

The Roman temporary camps at Marcus and Finavon, Angus: excavations 1987

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ABSTRACT

Excavation of cropmarks revealed the ditches of the perimeter and of a titulum of the Roman camp at Marcus. Excavation of the camp at Finavon, Angus, suggested that it should be reclassified as a '63-acre' camp. An undated enclosure and some pits were also investigated.

THE SITES

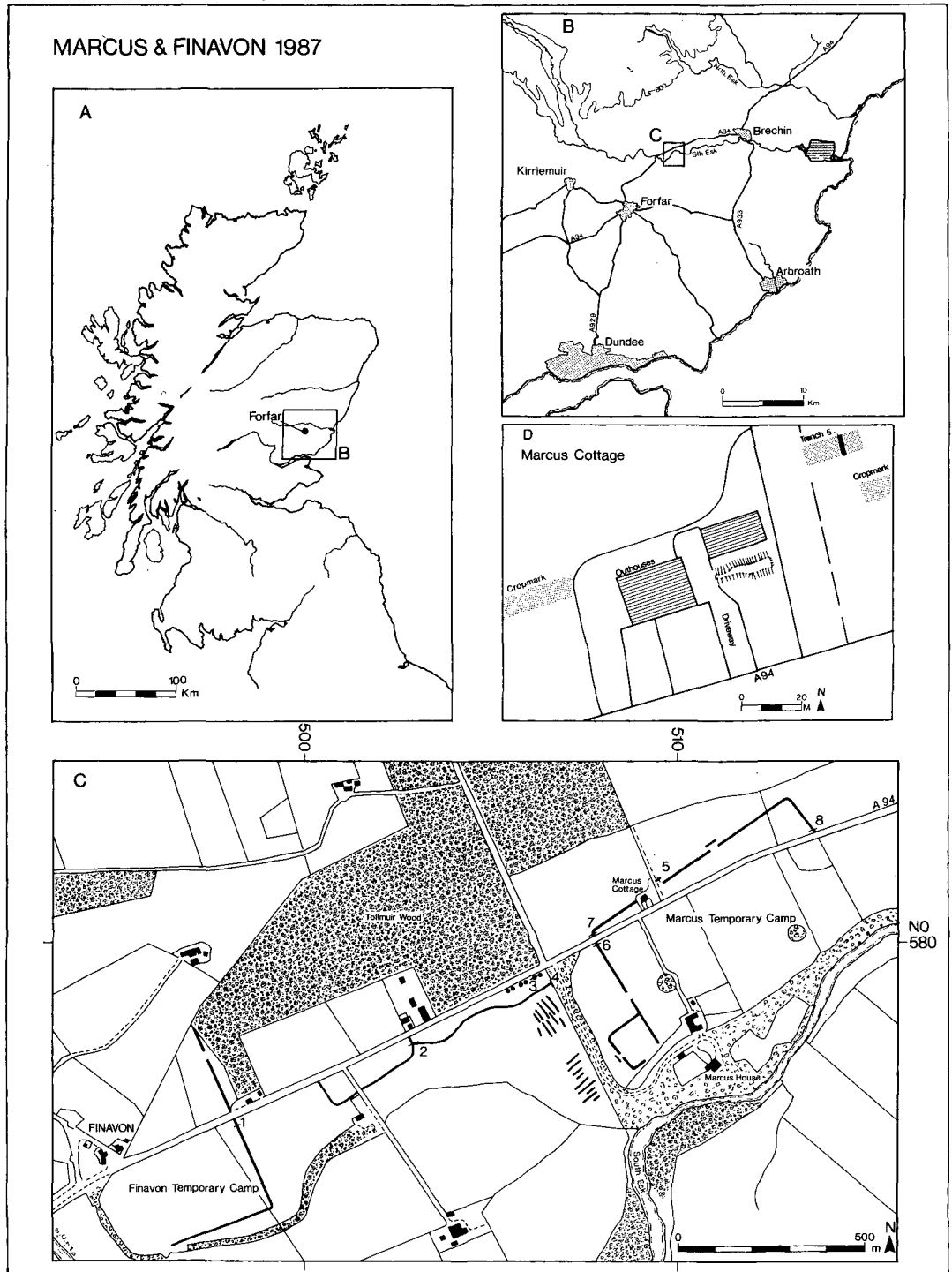
A proposed road-widening scheme, scheduled for the A94 between Finavon and Easter Marcus, afforded the opportunity to investigate a series of cropmarks, including two Roman camps, which straddle the modern roadline (illus 1c). The excavations were carried out for the Central Excavation Unit (HBMD, SDD) in June and July 1987. Eight areas were examined (illus 1).

