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## 7 Conclusions *by Paul Duffy*

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The archaeological work at Girvan provided a rare opportunity to examine, not only a series of archaeological sites, but also the archaeological and palaeoenvironmental development of a landscape from the earliest times of human occupation through to the present day. As such, the results of the project are more than the sum of its parts: the work carried out contributes to the current understanding of human occupation within the Girvan area and the relationship such activity had to a constantly changing environment over time. In particular, the project clearly demonstrated the high potential for organic preservation of material dating back as far as the Mesolithic, and the potential that such material has for providing rarely glimpsed evidence of the inter-relationship between human agency and environment in past landscapes. The organic potential of similar such valleys in this part of south-west Scotland is clear.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the project was the temporal depth of human activity explored. Most certainly, the area to the north of Girvan is well known for evidence of Mesolithic activity, and the project demonstrated that humans have been active in the area from the sixth millennium BC onwards. What is more interesting is that, save for a few isolated examples, such evidence did not come from the usual debitage of stone tool production and discard, but rather from direct evidence of early 'slash and burn' woodland clearance. This type of evidence is rare but not unknown from Scotland; its value here is perhaps to remind us that archaeological signatures of activities and human agency in the landscape at this time can and do extend beyond the ubiquitous lithic scatter. Such evidence reinforces interpretations of early settlers in Scotland as proactive and dynamic social groups, actively modifying the environment around them to meet specific needs, rather than hiding at the fringes of such landscapes, at the mercy of the local conditions.

Similarly interesting was the evidence of burnt mound creation in the Late Neolithic through to the Middle Bronze Age. Such sites are common throughout Scotland, and the dating evidence fits well into an increasingly well-defined prehistoric tradition. At Girvan, the sites were all badly damaged through various human and natural agents, rendering any contribution towards ongoing debate about the function of such sites somewhat problematic. It is instead the distribution of the sites that is most illuminating. The density of such sites in the area and the immediate environs is certainly unusual in this part of Scotland. When considered along with the dating evidence, it become clear that earlier

sites cluster within the middle of the Grant's valley, whilst later site location is on the periphery of this area towards the eastern end of the valley and to the south at Gallowhill. Findings from the environmental and pedological analysis from the project would appear to suggest that this may be a reaction to environmental change, with the gradual stagnation of existing marsh, and subsequent drying of the valley as land continued to rise following the retreat of the ice. The location of the burnt mound deposits, with an apparent requirement for an adjacent water supply, has therefore been actively altered by the environmental landscape in which human activity was occurring, and by natural changes within that landscape.

Further changes within the landscape and local environment were attested through the discovery of a concentration of chopped, burnt timbers dated to the Iron Age. The suggestion that this may represent a trackway, deliberately laid to facilitate movement over a still partially boggy landscape, is tantalizing, but unfortunately inconclusive. More certainly, the wood deposit demonstrates that, as in the Mesolithic period, woodland was being deliberately cleared from the slopes of the boggy valley floor though 'slash and burn' methods as part of a deliberate manipulation of the environment in which people lived. That this manipulation was both widespread and far-reaching in its impact is attested microscopically by the pollen evidence, which shows a widespread clearance of tree types at this time, and macroscopically by the layer of fine-grained grey clay that accumulated over the peat at this time. Although other potentials exist, it is probable that the clay deposit formed as a direct result of deforestation and/or as an indirect result of increased agricultural practices, potentially both a reaction to increasing population densities in the area and land pressures.

The descendants of such populations undoubtedly continued to use the valley throughout the Iron Age and into the early medieval period; evidence for this is scarce, but striking, in the form of a glass bead tinged with an opalescent bluish lustre. Such artefactual evidence provides limited insight into how the valley was used and perceived in this period, but gives pause for thought to question what the history of the object is: who made it, how did they use it and why was it lost in this area? More strikingly, the evaluation of the Ladywell moated enclosure in Area C demonstrated that by the time of the 13th–14th centuries AD the valley had become the focus of a rich settlement, the location of which, on a small gravel knoll, again reflects the relationship between human occupation and environment in the valley. This environmental alteration is borne out by

the presence of locally grown crops on this site, in all probability on the slopes of the valley that were initially impacted on in the Mesolithic and finally cleared of trees in the Iron Age. Whether the site was ecclesiastical or secular in nature is still open to question, but more certainly the owners of the moated enclosure possessed sufficient wealth not only to cultivate crops in the immediate area, but also to import highly processed breadwheat, and to store such crops in oak-built buildings. The potential of imported pottery from Yorkshire, or alternatively of a resident potter from Yorkshire creating these styles in local fabrics, only enhances the status of the site.

The subsequent history of the valley and its environment is one of agricultural use; two post-medieval farmsteads are known from cartographic evidence in the valley but were not investigated as part of this project. The fact that these activities also relied on a series of modifications to the local environment, in common with human activity over time in the area, was demonstrated by the observations of numerous field drains throughout the valley, testament to 18th- or 19th-century attempts to improve drainage in the

area. It was the wetter soil conditions and boggy areas which probably first attracted Mesolithic people to the area, and in part acted as a stimulus for burnt mound construction. These were ultimately modified by people in the Iron Age and medieval periods, and the vestiges of these conditions could thus still be seen as active forces on the modern landscape during the project.

The construction of new bonded warehouses for William Grant and Sons Distillers Ltd, the ultimate motivations for the excavations, can therefore be seen not as a unique act, but as a repeat of processes that have continued for generations. The construction process offered a rare opportunity to examine the history of an entire valley, and the archaeological findings contribute both towards a wider understanding of local and regional patterns of activity through time, and towards an understanding of an environmental and archaeological potential that extends in all temporal directions. Ultimately, the modifications of the valley environment that such works necessarily entailed are not a new process but part of a continuum of human agency and action in the valley that has existed from earliest times of the first local inhabitants.