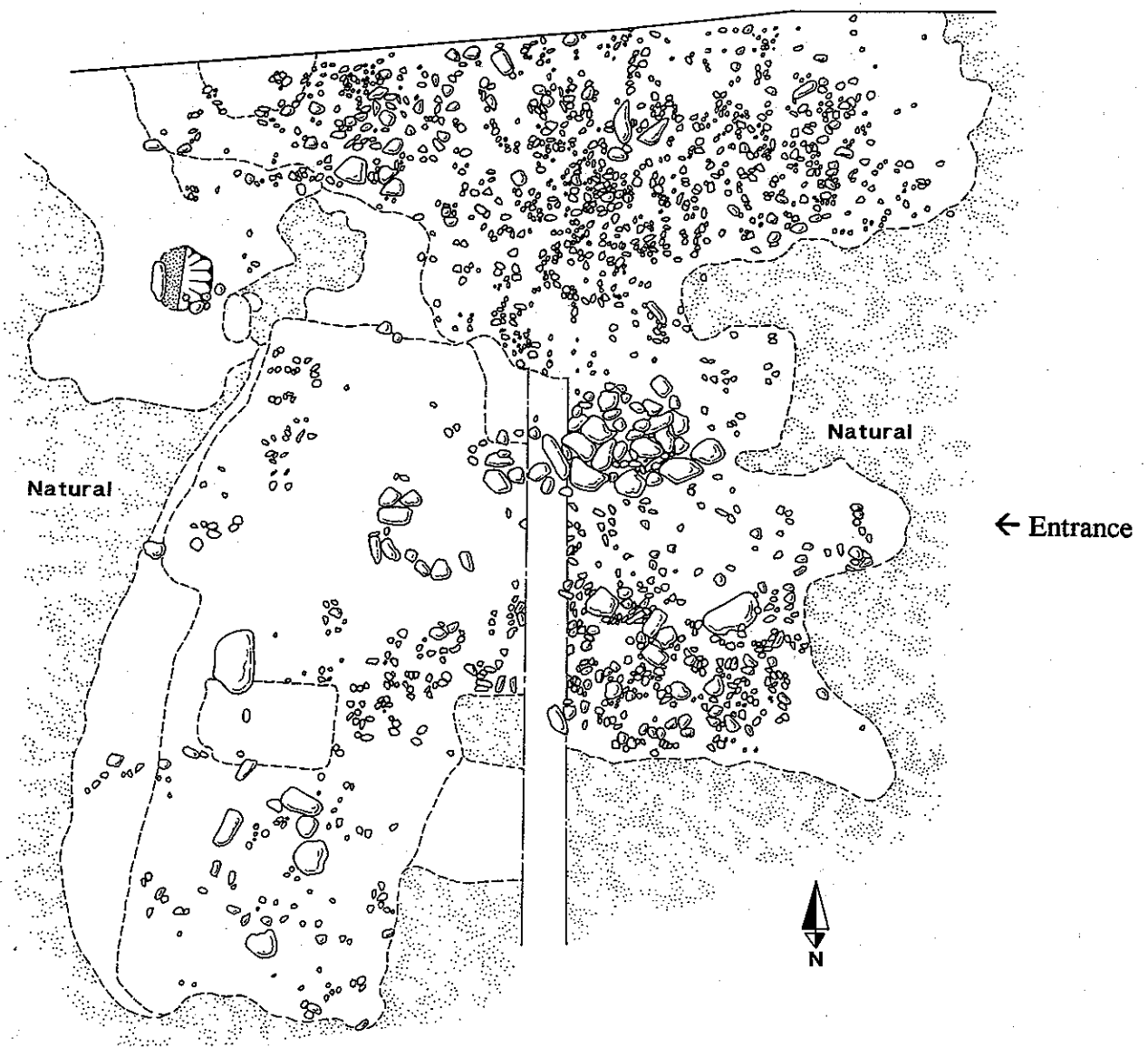
Fig 4 Sections of (a) ring groove B, showing post & recut wall trench (b) Oval scoop F743



The cobbled surface appears to be a yard (which was resurfaced at least once) attached to a rectangular building (8.2 x 3.4 m). The building was only partly examined, but had a slightly sunken stone-lined entrance to the east (fig 5). From the uppermost levels some medieval pottery was recovered along with sizeable pieces of burnt timber, suggesting the building had burnt down. This is a medieval building: the slightly sunken entrance suggests it may be a byre or a combined byre/house, with the cobbling being part of a yard for animals. A small blacksmithing hearth lay beside its NW corner: it could be linked to either the Iron Age or the medieval occupation.

