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Culduthel

An Iron Age Craftworking Centre in North-East Scotland

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Chapter 3

EARLIER PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY AND EARLY IRON AGE OCCUPATION

Period 1 – Earlier prehistoric Culduthel

Culduthel was certainly inhabited in the early prehistoric period, with both Early and Late Neolithic activity represented by pits containing identifiable and datable pottery and a scattering of unstratified pottery across the site. The true extent of the pre-Iron Age activity is unknown, as the intensive Iron Age occupation of the land seen in Period 3 could have eradicated many earlier features. The lithic assemblage suggests people lived on or near Culduthel for several millennia, from the Late Mesolithic to the later Bronze Age (Bjarke Ballin, Chapter 6). Previous archaeological investigations have also shown that the terrace was a focus for both Neolithic and Bronze Age communities.

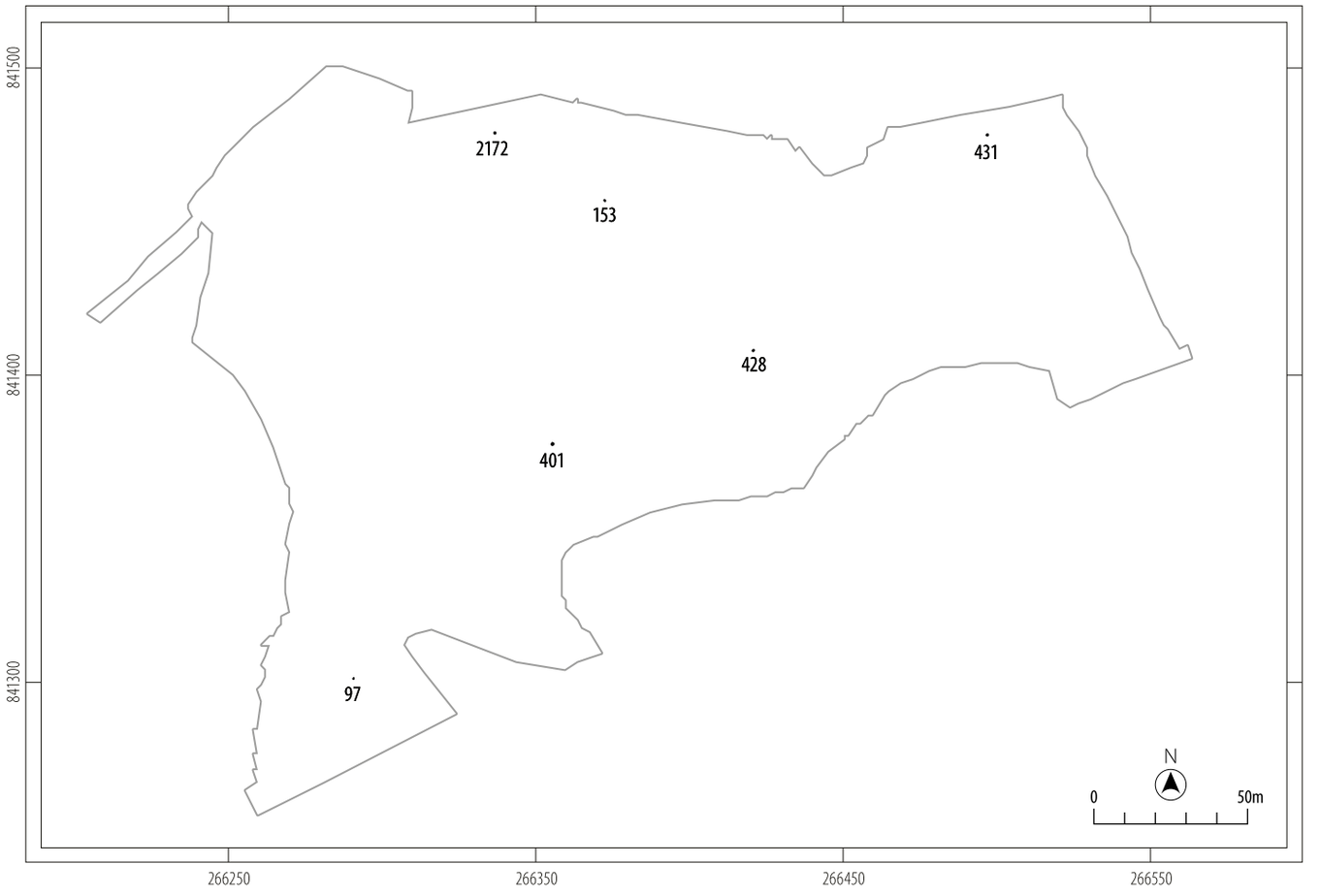


Illustration 3.1
Period 1 – Earlier prehistoric activity

Early Neolithic pits

There were numerous small pits present across the excavated area, mostly in the higher eastern half of the site, with the majority containing no evidence of their date or function. However, sherds of Early Neolithic carinated bowls were present in three shallow pits (097, 153 and 2172 – Illus. 3.1). Two sherds (Vessel 8) were present in Pit [097], which was located among a fairly isolated cluster of features in the south-west corner of site. The pit was pretty unremarkable being 0.4m in diameter and 0.08m deep with a single fill. Pit [153] contained the sherds of three Early Neolithic carinated bowls (Vessels 1, 14 and 15 – Vessel 1 Illus. 6.1). It measured 0.4m by 0.3m and was 0.22m deep. The third pit [2172] was located near the northern limit of the site. The pit measured 1m by 0.8m and was 0.08m deep. It contained five sherds from a single carinated bowl (Vessel 3 – Illus. 6.1).

One carinated vessel (Vessel 2 – Illus. 6.1) was recovered during the topsoil strip.

Late Neolithic pits

Two features contained sherds of Beaker pottery (Illus. 3.1). A stone-lined pit or post-hole [401] had a diameter of 0.9m and a depth of 0.4m and was lined with cobbles across the base, and angular stones around the lip of the cut. Nine sherds of Beaker pottery from the same vessel were found within the fill (Vessel 21). Pit [428] also contained Beaker pottery. It measured 0.7m by 0.5m and was 0.27m deep.

