12. DISCUSSION

The final phase of excavations at Grantown Road, Forres have uncovered a chronologically diverse range of features and artefacts, ranging from a Late Mesolithic microlith to medieval pits with pottery and an unusual mortar fragment. The earliest features comprise two scatters of Early Neolithic pits and a post-ring structure, followed by a substantial enclosed Late Iron Age post-ring roundhouse. The findings from the earlier phases of work, published by Cook in 2016, complement those from the present excavation with areas of overlap in terms of artefacts, radiocarbon dating, and feature types, though there are notable differences. Those earlier works identified features and artefacts from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, and early medieval periods but with a focus on Iron Age settlement as 'represented by a variety of building types including ring-ditch, ring-groove and post-ring structures, in association with four-post structures, a souterrain and metalworking furnaces' (Cook 2016: 61).

12.1 Mesolithic activity

Earlier excavations had returned two 7th millennium BC radiocarbon dates but these were interpreted as representing ancient bog pine (Cook 2016: 3). A single redeposited microlith was the only evidence recovered during the present phase of works for Mesolithic activity on site. The site is located in a landscape with potential for a range of resources to be available, lying as it does on gravel terraces a little over a kilometre from the River Findhorn.

12.2 Early and Late Neolithic activity

The Neolithic activity was the most geographically widespread on site, located in three distinct areas, Area C, E, and H. In total eight radiocarbon dates were returned from sampled deposits, predominantly Early Neolithic. As is common to many sites with a Neolithic presence the most common features were pits with evidence of burning in the form of charcoal and fire-cracked stones along with pottery, lithics, and small amounts of charred cereal grains and hazelnut (Thomas 1999: 64; Barclay et al 2002; Cook & Dunbar 2008). A single well-defined post-ring structure was present in Area C. This structure would appear to be a coherent post-built roundhouse typical of the Bronze Age or later sites; however, hazelnut shell (SUERC-94900) from Fill (1159) of Posthole [1158] of this structure returned an Early Neolithic date of *c* 3650–3550 cal BC at 2-sigma. There is a possibility that this date may be anomalous, representing residual material associated with nearby Early Neolithic pits. As the charcoal used in dating this posthole feature was not clearly from a post burnt in situ, there is a risk that the charcoal might be residual. This risk is greater in a multiperiod site or area of activity as present here, with known features of different dates. In choosing samples for dating, consideration was made of the taphonomy of the material available to be dated, and it is recognised that material that could be strongly associated with the post-ring structure, such as hearth deposits or burnt post material, was not available. Although unabraded charcoal was selected, suggesting it had not been present for centuries prior to inclusion within the posthole fill, there remains potential that this represents residual charcoal from activity earlier than the structure. The following discussion favours a Neolithic date, given possible similar structures found elsewhere at Forres; however, it is accepted that the roundhouse may be a Bronze Age or Iron Age structure, similar to many examples dated to those periods.

The earlier excavations (Cook 2016: 3–9) had recorded concentrations of pits and postholes believed to represent Neolithic structures (Structures 1, 10a, 12a, and 12b) though without any obvious structural post-rings. The rationale behind such interpretations has been covered extensively at many other sites, such as Kinbeachie (Barclay et al 2002), Kintore (Cook & Dunbar 2008), Deers Den (Alexander 2002), Beechwood (McLaren & Engl forthcoming), Laigh Newton, (Toolis 2011), Milton of Leys (Connolly & MacSween 2004), and Beckton Farm (Pollard 1998). In comparison with examples from the sites noted above and structures recorded from the earlier Grantown Road excavations, the scatter of pits in Area E could similarly be interpreted as remains of a Neolithic domestic structure. The features in Area E contained a saddle quern and round-based bowl pottery suggestive of a domestic setting; similar finds were present in Structure 12a/12b at the earlier site (ibid: 9).

However, in contrast to the more ephemeral structures identified in the earlier Grantown Road

works, the post-ring structure in Area C is unusually coherent in form, and in the absence of radiocarbon dates might have been interpreted as Bronze Age or later prehistoric in date. It would appear to represent a roundhouse structure with a post-ring diameter of 6.2m and a footprint of perhaps 9m to 10m diameter. Although no internal features survive, such as a hearth or central post, there are further pits and postholes outside the post-ring, commonly deeper than many of the postholes of the post-ring. The coherence of the post-ring is perhaps testament to a relatively low level of plough truncation.

A recently excavated site at Lochinver Quarry, to the west of Elgin, contains evidence for an Early Neolithic roundhouse/post-built building, and is similar to Grantown Road in also containing evidence for later prehistoric settlement. A sample of charred barley (SUERC-87239) from a pit within the Neolithic structure at Lochinver provided a date range between 3764 and 3653 cal BC at 2-sigma, very similar to the dated Early Neolithic activity at Grantown Road, and provides a possible parallel for the Area C structure (Cockcroft et al 2019: 14, 72–4).