A test pit under the yard revealed further deposits producing later prehistoric pottery and a small copper alloy ring (fig 6, 599 & 601). Survival of the archaeology in this area is very good, and it would repay further examination.

Fig 5 Detail of Medieval building and associated structures.



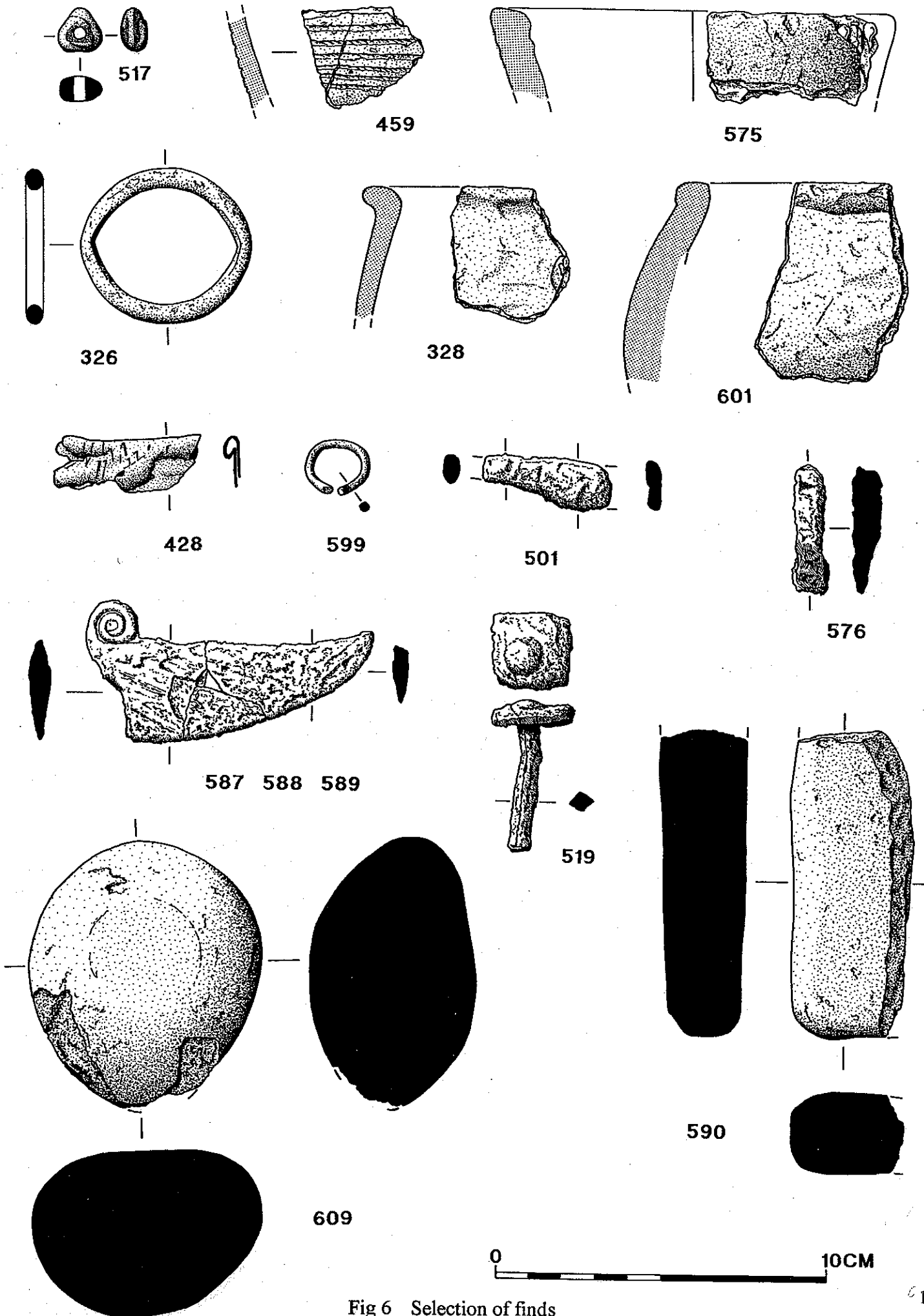


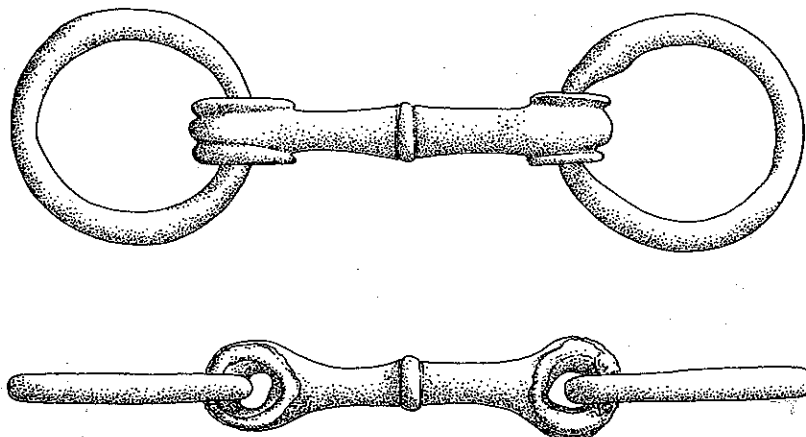
Fig 6 Selection of finds

3 THE FINDS (fig 6)

The finds from the excavations cast more light on the lives of the Iron Age and Medieval inhabitants of Birnie. A range of Iron Age pottery was recovered – some are from cooking vessels, the surfaces still encrusted with burnt food remains (eg fig 6, 575); others come from storage jars with incurving necks and beaded rims (328, 601), a typical Roman Iron Age style. Everyday tools were also uncovered, such as stone pounders and whetstones (609, 590). Fragments of iron tools were found – the Birnie finds are a valuable addition our knowledge, as iron survives infrequently in Scottish soil. The most interesting is the atypical knife from the oval scoop (587-9) – its unusual spiral handle and slightly curved edge suggest it may be a razor. There are also fragments of other tools and fittings (501, 519, 576).

As in previous years, the excavation was accompanied by a metal-detecting survey carried out by Hamish Stuart. This was vital to the investigation of the hoard (see below) but also produced a range of other finds. Most of these were post-Medieval, but there was also a piece of edge binding from a leather or wooden vessel, probably Medieval (428). Most interesting of all was a copper alloy ring (326) found near trench I: the distinctive wear