The first cropmark, Marcus temporary camp (centred at NO 511580), lies on the eastern side of the threatened area and consists of an incomplete rectangle some 630 m long SW/NE and at least 350 m wide NW/SE. The longer, northern side is clearly visible on the aerial photographs and is broken by gateways, each protected by a detached length of rampart (now gone) and ditch, known as a *titulum*. Only one entrance is to be seen on the western side and no titulum at the gate was noted. A small rectangular annexe, measuring some 100 m SW/NE by 120 m NW/SE can be seen extending westwards from the south end of the west side. No stratigraphical relationship is visible between the two cropmarks, but the fact that the annexe, like the camp, has a gate with a titulum suggests that they are contemporary. Such annexes are a relatively common feature at camps in the 63-acre series (St Joseph 1976). The southern end of the camp disappears beneath the woodland surrounding Marcus House, but presumably ran as far as the north bank of the river South Esk. Even less of its east side is visible. Only the north-east corner and a 130 m length running south-east towards the river survive.

The second cropmark (centred at NO 496575) is situated to the extreme west of the threatened area and almost encloses the village of Finavon. It is similar in size and general layout to the camp at Marcus, the major difference being in its alignment. The long axis of Finavon camp is NNW/SSE. Although a gateway was noted on the east side of the camp, no associated titulum feature was seen and there did not appear to be a gateway along its southern side. The present line of the A94 appears to respect the supposed southern gateway on the east side.

Between the two camps, which are situated 1.1 km apart, are three further sets of cropmarks, threatened by the road development. The most westerly of these appears to be the southern portion of a rectangular enclosure (centred at NO 501577, which is some 280 m long SW/NE and at least

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ILLUS 1 Location of Marcus and Finavon. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright

100 m NW/SE. The north end of this feature has been lost beneath Tollmuir Wood. Abutting this feature and running east along a sinuous line approximately parallel to the road is another cropmark (centred at NO 505578), which has been seen as possibly the old southern boundary of Tollmuir Wood (Barber pers comm). Its east end has been lost where it abuts the avenue to Marcus House. Between the eastern end of this linear cropmark and the road are six pit-like features (centred at NO 506579), grouped in three sets of two. They occur along a 100 m strip which runs parallel to the road.

The soils around Finavon are of the Corby/Boyndie/Dinnet Association, the parent material of which consists of fluvio-glacial gravels derived from acid rocks. The soils derived from this material are a mixture of humus-iron podzols and gleys which develop on undulating lowlands, mounds and terraces with gentle slopes. These soils are predominantly agricultural with free-draining cultivated podzols and extensive and peaty gleys restricted to small localized hollows. In the case of the cultivated podzols the depth of the A horizon is generally about 0.25 m, though depths of up to 0.4 m are not infrequent; occasionally the horizon exceeds 0.6 m. Good drainage conditions and general ease of cultivation tend to be offset by the low capacity of the soils to retain moisture and nutrients; in dry years yields are substantially reduced. Because of these limitations, the area, in general, is capable of producing only a moderate range of crops (Walker *et al* 1982). Nonetheless, it is a heavily cultivated area and has clearly been so since at least the medieval period.

EXCAVATION STRATEGY

The investigation of the Roman camps and the other cropmarks was limited to trenches with individual areas not exceeding 100 sq m. In all, eight trenches were opened (illus 1c) in an attempt to maximize the archaeological information gathered but with the minimum of inconvenience for the landowners concerned. In general, all of the areas were excavated to investigate the nature, form and complexity of the archaeology indicated by the cropmarks, but more specific questions were posed of each individual area.

Area 1 was positioned so as to maximize the chances of discovering whether the modern road cut the south-east gateway of Finavon camp. The questions posed of Area 2 were concerned with the relationship between the rectangular enclosure and the sinuous linear feature. The pits in Area 3 were excavated in an attempt to discover their date and function and Area 4 was opened in response to the slight evidence for the sinuous linear feature in Area 2.

