

A hut-circle at Ormiston Farm, Newburgh, Fife

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with a contribution by Stratford P Halliday

SUMMARY

A hut-circle which had been disturbed by ploughing was excavated in 1978 and 1980; it revealed few constructional features and no direct dating evidence. An earlier posthole with a contemporary assemblage of pottery has been dated to the late second/early first millennium BC.

INTRODUCTION

The hut-circle was discovered in March 1978 in recently ploughed hill-pasture on Ormiston Farm 1 km south of Newburgh. At this time the site comprised a poorly-defined ring of small and medium-sized boulders roughly 10 m in diameter. It was decided to test the nature of the surviving remains with a short excavation.

LOCATION OF THE SITE

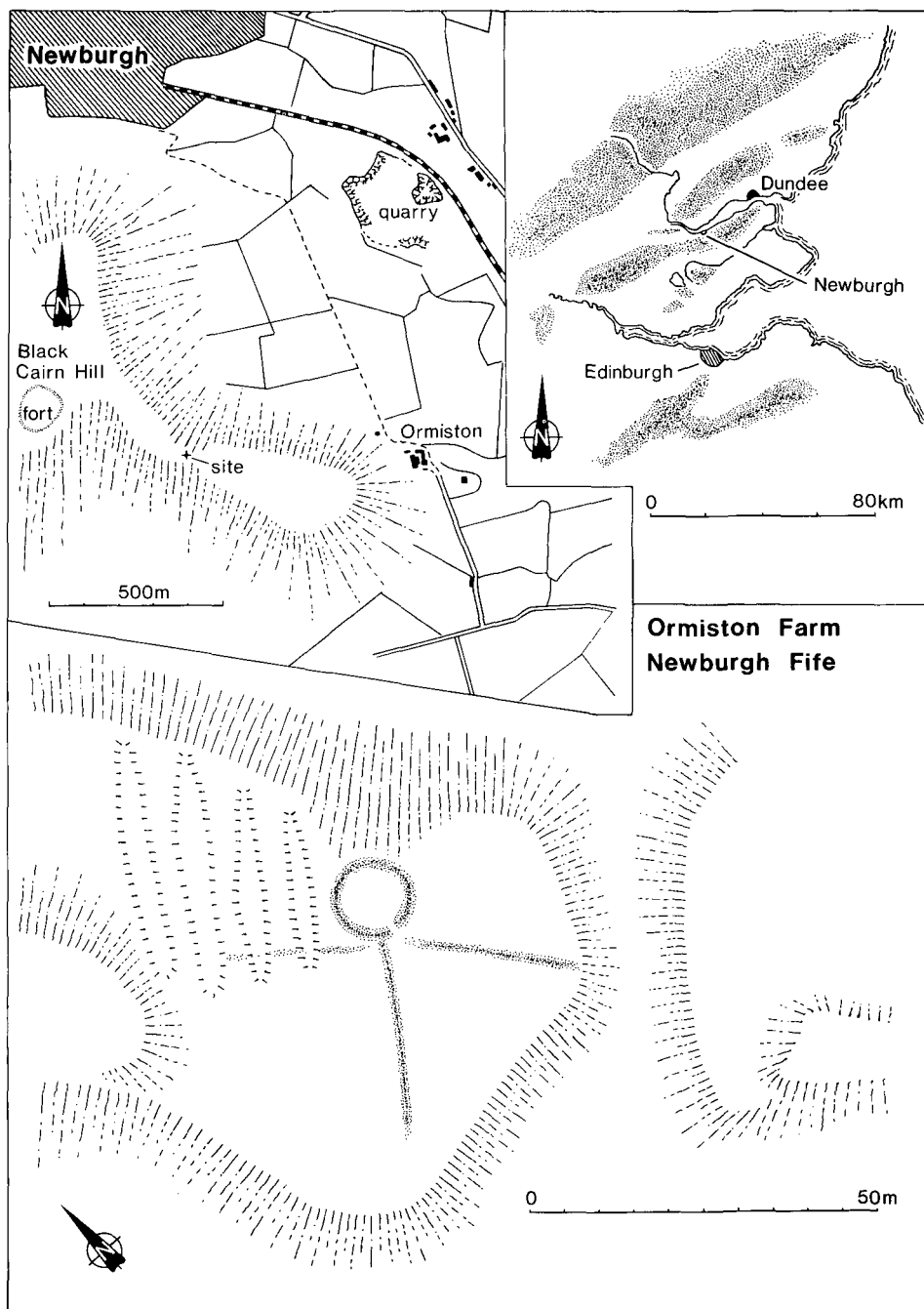
The hut-circle is situated (illus 1) 640 m west of Ormiston steading at a height of 169 m OD. It lies on an east-facing, slightly raised terrace on the north side of a west-north-west/east-south-east aligned ridge, which attains a maximum height of 236 m OD on the summit of Black Cairn Hill, 450 m west-north-west of the hut-circle. The ridge is formed of andesitic lavas of Old Red Sandstone age; a thin covering of till, however, masks the craggy natural features with only an occasional outcrop. The till supports a good topsoil which has attracted arable cultivation since at least the medieval period; both the north- and south-facing slopes are liberally covered with the remains of plots of ridge-and-furrow cultivation.

