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Burials of possible Romano-British date from Inveresk, East Lothian

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ABSTRACT

Five graves of Romano-British date, possibly associated with the fort or vicus *at Inveresk, were revealed during building operations at Musselburgh. The remains of one individual, pottery and animal bones were recovered.*

INTRODUCTION

In July 1985, workmen excavating a 10 × 3 m trench through the factory floor at Brunton's Wireworks, Inveresk, near Musselburgh, East Lothian (NGR NT 343 724: illus 1), discovered quantities of human and animal bone. Having been informed, the local police contacted what was then the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Upon arrival the archaeologists found the mechanical excavation of the trench completed and all the finds removed.

CONTEXT

Examination of the trench sections indicated that the factory floor lay directly over a layer of dark brown sand which varied in depth but was on average 0.5 m deep. The upper portion of this was disturbed and contained flecks of charcoal in a sandy-clay mix. This layer, in turn, lay over a natural yellow sand.

Although identification of stratigraphy was impaired by the poor light quality in the building, five U-shaped features were observed along one long section, cut into the brown sand and spaced c 1.5 m apart. The matrix of these presumed grave-fills was of a grey-brown sandy silt with some pebbles. In one of the features a red matrix surrounding some bone suggested the presence of a body stain. Fragments of bone, pottery and oyster shell were included in the fill.

DISCUSSION

Any comment is of necessity restricted by the limited archaeological work on site: this was confined to observation of the section dug by machinery and the collection of finds, including

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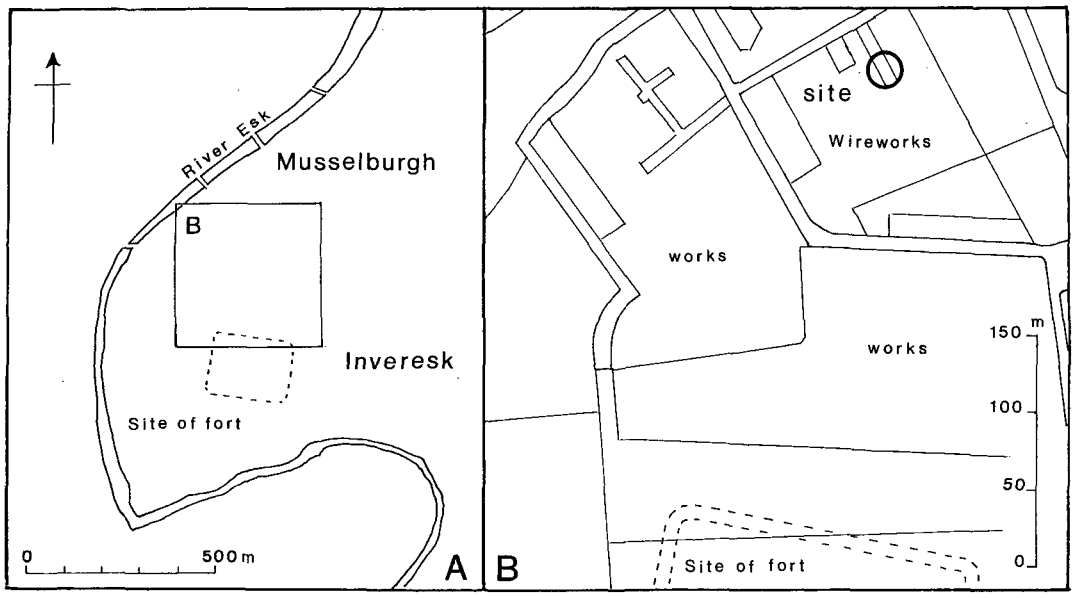

ILLUS 1 Brunton's Wireworks, Inveresk: site location

the human bone, that had been removed from their contexts prior to the arrival of the archaeologists.

Earlier finds from the immediate area of the site include Bronze Age cremations and inhumations in short cists (Lowe & Anderson 1894, 66), but the recently recovered burial was an inhumation without a cist. The similar appearance of the five features visible in section, along with their regular spacing, suggests orderly burial in a cemetery, although the remains of only one individual was recovered (fiche 2:A7–13). Removal of the skeleton by machinery meant that the form of burial was not noted. The pottery, the contexts of which had been destroyed, was all of a second-century AD date (fiche 2:A5–6). It is probable that the burial dates from that time, although the nature of the evidence does not preclude a later date. As the fashion for inhumation, as opposed to cremation, did not reach Roman Britain until the late second century it is possible that the Inveresk burial may have been influenced by the Iron Age burial rituals of lowland Scotland, which include both crouched and extended inhumations. A similar burial in an Iron Age tradition, in this case a double interment in a cist with weapons, was excavated close to the Roman forts at Camelon (Breeze *et al* 1976, 80).

The site lies NNE of the fort at Inveresk. Although the line of the road from the north gate is unknown, if the plan suggested by Richmond (1980, 294) is followed, the burial would lie close to a line projected at right-angles from the north gate of the fort, at a distance of c 300 m from its ramparts. The position of the grave thus may have been in accordance with the standard Roman practice of burial alongside roads.

If the suggested data of the burial are correct then the occupant of the grave could have belonged either to the fort garrison or the civilian population of the *vicus* (Thomas 1988). If the former, then an age at death of late teens/early twenties would fit that of a fairly new recruit to the Roman army, which most joined between 18 and 21 (Breeze *et al* 1976, 88).

The animal bone shows marked predominance of cattle. Although this is a very small sample and like the other finds, unstratified, this reflects the standard meat diet on Roman sites, mainly cattle with some sheep and pigs, a patttern that was noted on larger samples excavated from Inveresk (Barnetson 1988).

SUMMARIES OF SPECIALIST REPORTS

POTTERY

Dennis Gallagher

(The pottery catalogue is on fiche 2:A5–6)
Fifteen sherds were recovered, all compatible with an Antonine (second-century AD) date.

HUMAN BONE

Margaret Bruce

(The full bone report is on fiche 2:A7–13)
The remains of a single individual were recovered. These are considered to be those of a male whose age at death was probably late teens to early twenties. There was no evidence to suggest the cause of death.

ANIMAL BONE

Andrew Barlow

(The full animal bone report is on fiche 2:A14)
This comprised mainly cattle with some pig, deer, sheep/goat and horse. Some of the cattle bone showed evidence of butchery.

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