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Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

Edited by Gordon Noble

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Chapter 6

EXCAVATION RESULTS: CAIRN MORE

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6.1 Excavations at Cairn More 2018–21

As with Tap o' Noth, the site of Cairn More was targeted as part of the University of Aberdeen's Northern Picts: Rhynie Environs Project (2017–22), funded by HES. The investigation of Cairn More ran over four seasons from 2018–21 and was designed to address the research agenda outlined in Chapter 2. Principally, this sought to explore how the landscape of the Rhynie valley developed from the Iron Age to early medieval period, the chronological relationship between the enclosed sites of the valley, and the changing social and political makeup of the valley's settlement landscape through time. The excavations at Cairn More revealed a complex bivallate fort with composite wooden and stone ramparts and evidence for two associated buildings – one large internal structure and one just outside the outer rampart. Dates for the site suggest a 5th- to mid-7th-century AD chronology, overlapping in use with the enclosures at the Craw Stane (Chapter 5) and Tap o' Noth (Chapter 4) – for discussion of dating evidence, see Chapter 8.

6.2 Site location and previous research

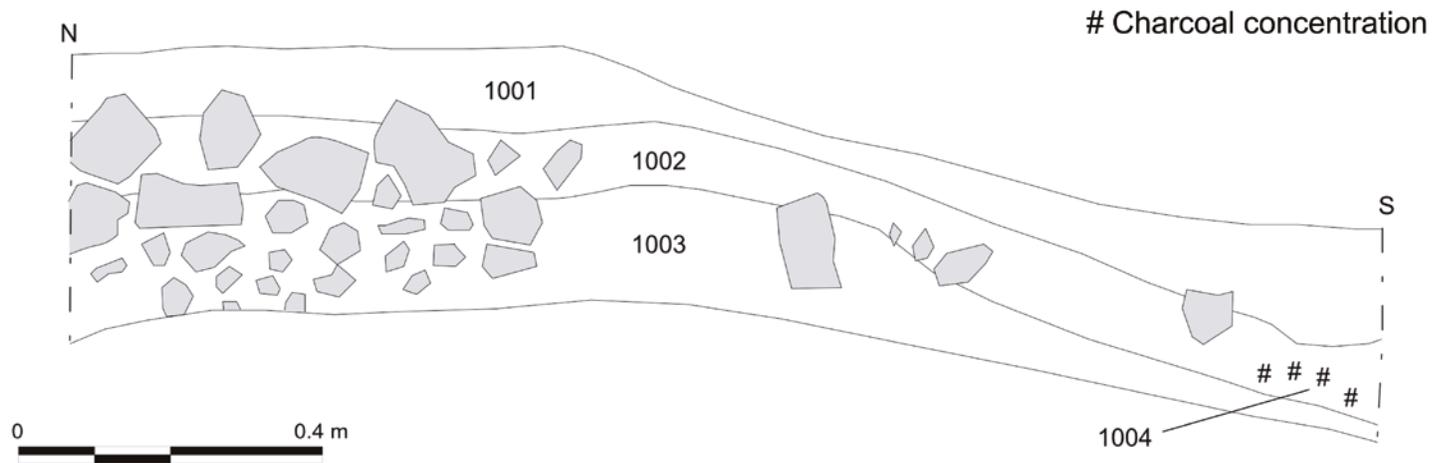
The fort at Cairn More sits on the shoulder of a hill that overlooks Rhynie village to the north-east. The fort encompasses a total area of 0.24ha and is defined by two stone ramparts that are only partially visible on the surface (Illus 6.1). The site has been known since at least the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey mapping programme c 1843–82, when a circular enclosure was depicted by a single rampart. Subsequent Ordnance Survey maps showed no further detail, and it was not until Feachem's (1966: 72) survey of the site in the 1960s that a more accurate account of its archaeology was documented. Feachem recorded the fort as comprising two closely spaced stone walls with an entrance at the south-east, though a later survey by Cook (2011b) suggested the enclosure system was more complex (see Illus 6.2). Cook's (2011b: 214) plan was broadly comparable with Feachem's work and corresponded with the north, west and southern sides on his record. The eastern

section, however, showed the defences expanding into three widely spaced ramparts, creating a 'forecourt' at the posited entrance to the fort. In Cook's record (2011b: 216), the inner rampart measured up to 1.6m wide and 0.4m high, the middle rampart up to 4.5m wide and 0.3m high, and the outer rampart up to 1.3m wide and 0.2m high with a shallow outer ditch. The extent of overgrowth at the time of Cook's survey may have impacted the accuracy and reliability of the survey, and could explain the discrepancy in accounts.

Cook (2011b) opened a number of test trenches over the enclosing elements and interior, in order to obtain dating information which could produce a basic chronology for the construction and occupation of the fort. Only a short summary of the results of these excavations were published (see Cook 2011b: 216), which included two radiocarbon dates. The destruction layer above the middle rampart on the eastern side was dated to AD 430–630 (SUERC-32839: 1510±30;) and the 'foundation cut' of the third outer rampart provided a date of AD 410–550 (SUERC-32840: 1580±30). Two brooch moulds and a pin mould of probable early medieval date were also recovered from the latter context, suggesting that early medieval activity had taken place at Cairn More.

6.3 University of Aberdeen excavations

The University of Aberdeen began work at the site in 2018. Upon the first visit, the university team were not able to access the centre of the monument due to dense gorse and tree cover. Site preparation therefore involved the clearance of extensive overgrowth which had covered the monument for the past few decades – a mammoth task undertaken by Rhynie local, Fred Murray (Illus 2.5). The thick gorse roots and nearby forestry has caused significant damage to the archaeology and extant elements of the fort; however, once cleared, the visible remains corresponded broadly with Feachem's (1966: 72) plan of the site, with no obvious 'forecourt', third rampart or eastern entrance as identified by Cook



Illus 6.3

West-facing section of Trench 1 showing the rubble remnants of the inner rampart and charcoal spread (1004) towards the outer edge of the rampart

(2011b: 214). While Cook’s earlier work has shown that there was evident early medieval activity at Cairn More, the dating and character of the fort itself remained to be fully confirmed. Cairn More’s close spatial relationship with other early medieval forts in the area, specifically the Craw Stane complex and Tap o’ Noth, made the site a key target in our attempts to understand the early medieval landscape of the Upper Strathbogie valley. However, it was also important to test the site to identify any other phases of use or construction. The Cairn More excavations therefore aimed to comprehensively date the enclosing elements of the fort and reveal their form and character, whilst also addressing questions of function by exploring the interior.

6.3.1 The enclosing elements

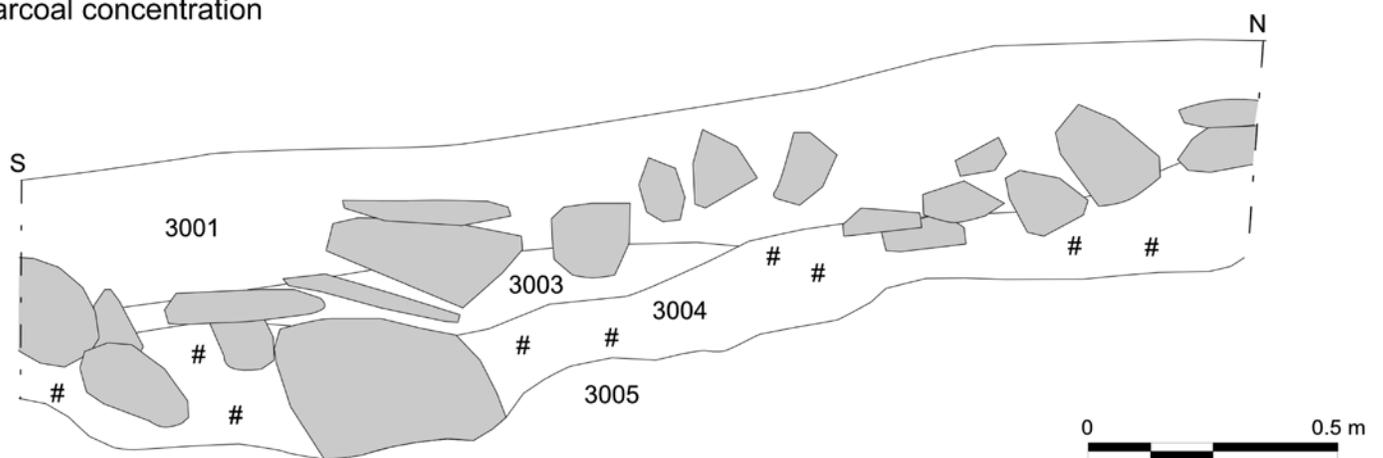
Excavations of the enclosing elements of Cairn More fort concentrated on establishing their chronology and development. It was unclear whether the fort had been built in the early medieval

period, as suggested by Cook’s (2011b) excavations, or was originally an Iron Age monument that had witnessed later reuse, as seems to be the case with a number of duns or homesteads in central Scotland (Noble et al 2020b). A series of trenches (Trench 1–3, 5–6 and 9–17) were positioned in order to characterise the form and chronology of the enclosing elements, though the ‘third’ rampart recorded by Cook (2011b) was not tested as it was not apparent on the ground even after the clearance of the hilltop (Illus 6.2).

