

Excavations at Kintore Roman temporary camp, 1984

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with contributions by W E Boyd and D J Breeze

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the excavation of a section through the ditch of the Roman temporary camp at Kintore, Gordon District, Grampian and of a possible field oven in the interior of the camp.

INTRODUCTION

The site of the temporary camp at Kintore (NGR NJ 787 166) was first identified in 1867 (Courtney 1868; Crawford 1949, 112–15) and its details refined by aerial photography some hundred years later (St Joseph 1958) (illus 1a–c). It lies on the western fringes of the town of Kintore in the Don valley, occupying undulating ground between the Bridgealehouse and Torry burns, and forms a link in the chain of camps in north-east Scotland, lying between the larger camps at Durno and Normandykes; Dr Breeze has kindly contributed a note on its size, position and possible date which follows this report.

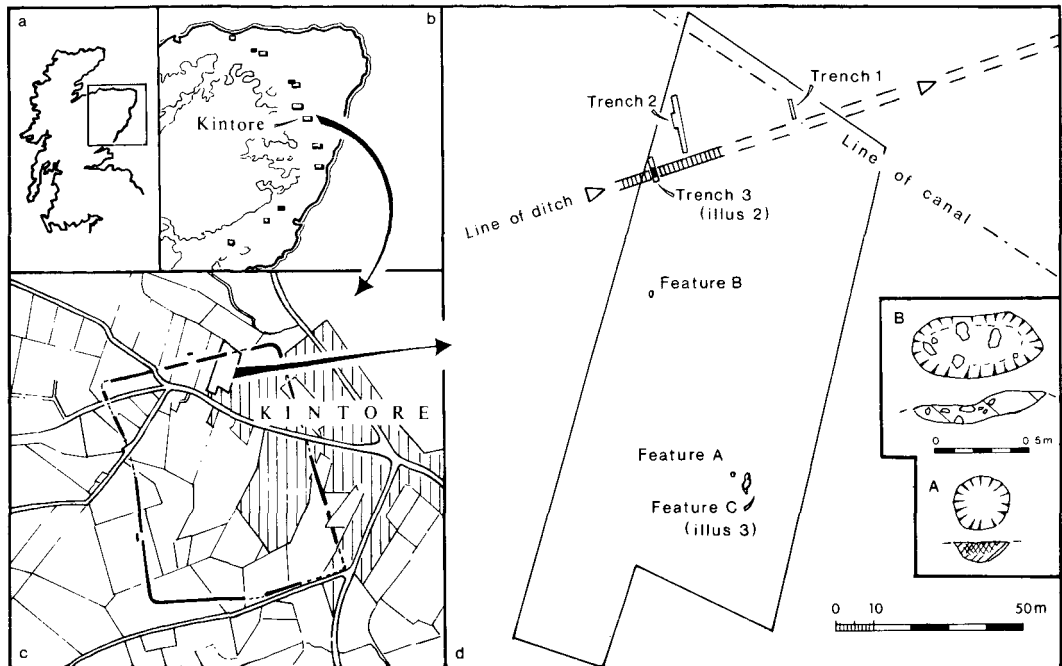
The north-eastern sector of the camp in particular has been monitored for some time as it covers an area subject to extensive housing development; in response to a sudden advance in building within a field on the north line of the camp (illus 1c) the SDD (Ancient Monuments Division) contracted the author to obtain a section through the ditch and to carry out a watching brief on the field during topsoil stripping to locate any evidence of activity within the area of the camp where an ‘axe’ and ‘spearheads’ had been found in the 19th century (*OS Object Name Book*, 51 (1864–5), 100).

