12. DISCUSSION

The archaeological work undertaken at Craggan has uncovered a multi-period landscape with activity from the Late Mesolithic to the modern day. A focus of settlement activity in the Middle to Late Iron Age and early medieval periods was identified, with evidence for iron working, grain processing, food processing, and cooking. The landscape setting of the site is of significance as it is located next to the River Spey, which forms the natural routeway of Strathspey.

12.1 Earliest activity

The earliest activity on site is represented by a Late Mesolithic lithic from pit [029] and a late 5th millennium BC radiocarbon date from pine charcoal from pit [031]. Both of these pits were part of an L-shaped pit alignment located at the northeast of the site. Unfortunately, this alignment could not be confidently related to one phase of activity. Other pits within this group of features contained a broken iron nail that had likely been removed from its fixture, blue glass dating to the 17th to 20th century, and material dated to the 13th to 14th century AD. Their arrangement in plan and the similarity of the limited macroplant and charcoal within their fills suggests they are related to each other, but date to the medieval period, with residual earlier material redeposited. The lithics and Mesolithic date do, however, indicate a level of activity in this area in early prehistory.

L-shaped pit alignments are difficult to date but are frequently early prehistoric. Examples of similar sites include Keltie Bridge, Callander (O'Connell 2019), Warren Field, Crathes, Aberdeenshire (Murray et al 2009), and Wellhill, Perthshire (Brophy & Wright 2021).

12.2 Neolithic funerary activity

A single Late Neolithic (Phase 2) cremation burial was identified in the central northern area but appeared to be an isolated feature. The cremation was deposited in pit [059] and analyses of the cremated bone indicated it likely represents one adult male. There is limited evidence for Late Neolithic burials in Scotland and when encountered they tend to be part of a cemetery or monumental feature such as a stone circle, and are often associated with Grooved Ware pottery. The cremation cemetery at Forteviot, Perthshire presents an example of Late Neolithic burial. Nine deposits of cremated bone were identified there and analysis has confirmed that they represent the remains of at least 18 individuals (Brophy & Noble 2021: 1). Further Scottish cremation cemeteries include Balbirnie stone circle in Fife (Ritchie 1974) and Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian (Piggott 1950; Barclay 1999). At all of these sites the scale of funerary activity and the number of cremated individuals is much larger than at Craggan. Craggan also does not have any grave goods, such as Grooved Ware or skewer pins, often seen at these sites. However, Craggan may represent, on a small-scale, this funerary tradition.

Within the Highlands only one other cremation burial has been dated to the Late Neolithic period, at Armadale, Isle of Skye (Peteranna 2011). The Late Neolithic cremation there was part of a much larger Bronze Age burial landscape and also contained grave goods in the form of three unburnt flint flakes.

Within the landscape surrounding Craggan standing stones have been identified at Tom Nan Carragh (HHER MHG6788, MHG6789, and MHG6790) and several possible burial cairns are known in the vicinity. This suggests that the Craggan cremation represents an element within a wider Neolithic ritual and funerary landscape. This find is a rare example of a likely single burial in this time period, making it an important example, enhancing understanding of Neolithic burial practices.

12.3 Late Bronze Age activity

A Late Bronze Age date (Phase 3) was obtained from a possible charred structural element or post identified within fire pit [106]. The fire pit was near Structure F, but due to the truncated nature of the features in this area it is uncertain that these features are related. The absence of other evidence for Bronze Age activity elsewhere on the site could indicate the settlement or structural activity relating to this period was of short duration.

12.4 Middle Iron Age settlement

During the Middle Iron Age (Phase 4) there is evidence of the landscape being occupied by a small

settlement comprising at least three roundhouses, Structures E, F, and G, and associated features. The roundhouses were all located within 50m of each other in the central northern area of the site, forming a discrete unenclosed settlement. Structure F was the earliest and the least well-preserved roundhouse. It was the smallest and could therefore have functioned as an 'outhouse' or 'workshop' such as those seen in and around settlement at Culduthel, Workshops 8, 18, and 22 (Hatherley & Murray 2021: 53). However, unlike Culduthel there is no evidence for craft activities being undertaken at Craggan during this period.