6.3.2 The inner stone rampart

Trenches 1–3 were small test-pits opened in the first year of investigation, which simply aimed to identify and define the line of the inner rampart. They showed it to consist of an unstructured tumble of small to large stones of local geology, which were inter-mixed in places with a mid-brown clayey silt. Trench 1 was a 2.2m x 1m cutting that revealed the outer edge of the rampart. In this area, the rampart matrix surviving to a depth of only 0.3m

Charcoal concentration



Illus 6.4

East-facing section of Trench 3 showing possible four courses of a possible outer facing on the south side

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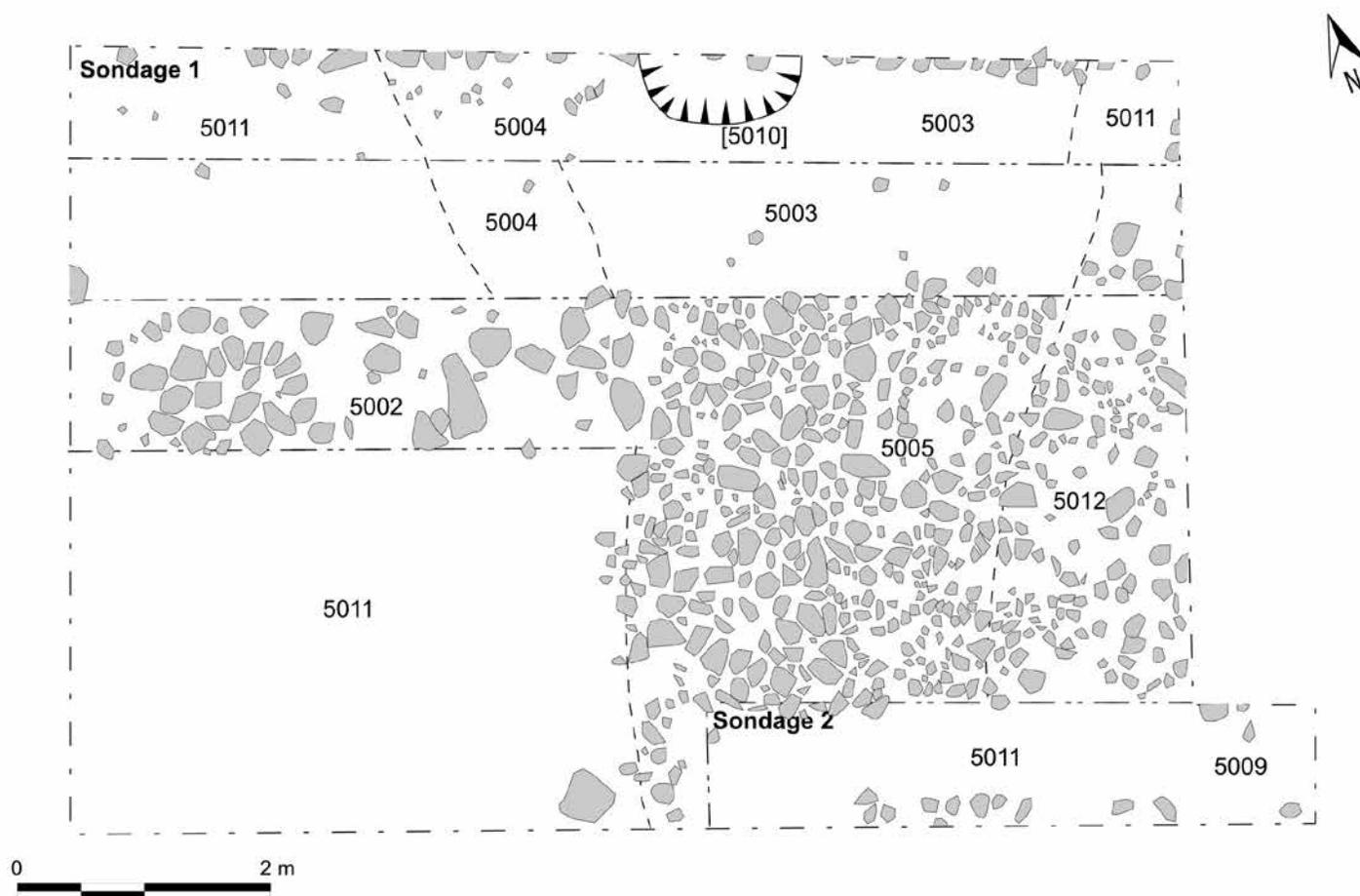
(1002/1003), suggesting it had been significantly robbed out (Illus 6.3). The soil matrix became richer in charcoal (1003) towards the base of the trench and a similar context was found mixed with heat-affected stones (1004) at the same level on the south-west edge. The latter may indicate the close proximity of a post hole of the character found elsewhere on the edges of the inner rampart (see below). Trench 2, a 2m x 1m cutting, exposed the core of the rampart but was not excavated further.

A third test pit (Trench 3 – 2.5m x 1m) revealed the core and outer edge of the rampart. Again, the excavation showed significant robbing of the rampart, which consisted of largely small stones intermixed with a loose, brown black silty sand (3003) that survived to a height of only 0.2m (Illus 6.4). However, a possible outer facing to the rampart was identified which comprised up to four basal courses of large, flat, angular stones with collapse downslope. The rampart sealed a light yellowish-brown silt with frequent amounts of medium-sized charcoal and burnt bone (3004). This deposit sat directly on the underlying natural.

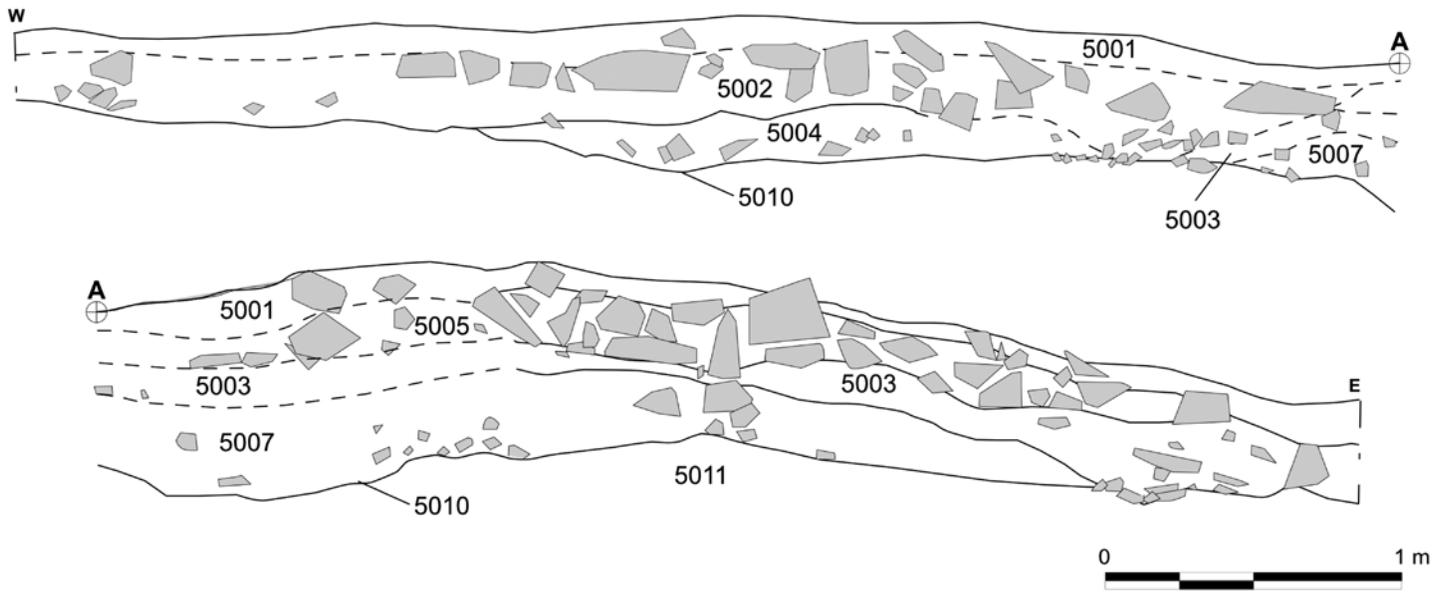
After identifying the general line of the inner rampart, a larger trench (Trench 5) was positioned over the ‘entrance’ on the south-eastern side of the fort which had been identified by both Feachem (1966: 72) and Cook (2011b: 214) (Illus 6.2). Trench 5

measured 9m x 6m and revealed an unbroken 6m stretch of rampart which survived as a 3m wide unstructured tumble of rounded and sub-angular field-gathered stone (5005), with probable wall collapse (5002) on the inner western side (Illus 6.5 and 6.6). A greyish-black silty layer (5003) was sealed by, and extended beyond, the limits of the rampart core (5005). Layer (5003) extended up to a post hole [5010] on the northern baulk of Trench 5 which measured 1.1m x 0.7m. Its upper fill (5007) consisted of a dark reddish-brown silt with occasional charcoal inclusions; however, the feature was not fully excavated due to time constraints and proximity to the trench edge. Its location next to the inner rampart may suggest it acted as a revetment post for the enclosing bank.

