

Excavations at Grandtully, Perthshire

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with a report on the cremations by C B Denston‡

ABSTRACT

The site at Grandtully is defined by a series of pits and scoops dug into a gravel terrace. Two phases of activity are represented, a late Neolithic phase with pottery deposited, perhaps ritually, in a number of pits and a subsequent early Bronze-Age flat cemetery containing urned and simple cremation deposits.

THE SITE

The site lies on a terrace to the south of the river Tay at a height of 103 m OD in the area known as the Haugh of Grandtully, approximately 1 km north-east of the hamlet of Grandtully and 7 km north-east of Aberfeldy (NGR NN 922 533) (illus 1 & 2). The terrace is largely composed of sand with superficial and intermittent gravel deposits. The first indication of its archaeological potential was revealed by the discovery of a collared urn (*P 15*) during the digging of a trench for a gas pipeline in 1965. In 1966 a small area of 65 m² was examined in the area of the initial find and the results from this excavation led to the mechanical top stripping and subsequent trowelling of 350 m² in 1967 (illus 3). A brief account of the site and the method of photogrammetric recording of the features (Simpson & Cooke 1967) (illus 4) and the radiocarbon dates (Coles 1969) have already been published.

STRUCTURAL FEATURES

A total of 52 features had been dug in the subsoil, all but one (no 35) being confined to a thin gravel capping which overlay a deposit of sand (illus 3 & 4). The majority were circular or sub-circular pits varying from 30 cm to 1.2 m in diameter. With one exception these were comparatively shallow, between 15 and 50 cm in depth. The one exception (no 15) was a cylindrical pit 1.2 m in depth (illus 7). In addition there were a number of more irregular scoops and hollows; the largest (no 6) had a surviving length of 3 m although its northern end had been truncated by the pipeline trench. On the basis of their content these features fall into two broad groups.

