



Society of Antiquaries
of **Scotland**

Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

Edited by Gordon Noble

ISBN: 978-1-908332-38-7 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-39-4 (PDF)

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Noble, G (ed) 2026 *Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland: The development of a landscape of Pictish royal power from the Roman to the early medieval period*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. <https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332394>

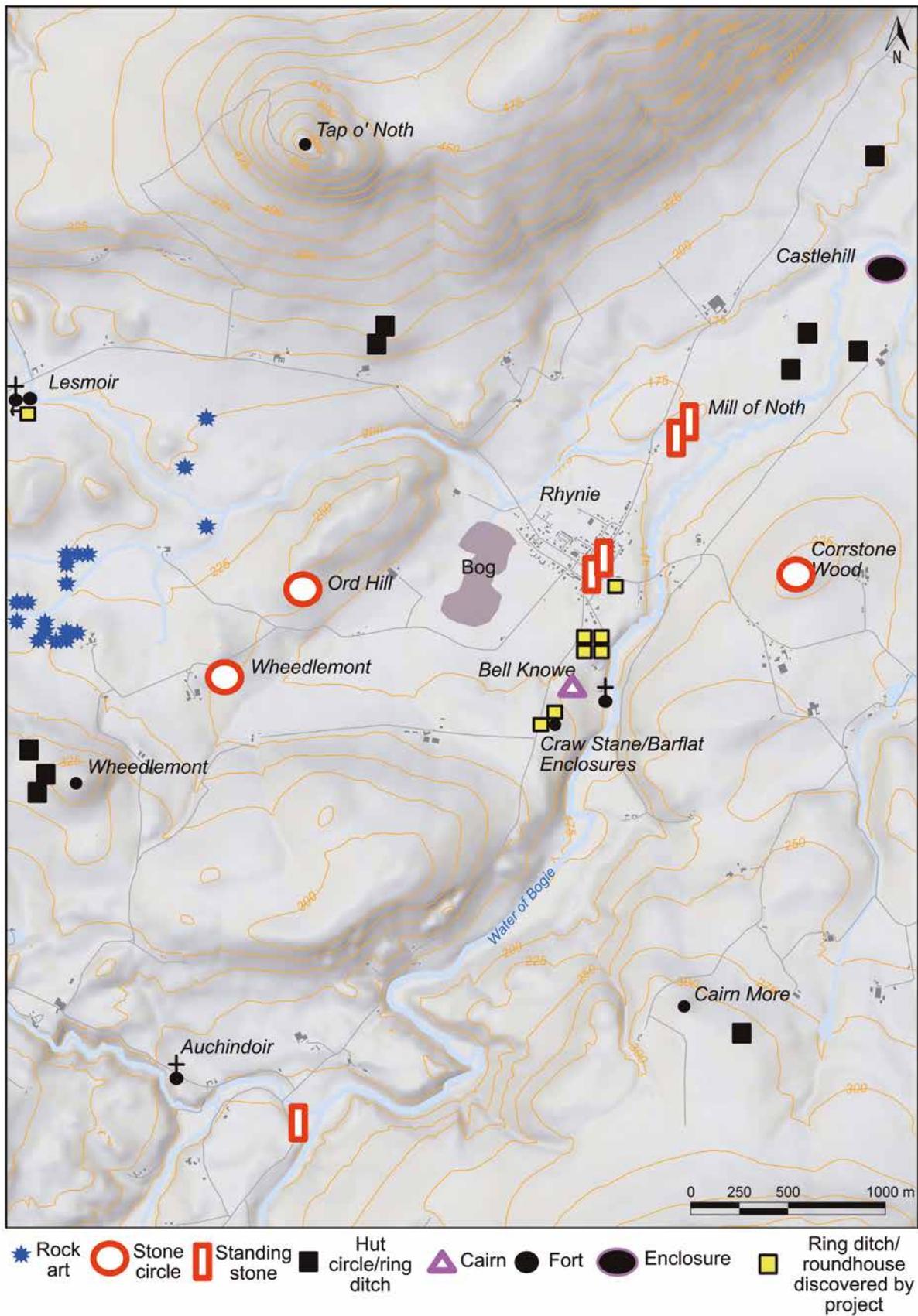
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Illus 9.1

Location of key prehistoric sites in the Rhynie valley and the ring ditches discovered during project excavations

Chapter 9

TAP O' NOTH OBLONG FORT AND THE PREHISTORY OF THE UPPER STRATHBOGIE VALLEY

GORDON NOBLE

9.1 Introduction

Alongside the exciting evidence for Iron Age to early medieval activity in Scotland, this project has provided new data on the prehistoric record of the Upper Strathbogie valley. This includes new insights from the large-scale study at the vitrified fort at Tap o' Noth to more incidental findings of prehistoric features during excavations at the Craw Stane complex and the cemetery near the village. This chapter first considers how these earlier features fit into the wider prehistoric landscape of the valley, before the evidence from the excavations at the vitrified fort of Tap o' Noth is examined in greater detail. The discussion explores issues including the chronology and character of oblong-style forts in Scotland, the process of vitrification, the function and use of the upper fort at Tap o' Noth, and the manner of its eventual destruction.

9.2 Prehistoric occupation of the Upper Strathbogie valley

Previous surveys attest to a rich prehistoric past within the Upper Strathbogie valley (eg RCAHMS 2007; Gondek & Noble 2015) (Chapter 2). Evidence of occupation can be found in the numerous upstanding hut-circles and settlement remains that litter the landscape, with the various Rhynie projects identifying a number of previously unknown prehistoric features and monuments that complement this existing record. Prehistoric features discovered over the course of the Rhynie investigations include four ring-ditch houses and pits excavated in the cemetery area, one ring-ditch house in the village itself, ring-ditch houses near and downslope from the Craw Stane complex, a standing-stone socket in the cemetery area and a prehistoric barrow next to Ashvale Cottage (Chapter 5).

The roundhouses identified in earlier surveys appear to be concentrated to the west and north of Rhynie village, whereas the new examples were found in more free-draining lowland areas and were previously unrecorded. In general, both the excavated and unexcavated examples vary between 7 and 11m in

diameter; the project revealed both Bronze Age and Iron Age ring-ditch roundhouses (RCAHMS 2007: 82–3). Though it is impossible to know the chronology of the unexcavated ring ditches and hut-circles found in the environs around Rhynie, it is likely that they similarly date from the Mid Bronze Age through to the later Iron Age (RCAHMS 2007: 82–109) (Illus 9.1). Not all of these sites may prove to be the remains of settlements – some of the ring-ditch cropmarks, for example, may represent ploughed-out barrows (or cairns). However, many of the hut circle/platform remains survive on the higher ground surrounding the valley and occasionally have accompanying field systems, suggesting they are likely to prove to be settlement remains.

