
6 SITE INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

Reconstruction of the site based on analyses of the arrangement of the post-holes has allowed an insight into the relationships amongst the various structures. Importantly, the excavation has shown that there are considerably more features on the ground than can be seen on the aerial photographs. Writing on the distribution of cropmarks on archaeological sites in Angus, Dunwell and Ralston (2008, 18) observed that ‘there is something of the iceberg about them’. This statement certainly rings true at Seafeld West, where only the larger post-built structures were visible among the background ‘noise’ of many other negative features.

Phasing of the site is hindered by the general lack of intercutting features which can be ascribed to individual structures. Nevertheless, the site is clearly multi-period and multi-phase, so an attempt has been made to provide it with a sequence on the basis of available dates, occasional stratigraphic evidence and spatial relationships. It is acknowledged that, like the structures themselves, a variety of other interpretations is possible. Potentially only three or four of these structures were standing at any given time, but overlap between the suggested phases of Period 2 is possible, and likely.

6.2 Period 1 – Later Bronze Age

The earliest occupation and activity within the excavated area appears to belong to the Late Bronze Age. All evidence of this date was found in the north-west area of the site, centred on Structure F. Whilst this structure could not be dated from the evidence available, the presence of fragments of sword mould (and the associated radiocarbon date AA-35528) in pits to both west and east, together with a fragment of pottery from a feature ‘inside’ it, are circumstantial evidence that this structure may belong to the same period. It has been reconstructed with a fairly long entrance passage (some 2.5m) to the SSE, a feature which may also be present in Structure D to the south-west. It is therefore tentatively suggested, admittedly on the basis of no strong evidence, that these two structures may be contemporary.

6.3 Period 2 – Iron Age

Structure C, the ring-ditch house, was undated, but if it had an outer wall of turf, this would have covered one of the posts belonging to Structure D (assumed above to belong to Period 1). It would also have run

very close to the penannular ditch of Structure B, which may indicate that it had been demolished before this was constructed. Work at Kintore (Cook & Dunbar 2008) has suggested that the earlier ring-ditch houses there had external posts whilst later examples had an inner post-ring; the latter is felt to be the more likely interpretation of the features in Structure C, which may suggest that it fell towards the later end of the date range for these structures. The overlying layer 034 contained rimsherds of an Iron Age pot and a brooch of 1st to 2nd-century AD date (see Section 4.3). This may provide a *terminus ante quem* for the feature, rather than actually dating its use, depending upon how layer 034 is interpreted. It is interesting to note that a similar layer in a ring-ditch at Ironshill was interpreted as re-use of the feature as a small garden (Pollock 1997, 349). If so, it is likely to be this layer which was contemporary with the other Iron Age structures, suggesting that the ring-ditch house was earlier.

Structure G can be shown to be earlier than Structure H on the basis of stratigraphic evidence. Structure G’s relationship with Structure H is determined by the hearth, assumed to belong to the latter, which cut one of the former’s post-holes, and the presence of fired clay and slag in the post-holes of G, which could have been deposited following its demolition and during the use of Structure H.

Dates from the inner ring of Structure B and from G suggest the two could be contemporary. Even if the radiocarbon dates from their post-holes represent their demolition rather than their use, these dates are statistically the same.

It is possible that the outer ring and penannular ditch of Structure B were later constructions than the inner ring, although it is impossible to determine how much later with the available evidence. Given the position of Structure C’s entrance and the proximity of the ring-ditch to the penannular ditch, it seems likely that Structure C had been demolished by the time the ditch was dug.

Structure E, assumed to post-date Structure F, has a similar size and entrance alignment (possibly) so may have been contemporary with B and G. Structure H appears to represent a less substantial structure than Structure G, which it replaced. Based on the presence of charcoal from its associated hearth in some of the upper fills of Structure G’s post-holes, it seems likely that Structure H occupied the site only a short time after G had been demolished. The date from the charcoal cache (GU-8032) shows a broad contemporaneity, although the charcoal from Structure G may date its demolition. Structure H appears to have had some kind of lean-to on the south side, and the double post-holes

here may indicate that this feature was replaced at least once, or was long-lived enough to require shoring in its later years. This structure is assumed to represent a workshop related to metalworking activity, possibly U-shaped with an open side to the west.