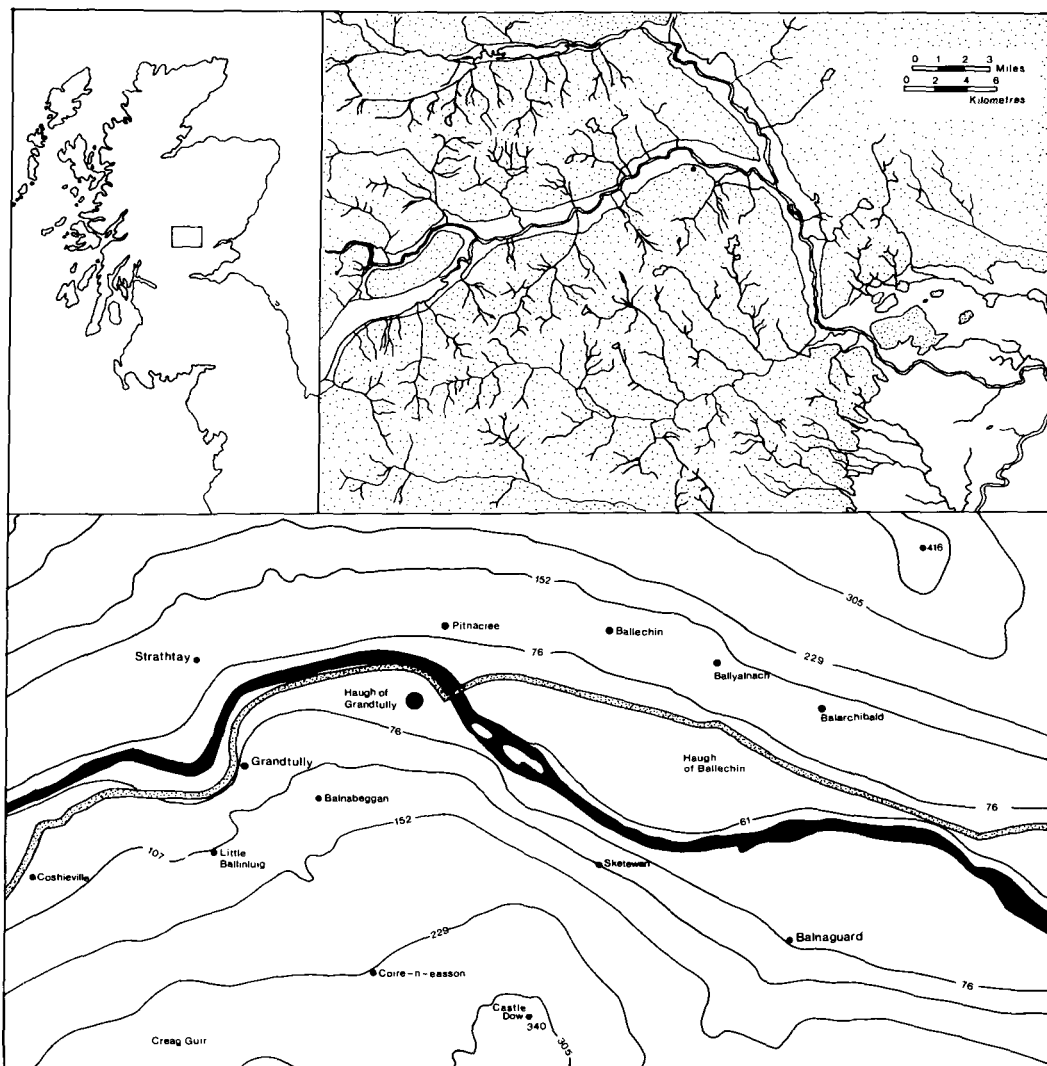
I LATE NEOLITHIC

A number of shallow pits and scoops were scattered over an area of about 350 m². The hollows were filled with stones, gravel and sand, very slightly discoloured in contrast to the unaltered light

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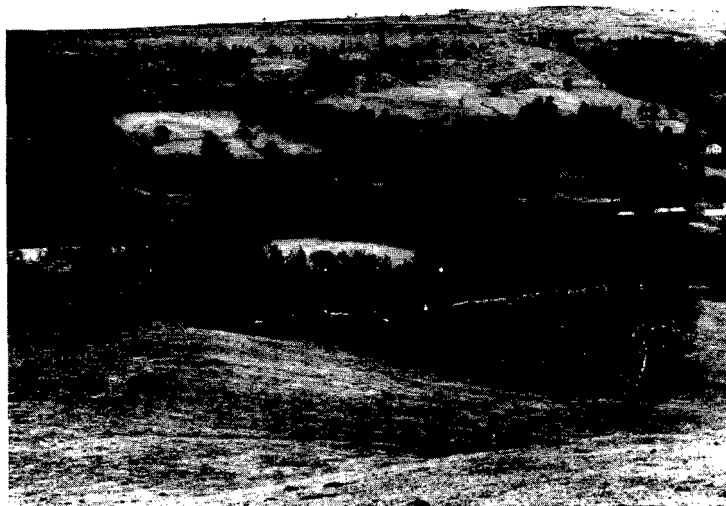
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ILLUS 1 Location map

material of the natural gravel and sand terrace (illus 5). Moisture tended to provide a useful contrast between the top of the hollows and the natural deposits, and in one case a series of small discolourations could be seen surrounding a hollow, perhaps the remains of a small protecting screen. Some of the hollows contained sherds of late Neolithic pottery and charcoal (illus 6). Samples of the latter from two of the features yielded radiocarbon dates around 4000 bp (uncalibrated). Some of the hollows appeared to have been back-filled at the same time, as sherds of vessel *P1* came from features 4 and 47, of vessel *P2* from features 3, 8 and 15, and vessel *P3* from features 4 and 15.

The nature of the fill, the generally unweathered condition of the sides of the pits and the lack of natural silt and gravel deposits in their bases suggest that all the features in this first group had remained open for a comparatively short period of time. The nature of the fill of these features would