A small number of cropmarks from the Rhynie valley may also indicate enclosed later prehistoric settlement, though without excavation the function and date of these features is uncertain. One possible enclosed site could be represented by the arc of a substantial ditch identified on Castlehill (Canmore ID 76553), just over a kilometre north-east of Rhynie village. The arc would suggest an oval enclosure *c* 35–40m in diameter, with possible interior pits or other features (Greig 1995: 33; RCAHMS 2007: 94) (Illus 9.1). To the south-west of Rhynie village, aerial photography identified two further possible oval/circular enclosures with internal features (Greig 1995: 32 – NRHE ID 106903); however the cropmarks of these are diffuse and in an area likely to have been encompassed by the Rhynie bog prior to its drainage (Chapter 2). As a result, they are more likely to be natural features than prehistoric settlement remains.

Aside from the vitrified fort on Tap o' Noth, the most substantial enclosed Iron Age site in the area is the fort at Cnoc Cailliche, which was evaluated as part of the Northern Picts: Rhynie Environs Project in 2017 (reported on in Noble et al 2020b). The fort, located around 3km south-west of Rhynie, is oval in plan and encompasses an internal area of around 0.11ha. A complex series of outer defences suggest the enclosing elements

had a phased development, while trenches within the interior revealed poorly preserved traces of occupation (Noble et al 2020b). Dating centred on the period 400–200 cal BC – a similar range to the dates for the construction and use of the vitrified fort on Tap o’ Noth, and to an unenclosed ring ditch [014] at the Craw Stane. This suggests that during this period there was a complexity, and perhaps even a hierarchy, to the settlement pattern in the area, with unenclosed and enclosed settlement occurring in the same valley.

9.3 Tap o’ Noth oblong fort

9.3.1 Exploring parallels

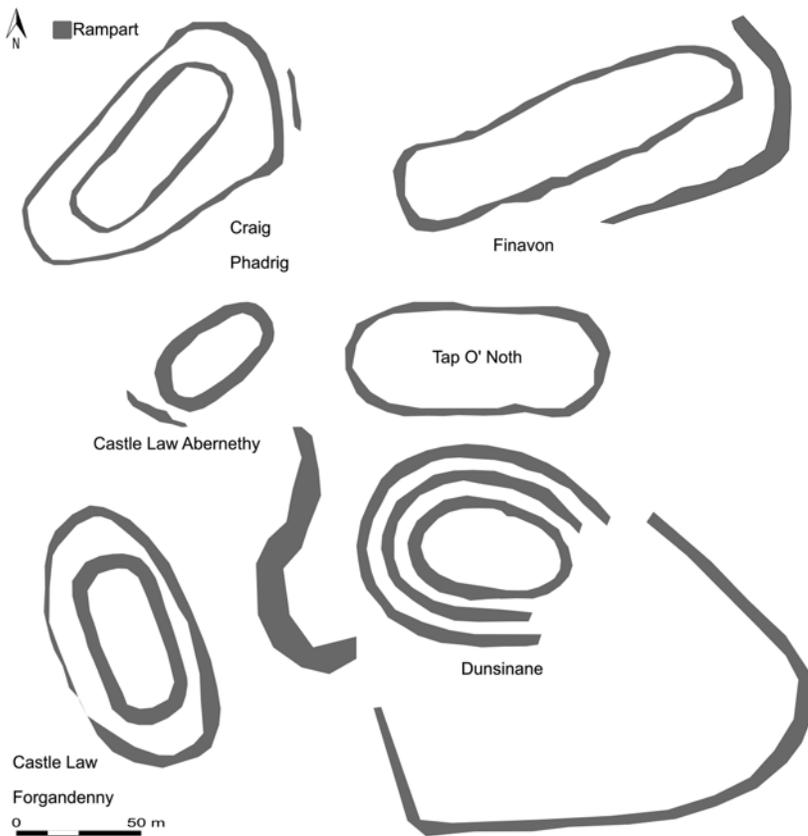
GORDON NOBLE AND JAMES O’DRISCOLL

Undoubtedly the most spectacular prehistoric site in the Rhynie valley is the vitrified fort at the summit of Tap o’ Noth (Chapter 4). At least 80 vitrified forts are known in Scotland (Lock & Ralston 2022: 432, Appendix 2), but forts of this type are part of a wider European phenomena with a small number of examples known in Scandinavia and Iberia, and a similar number to that of Scotland identified in France (eg Kresten & Ambrosian 1992; Kresten et al 1993, 2003; Ralston 2006: 144–5; Berrocal-Rangel et al 2019; Sjöblom et al 2022). Dating evidence for vitrified forts in Scotland is generally poor, but given the numbers of examples

known, the geographical spread and the size range (Lock & Ralston 2022: 430–1, table A2.1), then it is unlikely that the vitrification of forts was a unitary phenomena of one defined period of Scottish prehistory. Given the uncertainties of dating, seeking parallels and comparanda needs to adopt a cautious approach and here the discussion of parallels will concentrate on examples from north-eastern Scotland that share similarities in morphology, and where identifiable likely date. Within north-east Scotland there are a number of examples of vitrified forts that share close parallels to Tap o’ Noth in terms of being distinguished by thick walls, a lack of an obvious entrance and an oblong/sub-oval ground plan (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938a: Feachem 1966: 67, fig 5; Harding 2004: 85–90; Cook 2013: 329, fig 2),¹ with some having dating evidence that points to a similar chronological range to the vitrified fort on Tap o’ Noth (see discussion below).

Vitrified forts with an oval/oblong ground plan in north-east Scotland include examples such as Finavon, Barry Hill, Turin Hill and Laws of Monifieth (all Angus); Greencairn and Dunsinane (Aberdeenshire); Doune of Relugas (Moray), Craig Phadrig (Inverness-shire); and Castle Law Forgandenny, Castle Law Abernethy and Dunsinane (Perthshire) (Lock & Ralston 2022: 430–1, table A2.1) (Illus 9.2).² Examples of these have been the subject of investigation since the late 18th century (eg Greencairn at Balbegno, Kincardineshire and Dunsinane Hill, Perthshire); however, accounts of the early interventions at these sites rarely help illuminate the form and function of forts of this character (Christison 1900: 85; Wedderburn 1973: 1). Slightly more detailed accounts are available from the 19th century and include the Laws of Monifieth in Angus, excavated by James Neish in the 1850s who showed a c 0.45ha oblong fort to be enclosed by a massively thick-walled rampart and uncovered clear evidence for its destruction by fire (Neish 1859).³ Castle Law at Forgandenny, Perthshire, first excavated in 1892 by Edwin Weston Bell (Bell 1893), was found to feature a complex series of earthworks at the summit of which lay an oblong fort (Illus 9.3). The oblong fort comprised a c 5.5m thick timber-laced wall that enclosed a 0.12ha area, around half the size of Tap o’ Noth. Evidence for timber lacing within the walls of the fort was identified, along with clear signs for destruction by fire that included vitrified rock and abundant charcoal deposits abutting the inner wall faces (Bell 1893: 19). Bell also recorded numerous burnt and unburnt animal bones close to the inner wall face, reminiscent of the evidence from Tap o’ Noth (see Chapter 4), and while artefacts were few in number they included part of a jet ring, handmade pottery, a spindle whorl and coarse stone tools. The site was re-excavated in 2013 and 2014 as part of the SERF project, which again established the monumental character of the vitrified fort wall and found traces of vitrification in the wall core (Poller & MacIver 2014). Radiocarbon dating suggested that the site was in use in the second half of the first millennium cal BC (Tessa Poller pers comm); however, 5th–7th century AD dates recovered from an external hut platforms and from activity in the interior indicate that the site witnessed some degree of early medieval reuse.