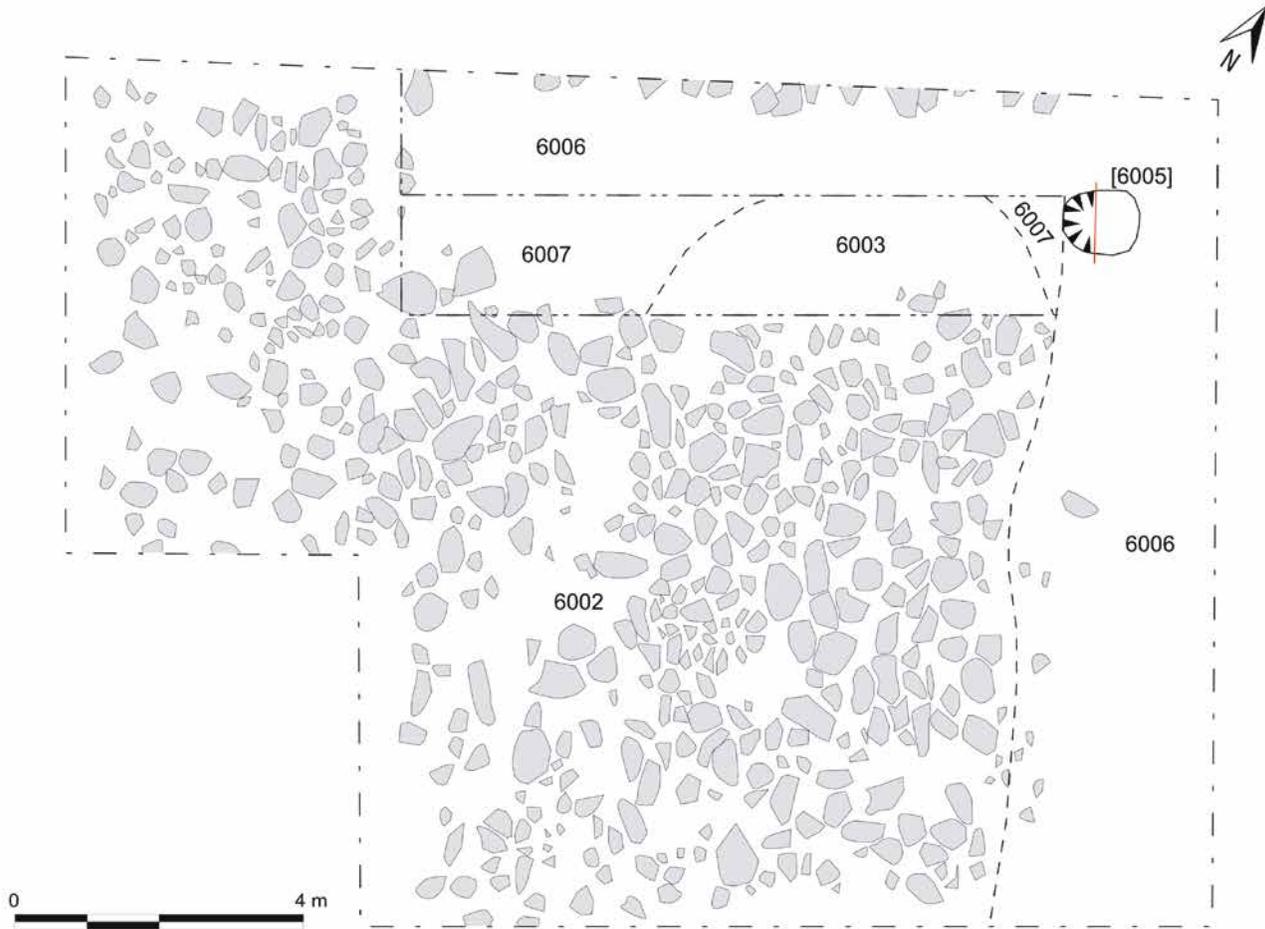
A charcoal-rich spread (5004) was identified extending towards the interior and beneath the possible wall collapse (5002). This consisted of a 0.2m deep yellowish-brown clayey silt intermixed with large charcoal and small fragments of burnt bone, and may represent a vestigial occupation deposit (Illus 6.5). A sondage through the rampart on the south-eastern side (Sondage 2) revealed a similar stratigraphy, with a 0.05m dark-brown silt lying underneath the rampart – though in this instance, this layer overlay a thin spread of redeposited natural intermixed with charcoal.



Illus 6.5
Trench 5 showing the general mass of stone (5011/5002) found around the inner rampart (5005)



Illus 6.6
South-facing section of Sondage 1, Trench 5



Illus 6.7
Trench 6 located over the outer rampart

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6.3.3 The outer stone rampart

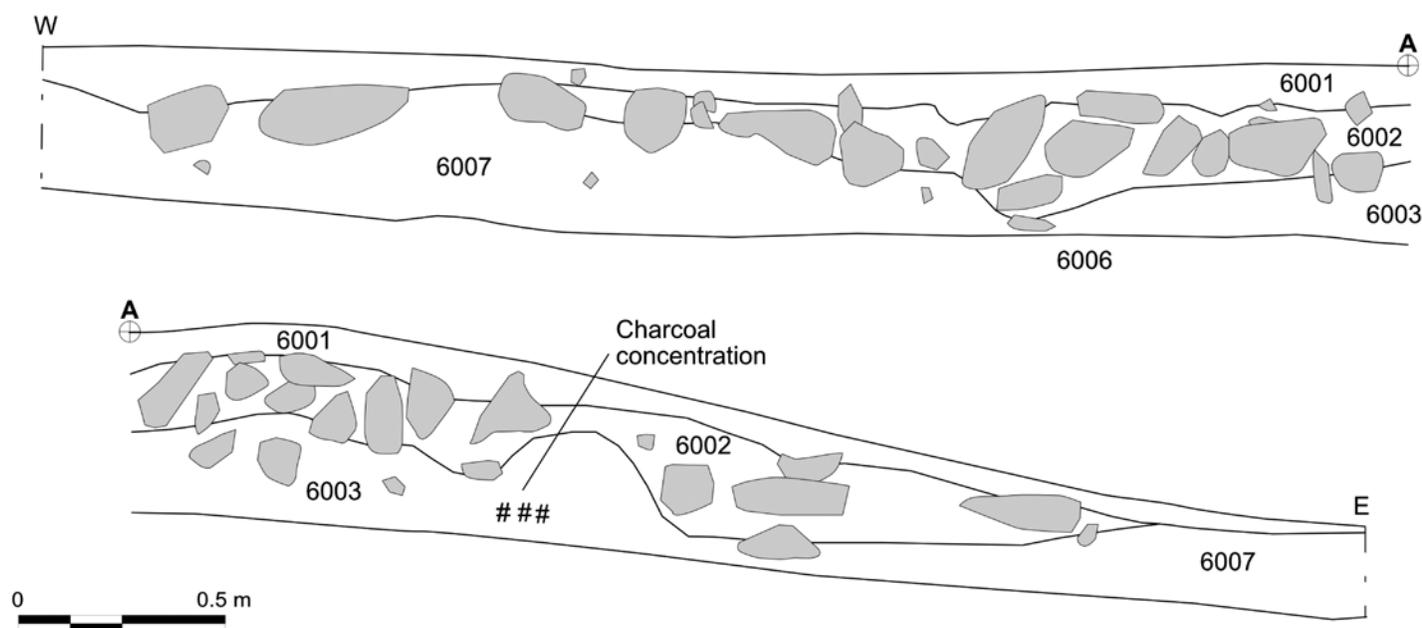
Trench 6 was positioned over the outer rampart on the eastern side of the fort and measured 5m x 7m, with a small extension on the western side (Illus 6.2, 6.7 and 6.8). Removal of the topsoil (6001) revealed the core of the heavily disturbed rampart extending across the width of the trench. Identifying the limits of the original rampart was difficult, given the disturbance and truncation of the rampart core and a lack of obvious facing stones or kerb. However, the largest stones were concentrated in a c 3m wide section which ran in a north-east/south-west direction (6002). This was confirmed on the northern side of the trench, where a sondage revealed the rampart edge defined on either side by a mid-brownish-yellow clayey silt (6007) which overlay the natural. Underneath the rampart lay a charcoal-rich, mid-brown sandy silt (6003), probably hearth waste (Niehaus & Ramsay, Chapter 8) intermixed with small fragments of burnt bone, small to medium charcoal and two fragments of metal-working slag. Again, this deposit was approximately 3m wide and may provide another indication of the original width of the rampart. Just beyond the eastern edge of deposit (6003) was a probable post hole [6005] measuring 0.64m x 0.4m and 0.15m in depth, which contained a dark-brown silty clay with frequent charcoal inclusions.

