

7 DISCUSSION

Table 9 provides a summary of the cremations found at Skilmafilly, detailing the dates, artefactual associations and anthropological characteristics of each.

7.1 *The people*

Of the 41 pits excavated at Skilmafilly, 29 contained cremated bone. The remains originated from nine urned cremations, nineteen un-urned cremations, one deposit consisting of both an urned and an un-urned cremation; and there were two single human bones that were presumably accidental deposits. Most of the cremation burials were of single individuals in pits. A minimum of thirty-five individuals were present, with a possible further seven whose presence could only be confirmed from one or more duplicated bones. It is likely, therefore, that up to 42 individuals were represented by the cremated bone assemblage. There were five certain multiple burials (003, 004, 007, 043 and 044), three of which were associated with an urn.

A range of ages and sexes was represented, with 13 sub-adults and 22 adults. Of the sub-adults whose age could be determined, one was a foetus, eight were children (5–12 years old), and three were adolescents (12–17 years old). Of the adults whose age could be determined, two were young adults (17–35 years old), three were middle-aged (35–45 years old), and one was elderly (over 45 years old). Of those adolescents and adults whose sex could be determined, there were two possible females, one

definite female, four possible males and nine definite males. The high number of males is likely to be a factor of ease of identification within the cremated bone assemblage.

The multiple burials include two children and an adult (003), a child and two adults (male and female) (004), a female adult and a foetus (007), two adults (one male) (043), and a male adolescent and male adult (044). The possible burial of a mother and her foetus (Urn 007) is paralleled in the isolated find at Findhorn ([Shepherd & Shepherd 2001](#)) of a Cordoned Urn containing the cremated remains of an adult female (aged between 18 and 25 years) and an infant either in the third trimester of pregnancy or newborn. That urn also contained the largest deposit of faience beads known in Britain, unlike Urn 007 at Skilmafilly, which contained no grave goods.

Multiple cremations are not unknown in Scotland and Petersen et al (1974) listed those 98 known at the time of writing. A number of the double burials recorded at that time contained an adult female and a young child/infant, indicating that there is perhaps a slight bias towards mothers and children being buried together, although of course it remains possible that such a familial bond is merely assumed due to the age and sex of the remains and that DNA testing may indicate no such relationship. Other multiple burials must represent other types of either blood or social relationship, due to the sex and relative ages of those buried. There is no evidence at Skilmafilly to suggest that bones were

Table 9 Summary of contents of cremation pits

Pit	Cal. date range at 2-sigma	Burial Type	No. Indiv	Age	Sex	Vessel type	Charcoal	Other finds
001	1890–1660 BC~	un-urned	1	adult	?		Birch 11.8g Hazel 32g Oak 4g	
002	1890–1660 BC~	un-urned	1	adult	M		Oak 2.4g	
003	1880–1530 BC~	urned	3?	5–7, c 12 + adult?	?	Collared	Oak 8.25g	
004	1890–1660 BC~ 2020–1750 BC#	un-urned	3	9, adult, adult	M + ?F + ?		Birch 35.05g Hazel 0.65g Oak 50.59g	4 burnt flints Golden Eagle talons 1 burnt perforated bone object 1 burnt bone pin
005	1760–1530 BC~	urned	1	adult	?	Collared	Oak 22.7g	
006	1890–1680 BC~ 1730–1500 BC#	un-urned	1+	older adult	?M		Birch 14.3g Hazel 1.1g Oak 63.7g	