Another Castle Law, this time at Abernethy, provides a further parallel to Tap o’ Noth. The upper fort at Castle Law, Abernethy, comprises a c 6m thick wall enclosing a small oval area around 0.06ha, with an outer rampart blocking access to the summit on the south-west side of the hill. Late 19th-century



Illus 9.2
Examples of oblong/oval forts of north-east Scotland



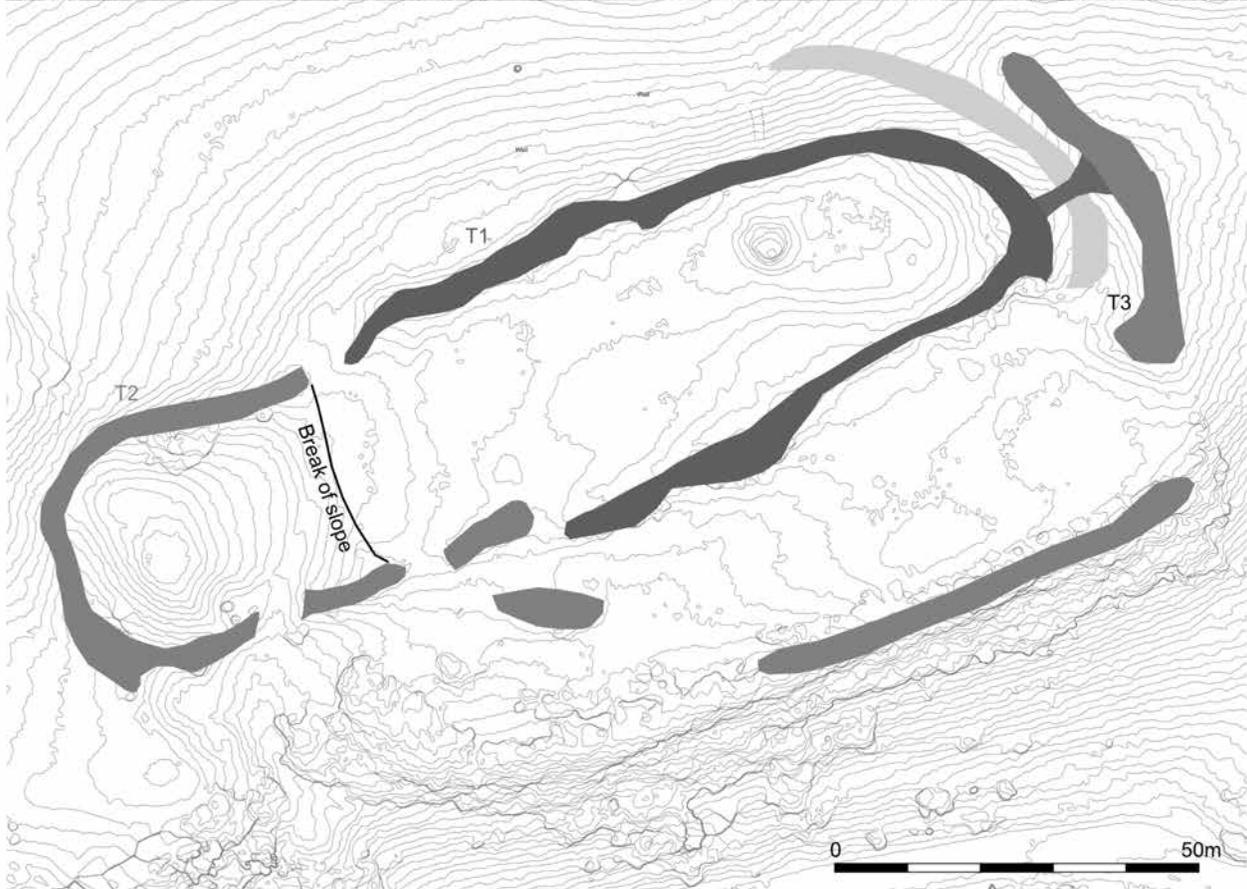
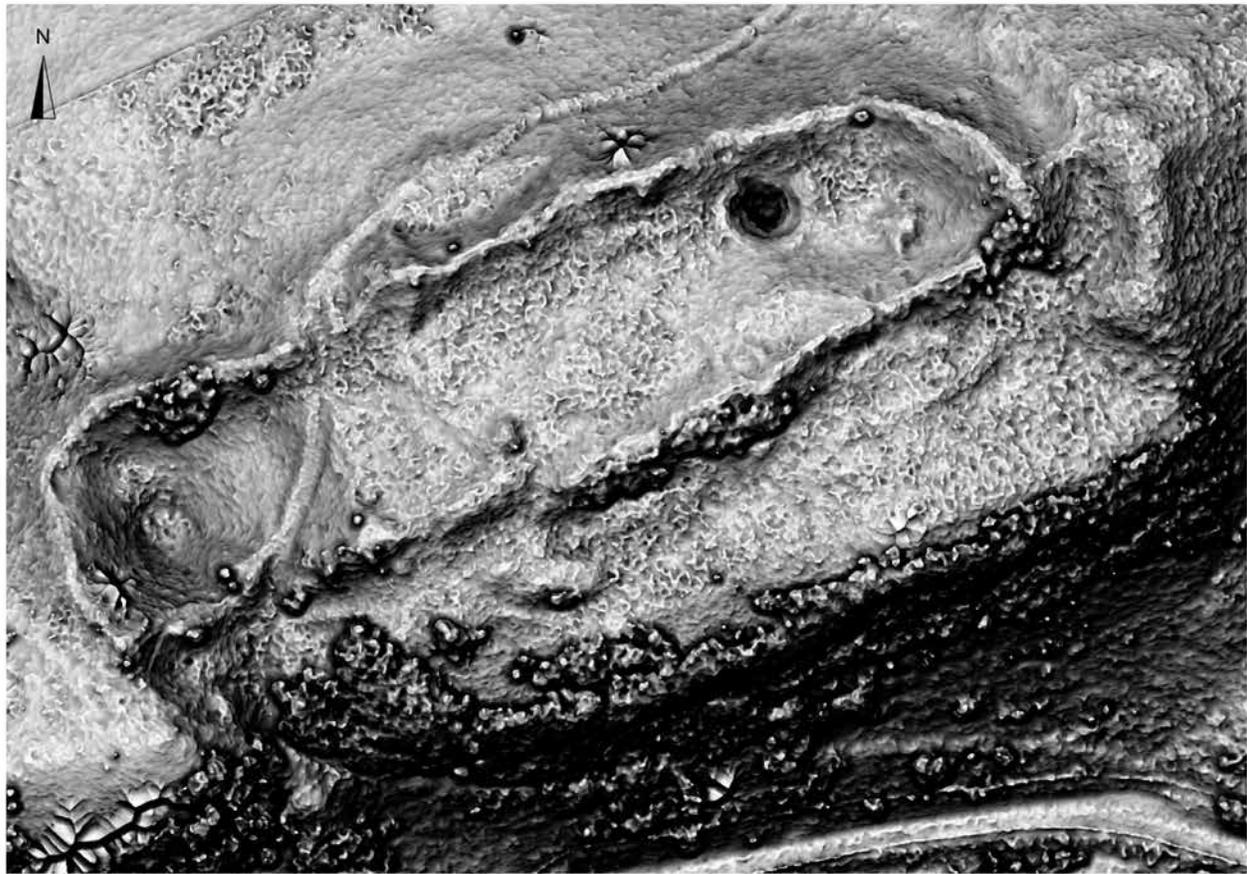
Illus 9.3

