

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Neolithic pits: axes, aesthetics and activity

The earliest evidence for activity at Lower Slackbuie that dates to the Early Neolithic are the sherds of Carinated Bowl and a distinctive polished stone axe recovered from Pit 504. The role of pits in prehistory has long been debated and discussion focused on their potential as proxies for settlement and symbolism (Anderson-Whymark & Thomas 2012; Brophy & Noble 2012; Carver 2012; Noble et al 2016). Collative research on pits has repeatedly highlighted the diversity of depositional practices and the difficulties in equating 'structured' deposition with symbolic significance (Noble et al 2016: 190). At Lower Slackbuie the material within Pit 504 appears to have been curated, with the abraded nature of the sherds suggesting that they had a long biography before being placed in the pit. The condition of the pottery is in contrast to the distinctive stone axehead placed at the base of the pit, which was probably only broken a short time before deposition. The contents of Pit 504 indicate wider connections and the curation of material possibly linking belief and daily practice (Anderson-Whymark & Thomas 2012).

The environmental assemblage from the pits provide an insight into surrounding activity when considering the cereal grain and four flax seeds recovered from the fill. As discussed above, flax seed is rarely recovered from Scottish Neolithic sites, with only timber hall sites yielding any significant quantities (Fairweather & Ralston 1993; Hastie 2011). More locally, flax seed, along with bread wheat, was also recovered from pits excavated at the Fortrose and Rosemarkie Waste Water Works (Fraser 2014). The greater level of management required to cultivate flax may indicate an adoption of sophisticated agricultural practices. Flax has a variety of functions, but the small number of seeds from Lower Slackbuie and the lack of evidence for associated activities limits our understanding of their significance. The evidence for cultivation, along with the continued use of wild resources indicated by the presence of hazelnuts, is typical of this period (Bishop et al 2010). The fertile soils in the region would have afforded opportunities for diverse subsistence practices throughout prehistory,

with flax also recovered from later features at the neighbouring site of Slackbuie (Garry 2015).

The Neolithic activity at Lower Slackbuie did not occur in isolation; both early-middle Neolithic pottery and Grooved Ware were recovered in a spread and from pits at the Slackbuie site immediately to the west (Garry 2015: 12). The Grooved Ware vessels recovered from Pit 1478 at Lower Slackbuie were all incomplete, with indications that some sherds had been laid in the pit. Grooved Ware has been found in the Inverness region at several sites associated with monumental and domestic activity, such as Milton of Leys (Conolly & MacSween 2003) and Stoneyfield, Raigmore (Simpson 1996, 1999). Six pits were uncovered during work on the Flood Relief Channel with one, like at Lower Slackbuie, containing the remains of multiple vessels; the fill of this pit was radiocarbon dated to 3087–2905 cal BC (4365±30 BP; Peteranna 2011: 17). The vessels at Culduthel show evidence of having been used for the preparation of foodstuffs and may have lain around before being deposited in the pits (Sheridan 2011: 38). It is unclear if deposits in pits at sites such as Lower Slackbuie are associated with wider activity that was lost due to the intensity of later occupation or if they represent isolated acts. The style of Grooved Ware at Lower Slackbuie shows local influence but also, as with the distinctive axehead, links the occupants of the site into wider cultural networks.

