

Excavations at Castle Craig, Auchterarder, 1978

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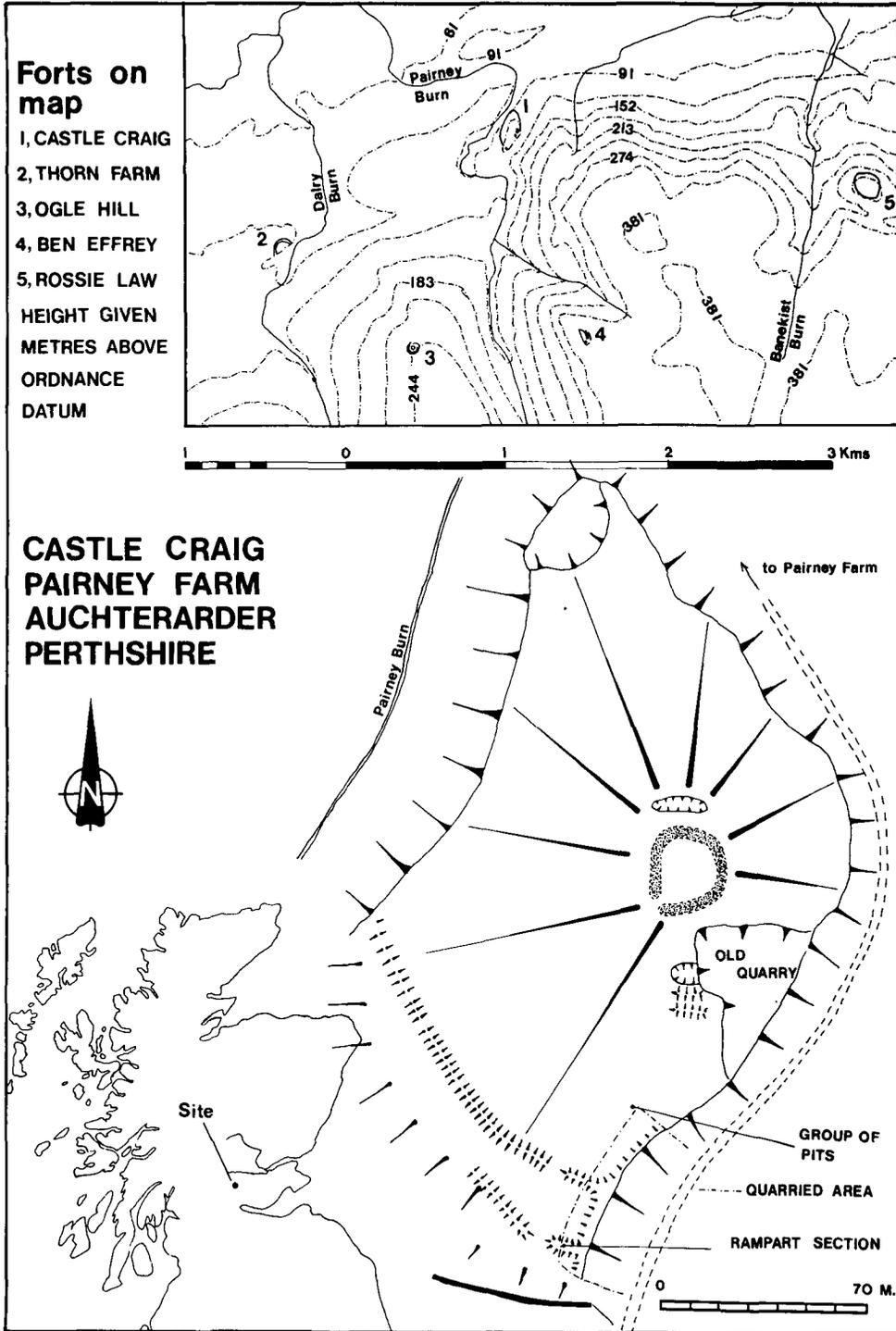
INTRODUCTION

In July 1978 the author carried out recording and small-scale excavation after the destruction of the eastern terminals of two ramparts and the disturbance of a number of slab-covered pits within the unscheduled hillfort of Castle Craig. The site is situated at the northern foot of the Ochil Hills 3 km E of Auchterarder (NGR NN 975 128). The knoll on which the site lies is a craggy mass of SW-NE sloping igneous rock which reaches a maximum elevation of c 140 m OD. On its summit is a small stone-built enclosure 28 m in diameter with an entrance to the SW. The enclosure is defined by a 4 m wide spread of locally derived boulders and small slabs. Immediately to the N is a length of rock-cut ditch, whilst on the S there are the disturbed remains of two ramparts and a section of rock-cut ditch (illus 1). 100 m S of the summit are the remains of two stone ramparts which form a defence stretching across the wide, easily approachable southern side of Castle Craig. An entrance gap through these ramparts at their eastern end was within a few metres of being destroyed by the rock removal. The largest enclosure on Castle Craig is c 4.2 acres but nowhere in that area are there traces of hut or house sites.

The western boundary of the site is defined by the precipitous eastern bank of the Pairney Burn and here no artificial defences seem to have been thought necessary. The east boundary is defined by the top of the steep west slope of the gully which lies between Castle Craig and the larger massif of Craig Rossie to the E; the east and west sides converge at the north end of the knoll.