Table 9 (cont.) Summary of contents of cremation pits

Pit	Cal. date range at 2-sigma	Burial Type	No. Indiv	Age	Sex	Vessel type	Charcoal	Other finds
007	1870–1530 BC~	urned	2	adult + foetus	?F +	Collared	Birch 8.5g Oak 101.5g	
009		1 bone					Birch 11.95g Hazel 0.4g Oak 23.8g	
010	1930–1690 BC~	un-urned	1	adult	?		Oak 32.6g	
012	1880–1530 BC~	un-urned	1	c 10			Oak 27.7g	4 burnt antler toggles
013	1690–1500 BC~	urned	1	older adult	M	Cordoned	Birch 1.3 Hazel 2.6g Oak 19.15g	Worked bone fragment
017	1890–1680 BC~	un-urned	1	12–13			Oak 2.7g	
019							Oak 5.8g	3 burnt flints 1 unburnt quartz
020	1770–1530 BC~	un-urned	1	?	?		Birch 8.1g Hazel 0.7g Oak 15.5g	1 unburnt flint
021	1890–1660 BC~ 1970–1740 BC#	urned	1+?	12 + ?		Collared	Oak 21.05g	
022	1880–1610 BC~	un-urned	1	young adult	M		Oak 5.6g	
024	1750–1530 BC~	urned	1+?	mid-adult	M	Collared	Birch 6.4g Oak 33.1g	Small vessel Perforated stone disc
025	2030–1760 BC~ 1880–1610 BC#	un-urned	1+?	adult	?		Birch 4.7g Oak 70g	
026	1920–1690 BC~	un-urned	1	14–16	?		Birch 0.05g Oak 18g	
027	2010–1750 BC~	un-urned	1	?	?		Birch 22.5g Hazel 0.4g	1 burnt flint
029	1950–1690 BC~ 1940–1740 BC#	un-urned	1	adult	M		Hazel 3.4g Oak 1.4g	
030	1920–1690 BC~	urned	1	adult	F	Cordoned	Oak 0.15g	
031	1880–1630 BC~	un-urned	1	sub-adult	?		Oak 1.9g	
033	1890–1660 BC~ 1880–1600 BC#	un-urned	1	?				1 burnt flint
034	1920–1690 BC~ 1940–1690 BC#	urned	1	elderly adult	M?	Collared	Birch 22.2g Oak 26.7g Alder 0.6g	Flint foliate knife
035	1920–1690 BC~	un-urned	1+?	10–12 +5?			Oak 12.5g	1 burnt flint 1 unburnt quartz
036		1 bone				Collared	Birch 8.2g Hazel 0.6g Oak 17g	
038	2040–1690 BC#						Oak 4.9g	
039	1870–1520 BC~ 2200–1620 BC#	un-urned	1	16–20	?		Hazel 0.05g Oak 2.3g	4 burnt flints
040	1900–1690 BC~ 1900–1690 BC#	urned	1+1?	2 adults	M + ?	Collared	Oak 2g	
042	1750–1530 BC~	un-urned	1	adult	M		Oak 1.8g	
043	1870–1530 BC~	un-urned	2	2 adults	M + ?		Birch 0.1g Oak 1.4g	
044	1890–1680 BC~ 2870–1740 BC#	un-urned + urned	2	12–16; 26–27	M?, M?	Collared	Oak 5.2g	

~ human bone date # charcoal date

being curated and that the two or more individuals present in a burial did not die at the same time, although there is some evidence for this at other sites (eg Tynings Farm, Somerset; Taylor 1951).

7.2 *Cremation rite*

The evidence obtained from the palaeoenvironmental analyses, the cremated bone analysis and the nature of the deposits filling the pits can be collated to provide an indication of the cremation and burial rites.

The condition of the cremated human bone suggested that the cremation technique was well understood and that high and even temperatures were achieved. It would appear that the bodies were fresh when placed on the pyre, as indicated by curved lateral splintering present on most limb bones, and in some cases by high degrees of distortion. Such observations support the theory that corpses were not curated for any length of time but were cremated within a short time after death.

Greater quantities of charcoal, in better condition, were recovered from the urns rather than the pits. The charcoal assemblage from the cremation pits is dominated almost exclusively by oak, most of which appears to have derived from mature wood. Soil pollen obtained from the urns included heather and fern pollen (probably bracken). Both plants will burn well if dry and it is highly likely that these plants, along with grass, were selected for tinder. The pollen strongly suggests that both ferns and heather formed the main component of the tinder in at least two of the cremations examined. It is likely that the local environment close to the cremation site provided all the wood and tinder to supply the cremations.

