

9. COARSE STONE ASSEMBLAGE

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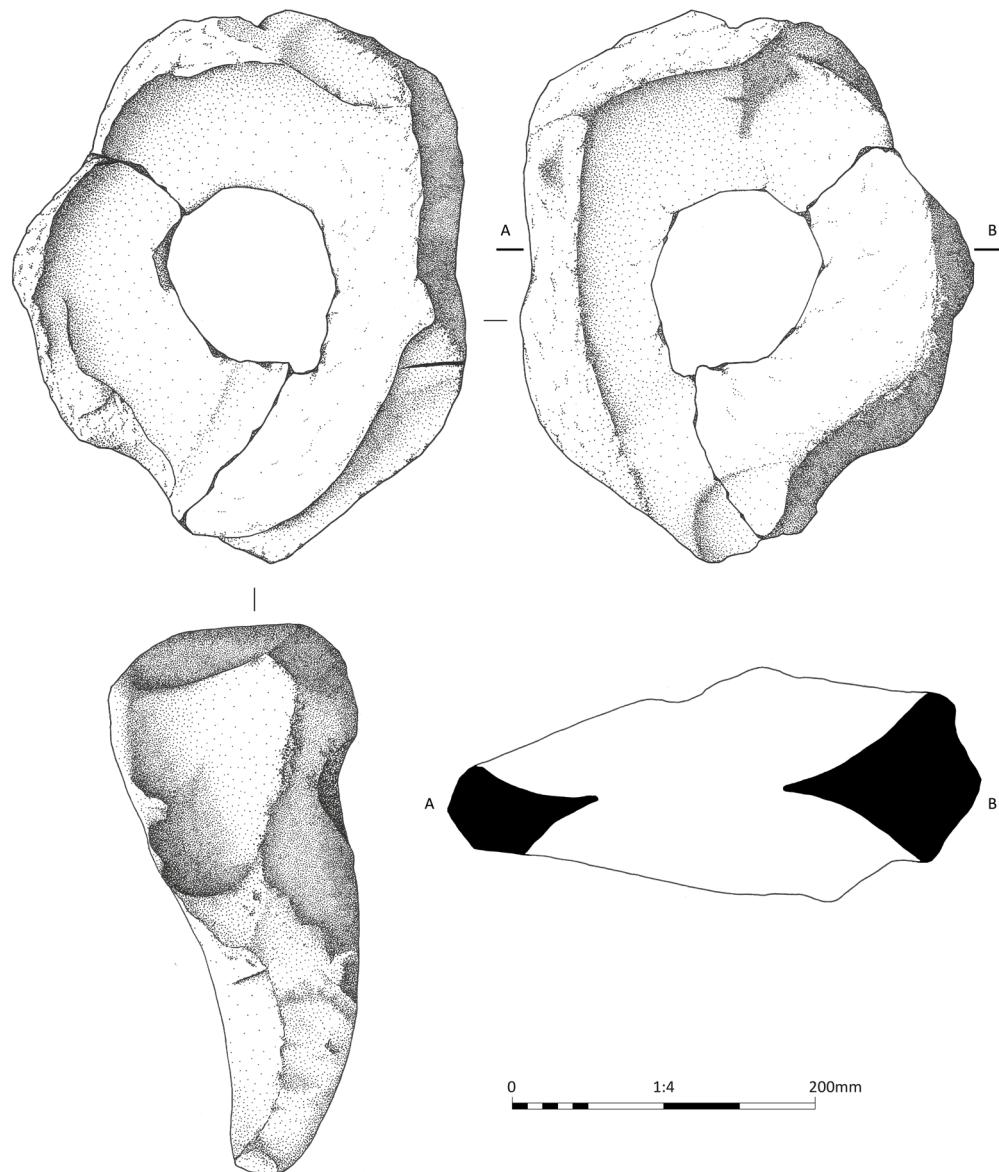
9.1 Introduction

A sandstone saddle quern (SF 23) was recovered from this phase of works; it is a well-worn example, now surviving in two large joining fragments and two smaller flakes. Recovered from the charcoal-rich Fill (1021) of stone-filled Pit [1020], the quern is made from a light reddish-brown even-grained sandstone and has been shaped from a moderately sized ovoid to sub-rectangular cobble (Illus 21). The stone would have been used in conjunction with a rubbing stone to grind grain into flour, but could

have been used to grind other foodstuffs as well as a variety of other materials.