Aerial image of Castle Law, Forgardenny, showing the complex enclosures and features revealed by antiquarian excavation



Illus 9.4

Oblique aerial image of Finavon fort in the foreground with the excavated well to the centre left of the image. The western rampart is under the trees to the right, with the fort rampart straddling a ravine that crosses the site



Illus 9.5

Photogrammetry derived model of Finavon (top) and transcription of the ramparts and features inside the oblong fort (bottom)

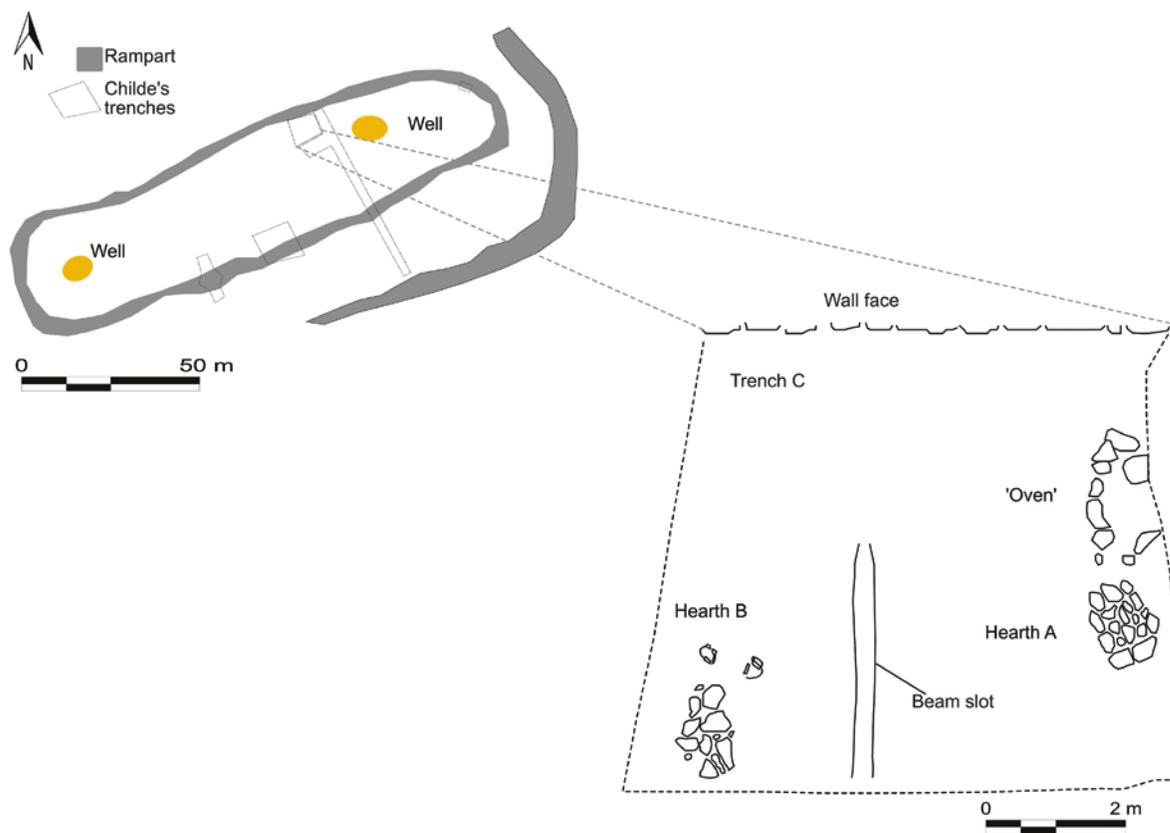
TAP O' NOTH OBLONG FORT

excavations revealed clear evidence for timber lacing on the outer side of the upper fort, with regular slots evident in the wall face. Timber beam slots were also found on the exterior face of the outer rampart, alongside evidence for timbers having been within the core of the rampart itself (Christison & Anderson 1899: 19–20). The interior of the vitrified fort was said to have been “thoroughly excavated” but no structural remains other than rough paving and a rock-cut cistern were identified (Christison & Anderson 1899: 23). Finds from within the fort were relatively few, consisting of a polished stone axe, a jet or cannel-coal ring, some other cannel-coal fragments, a bronze spiral finger-ring, coarse pottery, a La Tene style fibula brooch and fragments of iron. Within the cistern, large stones intermixed with charcoal and ash were found overlying lower deposits of brushwood and animal bone. The re-investigation of the fort in 2017 identified that some of the interior deposits had been left in situ (Strachan et al 2023: 212–13). A Late Bronze Age radiocarbon date was obtained for one phase of occupation, but a *c* 400–200 cal BC date for one of the animal bones recovered during the 19th-century excavations also suggests Iron Age activity (Strachan et al 2023: 216–17).