1978 EXCAVATION

Initial work in 1978 involved surveying the visible remains which confirmed the presence of a rubble ring and the position of the entrance on the south-east where there was a discernible dip.

The north wall was sectioned (illus 2) revealing an inner face of medium-sized boulders; very little of the wall core survived and none of the boulders of the outer face was found *in situ*. Ploughing on the northern part of the site had penetrated the shallow topsoil and at regular intervals scoring was visible on the surface of the underlying till. The inner face had survived only because the shares of the plough had passed parallel to either side. The lack of outer facing-stones (only two displaced stones were noted) is puzzling as there are no nearby dykes, buildings or tracks to suggest that they may have been robbed. A section across the wall on the north side (illus 2) showed that at least part of the core was turf-like,

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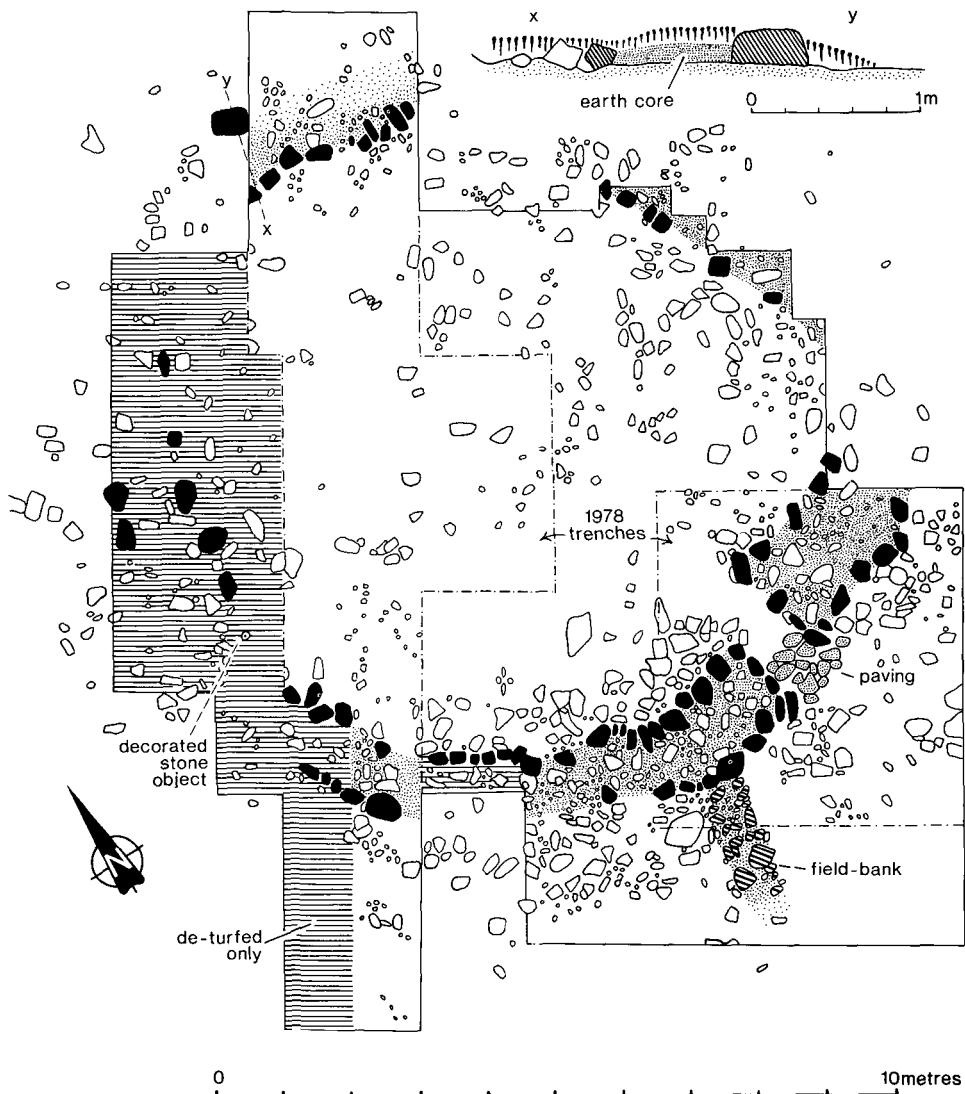


ILLUS 1 Location map and plan of site

suggesting, perhaps, that a solid stone wall, as built on the south half of the hut-circle, was not required on the north half. One outer facing-stone immediately behind the west section face indicated that the basal thickness of the wall was 1.3 m, although the surviving height of the undisturbed core was only 0.1 m.

