

Shorter Notes

Two Mesolithic sites near Newburgh, Aberdeenshire

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This note describes and partially illustrates surface finds from two flint-working sites located at Forvie and Menie Links which lie to the N and S of the mouth of the River Ythan, near Newburgh, Aberdeenshire (NGRs: NK 101256; NJ 991212). The finds are now stored in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Downing Street, Cambridge. They are part of a large collection of stone implements from various parts of Britain bequeathed to the Museum by Professor G S Graham-Smith, sometime Reader in Preventive Medicine at Cambridge University. They were collected at various times over a period of at least 30 years, beginning c 1913. They were accessioned to the Museum in 1972, and examined by the writer in the course of re-organising the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic collections in 1978–9. The location of the sites, as well as a series of shell middens, is shown on an annotated O S Map accompanying the finds (cf fig 1), but no other documentary evidence has yet come to light. Kirk describes excavations at several prehistoric sites on these sands, and illustrates 30 surface finds of flints (1953, 167, fig 7, 1–30). None of the sites examined by Kirk, however, was recognised as Mesolithic.

Both sites, as shown on the map, are areas of several hundred square metres, lying at c 15 m OD in blown sand. A section of the estuary, reproduced from Jamieson (1865), is given by Lacaille (1954, 68, fig 26, IV). This shows that the wind-blown sand overlies estuarine mud which had been deposited at a time of high sea-level. The major post-glacial marine transgression (which was responsible for the deposition of the carse clays in the Central Lowlands and the 'raised beaches' around the Scottish coast) is now known to have culminated between c 5000 and 4500 bc (Sissons 1976, 130–1). On the assumption that the Ythan silts were laid down at this time, a *terminus post quem* of c 4500 bc for the sites may be suggested. Further investigation of the stratigraphy of the sites from which the finds were derived is however needed.

Three types of raw material are represented by the finds. 1. Flint with primary staining characteristic of beach pebbles, grey, white, yellow or reddish-brown in colour, often speckled with light grey. An estimated 95% of the total tools and waste products are of this material. 2. A finer quality light-brown semi-translucent flint. Three of the 'splintered pieces' and one hollow-based arrowhead are of this material. 3. A dark grey fine-grained mudstone, represented by two small points only. The majority of the finds are slightly abraded with a glossy surface from sand-burnishing, as confirmed by microscopic examination. The technique of production from small pebbles is illustrated by the large number of cores, core-trimmings, notched blades, and 'micro-burins' (eg figs 2–3, nos 23, 36–7). A high proportion of the cores have the original cortex remaining on 20% or more of the surface. One or two pieces have deep cortication subsequent to working.

The microlithic component of the industry consists almost exclusively of tiny 'rod' forms,