Moving further north, the site of Finavon in Angus provides one of the strongest and geographically proximal parallels for the upper fort at Tap o' Noth (Illus 9.4 and 9.5). The remains at Finavon comprise an oblong vitrified fort enclosing an area of around 0.45ha. Outworks on the south-east could be the remains

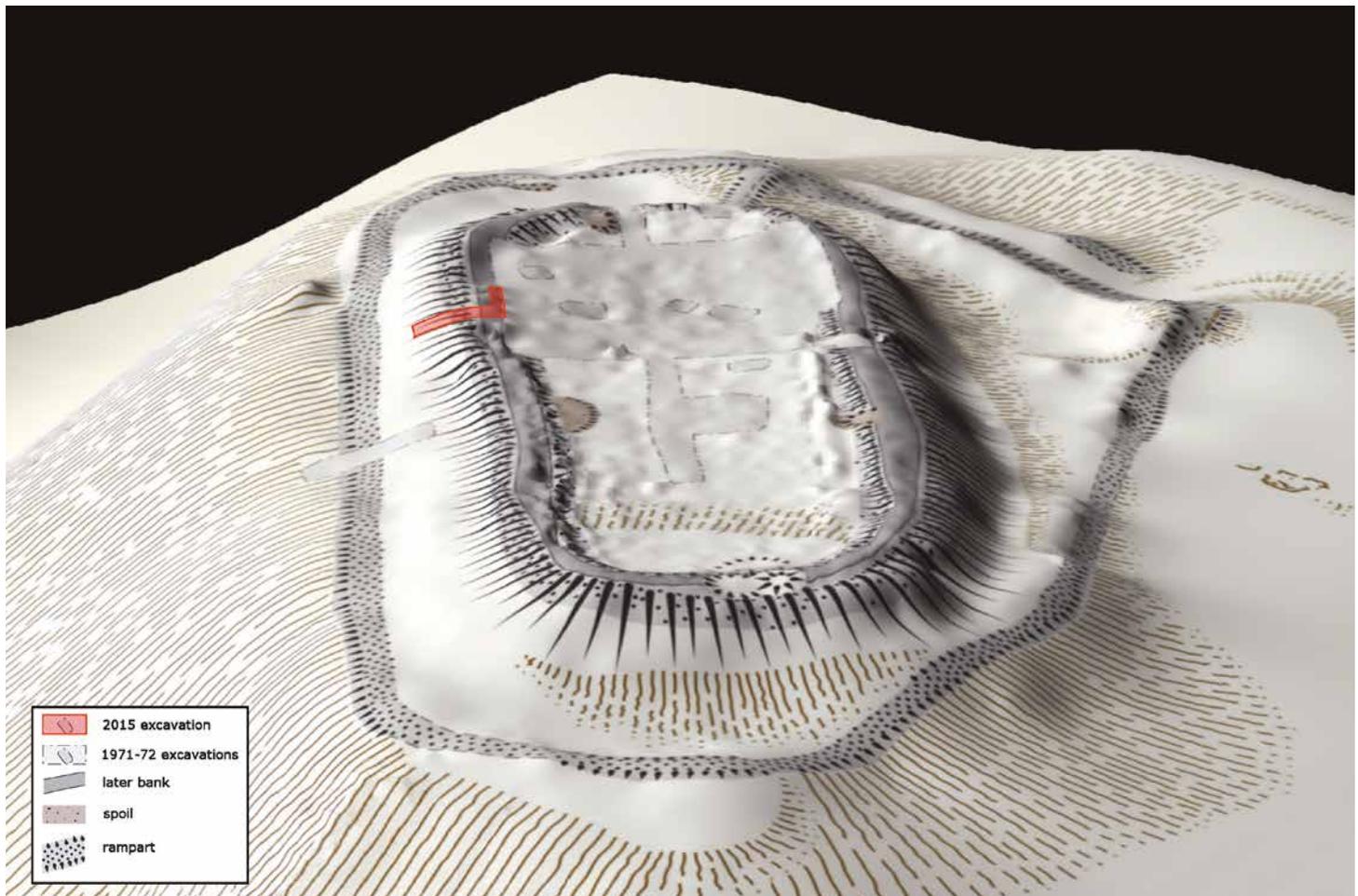
of an earlier fort or an outer enclosure of some kind. Excavations by Gordon Childe in 1933–5 found occupation deposits abutting the inner wall face, but there was no evidence to suggest the centre of the enclosure had been used for dwellings or structures of any kind, providing an interesting parallel to Tap o' Noth. At the northern side of the interior, two hearths, two pits and part of a slot were discovered near the wall face (Illus 9.6), and further into the interior possible paving was located, though this latter feature appeared to be from a phase of use that post-dated the destruction of the oblong fort wall (Childe 1936: 349–50). The eastern rock-cut cistern was found to be almost 7m deep and 5m wide at the top, with a mid-fill containing small fragments of human skull intermixed with a stone-rich deposit. At a lower level, small fragments of pottery and degraded animal bone were also recovered. Later investigations were conducted at Finavon in 1966, when Euan MacKie undertook excavations to retrieve charcoal samples for radiocarbon dating (MacKie 1966a, 1966b). While the error margins on these dates are wide, the determinations produced by MacKie's work are broadly consistent with the dates obtained from occupation horizons at Tap o' Noth (Chapter 8). The dates are also consistent with the stratigraphic sequence recorded by MacKie, though how the dating evidence relates to the occupation features or finds located by Childe is uncertain.

Craig Phadrig in Inverness-shire provides another compelling parallel for Tap o' Noth, since it is a substantial oblong fort with outworks with radiocarbon dates suggesting broad contemporaneity



Illus 9.6

Outline plan of Finavon, showing the placement of Childe's trenches and plan of features found in Childe's Trench C



Illus 9.7

Terrain model of Craig Phadrig by Rubicon Heritage overlain by RCAHMS measured survey showing excavation areas in 1981–2 and 2015 © Forestry and Land Scotland

(Small & Cottam 1972) (Illus 9.7). Situated on a prominent hill to the west of Inverness, the site comprises a sub-rectangular summit fort with thick walls enclosing an area about 0.18ha. A lower enclosure loosely follows the line of the oblong fort, but diverges on the eastern and northern sides, where an additional short stretch of rampart defines a possible entranceway. The interior of the oblong fort has been extensively disturbed by excavations from the 19th century onwards (RCAHMS 2014: 3–14), with the largest interventions being two seasons of excavation undertaken by Alan Small and Barry Cottam in 1971 and 1972.

The Small and Cottam excavations revealed large masses of vitrified stone along the wall line of the oblong fort, including stone that had directly fused to the bedrock (Small & Cottam 1972: 22). The outer rampart was found to be of a different character to that of the inner, with only an outer facing identified. The feature also appeared more bank-like than the massive rampart wall of the oblong fort. Samples obtained in association with the rampart of the oblong fort and from the outer rampart were radiocarbon dated to the second half of the first millennium BC. Small and Cottam (1972: 36) argued that the inner and outer ramparts were broadly contemporary, as collapse from the upper rampart partly overlay that of the outer; however, the

exact sequence requires more comprehensive investigation and dating.