The presence of carbonised seeds/nutlets within the cremations suggests that either the cremation pyres were placed on grassland where the seeds were burnt in situ, or dried grass was used for kindling. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the archaeobotanical remains were the result of deliberate ritual deposits, the material present being derived from natural accumulation.

The magnetic susceptibility results indicate that there is evidence of direct heating of soils on the site, but that this is of a different nature from the cremation deposits. There is no indication of pyre deposits being incorporated into the soils along the transect, or of pyres being constructed directly on the transect site. This ties in with the presence of small quantities of charred fungal sclerotia. These are usually present in soil or turfs and the presence of such material suggests that the cremation pits contained burnt soil.

7.3 *Treatment of the cremated bone*

Many of the pits clearly showed that the cremation fills, including diagnostic and large pieces of bone,

had been separated from other pyre deposits. In the un-urned pits, the cremated bone deposit was usually found to be very pure, often without a soil matrix and with voids present. In some cases, as discussed above, it can be argued that other pyre remains, including ash and charcoal deposits, were also selected, separated and placed within the pit. The clear distinctions between the contexts filling the pits indicates it is conceivable that the cremation deposits had been held within an organic container, possibly a cloth or a bag, of which no trace now survives. Only one pit (006) showed enough evidence for a more substantial organic container, possibly a basket.

It has been suggested at a number of excavated cremation sites (eg Kirkton, Fife, MacGregor 1998, 70; Findhorn, Moray, Shepherd & Shepherd 2001; Glennan, Argyll & Bute, MacGregor 2003) that the cremated bone found had been carefully collected or picked over and that the lack of any obvious pyre material in these deposits indicated that it may have been washed prior to deposition. At Kirkton, in the case of one of the pits, the cremated remains had perhaps been held in an organic container. A more extreme example of the sorting of bones is suggested by the urn found at Howford Farm (Shepherd 1987), where it was noted that the cremation deposit was carefully organised, with skull bones placed inside first, followed by other larger bone fragments, and finally charcoal pieces; the pit had also been packed with pyre debris. Another example at North Straiton (Burial 110; Stronach et al 2006) also suggests some selection during the process of gathering the bones and placing them in the container, with larger pieces collected first. The separation of bone can be argued for at Skilmafilly too, though there is no reason to assume washing of the bones was necessary for their collection.

There is often not as much cremated bone present as would be anticipated from the incineration of an entire body. There may be several reasons for this. Plough truncation may have removed part of the cremation, though this is unlikely in those cases where the upper fill of re-deposited subsoil was still in place above the cremation deposit. Alternatively, there was some degree of selection involved, with bones collected from the pyre as a token rather than the meticulous collection of every bone, possibly even that some of the smaller cremations were only intended as token deposits. Although many of the cremation deposits were smaller than would be expected from a full cremation, many included small hand and foot bones, and tooth roots were also present, often in large numbers, indicating that the remains may have been carefully collected before being placed in the urn or pit. There was also a higher average bone weight for the urned cremations, suggesting the urns afforded some protection from plough damage and other deleterious effects.

In some instances there was evidence for a second individual in some cremation deposits, which was represented by only one or two bones. If the pyre

site was re-used, the extra and/or stray bone fragments found in some of the deposits could be due to admixture during subsequent collections of cremated bone. It is also possible that these additional bones acted as a token or were heirloom relics previously circulated amongst the community or recovered from earlier burials (Brück 2004). So-called 'token' cremations are known from other sites in the Bronze Age (eg Horsbrugh, Petersen et al 1974; Knighton Heath, Petersen 1981).