THE EXCAVATION

THE CAMP DITCH

A machine was available for part of one day to carry out exploratory trenching (illus 1d). Trench 1 was positioned close to the fence line at the foot of the field to check an area of the projected line of the camp ditch which was not clearly visible on the aerial photograph. This failed to locate the ditch, revealing instead very thick grey clay sediments, the residue of the Aberdeen–Inverurie Canal which existed from 1804 to 1854 (Graham 1968). This had cut through the camp between Bridgealehouse and Tuach Hill and destroyed the evidence for this section of the ditch. A second machine-dug trench (Trench 2) narrowly missed the ditch line; a further, hand-cut, trench (Trench 3) located it at a point close to its reappearance on the aerial photograph.

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ILLUS 1 a, b, Location of north-east temporary camps showing position of Kintore (after Breeze); c, plan of camp at Kintore (after St Joseph); d, position of trenches and features as excavated

The ditch was approximately 3.25 m broad by 1.4 m deep, with a slightly asymmetrical V-shaped section (illus 2). It was dug through layers of varying sizes of gravels into very fine, shifting, sandy gravel. The more resistant layers of larger gravels together with a band of yellow clay had contributed to the stepped appearance of the section as the softer layers silted more readily into the ditch. The initial infill comprised small lenses of fine clean sandy gravels interspersed with lenses of siltier, more purply brown material. This fine interleaving of lenses of silting and slippage was succeeded after 0.4 m by a build-up of an homogeneous purple-brown silty soil. This soil contained varying amounts of gravel admixture representing incorporation of material from the sides and presumably the internal bank, some trace of which could be seen on the inner lip of the ditch as a thin spread of sandy upcast on the surface of the subsoil. This gradual infilling of the ditch clearly demonstrates that no deliberate slighting of the camp had taken place, at least not in this area.

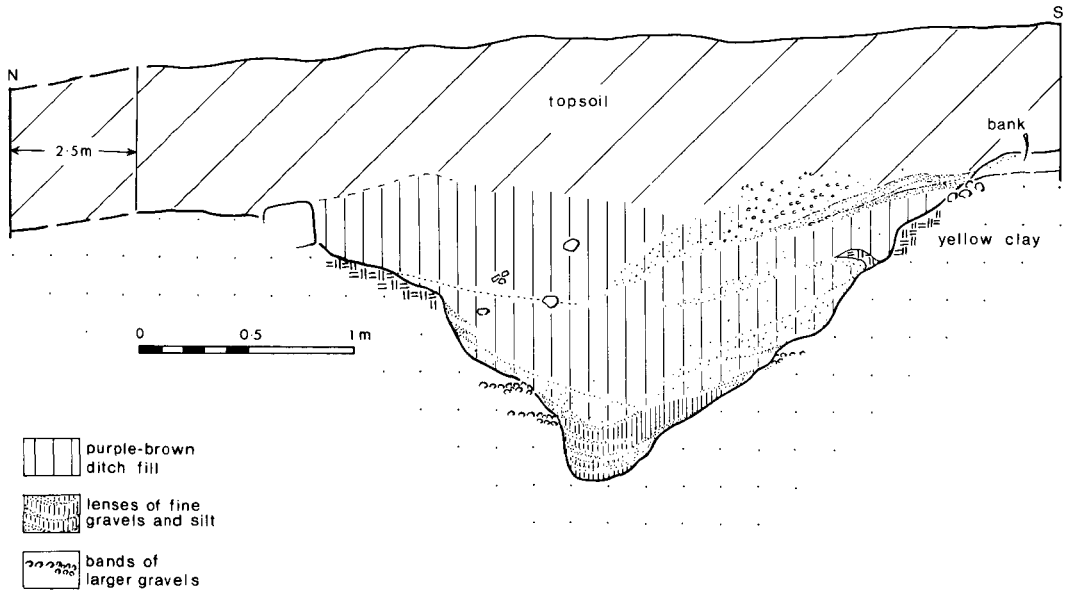
No diagnostic finds came from the ditch fill. A small oblate stone, 54 mm long and slightly flattened in section, was found at the bottom of the ditch fill; in size, shape and regularity it was unlike any material from the subsoil, ditch fill or topsoil. Although its size and shape are commensurate with those of slingstones of lead or clay from Roman sites such as Ardoch and Birrens, its identification as such is not considered likely (Dr D J Breeze and Dr D V Clarke, pers comm).