The main section was carried across the interior of the hut-circle to the south-west, where the wall was crossed but not sectioned. At this point the wall was well preserved with both faces intact, and the relatively undisturbed core survived to a height of 0.5 m. The wall was 1 m thick and faced on both sides with medium-sized angular boulders; the core comprised smaller angular and rounded stones within a sparse matrix of soil.

At the centre of the hut-circle the section was expanded in the expectation of locating a hearth and/or postholes. No such features were noted and plough damage was not so great as to have destroyed all archaeological features in the interior. A few small sherds of pottery were recovered from the disturbed topsoil and from the surface of a 20 to 90 mm-thick layer of fibrous red soil which overlay the till in the south-east corner of the area.



ILLUS 2 Plan of site as excavated

Owing to lack of time the examination of the entrance was restricted to the excavation of the entrance passage, the removal of disturbed deposits from a short section of wall on the east side of the entrance and to the deturfing of a short section of wall on the west side. The wall on the east side was 1.75 m thick and faced on both sides with angular boulders; that part of the wall which formed the east side of the entrance-passage was constructed of slabs set on edge. Internal pressure from the wall-core had caused these slabs to lean into the passage, which was originally 0.75 m wide and up to 1.75 m long. The outer 0.8 m was paved with flat igneous and sandstone slabs laid in a shallow bedding trench. The main mass of the wall on the west side of the entrance was intact and, although exact dimensions could not be obtained, it appeared to be at least 1.4 m thick and 0.6 m high.

Pottery was recovered from disturbed topsoil in the area immediately north of the entrance passage, from disturbed deposits south-west of the entrance and from a brown soil layer which was noted in the north corner of the area opened up to examine the entrance (illus 2). This brown layer measured up to 30 mm thick and contained little stone. It was not found in the main trench or its central expansion, and lay directly on the red fibrous soil in the centre of the hut. On the assumption that the brown layer was the vestige of an occupation deposit which had survived in the lee of the hut-circle wall, a second season of excavation was planned, to determine the exact nature of this deposit, to obtain more pottery and, hopefully, dating evidence. A further season would also resolve the relationship of the field-walls to the hut-circle and provide an opportunity to examine the details of the structure of the hut-circle.

1980 EXCAVATION

HUT-CIRCLE

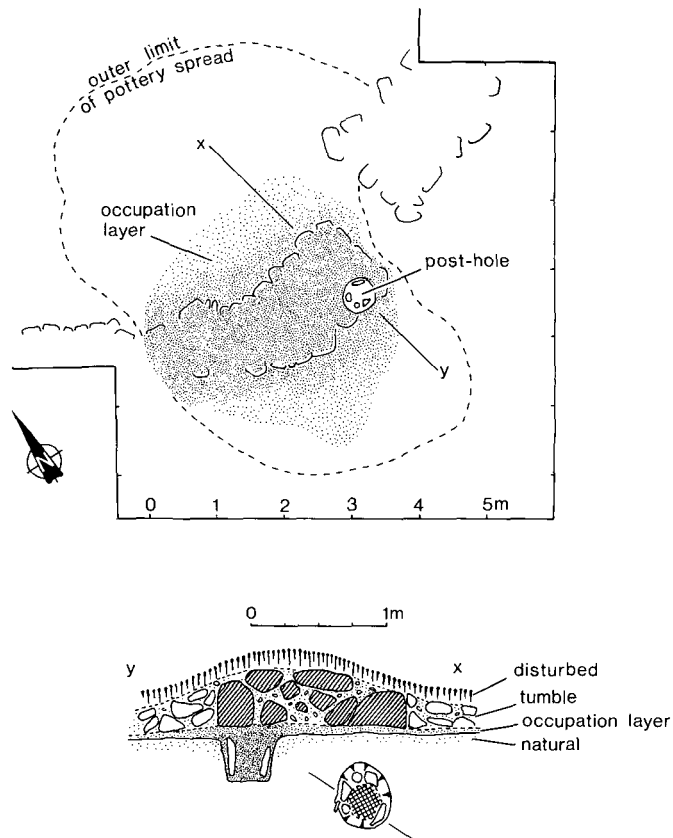
Topsoil was removed from most of the unexcavated part of the interior of the hut-circle, but no archaeological features were noted. Deturfing of certain sections of the wall was undertaken to obtain an accurate plan of the hut-circle and to examine the wall structure for evidence of post- or stake-holes. None was found as the top of the wall, even on the south side, had been disturbed by the plough.

