

Some early querns

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SUMMARY

Six saddle or trough querns are described, three found in or on chambered cairns, one built into a beaker cist, and one quern and two rubbers from Jarlshof. Some other trough querns are listed. The lack of a clear distinction between saddle and trough querns is noted, and the need for more information on their typology and chronology, towards which a few suggestions are made.

FALLAWS, MONIKIE, ANGUS

In 1868 a saddle quern was found in a cist near the King's Well, Fallaws, NGR NO 512 409, together with a skeleton, a beaker and five flints, during construction of the railway from Dundee to Forfar (Jervise 1870, 166-7). The quern, catalogue no BA 28, and the beaker, EG 17, are both in the National Museum, donated in 1871 and 1873.

The cist was one of six found within a space of 35 yards; some of the other cists contained burnt bone, while those with skeletons were floored with flagstones. The quern formed part of the flag floor of the beaker cist. It must thus be of beaker date or earlier.

The quern (fig 1, 1) of grey sandstone measures 670 by 440 mm by 100 mm thick, and has a very shallow grinding surface with a wide flat rim on two sides. The beaker (fig 1, 2) is of Clarke's Northern British/Dutch group (Clarke 1970, 513, fig 445) or Step 4 as defined by Lanting and van der Waals (1972, 40) which may date to around 1850-1750 bc in conventional C-14 years. It is decorated with tooth-comb impressed lines, incision, and what Clarke calls the ermine motif, a band of staggered short horizontal incisions. Most of the rim of the beaker is missing.

AUCHTERAW, INVERNESS-SHIRE

A trough was found in early March 1977 at Auchteraw, NGR NH 351 073, part of Inchnacardoch Forest, near Fort Augustus, by Mr Angus Grant while extracting gravel with a JCB. The find was reported by the Forestry Commission to the National Museum, and the writer visited the site a week later. The quern had been found in a gravel pit on a S facing, sloping hillside at c 55-60 m OD, in an area planted with mature conifers, some of which had been removed to facilitate gravel extraction. No archaeological features could be seen in the clean sides of the pit, only a deep soil above natural gravel.

The quern (fig 1, 3) is of micaceous schist, and measures 600 by 400 mm by 170 mm thick. It has worn so thin at the bottom through long use that the base has now broken through. The quern has been given by the Forestry Commission to Inverness Museum. Thanks are due to Mr Graham Gill of the Forestry Commission for help on the site, and to Mr Graeme Farnell and Mr Robert Gourlay, then of Inverness Museum.

No archaeological sites have been noted on the hillslopes N of the River Oich where the