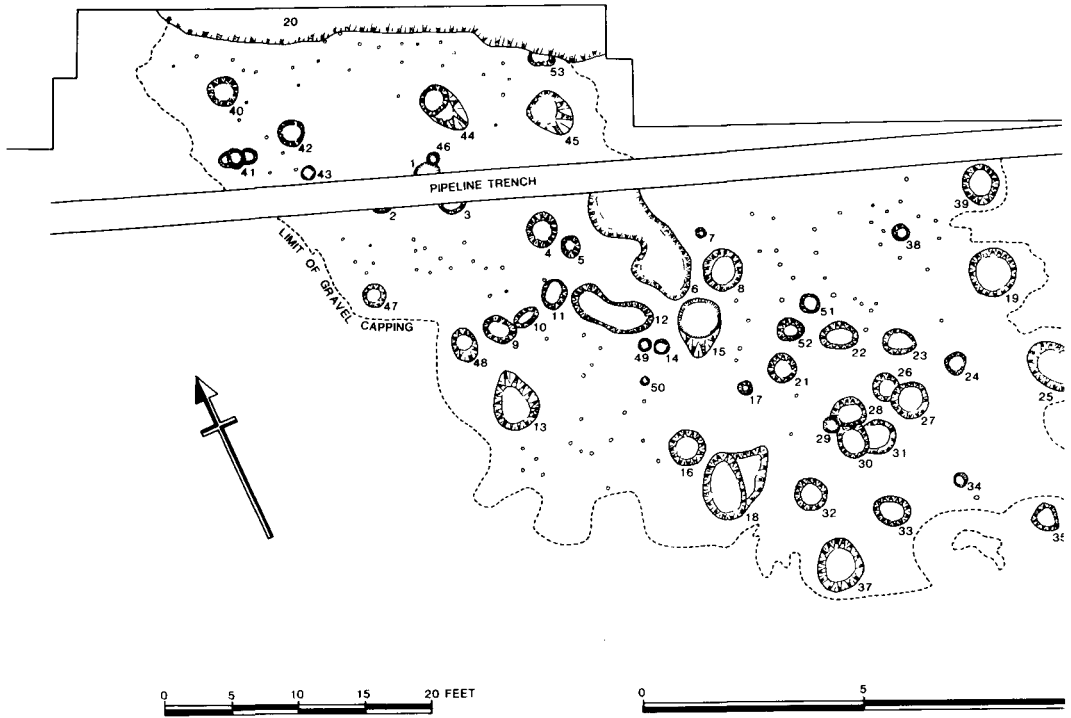
ILLUS 2 View of the Tay Valley from the south with the site in the middle distance

at first sight suggest domestic activity on the site at this period, an assumption perhaps reinforced by the form and size of pit 15 (illus 7) which appears to fall into the category of grain storage pit (Field *et al* 1964).

Radiocarbon dates:	Gak-1398	Pit 15	4080±190 bp
	Gak-1396	Pit 40	3920±100 bp.

Pottery – Late Neolithic (illus 8)

- P1* Shallow bowl with sharply developed collar and internally bevelled rim. Both rim and collar are decorated with vertical and horizontal bands of stab and drag. Hard well-fired ware with angular rock inclusions. *Pits 4 and 47.*
- P2* Simple bowl with flat and slightly expanded rim. Plain exterior and rim decorated with fingernail impressions. Hard, well-fired ware with fine grit inclusions. *Pits 3, 8 and 15.*
- P3* Shallow bowl with T-sectioned rim. Plain exterior rim decorated with five lines of twisted cord impressions. Fine, well-fired ware with no obvious inclusions. *Pits 4 and 15.*
- P4* Single rimsherd with slight internal bevel from a shallow bowl. Rim bears two rows of fingernail impressions. Outer surface has two rows of deep oval impressions. Hard gritty fabric with angular rock inclusions. *Pit 7.*
- P5* Single body sherd decorated with fine diagonal incision. Hard, gritty micaceous clay. *Pit 30.*
- P6* Rimsherd with slight internal level. Undecorated, fine micaceous clay with large angular quartz fragments. *Pit 40.*
- P7* Ten body sherds decorated with finely incised lattice pattern. Poorly fired with large angular rock inclusions. *Pit 4.*
- P8* Single body sherd decorated with a single fingernail impression above a row of irregular kidney-shaped impressions. Coarse, poorly fired ware with numerous angular inclusions. *Pit 29.*
- P9* Rim- and body sherds of an undecorated vessel with internal rim bevel. Hard, well-fired ware with quartz and angular rock inclusions. *Pit 15.*