pattern shows it is the side-ring of a bridle bit for a horse (fig 7; cf. MacGregor 1976, nos 11-14). Such copper alloy horse bits are typical of the Iron Age, and again this points to a site of some importance since everyday horse bits were made of iron. Such horse gear is exceedingly rare in north-east Scotland and this, along with the strap fastener found last year, again emphasises how unusual the Birnie finds are.

Fig 7 Complete bridle bit from Middlebie, Dumfriesshire (MacGregor 1976, no 11)



In 1999 two Roman brooches were discovered, some 40 m east of the cropmark concentration – this area also produced the strap fastener. It was decided to explore the brooch findspots to try to establish why they were there. Two 5 x 5 m trenches (G and H) were excavated but no archaeological remains were revealed. There are a number of possible reasons. The topsoil in this area is a lot deeper, and it is possible that objects have been dragged further by ploughing here. Alternatively they may have been deposited away from the site, either thrown away as rubbish or deliberately deposited as offerings of some sort. Although these objects were once impressive and important, as discovered they are fragmentary – both brooches had lost their pins, the fastener's loop had broken and the bridle ring was heavily worn. It may be they were discarded once they had come to the end of their useful life – although it is surprising that they were not recycled, suggesting there may be a more complex explanation. Only further work in this area can clarify what is going on to the east of the main site: this is the area which, on one aerial photograph, has hints of a palisaded enclosure.