Trenches 10–12 were opened across the second rampart on the south-eastern side of the fort to further characterise and date this enclosing element (Illus 6.2). Trenches 11 and 12 were smaller interventions (each measuring 4m x 1m) designed to confirm the presence of the rampart in this area, before a larger trench (Trench 10) was opened which extended from the eastern edge of Trench 5. Trench 10 measured 10m x 2m, with a 2m x 2m extension at the south-east side (Illus 6.2). It exposed the denuded core of the

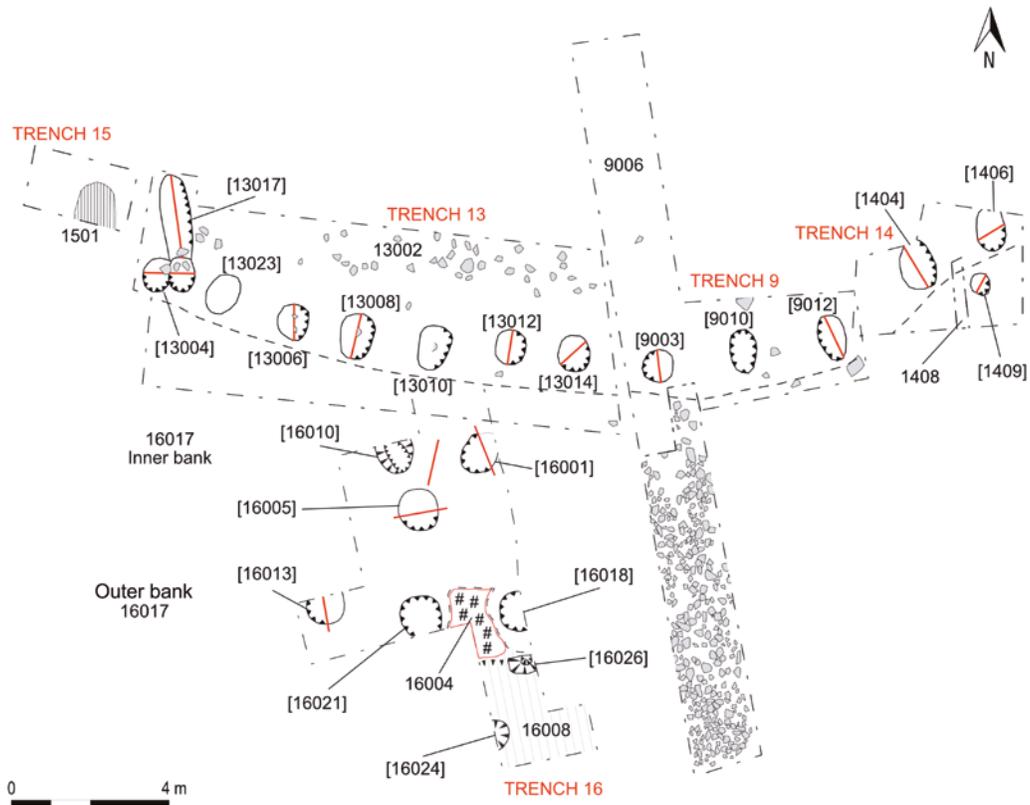
outer rampart which measured approximately 3m wide and survived only 0.1m higher than the collapse (10001) between the inner and outer ramparts. There was a gap of approximately 6m between the edges of the inner and outer rampart on this side of the monument, with no obvious features between. The bank itself was not excavated.

6.3.4 Post arcs

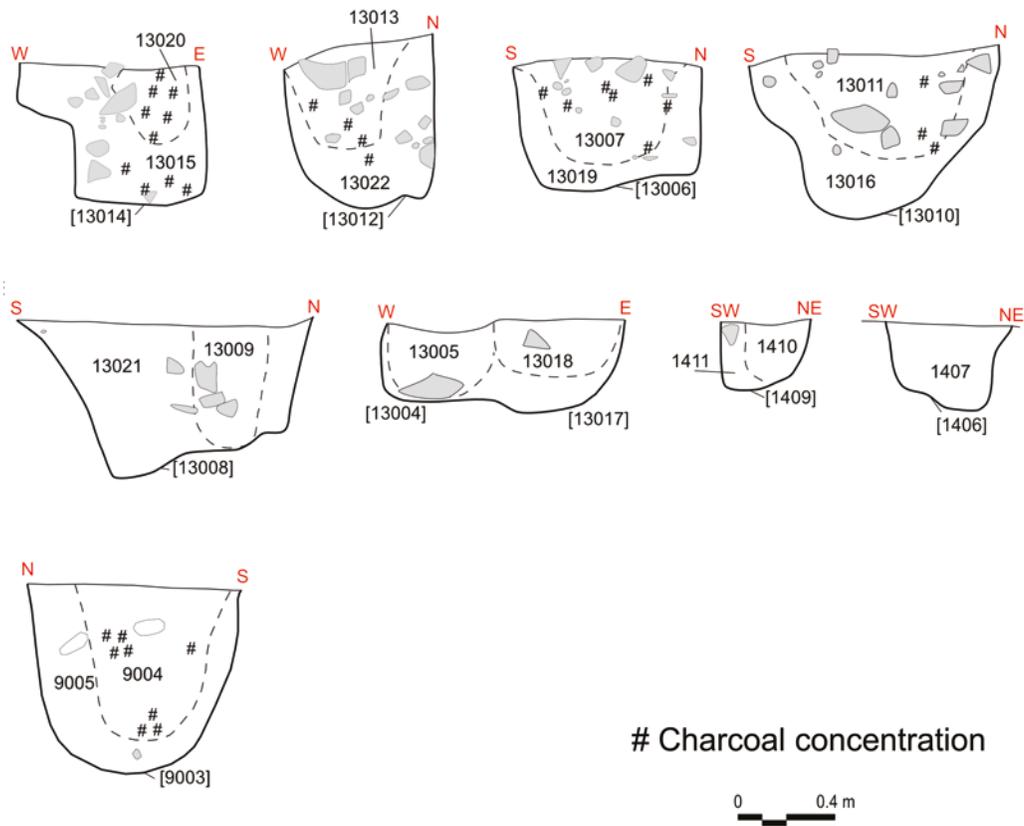
Six trenches (Trenches 9 and 13–17) were positioned at the southern side of the fort over the two ramparts and extended into the interior (Illus 6.2). Excavation in this area began with Trench 9, a 16.5m x 2m cutting that extended in a roughly north/south direction from the interior and over the ramparts, which appeared to converge in this area (Illus 6.9). After the identification of a large post hole [9003], a 4.5m x 2m extension was opened to assess if this represented part of a larger wooden palisade or if it was an isolated feature. Post-hole [9003] was around 1m in diameter and 0.75m deep, with vertical sides cut into the underlying natural and bedrock (Illus 6.10). It contained a central post-pipe (9004) comprising a charcoal-rich, mid-brown soft sandy silt about 0.5–0.6m wide and 0.69m deep, which was surrounded by stone packing (9005). Two further post holes [9010] and [9012] were spaced approximately 2m apart and were more oval in shape. Post-hole [9010] measured 1m x 0.85m and 0.7m in depth, while [9012] measured 1.1m x 0.8m and 0.65m in depth. Both had a similar fill to [9003], with charcoal-rich post-pipes surrounded by stone packing. [9010] showed a distinct step in its cut on the southern side that may have been a ramp to ease lifting the post into place. Though exposed, neither of the ramparts were excavated in Trench 9.



Illus 6.8
South-facing section of sondage through outer rampart in Trench 6



Illus 6.9
Trenches 9 and 13-16, showing post arcs



Illus 6.10
Examples of post-hole sections from Trenches 9, 13 and 15

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Illus 6.11

Trenches 13 and 14 showing the arcing arrangements of post holes at the internal edge of the inner rampart

Trenches 13–15 were designed to build on the results discovered in Trench 9 and exposed up to ten further post holes (Illus 6.9). Trench 13 was positioned immediately to the west and measured 12m x 4m, with its length following the projected arc of posts along the edge of the inner rampart. This revealed six large post holes – [13004], [13006], [13008], [13010], [13012] and [13014] – spaced approximately 1.8m apart, with a possible seventh post hole [13023] recorded but not excavated (Illus 6.11). All post holes were of similar character, being circular or oval in plan, with a diameter ranging 0.5–1m and average depth of 0.5–0.6m (Illus 6.10). Their sides were concave to vertical with sharp breaks of slope, and each had a concave to flat base. All but [13004] showed evidence of a post-pipe, and [13008], [13010] and [13014] had evidence of ramps (Illus 6.12).

Post-hole [13004] was positioned at the western edge of the trench, adjacent to a linear feature [13017] which ran in a north-west/south-east direction (Illus 6.9 and 6.13). The linear feature measured 2.2m long, 0.55m wide and up to 0.4m in depth. Within [13017], a single dark-brown sandy silt fill with occasional burnt bone and frequent charcoal (13018) was recorded (Illus 6.10). It is difficult to interpret this feature with any certainty, though the large amount of charcoal in its fill suggests it held some wooden feature that was burnt in situ possibly before the construction of the arc of post holes, as post-hole [13004] clipped the edge of [13017]. One hypothesis was that it represented an elaborate feature associated with an unrecorded entrance. To test this, a

2.5m x 1.3m extension (Trench 15) was opened immediately to the west of Trench 13 to see if there was a corresponding break in the arc of post holes. However, the cut of another large post hole (1501) was revealed, inferring the arc of posts continued unbroken to the west.