Discussion

There is certainly evidence on the site of Neolithic activity in the form of scattered pits, some characterised by deposits of carinated bowl or Beaker pottery, lithics and charred material. The excavation and curation of pits throughout the Neolithic was a common act, likely done for a wide variety of reasons such as waste disposal and crop processing, or less prosaic reasons such as commemorating an event or marking a location (Brophy and Noble 2011). Pits are often the only evidence for Neolithic settlement and Culduthel could have been significantly settled or frequently visited by more mobile societies in earlier prehistory. The carinated bowl (CB) tradition is a well-documented feature of eastern Scotland at this time, and Culduthel fits well into the map of CB activity in the north-east (Sheridan 2016).

Archaeological investigations in the immediate area in the last 20 years (Illus. 1.8) indicate that this activity generally fits well into a wider picture of fairly intensive use of the landscape in this period, focused along the ridge of the terrace, likely a prominent local place in earlier prehistory. Neolithic activity has been identified on the terrace through archaeological investigations to the north-east (Headland Phases 7 and 8 (Murray 2008)) and east of the site (Headland Phase 9 (van Wessel 2012); Flood Relief Channel (Peteranna 2011)). Dense clusters of pits and hearth pits identified in Headland Phases 7 and 8 contained Early to Middle Neolithic carinated bowl, one of which was AMS dated to 3650–3510 cal BC (SUERC-20229) (Headland Phases 7 and 8 (Murray 2008)). Late Neolithic activity was also identified on the site with one pit containing 195 pieces of flint, representing an entire knapping sequence, dated to the Late Neolithic (2870–2570 cal BC, SUERC-20247), while another containing concentrations of burnt bone alongside Late Neolithic pottery AMS dated to 2910–2670 cal BC (SUERC-20308) (ibid). Other pits showed structured deposition of food preparation equipment including one with a carefully placed saddle quern, rubbing stone and heat-fractured stone alongside Early to Middle Neolithic pottery, dated to 2880–2610 cal BC (SUERC-20240) (ibid).