The series of deposits contained within a bell-shaped feature, Pit 038, seemed to indicate that a bag of charcoal had been deposited in the pit, without any cremated bone. The lack of bone in this pit is unusual, as the nature of the deposits would suggest that pyre material, or some other burnt item, was carefully selected and placed in an organic bag before being buried. Perhaps this feature symbolically represented the interment of a cremation of a person whose actual body was unavailable, for example the person had drowned at sea. This feature also contained a burnt flint object, which perhaps symbolically represented the person in the absence of a body.

7.4 *Pyre and grave-goods*

There is a distinction to be made in the case of cremation burials between pyre goods and grave-goods (McKinley 1994b). Pyre goods are items which were added to the pyre with the deceased and thus were burnt or destroyed. Some pyre goods may survive the process, such as stone and flint; others will not survive, such as wood, textiles and foodstuffs. McKinley points out (*ibid*, 133) that even when pyre goods survive, they may not appear in the burial; not all pyre debris is automatically included. It has been noted that there may be a certain degree of selection of cremated bone; small objects may be lost within the ashes or not selected for further treatment. Grave-goods are unburnt and added only at the time of burial. The ritual distinction between these two types of goods must have reflected different ritual practices. It is traditional to see grave goods as a signal for the social status of the deceased person, with items of a perceived intrinsic value (such as gold) suggesting high status, or other goods referring to the person's gender or age. However, more recently it has been argued that grave goods may not have belonged to the deceased at all and instead may have been gifts from the mourners, which could reflect the interpersonal relationships between the living and dead or the impact the death had on the community, or were objects used in the mortuary rite to perform specific ritual functions, and therefore may bear no relation to the deceased's social status or identity (Brück 2004).

At Skilmafilly, the majority of objects found with the cremations are pyre goods. Of course, there may have been other grave-goods consisting of organic

materials which have not survived. Pyre goods included bone pins and toggles, which may have been worn by the deceased as shroud pins or other garment fasteners. Burnt flints were found, which are noted as being severely burnt and vitrified, suggesting that they were deliberately included on the pyre. The Golden Eagle talons were also burnt, suggesting that they were included in the pyre with the individual, perhaps as a necklace.

The addition of animal remains with cremations is well attested during this period. Eagle talons, however, are more unusual. Sea Eagle talons were found in the tomb at Isbister on Orkney, as a secondary deposit to the original use of the tomb, and the talons were dated to 2450–2050 cal BC (British Archaeology 2006). This is slightly earlier than the Skilmafilly cemetery, but indicates the possible longevity of a tradition of associating eagle remains with human burials. The cremated remains of part of an immature sheep/goat were included in the urned cremation burial at Glennan, Argyll and Bute (MacGregor 2003) and MacGregor notes that it is not uncommon for Bronze Age burials to be accompanied by butchered portions of domestic animals, particularly goat/sheep with cremations and pig with inhumations. Other Bronze Age examples include sheep/goat within cremations at Cloburn Quarry, Lanarkshire (Lelong & Pollard 1998) dated to 1910–1620 BC; sheep bones with a cremation at Horsbrugh Castle Farm, Peeblesshire (Denston 1974); and apparent pig joints accompanying inhumations at Uppermill, Aberdeenshire (Harman 1977), Grainfoot, East Lothian (Dalland 1991), Aberdour Road, Fife (Close-Brooks et al 1972) and Gairneybank, Perth & Kinross (Cowie & Ritchie 1991). Other more unusual animals include sea urchin spines along with pig bones and a flint knife within an inhumation at Muirhill, Perth and Kinross (Stewart & Barclay 1997), and the cremated foreleg of red deer in two cremation deposits at Sketewan, Perth & Kinross (Mercer & Midgley 1997). At this latter site two trout vertebrae were found within the cremated remains of a child but it is unclear if they were a deliberate deposit.

MacGregor suggests that the presence of these animals could relate to feasting, particularly where only joints or parts of animals are included in the burial, animal sacrifices, or use in other ceremonies/rituals associated with the mortuary rites, and that certain animals were associated more strongly with different burial rites, and he sees the inclusion of domestic animals as being related to the dominance of an agro-pastoral economy.

