'Fire pits' at Camelon, Stirlingshire

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INTRODUCTION

In January 1975 a stone cist containing two inhumation burials and a series of iron objects was found in gravel-working at the Cairnmuirs Gravel Pit, W of the Roman fort at Camelon, Stirlingshire, now in the Falkirk district of Central Region (NGR NS 860810) (Breeze *et al* 1976). In 1975–7 the quarry was visited on several occasions to observe the working face and six pits containing burnt material were noted. In September 1975 a section through pit 2 was drawn by the second writer and shortly afterwards pit 5 was excavated by both writers. In the following year a section through pit 6 was dug by the first writer and Dr J N G Ritchie, and in 1977 pit 1 was excavated by Dr Valerie A Maxfield. This report is prepared by the first writer, taking into account the working drawings and records of the second, which were kindly made available by Mr J Sanderson of Falkirk Museum, and with the help of Drs J N G Ritchie and Valerie A Maxfield.

EXCAVATION

Six 'fire pits' were noted in the quarry face. They are in a line running approximately NW–SE, but this merely reflects the position of the quarry edge. Fortuitously perhaps, they

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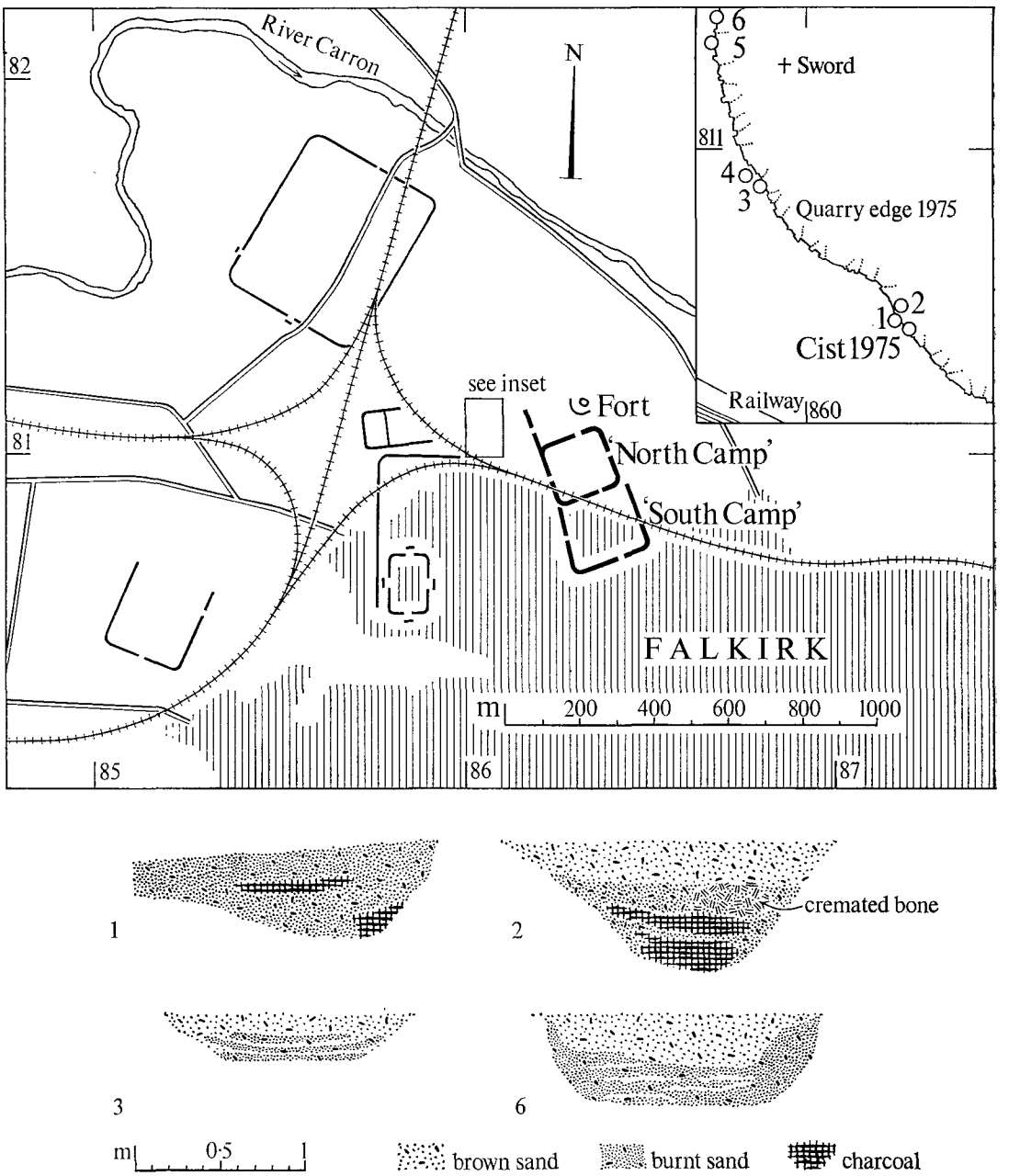