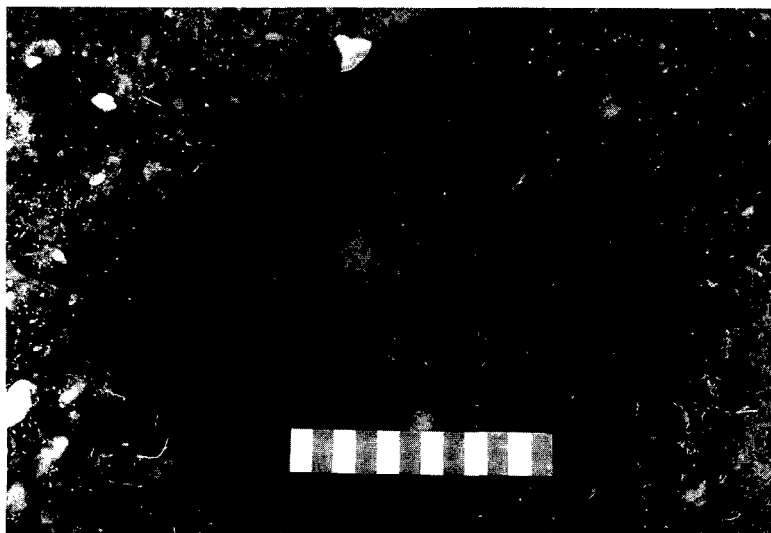
ILLUS 3 General plan



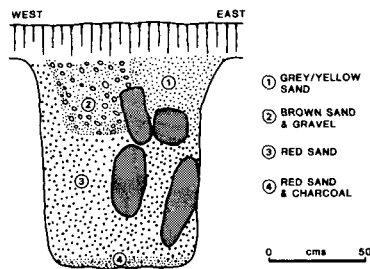
ILLUS 4 Photomosaic of site



ILLUS 5 Late Neolithic pits and scoops



ILLUS 6 Late Neolithic pottery in shallow scoop, Pit 4



ILLUS 7 Pit 15, section

- P10* Four rimsherds of shallow bowl with slight internal bevel. Rim decorated with irregular fingernail impressions; exterior, finger-tip rustication. Poorly fired with large inclusions of schist and granite. *Pit 7.*
- P11* Single plain body sherd of fine micaceous clay, lacking inclusions. Not illustrated. *Pit 31.*
- P12* Two plain body sherds, poorly fired with large angular rock inclusions. Not illustrated. *Pit 32.*
- P13* Three plain body sherds of hard, gritty fabric with large quartz inclusions. Not illustrated. *Pit 44.* (This scoop also contained a small grey unburnt flint core, see below.)
- P14* Two body sherds of poorly fired fabric with many small rock inclusions. Not illustrated. *Pit 43.*

Flint

Flint flake: grey flint, rectangular, L 28 mm, W 24 mm, with thick retouched platform, scalar retouched sides, and reverse nibbled retouch on slightly curved end. *Feature 20.*