Illus 6.12

Post-hole [13008] with central packing and post-pipe and ramp on one side of the cut

RHYNIE

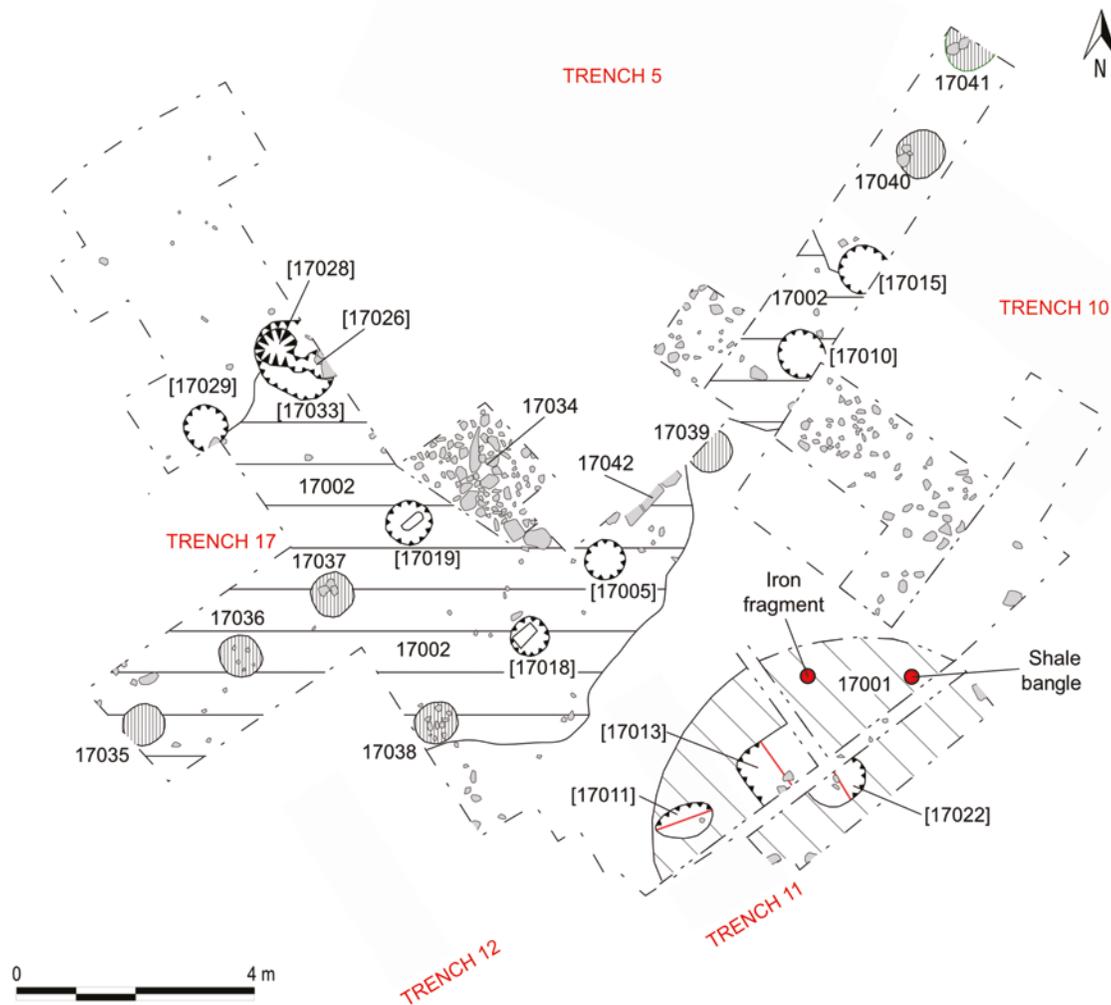


Illus 6.13
Large linear feature [13017] next to post-hole [13004]

Trench 14 extended Trench 9 on its eastern side and identified two further post holes [14004] and [14006] spaced approximately 2m apart, confirming the continuation of the post-built feature in Trenches 9, 13 and 15 (Illus 6.2 and 6.9). The post holes were similar in character to those identified previously, being circular or oval in shape and up to 0.75m wide and 0.65m deep (Illus 6.10). They were both rock-cut, with a charcoal-rich post-pipe (14005) at the centre of [14004]. Post-hole [14006] also appeared to be ramped.

Trench 17 was a large, irregularly shaped cutting opened over the line of the inner and outer ramparts at the south-east of the monument (Illus 6.2 and 6.14). This trench was the first to fully reveal the complexity of the enclosing elements of Cairn More and aimed to expose the possible entrance identified by Feachem, although no clear trace of this could be found. The trench revealed three evenly spaced post-hole arcs that corresponded to the lines of the inner and outer faces of the inner rampart and the inner line of the outer rampart.

At the inner edge of the inner rampart, three post holes [17026], [17028] and [17029] partially cut through the patchy remains of an old ground surface (17002) that survived in the vicinity of all three post arcs (Illus 6.2, 6.14 and 6.15). The ground surface comprised a mid-greyish-brown sandy silt with moderate



Illus 6.14
Trench 17 plan

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Illus 6.15

Drone shot showing Trench 17 with the post settings on the south-east stretch of the monument



Illus 6.16

Double post setting [17033]

amounts of burnt bone and charcoal that sat directly on the undisturbed mid-yellowish-orange natural subsoil. A double-post setting comprising post-holes [17026] and [17028] were found within a large shallow oval cut [17033] that measured 1.43m x 0.94m and 0.14m in depth and cut through (17002) and the underlying natural subsoil (Illus 6.16). Approximately half of post-hole [17026] was revealed during excavation, with the remainder extending into the trench edge. It was found to be circular in plan, measuring 0.56m in diameter and 0.69m in depth where excavated, and was rock-cut, with a steep break of slope, vertical sides and a flat base. It had a clear post-pipe (17025) consisting of a soft, mid-blackish-brown sandy silty with occasional burnt bone. The other post hole [17028] was positioned 0.22m to the north-west. It was a sub-circular rock-cut feature measuring 0.63m x 0.85m wide and 0.56m deep, with a single fill (17027) comprising a mid-greyish-brown sandy silt with occasional burnt bone, frequent charcoal and moderate amounts of medium to large angular stone. The close position of [17026] and [17028] might suggest that [17026] was a repair to this post arc. A third post hole [17029] was identified to the south-west which consisted of a circular cut into bedrock measuring 0.82m in diameter and 0.79m deep. It contained a packing fill of redeposited natural which surrounded a clear sub-rectangular central post-pipe (17031) comprising a mid-greyish-brown sandy silt with moderate amounts of charcoal, burnt bone and medium to large angular packing stones.

The middle post arc was revealed in Trenches 16 and 17 and comprised a series of large, evenly spaced rock-cut post holes of similar size and shape to those of the innermost post arc (Illus 6.2, 6.9, 6.14 and 6.17). Trench 16 revealed three post holes near to the outer edge of the inner rampart, two of which – [16001] and [16010] – were approximately in line with the innermost post arc

(Illus 6.9). All three post holes had a large circular rock-cut $\approx 0.7\text{--}1\text{m}$ in diameter and $0.9\text{--}1\text{m}$ in depth and contained clear post-pipes, with that of [16010] very obviously squared in plan. The post would have been around $0.2\text{--}0.25\text{m}$ square, with the post-pipe continuing to the very base of the post-hole cut (Illus 6.18). Another large rock-cut post-hole [16005] was seemingly located between the middle and outer palisades (Illus 6.9). It was of a similar character to the other post holes in the trench, around 1m in diameter and 1.3m in depth, with evidence for a post-pipe and packing fill. In Trench 17, four post holes – [17019], [17035], [17036] and [17037] – of the middle post arc were revealed (Illus 6.14), though only one was excavated. Post-hole [17019] was circular in plan, measuring 0.84m in diameter and 0.97m in depth, and had been rock-cut with a rectangular post-pipe apparent in plan.

The outer post arc was first identified in Trench 16, when three large post holes spaced approximately 2m apart were revealed – [16013], [16018] and [16021] (Illus 6.9 and 6.19). All three had been cut into bedrock, contained clear post-pipes, and measured $0.7\text{--}1.1\text{m}$ in diameter and up to $1.05\text{--}1.35\text{m}$ in depth. A further eight post holes were revealed to the east in Trench 17 – [17005], [17010], [17015], [17018], [17038], [17039], [17040] and [17041] – four of which were excavated. Post-holes [17005], [17010], [17015] and [17018] were spaced $1.3\text{--}1.8\text{m}$ apart and were of a similar size, shape and character (Illus 6.14). They measured $0.72\text{--}0.88\text{m}$ in diameter and $0.71\text{--}1.05$ in depth and all showed evidence for having held posts, with [17005], [17010] and [17018] retaining clear evidence of squared timbers (Illus 6.20). Variations in the underlying geology, however, meant that some of the post holes were cut into a smooth sandstone bedrock, while others had been cut into more irregular bedrock with multiple bedding planes and were less well defined.