5.2 Later prehistoric settlement and structures

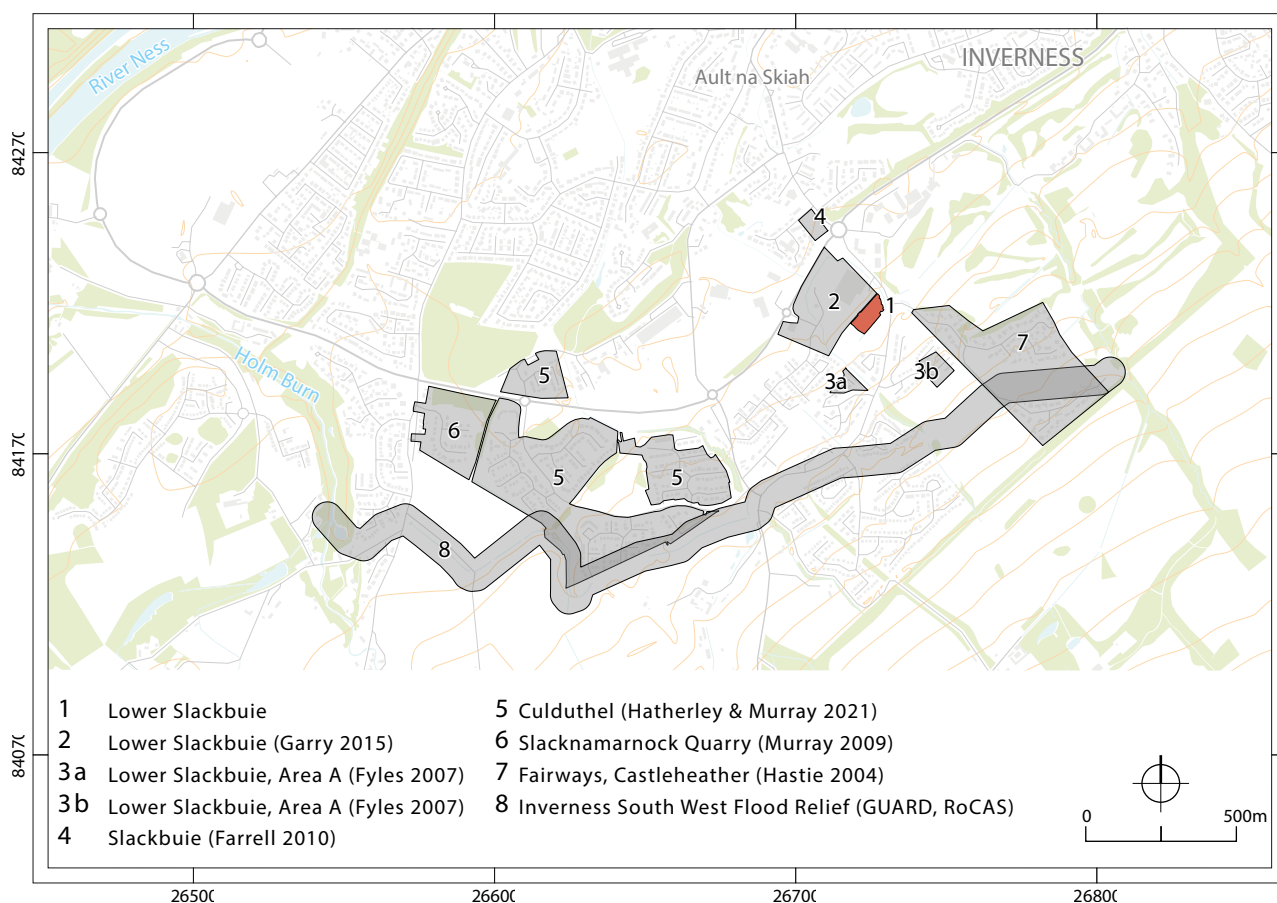
The roundhouses at Lower Slackbuie display a variety of architectural styles, from single post rings to more substantial constructions with elaborate porches and entranceways. The palisade and central roundhouse, Roundhouse 4, likely date from the Early Iron Age, and there are some indications that Roundhouse 6 belongs to an earlier phase of activity since the projected outline of Roundhouse 6 is potentially truncated by the palisade enclosure. The relationship between the structures uncovered is difficult to define due to the lack of direct stratigraphic relationships. Roundhouses 5 and 7, which are both defined by simpler single post rings, do appear to truncate or be truncated by more substantial structures. Post-built structures date from the Early Bronze Age onwards, increasing in

size to an average of *c* 9m in diameter after 1200 BC and becoming increasingly circular into the Late Bronze Age (Pope 2015: 171). Ring grooves, such as in Roundhouse 6, were traditionally considered to be an Iron Age development (Feachem 1965; Jobey & Tait 1966). However, Bronze Age examples are known, and typological schemes have increasingly come into question in recent years (Pope 2015: 173). Unfortunately, no chronologically distinct artefacts were recovered from the structures at Lower Slackbuie. Yet Bronze Age activity was noted in the southern portion of the site due to the a crucible sherd and fragment of bangle recovered from Pit 1058.

The two sites which neighbour Lower Slackbuie had extensive evidence of Bronze Age activity. The excavation of the area immediately to the west, now the Asda superstore, revealed a large stone tool assemblage consistent with a Bronze Age domestic assemblage, including Late Bronze Age querns (Garry 2015: 23; Illus 16). The environmental assemblage

also contained oat which is more indicative of later Bronze Age – Iron Age activity (ibid: 24). Further evidence for Bronze Age settlement was uncovered at Lower Slackbuie to the south. There, two areas were excavated to reveal a cooking pit, a hearth and scattered post holes that indicated the presence of structures, including a roundhouse in the southern area (Fyles 2007: 5; Illus 16 3b). The artefactual assemblage indicated a middle-late Bronze Age date for many of the features (ibid: 6). The evidence from neighbouring sites supports dispersed Bronze Age activity within which some of the structures, potentially Roundhouses 5 and 7, at Lower Slackbuie may be situated. The phasing evidence at Lower Slackbuie is limited but the suggested stratigraphy, the few Bronze Age finds and the evidence from neighbouring sites would support activity prior to the main Iron Age phase.

The larger roundhouses and the palisade and central roundhouse, Roundhouse 4, have been interpreted, based on form and limited radiocarbon



Illus 16 Location of key sites mentioned in the text with approximate area of investigation shown. (© Headland Archaeology (UK) Ltd)

dates, as belonging to a phase of Iron Age activity. The chronological relationship between features cannot be defined, and it is unclear if any of the structures are contemporary. The alignment of Roundhouse 4 and the palisade enclosure suggest that the two are contemporary, as comparable sites are found across Scotland. The palisade at Lower Slackbuie comprised a ditch with large post holes that flanked the east-facing entrance. Packing stones within the ditch and post holes continuing the alignment across a gap in the ditch to the south-west indicate that the ditch may have held upright timber posts. Roundhouse 4 was located at the centre of the enclosure with its entranceway aligned to that of the palisade. A sample from the entrance post hole was radiocarbon dated to the Early Iron Age (754–415 cal BC, Table 1).