Structure E, to the southwest of Structure F, comprised a post ring with a porch at the west end, a segment of ring ditch which contained a stone surface, and three internal features. The function and use of the stone surface could not be identified but similar stone surfaces have been found at Kintore, where it has been suggested that the stones functioned as stands for equipment, possibly related to looms (Cook & Dunbar 2008: 333). Two radiocarbon dates obtained for this feature indicated Middle Iron Age use. Approximately 5m to the northeast of Structure E was a pit, [124], that contained an iron working furnace with a large amount of metalworking waste. The furnace was dated to the Middle Iron Age and is likely contemporary with roundhouse Structure E. Similar metalworking furnaces were found at Grantown Road, Forres, one of which was dated to 410–200 cal BC, a similar range as the Craggan furnace (Cook 2016: 4).

Structure G, represented by a segment of ring ditch and associated posthole, was very similar in size and shape to other Middle Iron Age roundhouse structures identified on the site and may therefore be another roundhouse. The radiocarbon dates from Structure G were contemporary with Structure E, suggesting that they were in use (or at least went out of use) at a similar time. This indicates that the settlement may have contracted significantly around the end of the Middle Iron Age.

Micromorphological analyses of the ring ditch fills for Structures E and G showed that as the ring ditches went out of use, they were infilled gradually, with some evidence for human activity in the general vicinity. There was then a period with no activity in the immediate vicinity during which they then fully silted up with more sterile material. This also suggests that the roundhouses were not deliberately demolished after they went out of use and may have continued to be discernible throughout the stages of decay, with the ring ditch remaining as a visible hollow for some time.

The micromorphological analyses also showed that the drift geology surrounding Structures E and G were significantly different from each other. This was also evident during excavation, as Structure G was cut into sand while Structure E was cut into sandy gravel. Across the entire site it was noted that the vast majority of features were dug in places where the natural subsoil was a compact sandy gravel and that areas of natural sand were not favoured for settlement. The areas of sand subsoil tended to be on lower-lying ground, more prone to waterlogging, or areas of undulating ground. In contrast, areas with sandy gravel subsoil were generally more even and on higher ground, and therefore more suitable for settlement. The natural geology and micro-topography of the site therefore likely played a significant role in the selection of settlement locations. Exceptions were Pit Group 1 (probably dating to the early prehistoric period) and Pit Group 2 (5th to 6th century AD) and some other isolated features that were located in lower lying areas.

12.5 Late Iron Age settlement

Radiocarbon dating suggests a gap in activity between the Middle Iron Age and Late Iron Age of at least 50 years, which could suggest a shift in settlement. The Late Iron Age settlement comprised three roundhouses, two of which were located in the northern half of the site, respecting the Middle Iron Age roundhouses while one was located near the River Spey, with evidence that this structure was used for grain processing. Micromorphological analysis (L Roy 2022) suggests that the ring ditches of Structures E and G continued to be infilled post-abandonment. Therefore, these Middle Iron Age structures may have been visible at the time of the Late Iron Age settlement and knowledge of them may have persisted. The Late Iron Age roundhouses were also structurally and in size similar to those in the Middle Iron Age, this could suggest that the building techniques were carried on from the

Middle Iron Age and reused in the Late Iron Age.

Within the Highland region a large range of other Middle Iron Age and Late Iron Age roundhouse settlements have been found, including Grantown Road, Forres; Birnie, Moray, and Seafield West and Culduthel, immediately south of Inverness. At Grantown Road, Forres the Middle Iron Age and Late Iron Age roundhouses measured between 5.8m and 12m in diameter (Cook 2016: 19). The Late Iron Age roundhouse structures, especially Structure 4 (ibid: 19), were very similar to Structure C at Craggan. At Birnie, Moray the roundhouses measured *c* 12m in diameter and were very well preserved, much larger than the features at Craggan. Birnie has been described as a likely 'key centre in the local area' (Hunter 2004: 1). At Seafield West (Cressey & Anderson 2011) 13 roundhouse structures were identified, including two with ring ditch segments but mostly post ring defined structures which measured between 7m and 9m in diameter. Similar finds were also identified at Seafield West including a quernstone, slag, and metal objects, however unlike Craggan, pottery was also found. At Culduthel (Hatherley & Murray 2021: 39) the workshops varied between 3.7m and 9m in diameter, whereas the houses varied from 9.7m to 12.5m in diameter. All the structures identified at Craggan fall within the diameter range of the workshops and are much smaller than the houses at Culduthel, but contain no material culture which would indicate they are used as workshops. Culduthel, Seafield West, Birnie, and Grantown Road are all settlements located in gradually undulating coastal plains and rich agricultural land, whereas Craggan is located within a narrower strath with mountainous terrain bordering either side. The location of Craggan in a more upland environment further from the rich coastal plains could explain the reason for the smaller size of the roundhouses and the smaller number of overall structures relating to each period. Craggan was likely a smaller rural agricultural settlement which used the River Spey and associated strath as a transport link to these richer and more extensive settlements.