4 THE HOARD

Discovery

The first hint of something exciting at Birnie turned up in 1996 when Hamish Stuart found 18 *denarii* over a number of visits to the field. These were quite widely scattered, although no detailed record was kept of their location. As part of the fieldwork in 1998 and 1999 Hamish carried out more metal-detecting, and a further ten coins were found which were accurately surveyed. These showed a remarkably tight concentration, suggesting they had not been moved far by the plough. It was decided to see if the original focus of the hoard could be located.

In 2000 an area 15 x 15 m was marked out (trench I) and the topsoil removed in spits by the JCB, with the surface metal-detected after each spit. Initially 150 mm was removed with subsequent spits of c 70-100 mm. This revealed an irregular line of coins running NNW-SSE across the trench, marking the plough line which had disturbed the hoard. At one point in the centre of the trench, a cluster of 11 *denarii* was found along with potsherds. A 2 x 2 m trench was laid out around this and excavated by hand, with all the spoil being sieved and scanned by metal detector. The density of coins along the plough line got stronger until, at the very base of the plough soil, the remains of the hoard were revealed (fig 8) – a cluster of silver framed by a broken pot.

We can now understand how the hoard came to light. The pot was hit during deep ploughing and the top of it smashed, scattering the uppermost coins into the ploughsoil. In subsequent years, shallower ploughing spread these coins around the field. The whole story is a marvellous example of serendipity – without the deep ploughing, the hoard would have been invisible to a metal detector, but one more deep ploughing could have scattered it totally, and many more seasons of shallow ploughing would have scattered the coins too far for us to pinpoint the source.

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The hoard was lifted intact in a block of soil and taken back to the NMS Conservation laboratories for excavation by Katherine Ridgeway. It is very rare to get the chance to excavate a hoard under controlled conditions – they are normally chance finds, and the finder generally removes them from the ground without much care, which means a lot of information is lost. Here we had the chance to extract the maximum information from the hoard. This allowed us to recover a whole range of fragile remains, especially organic material which does not normally survive – here it was preserved by the corrosion of the coins, which created an atmosphere too toxic for bacteria. A layer of bracken lined the pot to cushion the coins, and there were fragments of leather and string, perhaps from a lid or a pouch. We hope that the bracken and other plant remains will provide clues as to what season the hoard was buried in and the environment around the site at the time.

The container is a typical Iron Age pot. Sadly the top is lost because of the ploughing, so we cannot be sure of its shape and size. This also means we cannot know how many coins it could have held, although given the relatively small number recovered from the ploughsoil it is unlikely that much of the hoard was disturbed.

The total number of coins from the hoard now stands at 313. They are still being conserved, but initial appraisal by Nick Holmes shows they range in date from Nero to Severus, with the latest coin being minted in AD 196-7. This is typical for a late second century hoard, as coins could circulate for a long time. The small numbers of Severan coins, and their date, indicate it is an early Severan hoard and it is likely to have come north in AD 197 or shortly thereafter.

More details must await a full study of the coins, but there are a few points of interest. One of the coins is a Greek one – or rather a Roman coin minted in the eastern empire, where Greek was the main language. Coins would move around the empire with people (especially soldiers and bureaucrats), and it is not surprising that the occasional eastern coin appears. Presumably it was still treated as legal tender in the western empire. Another of the coins is a contemporary fake, with silver foil round a lead or pewter core. Again this is not unusual – forgery was rife in the Roman world, and most hoards include some fakes.