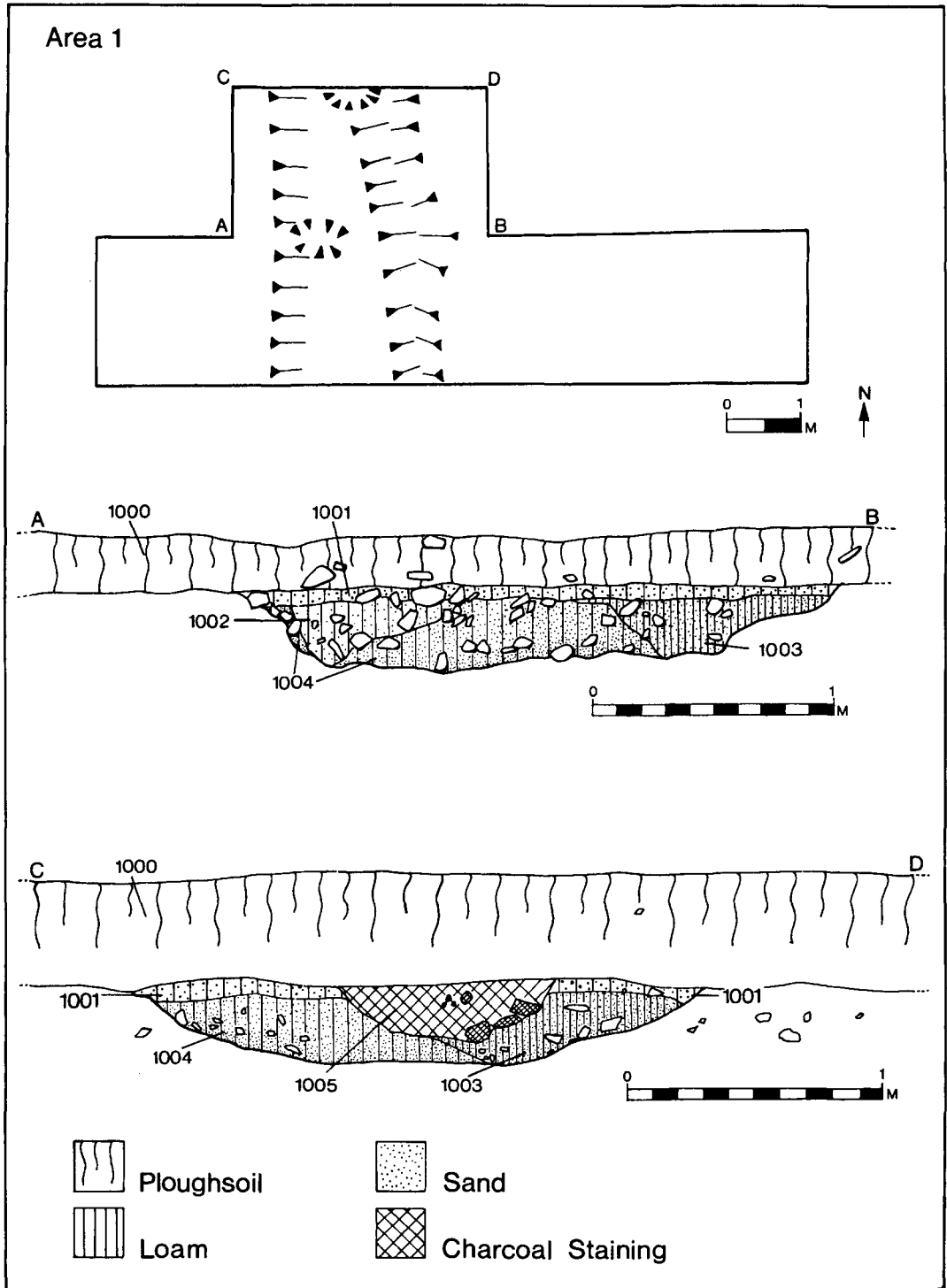
From the distinct nature of the cropmarks visible on the aerial photographs and from valuable information supplied by Mr Falconer, the tenant of Easter Marcus Farm, it seemed likely that good preservation of the ditches and entrances of Marcus camp would be found. Thus, Area 5 was examined in an attempt to achieve a partial plan of a titulum and Areas 6, 7 and 8 were excavated to obtain possible dating evidence. All the areas were positioned using available aerial photographs and 1:10,000 maps.

The last set of cropmarks noticeable on the prints are two groups of what appear to be rig and furrow. The northern set (centred at NO 507578) runs NW/SE, whilst the southern group (centred at NO 507576) runs SW/NE. These were not investigated.

THE EXCAVATIONS

AREA 1

A trench, measuring 2 x 10 m and aligned east/west, was excavated to locate the position of the east defences of the camp (illus 2). The plough soil was removed and was found to be approximately 0.4 m



ILLUS 2 Area 1: plan and sections

deep. Below this was a hard, compacted gravel which extended over much of the trench floor. Towards the west end of the area, a 2.3 m wide linear feature, running north/south, was revealed which appeared as a uniform band of loose, dark-brown, stony, sandy loam. This was excavated and proved to be a shallow ditch containing a number of separate archaeological features. To facilitate their examination in plan, the trench was extended 2 m northwards.

The upper layer of the ditch was a compacted, red-brown, coarse, sandy loam, some 0.05 m deep (1001). A single feature had been dug through this layer (illus 2: c–d), a circular pit. 0.8 m in diameter and 0.2 m deep, filled with blackened soil, charcoal, and burnt and unburnt stone (1005).

The removal of the upper uniform layer revealed the separate elements which comprised the ditch fill. The first was a shallow deposit, 0.7 m wide and 0.25 m deep, which lay along the west edge of the ditch (illus 2: a–b). This consisted of a light brown, loose sandy loam with many stones (1002). It extended a mere 0.2 m north of the section line A/B and did not appear in the south section.