Structure A was too poorly preserved and incomplete to be certain of its function or date, although the presence of oddly shaped shallow hollows close to it may indicate that animals used it for shelter; it may have been a palisaded enclosure rather than another roundhouse. It predated a post-medieval field ditch and a smaller, undated linear feature.

Structures I–J have been interpreted as representing a group of livestock pens. The sheer quantity of posts in this area suggests continual re-use of the area over a long period with shifts in alignment, but potentially there is evidence for a static entrance through a fenceline running along the north-east side of the settlement which remained unchanged despite the movement of posts to either side. As discussed above, there may also be evidence for an earlier domestic structure on this part of the site.

6.4 *The settlement and its setting within the landscape*

The presence of structures which may date to the Late Bronze Age has been suggested. This area of settlement was somewhat more recent than the nearby cemetery site in Area 1 (illus 2; [Cressey & Sheridan 2003](#)), but could represent continuity of use in the area. Other Bronze Age finds in the vicinity have included a presumed Bronze Age burnt mound with complete wooden trough at Beechwood Farm (NH 69264525) approximately 200m south of Seafield West ([Cressey & Strachan 2003](#)) and a kerbed funerary monument at Raigmore ([Simpson 1996](#)), situated approximately 500m from Area 2. With the exception of a spearhead (Coles Class D) recovered from Inverness (NMRS NH64NE 29), there appear to be few finds of Late Bronze Age metalwork in the vicinity, although findspots are spread along the coast of the Moray Firth ([Coles 1960](#)).

Cropmark evidence representing possible Iron Age settlements has been widely recognised in Moray. The Moray Aerial Survey ([Jones *et al* 1993](#)) recorded a wide variety of cropmark features during the 1980s in drought conditions. The cropmark sites at Flemington 2 (NGR NH 806519) and Brackla (NGR NH 852513), both close to the River Nairn, south-east of Nairn (see plates 4 and 7 in [Jones *et al* 1993](#)) display similarities with Seafield West in terms of the presence of a single entrance palisaded feature. The Flemington 2 site includes a large circular palisaded structure with internal post-holes and, as is the case at Seafield West, a large number of features, possibly pits, form discrete clusters outside this structure. All three sites were situated in areas of former floodplain. In general terms, the character of the settlement can be

paralleled at nearby Culduthel ([Murray 2006](#)), Birnie in Moray (summaries of seasonal excavations, eg [Hunter 2003](#)) and Kintore, Aberdeenshire ([Cook & Dunbar 2008](#)). These large-scale excavations of Iron Age settlements contain a variety of roundhouse types alongside four- and six-posters, palisaded stock enclosures, metalworking evidence and other more enigmatic features; most are ongoing projects in the process of analysis at the time of writing.

The character of the landscape at Seafield West, supported by evidence from both early cartographic sources and modern soil maps, shows that the settlement was confined to the edge of a floodplain, or marshy area of the Inshes, a region of low-lying ground. It is highly probable in general that the margins of low-lying marshy ground were favoured for occupation due to the greater diversity of exploitable wetland resources (cf [Evans 1992](#); [Needham & Macklin 1992](#)). Cultivation of field systems higher on the south-facing slopes and on the gravel ridge overlooking the settlement could have been extensive, given the ease of tillage on these light sandy soils. The recovery of charred cereal remains indicates that the occupants of the site were involved in cereal production and processing. The cereal remains point to the production of barley, a crop well suited to the area (see below). The presence of tubers and rhizomes identified in the plant assemblage perhaps indicates that turf may have been used for fuel or indeed roofing material. The large areas of fire-reddened soil with the section above and adjacent to a small oven in Structure C equally suggest prolonged use of turf or peat as a fuel.