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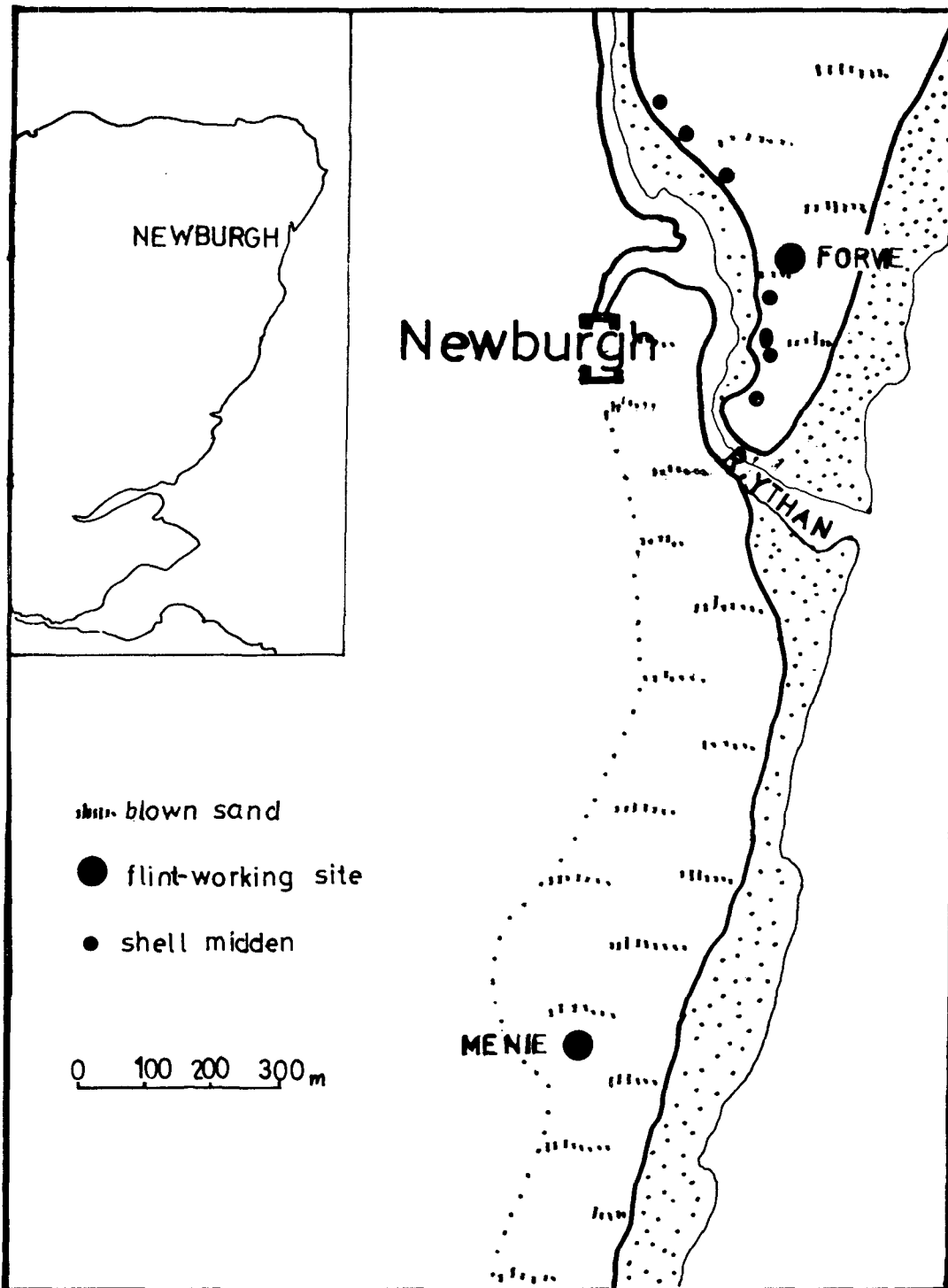