The remaining two features were noted in both the sections. The first, and later, feature consisted of a trench, on average some 0.8 m wide and 0.3 m deep. It ran along the east edge of the ditch and was continuous, at least over the exposed 4 m. This trench was round-bottomed and steep-sided, its fill consisting of a compacted, dark brown, loamy sand with abundant, sub-rounded, unsorted stone (1003).

The earliest feature uncovered was the main ditch. The profile of the west edge was regular, steep-sided and flat-bottomed, filled with a compacted, light brown, loamy sand with abundant unsorted stone (1004). It survived to a constant depth of 0.3 m along its length. The eastern edge had been truncated by the digging of the later trench, but it was possible to estimate that the ditch originally was approximately 2 m wide.

AREA 2

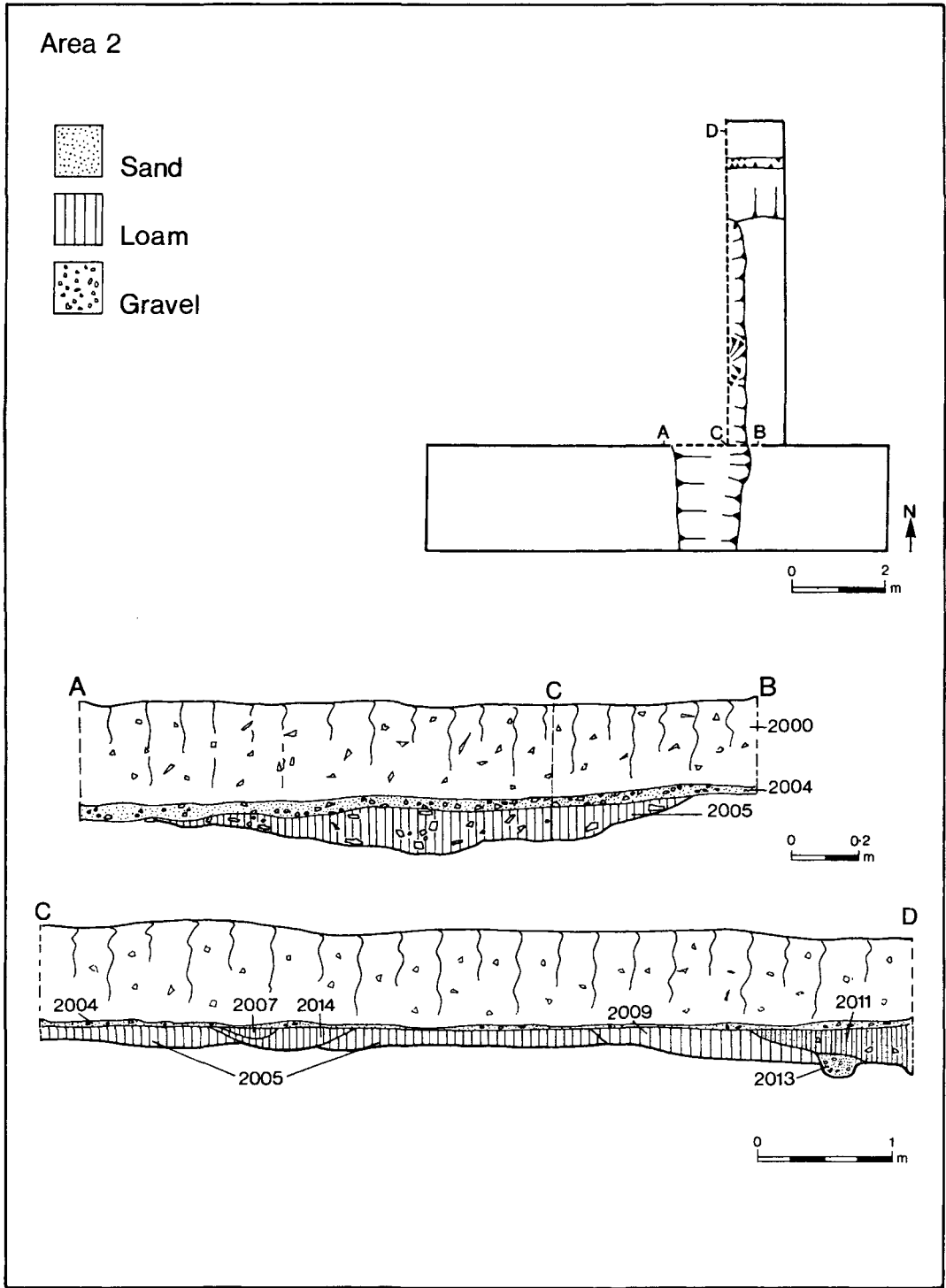
Area 2, 2 x 10 m, was located over what appeared from the aerial photographs to be the junction of the rectangular enclosure and the sinuous cropmark (illus 3). The trench was aligned east/west. The Area was excavated down to subsoil and midway along its length a band of slightly darker brown sand-gravel was revealed (2005), which on excavation proved to be a broad, shallow ditch some 1.6 m wide and at most 0.15 m deep, running north/south (illus 3: a–b). As no evidence for the sinuous cropmark running east was noticed, the area was extended northwards for 6.5 m. The western edge of this 1 m wide trench was aligned along the centre line of the ditch. At the northern edge of this extension was noted a series of cuts and associated fills, at least two of which may be discounted as being modern, because the finds recovered from them included lengths of barbed wire and fragments of modern glass (2011 & 2013, illus 3: c–d). Just south of these features, the north/south ditch was cut by a linear feature running east/west. The fill of this later feature consisted of a compacted, dark brown, sandy loam with abundant stone (2009). This secondary ditch had a well-defined southern edge, cut partly into the fill of the north/south ditch and partly into undisturbed gravels. It was impossible to estimate its full width as its northern edge was truncated by modern disturbance, but it was 0.2 m deep.