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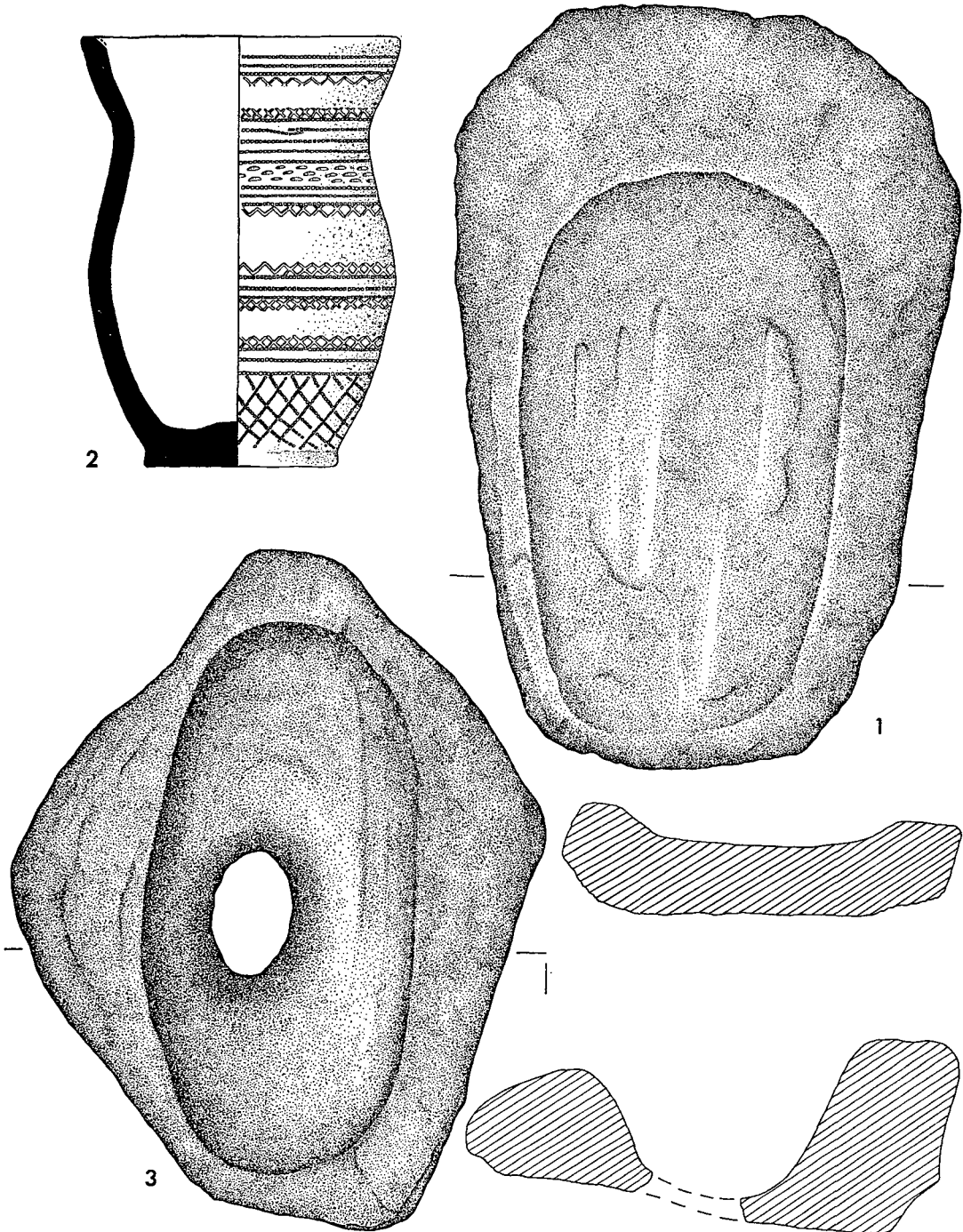


FIG 1 Quern, 1, and beaker, 2, from Fallaws, Angus. Quern, 3, from Auchteraw, Inverness-shire (scale, querns 1: 6, beaker 1: 3)

quern was found, but much of the ground is covered by mature forest. However, on the S side of the river several areas of stone clearance heaps have recently been noted by the Ordnance Survey, at NH 359 061 (20 heaps), NH 364 068 (20 heaps) and NH 367 074 (12 heaps), while at NH 369 082 they record 'an early field system defined by stone clearance heaps and irregular walls, also one possible hut circle', in an area now partly occupied by Fort Augustus golf course. The quern may be evidence of early settlement on the other side of the valley.

KILCOY SOUTH, BLACK ISLE, ROSS-SHIRE

This quern, and the two following, were found by Dr A A Woodham in the course of his investigations of chambered cairns in the Black Isle between 1955 and 1958, and were given by him to the National Museum in 1977. I am grateful to Dr Woodham for information about their discovery.

The quern was found during excavation of the Orkney-Cromarty chambered cairn at NGR NH 569 516 that has been called variously Kilcoy West or Kilcoy V (*Discovery Excav Scot 1956*, 23-4; Woodham & Woodham 1957) and Kilcoy South (Henshall 1963, 348-9). It lay amongst fallen roofing slabs in the second compartment from the entrance, and while it seems likely it had been used as part of the original roof, it could be a more recent intrusion. The finds from the cairn include parts of several beakers (Henshall 1963, 349).

The saddle quern (fig 2, 4; NMAS catalogue no EO 1115) is of irregular squarish shape; the shallow grinding area is confined to part of the surface and there is a wide flat rim on two sides. It measures 520 by 490 mm by 160 mm thick. Woodham and Woodham (1957) described this as a 'broken saddle or saucer quern', but its rather unusual present shape appears to be more or less original.