Monitoring prior to the construction of a flood relief channel in 2011 opened up areas immediately adjacent to the eastern limit of Headland Phases 7 and 8. The activity seen in Headland Phases 7 and 8 continued within this area, with pits containing both sherds of carinated bowl of the Middle Neolithic and Late Neolithic Grooved Ware dated to 3030–2890 cal BC (SUERC-34575) and 3090–2900 cal BC (SUERC-34576) (Peteranna 2011).

Further work to the east was undertaken during Headland Phase 9. Alongside numerous clusters of pits with Early, Middle and Late Neolithic pottery and lithics was an enclosure of possible Neolithic date (Illus. 3.2) (van Wessel 2012). The enclosure ditch had a rounded western end and an entrance on the southern side marked by shallow pits. It enclosed a centrally located large pit with a row of post-holes cut into its base. Further pits and post-holes were located within the interior, both continuing the line of the post-holes in the base of the large pit and curving around it. Although the enclosure remains undated at the time of writing, typological parallels suggest that this elongated rectilinear enclosure may have been a ceremonial monument associated with mortuary activity during the Neolithic (Barclay and Maxwell 1991). It closely resembles the Early Neolithic rectilinear mound identified at Kintore in Aberdeenshire constructed between 4250 and 3950 cal BC (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 35–42) and an undated double enclosure at Whelphill in South Lanarkshire (Masser 2009). The Kintore feature has been described as 'a large, complex communal monument' (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 49), perhaps functioning as a ceremonial or ritual focus for social gatherings and the wider community for hundreds of years. In a similar linear monument tradition are the Early-Middle Neolithic long mortuary enclosure at Inchtuthill in Perthshire (Barclay and Maxwell 1991), the long barrow at Dalladies (Piggott 1972) and several pit-defined enclosures such as Douglasmuir and Cowie Road, Bannockburn (Kendrick 1995; Rideout 1997; Brophy 1999). The linear arrangement of post-holes within the interior of the enclosure bears some similarity to the possible mortuary platforms that predated the oval barrows at Pitnacree in Perthshire (Scott 1992, 107–17) or the division of space seen within the interior of enclosure at Kintore (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 51). Whatever the function of the rectilinear enclosure at Culduthel its construction would have been a highly significant event that would have required substantial planning and labour to build.

Period 2 – Early Iron Age occupation

Charcoal retrieved from two structures, a roundhouse (House 3) and a clearance cairn [4234], returned Early Iron Age radiocarbon dates. House 3 was a ring-groove roundhouse that contained a