The other feature noted in this extension was a shallow pit, some 1.1 m wide and 0.2 m deep. It was cut into the fill of the north/south ditch and was filled with a very dark brown, sandy loam (2014). The upper portion of the fill had a concentration of a black sandy loam (2007), suggestive of burning, but no charcoal or burnt stone was recovered.

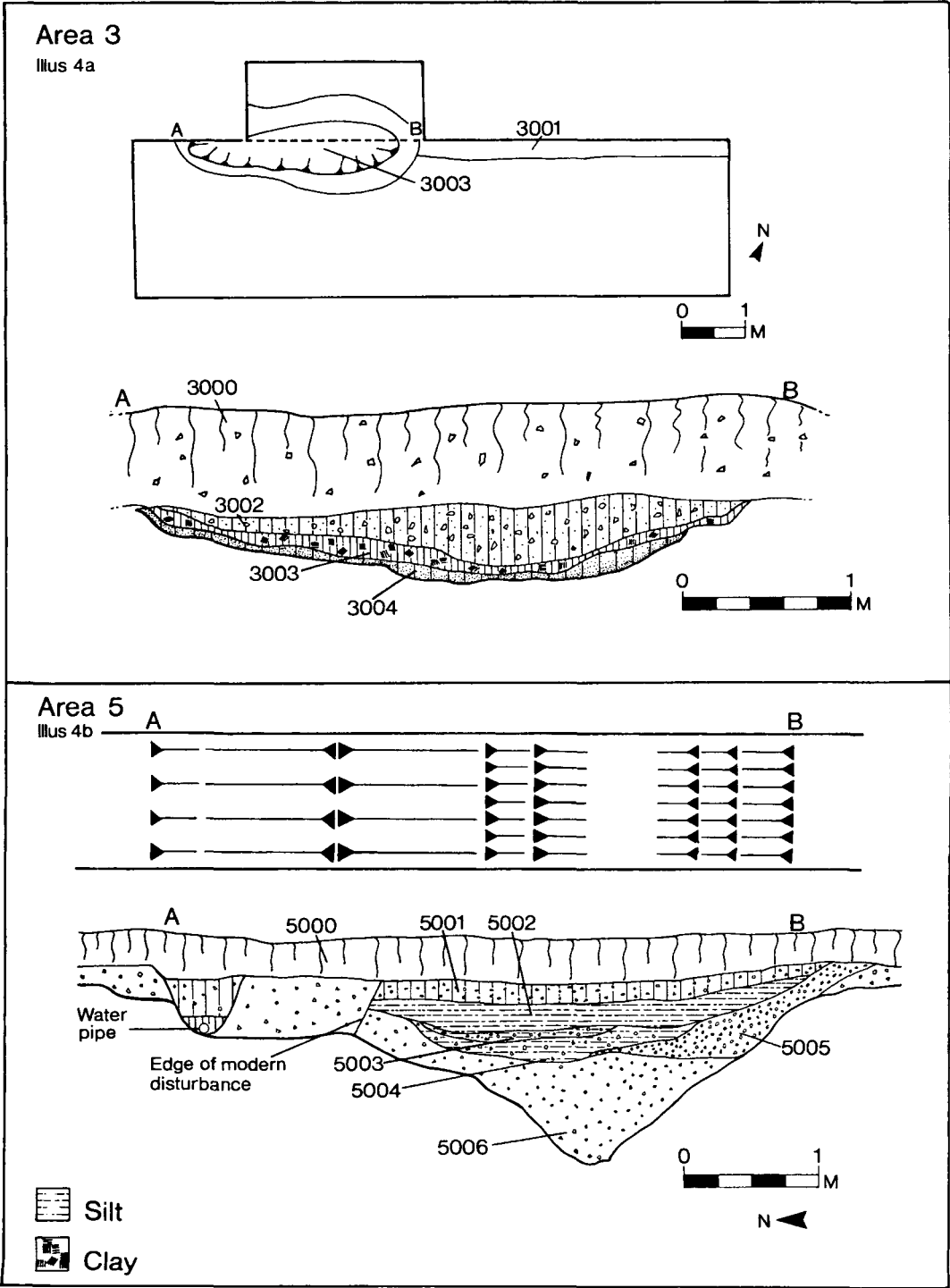
AREA 3 (illus 4a)