The earlier excavations at Grantown Road produced five radiocarbon dates between around 3650 cal BC to 3400 cal BC with 95% confidence, from Structures 12a and 10a (Cook 2016: 4). These Early Neolithic dates are broadly contemporary with the dates for the post-ring roundhouse and pits in Area C and the pits in Area E. It is possible that some of these features and structures could have been contemporary and at the very least this indicates extensive areas of activity during this period. The presence of Early Neolithic round-based bowls from Area C and Area E matches the small assemblage from the earlier excavations with various carinated and uncarinated bowls present (McLaren 2016: 26–30), again suggesting a cohesive integrated settlement across both sites.

Two Later Neolithic features on the present site include a pit, [1127], containing pottery of an uncertain tradition, possibly Grooved Ware, in Area C and Pit [1045] in Area H. In the earlier excavations there was a similar pattern of concentrated Early Neolithic activity with isolated Late Neolithic features. Close to both Structures 10a and 12a were isolated pits with mid to late 3rd millennium BC Late Neolithic dates, Pits [655] and [731] (Cook 2016: 4). This points to the continued use of the wider landscape around the Grantown Road site from the 4th millennium through to the mid-3rd millennium BC.

A wide range of food products was utilised in the Neolithic period. The macroplant remains include limited quantities of typical Neolithic cereals, barley and oats, while there is evidence for crop processing on or near the site as a heavily worn saddle quern, likely reused for axe sharpening, was recovered. Large amounts of carbonised hazelnut shells recovered from Neolithic contexts indicate their use as a food source while lipid analysis of organic residues on a sherd of possible Grooved Ware shows that dairy products possibly milk, butter, or cheese were consumed.

12.3 Late Iron Age activity

Unlike the earlier works at Grantown Road (Cook 2016), there was an absence of evidence for Bronze Age and Middle Iron Age activity on the present site.

Late Iron Age activity was represented, however, as a cropmark was identified through excavation as a palisaded enclosure and post-ring roundhouse in Area G. This was a comprehensible series of features comprising a large enclosure cut which would have held a post-built palisade, likely with larger entrance posts representing a gate of some form across a 2.6m wide opening. The enclosure had an internal diameter of 17.5m and an internal area of 240m^2. The enclosing ditch was on average 1.0m deep and the palisade posts would have been between 0.30m and 0.40m in diameter, which suggests a height of perhaps around 2.0m above ground.

The earlier excavations at Grantown Road revealed the presence of a number of Iron Age features, 'forming a discrete settlement on the higher ground overlooking the Findhorn. The settlement comprised a huge substantial ring-ditch roundhouse, a smaller ring-ditch, two post-ring structures, a small ring groove, two palisade enclosures, two metalworking furnaces and a souterrain. Two smaller ring-ditches were identified to the immediate north-west of this main settlement' (Cook 2016). The two palisades were not fully exposed during these earlier works but it was clear that Palisade 2 cut across Palisade 1. The earlier palisade had a postulated internal diameter of

21.5m, while Palisade 2 was slightly larger with an estimated internal diameter of 23m. The palisades were dated to *c* 1st century AD for Palisade 1 and to the late 1st to 2nd century AD for Palisade 2. Structure 6, a large ring-ditch roundhouse cut by the earlier Palisade 1 was dated to between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD (Cook 2016: 5, 21–2). These dates are extremely similar to the four dates returned for the palisade and post-ring roundhouse in Area G, which are of likely late 1st century AD to early 3rd century AD date, suggesting they represent part of the same later prehistoric occupation. The radiocarbon dates suggest that these structures may have been in contemporary use or in a relatively continuous sequence. The souterrain from the earlier works also returned a 1st to 2nd century AD date for its backfilling (ibid: 5, 15–6).

The three palisades therefore share very similar dates but they are also directly comparable in terms of scale, plan and form. The primary difference is that the palisade in Area G of the present works is complete and contains a post-ring roundhouse. This centrally placed roundhouse, whose entrance porch is aligned with the entrance to the enclosure is undoubtedly contemporary with the enclosure. Cook (2016: 61) suggests that the enclosures encountered previously were likely to have been used for stock control and animal protection rather than enclosing settlement. Unfortunately, as less than half of each of Palisade 1 and Palisade 2 were revealed, it is unclear whether either palisade recorded by Cook contained an associated structure, as identified in the Area G palisade, or not. Had these two previously recorded palisades been fully excavated, perhaps the various pits and postholes present within the excavated areas would have indicated the truncated structural remains of a building.

Across Scotland the last few decades have seen a number of enclosed Iron Age sites subject to excavation, from multivallate enclosures such as Braehead, Glasgow, which utilised ditches and wooden palisades (Ellis 2008) to Dryburn Ridge, East Lothian (Dunwell 2007) where there was an extended Iron Age settlement with both enclosed and unenclosed phases and numerous post-ring roundhouses. These sites and many of the other known enclosed Iron Age settlements were established by the mid-1st millennium BC (Dunwell 2007: 112) but the three palisades at Forres appear to date to several centuries later, the 1st and 2nd century AD. There were, however, also unenclosed settlement remains from the mid-1st millennium BC, such as post-ring Structure 3 (Cook 2016: 19) or metalworking furnace [157] (ibid: 14). At Dryburn Ridge, the first phase of settlement within the palisade suggests the presence of three roundhouses with entrances aligned on breaks in the palisade and facing due east, in similar fashion to the Area G example (Dunwell 2007). The recent excavation at Lochinver Quarry, to the west of Elgin, as well as containing a post-built Early Neolithic roundhouse (noted above), also provides nearby evidence for Iron Age settlement, though here there was an unusual rectangular building, lacking evidence for enclosure, and apparently of somewhat earlier date. A barley grain sample (SUERC-87244) from one of its pits had a date range between 350 and 59 cal BC at 2-sigma (Cockcroft et al 2019: 14, 73, 76–7).