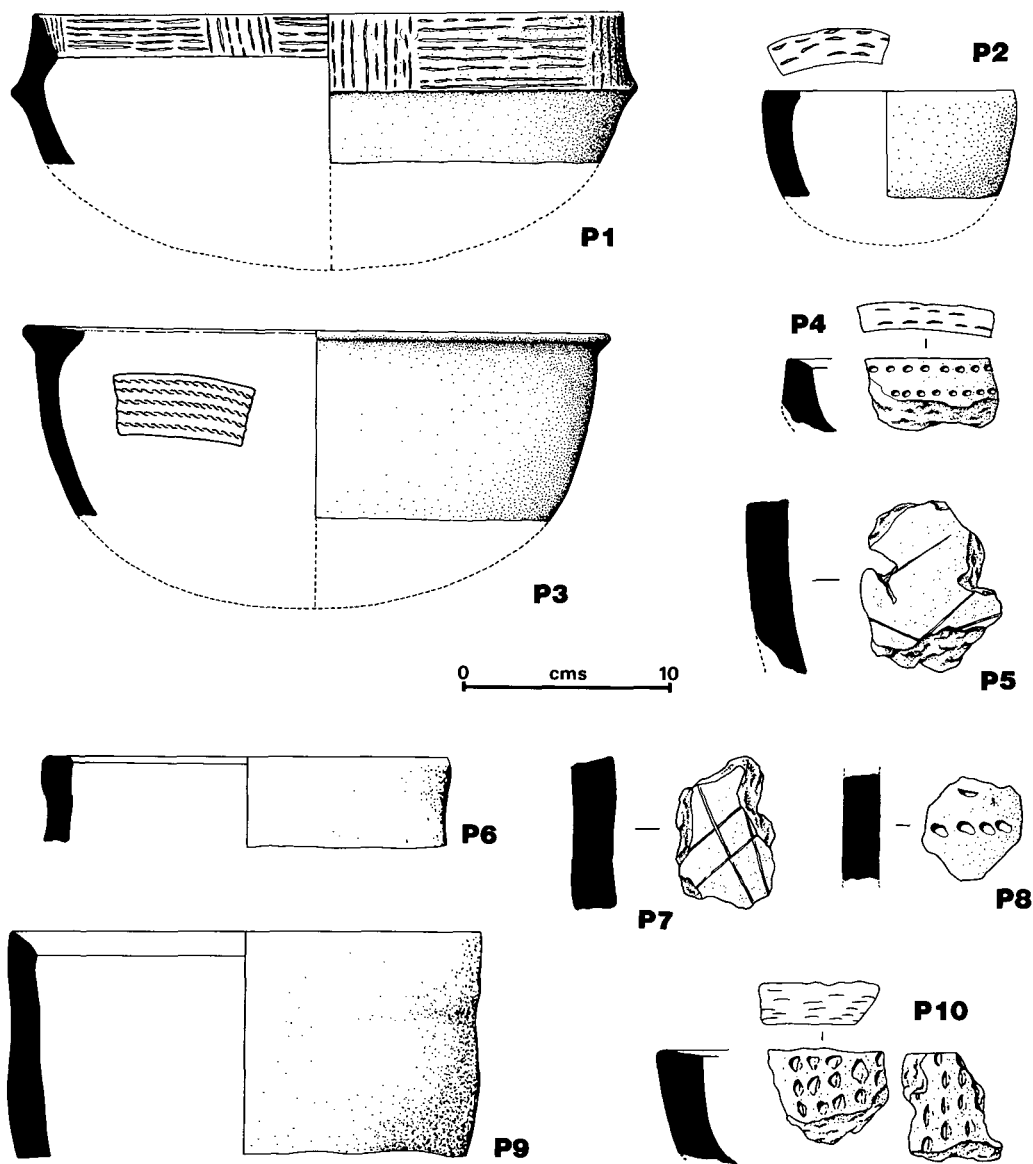
Flint core: small grey and unburnt, L 39 mm, W 19 mm, with cortex and blade-like scars, and a shattered platform. *Pit 44.*

DISCUSSION

Both the two radiocarbon determinations and the general character of the pottery suggest a late Neolithic date and much of the material belongs to the Scottish impressed-ware tradition, the northern equivalent of Peterborough Ware, although not as yet capable of broad classification into distinctive styles as in the case of the latter. 'The impressed wares of Scotland have a common denominator in their decoration and in their fabric, but the forms are innumerable and their decoration follows no classifiable pattern' (McInnes 1969, 22). As a group the Grandtully pottery is most closely comparable to vessels from a pit at Brackmont Mill, Fife (Longworth 1967, 67) with the emphasis on stab and drag, fingernail and rusticated decoration. Cord impressions are uncommon but the T-rimmed vessel Grandtully *P3* can be paralleled at Hedderwick, East Lothian (Callander 1929, 67) and Luce Sands, Wigtownshire (McInnes 1964, 73, fig 8, 148-9). The most interesting of the Grandtully vessels is *P1*, a shallow bowl with a heavily developed collar decorated with a hurdle pattern executed in a stab and drag technique. Both in form and decorative technique it invites comparison with Unstan Ware (eg Henshall 1963, 252). Unstan Ware is essentially a northern and western form in the Scottish Neolithic but occasional collared bowls are represented in the east as at Knapperty Hillock, Aberdeenshire (Henshall 1983, 26, fig 5, 7) and again at Brackmont Mill (Longworth 1967, 67).