CARN GLAS, BLACK ISLE, ROSS-SHIRE

During Dr Woodham's excavation of this Orkney-Cromarty chambered cairn, NGR NH 578 520, a quern was found in the filling of the chamber, above modern sheep burials. As the quern came from recently disturbed levels it was not mentioned in the report (Woodham & Woodham 1957). The cairn at the time of excavation was only some 4 ft high. It is possible, as Woodham has suggested (*in litt*) that the quern may have formed part of the original roof structure, having been removed when the chamber was first broken into, and then replaced above the sheep burials.

The finds from Dr Woodham's excavations include a leaf-shaped arrowhead, sherds of beaker and sherds of rusticated ware, while a barbed and tanged arrowhead was found 'in a grave under the cairn' in the presence of Lord Abercromby in 1906.

The quern (fig 2, 5; NMAS EO 1116) is of muscovite psammite, a rock related to mica schist but coarser. It measures 620 by 470 mm by 130 mm thick, with a broad flat rim round the grinding surface. It might be described either as a saddle quern or a shallow trough quern.

KILCOY III, BLACK ISLE, ROSS-SHIRE

Dr Woodham found this saddle quern on the side of a large round cairn at NGR NH 578 519, called Kilcoy III (*Discovery Excav Scot 1956*, 73; Woodham & Woodham 1957, 103). As Dr Woodham has noted, the quern could have been cleared from adjacent fields and added to the cairn at a later date.

The quern, of coarse buff sandstone, measures 520 by 280 mm by 200 mm deep (fig 3, 6; NMAS EO 1117). In shape it is an irregular rectangle. It is worn by use almost all over; both ends are now slightly damaged, but the wear may originally have extended right up to the ends. It is flat from side to side, and slightly concave from end to end.