Evidence of occupation was found within the upper fort of Craig Phadrig, though much of the clearest evidence of occupation appears to represent early medieval reuse of the fort (Small & Cottam 1972). Indeed, a lack of occupation remains were found near the inner wall face of the oblong fort, leading Small and Cottam (1972: 40) to conclude that it had not been extensively used in its original incarnation and had been destroyed by fire relatively soon after construction. Evidence for early medieval activity included various buildings, midden deposits and metalworking activity. Finds from the later occupation included sherds of E Ware and metalworking moulds, including that for an escutcheon of a hanging bowl.

More recent excavations at Craig Phadrig were conducted in 2015 as part of rescue work following storm damage to the rampart of the upper fort (Peteranna & Birch 2019). These excavations again pointed to early medieval reuse of the oblong fort, with a palisade cut along the crest of the inner wall and a dating sample suggesting a *terminus post quem* of the 5th to 6th century cal AD for this feature. Evidence of even later activity in the interior was identified and dated to the 11th–12th century cal AD (Peteranna

& Birch 2019). Overall (and of relevance to later discussion (Chapters 10 and 12)), what is particularly interesting at Craig Phadrig is the very direct evidence of the reuse of the oblong fort on the summit in the early medieval period. This is in sharp contrast to Tap o' Noth, where it was the slopes of the hill rather than the fort interior that saw the most activity in the later Roman Iron Age and the early Middle Ages (Chapters 10 and 12).

Other parallels for Tap o' Noth can be found in the north-east of Scotland, but few have been investigated to any meaningful extent. A probable oblong fort at Dunnideer, Aberdeenshire, was investigated in 2010 by Murray Cook. Charcoal from within the rampart and from probable wall collapse was dated to 360–160 BC, while archaeomagnetic dates from the vitrification spanned the period 606–275 BC (Cook 2010). The radiocarbon dates are broadly contemporary with those from Tap o' Noth, but the limited scale of excavation precludes any detailed comparisons about the character of the vitrified fort or its deposits. Radiocarbon dates are also available from a sub-oval, thick-walled fort at Greencairn at Balbegno, Kincardineshire. It was originally excavated in 1796 by Sir Walter Scott (an account of which survives in a letter – see Cameron 1899: 135–7) and later by Laurie Wedderburn (1973). The site was found to have a complex sequence of development and five radiocarbon dates returned a wide range spanning the Early Iron Age to early centuries AD (Wedderburn 1973). One final worthy mention is the upper fort of White Catherthun, Angus, an impressively large oval fort that lies within a complex series of earthworks (Dunwell & Strachan 1997: 75–89). Traces of vitrification have been found within the rampart of the thick-walled summit fort, but unfortunately none of the enclosures including the thick-walled oval fort on the summit of White Catherthun have been directly dated and the oval fort itself remains unexcavated.

9.3.2 Chronology

The dating of the vitrified oblong/oval forts of north-east Scotland has long been the subject of considerable debate. Several scholars have maintained that a later centuries cal BC date is the most probable scenario for the date of these (see Ralston 2006: 151), whereas others have suggested early medieval origins (eg Halliday 1991). Dating programmes by thermoluminescence and archaeomagnetism have produced different and conflicting date ranges (see Sanderson et al 1988; Gentles 1993) and many of the existing radiocarbon dates have wide error margins resulting from the use of bulk samples (eg at Finavon and Craig Phadrig). The dates from Tap o' Noth suggest that activity at the fort began in the 5th century cal BC and came to an end in the later 3rd or earlier 2nd century cal BC (Chapter 8). Dating from examples such as Doune of Relugas (Noble et al 2020b), Dunnideer (Cook 2010), Craig Phadrig (Small & Cottam 1972; Peteranna & Birch 2019) and Finavon (Mackie 1966a, b) suggests broadly contemporaneous activity during the second half of the first millennium BC. The radiocarbon dates from all of these examples overlap at the younger end of the radiocarbon spread with Gentles's archaeomagnetic dating of Tap o' Noth, Finavon and Craig Phadrig (and Knockfarril, Highland too), which suggested destruction in the closing centuries cal BC (Gentles 1993). However, this broad chronology is likely to hide many more localised sequences of construction, use and abandonment, and more detailed dating sequences for vitrified forts in general are sorely needed.

9.3.3 Vitrification

Other than their chronology and broad similarities in morphology, the other feature that unifies many of these sites is clear evidence for vitrification through the burning of timber-laced ramparts (Nisbet 1974: 10).⁴ The characteristic feature of vitrified forts is the presence of stonework that has been transformed through heat during the destruction of these forts by fire, leading to the cracking and buckling of stonework, and the fusing together of individual stones and cobbles to form glassy-like concretions found in particular at the core of the rampart (Nisbet 1974, 1975; Ralston 2006: 146). The act of vitrification has long maintained the interest of archaeologists, with interpretation of the phenomena focusing on a number of potential causes and motivations:⁵

1. Vitrification as a deliberate act to strengthen the ramparts
2. The result of accidental fires
3. An act of conquest
4. A ritualised act to bring the use of a site to a spectacular end

In Scotland, the earliest research on vitrified forts goes back to the 18th century, when Williams and Anderson observed that the stonework of a number of hillforts in Scotland had been exposed to fire, with some of the stone fused together as a result (Williams 1777; Anderson 1779, 1782; Tytler 1790). Williams interpreted this as a method to strengthen the walls of the fort, though Tytler was more sceptical of this assessment. In the early 20th century,⁶ the phenomenon attracted analytical and experimental approaches to demonstrate how fire, accidental or otherwise, may have transformed parts of the ramparts into molten masses. McHardy's experiments began with simply setting fires around piles of stone, though this failed to return the desired evidence of vitrification (McHardy 1906: 143). He subsequently turned to the earlier observations (eg Tytler 1790: 18), where burning with wood was identified as the catalysis for vitrification. As a result, McHardy's next experiments involved layering stone and wood and this did indeed produce minor traces of vitrification.

It was through the excavations by Gordon Childe at Finavon and Rahoy in Argyll that the actual mechanics of burning ramparts and the vitrification process was set on a firmer footing. In his own excavations of vitrified forts, Childe had noted pieces of charred timber within the walls and impressions of wood grain within vitrified masses. The large numbers of burnt wooden logs and brushwood found against the inner wall face of Finavon were also noted by Childe as an important indicator that the ramparts had been deliberately set alight. Alongside these observations, Childe was influenced by continental writers who had similarly concluded that vitrification resulted from the combustion of wood within a timber-laced or framed rampart (see Childe & Thorneycroft 1938b: 45; Ralston 2006: 148–9). Experiments conducted by Childe and Thorneycroft (1938b) subsequently proved that the burning of timber-laced ramparts enabled the vitrification process to occur.