FIG 1 Location of sites at Forvie and Menie

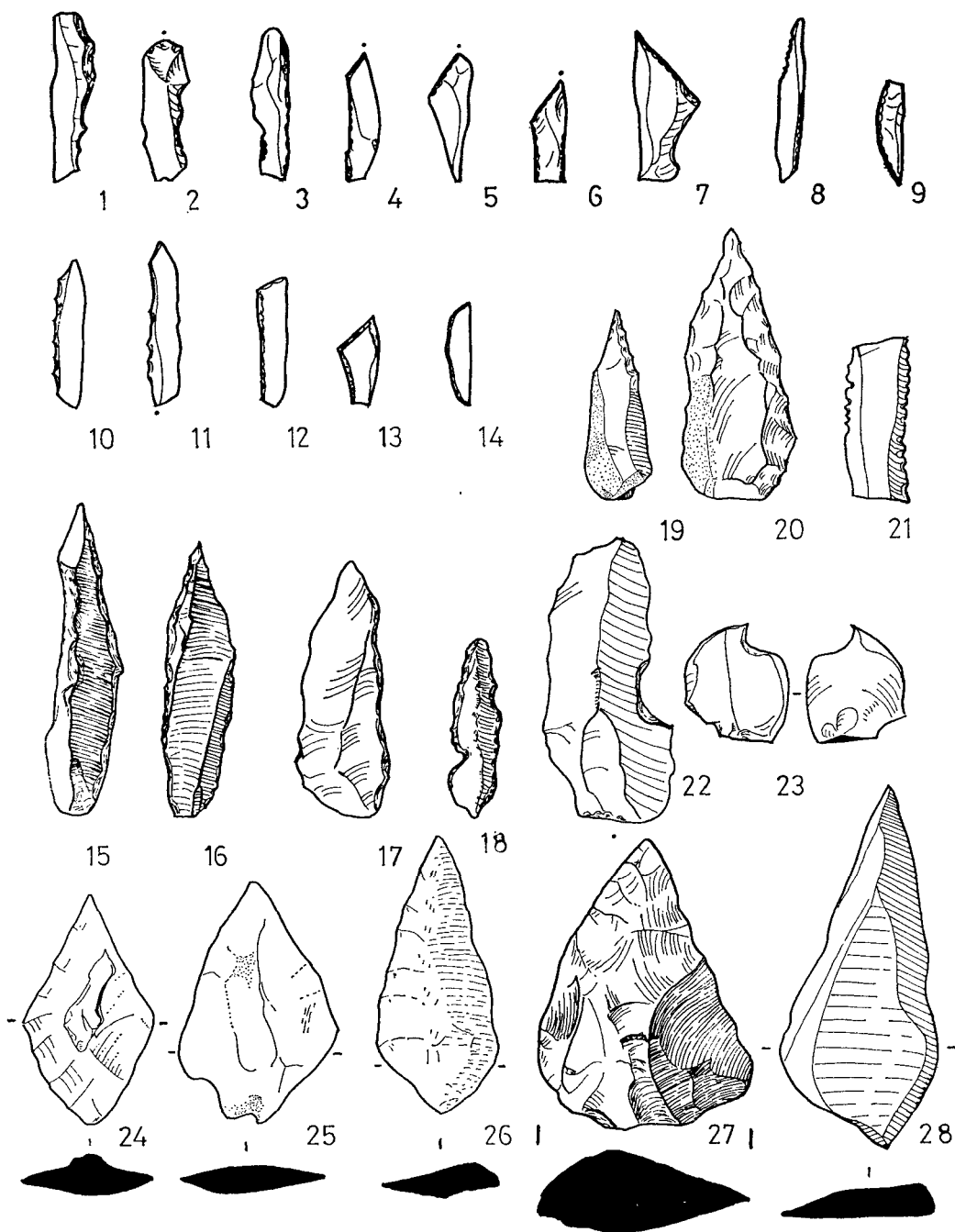


FIG 2 Stone implements from Forvie and Menie. Dot indicates direction from which blade was struck, where known

with an average length of c 2 cm, worked by delicate blunting along one or more edges (fig 2, nos 1-18). Strictly geometric forms are represented by seventeen examples (eg nos 4-6, 9, 12-14). There are also nine larger microliths with coarser abrupt retouch or blunting (eg nos 15-18). By far the most abundantly represented of the remaining tool types is the small convex scraper, of which there are 90 examples (eg nos 32-3). There are also 11 examples of heavier flake scrapers,