The hut-circle was almost polygonal in plan; the east side was formed by a 6.5 m-length of straight wall whilst the south side was essentially a straight length of about 6 m. It was only from the south-west around the north-west arc to a point on the north-north-east that the structure had any true curve to it. The internal measurements were 9.75 m north-south by 8.5 m transversely, providing a floor area of about 61 m².

The wall structure immediately west of the entrance was examined and the brown soil layer encountered in 1978 was found to continue under the inner face. The brown soil layer was located outside the hut-circle immediately south-west of the entrance, where a posthole (illus 3) was found underlying the outer face of the hut-circle wall.

The posthole measured 0.48 m by 0.50 m at the top, narrowing to 0.33 m at its base and was 0.32 m in depth. It was cut through till, and into solid rock. Several flat stones had served as packing for a post c 0.25 m in diameter. The fill was of black, greasy soil which contained numerous fragments of charcoal and, near the surface, pottery. The wood remains have been identified by Mr R McCullagh as oak (*Quercus sp*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*). One of the oak samples had 22 growth rings, suggesting that it came from a tree at least 0.3 m in diameter; it is likely that the oak was derived from a single timber. In both samples where hazel was recorded it was noted that all examples were of fairly young branches with diameters of 10–25 mm. The brown occupation deposit appears to have accumulated whilst the post was *in situ*; the hazel and pottery fragments were distributed throughout it and the topmost part of the fill of the posthole, whereas the large oak fragments were restricted to the bottom half of the post-pipe.

The hut-circle wall lay directly upon the brown layer; there was no indication of a vegetation growth between the two features. This suggested either that the building of the hut-circle closely followed the destruction of the earlier timber structure or that the hut-circle builders had destroyed



ILLUS 3 Plan of earlier posthole, occupation deposit and extent of pottery

any evidence of a time-lapse between the two events. The latter suggestion is supported in part by the 'turfy' texture of the wall core on the north side and by the occurrence of numerous sherds of pottery within the core of the hut-circle wall. The brown layer survived best under the hut-circle wall to a depth of up to 80 mm and comprised a dark brown, stone-free matrix containing pottery fragments. The thickness of the layer beneath the wall compared with its slightness (up to 30 mm) immediately outwith the wall faces may suggest that the line of the wall was established before the turf, within and outside the hut-circle, was excavated. What cannot be estimated, however, is the time-span between the abandonment of the early structure and the building of the hut-circle. The occupation layer survived beneath the wall for a distance of 3 m from the posthole. The edge of the layer was examined for traces of some form of outer limit of an earlier structure (this being the one position where it may have been expected to survive) but the layer simply petered out. The date obtained from charcoal found within the posthole was 2935 ± 60 bp (GU-1669).

FIELD WALLS (illus 1 & 2)

When the hut-circle was first examined it was clear that several ruined stone banks lay in the vicinity (illus 1). One in particular appeared to join the south side of the hut-circle immediately west of the entrance and to extend for a distance of 26 m to the south-west. Excavation clearly demonstrated (illus 2) that the wall abutted the outer face of the hut-circle and that it comprised a boulder-faced bank 0.7 m thick by up to

0.3 m high. A second bank extended for a distance of 23 m to the south-east; it appeared to enter the area of the excavation but its presence was not confirmed. This wall enclosed a small area of ground measuring 22 m by 20 m to the east of the hut-circle, the north and east sides of the plot being defined by natural scarps. A third wall ran in a north-west direction from the south-west arc of the hut-circle, but most of its length was obscured by a plot of ridge-and-furrow cultivation which lay immediately west of the hut-circle. Probable traces of this wall were noted at the south end of the 1978 main trench.

THE FINDS

Apart from the pottery, dealt with below, only two other finds were recovered in the two seasons of excavation: fragments of a loom-weight were found in disturbed topsoil in the area immediately east of the hut-circle, and a decorated stone object was found in a disturbed section of the hut-circle wall on the south-west.

LOOM-WEIGHT (illus 4)

Ten fragments of baked clay were found as scattered surface finds; two of the larger pieces joined, providing some indication of the original shape. The weight measured at least 141 mm in length by 112 mm in width and 63 mm in thickness; one end is missing, but the other bears much of its original form. It is curved, and 45 mm from the end is a perforation tapering from 30 mm to 15 mm in diameter. The bright orange fabric is smooth to the touch; there is evidence that much of the original harder surface has flaked off and is now uneven. The core of the object is a charcoal-grey colour. The clay has virtually no tempering, but is distinctly micaceous.