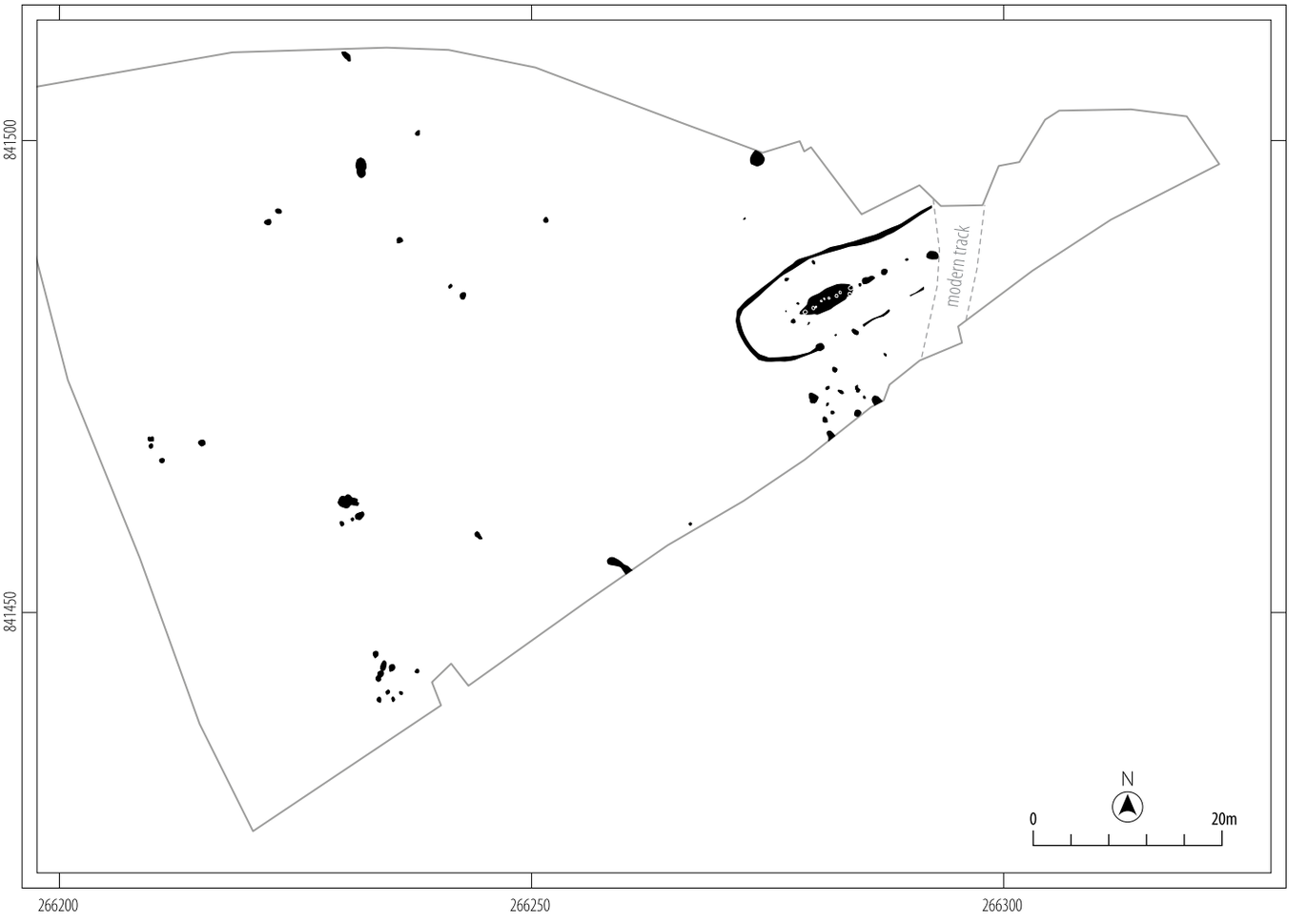


Illustration 3.2
Phase 9 excavations at Culduthel by Headland Archaeology

sizeable assemblage of saddle querns incorporated into the structure of the building, both in the walls and the post-holes. The house was constructed over a post-built roundhouse (House 5) and was later cut by an iron-smelting workshop (Workshop 2). Both House 3 and 5 are considered to represent Early Iron Age occupations of the site. The clearance cairn was one of a series of cairns, some of which were situated beneath a thick layer of hillwash that predated the Middle Iron Age settlement (Period 3). These cairns may represent Early Iron Age clearance of the land. As discussed in Chapter 2, the palisade enclosure has also been placed within the Early Iron Age occupation of the site.

All of these Early Iron Age features (Illus. 3.3) were protected from plough truncation or obliteration by the later occupation, by a thick layer of hillwash (the cairns), by their location in a natural dip (the houses) or by being elevated (the palisade). The density of the Early Iron Age occupations of Culduthel therefore could have been considerably higher.

Chronology

The two dates within this period come from charcoal from the ring-groove of House 3 (810–550 cal BC – SUERC-30367) and from within Cairn 4234 (800–490 cal BC – SUERC-30405). These are very broad dates as they fall onto a plateau within the calibration curve between 800 and 400 cal BC (Reimer et al 2013). As discussed within Chapter 2, these dates are likely to have been obtained from charred material from secondary or tertiary deposits.

The only material culture that could assist with the dating of these features was the saddle querns identified within House 3. While saddle querns have a long currency in prehistoric Scotland, their location within a ring-groove house (a fairly common structural form in this period in north-east Scotland) which contained no rotary querns, may corroborate the Early Iron Age radiocarbon date made for the structure. Stratigraphically, Cairn 4234, another similar cairn (Cairn 2671) and a cobbled surface were all located beneath hillwash that predated the Middle Iron Age occupation of the site (Period 3) and are here considered broadly contemporary features.