Setting

The hoard was buried in an area which had seen lots of activity (fig 9). However we do not yet know how much of this was contemporary with the hoard and how much earlier or later – for instance, a sherd of early Bronze Age Beaker pottery was found on the surface of one feature (fig 6, 459). A few features were examined, but more extensive excavations are planned in 2001-2 to tackle this question thoroughly. The hoard must have been buried in a shallow pit, although all traces of this were lost through years of ploughing and soil disturbance. It is not obviously connected with any house or other structure, although it lies close to the houses. If it was buried for safekeeping, it is neither hidden inside a house nor in the safety of a remote area. Equally, there is no strong positive argument for interpretation as an offering. The debate is still ongoing: establishing ancient motives is one of the hardest tasks, but here we have the chance to explore the problem rather than theorise about it.

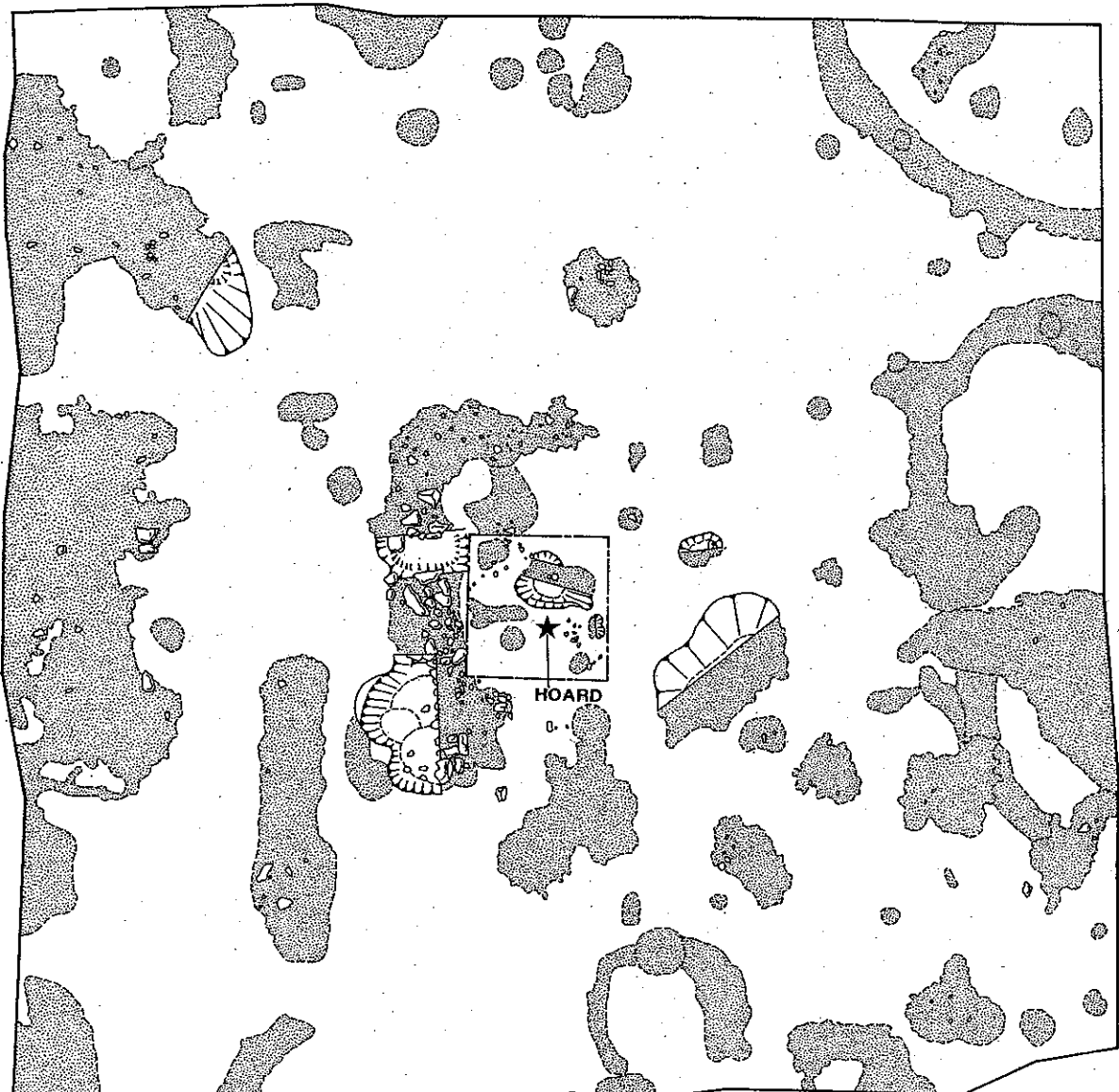


Fig 9 Plan of trench I, showing location of hoard



0 5m

5 DISCUSSION

The 2000 excavation season has allowed us to make significant advances towards our research aims. We have exposed a range of structures in both the Iron Age and Medieval phases which, when analysed, will give us a good idea of the nature and development of the settlement. In places the survival of the archaeology is very good and will provide a wealth of information. There is also a good artefact assemblage to throw light on everyday life at the site. The finds (especially from metal-detecting) point to a site of some status, with the bridle bit fragment being particularly interesting as this is a rare find on any site and a unique one for north-east Scotland.