DECORATED STONE (illus 4)

A decorated piece of basalt was found in disturbed deposits on the surface of the hut-circle wall in the south-west arc. The maximum dimensions of the object are 156 mm by 137 mm by 76 mm, and one side appears to have been deliberately shaped by the removal of several flakes. The upper surface has been artificially smoothed to facilitate the carving of a design, most of which survives. The original design was a quadrilateral formed by two parallel incised lines on three sides with the fourth formed by a single line. A rough layout of the design can be seen in the form of several light score marks, and it is likely that these marks represent nothing more than a test made by the sculptor to gauge the area of the final design. Examination of the marks reveals that they are U-shaped in profile indicating the use of a blunt tool. The tailing-off of several of the lines beyond the junction points suggests that that tool was a blade.

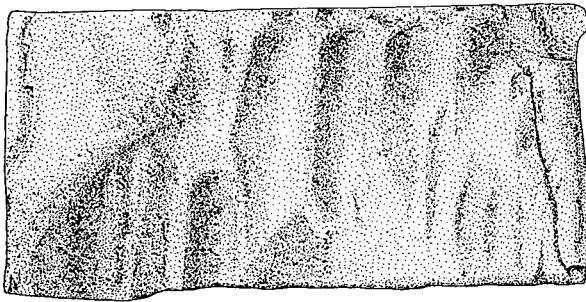
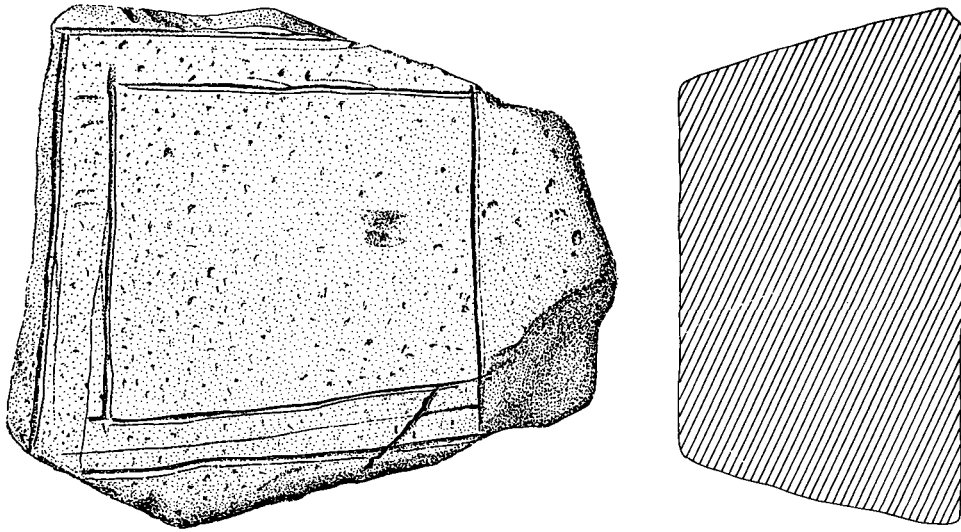
THE POTTERY

S P Halliday

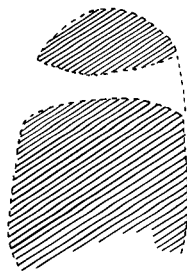
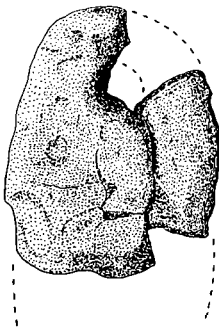
A total of 135 sherds of pottery was recovered from the excavation; of these 45 are small fragments of less than 20 mm². Most of the rest are body sherds, but a small number of rimsherds is also present. At least eight vessels are represented, seven identified from rimsherds and the eighth from a group of coarse base-sherds.

Too little survives of any of the vessels to be certain of either their profiles or sizes. All the fabrics are fairly hard and the grits used as a filler rarely exceed 1 mm across in the vessels represented by rimsherds; the grits in the group of sherds representing the eighth vessel, however, are up to 5 mm across. Some of the sherds carry encrustations of carbon which occur indiscriminately on both internal and external surfaces.

Although the vessels are relatively crudely made, an examination of the surfaces of the sherds shows that some of them were quite well finished. Before the clay had dried the surfaces of these vessels were worked over; normally carried out with a damp rag or by hand, this process brings some of the finer clay particles to the surface. On vessel 1 the striae preserved on the surfaces of the sherds, together with occasional grass impressions suggest that a handful of grass was used. Particular attention was paid to the inner surfaces of the vessels, the outer surfaces tending to be rougher and more gritty.