The absence of local pollen diagrams from the immediate vicinity limits the discussion on woodland development along the coastal edge of the Moray Firth. Indirect evidence based on roundwood charcoal and carbonised seed remains does however provide tentative evidence on the character of the landscape around Seafield West at the time of its occupation. The charred remains of hazelnuts and the charcoal assemblage show that birch and hazel were readily available. These trees would have thrived on the potentially acidic soils bordering the fluvioglacial ridge overlooking the Moray Firth. Oak is very tolerant of base-poor soil ([Wilkinson 1975](#), 55–66) and would have thrived on the edge of the floodplain. It is a matter of conjecture whether sufficient quantities of oak for smithing purposes were readily available. Some 12% of the charcoal identified within the cache associated with the hearth within Structure G was carpentry debris. It seems likely that oak was recognised by the metalworkers as providing better-quality charcoal for smithing.

The presence of prestigious metalwork in the form of two ornate copper alloy brooches fits well with the theory that the occupants of the site were of a fairly high status with access to luxury goods. The distribution of artefacts and coin hoards so far recorded within the Inverness–Elgin region may well be linked to the agricultural potential of the region, as has been noted by Hunter ([above](#)). Examination

of modern soil maps for this area shows that from Seafeld West eastwards to the Lossiemouth area the soils are predominantly classified as the Corby and Boyndie Associations which are formed from humus iron podsols found widely on river terraces and raised beach deposits; they equally characterise other extensively cropmarked areas, such as the lower Lunan Valley in Angus. The Moray–Inverness lowlands today have a rainfall comparable to warm dry lowlands elsewhere at 700mm per year, a rainfall trend which is conducive to barley production. In Britain, barley growth is only restricted in areas of poor drainage and in acid soils where pH is lower than 6 (Jones 1996 citing Bland 1971). The agricultural potential of the region in the first century AD must have been good, with only nutrient status and drainage, along with variability in climate, being factors limiting crop production. The generation of crop surpluses may have stimulated a concentration of wealth along the coastal plain of the Moray Firth, although other factors such as the elite power-structure and trading links via a maritime route, alongside possible biases in the archaeological record, might play a part in the distribution pattern of prestigious finds from this area.

We cannot be certain to what extent the consumption of iron and its manufacture into tools influenced or led to increased status of members of the community at Seafeld West. In the light of these results it is clear that some of the occupants were of high status, a status gained perhaps from control of crop production and surplus. The site's position, just along the coast from the mouth of the River Ness and the junctions of the Beaulieu and Moray Firths, perhaps provided greater access to trading partners connected by well-established maritime networks along this part of the coastline.

6.5 Conclusions

The excavations at Seafeld West have achieved their primary objective in mitigating the loss of

archaeological features recorded as cropmarks. It is clear from the excavation that the density of archaeological features actually present exceeds those that are visible from cropmark evidence and geophysical survey by well over 200%. The wealth of palaeobotanical remains recovered from environmental processing shows that arable agriculture apparently formed the mainstay of the economy at the site, although the acidic nature of the subsoils negates the survival of animal bone thus skewing the economic record in favour of carbonised plant remains. Additional evidence gained from the weed spectrum shows that cultivated land was close to the site and the identification of a 'marginal' plant spectrum suggests that local floodplain environments were also exploited.

The suggestion that Seafeld West may represent one of the earliest radiocarbon-dated smithing sites in Scotland adds a new dimension to the value of large-scale excavation on cropmark sites. Although much of the slag examined from the site was derived from secondary contexts, the slag assemblage as a whole has provided a wealth of data to support the theory that both smelting and smithing were being practised, even though none of the products of this craft were recovered. These iron-smithing remains are an all-too-rare survival of what must have been an everyday occurrence on most settlements. When slag and industrial remains are recovered they are generally dispersed far from their original context: here the focus of metalworking was found, with evidence of forging in a pit-hearth. As Heald discusses, there remain problems of interpretation, but this is a valuable addition to the record.

Metalworking activity appears to have been undertaken during both the Late Bronze Age and the Late Iron Age, although there is insufficient evidence at the site to suggest continuity of settlement. Answers to many of the questions posed by the excavation at Seafeld may well be forthcoming as reports on larger contemporary settlement excavations become available in the near future.