6 Discussion of the evidence and conclusions

6.1 Problems of artefact distribution and survival

Analyses of the location and distribution of the finds across the site (Illus 27; Illus 28; Illus 29; Illus 34; Illus 38) and of the individual artefacts have produced little information on the function and chronology of the house. Overall, the assemblage was concentrated within the north and west parts of the building where it was best preserved. However, the distribution becomes random when viewed in phases. There were very few diagnostic artefacts. Those finds that could help define the chronology of the house or the length of its use were scattered throughout the stratigraphic levels of the site, or were found in contexts which could be described as disturbed or unreliable for dating purposes.

The majority of artefacts were from abandonment and modern levels, with very few objects from the actual occupation and use of the house. This situation is paralleled in other prehistoric and rural medieval sites excavated in the Northern Isles. At the complex Iron Age levels at Howe, Orkney primary floor levels of buildings were almost devoid of artefacts (Ballin Smith 1994). Cleaning and clearing of floors was suggested as a reason for this paucity. At the medieval site of The Biggings, Papa Stour, Shetland (Crawford & Ballin Smith 1999) there was a similar situation, made more complex by the possibility that artefacts had been stored in roof spaces and had later become incorporated into abandonment levels of the same building. Reworking of early deposits by later occupation at The Biggings produced an artefact distribution table that mirrors that of the Catpund house. Many artefacts from earlier buildings were found in abandonment levels, especially in the uppermost levels of the site where they were encountered as residual finds.

No two situations are identical, but it is highly probable that the large numbers of artefacts present in abandonment levels at Catpund derived from the occupation of the structure. The significant growth of soil during this period might have been the result of the platform being used for agricultural purposes. It is reasonable to suggest that the level area was used for crop production, possibly with the addition of manure or turf brought in from other accessible areas of the hillside. The accumulation of artefacts in abandonment levels, in addition to those derived from reworked occupation deposits, could be the result of agricultural activities represented by the high number of ard point fragments, bars and miscellaneous stone tools.

The reuse of the site, indicated by the occurrence of the only quern, appears to have been relatively short-lived. Stratigraphic evidence for occupation at that time is slight, with perhaps the shell of the original structure being reused for shelter or temporary accommodation. The range and number of artefacts found in the succeeding abandonment phase might indicate that further agricultural activity had taken place on the platform during the reuse of the building. On the evidence of the quern, ard points and bars, the occupation could have been seasonal and related specifically to food production while the presence of steatite and ceramic vessels suggests gathering or preparation of foodstuffs. The artefacts present in the final abandonment might have derived from the preceding reuse. The reworking of deposits in more recent times, with the disturbance of the original building and its later reuse, largely account for the high numbers of prehistoric artefacts within a structure that belongs to the historic period.

Following the analysis of ard point distribution from sites in Orkney and Shetland, an alternative suggestion is that the large numbers of unworked ard points found in abandonment levels is possibly due to deliberate deposition, as a 'closing deposit' or votive offering (Downes & Lamb 2000, 126). Almost all the complete ard points, including 13 fragmentary ones, found at Catpund were located towards the base of the earth fill of the *planticrub*, or within and around its walls. The high numbers of other artefacts indicate disturbance of earlier deposits when the *planticrub* was built. However, the suggestion of symbolism proposed by Downes & Lamb is not without its merit, as the unworked ard points might have derived from abandonment levels.

6.2 Activities indicated by the tools

All the artefacts recovered from the site were made from inorganic resources. This bias results in an interpretation of the building's use that is far from accurate and completely one-sided. The evidence from the artefacts is indicative of grain cultivation, with ploughing or digging taking place in the vicinity of the house although no carbonised grain was found at the site and plough marks did not survive. The tools included bars (probably rough-outs for ard points and turf cutters), ard points and fragments. The quern, a non rotary type, indicates grain-processing, while the small hand tools and some of the miscellaneous stones that might have been used in food preparation indicate that pounding, rubbing or chopping tools were required. It is equally plausible that some of the hand tools could have been used during the construction of the prehistoric building. Direct evidence for cooking was

indicated by the presence of the broken steatite vessel, with its worn-out base and carbon deposits, lying on the floor near the hearth area. The scrapers and the single borer found among the quartz tools indicate leather processing, or the manufacture of wooden or bone artefacts. Analysis of the quartz suggests that there were two clusters from the final abandonment or possibly from the reoccupation of the site. One, possibly a cache, was located between the wall of the house and the west pillar and a second between the hearth area, the entrance and the south pillar. Both these areas of the house might have been used for knapping purposes during later phases.