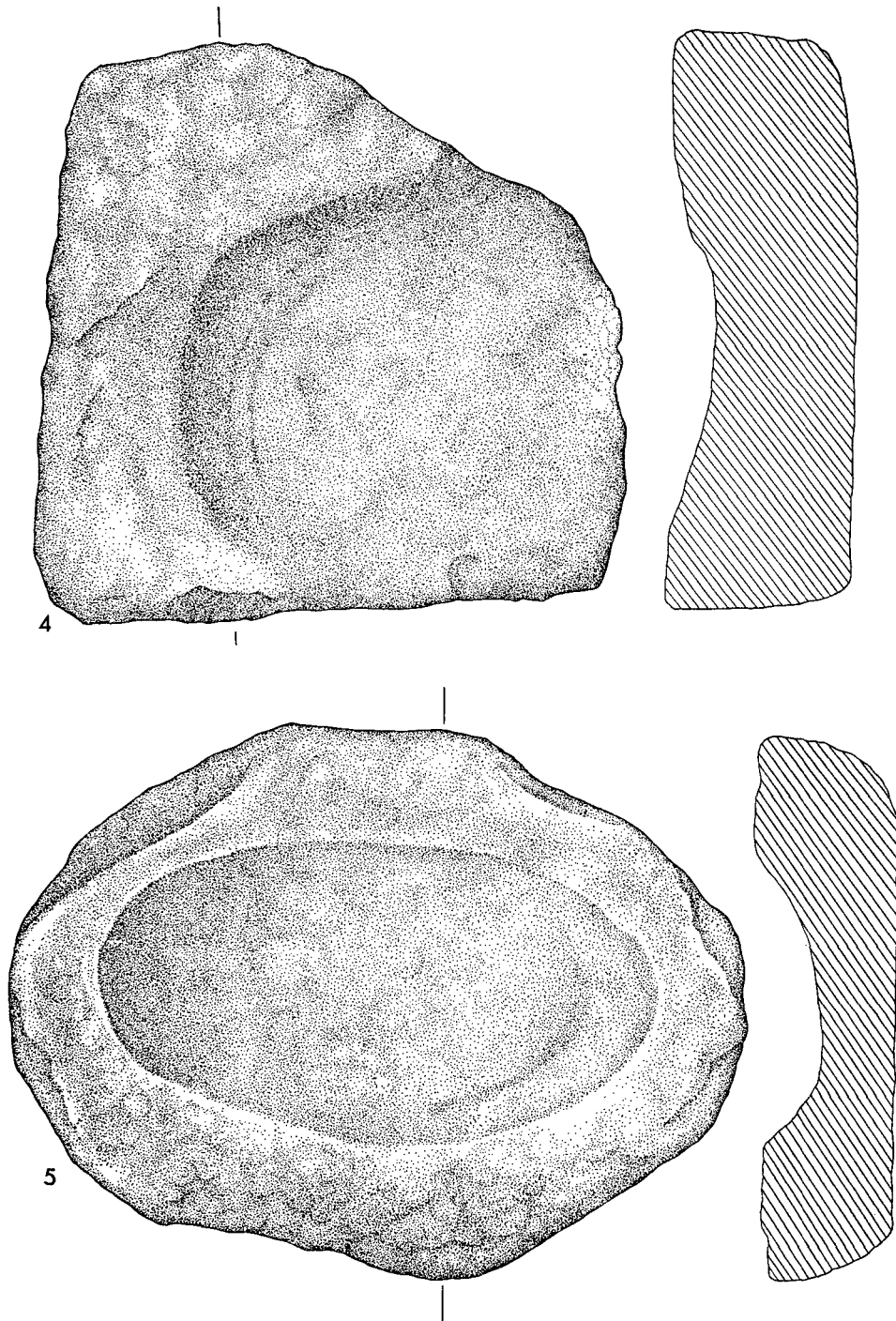


FIG 2 Querns from Kilcoy South, 4, and Carn Glas, 5, Ross-shire (scale 1 : 6)

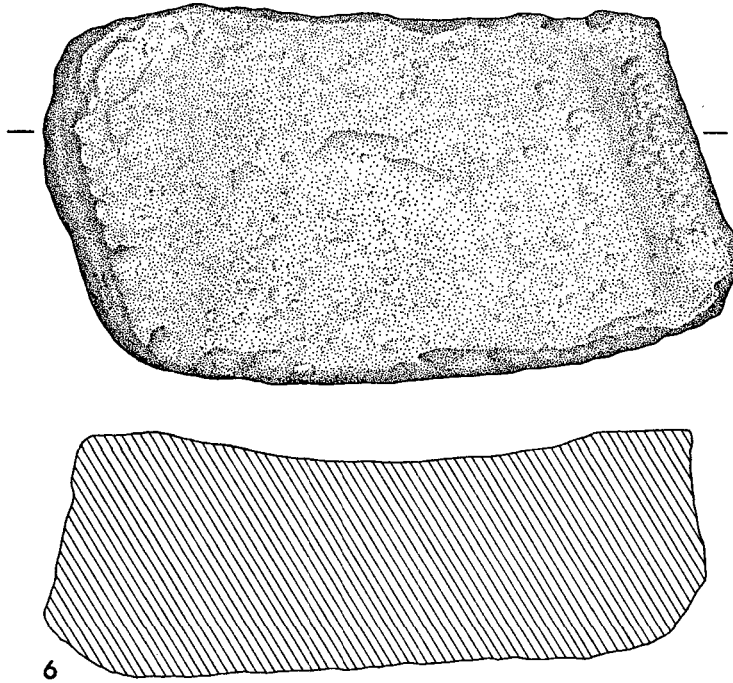


FIG 3 Quern from Kilcoy III, Ross-shire (scale 1 : 6)

JARLSHOF, SHETLAND

The large collection of material from excavations in the Bronze Age and later settlements at Jarlshof, Shetland, given to the National Museum in 1957, did not include any examples of the numerous querns found. This gap in the collection has partly been filled by the Department of the Environment who gave one trough quern and two quern rubbers from Jarlshof, all unstratified, to the National Museum in 1977.

The grey sandstone quern (fig 3, 7; catalogue no HSA 5021) measures 620 by 520 mm by 230 mm thick. The base is irregular. One end of the quern is now chipped and broken, so the original shape of this end is uncertain.

The two grey sandstone rubbers (fig 3, 8, 9; NMAS HSA 5022, 5023) have a roughly D-shaped cross-section on the long axis, and measure 240 by 190 mm by 90 mm thick. The illustration shows a side view with the grinding surface downwards, and a plan view of the grinding surface. This surface is almost flat in section on the narrow axis of the stone, but the D-shaped cross-section suggests these rubbers were used with trough querns.