The site was first recorded by James Stobie on his one inch to a mile map of Perthshire at the beginning of the 19th century. David Christison did not include the site in his publication on local native earthworks (Christison 1900) and it seems that the fort lay generally unnoticed until 1967 when

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ILLUS 1 Location of Castle Craig and plan of fort

the Ordnance Survey recorded it (OS Archaeology record card number NN 91 SE 11). In 1971 a stone-built structure was reported on the summit of Castle Craig (*Discovery Excav Scot 1971, 33*).

EXCAVATION

THE PITS

The section of pit 1, which had been machine-cut, showed clearly that it was capped by a flat, igneous slab which had broken into several pieces. A small area of turf was removed from above the pit and the contents examined. An area measuring 4 m by 3 m was eventually uncovered. A number of flat slabs were revealed and most were subsequently found to have covered pits of varying sizes. All the slabs lay immediately below the top of the present turf and directly on the shallow subsoil. Ten pits were excavated and contained dark brown soil with varying amounts of charcoal and small amounts of burnt bone, all of animal origin. Two small sherds of unidentifiable pottery and a fragment of a jet hoop were also found.

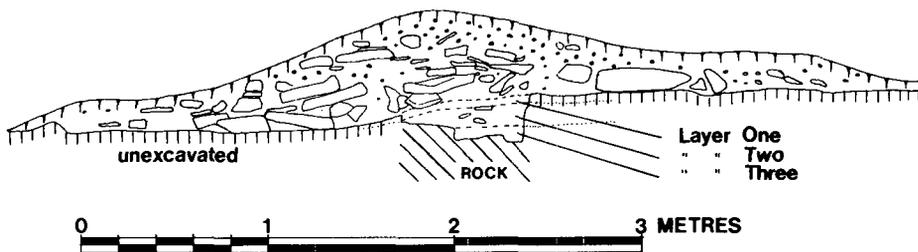
THE OUTER RAMPARTS

Two ramparts, 16 m apart, define the south limits of the fort: their east terminals were destroyed by the initial removal of rock in 1978. On inspection of the ragged, machine-cut section through the outer rampart it was clear that the structure was built of locally derived igneous slabs. The section was re-cut by hand and recorded but no excavation was carried out on the inner of the two ramparts due to its poor state of preservation.

The mass of rubble cut by machine (illus 2) represents the denuded remains of a stone rampart about 2 m thick. The rear of the rampart was defined by a large boulder, the front face was less well-defined a couple of metres down the slope. The existing structure of the rampart consisted almost entirely of flat slabs with the spaces in between filled with a mixture of small angular stones and grey soil. The surviving height of the rampart structure was 0.52 m and it is very likely that much of the original structure was robbed to build the drystone wall almost immediately to the S.

Beneath the rampart lay three distinct deposits, the topmost of which was very black and contained charcoal and small pieces of calcined bone. This layer was a fairly constant 40 mm thick and lay under most of the width of the rampart. Beneath this black deposit was a layer of light brown soil which was a uniform 100 mm in depth. The layer contained small quantities of charcoal and burnt bone in a matrix of dry soil which was virtually stone-free. This layer directly overlay the bedrock under most of the width of the rampart and, judging from the quarried profile over the rest of the site, is almost certainly the remains of the pre-rampart A horizon. A third deposit below the rampart was a localized concentration of black, greasy soil. It was more or less stone-free and contained no traces of either charcoal or bone.

The inner of the two outer ramparts (not drawn) was an ill-defined mass of igneous slabs and waterworn boulders measuring 5 m across. The surviving height of the rampart is in the region of 0.3 m and no sure indication of either the front or rear faces could be seen. Found in the rubble of this rampart was a shaped block of stone in which an hemispherical hollow has been carved (see below).



SECTION ACROSS OUTER RAMPART OF OUTER ENCLOSURE

ILLUS 2 Castle Craig, Auchterarder: Rampart section

DISCUSSION

The function of the pits at Castle Craig remains unknown though certain observations can be made. It is obvious from the position of the slabs that those covering pits as well as those sitting on undisturbed subsoil formed a coherent, if incomplete, area of paving. The builders had carefully chosen the shape of the stones and had gone to the trouble of jamming the narrow gap between two of the slabs. The nature of the paving remains obscure even though there appears to be a direct relationship between the edges of the slabs and the underlying pits. What is not apparent is whether the slabs were picked for their particular shape to fit neatly over previously excavated pits or whether the sizes of the pits were dictated by the size of slabs in an area of existing paving.

An examination of the contents of the pits does not throw any light on the question regarding their purpose. A piece of broken jet ornament, two sherds of pottery, numerous small pieces of burnt animal bone and specks of charcoal contained in a matrix of very dark, sometimes black, friable soil tend to suggest that the fill was simply rubbish probably originally dispersed in the local topsoil.

THE SMALL FINDS (not illustrated)

POTTERY

One small sherd of pottery was found just above the bottom of pit 3. It measures 26×19 mm and varies in thickness from 6 to 8 mm. The fabric is bright orange in colour throughout and there is little or no grit and no decoration. A second sherd measuring 25×17×4–9 mm thick was found in the middle of the fill of pit 6. The colour and the fabric of the sherd are exactly as those from pit 3.

JET

The fragment of jet found in pit 1 represents about a seventh part of a hoop originally c 58 mm in internal diameter and c 71 mm externally. The internal and external faces of the object are polished, convex surfaces which meet at a rounded point. In section, the object is a rounded triangle with the third surface flat and unpolished.

STONE

A shaped block of stone measuring 131 mm long by 38–87 mm wide by 50–60 mm thick. A hollow has been cut out of the wider end and measures 69–78 mm in diameter and 27 mm in depth. Dark staining below the outer rim may indicate that the object was a lamp.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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