II BRONZE AGE

A number of rather narrower and deeper pits and scoops dug into the sand and gravel, but not intruding into the Neolithic hollows, contained burials of the earlier Bronze Age. Two radiocarbon dates suggest activity in the later second millennium BC. The cemetery was laid out within the area of



ILLUS 8 Late Neolithic pottery

the Neolithic occupation. There were only seven identifiable graves with cremations, and seven individuals were represented, but unequally spread among the grave pits. One urn (*P16*) (illus 9) in Pit 1 contained the remains of three people, all young and aged from 5 to 12 years, and accompanied by a bone pin, a leaf-shaped flint point and some shattered flint chips. Another urn (*P15*) in Pit 16 had remains of a young adult male, and a third pot (*P17*) in Pit 24 had remains of a seven year old. Cremated remains of two adults, possibly female, were laid directly into holes in the ground; one had four flint and chert artefacts, and the other had five barbed-and-tanged arrowheads and a flint knife.



ILLUS 9 Bronze-Age urn in Pit 16

Two scoops in the ground had very few fragments of bone and might represent residues of the major cremations. The details of the bones appear in appendix A (fiche 1:A3–C12).

Radiocarbon dates:	Gak-603	Pit 1 (Urn <i>P15</i>)	3220±100 bp
	Gak-1397	Pit 33	2880±100 bp.

Pit 1

Cremation of three young people, aged 5–12 years, and deposited in an urn inverted in a pit. Charcoal yielded a radiocarbon date of Gak-603 1270±100 bc; illus 10, *P16*.

Grave goods

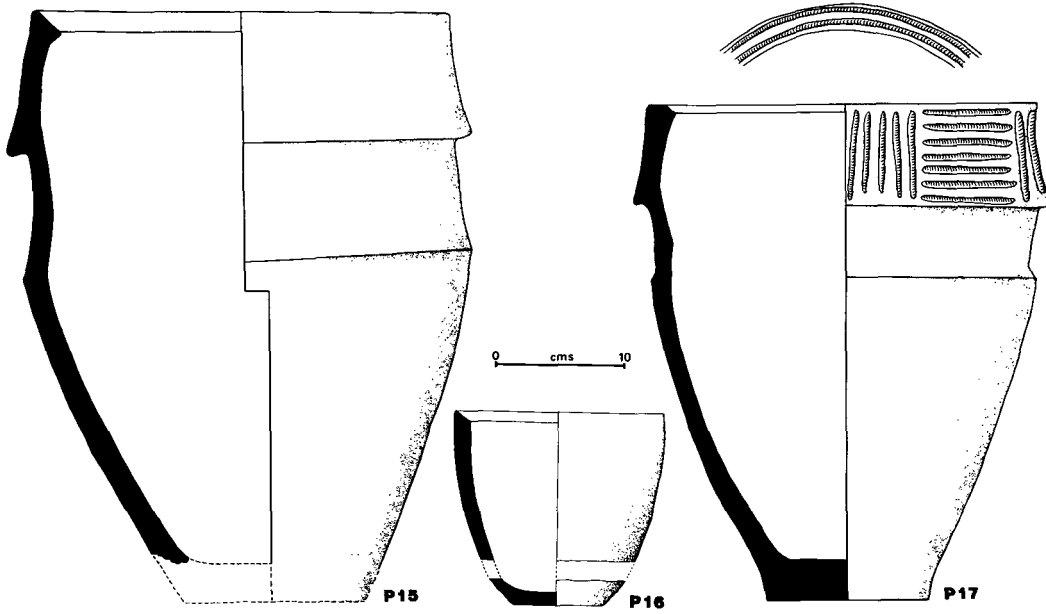
Urn (*P16*), flint leaf-shaped point, bone point, flint chips (illus 11).

Collared urn (illus 10) Decorated with a hurdle pattern in whipped cord on the collar and two concentric lines of whipped cord on the rim. A few angular rock inclusions are visible on the interior and exterior surfaces. Secondary Series Urn, Form 1A (Longworth 1984, no 1998).