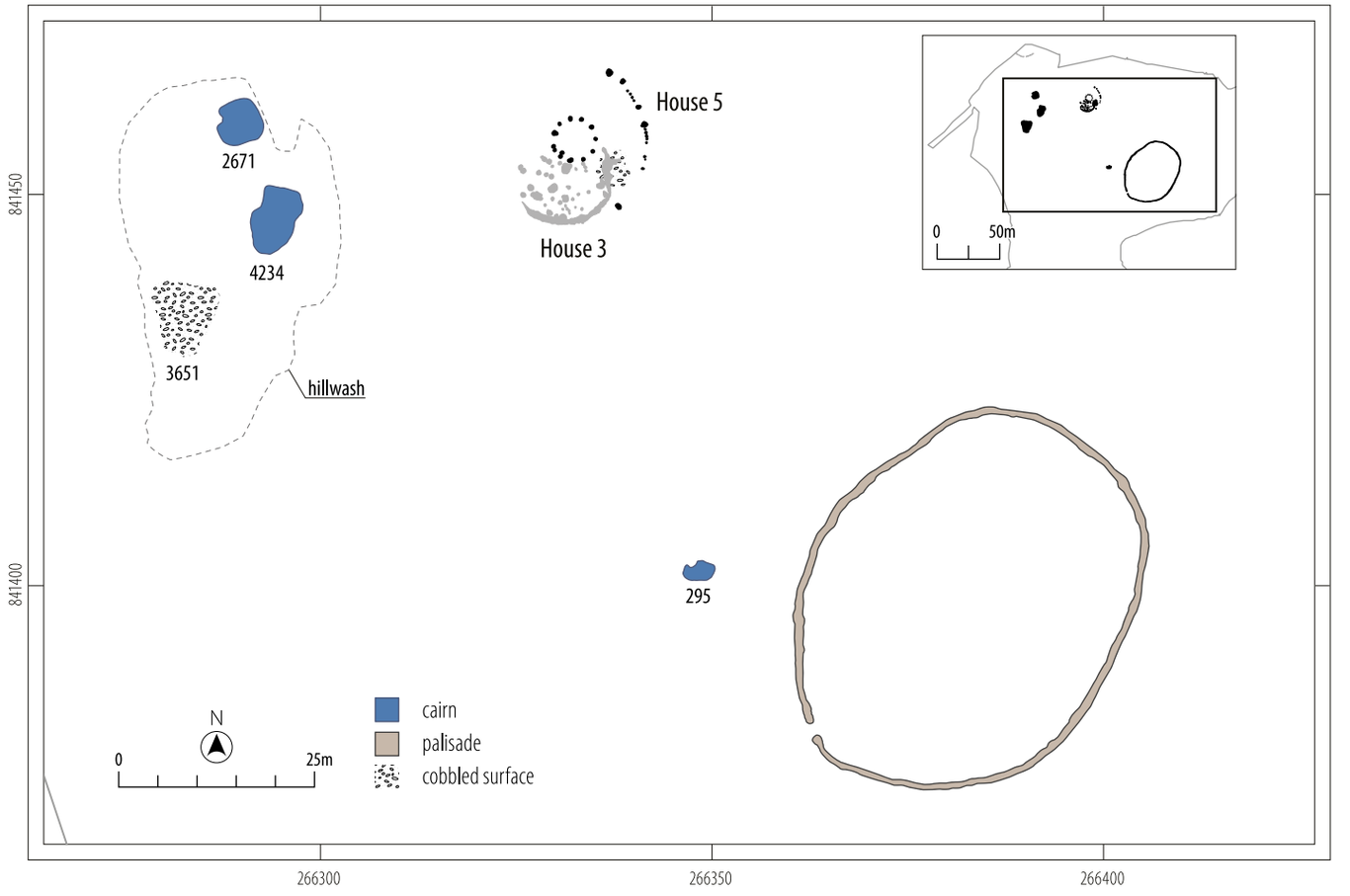


Illustration 3.3
Period 2 – Early Iron Age occupation

The houses

House 5

House 5 survived as a 5.3m diameter post-ring of 14 post-holes (Illus. 3.4). It was truncated by House 3 to the south and House 4 to the north. Three of the post-ring post-holes had been recut and two contained packing stones. The outer wall was represented by an arc of stake and small post-holes located 6m from the post-ring. Larger post-holes were identified at intervals along the line of the outer wall and a north-east facing entrance (*c.*1.8m wide). The outer wall formed a *c.*18m diameter circular structure.

House 3

House 3 was defined by an arc of heavily truncated ring-groove, which formed the south and east arc of a wall-slot with an east-facing entranceway (Illus. 3.5–3.7). The building would have been *c.*12m diameter. It was located within a dense concentration of roundhouses, partially overlying an earlier roundhouse (House 5) to the north and cut by a Middle Iron Age building (Workshop 2) to the east (Illus. 1.6).

Stage 1

The house was defined in plan by the southern arc of a stony ring-groove and a cobbled entranceway (Illus. 3.6). The ring-groove was a wall-slot [724], a steeply cut gully up to 1m in width and 0.25m in depth, widening and shallowing into a flat-based gully at the entrance into the house on the east. This transformation of the