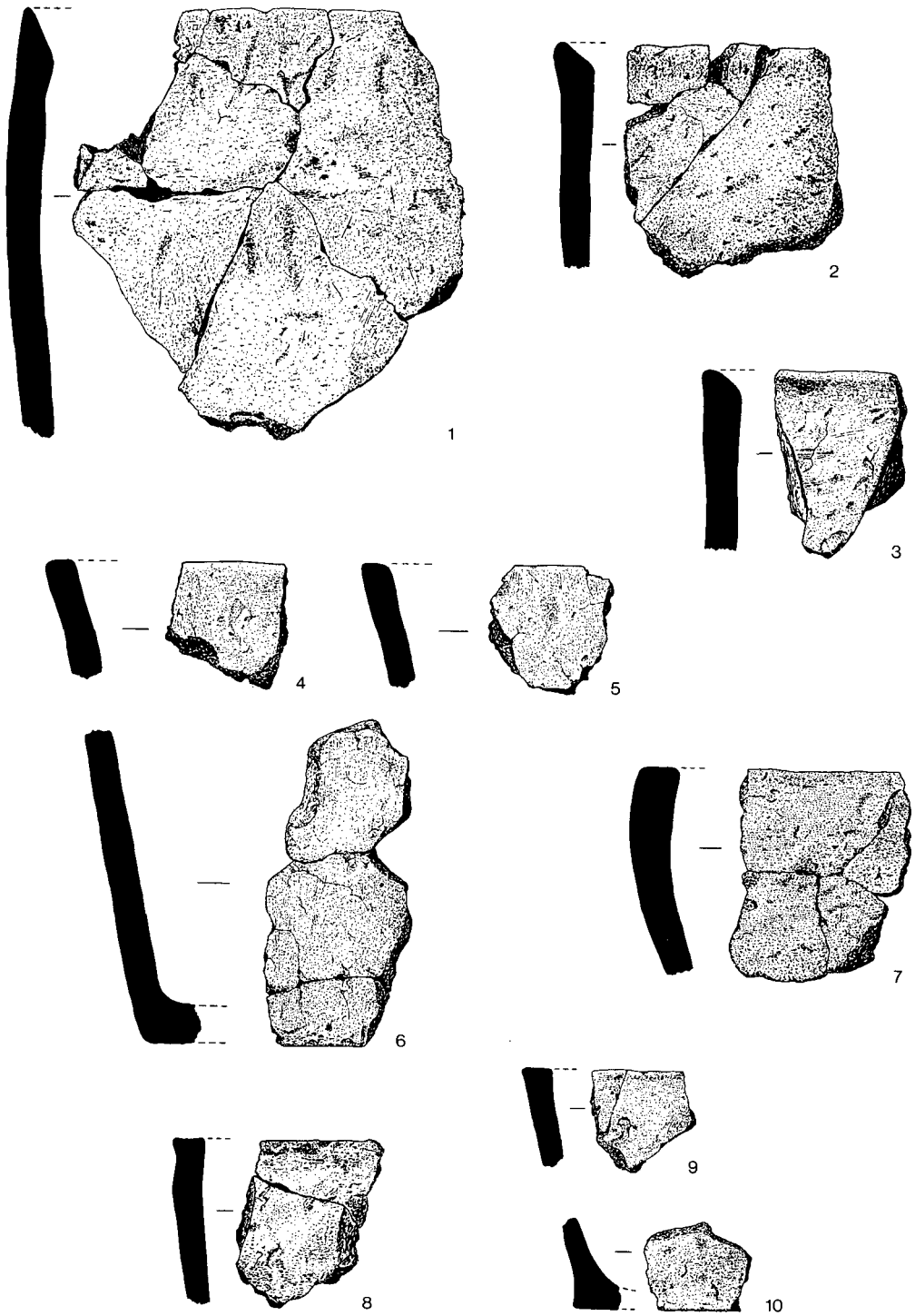


0 5cm



0 10cm

ILLUS 4 Decorated stone object and baked clay loom-weight



ILLUS 5 The pottery (scale 1:2)

Vessel 1 (illus 5, 1)

This vessel probably had a fairly upright profile, measuring about 240 mm in diameter at the rim. Buff to grey in colour, it is a hard fabric 9–10 mm in thickness. Five conjoining sherds (30 mm by 110 mm) include 70 mm of a steeply bevelled rim. The whole of the internal surfaces of these sherds bear easily distinguished striae; slight traces of both horizontal and vertical striae appear on the more gritty external surfaces. An additional 10 body sherds bearing a similar pattern of striae are probably from the same vessel.

