
5 DISCUSSION

At least three, and possibly as many as five, plough-truncated Middle and Late Bronze Age ring-ditch houses were excavated. The linear nature of the excavation area leaves the prospect that other, similar, related structures remain undiscovered nearby. Whilst the features demonstrably were not all contemporary, House 1 being later than Houses 2 and 3, it remains a possibility that this group forms elements of an unenclosed settlement, possibly of extended use. The excavated roundhouses could reflect elements of a single residence, sometimes refurbished and on other occasions replaced by a new building, which was occupied over the course of several centuries (discussed by Kendrick (1995) as a possible interpretation for the ring-ditch houses at Douglasmuir, Angus). However, we cannot be sure whether the settlement implied by the presence of these buildings was permanent, episodic, or even seasonal. The lack of evidence for modification of Houses 1 and 3 may indicate that they were not long-lived buildings, as has been argued more generally for timber roundhouses by others (eg Barber & Crone 2001).

Similarly dated ring-ditch houses have been found across the north-east of Scotland, for example Structure 3 at Deer's Den, Kintore (Alexander 2000), Structure RH11 at Kintore (Cook & Dunbar 2008) and Structure A at Auchrennie in Angus (Cameron et al 2007). Houses 1–3 were typical of later prehistoric dwellings and structures found commonly in Aberdeenshire and Angus (Dunwell & Ralston 2008). They fit neatly into the chronological and typological sequence of ring-ditch houses developed by Cook & Dunbar (2008, 317–21), based upon the buildings they excavated at Forest Road, Kintore. The Oldmeldrum roundhouses all belong to the Kintore Type 1 ring-ditch house, characterised by the ring-ditch being present inside the alignment of the post-ring, which occurs at Kintore during the Middle and Late Bronze Age.

The appearance of the roundhouses can be reconstructed based on the excavated evidence both here and at similar sites in the region. The post-ring of each building would have held upright wooden posts that supported the roof. The post-rings may also have defined the lines of the outer wall of the buildings, although their irregular spacing (if a design feature rather than a facet of plough-truncation and uneven archaeological survival) may have required a bank or wall to support the weight of the roof (cf Cook & Dunbar 2008, 325). Both have been inferred at Structure DD ST3 at Deer's Den, Kintore (Alexander 2000, 20). No trace of such banks or walls survived at the Oldmeldrum site, although it is possible that all traces have been eliminated by ploughing.

The ring-ditches lay within the buildings, as shown in Kendrick's reconstruction drawing (1995, 62). The function of the ring-ditches remains unclear: the rough paving identified at the base of the ditches of Houses 1–3 may suggest that they were meant to be walked on, although whether by humans or animals is uncertain (see Harding 2004, 68–71 and Cook & Dunbar 2008, 331–3 for recent reviews of the potential functions of ring-ditches as eg cattle stalls or proto-souterrains). Due to the homogeneity of the ring-ditch fills, it was not possible to conclude whether they had been filled in deliberately or not, although the evidence from House 1 suggests that the upper ring-ditch fill was deposited either during the terminal use or after the abandonment of that roundhouse, since the deposit also spread across the floor of the building. There is also little to suggest that the roundhouses burnt down; rather the palaeoenvironmental evidence suggests that the charred plant remains and charcoal were deposited by everyday domestic activities such as cleaning. These factors suggest that the roundhouses were abandoned or pulled down and left to deteriorate over time.

House 2 was different from the others for several reasons. It was larger, and its internal ring-ditch was much better defined and more regularly shaped. The main difference, however, was the presence of a secondary curvilinear ditch. The secondary feature was cut through the infilled ring-ditch, and therefore the two could not have formed part of a contemporary design within House 2. Most likely the secondary ditch formed part of an entirely separate, and presumably smaller, structure of uncertain form erected after the removal of House 2. It is conceivable, but considered much less likely, that the secondary ditch formed an internal feature of a reorganised House 2, potentially associated with a refurbishment of the roundhouse wall as indicated by re-cut and juxtaposed post-holes. However, if so the secondary ditch would have been inconveniently sited within House 2, eccentric to the wall line; it would also suggest that the primary ring-ditch had filled up during the use of the building, in contrast to the evidence from House 1 (although the same infilling process need not have occurred in all the ring-ditches). Unfortunately no suitable material for dating could be found within the secondary ditch, and as such the only clue to its date is that it post-dates the larger ring-ditch (10005).

The central area of House 2 as defined by the primary ring-ditch was considerably larger than the central areas of House 1 and, in particular, House 3. This difference in size could be used to infer differences in building function – House 2 was built

for a particular activity, possibly involving several people, that required more central space than was afforded or required by Houses 1 or 3, and it may be no coincidence that the site's highest concentrations of cereal grains were found in the smaller length of ditch in House 2 (10033). The majority of floor space within House 3 was taken up by the ring-ditch. The central area that contained the hearth and large pit would have appeared raised in relation to the rest of the roundhouse's interior, suggesting the hearth as the focal point of the roundhouse.

Feature Group 1 contained by far the greatest amount of pottery of all the features on the site. It can be surmised that the crescent-shaped ditch was treated as a domestic refuse pit at some point, due to the burning evidence on the sherds. Although no stratigraphic evidence exists to link Feature Group 1 with any of the other structures on the site, the pottery is broadly contemporary with that found in Houses 1, 2 and 3. Thus it is possible these features

represent either an out-building of another structure or the heavily truncated remains of a ring-ditch house. Similar features have been found in Angus at Douglasmuir (Kendrick 1995) and Hospital Shields (Johnson 2004). Feature Group 2 could also have been the vestigial remains of a ring-ditch house, but the leap of faith required between archaeological remains and structural interpretation is greater still.

The programme of excavations has provided a small insight into prehistoric domestic activity in Aberdeenshire and has added more evidence to the steadily increasing resource of ring-ditch type houses. Although the roundhouses and other features could not be linked stratigraphically the dates and artefacts, and indeed the morphology of the features, fit neatly into the settlement development model recently constructed from the Forest Road, Kintore excavations (Cook & Dunbar 2008). Further discoveries will allow us to assess how widely applicable is that model.