9.2 Description and discussion

The quern is heavily worn on both faces with sloping, dished working surfaces and lipped edges in areas and a short funnel-shaped facet at one end of each grinding face to aid in the removal of the flour. There is a large hole in the centre of the dished faces created by the extensive and prolonged grinding of the working surfaces. The wear present along the edges of this hole suggests that it was the result of extensive use over time rather than as an intentional or accidental fracture. Significantly, there



Illus 21 Saddle quern (SF 23)

are multiple discrete and in some cases overlapping narrow grinding facets along the long edges and sides of the quern that were likely caused by the sharpening or re-sharpening of stone axeheads against the sandstone. The breakage of the quern into multiple fragments appears to be unintentional and may have occurred either during deposition or post-depositionally.

The overall form of the quern is difficult to classify due to the pronounced wear in evidence but it is generally consistent with Close-Brooks' (1984) Early Neolithic querns in that it lacks evidence of shaping prior to use and wear is confined to the centre of the faces, leaving a narrow unmodified area around the periphery of the dished grinding facet (ibid: 288), which in this example was later used to abrade the blades of axes. Despite the depth of the grinding facets, the lack of a deliberate and well-defined rim around the edges argues against this example being classified as a trough quern as the shape is a product of wear rather than design. The presence of axe-sharpening facets, and their number, is very unusual but their presence on the tool edges and ends bolsters the interpretation of the quern as being Neolithic in date.

Saddle querns are known widely across the region, such as the large assemblage from Forest Road, Kintore, Moray (Engl 2008). A total of 32 intact and 25 fragmentary saddle querns were recovered at Kintore, associated with both early and later prehistoric contexts and were classified into three broad groups: slug, saucer, and stationary querns (ibid: 213, 215). The Grantown Road example most closely resembles that of Engl's saucer quern form, being largely undressed; three examples were recognised amongst the Kintore assemblage (ibid: 215). Only one intact and one fragmentary saddle quern were recovered during the previous excavations at Grantown Road. The closest parallel to the example under discussion here comes from the earlier area of investigation at Grantown Road (Engl & McLaren 2016) where a thick sub-rectangular sandstone slab (ibid: 37–8, illus 18, SF 03) saw use on one face as a saddle quern but had a bevelled abrasion facet flanking the surviving surface adjacent to both damaged ends of the stone. It was recovered from the fill of a pit associated with Structure 5. Also from this earlier phase of investigation was a grinding slab (SF 11) with two parallel and

elongated concave facets on one face (ibid: 40, illus 19). Although it was suggested that this tool could have been used as a large stationary whetstone for fashioning metal or stone artefacts (ibid: 40), the similarity in the depth, width, and curvature of the facets suggests they could have been formed by abrading the blades of stone or metal axeheads. Further tools identified as possible axe-sharpeners are known from Stoneykirk, Wigtownshire (Anon 1892: 51; NMS: X.AL 38 & 39) and an example which also saw use as a working surface or knapping anvil was recognised amongst the stone assemblage from Ness-side, Inverness, excavated as part of the Inverness West Link Road (McLaren forthcoming). The texture of stone used here is ideal for abrasion and it is easy to see why a specimen such as this would have been chosen but the combination of use for both food processing and axe-sharpening tasks, and the extent of wear resulting from both is not readily paralleled.