The situation of Craggan in the landscape likely also influenced the roundhouse entrance location. The entrances to most of the roundhouses were on the east side, which was likely an adaptation to the local prevailing winds. It was noted during fieldwork that weather generally approached the site from the southwest due to the shape of the strath and the location of the hills along either side, meaning that the more sheltered location for an entrance would be to the northeast or east.

During the construction of the roundhouses the location was carefully chosen by the builders to utilise flatter, slightly elevated areas of the site. Structure C was located on its own near the river, on a small rise, perhaps indicating a deliberate placement away from the core of the settlement. It contained the largest cereal assemblages from the site, and three basal disc-shaped quernstones were recovered. The recovery of both a significant grain assemblage and quern fragments suggests that this was the location for processing grain, perhaps serving a function for the wider settlement. The structure's proximity to the river could be related to a need for a source of water for processing and preparing food.

The three quernstones in Structure C had clearly been intentionally placed in a straight line along the base of the ring ditch, which may have been towards the rear of the structure. Three small fragments of metal were also identified within this feature, a possible knife tip, nail, and sheet vessel metal. While these metal fragments most likely relate to causal losses or waste material, the three quernstones present an example of deliberate deposition. It is possible they were placed along the base of the ring ditch as convenient stepping stones or working surfaces, part of a functional arrangement related to the use of the structure, similar to the stone surfaces seen in Structure E and pit [072]. Structure A also contained a single quernstone within its ring ditch. This was an upper rotary quernstone, placed face down, suggesting a possible different deposition process to that represented in Structure C. However, both of these structures show that quernstones had been deliberately placed within ring ditches during the Late Iron Age. Other examples of this practice had been found at sites including Aldclune, Perth and Kinross (Hingley et al 1998: 452) and Birnie, near Elgin, Moray (F Hunter, pers comm), suggesting that this was a wider Late Iron Age phenomenon.

Structure D was well preserved and many of the postholes in this roundhouse still have visible postpipes, which suggest that, like the ring ditches of Structure E and G in the Middle Iron Age

settlement, the Late Iron Age roundhouses were left to decay in situ after the buildings went out of use rather than being demolished. Different theories have been proposed for the lifespan of a roundhouse. Cook & Dunbar (2008: 320) suggest that the likely time was perhaps between 15 and 30 years, based on their evidence from Kintore, with a longer lifespan achievable only if repairs were undertaken. At Castell Henllys, South Pembrokeshire, it has been suggested that the roundhouses stood for at least 30 years (Mytum & Meek 2020) and interestingly Harding (2023: 230) suggests that, depending on the method of repair, maintenance of the structures might not be easily observed in the truncated archaeological record. If the life spans of the houses at Craggan were around 30 years, then the Late Iron Age settlement probably went out of use by the end of the 3rd century AD at the latest.

12.6 Early medieval settlement

After a pause in settlement, the site was in use again around the end of the 3rd to 6th centuries AD. An isolated fire pit and a refuse pit, located to the south of previous settlement, indicates that activity was taking place during this time period.