The quern is only one of at least 16 trough querns found in the excavation of the pre-bronch settlement at Jarlshof, the area called Village I and II by Curle (1934) and Late Bronze Age Village I and II by Hamilton (1957). The second building phase is now generally considered to be Iron Age. The few querns found clearly *in situ* belonged to the earlier, Bronze Age, phase of the houses. The querns are listed by Hamilton but not illustrated, and their profusion is fully appreciated only by visitors to the site. Some of the querns are in the houses, one in House II, two in House III, three in House IV, one in House VI, and one in another house further N,

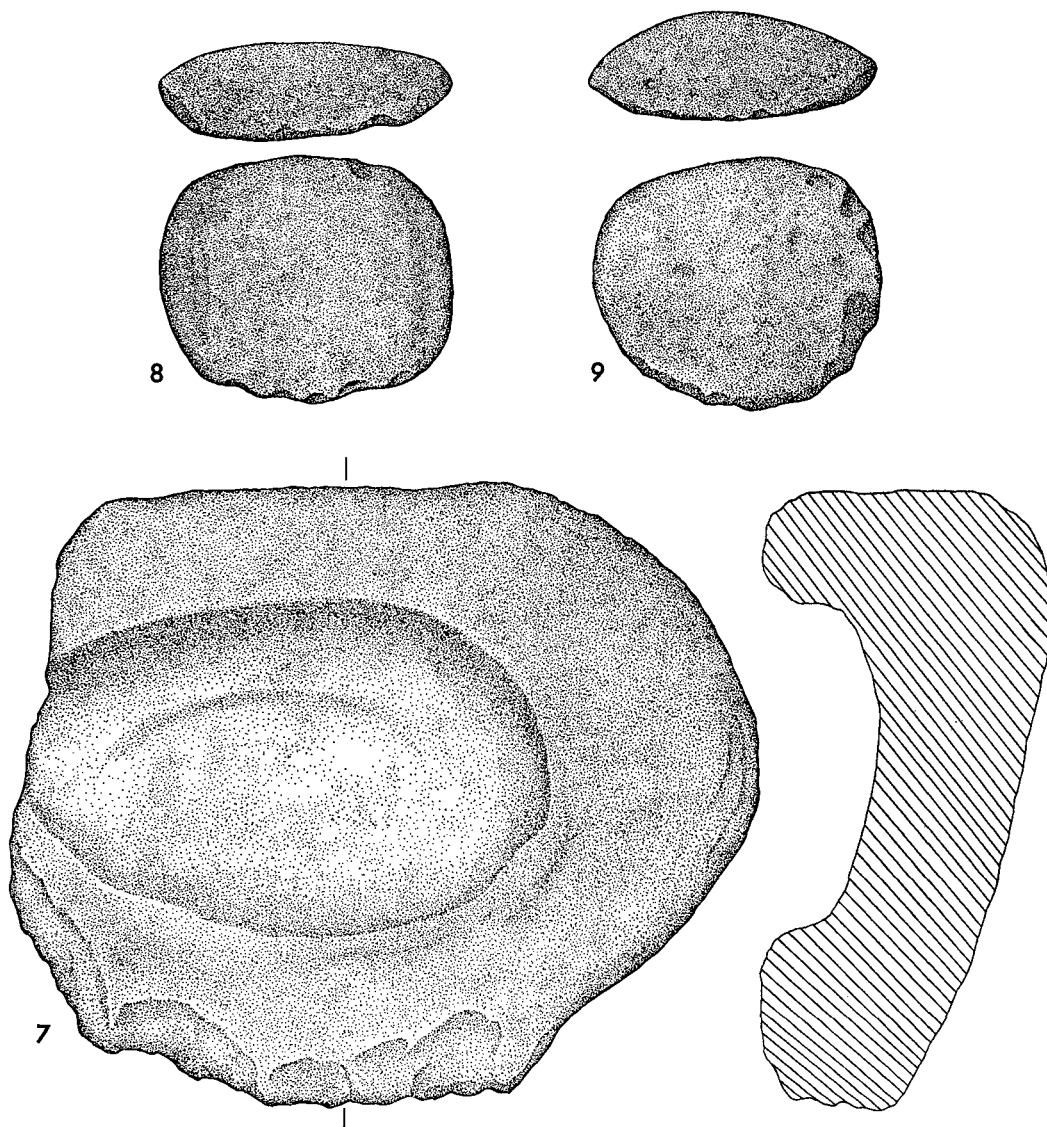


FIG 4 Quern, 7, and rubbers, 8-9, from Jarlishof (scale 1 : 6)

not on the plan (Hamilton 1957, fig 10). Another nine querns lie on the grass in the area of middens A-D. Three of these querns, belonging to an early phase of the houses, can be seen *in situ* in published photographs in Houses II and III (Hamilton 1957, pl IVa & b) and House IV (Curle 1934, 232, fig 6).