THE INTERIOR OF THE CAMP

A watching brief on the rest of the field during topsoil stripping revealed two minor and one major feature in the subsoil (illus 1d; Features A–C).

Feature A

This was a small, roughly circular, scoop of charcoal surrounded by red burnt subsoil, c 0.1 m deep and 0.3 m in diameter. There were no associated small finds.



ILLUS 2 Section through temporary camp ditch

Feature B

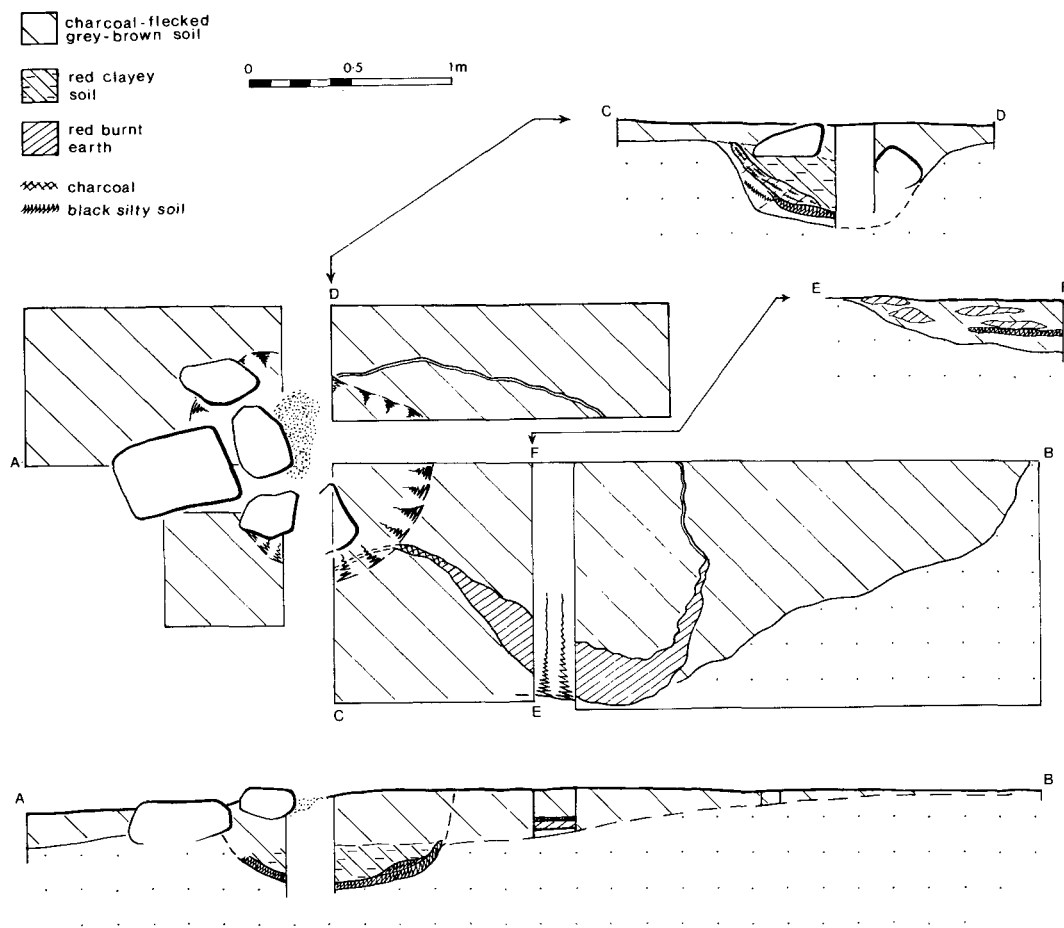
This was a roughly oval scoop, c 0.72 m by 0.36 m by 0.1 m deep, with a homogeneous fill of grey-brown sandy material. There were no associated small finds.