A trench, 10 m by 2.5 m, was excavated in order to investigate one of the pit features apparent on the aerial photographs (illus 4a). The removal of the plough soil, which in this area was over 0.6 m deep, revealed that the trench lay largely to one side of one of the pits. The trench was extended to reveal the entire pit. It appeared as an oval patch of dark yellow-brown, sandy loam, 3.5 m long and 1.5 m wide. In section (illus 4a: a–b) the pit was some 0.4 m deep and contained three deposits, the uppermost of which was a loose, dark yellow-brown, sandy loam with abundant small stones (3002) Below this was a layer of dark-brown clay loam in which were found many rotted pieces of fibrous, rooty, matter (3003). The lowest fill of the pit consisted of a loose, yellow-brown, fine, loamy sand (3004).

A linear feature was also noted in the trench. It was some 0.25 m wide and at most 0.1 m deep and ran the entire length of the trench. It was filled with a slightly clayey plough soil (3001) and was interpreted as a plough furrow.



ILLUS 3 Area 2: plan and sections



ILLUS 4a Area 3: plan and section ILLUS 4b Area 5: plan and section

AREA 4

Having first excavated to and subsequently dug through undisturbed horizons, it was concluded that no archaeological features survived and the trench was backfilled.

AREA 5 (illus 4b)

Prior to excavation, it was hoped to achieve a partial plan of the western titulum gateway on the north side of Marcus Camp (illus 1c). Thus, a 25 x 1 m trench was excavated in order to establish the spatial relationship between the titulum ditch and the main perimeter ditch. This proved impossible as excavation revealed that the southern 10 m of the trench had been disturbed by 19th-century quarrying.

The northern portion of the trench was relatively undisturbed and a 5 m wide linear feature noted at this end proved on excavation to contain the titulum ditch (illus 4b). This was V-shaped in section, and was 3.4 m wide and 1.4 m deep, measured from the base of the plough soil, which was itself about 0.6 m deep. The full northern extent of the ditch could not be ascertained as it was truncated by a modern trench some 1.6 m wide and 0.4 m deep, containing a water pipe.

The fills within the ditch were divided into three basic soil types: gravel-loams; silty-gravels; and gravels. The gravel-loams (5001 & 5002) occupied the upper 0.3 m of the ditch, forming a shallow dish-like feature. Below this, and extending a further 0.3 m in depth were the silty-gravels (5003, 5004 & 5005). These overlay the fine gravels which formed the major part of the ditch fill (5006). No finds were recovered from the ditch.

During excavation of Area 5 a visual survey of the surrounding land revealed a low-spread bank and berm, situated in the adjacent garden of Marcus Cottage (illus 1d). The bank was about 10 m wide and a mere 0.35 m high. The projected line of the surviving 18 m length would have run some 15 m to the south of the titulum ditch.

