
6 Discussion and interpretation of the Loch Shurrery hut circle *by Richard Hingley*

6.1 Introduction

At least 2000 earthwork hut circles survive in Caithness and Sutherland which, together with the visible remains of their field systems, represent an important record of human settlement in the period between around 3900 and perhaps 1500 years ago. Mercer (Mercer 1985, 59–95) discusses the range of hut circles in Caithness and Sutherland while the Lairg report (McCullagh and Tipping 1998, 4) considers the range of dates that these sites may cover. These hut circles are the surviving traces of the stone foundations of round stone, timber and turf houses (Armit 1997, 27–30). They occur singly and in groups of up to 20 examples. The internal diameter and substantial nature of many of these hut circles actually suggests that the term ‘house circle’ is more appropriate (Hingley 1998, 25), but ‘hut circle’ is well established in the literature. The Loch Shurrery hut circle represents one of a small group of such sites which have been excavated in the northern part of the Scottish mainland.

This discussion will consider the Loch Shurrery hut circle through a comparison with similar sites excavated in Sutherland in recent decades, at Kilphedir (Fairhurst and Taylor 1974), Lairg (McCullagh and Tipping 1998), Rhiconich (Cullen 1993; Donnelly in prep.) and Armadale (Strachan 1996). These few excavated examples represent some of the variety evident in the sites recorded through field survey. With so few excavated examples, however, it is not possible to draw any clear conclusions about the class as a whole.

The Loch Shurrery hut circle appears to have been an isolated example and there is no evidence of contemporary cultivation in the vicinity (O.S. surveyors 1981, cited in NMRS NDO5NW3). A dense concentration of sites immediately to the north of the hut circle and to either side of the Forss Water includes a number of brochs and other structures which may be broadly comparable in date to the excavated site. Because of the limited nature of the excavation at Loch Shurrery, the main value of the evidence about the hut circle relates to its structure and dating, although the material culture of its occupants will also be discussed.

6.2 Dating

Of the excavated stone-built hut circles in Sutherland, many appear to date to the second millennium BC; for instance a range of houses at Lairg and the single house at Rhiconich. The dates from the excavated houses at Kilphedir may indicate occupation in

the early to mid first millennium BC, with reoccupation of at least one house late in the first millennium BC or early in the first millennium AD. Three of the houses at Lairg were constructed in the first millennium BC or early in the first millennium AD (houses 3, 7 and 8). This dating evidence may suggest a spread of dates for the construction of roundhouses from as early as c1900 BC to the early first millennium AD; this may be broadly comparable to the dating of roundhouses for much of Scotland, although it is usually assumed that the majority of examples in Sutherland and elsewhere are second millennium BC in date.

Two radiocarbon dates were obtained from the two samples of Alder from the central hearth of the Loch Shurrery house (Section 5) and these were virtually identical, suggesting at the 2-sigma level that the house was in use in the fourth to first centuries BC. These dates should indicate the time at which burning occurred in the centre of the house. They do not necessarily date the construction or initial usage of the roundhouse, which may have been rather earlier. The pottery from the Loch Shurrery roundhouse (see Section 4) and certain aspects of its construction (see below) might support the idea of an Iron Age phase of occupation. Although it would appear likely that the roundhouse at Loch Shurrery was used in the later first millennium BC and the saddle quern and pottery suggests that this use may have been domestic, the evidence does not serve to demonstrate conclusively that the house was built at this time as the radiocarbon dates were obtained from a context relating to the occupation rather than the construction of the house.

This dating problem appears more serious because of the evidence from Rhiconich, where the central hearth of the second millennium BC roundhouse appears to have been reused in the middle first century AD, perhaps to cremate a human body (Donnelly in prep.). Other roundhouses were reused at a date sometime after their abandonment; for instance Kilphedir house V (Fairhurst and Taylor 1971, 92). Elsewhere in Scotland additional evidence exists for reuse of roundhouses at a date somewhat later than their initial construction (see Carn Dubh, Perthshire: Rideout 1995, 158–59).

At Carn Dubh and Rhiconich the reuse of roundhouses does not appear to have been domestic in nature, but there is no apparent reason why an old house should not have been rebuilt at a much later time. The only way to study the complex potential history of the use and reuse of stone walled hut circles, brochs and other substantial later prehistoric houses which are excavated in future is to

obtain multiple dates for the construction and use of these complex monuments.

To summarise, it is likely from the limited evidence that in some cases the stone foundations of earlier roundhouses were reoccupied, rebuilt or used for a later activity. With regard to the idea of the possible Iron Age phases of activity at Loch Shurrery representing reuse, traces of a possible rebuild in the outer wall may indicate that the house saw more than a brief period of occupation. Whether this extended phase of occupation occurred in more than one distinct period is unclear from the excavated evidence and the whole period of construction and occupation may have occurred within the Iron Age.

6.3 The structure of the hut circle

The Loch Shurrery hut circle represented a medium-sized oval house with a west-facing entrance (Illus 5). It had an off-centre hearth of rectangular construction. There was also a post hole just to the north-east of the hearth which may have held a roof support or some item of internal furniture. The entrance passageway was well-paved and contained a door-check (Illus 8), while at least part of the interior was also paved. The (probable) disturbance of the interior area made it difficult to ascertain whether the remainder of the interior had been paved, most of the paving on the plan being to the west of the interior of the building.

Too few hut circles have been excavated in Northern Scotland to attempt to place them into any meaningful types (McCullagh and Tipping 1998, 4), although Armit follows Fairhurst and Taylor in suggesting that during the latter part of the first millennium BC hut circles seem to have become rather more complex in design, having thicker walls and lengthened entrance passageways. He has also suggested that their overall numbers appear to be reduced so that they occur as isolated farmsteads rather than in groups (Armit 1997, 30).

It has been suggested above that the Loch Shurrery hut circle may have been an Iron Age roundhouse. It was similar in size to examples at

Rhiconich and Armadale and broadly comparable to examples at Kilphedir. It is also similar in size to the smaller examples at Lairg. It was rather different in structure to the majority of these houses, however, as it did not appear to have an internal ring of post holes. In addition, its western entrance is not matched at the other sites, where entrance orientations are to the south, east or south-east. The isolation of the Loch Shurrery hut circle appears to fit with the interpretation outlined by Armit for first millennium AD hut circles (see above). In addition, the wall of the house was fairly thick and the excavation suggested that it was complex (Illus 7), while the entrance passage way was quite long (Illus 5). When the site was visited by the O.S. surveyors in 1981, they noted that around the north-western arc the width of tumble was about 6.0m, suggesting an unusually massive construction in this quarter, or possibly further subsidiary structures as yet unexcavated (NMRS NDO5NW3). The existence of door checks is also an unusual feature in the excavated examples of Sutherland hut circles and may relate to the entrance structures of brochs and other substantial roundhouses, which usually appear to date to the late first millennium BC or early first millennium AD.

6.4 Material culture

The site produced a limited quantity of very undiagnostic pottery (Section 4) and a saddle quern (Section 3.5). These types of finds are typical of later prehistoric settlements in Scotland. Unlike the Rhiconich site, Lairg and other hut circle sites, no lithics were found; perhaps if the Iron Age dating is preferred for the Loch Shurrery hut circle it may be supposed that by the later first millennium BC lithics had ceased to be common items of the domestic tool-kit. The single stone with a 'cup mark' from outside the wall of the hut circle to the south of the entrance (marked on Illus 5) was of uncertain significance, as it did not survive when this discussion came to be written.

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