Stripping large areas has again proved very worthwhile in showing the sheer density of features in much of the site. It has also cautioned against over-reliance on the aerial photographic evidence except as a general guide – none of the roundhouses revealed this year had shown on the photo. Clearly this was a densely settled site, suggesting use over a considerable period of time. Since many of the structures can be radiocarbon dated, we should be able to tackle the key question of whether we are dealing with a single farm unit which moved around the field over time or a larger village-type settlement. This is of considerable importance in understanding the nature of society in Iron Age Moray.

The most exciting find was undoubtedly the core of the coin hoard. There is still lots of work to do on it, and something of the potential and the results to date have been outlined above. Here I would like to look at the wider implications of the discovery. The obvious first question is why was it there? The working hypothesis is that it was a gift or bribe to a local chieftain to keep him sweet and persuade him to keep the peace or quell restless natives elsewhere. This still seems the best theory – Birnie is not unique, but part of a series of hoards, most of which date between the withdrawal from Scotland in the 160s AD and the re-invasion under Severus in AD 208-211 (fig 10). This looks like the remains of a long-lived and wide-ranging Roman policy. There has been a tendency to link the hoards to specific historical events, and especially to pull them all into the Severan period where literary sources refer to trouble on the frontier and the Romans resorting to bribery. For instance, some time

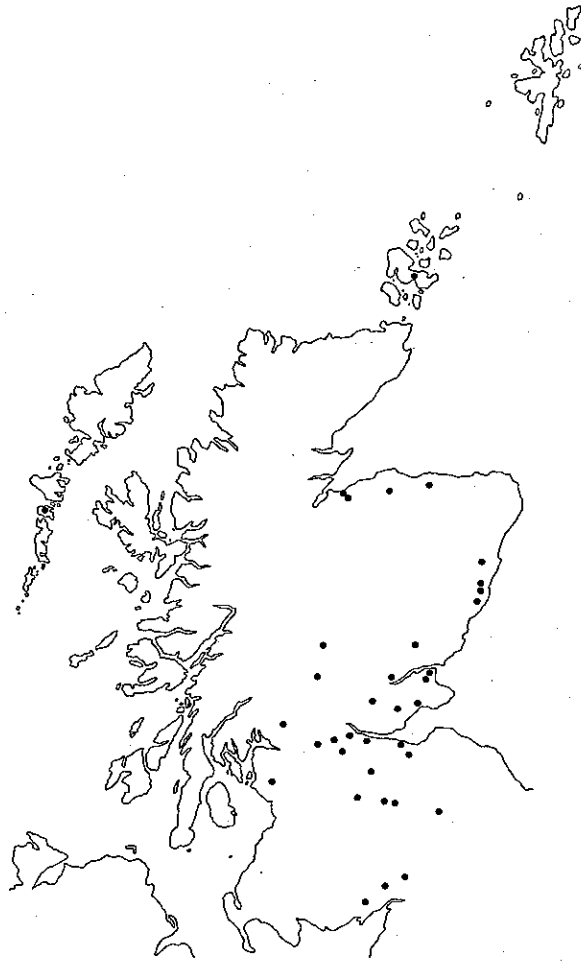


Fig 10 Distribution of Roman silver and gold coin hoards in Scotland.

after AD 197 we hear that the governor of Britain, Virius Lupus, was having problems with the tribes of the Caledonians and the Maeatae, in central and north-east Scotland.