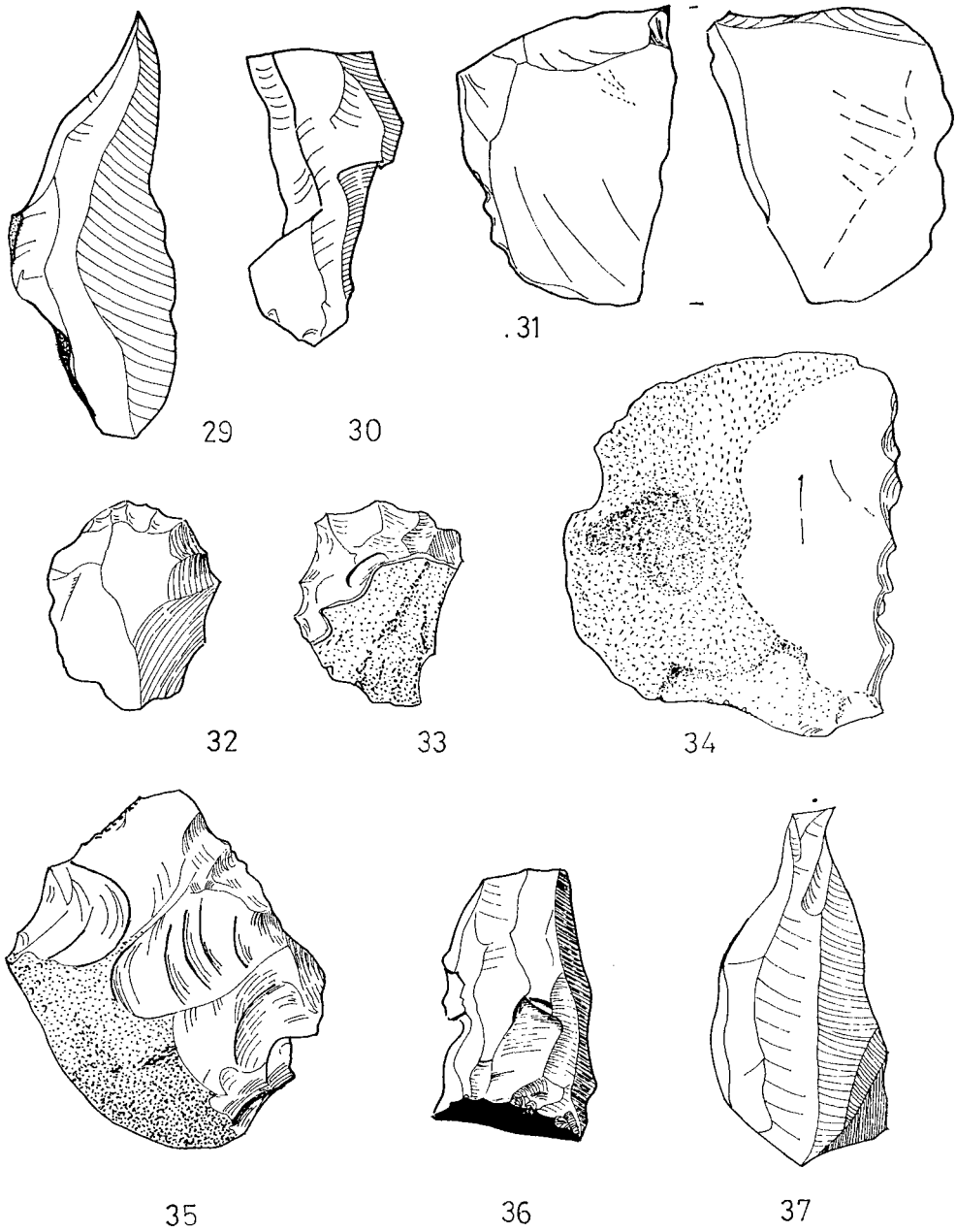


FIG 3 Stone implements from Forvie and Menie

which consist of thick irregular flakes with one edge abruptly retouched (eg no 34). The thirteen 'splintered pieces' or *outils écaillés* (eg no 35) are similar to those described and discussed by Mercer (1971, 25–7) from shell midden sites on the Western littoral of Scotland. Together with the six burins (eg nos 29–31), the entire industry could represent the residue of a specialised tool kit for the production of composite bone implements, such as fish-spears. In view of the limitations of the raw material and the specialised function of microlithic tools, there seems no purpose in pressing typological parallels (cf Coles 1971, 317–9). The nearest well-published site in NE Scotland which includes some types also found at Forvie and Menie is at Birkwood, Banchory, Kincardineshire (Paterson & Lacaille 1936).