Felsite knives have been found at most prehistoric houses in Shetland, and as artefacts are not uncommon. However, at Catpund the felsite knife was the best finished of the artefacts and the most aesthetically pleasing to modern eyes, even though it was broken and damaged (Illus 22). The condition of the tool suggested heavy use although its use as a knife is implied and not certain. During the Neolithic period it might have been a valued item, perhaps used for a ceremonial purpose, as a status object or votive offering, only to be put to a more mundane or practical use during the Bronze Age.

The activities to which the two handles from Shetland clubs were put remain obscure. It has been suggested (Clarke 2000a; Clarke 2000b, 99) that 'handles' might not have been handles as such but the means of hafting an object, although no further indication of their use was evident. The Catpund examples have no extra wear to support the idea of hafting and in fact they fit well in the hand. The care taken with the manufacture of the handles (and perhaps the complete tools as well) suggests that they might well have had a decorative, and not simply a functional, use. The presence of similar handles at many Bronze Age sites in Shetland might indicate that they were either part of a general tool kit for food preparation, or were in general use for other unspecified activities such as weaving or textile preparation.

It is interesting that there were no articles of personal adornment and no armlets or beads although, in contrast to late Bronze Age/early Iron Age sites such as Mavis Grind, only one bead was found at Scord of Brouster and no personal artefacts at Tougs. Catpund yielded little environmental evidence. Some burnt peat remained in a stone box in the floor of the house but there were no other carbonised remains, no burnt or unburnt bone, shells or seeds. The mineralised fragments of coprolites perhaps tell us a little more about the inhabitants of the house or the domestic animals that lived with them, as well as the function of the drain.

In general, the Catpund assemblage indicates that the site was an agricultural settlement where the economy was based on farming activities and food preparation. The reoccupation of the house shows a very similar picture, but perhaps a more transient one as the stratigraphic evidence is slight. The quartz tools suggest that meat and other animal products, especially leather, were being treated at the site. The presence of ceramic and steatite pots indicates that the manufacture of both types of vessels, if not taking place within the building, probably occurred nearby. The exploitation of resources for the manufacture of all the stone tools, the stone vessel and the ceramic pots took place locally. Apart from the felsite knife, there is little that can be described as coming from beyond the local area.

The knife and the stone handles belonged to tools whose functions remain lost in the past. Whether they were used for daily activities or had more esoteric meanings is open to speculation. However, the presence of the steatite lamp, although technically from a modern context, indicates that the house was probably occupied throughout the year, suggesting that, despite the lack of evidence, the normal cycle of activities took place at Catpund as it did in other Shetland prehistoric houses.

6.3 Dating the house from the finds

From the analysis of the artefact assemblage it is difficult to be certain in which period the Catpund house was built. Almost all of the artefacts from all phases of the site confirm that the house is prehistoric in date, but probably not Iron Age because of the lack of diagnostic tool and ceramic types. It seems most likely that the house is post-Neolithic because of the number of ard points and the inclusion of a worn and broken felsite knife. Through analogy with other sites, the association of the steatite vessel and the lamp places the building in the Bronze Age while the limited pottery evidence suggests that it post-dates the Early Bronze Age. This is reinforced by the quartz assemblage, which suggests that the house was occupied some time in the middle or late Bronze Age. The range of finds from the Catpund house is comparable to those found at House 1 at Scord of Brouster which was dated to 2510±70 BP (CAR 244) to 1715±75 BP (CAR 248) (Whittle *et al* 1986, 75).