Vessel 2 (illus 5, 3)

This vessel is represented by a single rimsherd (55 mm by 35 mm); black to grey in colour, it is of a hard fabric about 10 mm thick. The rim has an internal bevel with a rounded lip and there are slight traces of striae on both the inner and outer surfaces.

Vessel 3 (illus 5, 2)

This vessel probably had a fairly upright profile measuring about 180 mm in diameter at the rim. Buff to almost black in colour, it is of a hard fabric about 9 mm in thickness. Three conjoining sherds (70 mm by 60 mm) include about 60 mm of a bevelled rim with a slightly flaring lip. The inner surface is relatively smooth, but the outer ranges from slight traces of striae to a gritty surface like a coarse abrasive. A group of 10 body fragments possibly come from this vessel; they exhibit a similar range of surfaces with little trace of striae. A carbon deposit of varying thickness occurs on the inner surface of seven of the sherds and what may be another body-sherd from this vessel bears a carbon deposit on the inner surface and also preserves the internal angle of the base.

Vessel 4 (illus 5, 8)

A vessel measuring about 160 mm diameter at the rim is represented by two conjoining sherds of a hard fabric 7–8 mm thick and buff to dark grey in colour. The profile is probably fairly upright and the rim has been flattened to produce a slight external overhang. Striae are visible on the inner surface and the rim; there are also traces of carbon encrustation on the inner surface.

Vessel 5 (illus 5, 4 & 5)

All that can certainly be attributed to this vessel are two rimsherds each about 35 mm square. Grey in colour and of a hard fabric 8 mm thick, these sherds are perhaps the best finished of the whole assemblage. Both have smoothed surfaces bearing traces of fine striae, which also occur on the flattened rim; on the inner surface the striae are horizontal, but on the outer they are vertical. Three small body sherds, one with carbon encrustation, may also come from this vessel. The profile is uncertain; it may have been upright with an internal rim-bevel, but alternatively the walls may have risen at an angle to a horizontal rim. If the latter, they may belong to a fragment of well-finished base (no 6) from which two body-sherds rise at an angle of about 80°. Buff to grey in colour, these sherds are of a hard fabric 7 mm thick, the base being about 12 mm thick. The outer surfaces bear traces of fine vertical striae and there are traces of a carbon encrustation on the inner surface.

Vessel 6 (illus 5, 7)

This was probably an open-mouthed vessel with a rounded profile, measuring between 240 mm and 300 mm in diameter at the rim. Buff to almost black in colour, it is of a hard fabric varying from 9 mm in thickness to a maximum of 13 mm at the flattened rim. Four conjoining sherds (60 mm by 50 mm) include 45 mm of the rim; at one point there are traces of fine striae below the inner edge of the rim, but otherwise both the inner and outer surfaces have a gritty texture like a coarse abrasive. Ten other body-sherds with similarly textured surfaces may come from this vessel; four conjoin and a fifth preserves the internal angle at the base.

Vessel 7 (illus 5, 9 & 10)

A small vessel measuring between 120 mm and 160 mm in diameter at the rim is represented by one rim and two body-sherds, the latter preserving the angle at the base. The rimsherd is grey in colour and of a hard fabric 6 mm thick expanding to 9 mm at the rim. The rim is flattened, producing a slightly flared

external lip. Both the inner and outer surfaces bear traces of fine striae and the angle of the rim is uncertain. The two other sherds are buff to grey in colour; the base measured about 80 mm in diameter.

Vessel 8 (not illustrated)

The assemblage also contains a group of at least 14 sherds which are characterized by very coarse grits up to 5 mm across. These include at least four sherds from a base 15 mm thick and 160 mm in diameter. Not all the body-sherds necessarily come from the same vessel. There is one large sherd (85 mm by 60 mm by 11 mm thick) with a relatively smooth dark grey inner surface, and a coarse light brown outer surface bearing traces of striae in two directions. Two other sherds (each c 50 mm by 30 mm and 9–10 mm thick) have coarse orange-coloured outer surfaces and smooth buff-coloured inner surfaces, the latter bearing well-formed striae.

Discussion of the pottery

Despite the simplicity of the vessels from Ormiston, the assemblage is of considerable interest, representing a group of domestic vessels of late second-/early first-millennium BC date. In the past there has been a tendency to lose such groups of pottery amongst Flat-rimmed Ware, a label which has been used to describe coarse pottery from the third to the first millennia (Coles & Taylor 1970, 97–8). The label is, however, inappropriate and there is little justification for grouping the diverse assemblages of coarse pottery from three millennia this way (Hedges 1975, 69).