These are all quite deep trough querns, which characteristically have one open end. This is presumably an original feature, to allow the flour to fall out more easily. In use, one end of a quern was probably wedged up a little, and the woman grinding knelt at the higher end grinding slightly downwards and away from herself, as shown in Egyptian models.

DISCUSSION

Not much can be said about early prehistoric querns in Scotland since so few are published. There is no well-defined typology; some flat querns can readily be classified as saddle querns, and some deep ones as trough querns, but others hover between the two extremes. One must assume that early Neolithic querns were flattish saddle querns, and that later on trough querns came into fashion. These apparently flourished in the Bronze Age especially in northern Scotland. There are now radiocarbon dates of 1564 bc \pm 120 (BM-441) and 1760 bc \pm 55 (GrN-6168) from carbonized barley associated with part of a trough quern in the wall of a house at Ness of Gruting, Shetland (Calder 1956, 353; Barcham 1980). In the Iron Age flat saddle querns reappear. This change is demonstrated at Jarlshof (Hamilton 1957, 49, 50), and Clickhimin (Hamilton 1968, 30, 64, 78), though the exact date at which it happens is not altogether clear. The preponderance of flat saddle querns on Iron Age sites is also shown by old excavations such as Duntroon, Argyll (Caulfield 1978, pl 8a). There seems to be a general, though not exclusive, tendency for earlier saddle querns to be a shallow scoop with a rim round the grinding area on some or all sides (fig 1, 2; fig 2, 4), whereas Iron Age querns are almost flat and worn right out to all edges, as can be seen in the photograph of the Duntroon querns mentioned above. This is also true of the large collections of saddle querns recently excavated at Broxmouth, East Lothian, and at Douglasmuir, Angus. On this basis the quern from Kilcoy III (fig 3) is likely to be of Iron Age date.

The geographical extent of trough querns is unclear at present. Curle (1934, 301) coined the term 'trough quern' for the deep querns he found at Jarlshof. Though this type of quern is best known in Shetland, the type is also common in northern mainland Scotland, and a number of trough querns from Ross-shire and Inverness-shire are noted below. Beyond this, trough querns may occur even in southern Scotland. There is an unstratified example from the hillfort at Clat-chard Craig, Fife, though this need not necessarily belong to the Iron Age occupation of the hill. There are also small fragments of what may have been trough querns, or at least dished saddle querns, from recent excavations at Douglasmuir, Angus, Broxmouth, East Lothian, and White-kirk, East Lothian (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1980, 38; Hill 1982; *Discovery Excav Scot* 1970, 26). Much more excavation is needed to clarify the typology of early querns in Scotland.

SOME NORTHERN TROUGH QUERNS

The following list is of a few chance-finds of trough querns:

Gletness, Shetland. Quern acquired in 1975 by Dr A K Bradley and taken to the Gambia, West Africa. Photograph in NMAS.

Sands of Breckin, Yell, Shetland. Large trough quern removed from the Sands of Breckin, seen outside the Post Office at Haa of Houlland, 1974.

Ardvanie, Ross-shire. One trough quern and part of another, found together at c NGR NH 697 876 when digging a hole for a gate-post. In possession of the farmer, Mr Simpson, at Dounie, Edderton, Ross-shire.

Near Tournaig, Ross-shire. Two trough querns found in 'three Pictish brochs or round houses' on shore of Loch nan Daithean (Dixon 1886, 104, figs 9 & 10).

Portmahomack, Ross-shire. One quern built into wall of Tarbat churchyard, to left of gate.

Scotsburn, Kildary, Ross-shire. One quern in garden, provenance unknown.

Tore Mains, Black Isle, Ross-shire. Quern in Dingwall Museum.

Bothyhill Farm, Alturlie Point, Inverness-shire. Quern in Inverness Museum.

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