FIG 1 Upper: location map; Lower: sections of pits 1, 2, 3 & 6

appear in pairs: pit 1 is 5 m WNW of the 1975 cist burial, pit 2 4 m N of 1, pit 3 65 m NW of 2, pit 4 5 m NW of 3, pit 5 48 m NNW of 4, pit 6 5 m N of 5. Four pits are described.

Pit 1 was circular, 1·85 m in diameter and 66 cm deep, with a U-shaped profile. At the bottom was a layer of charcoal and burnt soil and above that there were two similar layers separated by brown sandy soil, each of the five deposits being about 10 cm thick. The upper

layer of charcoal and burnt soil was covered by burnt sand and then the usual mixed brown sandy soil and charcoal. The edge of the pit was sharp and unweathered.

Pit 2 was 1·90 m in diameter and about 75 cm deep, being V-shaped but with a flat bottom. It contained two bands of charcoal each about 14 cm thick. Above the upper band was a patch of burnt bone. The bones were examined by Miss L Barnetson but beyond containing the root of a tooth, possibly of human size, were too fragmentary for identification.

Pit 5 was roughly circular, though the E segment had been destroyed by gravel digging, 1·45 m in diameter and 25 cm deep, with steep sides and a flat bottom. In the bottom half of the fill of the pit there were three horizontal bands of charcoal each up to 4 cm thick, not always reaching the sides of the pit. These layers were mixed with burnt sand and brown sandy soil. The sand forming the sides of the pit was heavily burnt. The top half of the pit was filled with brown sandy soil mixed with charcoal.

Pit 6 was 1·60 m across and 55 cm deep and appeared to be circular. It also was dish-shaped being cut through natural sand into a layer of natural gravel. The gravel sides of the pit had been burnt. The edges of the pit were sharp suggesting that it had not been open long. As in pit 5 the bottom half of the pit contained three bands of charcoal each up to 6 cm thick separated by burnt sand, and the top half dirty brown soil.

No artefacts were found in any of the pits, though the head of a flagon of Roman date was found near to pit 6. Charcoal from pit 1 was submitted to the Radio-Carbon Laboratory in the Department of Chemistry, Glasgow University, for analysis. The date determined by the laboratory was ad 15 ± 55 (GU–1188). When calibrated, and due allowance made for the age of the wood on burning, this determination places the fire in the 1st century BC or the 1st century AD.

DISCUSSION

The burnt sides of the pits demonstrate unmistakeably that fires had been lit within them: the burnt material had not been shovelled in from fires lit elsewhere. The two or three bands of charcoal separated by burnt sand may suggest that fires had been lit within the pits at different times, each either damped down by sand or covered over before the next fire was lit. After the last fire the pits were left as slight depressions, almost filled with burnt debris and sand: there seems to have been no attempt to fill them completely. Several sites in the vicinity are probably contemporary with the chronological span indicated by the radiocarbon determination: the Iron Age settlement, the Roman forts, particularly the first-century station, the Roman temporary camps and the military grave(s).