At Strathallan, Perthshire, three palisaded enclosures were excavated on a gravel ridge, one of which contained a post-ring roundhouse with a further two ring-ditch roundhouses and two ring-groove roundhouses also present (Dunbar 2015). The post-ring roundhouse lay within a 30m diameter palisade with its entrance to the east. Though unpublished, the pottery assemblage and form of the roundhouses at Strathallan suggest an Iron Age date for the settlement.

The post-ring roundhouse at Forres is typical of this form of structure, which has parallels from the Bronze Age onwards across Scotland and Britain. The size and form of the roundhouse at Forres is entirely typical and comparable with known examples. Local parallels with very similar post-ring structures with porches include Culduthel (Murray 2008a; 2008b) and Beechwood, both Inverness (McLaren & Engl forthcoming), Kintore, Aberdeenshire (Cook & Dunbar 2008), or further afield, Braehead, Glasgow (Ellis 2008), and Dryburn Ridge, East Lothian (Dunwell 2007).

Further recent archaeological work in Forres includes a watching brief at Waterford Road, close to the River Findhorn. Several postholes and pits were uncovered and excavated, including a series of pits relating to the smelting and smithing of iron ore, and the disposal of waste materials which are interpreted as Iron Age in date (Gaunt 2017). There is therefore evidence for widespread Iron Age activity

focused along the terraces above the River Findhorn and this river clearly played an important role as a resource and routeway across the later prehistoric landscape. Further evidence for Iron Age smelting activity was recently encountered further east at Lochinver Quarry, in the form of three possible iron smelting furnaces/hearths with associated tap slag, though these are suspected to be of Early Iron Age date (Cockcroft et al 2019: 76; McDonnell 2019).

12.4 Medieval activity

The medieval activity on site was limited, with three pits assigned to this period. A solitary pit, [1110], in Area C was likely dated to between the 7th and 9th centuries AD (SUERC-94904), which accords with a number of 8th to 10th century AD features and structures recorded during the earlier excavations (Cook 2016). Of more interest, however, were two large intercutting pits located in Area E which were radiocarbon dated to the mid-to-late 13th century AD. Pit [1057] and later Pit [1010] which truncated it are amongst the largest cut features on site. Pit [1010] had a deliberate clay lining presumably imported from somewhere off-site as no natural clay deposits were encountered during the excavations. However, the plant macroplant finds from these pits did not suggest any clear crop processing or storage function. The macroplant evidence was dominated by oats, rye, and hulled barley though the presence of bread/club wheat is unusual given its difficulty to cultivate. Where present on medieval sites, it is often viewed as an imported luxury food item or at the least an indicator of a high status site. The radiocarbon dates and the locally made Scottish Redware pottery recovered suggest a mid-to-late 13th century AD date, which would also match the date proposed for the mortar fragment recovered from Pit [1010]. This is a rare example of an apparently locally made medieval sandstone mortar in Scotland, with only one other known, from an excavation carried out at Bon Accord in Aberdeen (Haggarty 2021). The presence of such a rare item would suggest the presence of a high status site in proximity to the present site, though with the exception of remains of bread/club wheat, no further evidence in support of this was identified. However, the presence of a high status site, nearby in medieval Forres or the surrounding area, cannot be discounted.

The settlement of medieval Forres was likely one of up to 19 settlements in Scotland granted 'burgh' status by the end of King David I's reign in 1153 (Dennison 2018: 11–12) though the original charter is lost. Excavations within the medieval core of the town in 1994 uncovered a series of pits, a boundary ditch, and postholes with pottery including imported wares but also locally made Redwares, which were deemed to be 13th century in date (Cachart & Hall 1994), while the medieval castle in Forres is mentioned in 1264, when William Wiseman, the Sheriff of Forres, paid for a new tower to be built (Douglas 1934: 523). In addition:

> 'in 1297, Forres Castle was said to have been in English hands, and in that year it was attacked and taken by the patriotic party under the command of Sir Andrew Murray. After Bruce's victory at Bannockburn in 1314 it was transferred to the custody of the Earls of Moray' [Simpson & Stevenson 1982].

While the present site would have been very peripheral to the core of the medieval settlement of Forres, it is possible that the mortar derives from the turbulent later years of the 13th century when medieval Forres saw much disruption. It is also possible that it derives from a possible high status settlement perhaps ecclesiastical in nature near the present site. According to Easson (1957: 103), while the presence of a Dominican friary in Forres has been suggested by a reference to its possible foundation in a manuscript in the National Library of Scotland, this is unlikely to be correct.