The grave-goods include the pottery containers themselves which, although it is not clear why some burials warranted a vessel and others did not, must have formed an important part of the burial ritual. The grave goods also include the foliate knife from Pit 034, which must have been added to the urn with the individual after cremation had taken place. Other unburnt flint and quartz pieces were recovered from Pits 019, 020 and 035. Some of the unburnt lithics

found in the pits, including the quartz, may have been accidentally incorporated during back-filling. The majority of the flint and quartz pieces found were débitage (see Ballin [above](#)). Of the three flint tools, two were unburnt and one was burnt.

It is quite likely that such an elaborate and elegant piece as the foliate knife was produced specifically for deposition in Pit 034. Foliate knives are quite rare, but the few known specimens are from burial contexts. It is thought that the best plano-convex knives, a related type, may have been manufactured for immediate deposition in burials rather than for domestic use ([Finlayson 1997](#), 311), as they usually show no or little use-wear. As argued above, foliate knives are associated with Collared Urns, and at Grandtully in Perthshire a foliate knife was retrieved from a cremation cemetery along with Collared Urns and barbed-and-tanged arrowheads of the Kilmarnock type.

It is not clear whether the stone bead from Pit 024 was burnt or not. It is likely to have been a personal ornament, worn by the individual buried in this pit.

There were six burnt bone/antler ornaments from just three burial contexts. Two of these were in the same cremation pit, 004. A burnt bone pin was associated with an adult cremation, while a nine-year-old child in a re-cut of the same pit was accompanied by a bone toggle/pendant or short pin. Another burnt pin was found inside Urn 013 with an older adult. The presence of pins could suggest a simple shroud being used to clothe the deceased as they were put on the pyre. Bone pins of this form are only broadly datable but they are generally, but not exclusively, found in association with Collared Urns. At Skilmafilly, however, Urn 013 has been identified as a Cordoned Urn, containing as it does a burnt bone pin fragment.

An un-urned pit burial (012) of a ten-year-old child was accompanied by four burnt antler objects, two of which have been identified as toggles. This is an unusual find, and may indicate that a more elaborate garment with multiple fastenings was worn by the deceased. Ornamental objects made from antler are rare in Scottish burial contexts and no further antler toggles are known.

None of the bone or antler artefacts were complete. They were all burnt, suggesting that they went through the pyre and only partially survived the process. The lack of similar finds from the other cremations could mean that only some of the deceased were wrapped in garments which required a fastening device. It could also mean, however, that other objects did not survive the pyre, or even that they were not collected during the gathering of material from the pyre, either because they were not seen or because it was not considered important to collect them. We know that not all of the cremations were extensive enough to represent a whole body and so this selective collection policy may have extended to pyre goods too.

The cremations in Pit 004 are also unique in that they contained two Golden Eagle talons, specifically

associated with the child. Furthermore, four burnt flints were found too, meaning this burial of a young person had the widest variety and largest quantity of objects associated with it, as well as being one of the few multiple cremations.

It is tempting to interpret this group as being people of some considerable importance, perhaps even a family group: parents and child. Perhaps the nature of their deaths contributed to their special treatment, especially if the child, being interred in the re-cut, died shortly after its parents, perhaps as a result of some accident or illness which befell them all. Another possibility is that the group were of a leading family, perhaps one of them even being the chieftain.

The presence of other grave or pyre goods may be indicated by stains on some of the bones. Staining of the bone with a green/blue discolouration was noted in contexts 003 and 040. This type of staining may be related to contact with copper alloy ([McKinley 1994b](#), 133).

The range of goods present, and the presence of both pyre and grave-goods, indicates that a degree of choice existed as to how burial goods were treated and deposited.