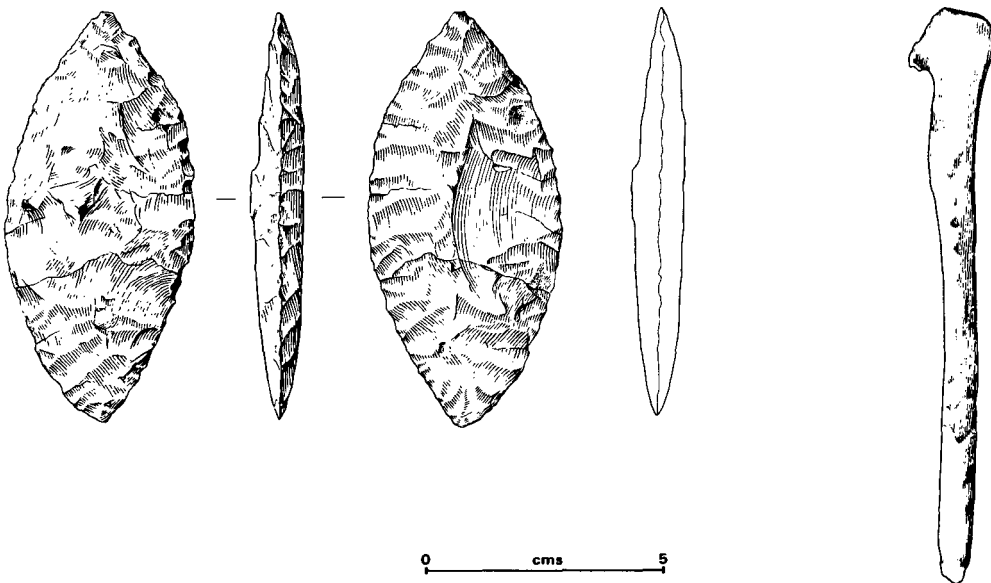
Bone point (illus 11) Long bone of large mammal, possibly *Bos*¹, L 116 mm, flaked to form a point, now broken, head unaltered, slightly burnt and pitted. The bone cannot have been in the funeral pyre, but must have been put into the urn along with the still-hot bones.

Flint leaf-shaped point (illus 11) Grey, L 86 mm, W 39 mm, Th 10 mm, bifacially flaked, burnt and in two pieces when found, with other cracks and thermal features undetached.

Flint chips Twelve, grey, from L 28 mm to L 12 mm, plus one tiny chip, cortex remaining on several, burnt and shattered, possibly once a single or several artefacts (not illustrated).



ILLUS 10 Bronze-Age pottery from Pit 11 (P16), Pit 16 (P15) and Pit 24 (P17)



ILLUS 11 Bronze-Age leaf-shaped point and bone point from Pit 1

Pit 16

Cremation of a young adult male, deposited in an urn inverted in a pit with a stone slab cover.

Grave goods

Urn (P15).

Undecorated collared urn (illus 10) With unweathered angular rock fragments as filler. The collar is badly weathered and the base missing. The base was covered by a large flat slab. Secondary Series Urn, Form I C (Longworth 1984, no 1997).

Pit 23

Cremation of one individual, possibly part of the cremation in adjacent Pit 36 West.

Pit 24

Cremation of an immature person, aged about seven years, in a pit.

Grave goods

Broken pieces of a pot (P17).

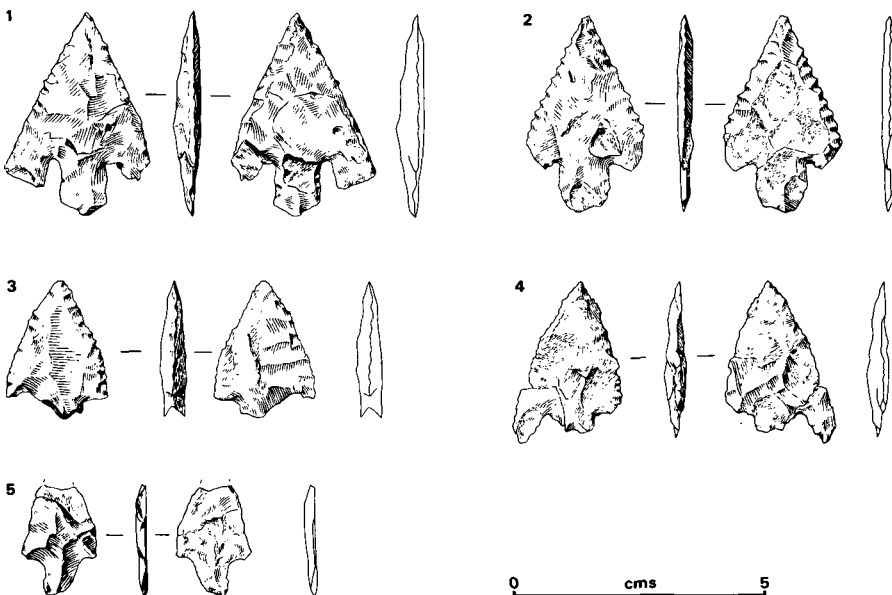
Small undecorated bucket-shaped vessel (illus 10) Poorly fired and with numerous angular rock and quartz inclusions.