The heavy wear displayed on the dished saddle quern is the result of extensive use over a prolonged period to the point of exhaustion of the grinding surfaces as indicated by the worn-through hole at its centre. Daily use would have denuded the stone surfaces over time due to the action of the grain and rubbing stone regularly rubbing against and wearing down sandstone. The length of time required to accumulate this type of dished wear through regular use is unclear in the absence of experimental work to test the attritional affects of wear on various lithologies over time. Saddle querns, like their later rotary forms, were key household implements both in a practical and symbolic sense as they represent tools that are closely associated with the agricultural cycle (Williams 2003). The fact that this example remained in use as an axe-sharpening tool implies that it was a prized object kept in circulation for an extended period of time, as argued for quern stones found elsewhere (Heslop 2008).

The quern was recovered from the charcoal-rich fill, Context (1021), of stone-filled Pit [1020] that formed part of a cluster of well-defined pits and postholes within Area E. The form of the quern is consistent with a Neolithic date and the radiocarbon dating of the charcoal-rich fill from which the quern was retrieved confirms this, producing a date of 4819 ± 23 BP (SUERC-94888), placing it within the Early to Middle Neolithic period. It is difficult

to argue with certainty whether this particular quern was purposefully deposited but its unusual use-wear biography suggests that it may have been carefully placed within Pit [1020] after its long use had come to an end. The purposeful deposition of quern stones and other stone tools has long been attested in Iron Age Scotland (Hingley 1993) and recognised amongst the quern fragments from a variety of sites in the region, including examples from previous excavations at Grantown Road (Engl & McLaren 2016: 41–2), Forest Road, Kintore (Engl 2008: 223–4) and Birnie, Moray (Hunter forthcoming). Although the depositional practices of quern stones in Neolithic Scotland are less well understood than in the Iron Age, the practice of structured deposition involving key household implements and tools associated with the stages of agricultural production or processing undoubtedly enjoyed a long currency (Brophy & Noble 2012), stretching back into early prehistory as examples from Beckton Farm, Dumfriesshire (Pollard 1998) amongst others attest. The Grantown Road quern provides a further possible example to the growing corpus of household artefacts seeing re-use and possible purposeful deposition in the Neolithic in Moray.

9.3 Catalogue

► SF 23

Largely complete but fractured dished saddle quern in a light reddish-brown even-grained sandstone. Sub-rectangular to slightly ovoid in shape, with a roughly triangular profile. Both faces are heavily worn creating deeply dished faces (maximum D: 67.5mm) with a lipped edge in places as well as a funnel or smoothed channel (W: 59.2mm) for removing the processed grain. A large hole (maximum D: 113.3mm) in the centre of the

dished faces has been created by extensive wear from opposing sides. The concave grinding surface of the first face is characterised by a sharp slope on one end, which then evens out to a more shallow-dished face before tapering down to a narrow funnel, fairly smooth and even in wear, with a few shallow raised ridges present to suggest use at varying angles. There are small areas of wear along the top of the ridge from use as a resting point while the opposite face was in use. The opposite working surface has a vertical edge with a slight overhang along the long edge (L: 200mm, H: 70.4mm), and slopes downwards at a shallower angle than the opposite face, creating a more evenly dished profile. The pronounced ridge on the long edge slopes downwards and smoothes out meeting the dished face to create a pronounced funnel that breaks in slope and tapers down along the side of the quern (W: 107.5mm, L: 71.1mm). Two long sides of the quern display multiple facets of secondary wear, likely created by the sharpening of axeheads along the sandstone: the largest facet is located adjacent to the first face along the top half of the widest edge of the quern. This facet is linear with a semi-circular profile with a slightly dished base (L: 166.1mm, W: 74.1mm, H: 16.1mm). A similar linear facet adjoins the facet just described, though is much shallower and sweeping in shape following the line of the stone and terminating at the funnel edge (L: 179.3mm, W: 43.1mm, H: 3.4mm). Three small U-shaped grooves from sharpening are also present along this face (L: 24.5mm, W: 6.1mm, H: 1.6mm; L: 36.7mm, W: 4.7mm, H: 1.8mm; L: 25.1mm, W: 4.2mm, H: 1.1mm). A series of similar abrasion facets additional to those already noted, is also observed on the opposite face. L: 355mm, W: 287mm, H: 143mm, M: 6443.15g. Context: (1021) fill of Pit [1020].