A notable feature of the finds is the presence of six bifacially worked points (eg nos 24–8). Several of these conform to the Neolithic type of 'leaf-shaped' arrowhead, though thick in cross-section (esp no 27). These pieces, together with the hollow-based arrowhead may indicate an admixture of types of a later period than the main occupation phase. On the other hand, C14 dates from the W of Scotland imply the co-existence of Neolithic and Mesolithic industries for perhaps as long as 1,000 years.

The assemblages from the two sites at Newburgh are sufficiently alike to indicate approximate contemporaneity, and in view of the way in which the collections were formed the quantitative differences in the representation of the various types is not necessarily significant. It is of course impossible to say whether the finds are representative of a series of occupations or a single short period of occupation. The finds raise the question of the chronological and functional relationship of these flint-working sites to the adjacent shell middens (of which some unlabelled samples are also held in the Museum). The main interest of the sites is, however, that they are among the most northerly in Britain that can be firmly identified as Mesolithic. They therefore provide some of the earliest evidence for the colonisation of NE Scotland.

FORVIE AND MENIE: TYPE LIST AND KEY TO ILLUSTRATIONS

Smaller microliths

- I rod forms with blunting down whole or part of one edge: Forvie, 20 examples (fig 2, nos 10, 11); Menie 22 examples (nos 1, 2).
- II rod forms with blunting down whole of one edge and partial blunting down opposite edge: Menie, 3 examples (no 3).
- III trapezoids and sub-triangular points: Forvie, 8 examples (nos 12, 13); Menie, 7 examples (nos 4, 5).
- IV obliquely blunted point: Menie, 2 examples (no 6).
- V obliquely blunted point with notched blade: Menie, 2 examples (no 7).
- VI rod form with partial blunting down one edge and serrations along part of opposite edge: Menie, 1 example (no 8).
- VII crescents, with blunting on arc: Forvie, 1 example (no 14); Menie, 1 example (no 9).

Larger microliths (ie length more than 2.5 cm)

- VIII blades and points with blunting down whole of one edge: Forvie, 2 examples (no 17); Menie, 4 examples (no 15).
- IX point with blunting down both sides: Forvie, 1 example; Menie, 2 examples (nos 16, 18).

Other components

- Awls: Forvie, 3 examples (nos 19, 20).
- Bifacially worked points: Forvie, 5 examples (nos 24, 25, 26, 28); Menie, 1 example (no 27).
- 'Splintered' pieces: Forvie, 5 examples (no 35); Menie, 8 examples.
- Saws: Forvie, 3 examples (no 21).
- Burins: Forvie, 5 examples (nos 29, 30); Menie, 1 example (no 31).
- Heavy flake scrapers: Forvie, 5 examples (no 34); Menie, 6 examples.

Small convex scrapers: Forvie, 78 examples (nos 32, 33); Menie, 12 examples.
Retouched flakes and blades: Forvie, 22 examples; Menie, 21 examples.
Heavy core tool: Menie, 1 example (fragment).
'Leaf-shaped' points: Forvie, 1 example; Menie, 1 example.
Hollow-based points: Forvie, 1 example; Menie, 1 example.

Industrial Waste, etc

Notched blades: Forvie, 38 examples, including 4 microburins (nos 22, 23); Menie 4 examples.
Cores: Forvie, 249 examples (no 36); Menie, 55 examples.
Core-trimmings: Forvie 73 examples (no 37); Menie 42 examples.
Blades, flakes and irregular fragments: Forvie, in excess of 2,000; Menie, in excess of 1,000.
'Bashed lumps': Forvie, 10 examples.
Hammerstones: Forvie, 3 examples.
Anvils: Forvie, 3 examples.

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