7.5 *Marking the grave*

The presence of grave markers of some form is perhaps likely given that in the 41 pits there is little evidence for re-cutting or disturbance. There must have been some way of locating the pits in order to avoid disturbing them, as they are tightly clustered: it is highly unlikely that they were all dug at the same time. A small pit or stake hole (008) is interpreted as a possible grave marker: this may have served to ensure that the pit could be found later, possibly for a secondary cremation, or may have helped to mark the location of the cemetery. A possible wooden grave marker was also recorded at the site of Kirkton, Fife in a grave located beside cremation pits ([MacGregor 1998](#)). Alternatively, there may have been small mounds or stones set on the ground surface overlying the pits which have since been ploughed away.

7.6 *Dating*

It is generally accepted that Collared Urns were made earlier than Cordoned Urns. The former type is envisaged to appear around 2000 BC, while the latter appears *c* 2050–1700 BC ([Sheridan 2003](#), 203). Needham's synthesis of the dating evidence for the British Bronze Age ([Needham 1996](#)) presented a general scheme, in which he suggested that the period 2050–1700 BC saw a major change in funerary rites, with the introduction of urned cremations. Collared Urns of Burgess' (1986) Early and Middle type appear at this time, and Cordoned Urns are described as running 'broadly parallel'

(Needham 1996, 131), beginning a little before 1900 BC. Both types continued in use until about 1500 BC. The picture in Scotland is little different. Prior to the dating programme of the Skilmafilly cremation cemetery, there were only a limited number of dates associated with Collared Urns and Cordoned Urns in Scotland, obtained principally through the NMS *Dating Cremated Bones Project* (Sheridan 2003); this project took the total to 13 dates for Collared Urns and 13 dates for Cordoned Urns. For Scottish Collared Urns, the known dates were in the range 2130–1510 BC (Sheridan 2003, 206), while for Scottish Cordoned Urns the range was 1940–1410 BC (ibid, 207).

Fifty-seven radiocarbon assays were obtained for Skilmafilly, which clustered between 2040 BC and 1500 BC, making Skilmafilly the most comprehensively dated Bronze Age cremation cemetery in the UK. Eighteen of these dates relate directly to the urned cremations. Therefore, this new set of dates contributes significantly to the available dataset and builds on the dates obtained by the NMS *Dating Cremated Bones Project*.

However, there is no apparent difference in date between the two types of urns here, so Skilmafilly does not contribute to a refinement of the dating schemes of these two vessel types. The two Cordoned Urns, 013 and 030, date to 1690–1500 BC (GrA-26523) and 1920–1690 BC (GrA-26528) respectively, while the Collared Urns have a range of 1970–1530 BC (excluding date Poz-7706), and indeed, as noted above, it is not always possible categorically to state to which of these two types each urn belongs.

7.7 Skilmafilly in context

The burial practices of the first half of the second millennium BC are characterised by cremation burials but within this broad category there are a wide variety of funerary monuments and ritual practices, such as cairns, cists, flat cemeteries, enclosed and unenclosed cemeteries of various sizes, urned and un-urned cremation burial, and isolated discoveries. These cemeteries can include a mixture of Collared and Cordoned Urns, occasional upright vessels, a mixture of ages and sexes, a mixture of urned and un-urned cremations within the same cemetery, and a variety of grave goods. It is apparent that grave goods are unequally distributed amongst the cremation burials, with many cremations being unaccompanied while others have a few items such as pins, toggles and flints, while yet others have more lavish goods (for example the fine faience beads at Findhorn; Shepherd & Shepherd 2001). A small proportion are also accompanied by animal remains, whose presence is not always easily explained away as the result of ritual feasting as the animal or animal part is not one normally recognised as being eaten.

The unenclosed flat cremation cemetery at Skilmafilly is one of a number known across central,

southern and eastern Scotland in the Early Bronze Age, although few have been recently excavated. Many are older excavations or antiquarian finds, where findspots are uncertain, little analysis has been undertaken on the bones or finds, and the thoroughness of recovery can be called into question (eg Eastern Culbeuchly, near Banff; Wallace & Walker 1961). However, all of these sites provide important comparisons with Skilmafilly and indicate that Skilmafilly sits within a broad tradition of cremation rite at this period.