The pits may have been cooking hearths but the lack of bones, pottery and other debris suggests this interpretation may not be correct. The proximity of the pits to the military grave(s) found in 1975 suggests that they may have been cremation pits. A body could have been placed in or above a pit and then wood or charcoal heaped over and around it and set on fire. The bones would presumably have been carefully collected for deposition elsewhere which would account for the lack of all but the smallest fragments in the pits: domestic debris would not have been cleared up. Each pit was just large enough to contain an extended body. However, the body may not have been burnt within the pit but on or under a pyre placed over it: the purpose of the pit may have been to facilitate the subsequent recovery of the bones (Wells 1960, 34–5).

There are a number of possible parallels to the Camelon pits at other Roman sites. At Riseholme, Lincolnshire (Thompson 1954, 31–2) a pit, sub-rectangular in shape and measuring 2·45 m by 1·5 m by 50 cm deep lay underneath the centre of a Romano-British barrow. The pit

had been dug through the old ground surface into the natural sand. It contained stony soil mixed with lumps of clay and was sealed by a layer of clay. The finds from the pit included a quantity of fragmented burnt human bone and two unburnt bones of a sheep or goat, a few scraps of bronze, glass and sherds of pottery. There was evidence of intense heat or scorching in the pit and on the surrounding old ground surface. This burning and the cremated bone led the excavator to suggest that a body had been burnt on a pyre over the pit, which had been dug to improve draught. Alternatively it seems possible to consider that the body had been burnt within the pit, the bonfire spreading beyond the depression.

At the cemetery at Ospringe, Kent, grave AS, located at a depth of 60 cm is described thus: 'at the spot there was a quantity of red soil, either from the decomposition of some badly baked vessel, or natural clay burnt red by the process of cremating a body; the latter is more probable, because there was a good deal of wood ash around the spot' (Whiting *et al* 1931, 20). Elsewhere a probable funeral pyre was noted (Whiting, 1923, 65). Pits containing burnt material were found in the crematorium area in the Trentholme Drive cemetery, York. These, however, were not cremation pits, but holes into which the debris from the funeral pyres had been shovelled (Wenham 1968, 26).

A closer parallel, geographically, is provided by the work of Mrs D B Charlton and Mr J C Day at the cemetery outside the Roman fort at High Rochester in Northumberland (pers comm). Here, beside the well-known stone tombs, a barrow cemetery has recently been recognised, and confirmed by means of excavation to be Roman in date. Each barrow covers a small pit, about 1 m in diameter. In some barrows it appears that the body had been burnt in the pit. The bones had then been collected and inserted into a pot which was placed at one end of the pit. Finally a barrow was thrown up over the pit and burial. Not all the graves contained evidence of cremation and in others the amount of cremated material varied greatly. The main difference between these burials and the pits at Camelon is that the latter, if cremation pits, were not also used for the burial.

Excavations in 1977 and 1978 at Asciburgium in Lower Germany led to the discovery of 213 cremation graves in three separate cemeteries W of the auxiliary fort and dating to the late 1st century–early 2nd century (Bechert 1980, 508–13, for a convenient summary in English). Eighty-five burials were *busta*. In this form of cremation, the *bustum*, the pyre is placed over a pit in which a fire is lit (*Festus*, IV, 130). The pits at Asciburgium are rectangular in plan and section, measuring up to 3 m in length and 2·2 m in width, and their walls and bottoms show traces of burning. The excavator, Dr T Bechert, has suggested that this form of burial may be Gaulish in origin, being recognised in Lower Germany as early as the time of Claudius and continuing there into the mid-2nd century. This form of burial at Asciburgium is therefore contemporary with the fire pits at Camelon and though the pits are not exactly the same there are sufficient features in common to render them comparable and this strengthens the interpretation of the Camelon fire pits as cremation pits.

There is no clear proof of the function of the pits at Camelon. Nevertheless, the suggestion that they were cremation pits seems to be the most acceptable and in view of the proximity of the pits to the 1975 cist burial a Roman rather than an Iron Age context is preferable.

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The drawings and records relating to the pits are housed in Falkirk Museum.

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