ring-groove from a narrow steep sloping slot into the shallow sloping flat-bottomed wide cut suggests that the wall-slot section closest to the entrance may have been the foundation cut for a low wall or timber forming a threshold step. Substantial packing stones along this stretch suggest that upright timber posts may also have been located here, forming a possible door frame. Running north of the entrance the shallow gully tapered, to end in a clear terminal. The ring-groove was not present along the north side of the house.

Packing stones located along the entire length of the interior of the ring-groove must have supported contiguous split-timber wall, wattle panels or upright planks rather than individual posts or stakes. A single AMS date from charcoal within the backfill of the ring-groove yielded a date of 810–550 cal BC (SUERC-30367). There was no evidence on the ground that the ring-groove formed a more complete circle, but a number of factors suggest

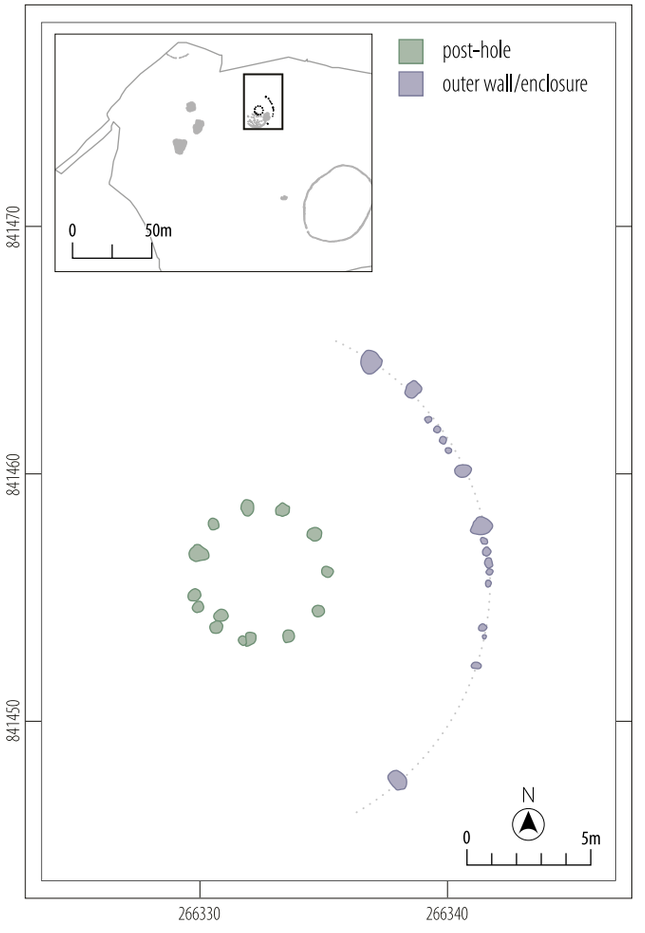


Illustration 3.4
Plan of House 5

this was the case. The surviving ring-groove was slightly revetted into a natural dip located along the southern and eastern sides of the house and the wall-slot was substantially cut into the slopes here. The missing northern half of the house would have been located on more level ground and may have been shallower cut and removed by the plough.