AREA 6

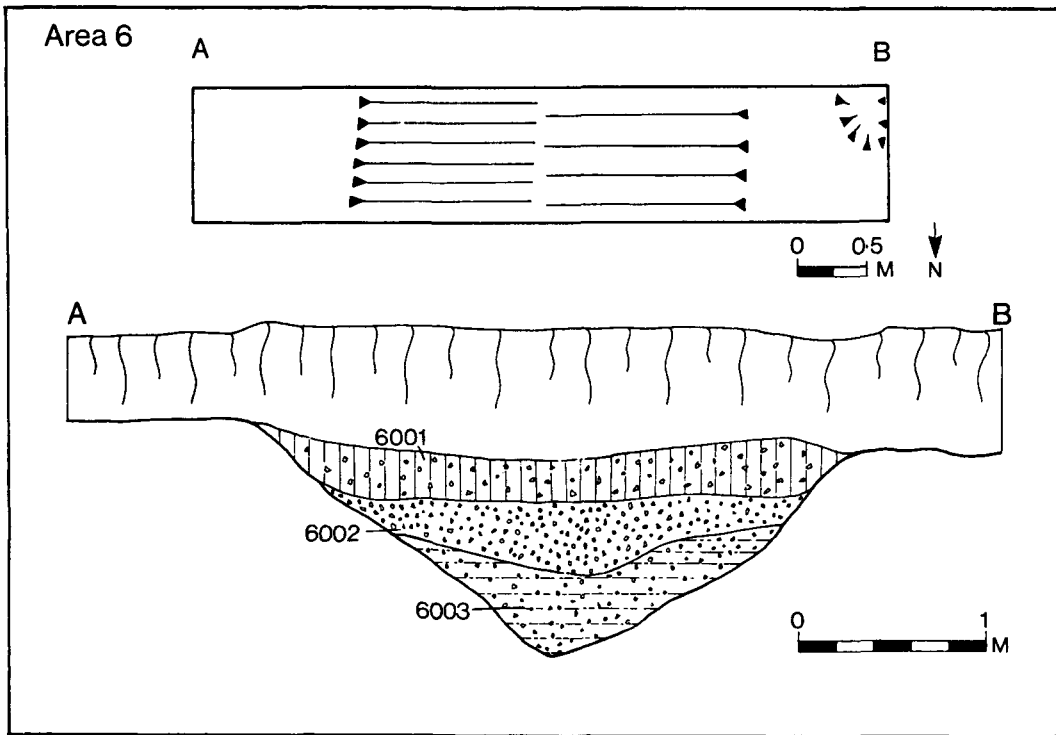
Area 6 was located using the aerial photographs and information from the local tenant who reported that during previous dry years an obvious cropmark could be discerned running north from Marcus House. Thus, a 5 x 2 m trench was excavated at the junction of the cropmark and the A94. The removal of the plough soil, which was over 0.6 m deep, revealed a 3.2 m wide linear feature running north/south (illus 5: A-B). This proved to be a V-shaped ditch, the fills of which may be divided into three strata. The uppermost consisted of a loose, light, red-brown gravelly-loam (6001). Immediately below this was a layer of slightly compacted, red-brown gravel (6002), which had been disturbed along the west edge of the ditch by tree roots. The lowest fill of the ditch was a mixture of loose, silty-gravel and brown, humic-sand (6003), the humic content of which was a product of decayed roots. The excavated ditch was some 3.15 m wide and 1.2 m deep measured from the base of the plough soil.

AREAS 7 & 8

These areas lacked any discernible archaeological features. The available maps and aerial photographs all pre-dated road improvement schemes which took place on the A94 during the mid-1970s and this may have led to the incorrect siting of the trenches.

INTERPRETATION

Area 1 (illus 2) proved to contain a complex set of archaeological features, the earliest of which was the primary, broad, flat-bottomed ditch. Owing to the free-draining nature of the gravel, it is not possible to say that it was deliberately backfilled, but there is some support, in the unsorted nature of the stone content, for the suggestion that this was the case. Consistent with this, the shallow deposit found along the western edge of the ditch is seen as a discrete pocket of backfilled material. A second, almost V-shaped, ditch was cut into the primary ditch and followed its line. It was also filled with gravel and unsorted stone and this, similarly, is interpreted as evidence of deliberate backfilling.



ILLUS 5 Area 6: plan and section

The upper layer of compacted, red-brown soil is a product of natural soil processes acting on the fills of the ditches. This theory is strengthened by the fact that the natural gravels into which the ditch was dug were discoloured red-brown to a similar degree. The pit, which contained evidence of burning, was dug through this layer, indicating that it was a much later feature than the ditches.

No artefactual evidence was uncovered in this area to suggest a Roman date for the two ditches. It is only by their association with the cropmark, readily seen as a temporary camp, that such a date is proposed.

A Roman date is presumed for the perimeter and titulum ditches uncovered at Marcus Camp, for similar reasons (illus 4b & 5). The major difference in this latter case was in the quality of the surviving archaeological evidence. Not surprisingly, both ditches were alike: both were V-shaped and of similar dimensions. In both cases, the lower fills consisted of fine gravels with only slight evidence of silting and the upper fills were dished in shape, suggesting a settling zone. These factors indicate a phase of rapid backfilling followed by a period when the upper material gradually settled.

Surviving archaeological evidence for the small enclosure, the sinuous linear feature and pits was scant and no evidence of their dates was retrieved. Each survived as a slight, shallow depression in the compact gravel. Nonetheless, sections through them proved that the enclosure was the earlier feature.

The pit found in Area 3 (illus 4a) is interpreted as a tree hole because the edges of the feature

were irregular and difficult to define, and a large quantity of rotted, fibrous matter was uncovered in the clayey fill.