In their paper to the 1937 *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Childe and Thorneycroft reported on two experiments on vitrification. At Plean Colliery, Stirling, they had a furnace manager supervise the construction of an experimental timber-laced rampart. The construction measured 3.6m long, 1.8m high

and 1.8m wide, and was made of old fireclay bricks and pit props with brick facings and a rubble core of basalt (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938b). Four tonnes of scrap timber and brushwood were heaped around the rampart and set alight. The experimental rampart burnt for three hours before the outer wall face collapsed, and after another 17 hours the construction was reduced to a smouldering mass of rubble. The experiment produced a substantial quantity of vitrified stone, weighing 736kg in total. A second, smaller timber-laced rampart experiment was conducted at Rahoy, Argyll, using the stones excavated from the vitrified fort (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938a). Though hampered by a lack of suitable timber, a small section of rampart was constructed and set on fire at 11am and burned into the night. The wall face was found to have buckled and sagged, and substantial pieces of vitrified stone were recovered from within the rampart.

Another large-scale vitrification experiment was undertaken in the 1980s by Ian Ralston, funded by Yorkshire Television as part of an episode of *Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious World* (Ralston 1986). On the edge of Aberdeen's waste disposal site at Tullos, a section of a timber-laced rampart was constructed to near full-scale proportions, measuring 4m wide at the base. The wall was constructed from granite and gabbro rocks, with around 8m of scrap pine used for the timber lacing. Repeated lorry-loads of timber, brushwood and even an old mattress and wardrobe were added to the fire over the course of the burning. Despite the amount of material consumed, the fire failed to get the core of the wall to a high enough temperature to initiate large-scale vitrification. The experiment had been hampered by inclement weather, including a change of wind direction, and the burning had been cut short while the rampart was still smouldering (Ralston 1986: 34). Nonetheless, a small amount of vitrified stone (around 3kg) was produced.⁷ Whilst varied in success, the Childe and Ralston experiments showed that vitrification was not a process that would strengthen the ramparts, or at least not in a predictable fashion. Childe and Thorneycroft's experiments demonstrated that vitrification did not happen consistently across or through a rampart, and that the process of firing could lead to the sagging, buckling and collapse of the rampart wall face (Childe & Thorneycroft 1938b: 53). The firing at Ralston's Tullos experiment similarly led to great instability, with parts of the rampart collapsing and the wall face left buckled and cracked. As Ralston noted, even for substantially vitrified sites like Tap o' Noth, the vitrification is not entirely consistent around the circumference of the site and at others vitrification is concentrated in only small areas, with burning leading to the collapse of large sections of stonework (Ralston 1986: 37). Given that vitrification produces uncertain results in terms of consistency and impact, and often leads to much weaker sections of wall through destabilising the core and face, it is unlikely to have been a practical process used to strengthen the walls of forts.⁸ The experiments by Childe and Ralston suggest that large amounts of timber would be needed to initiate vitrification and that this may not have come solely from the timber lacing itself. Additional fuel could have come from timber buildings constructed up against the wall face. In his Trench C at Finavon, Childe found hearths near the wall face of the northern rampart (Childe 1935: 63) (Illus 9.6). This was one of the few locations where signs of occupation were detected, and Childe and Thorneycroft believed that

the conflagration of structures built up against the wall face was likely to be a potential source for the destruction of forts of this type (Childe and Thorneycroft 1938b). The excavations at Tap o' Noth (Chapter 4) similarly found some form of structure up against the wall face on the northern side of the rampart, though evidence of structures in the oblong series is not overwhelming. Little architectural detail was found during the excavations at Castle Law at Abernethy or at Castle Law at Forgandenny for example, and trenches up against the wall faces at Finavon and Tap o' Noth did not produce evidence of floor layers or structures in all locations, and where evidence was found there was little evidence for the substantial use of timber in any structures that were identified. It therefore seems unlikely that the accidental (or otherwise) firing of structures built up against the rampart would have provided sufficient fuel to produce the catastrophic levels of burning, destruction and vitrification evident at sites such as Tap o' Noth, even if these were continuous right the way around the inner circumference of the fort. The Tullos experiment demonstrated that vitrification may have also involved the need to maintain the fire with substantial quantities of fuel over an extended period of time, and Ralston in particular has argued that obtaining the level of vitrification evident at these sites could have taken days if not weeks (Ralston 2006: 163).⁹ Deliberate firing seems the most likely scenario for the vitrification of the Iron Age oval/oblong forts of north-east Scotland, and there is certainly clear evidence at some sites to support this conclusion. At Finavon, there is little doubt that the walls of the fort had been set alight from the inside via extensive deposits of timber piled up against the wall faces. In Trench A, Childe found charred remains of willow and poplar logs, some with branches still attached, sitting directly on the occupation layer, while in Trench B a similar layer of burnt logs was identified surviving up to 0.33m thick that was full of willow, birch and oak timber (Childe 1935: 52, 55). In Trench C, immediately below the wall collapse, a 0.15–0.30m thick layer of charcoal and carbonised wood was found above the occupation horizons with 'the remains of numerous charred boughs discernible' (Childe 1935: 61–2). Where identifiable, the timbers were all oak and the wood appeared to be from dumps of branches with no discernible arrangement. In Trench D, charred trunks and branches were also detected near the wall face. In sum, the findings of Childe provides clear evidence for the deliberate destruction of the fort by fire through piling branches and timbers at the wall face and setting them alight (Childe 1935: 67).¹⁰ Overall, it seems very likely that these forts were deliberately destroyed and that in the case of Finavon at least that large quantities of timber had been gathered to fuel the fires that led to the destruction of the fort. However, whether destruction was an act of conquest or a ritualised act of closure is a more difficult point to address. Burning following conquest certainly happened at forts in the early medieval period, and there is significant textual evidence to support its occurrence. The burning of forts, for example, is a regular feature of the accounts recorded in the Irish annals (see Noble et al 2022). Bede's record of a siege at Bamburgh in AD 651 also provides a visceral description of an attempt at burning. Bede states that Penda, King of Mercia, waged war against Oswiu, a Northumbrian king, and besieged the fort and settlement of Bamburgh. After failing to capture it, he attempted to set the fort

ablaze by piling timber sourced from the surrounding settlement against the walls of the fort. However, after prayers, an intervention from Saint Aidan is said to have saved the Bernicians, turning the wind in the direction of the besiegers (*HE* iii: 16; Colgrave & Mynors 1969: 262–3). Although our understanding of Iron Age vitrified hillforts is not enriched by similar textual evidence, the destruction of these sites has been considered by many commentators to be evidence for the conquest of a site or landscape by an enemy force (eg Armit 1997: 59; Harding 2004: 91; Cook 2013: 81, 95).