Pit 32

Few fragments of cremated bone.

Pit 33

Cremation of a young adult, possibly female, in a pit. The top of the pit fill contained six flat stones, three at the edges and three near the centre. The pit fill was of dark-stained gravel, probably in part the remains of the pyre. Beneath the upper stones was a large flat slab overlying the cremation, and at the base of the pit was a lump of wood, charred but identifiable as probably oak. The abundant charcoal yielded a radiocarbon date of Gak-1396 930±100 bc.



ILLUS 12 Barbed-and-tanged arrowheads from Pit 33

Grave goods

Five barbed-and-tanged arrowheads (illus 12), flint knife, possible wooden object.

Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead L 38 mm, W 28 mm, serrated edges, burnt and thermal fractures (illus 12, 1).

Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead L 40 mm, W 29 mm, squared barbs, slightly serrated edges, burnt (illus 12, 2).

Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead L 21 mm, W 20 mm, pointed barbs, tang broken and lost, burnt (illus 12, 3).

Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead L 33 mm, W 19 mm, pointed barbs, in two pieces, burnt and thermal fractures (illus 12, 4).

Barbed-and-tanged arrowhead L 22 mm, W 15 mm, narrow, split by thermal effects (illus 12, 5).

Flint knife Grey flint, L 48 mm, W 19 mm, Th 11 mm. One side and end retouched, wide flake scars extending into cortex, burnt (not illustrated).

Pit 36 West

Cremation of a young adult, possibly female, in a pit.

Grave goods

Flint and chert flakes.

Flint flake Brown, L 26 mm, W 21 mm, with pronounced small bulb, utilized along one straight edge.

Flint flake Burnt fragment, L 18 mm, W 28 mm.

Chert chip 14×7 mm, thermal fractures, probably burnt.

Chert chip 11×8 mm, cortex, thermal effects. Probably once part of the above chert chip.

DISCUSSION

The radiocarbon dates and the urns from this cemetery indicate a later second millennium BC age for the activity, and the radiocarbon evidence is only slightly at variance with the earlier dated cemeteries in southern Scotland, for example at Weird Law, Peeblesshire (NPL-57 3440±90 bp) and Whitstanes Moor, Dumfriesshire (Gak-461 2310±90 bp). The date of 2880±100 bp for Pit 33 at Grandtully, with its barbed-and-tanged arrowheads, is later than expected. A beaker burial at Culduthel Mains, Inverness-shire, had eight such arrowheads as well as a bracer, and would be expected to be more than several centuries earlier than the cremation in Pit 33 with its five arrowheads, but one radiocarbon date is, as we all know, no date by itself when it comes to the final summing-up. The cemetery itself at Grandtully is but one of a large number of rather small early Bronze Age burial groups now known from northern Britain, some marked by enclosures and others entirely open, although any slender fencing around the cemeteries might well have perished without trace.

CONCLUSIONS

The Grandtully cemetery is a useful addition to our knowledge of Neolithic and Bronze-Age activity in the valley of the Tay, an area particularly rich in stone-built monuments of the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The high terraces of such river valleys are not often exposed to archaeological inspection except by aerial survey, and it was only the fortuitous presence of a group of archaeologists, and the digging of a gas pipeline during that presence, that allowed the recognition of, first, an urn cut by the pipeline, then the Bronze-Age cemetery, and finally the existence of the later Neolithic occupation.

LOCATION OF OBJECTS

All of the finds have been deposited in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.

NOTE

- 1 The writers are grateful to Dr F McCormick, Scottish Central Excavation Unit, for examining this object.

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