From the 7th to the 11th century AD, more substantial activity was present, with what appears to be continuous settlement. The first evidence related to this period was Pit Group 2, located between Pit Group 1 and the Middle Iron Age and Late Iron Age settlement. Pit Group 2 included several fire pits, one of which could have been a rudimentary grain dryer, suggesting that grain processing was again occurring. Such activity was further substantiated in a nearby pit, [037], which contained a roughout for a millstone or large lower rotary quernstone, and also contained cereal likely derived from crop processing. At the same time that grain was being processed and quernstones were being manufactured on site, Structure B, which contained a large hearth, was in use. Evidence for grain processing and settlement has been found at early medieval sites such as Lair, Glenshee (Clarke 2019: 82; Strachan et al 2019: 45); however, the geographic location and the type of structure found at Lair are quite different to Craggan, as is Lair's upland environment. The structures at Lair were mainly turf-built with sunken floors and a hearth. These types of structure are unlikely to survive in an agricultural field or lowland environment, as at Craggan, and the best opportunity to identify them is through aerial photography. Possible sites have been identified in this way at Inchture, Perthshire, Inchcoonans, Balgarvie, Blairhall, Perthshire, and Leuchars, Fife (Noble & Evans 2022: 59). Investigation of such sites would allow more early medieval lowland settlements to be identified. A radiocarbon dating programme was also crucial for identifying the early medieval activity, as during excavation these features appeared indistinct from earlier, Iron Age, activity.

The most substantial evidence for metalworking at Craggan was also dated to the early medieval period and included a potential metalworking furnace, [337], and two pits that contained dumps of metalworking waste, including evidence for smelting and smithing. The metalworking was probably focussed on production and repair of everyday iron items and tools.

The settlement during the early medieval period was apparently quite limited in size, as Structure B is the only structure confidently attributed to this period. Further buildings could, however, have been formerly present but not surviving in the archaeological record, in particular if constructed of turf. The discovery of a rural settlement dating to the early medieval period is significant, as these types of sites are difficult to identify. Until recently, research in the North of Scotland has often focussed on high status sites such as hillfort settlements including Tap o'Noth, Craig Phadrig, royal settlements such as Barflat, Rhynie and coastal sites such as the promontory fort at Burghead (Noble & Evans 2022). The site at Craggan has no evidence of non-ferrous metalworking or any of the imported wares that would be present at a high status site, but is a rare opportunity to investigate and understand a more mundane rural agricultural settlement of the period. The source for raw material for iron is understudied in northern Scotland, but it is widely accepted that bog ore is frequently used (Hatherley & Murray 2021: 63). In the immediate landscape surrounding Craggan there are multiple areas of waterlogged ground that likely relate to palaeochannels, which could be the source for the bog ore and one factor that encouraged settlement and metalworking here.

A four post structure (Structure H) was also identified on site, which was likely an early medieval granary. The date of this feature could not be definitively proven, as one of two radiocarbon dated samples from this feature provided an Early Iron Age date. However, the interpretation of this structure as a granary is supported by a large macroplant assemblage, and the presence of a millstone roughout. Nearby pits with an early medieval date that also contained many macroplant remains would indicate that grain processing was occurring on-site during this time period, and therefore this granary feature is most likely early medieval in date.

There, however, have not been many early medieval four post granaries found, most features of this type being Iron Age in date. Two somewhat similar four post structures were identified during excavation at Grantown Road, Forres (Cook 2016: 12); these were dated to the Iron Age, between 350 cal BC and cal AD 30, slightly later than the Craggan Early Iron Age date. Another site with multiple four post structures was excavated at Kintore, Aberdeenshire (Cook & Dunbar 2008: 164), and a radiocarbon date obtained from one of these four post structures is very similar to the Early Iron Age date from Craggan.

Further afield, similar Early Iron Age four post structures have been discovered in England, near Reading (Brossler 2001) and at Danebury Hillfort in Hampshire (Cunliffe 2011: 94–5). These structures have been interpreted as specialist storage structures, located outside the main centre of settlement. The location of the four post structure at Craggan appears to be similar. The presence of a large quantity of burnt grain would suggest a grain storage feature that might have been burnt down or deliberately backfilled.

12.7 Medieval activity (11th to 13th centuries AD)

A large shallow pit, [092], with a flat stone surface likely formed a working surface of 11th to 13th century AD date. It is likely that this stone surface was once part of a larger structure, likely with a turf or earth-built structure covering it. It is rare to find such structures from this time period, and so this is an important addition to the archaeological record. Metalworking waste within the deposit surrounding the stones indicated that it had been used for craft processes, in the vicinity of metalworking activity.