Illus 6.17
Trench 16 looking south with the middle and outer post settings evident



Illus 6.18
Post-hole [16010] with squared post impression



Pre-excitation.



Mid-excitation showing central packing stones.



Mid-excitation, highlighting the large size of the post-holes.



Post-excitation.

Illus 6.19
Post-hole [16021] at various stages of excavation

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Illus 6.20
Post-hole [17018] with clear rectangular post-pipe



Illus 6.21
Heavily burnt layer (16008)

6.3.5 An earlier enclosure?

In Trench 16, a number of features were recorded underneath the core of the outer rampart. These included a 0.02–0.07m thick layer of loose, bright reddish-pink silty clay intermixed with bands of charcoal-rich silt and significant quantities of charred round-wood fragments (16008). This was directly sealed by, and extended partially beyond, the inner edge of the rampart (Illus 6.21). Downslope, (16008) sat directly over fragments of charred wattlework (16004), suggesting that (16004) and (16008) formed part of a burnt wattle and daub fence/wall panel that may relate to a pre-fort structure or possibly an earlier phase of fort construction (Illus 6.22). It is unlikely that this delicate wattlework would have survived for long unless it had been quickly sealed. The wattlework itself had sealed two earlier shallow features [16026] and [16024], both of which were rock-cut with single fills containing occasional charcoal flecking (Illus 6.23).



Illus 6.22
Remains of wattlework (16004)

6.3.6 The interior

The dome-shaped interior of the fort may have restricted settlement to the flatter summit at the centre of the defences. This is tentatively borne out in the archaeological record, where no evidence of habitation was found in the small 2m x 1m test pit (Trench 4) on the south-eastern side of the interior, or in the areas of Trenches 5, 9, 13 and 15 that abutted the inner edge of the enclosing elements. Trench 14 did reveal a smaller post-hole [14009] inside the inner rampart; however, this appeared to represent activity prior to the construction of the defences. While much of the interior remains to be investigated, the only area to produce any unequivocal evidence for settlement was the summit, explored in Trenches 7 and 8 (Illus 6.2, 6.24 and 6.25). Trench 7 was excavated over two seasons in 2018 and 2019 and comprised a 12m x 9m area, with a 5.5m by 3.5m extension at the north-east, a 5m x 2m extension at the south-west and a



Illus 6.23
Feature [16024] underneath burnt layers (16004) and (16008)

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3.5m x 1m extensions at the west. The trench partially exposed what we interpret as a large building with a central hearth at the summit of the interior.

6.3.7 The building: structural features

The building at the summit was defined by a series of deposits and possible structural features, which suggest that it covered an area approximately 18m east/west by 10m north/south. A cobbled/stony surface comprising small angular and sub-angular stones (7103) survived in large patches within this area, and ranged from 0.05–0.15m in thickness. It did not appear beyond the limits of the possible walls of the structure at the north-east (7108), south-west (7133) or east (8004), which suggests that it could represent ground preparation prior to the construction of the building.

The preservation of the building's walls varied considerably, and the archaeology had undoubtedly been truncated by a variety of factors including tree roots, gorse, animal burrows and clearance. The best-preserved section of walling was revealed at the eastern side in Trench 8, where a 1.8m wide concentration of medium to large sub-angular stones (8004) formed a probable wall core. A surface of cobbled stones (8003) found in the vicinity of the wall may be equivalent to the foundation surface (7103). At the north-east in Trench 7, another stretch of probable walling (7108) survived as a 2m wide curving concentration of large, relatively flat, sub-rectangular stones. This directly overlay a light yellowish-brown silty sand with frequent small stones (7117), which may represent the edges of the foundation surface (7103). The south-west wall (7133) was defined by a similar concentration of large sub-angular stones approximately 2.2m wide. The foundation surface (7103) abutted the edge of these large stones, with the wall itself (7133) built on the natural subsoil. A considerable amount of disturbance in the form of animal burrows was noted in this area. No obvious wall was recorded on the western side of the summit, but there was a clear end to surface (7103). This could be interpreted as a possible entrance to the structure, though it could equally represent an area of the wall which has been severely truncated and robbed out.

Considering the potential size of the structure, only a handful of post holes large enough to support a roof were identified – though it must be noted that a large portion of the trench was not bottomed and the archaeological deposits were significantly damaged and disturbed by roots and animal burrowing. A possible post pad (7009) identified in the 2018 season comprised large sub-rectangular flat stones arranged in a sub-circular setting approximately 0.68m in diameter and was positioned approximately 2m south of the hearth (7104) (Illus 6.26). Just over 1m to the west of this lay a small pit or post hole [7129] that measured 0.51m x 0.37m and was 0.23m in deep. Its fill (7130) comprised a dark-brown, soft sandy clay with occasional burnt bone and frequent charcoal. Directly opposite these features on the northern side of the hearth were two further post holes [7121] and [7123]. Both were substantial features, with post-hole [7121] comprising a circular cut approximately 0.68m in diameter and 0.57m in depth, with vertical sides and a rounded base. A post-pipe consisting of a dark greyish-brown silt with frequent charcoal (7120) was surrounded by packing stones intermixed with a mid-yellowish-brown sandy silt (7122) that had later been covered by a

mid-greyish-brown clayey silt upper fill (7119). Post-hole [7123] was positioned approximately 2m to the south-west of this feature and measured 0.58m x 0.47m and 0.25m deep. It was filled with a soft, mid-brown sandy clay mingled with frequent charcoal and burnt bone (7124). It is possible that these post holes formed part of an internal support structure for a roof to the large building on the summit, though post-hole [7123] seems to have been covered by the foundation deposit (7103) and probably represents an earlier phase of activity on the summit.



Illus 6.26
Post-pad (7009)

A series of other putative features were identified at the north-west of the trench, including the cut of a shallow pit or truncated post hole [7125] measuring 0.48m x 0.57m and 0.13m deep, with a dark-brown clay fill with occasional charcoal inclusions (71026) (Illus 6.25). Just under 2m to the west, a small post hole [7128] measuring 0.18m in diameter and 0.2m in depth and containing a fill of dark grey sandy silt with moderate charcoal inclusions (7127) was identified. Between these two features lay a linear spread [7115] of medium-sized angular stones mixed with a mid-grey-brown sand with occasional burnt bone and charcoal (7114). It was 0.23m long, up to 1.4m wide, and was cut 0.28m into the underlying natural. Further features included a possible post pad (7109) on the western edge of the trench, which measured approximately 0.38m in diameter and cut feature [7111]. Feature [7111] was approximately 1.2m in diameter and 0.04m deep, and contained a fill of mid-greyish-brown black sandy silt intermixed with moderate to frequent amounts of charcoal (7112). Most of these features seemed to truncate the foundation cobbling and therefore could have been associated with occupation of a large building on the summit.

At the centre of the building were the remains of a large hearth [7104] which measured 2.1m east/west by 1.35m north/south (Illus 6.27). The hearth was covered by a large spread of sub-angular stones (7002) which appeared to be field clearance, with cultivation of the interior perhaps explaining the poor preservation on site. The hearth was defined by five large longitudinal angular stones on its southern, western and eastern edges. These



Illus 6.27

Hearth [7104] with detail of knife-marks on the largest hearth stone

stones were on average 0.6m long and 0.1m wide, with the exception of the kerbstone on the western side which was particularly large, measuring 1.25m long and 0.3m wide. Knife sharpening marks were identified on this stone (Illus 6.27). A series of deposits within and surrounding the hearth (7003/7005/7006) may be associated with its use. The uppermost deposits (7003) and (7005) were thin spreads of mid-brown clayey silt, 0.08m and 0.05m thick, intermixed with occasional small fragments of burnt bone, moderate amounts of charcoal and frequent amounts of medium-sized angular stones. These layers were sealed by the spread of stone (7002) and were contained within the upper levels of the hearth. Fills (7003) and (7005) sat on a series of flat hearth stones which in turn lay on a lower soil deposit consisting of a mid-brownish-grey clay mixed with charcoal and burnt bone (7006). This lower fill was approximately 0.04m deep and may represent an earlier hearth.

Removal of the stone concentration (7002) on the southern side of the hearth revealed another spread of material (7106). This consisted of a 0.05m thick deposit of soft, dark grey clay intermixed with occasional charcoal and burnt bone that sat directly on the cobble foundation (7103). This sequence suggested that the hearth was built and used when the large building was first constructed. A second, more extensive occupation deposit (7113) that also sat directly on (7103) was identified during the 2019 season. Deposit (7113) comprised a 0.1m thick greyish-brown clayey silt with burnt bone and charcoal inclusions. While this survived best on the north-eastern side of the hearth underneath stone spread (7002), it was also identified in patches within the tentative limits of the large structure. It may have also extended into Trench 8, where a somewhat similar deposit of mid-yellowish-brown sandy clay mingled with burnt bone and charcoal (8005) was identified.