Clearly, this sort of pottery is not sensitive to fine chronological definition, but there are now several assemblages from eastern Scotland associated with late second/early first-millennium radiocarbon dates. Principally, these are from Green Knowe, Peeblesshire (Jobey 1980) and Myrehead (Barclay 1983). At both sites there are thick-walled vessels with large grits, the most distinctive vessels (one from Myrehead and three from Green Knowe) bearing shallow grooves beneath the rim; similar features are present on a vessel from the undated hut-circle site at Dalnaglar, Perthshire (Stewart 1962), and a midden on the Culbin Sands, Moray, the latter probably associated with a single radiocarbon date of 1259 ± 75 bc (Coles & Taylor 1970).

In contrast most of the vessels from Ormiston have relatively finely-gritted fabrics, and none of the wall sherds is more than 10 mm thick. The range of profiles is probably similar, being no more than variations of bucket and barrel shapes, but the number of vessels with internally bevelled rims is particularly notable. Similar pottery comes from the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, Moray (Benton 1931) and a double-walled hut-circle at Dalrulzion, Perthshire (Thorneycroft 1933). In both assemblages there are steep internal rim bevels and a complete absence of the shallow finger-grooving. The Covesea pottery was apparently associated with Ewart Park metalwork of ninth- or eighth-century BC date.

The steep internal rim-bevel is not entirely absent from the assemblages where shallow finger-grooving is present (*contra* Halliday 1985, 245), as can be seen for instance at Myrehead (Barclay 1983, 58–9); the capacity for rim-forms to vary at different points on the same vessel must also be borne in mind. Nevertheless, the two groups of pottery can still be validly distinguished. Vessel *I* from Ormiston would be out of place in the Green Knowe assemblage, while the vessels from Dalrulzion are generally better fired and have harder fabrics than those from Dalnaglar (Coles 1962). In practice, however, the distinction may be functional, and the bevelled rims may be for vessels which contained liquids.

Jobey (1980, 87) has noted that vessel *8* from Green Knowe would have been at home in a cremation cemetery, and the same can be said of vessel *I* from Ormiston. From Sandy Road, Scone, Perthshire there is an urn with a similar profile and an associated radiocarbon date of 1200 ± 150 bc (Stewart 1965).

DISCUSSION

The excavation of the Ormiston hut-circle is the latest in a series of examinations of prehistoric house sites in Fife; a late Iron-Age house and enclosure was excavated at Green Craig (Bersu 1948b) following the 1946–7 excavation of a multiphase ring-groove house and enclosure at Scotstarvit Covert (Bersu 1948a). In 1962 a stone-walled house, one of an unenclosed group of three at Drumcarrow, was also excavated (Maxwell 1968). No datable finds were recovered from any of the sites, but Green Craig and Scotstarvit fall into readily identifiable typological groupings. The

constructional evidence which led the excavator of Drumcarrow to suggest a Roman or sub-Roman date is at best inconclusive.

A feature of the earlier excavated sites which was repeated at Ormiston was the paucity of finds; the decorated stone object and the loom-weight were both found in disturbed deposits and none of the pottery can be attributed to the immediate hut-circle period.

With regard to the nature of the posthole and occupation layer, the evidence is not helpful; if a building is indicated neither its form or size can be assessed and from a minimalist point of view, the remains could simply represent a midden heaped against a fence-post.

The principal point of note concerning the structure of the hut-circle was the lack of internal postholes; this was a feature shared with the Drumcarrow house and one which contrasted markedly with the ring-groove house at Scotstarvit. Whilst it is possible that the Ormiston house may have had an internal post-ring supported on a series of stone foot-plates it would be remarkable if all the evidence had been destroyed by the modern disturbance. Indeed, the presence of foot-plates would have been surprising on a subsoil of tractable till in which the digging of postholes would have been a simple task.

The main weight of the roof could have been borne on timbers which rested on horizontal sleepers on top of the wall structure. No postholes were found within the wall-core and providing that the main timbers were stout enough there would have been no need for the additional support provided by an inner post-ring. It has been shown elsewhere (Reynolds 1982) that the presence of a ring-beam need only reflect the need to support an upper floor level which is largely independent of the roof structure. Following this line, it is probably fair to assume that the Ormiston hut-circle was originally a simple structure without internal divisions or supports that were substantial enough to have left traces in the archaeological record.

Finally the remains of the field-walls provide evidence of some form of contemporary land management with the first millennium BC. The extent of the area partitioned by the banks and natural slopes is not great nor particularly informative since small plots of enclosed ground such as these were common from the second millennium BC onwards (Fowler 1983, 129). The original extent of the plots may originally have been much greater but intensive cultivation in the more recent past has effectively destroyed or masked the evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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