6.4 The enclosure

In spite of excavation, the dating of the enclosure dykes at Catpund could not be ascertained with any certainty. In form they are similar to field walls excavated at Scord of Brouster (Whittle *et al* 1986). However, at Scord of Brouster there survived a prehistoric landscape of various dates with a complex system of infield and outfields. It could be argued that some of the dykes at Catpund are contemporary with the house, with features such as the enigmatic D-shaped structure being later. Alternatively, the simply constructed field dykes could be of medieval or later date.

The dykes follow the terrain, limiting access to higher slopes and to more severe drops from the platform. The entrance in the south-west of the enclosure was made possible by the more gently sloping contours and was the only practical place for

it. The platform was used for agricultural purposes in the Bronze Age and therefore a dyke might have been a useful means of keeping farm animals on the more difficult slopes and away from crops. The lack of evidence to suggest that the dykes had been rebuilt or realigned may move the argument towards their being contemporary with the house. If they were contemporary, the house and its enclosure form an interesting unit that is worthy of further research in the context of the development of the Shetland landscape.

6.5 The house

The Catpund house is similar in shape and design to many of the early Shetland stone houses, being oval or sub-circular in plan with four internal pillars and a single entrance. There have been recent attempts to summarise the information on Shetland houses by bringing together a useful diagram of the size and shape of prehistoric houses, by a reviewing their attributes in the light of those at Sumburgh (Downes & Lamb 2000, 120, fig 40), and also by outlining their statistics in relation to the structural remains at Kebister (Owen & Lowe 1999, 262, table 54). From these publications it is possible to suggest that the Catpund house is above average in dimensions and, although it most resembles the Phase 2 house at Mavis Grind in size, it does not in form.

In spite of its poor structural preservation and the lack of archaeological deposits within it, the Catpund house retained some features that allow comparison with, for example, House 1 at Scord of Brouster (Whittle *et al* 1986). Although smaller than Catpund, House 1 had four massive orthostats that divided the house interior into bays. It also had a paved gully or drain with an extension of similar dimensions to that at Catpund (Whittle *et al* 1986, 24, fig 18). The location of several central hearths and the presence of platform recesses (recesses or chambers raised slightly above floor level) at Scord of Brouster are also mirrored at Catpund and hint at what had been destroyed. The Scord of Brouster house has been dated to the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. From the analysis of artefacts, the balance of evidence suggests that the Catpund house is slightly later, possibly middle to late Bronze Age. Recent publications of investigations at Sumburgh and Kebister have added considerably to our knowledge of the form and function of Shetland prehistoric houses although they do not necessarily help define or interpret the one at Catpund.

Catpund, unlike Sumburgh, Kebister and the earlier site excavated at Stanydale, produced no evidence for wooden construction. Despite the dearth of statigraphic evidence, the use and occupation of the Catpund house might indicate moderate alteration of the construction concentrated in a contained period of time, but no significant rebuilding of the original structure. This picture is reinforced by artefactual evidence that suggests little cultural change took place at the site. The internal arrangement of the house at Catpund, particularly the dividing pillars, the provision of at least one recess and the internal drainage system (Illus 14), is mirrored at many houses but with variations. Drains were associated with the late Bronze Age structures at both Kebister (Owen & Lowe 1999, 265–6) and Sumburgh (Downes & Lamb 2000, 11) and, like the one at Catpund, their function can be difficult to interpret. The mineralised coprolites at Catpund are a surprising survival from the drain and suggest it functioned as a sewer, perhaps in addition to removing water from the house.

The form of the Catpund house is clearly defined in spite of stone robbing and wall collapse. However, due to the paucity of finds and stratigraphy within the building, it has been impossible to assign activities to specific areas of it. The central hearth area is clearly defined whereas the functions of other areas of the house are lost.

The problem of the location and distribution of finds are discussed above. However, the limited nature of the artefact assemblage (both in numbers and types of finds) adds little to the phasing identified from the site's stratigraphic record. Both stratigraphically and artefactually the evidence from the site points to the construction, use, abandonment, limited reuse and further abandonment of the structure within a limited cultural period. The construction and use of the *planticrub* suggests that after its abandonment, possibly in the late Bronze Age, the site was not used again until the post-medieval period when steadings were probably constructed along the Catpund Burn.