It seems likely that this deposit, and any other floor layers or deposits, had been truncated by later activity on the hilltop that included phases of cultivation and tree planting.

6.3.8 External structure

Within Trench 17, the partial remains of a house floor (17001) were identified just outside the outer rampart, perhaps having been built directly against the outer rampart if they were contemporary (Illus 6.2, 6.14, 6.28 and 6.29). This floor layer was at least 6m in diameter and comprised a 0.12m deep, dark brownish-black clayey silt with frequent charcoal and moderate amounts of burnt-bone inclusions. The majority of the revealed floor was excavated and dry-sieved, though only a fragment of a shale brooch and an iron object were recovered. Two narrow baulks were left in situ at the centre of the deposit (17001) to facilitate micromorphology sampling. There were no structural features such as post holes or stake-holes associated with this floor, implying the walls were likely made of turf or utilised other non-earthfast construction techniques.

Cut into the floor layer (17001) and the underlying natural were three pits/hearths – [17011], [17013] and [17022] (Illus 6.14 and 6.29). A shallow, lozenge-shaped hearth pit [17011] positioned near the south-eastern edge of the house floor measured 1.22m x 0.63m in maximum length and width and 0.12m in depth, with gradual sloping sides and a concave base. The heat of the hearth had discoloured the underlying natural in this area to a reddish-orange. The hearth had a single fill (17012) comprising a firm, dark reddish-black silty clay with occasional burnt bone, moderate amounts of small angular stones and frequent amounts of charcoal.

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Illus 6.28
House floor (17001) located outside the main enclosure complex



Illus 6.29
Hearths associated with house floor (17001). Left [17013], right [17011]

Two additional central features [17013] and [17022] may also represent hearths associated with the use of the house. The largest of these was [17013], a 1.06m x 1.46m sub-rectangular feature with a gradual break of slope, concave sides and a flat base cut 0.21m into the underlying natural subsoil which again was discoloured, this time to a dull reddish-pink. Its fill (17014) consisted of a charcoal-rich, soft clayey silt with large pieces of burnt branches and wood, occasional burnt-bone inclusions, and a small number of small- to medium-sized angular stones. Some bright orange pockets of clayey silt were also intermixed with this deposit, which may represent burnt turf or daub. Abutting [17013] to the east was another probable hearth [17022]. It was sub-circular in shape, measuring 1.13m x 0.85m in maximum length and width, and was cut 0.35m into the underlying natural subsoil which was similarly discoloured to a dull reddish-pink. It had a single charcoal-rich fill (17023) comprising a firm, dark black clayey silt with occasional burnt bone and moderate amounts of coarse pebbles. As with (17014), patches of bright orange-red clayey silt mixed with the fill may represent burnt turf.

6.4 Discussion

The Cairn More excavations sought to comprehensively date the enclosing elements of the settlement and reveal their form and character. In this respect, the various seasons of investigation were successful, having firmly dated the site to the early medieval period and, more specifically, to the 5th to early 7th century AD (Chapter 8). The survey work of Feachem (1966: 72) and the investigations by Cook (2011b: 215) had led to some doubt over the overall form of the Cairn More enclosures. The current work suggests that Feachem's plan, drawn prior to the engulfing of the site by forestry plantation and gorse, is the more accurate. The site appears to have comprised a bivallate enclosure with at least one large building at the centre. The ramparts appear to have been complex wooden and stone features, whose walls stood around 2–3m wide with the inner rampart having both inner and outer posts bracing what may have been a largely rubble core. In the

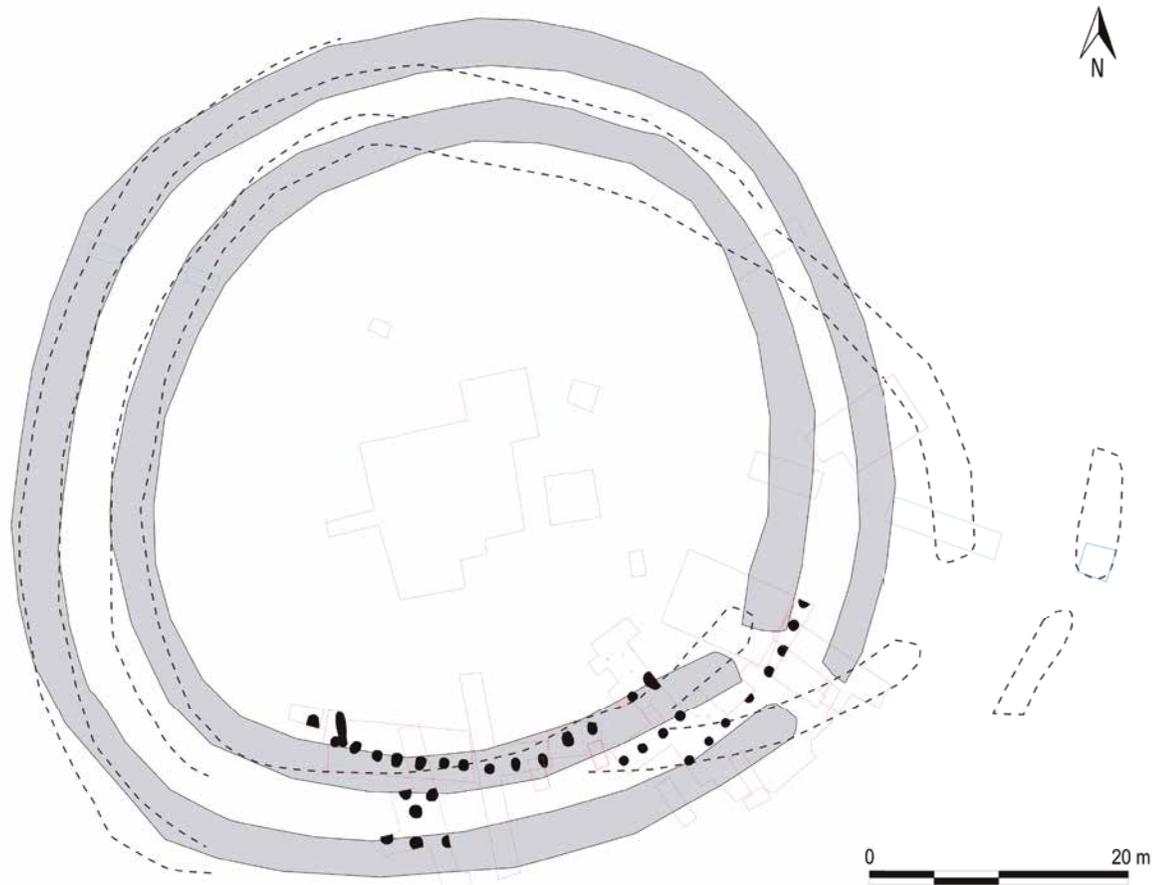
outer rampart, only the inner face appears to have incorporated wooden posts. Due to the level of disturbance at the site, it was sometimes hard to define where the edges of the rampart ended and the stone collapse/spreads began, but the general adherence of the post arcs to the edges of the rampart cores suggests the post arcs and ramparts were contemporary rather than forming different phases of enclosure. If these features did represent different phases of development, for example palisades pre-dating stone rampart, the adherence of the plan of the ramparts to the line of the post arcs suggest that the ramparts must have immediately replaced the post arcs and conformed largely to the same plan.

The favoured interpretation here is that the posts were incorporated into the facing of the ramparts. Where identifiable, the posts broadly follow the Feachem plan as projected on a modern map, with the exception on the south-east where the post arcs would suggest a sharper curve to the enclosure boundary (Illus 6.30). No post arc was evident on the outer side of the outer rampart, though this might be expected given the ease with which wooden components could be set alight through fire-setting against the outer face of the enclosure complex in acts of conflict (eg Noble et al 2022).

The timbers held in each arc would have been substantial features, with some post holes over a metre in diameter and cut up

to 1.4m into the bedrock. The significant length of the posts is also suggested by the presence of ramps, and it is clear that at least some of the posts were squared, indicating they were large prepared timbers. If contemporary with the ramparts, the posts are likely to have been joined by planks or drystone walling (see below). There was only limited evidence for facing for each rampart (eg in Trench 3) but it is possible that the majority of good-quality building stone has been thoroughly robbed from the site and reused in the substantial field walls that enclose the modern plantation (and perhaps in nearby buildings too). The evidence for field clearance in the interior of the monument and the difficulty tracing the outlines of the internal building also suggest extensive disturbance.