Unenclosed cemeteries at Brackmont Mill, Fife (Mears 1937; Spence 1949; Longworth et al 1967) and Grandtully in Perthshire (Simpson & Coles 1990), produced both Collared and Cordoned Urn burials alongside un-urned cremations. At Brackmont Mill, brief mention is made of an occipital bone of a pig which may have been associated with one of the urns (Mears 1937, 262), giving us another example of animal remains being associated with cremations, and other grave goods identified were a pin and a small accessory vessel (Mears 1937). Grandtully is of interest for containing only children and young adults. One of the burials, of three children in a Collared Urn, contained a bone point and a leaf-shaped flint point. This is a similar context to the foliate knife at Skilmafilly, but with children instead of an old man.

An unenclosed cremation cluster of just five burials was excavated beside an enclosed cemetery at Silvercrest (Suddaby forthcoming). The unenclosed cremations appear to be contemporary with those in the enclosed cemetery, indicating that the two forms are not mutually exclusive. The cemetery includes Collared and Cordoned Urns, one of which was upright, and, where identified to age and gender, the cremation cluster contained adults. Of interest is an upright Cordoned Urn which contained an adult along with nine complete and unfinished arrowheads.

Enclosed cemeteries have been more commonly excavated, including Loanhead of Daviot (Kilbride-Jones 1936), Ratho, Midlothian (Smith 1995), Sketewan, Perth & Kinross (Mercer & Midgley 1997), and Seafield, Inverness (Cressey & Sheridan 2003). Similar variety can be seen in these, as in the unenclosed cemeteries.

There is no readily apparent reason from the excavated material why some people were buried in pots and some were not, why some pots were occasionally upright, and why some people were accompanied by grave goods; there is also no obvious distinction or identifiable and repeatable pattern present between young and old or male and female burials. The range of sexes and ages and the overall number of burials suggest the cemetery was in use for perhaps several generations by a small community, whose home base location is unknown, and there was no apparent exclusivity in who could be buried there. The excavated evidence does indicate, however, that Early Bronze Age cremations were a complex

mixture of funerary rites which hint at a complex social structure or set of beliefs, taboos and societal norms, the unpicking of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

7.8 *The Mesolithic pit*

An earlier feature was found on the site, a large, deep pit of apparently late Mesolithic date, with charcoal dates calibrated to 4510–3970 BC. No artefacts were recovered from this pit, other than a Collared Urn smashed on its surface, so its function is difficult to determine. A similar large, deep pit with multiple fills, some containing charcoal, was excavated at Spurryhillock, Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire (Alexander 1997) and radiocarbon dates from its base calibrate to 4910–4360 BC (Beta-73552–3). This pit lay within a small group of isolated pits and its function was unclear but it also lacked artefacts apart from a single flint blade, and contained oak charcoal.

The majority of the known Mesolithic activity in Scotland consists of lithic scatters and very little structural evidence has thus far been excavated

(see for example Suddaby 2007). There is perhaps a poorly understood tradition of late Mesolithic activity in the north-east of Scotland which includes the digging of pits, of which Pit 036 at Skilmafilly is one and Spurryhillock another.

7.9 *Conclusion*

The Early Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Skilmafilly is currently the most comprehensively dated cremation cemetery in Britain, and has been found to date to the period 2040–1500 BC. Twenty-nine cremation pits were found, ten of which contained cremation urns. An eleventh urn was found smashed and spread across the site surface. Two of these urns are Cordoned Urns, and nine are Collared. A single urn was found upright while the remainder were found inverted in pits. A range of artefacts was found associated with the cremations, including a flint foliate knife, antler toggles and bone pins and two Golden Eagle talons. The cremation rituals and characteristics of the population buried have been discussed, and analysis has shown that the indi-