DISCUSSION

The problems of temporary camps – particularly the questions relating to their chronology, and to the distinction between camps constructed during one campaign and those belonging to other, separate episodes – continue to exercise students of Roman history and archaeology (Reed 1975, 92; Hanson 1977, 140; Maxwell 1980, 28). Temporary camps were rapidly constructed with simple defences. The entrances were not closed by gates, as such, and the interiors contained few, if any, built structures. The scale of a camp is a product of a number of factors, most of which do not survive in the archaeological or historical record. These include the availability of suitable materials, the defensive nature of the camp-site, the perceived threat and apparent strength of the enemy, the size of the unit to be housed, and even the whim of the particular commander.

Recent investigations of Roman temporary camps have concentrated on inter-site relationships. Thus, at Ardoch, both St Joseph (1970) and Hanson (1977, 146–9) concentrated their efforts on establishing camp stratigraphies. A similar investigation carried out by St Joseph (1970) at Ythan Wells suggested that the ‘Stracathro-type’ camp was earlier than the ‘120-acre’ example.

Little work has been carried out in the interiors of camps and even the sections cut through the defences have been rather small. It is to be hoped that future excavations will examine the defences in more detail and over larger areas and, particularly, that the interiors of the camps will be much more fully investigated.

Maxwell (1980, 28) has commented on the need for further study of the camps, concentrating on ‘their size, proportions, gateway defence, topographical position and associated material; then account must be taken of their geographical position in relationship to other camps or natural routes of access; finally, and not till then, we may examine how they relate to the literary account.’

The two sites investigated here provide ready examples with which to start. Marcus has been classed as a ‘63-acre’ camp and Finavon as a ‘30-acre’ example (St Joseph 1976). It is difficult to see from studying the aerial photographs and the cropmarks, plotted on maps, how this distinction arose. It is true that the complete northern edge of Marcus survives, making it easier to estimate the original dimensions; calculating the acreage of Marcus from the surviving cropmarks alone gives a total of no more than 45 acres, while the internal area of Finavon camp measures 34 acres. This difference can be accounted for simply because more of the latter camp’s defences have been destroyed by modern disturbance. The titulum gateways seen in Marcus are not visible in Finavon. This could be cited as a significant difference were it not the case that the western entrance to Marcus does not exhibit a titulum entrance, and only one of the entrances to Finavon is visible from the air, the other having been destroyed possibly by the modern road line. Further excavation is needed, particularly in these areas, in order to clarify if the apparent absence of titulum gateways in Finavon is real or a product of poorly defined cropmarks and aerial photographs. Both camps are sited on a flat promontory created by a meander in the course of the river South Esk and presumably mark a fording point. Both also lie on a natural ‘corridor’ of communications, with the Grampian massif to the north and the Sidlaw Hills to the south. Some 14 km to the north-east is Keithock camp and 18 km to the south-west is Eassie camp. Each of these camps is of the ‘63-acre’ class and is positioned within what is considered to be a day’s march from Marcus and Finavon. Finally, it is possible to overlay the plan of Marcus on that of Finavon and find that the

entrance positions coincide and that the distance from the entrance to the return of the perimeter ditch is the same for both.

All of these factors – similarity in plan, gateway position, siting and relationship with other known ‘63-acre’ camps – suggest that Finavon should be reclassified as a ‘63-acre’ camp.

As no datable material has been retrieved from a ‘63-acre’ camp, the dating of these camps relies heavily on results from excavations where inter-camp relationships were noted. The current dogma suggests a date of AD 208–11 for the ‘63-acre’ series. This relates to the period when the Emperor Severus was campaigning in Scotland. The reasons for placing them within this time bracket are three fold. First, at Ardoch the ‘63-acre’ camp was interpreted as being markedly later than the ‘13-acre’ and ‘30-acre’ camps (St Joseph 1970) which are seen as first century and therefore Agricolan. Second, there are no temporary camps from the second century Antonine advance known north of the Forth (Hanson & Maxwell 1986). Third, the ‘63-acre’ camp at Ardoch was interpreted as being slightly earlier than, but close in date to, the larger ‘130-acre’ series (St Joseph 1970; Hanson 1978), both series being related to two early third-century campaigns: those of Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla.

CONCLUSION

The series of excavations at Marcus and Finavon provided evidence of activity in the area from the Roman through to relatively modern periods. Clearly, little can be said about any of the archaeological features uncovered apart from the two camps. These proved to be substantial, especially the example at Marcus, where ditches of up to 3 m wide and 2 m deep were noted. The camp at Marcus should be re-investigated, not least because of the surviving ditches, but also, and more importantly, because there appears to be an 18 m length of upstanding bank surviving, situated in the garden of Marcus Cottage. Careful and complete excavation of this length of bank and a systematic excavation of large portions of the ditch, allied to an investigation of a representative sample of the interior of the camp, could yield valuable information concerning the construction, date, internal layout and method of abandonment of the camp. At worst, such an investigation would confirm the absence of archaeological remains. At best, it would start the process of putting some ‘meat’ on the literary ‘bones’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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