The timber elements of the ramparts are a striking feature of what could otherwise be taken as a relatively modest monument from surface inspection alone. The evidence for squared timbers and posts spaced around 2m apart suggests that a very significant investment in resources and labour was required to build the Cairn More enclosure complex. The spacing of the posts in the inner line where the largest number of posts were revealed would indicate that over 80 posts would be needed for the inner post revetment alone, not including the timber needed for transverse cross-beams and planking, or any structures on top of the rampart. The incorporation of



Illus 6.30

Location of post holes in relation to Feachem's plan of the then upstanding remains. The three post settings are a good match for being revetment to the inner side of the outer rampart and both sides of the inner rampart. However, there is no clear evidence for an entrance at the south-east

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earthfast timbers within ramparts is relatively unusual in Scotland but the outer wooden elements of the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 5) provide a contemporary parallel. Ramparts of this type are known in Central Europe as *Pfostenschlitzmauern* (Lock & Ralston 2022: 169; Ian Ralston, pers comm), where they are characterised by one or two vertical lines of wooden posts with inner planking or drystone walling. Their cores tended to be constructed from earth or rubble, which filled the void between the two timber-revetted drystone wall faces. In some cases, the back of the rampart could be supported by a ramp of earth (see discussion Lock & Ralston 2022: 166–70). Where two timber faces were present, transverse cross-beams between the rampart wall faces may have been used to provide extra bracing and support for the rampart core. The vertical posts at the face of ramparts may have also extended above the rampart to create a breastwork surmounting the wall. Considering the presence of post-hole ramps at Cairn More, which infer the vertical timbers were long and substantial, it is possible that such elements could well have existed here.

Pfostenschlitzmauern-style ramparts are not widely known in Britain and Ireland, where timber-framed and timber-laced ramparts are better represented. One parallel other than the Craw Stane complex is Dunnicaer in Aberdeenshire, which had a timber-framed rampart with some earthfast elements around the edge of a sea stack or promontory fort (Noble et al 2020a). However, the character of the Dunnicaer evidence was not of the scale and regularity of what was present at Cairn More. Other Pictish parallels include Green Castle, Portknockie (Ralston 1980, 1987) and Burghead, Moray (Noble & Evans 2022: 108–11), the latter of which had elaborate timber-framed ramparts of an exceptional scale. At c 0.28ha, Green Castle would have defined a similar enclosure space to Cairn More, though it does not provide a parallel in terms of its topographic position or setting.

Closer in character to Cairn More, at least in morphology if not in detail, are the small number of hilltop or hillslope thick-walled ‘ringfort’ type enclosures found in Aberdeenshire.¹ In the 2000s, the Royal Commission developed a classification system for the fortifications of Aberdeenshire which placed Cairn More alongside the inner walled enclosures identified at Maiden Castle and other similar sites such as Keir Hill, White Hill and Barmkyn of North Keig (RCAHMS 2007: 101; Cook 2013: 338, table 3). Maiden Castle comprised two successive enclosures whose earliest phase was a 4.5m thick stone wall some 0.6m in height, which was later reinforced by the addition of two banks and ditches that abutted the edge of a steep drop to the east (Cook 2011a: 25). The enclosures had a total area of approximately 0.08ha and while no obvious entrance to the walled enclosure was identified, a cobbled entrance on the southern side of the outer ramparts and ditches was uncovered during excavations (see Cook 2011a: 27). The excavations by Cook dated both internal and external activity to the early medieval period: within the interior of the fort, samples from an occupation deposit returned a date of cal AD 530–640 (SUERC-22160) and a post hole produced an early medieval glass bead. A possible rectangular enclosure or structure was also identified abutting the inner face of the walled enclosure. During excavation it was noted that the inner rampart was built on deposits that abutted the walled enclosure, suggesting that the outer enclosing elements were a secondary phase. However, radiocarbon dating revealed that these must have been built in relatively close sequence, as charcoal

from underneath the inner rampart and middle fill of its associated ditch was dated AD 420–610 (SUERC-15908) and AD 500–650 (SUERC-15909). Further investigation of two cobbled areas immediately east and south of the fort produced at least four early medieval crucible fragments, a fragment of early medieval imported glass and a stone bead dating to a similar period to the fort, attesting to high-status activity within the fort environs.

As a result of these features, Maiden Castle draws particularly strong comparisons to Cairn More. Its internal walled enclosure is broadly similar in scale to the large walled structure identified at Cairn More, and its two surrounding ramparts and ditches are comparable in size with the stone ramparts surrounding the domed hill. While the enclosing elements at Cairn More are more complex in terms of having additional timber elements, the trenches at Maiden Castle may have been too narrow to reveal any comparable features. Indeed, the narrow trenches in Cook’s earlier excavations at Cairn More failed to identify the massive posts of this palisade. Both Cairn More and Maiden Castle are broadly contemporary and show evidence for onsite production of prestige goods and the importation of exotic material culture. Of further interest is the clear evidence for extra-mural activity at both sites, inferring that the settlement and its associated activities were not defined by the limits of the enclosing elements of the forts themselves.

Elsewhere in Aberdeenshire, the RCAHMS survey identified a small number of potentially similar sites to Maiden Castle and Cairn More, though the dating for these has shown diverse results, with only some revealing activity in the early medieval period. Of the other examples in the typological group identified by RCAHMS (2007: 101) and Cook (2013), Hill of Keir has been shown to have evidence of reuse in the early medieval period but appears to have been an Iron Age enclosure in its first incarnation (Noble et al 2020b). Evaluation of the enclosure at Barmkyn of North Keig, Aberdeenshire, suggested this enclosure was also Iron Age in date (Noble et al 2020b). Dating of other ‘ringfort type’, thick-walled enclosures in eastern Scotland has produced similarly mixed results, with examples in Perthshire producing clear evidence for Iron Age construction (eg Black Spout – Strachan 2013) – though several of these have also revealed evidence for early medieval use or reuse (eg Aldclune, Queen’s View and Litigan – Taylor 1990; Hingley et al 1997). In Angus, excavations at sites such as Rob’s Reed and the three examples on Turin Hill (Noble et al 2020b) suggest Middle Iron Age to early Roman Iron Age construction and activity. Thus the sites at Cairn More and Maiden Castle remain unusual examples of early medieval enclosures, with few clear parallels identified to date and none with the scale of resource expenditure apparent at Cairn More.

The enclosure at Cairn More contained at least one building, with structural evidence comprising earthfast posts and post-pads and an area of cobbling that appears to have been used as foundations. This covered an area of at least 18 by 10m, suggesting that the building was of a substantial size. The size of the hearth (2.1m long, but an uncertain width) and the exterior walls (which measured up to 2.2m wide) also indicate that the building was an imposing feature in the summit interior. The floor layers appear to have been largely truncated, though multiple surviving deposits of hearth waste and perhaps two successive hearths suggest a significant lifespan for its use.

In addition to this larger building, what is likely to have been a more modest and perhaps specialised building was found outside the enclosure, possibly abutting the outer rampart on the south-east side of the settlement. This was around 6m in internal diameter (assuming the building was circular) with up to three hearth pits. These were of a different character to the large stone-built hearth at the centre of the interior building, and their pit-like nature may suggest they functioned as bowl furnaces for metalworking, though no direct evidence of this was found. No other structures were conclusively identified during the investigation at Cairn More, but the excavations did largely target the enclosing works and central interior area. The wattle work discovered in Trench 16 could conceivably have come from a pre-rampart house or structure and some of the charcoal analysis suggests hearth material under the ramparts, again implying some settlement prior to the construction of the ramparts (Niehaus and Ramsay, Chapter 8). The metalworking evidence identified by Cook in association with what was interpreted as a third rampart could also have been structural elements and/or activity associated with extra-mural settlement, suggesting that more settlement features remain to be explored at Cairn More.

The material culture from Cairn More was meagre in comparison to that recovered from the Craw Stane enclosure, though Cairn More had been heavily affected by later disturbance of the site through cultivation and tree planting, which had removed floor layers and greatly reduced the ramparts. In addition, nothing in the way of ‘artefact traps’, such as ditch deposits or deep midden layers were identified in the excavations conducted by the University of Aberdeen. It is certainly possible that middens survive at the site, and the fact that Cook’s excavations identified metalworking moulds from outside the enclosure points to an area where future investigations could be fruitfully targeted.

6.5 Conclusions

The investigations at Cairn More was one significant part of characterising the wider landscape setting of the Craw Stane complex during the Rhyne Environs project. The research on the wider setting has illuminated the extent to which the Craw Stane complex was just one node within a landscape of power in the first millennium AD (Chapter 12). The community response to the excavations at Rhyne were uniformly impressive, but the single-handed undertaking of the clearance of the site to allow the investigations of Cairn More to take place by local resident Fred Murray was particularly notable. The Cairn More excavations aimed to comprehensively date the enclosing elements of the fort and reveal their form and character, and explore the interior. Despite the seemingly better preservation of the site than the Craw Stane complex, agricultural impacts had undoubtedly taken a toll on this site. Nonetheless, the excavations revealed a complex bivallate fort with very impressive post revetments to the stone-built ramparts that enclosed the interior settlement. Two buildings were identified – one large interior structure with a hugely impressive hearth-setting and an exterior floor layer that phytolith and micro-algae analysis has shown was a turf-walled building that may have had a thatched roof (Chapter 8). Dates for the site suggest a 5th- to mid-7th-century AD chronology, overlapping in use with the enclosures at the Craw Stane and the use and decline of Tap o’ Noth as a major regional centre. The relationship between the three sites in the first millennium AD will form the focus of the final chapter (Chapter 12).