Alongside interpretations that focus on the destruction of forts through warfare and conflict, there have also been suggestions that more esoteric motivations may have led to the burning of forts. Dennis Harding, for example, has argued that the oblong forts of eastern Scotland were non-defensive ceremonial structures (Harding 2004: 85–7). Cook (2010: 80) has followed Harding's interpretations and suggested the burning of oblong forts may have been part of a 'ritual closure' at the end of the site's active life (see Berrocal-Rangel et al 2019 for a discussion of potential examples of ritualised burning in Iberia). Certainly, a ritualised end to examples of these forts should not be discounted. For one, whether these sites were actually forts or settlements in the conventional sense remains to be fully demonstrated. As already noted there is in fact relatively sparse evidence for intensive settlement within many of these examples. At Finavon, Childe (1935: 77) identified only two hearths amongst 'a row of dwellings' on the north side of the interior (Childe 1935: 78) (Illus 9.6), and while Childe's excavations produced a substantial assemblage of finds that included coarse handmade pottery, crucible sherds, an iron ring and blade, six spindle whorls, a fragment of a rotary quern, coarse stone tools and a shale ring, the dating of much of this material and whether it was necessarily contemporary with the fort is not clear. The presence of a rotary quern fragment for example may suggest some level of later reoccupation (Childe 1935: 75–6). Similar uncertainty surrounds other early excavations – eg the dating and context of some of the spectacular finds from Laws of Monifieth (Neish 1859, 1865). The finds assemblage from other sites were certainly meagre: Castle Law Forgandenny and Castle Law Abernethy had very few finds despite extensive antiquarian interventions. Finds and deposits in the Iron Age phases at Craig Phadrig were so limited that Small and Cottam suggested the fort had not been occupied at all prior to its destruction (1972: 40). At Tap o' Noth, not a single artefact was found within the interior during two seasons of excavation and no finds were noted in Macdonald's account of his excavations in the 19th century (1891: 35–51). As a result, there is not as yet strong evidence that any of these enclosures were occupied intensively, though it is difficult to state this conclusively given that even in relatively extensive excavations such as at Tap o' Noth, the percentage of area revealed in the interior has still been relatively small.¹¹ There are other peculiarities about other elements of at least some of these oblong vitrified forts. At Finavon, for example, the fort appears to have been extended at some point to incorporate a second low summit, making for a very irregular interior. The lack of obvious entrances for most of these sites is also unusual (Harding 2004: 85). The emphasis at these sites therefore seems to be as much on containment and keeping things in, as it is on keeping people or other things out. In this respect,

some commonalities with the large, internally ditched enclosures found at Irish late Iron Age ceremonial complexes such as Navan, County Armagh and Tara, County Meath, could be posited. Warner (2000a) suggests that the internal banks of Irish late Iron Age enclosures were built in order to defend the world from powerful forces within, perhaps enclosing places that may have been powerful or considered dangerous or taboo. Similar interpretations have been posited for Late Neolithic henge monuments in Britain (eg Barclay 2005; Brophy & Noble 2020), where deliberately blocked entrances may have acted to contain powerful forces unleashed by episodes of ceremonial activity (Bradley 2011: xviii). The form of the heavily vitrified forts of north-east Scotland is obviously very different to the internally ditched enclosures of Iron Age Ireland, and more so to the henge monuments of the British Late Neolithic, but there could be resonances here in how they were constructed and used. The absence as yet of intensive interior occupation and the lack of entrances could suggest other uses for these enclosures such as temples, seasonal gathering places or as assembly sites of some kind, though equally some of these roles may not be mutually exclusive with the use of at least part of each fort as a settlement of some kind.

Overall, it must be admitted that we know less about these forts, their function and the reason for their demise than we would like. However, whatever their exact function within Iron Age society, we can certainly highlight that the burning of these forts would have been a spectacular and memorable event – whether they were ritually decommissioned as part of long-term use as ritual spaces or settlements destroyed by enemy action during episodes of conflict. This destruction would have been a spectacle to behold, with Ralston highlighting the sensory qualities of their demise:

... it is worth drawing attention to the matter of spectacle. The experimental wall at East Tullos, edged by flame and glowing red at night, made an impressive sight, even against the backdrop of a modern city. The progress of widespread vitrification around the 563m high summit of Tap o' Noth must have appeared awesome to the prehistoric communities of great tracts of the Garioch and neighbouring areas – a spectacular advertisement of power (Ralston 1986: 38).

As Ralston notes, these burnings would have been particularly visceral at night (see also Bradley 2005a: 111–12 and Svensson 2002 for discussion of the significance of fire and darkness vis-à-vis prehistoric monuments and their use and destruction). Ritual is dependent upon a sense of drama and is designed to afford the participants an intense experience (Tambiah 1979: 115; Bell 1992: 92). The deliberate burning of these forts would have certainly evoked powerful emotions, which may have been heightened by the danger involved in creating and perhaps maintaining such an intense conflagration. The deliberate burning of prehistoric monuments has been linked with the creation of memories and the ways in which we remember a place, people or events. It is aided by a phenomenon known as 'flashbulb memory', where memories associated with dramatic events result in a high level of recall, distinct clarity and vividness (Noble 2006: 57–8). The circumstances and drama of such events can form the basis of important collective memories (Brewer 1996:

49; Schacter 1995: 25; Groeger 1997: 216). The burning of the forts may have marked transformative events – the taking of the land and central place of an enemy group, or if we imagine a more ritualised act of closure, burning could have occurred following the death or replacement of a leader (cf Küchler 1987: 250), or followed a period of drought, famine, or other misfortune in the community. The possible reuse of sites like Tap o’ Noth (as represented by the U-shaped banks) and Finavon (eg the putative post-destruction paving), after these burning events may have been attempts by subsequent generations to appropriate the significance of these sites, perhaps even to reinvigorate their former purpose and function by new leaders or particular social factions. However, there may have been varied temporalities, motivations and outcomes surrounding the significance and destruction of each sites within their own regional and social context. It may be wrong to try and identify one singular reason for the use and destruction of such sites. The construction and destruction of the massive timber-laced forts of the period *c* 400–100 cal BC in north-east Scotland may not have had unified causes or purposes – rather the construction, use and demise of each may have followed a whole range of unique and local circumstances.

9.4 Conclusions

Though we can find compelling parallels for the oblong fort of Tap o’ Noth, without further excavation and much more extensive investigation the exact function and circumstances of the demise of such sites is likely to remain unresolved. Whatever the motivation behind the construction and destruction of such sites we can certainly identify the huge amount of resources and labour that communities utilised in their construction, and recognise that strong social imperatives must have lain at the heart of both their use and abandonment. Clearly these were sites that were significant at a regional and perhaps supra-regional level. Given the relative dearth of settlement remains found in the interior a ritualised role for Tap o’ Noth can be entertained, but equally we cannot rule out that Tap o’ Noth and some of the other sites highlighted in this chapter were major settlement locales that were destroyed through conflict and the powerful acts of conquest by one group over another. Overall, while our understanding of these forts remains limited, the results of fieldwork at Tap o’ Noth has supplied the most secure and comprehensive dating programme for an oblong fort of north-east Scotland to date, and a new detailed dataset that will provide fuel for ongoing discussion for many decades to come.