Feature C (illus 3)

This was first observed as a group of comparatively large stones associated with an area of burnt material comprising charcoal, reddened subsoil and charcoal-flecked grey-brown soil, material similar to that of Feature A. Cleaning revealed that the stones partially covered a smallish sub-rectangular pit, c 1.2 m by 0.9 m by 0.47 m deep. It was lined at the bottom with a black silty soil and subsequently filled with layers of charcoal and red, burnt, clayey earth and ultimately with charcoal-flecked grey-brown soil. From this spread an oval scoop, 2.9 m by 1.1 m by a maximum of 0.25 m deep, containing similar burnt material, red earth and charcoal-flecked soil, suggesting material cleared-out from the pit itself. Traces of charcoal also continued in an amorphous spread at the base of the topsoil.

One carbonized grain of cultivated oats, either *Avena strigosa* (bristle oat) or *A. sativa* (cultivated oat) was found within the residue of burning at the bottom of the pit. Both of these species have been found at the Iron-Age sites (Boyd, forthcoming) and at Roman sites throughout Scotland (Jessen & Helbaek 1944) and appear to have been becoming established in Scotland around this time. Traces of alder and oak charcoal were also present in this material, and alder, birch and, to a lesser extent, oak comprised the larger remnants of charcoal layered in the pit; Dr Boyd's full report on the charcoal and material from the pit is on fiche 4: G8-11.

The identification of this feature as a field oven seems likely (Dr D J Breeze, pers comm), the charcoal evidence suggesting firewood drawn for the most part from scrub woodland. Unfortunately, no diagnostic small finds were present in the pit or amongst the spread of burnt material.



ILLUS 3 Plan and sections of Feature C

ROMAN CAMPS NORTH OF THE MOUNTH

David J Breeze

The temporary camp at Kintore is one of at least eight Roman camps known north of the Mounth. In 1958, when Professor J K St Joseph drew up his first classification of Roman camps in Scotland, Kintore was placed within the 120 acre series, which was dated to either the Antonine campaigns of the mid second century or the Severan campaigns of the early third (St Joseph 1958, 93). Excavation at Ardoch in 1969 was considered to provide support for the later date for the series (St Joseph 1970). In 1973 St Joseph (1973, 231–2) noted that the northernmost camps of this series – Raedykes, Normandykes, Kintore, Ythan Wells and Muiryfold – are noticeably smaller than 120 acres: Raedykes is 93 acres and the other four about 110. He tentatively proposed that they might relate to Agricola's seventh campaign, that leading to Mons Graupius. In 1977, following the discovery of an exceptionally large camp at Durno (140–4 acres), between Kintore and Ythan Wells, he restated his case with more assertion, specifically suggesting that Durno was where Agricola's army camped on the night before the battle of Mons Graupius (St Joseph 1977, 143–5; 1978, 277–87).

G S Maxwell (1980, 41) has noted that 'although the arguments advanced in favour of this ascription are most ingenious, the fact remains that the same level of evidence has long been used to support an early third-century date', and that the shape of the 110 acre series of camps, of which Kintore is one, would tend to support a Severan rather than an Agricolan date. There the problem must rest meanwhile, with Kintore being assigned to the 110 acre series of marching camps, but doubt still surrounding the date of the series. It is unfortunate that the excavation of 1984 failed to produce dating evidence, but hardly surprising as these enclosures, occupied for a few nights at the most, rarely yield up the secret of their date of construction easily.

It is interesting that Kintore, like many other Roman camps in Scotland, seems not to have been slighted when it was abandoned. This helps to account for the good survival rate of these camps, several of which are still visible in part, or were like Kintore until recent centuries brought agricultural improvement and the destruction of their slight earthworks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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