"Since the Caledonians did not remain true to their promises and had made preparations to assist the Maeatae, and since at the time Severus was embroiled in war elsewhere, Lupus was forced to buy peace from the Maeatae for a large sum"

(Dio Cassius LXXV, 5, 4; translation from Ireland 1986, 109)

The bribery was unsuccessful and Severus led a huge army into Scotland accompanied by his sons Caracalla and Geta, a ploy to remove them from the fleshpots of Rome. However his Scottish campaigns proved unsuccessful – he was unable to bring the troublesome tribes to battle, as they relied on guerrilla tactics. We are told that Severus “neared the furthest point of the island ...” (Dio Cassius LXXVI, 13; Ireland 1986, 112): how far this was, and whether he reached Moray, are still debated. However he did not manage to secure peace. Treaties were concluded and

immediately broken, and Severus died in York in AD 211 while preparing for another campaign. His sons were more keen on politics in the heart of the Empire than soldiering on the edge, and headed back to Rome as soon as possible. The sources recount that Caracalla "... came to terms with the barbarians...", a phrase redolent with political chicanery (Herodian III, 15, 6-7; Ireland 1986, 117).

Whatever the military successes of the campaign, in political terms it worked well – it seems there was relative peace in northern Britain throughout the third century. In part this may stem from the results of frontier diplomacy. The dated coin hoards run from the reign of Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161) to the 230s, with a concentration in the late second century – the time when the frontier was at its most difficult. The distribution is also interesting (fig 10), as it concentrates in central and north-east Scotland, the homelands of the troublesome Caledonii and Maetae.

However we must be careful not to focus too much on the "local difficulties" of Britain. What is often overlooked is the fact that very similar things were happening throughout barbarian Europe, from Ireland to Russia (Lind 1981; Berger 1996). This suggests that we are looking at a general frontier policy across the northern frontiers. It may have been tailored a little to local circumstances (for instance, the Scottish hoards continue a little later than the Continental ones) but it seems to have been a wide-ranging pattern. This is important, because it takes us into Empire-scale issues – to understand the Birnie hoard we must look far beyond Scotland. However it also means that Birnie has an importance far beyond the north-east, as well-excavated hoards, especially from contemporary settlement sites, are a rarity.

What was the silver used for? There was no money economy in Scotland at the time. The *denarii* could not be exchanged for a cow or a bushel of grain. It has often been suggested that the silver was valued primarily as a raw material. This has always seemed plausible, although there is a problem in the almost total lack of Iron Age silver objects of this date – it is mainly from the fourth century onwards that we see Roman silver being reused for native jewellery.

So what other uses are possible? It could have been a specialist form of money, not for everyday use but more a special or restricted currency, symbolising wealth and

used perhaps for the wages of mercenaries or the dowries of brides. Silver would be a convenient way of storing wealth, and this is how the earliest Celtic coins (in gold and silver) were used in southern Britain and the Continent.

Birnie also has implications for our understanding of the Moray Iron Age. From the cropmark the site looks no different from innumerable other such sites in Moray. There are no unusually large buildings or substantial enclosures to mark it out as special. Enclosed sites are found in Moray, and it has been argued that their distribution suggests a pattern of petty chiefdoms focussed on each river valley (Jones et al 1993). However these sites may be earlier than the period we are dealing with here – we have no certain dates for them. It is noticeable that Moray, and indeed the north-east generally, has fewer enclosed or defended sites than in southern Scotland. This suggests a different form of society, perhaps one with smaller-scale political units and less conflict between them.