Palisade enclosures across Scotland have been dated from the Neolithic onwards and appear to serve a variety of functions (Johnstone 2021). The palisade at Lower Slackbuie is comparable to neighbouring examples excavated at Balloan Park (Wordsworth 2000), located 500m to the north of the site, and Culduthel (Hatherley & Murray 2021), situated 1,160m to the south-west, both interpreted as Early Iron Age in date. Several examples of palisade enclosures with central roundhouses have been identified across the region through aerial photography, such as at Aldourie Farm further south (Harden & Bone 1990; Jones et al 1993; Hatherley & Murray 2021). Comparable excavated examples are concentrated in the south of Scotland, such as at Ravelrig Quarry, Edinburgh, where an oval-shaped palisade enclosing a central roundhouse with aligned entranceways was also dated to the Early Iron Age (Rennie 2014: 141). The site at Ravelrig was termed a 'palisaded homestead'; it is likely to have had a domestic function and may have been occupied for several generations as evidenced by the repair of the palisade (*ibid*: 145). The palisade at Lower Slackbuie displayed evidence for at least one phase of repair or realignment during its lifetime. Palisades likely served a variety of functions, such as to define space for livestock, events and perhaps even as conspicuous displays of community wealth and endeavour, as has been argued for Culduthel (Hatherley & Murray 2021). While the alignment of the entrance of Roundhouse 4 and the palisade may be coincidental, the division or screening of

space and the importance of entranceways is a recognised Iron Age architectural tradition (Hingley 1992; Pope 2007; Harding 2009).

It is difficult to determine the relationships between the roundhouses external to the palisade, as very little material was recovered from the structures. The most northerly roundhouse, Roundhouse 1, is similar in form to Roundhouse 6 and extends beyond the excavated area to the north-west. Roundhouses 2 and 3 are more similar in style to Roundhouse 4, with each having a more elaborate entranceway. Roundhouse 2 displayed evidence for the possible subdivision of the interior and a depression across the entranceway. The north-east facing entranceway was flanked by two large posts with the post holes that decreased in size as the porch extended away from the outer wall of the roundhouse. The same pattern was witnessed at Roundhouse 3, which was the largest structure excavated on site. Roundhouse 3 also displayed evidence for the possible replacement of the internal posts, perhaps indicating greater longevity of occupation.

A range of roundhouse forms have been identified at nearby sites, with some having evidence for elongated or elaborate porches, such as at East Beechwood (Engl 2011) and Seafeld West (Cressey & Anderson 2011). The structures at the above sites have been interpreted as largely dating from the middle-late Bronze Age to the Iron Age based on the artefactual evidence and radiocarbon dates. Rectangular or four-post structures were found alongside roundhouses at several sites and have been interpreted as stores for grain or other material (Engl 2011; Cook 2016; Johnstone 2021: 63). Four-post structures with surrounding post rings, have been dated to the later Neolithic, such as at Greenbogs, Aberdeenshire, where the charcoal-rich fills were radiocarbon dated to 2890–2490 cal BC (Noble et al 2012). However, no comparable surrounding post ring could be identified at Lower Slackbuie, and no chronologically distinctive artefact or material suitable for radiocarbon dating was recovered from the four-post structure. At Lower Slackbuie, material from a post hole of the rectangular structure was radiocarbon dated to 800–552 cal BC (95.4% Probability; SUERC-9577) with the four-post structure overlying the edge of Roundhouse 1 suggesting it is not directly contemporary. The roundhouses at Lower Slackbuie also likely date from

this period, though there is limited chronological resolution. The radiocarbon strategy did explore the possibility of Neolithic structures, with the resulting dates leading to the reinterpretation of the post holes surrounding Pit 504 as the porch of Roundhouse 4. The radiocarbon dates from the Iron Age features indicate activity in the Early Iron Age but unfortunately fall on the Hallstatt plateau (800–400 BC), thus limiting their resolution (Hamilton et al 2015).

The site at Lower Slackbuie also produced a very small artefactual assemblage. A limited amount of vitrified slag was retrieved from the site along with a very small amount of hammerscale and slag spheres – not sufficient to indicate metalworking on site. However, it may indicate an association with the ironworking evidence uncovered at the adjacent

site. Evidence of metalworking was found in three areas: a pit with possible flue, a series of pits with smelting evidence, and a shallow bowl-like pit from which slag from iron smelting and a fragment of crucible were recovered (Garry 2015). The limited range of artefacts at Lower Slackbuie is not wholly unexpected given that this is typical for many later prehistoric sites, which appear to be largely aceramic (Harding 2000: 20). This contrasts with the abundance of material recovered from Iron Age wetland and crannog sites, underlining that the surviving assemblages are not likely to be representative of material available to and used by the occupants during this period (Cavers & Crone 2018; Crone et al 2018). This makes any interpretation of wealth, status, access to materials, and activities conducted incomplete.