This leads to important implications for how we study the period. It is the finds (the hoard, the Roman brooches, the Iron Age horse equipment, the sword) which mark the site out as special, above the norm. Yet outwardly it looks to us like any other Iron Age settlement. If we are correct in seeing Birnie as a status site, it suggests that during the Roman Iron Age the homes of the chiefs are going to be hard to recognise except from their finds – making them all the more elusive to normal approaches.

The hoard will provide material for debate for years to come, and links into issues which go far beyond Birnie itself to the wider questions of Roman frontiers across Europe and the dealings between Romans and barbarians. It is also a marvellous demonstration of the value of cooperation between metal detectorists and archaeologists. Without the detecting, the initial discovery would never have been made; without cooperation and the plotting of the finds, the hoard would never have been pinpointed; without its archaeological excavation, much of its information value would have been lost. The opportunity to excavate a hoard scientifically, under controlled conditions, is all too rare, and it is producing a wealth of information to illuminate our knowledge of Moray's and Scotland's past.

6 APPENDIX – BIRNIE KIRK

One of the aims of the project from the start has been to put the site at Birnie into its wider context, and especially to consider any relationship with Birnie Kirk. This is believed to be an Early Christian site, with an iron handbell surviving in the kirk and a Pictish class I stone pointing to a long history. The oval shape of the old part of the churchyard has been seen as perpetuating a typical Early Christian church enclosure (Macdonald & Laing 1970, 140). It is possible that the early church was founded here because of the importance of the nearby settlement site, and (even more speculatively) because the hillock where the church lies and the drained bog beside it were an important pre-Christian ritual site. The details of this argument have been outlined in an earlier report (Hunter 1999, 8-9).

As a first step towards tackling this we need to confirm if anything remains of an early Christian presence on the site and attempt to date it. Anything within the kirkyard will be so disturbed and concealed by later burials and buildings that it will be all but impossible to find. However the line of the enclosure might offer more scope, as the narrow modern wall is unlikely to conceal totally what should have been quite a substantial ditch. Similar work has been carried out with considerable success at Govan, Glasgow (*Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* 1994, 68; 1996, 55-6).

To test this, on 27th-28th January 2001 three trial trenches were excavated in the gap between the modern kirkyard wall and the fence – the area where ploughing will have done the least damage (see fig 1, trenches A-C by church). In all cases, all the remains recovered were modern – there was no trace of an earlier enclosure line.

This does not mean that there was no Early Christian enclosure. It may have lain further out, and this will be tested in subsequent years by larger trenches radiating out into the field. However it does cast some doubt on the assumption that curved enclosure walls need reflect earlier boundary lines rather than, for instance, the natural shape of the hill.

7 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As ever my main thanks go to the farmer, Mr William Mustard, and his family, for their enthusiastic support, and to Mr Hamish Stuart, the metal detectorist, for his continuing, tireless and invaluable efforts. I am very grateful to Andrew Heald & Mike Church for acting as supervisors and to the large and enthusiastic body of volunteers, too numerous to list, who toiled so willingly in the sand and the mud. Ronnie Ogg's skills at the controls of the JCB were a crucial part of the excavation's success, while the enthusiasm of Ian Keillar is an inspiration, as is the friendly welcome and assistance of the Moray Society and the practical help of Kenny Williamson and his amazing scaffolding kit. The support of Ian Shepherd and Moira Greig, especially in taking aerial photographs, is much appreciated. The post-excavation work is less glamorous but just as vital, and I am indebted to the efforts of Grant Lock and Dawn McLaren in helping me with this. Discussions with Rachel Pope were much appreciated in clarifying details of the houses. Conservation work on the hoard was a labour of love (and sometimes hate) by Katherine Ridgeway, and I am grateful to her and many other colleagues at NMS for their support. Particular thanks are due to Nick Holmes for his efforts and guidance in matters numismatic. Once more René Harris has been an angel in allowing her house to be infested by archaeologists and providing cuisine and G&T beyond the wildest dreams of most digs. Illustrations are by Alan Braby, except fig 10 by Craig Angus.

The excavations were funded by the National Museums of Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, with help in kind provided by Caledonian Quarry Products of Cloddach Quarry through the good offices of Mr E Walker.

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