Pits and post-holes were located within the interior of the house, but no coherent internal post-ring or hearth was identified. It was not clear if any of these internal features were associated with the construction or occupation of the house, but a number of pits and post-holes were slightly cut into the inner edge of the ring-groove indicating that they may have been cut up against an existing wall. Linear or curvilinear patterns could be distinguished from this group (Illus. 3.5), perhaps representing elements of internal partitions or furniture.

Saddle querns and rubbing stones were incorporated into the ring-groove and the post-holes as packing or post-pads (SF0233, SF0234, SF0235 and SF0428). All the querns bar one (SF0428) were fragments, either broken during use or deliberately shattered prior to deposition. Other internal pits and post-holes also contained coarse stone tools – a whetstone (SF0244), a cobble tool (SF0223 – Illus. 6.15) and a grinding surface (SF0238).

Stage 2

Overlying the upper fill of the ring-groove was a deliberately placed stony spread (793 – Illus. 3.6). This rough cobbled surface was confined to the narrower part of the ring-groove and was absent from the entrance area, and may have been an intentional backfill of the ring-groove or the base of a stone/turf wall. Two fragments of a large rubbing stone (SF0204 and SF0205) and one complete one (SF0206) were recovered from the spread.

Another cobbled surface was constructed to level the well-worn entrance of the roundhouse. This surface was overlain by a spread of large sub-angular stones (796), which formed an uneven surface with two roughly circular arrangements of stones, possible settings for posts. A large, and almost complete, saddle/trough quern (SF0147 – visible in Illus. 3.6 and illustrated on Illus. 6.15), a hammerstone (SF0207), a fragment of a saddle quern (SF0222) and a grinder (SF0209) were recovered from the spread. The saddle/trough quern (SF0147) may have been deliberately set into the surface with the grinding face upwards. Two post-holes of Workshop 2 truncated this surface.

The stones across the entrance and the top of the ring-groove may represent deliberate infilling of the building to level and reuse the land.

Clearance cairns

Three cairns were identified on site (295, 2671 and 4234). These amorphous spreads of stones are likely to have been created during the clearance of ground for ploughing and planting. Each had been disturbed in antiquity, most likely by the occupants of the Middle Iron Age settlement (Period 3).

The best-preserved cairn (4234) (Illus. 3.8 and 3.9) was sealed beneath a layer of hillwash (3720) that predated the Middle Iron Age settlement (Period 3). A single AMS date of 800–490 cal BC (SUERC-30405) was obtained from charcoal recovered from within the cairn. The core of the cairn was a roughly circular arrangement of densely packed stones that measured 3.7m in diameter and 0.35m in height. Spreading out from this was an amorphous thin spread of stone; the disturbed or truncated base of the cairn. A sub-circular pit cut was through the centre of the cairn, interpreted as a robber trench cut in antiquity (Illus. 3.9). A fragmented cobbled surface was sealed beneath the cairn.

Cairn 2671 was also sealed beneath a layer of hillwash (3720) that predated the Middle Iron Age settlement (Period 3). It was less well preserved, and its remnants had been incorporated into a later cobbled yard (1945) associated with House 10/3 (Period 3). The cairn was sub-circular in plan and *c.*7m in diameter and a similar construction to Cairn 4234. A similar pit had been cut through the cairn material, presumably to remove and reuse the stone.

The third cairn (295) consisted of an amorphous spread, measuring *c.*7 × 5m, of small sub-angular stones in a loose sandy-silt matrix, which overlay a core of more substantial, deliberately placed stone. This was interpreted as the remnants of a small cairn that had been robbed or plough truncated. The cairn sealed a preserved ground surface (447), which contained a rich quantity

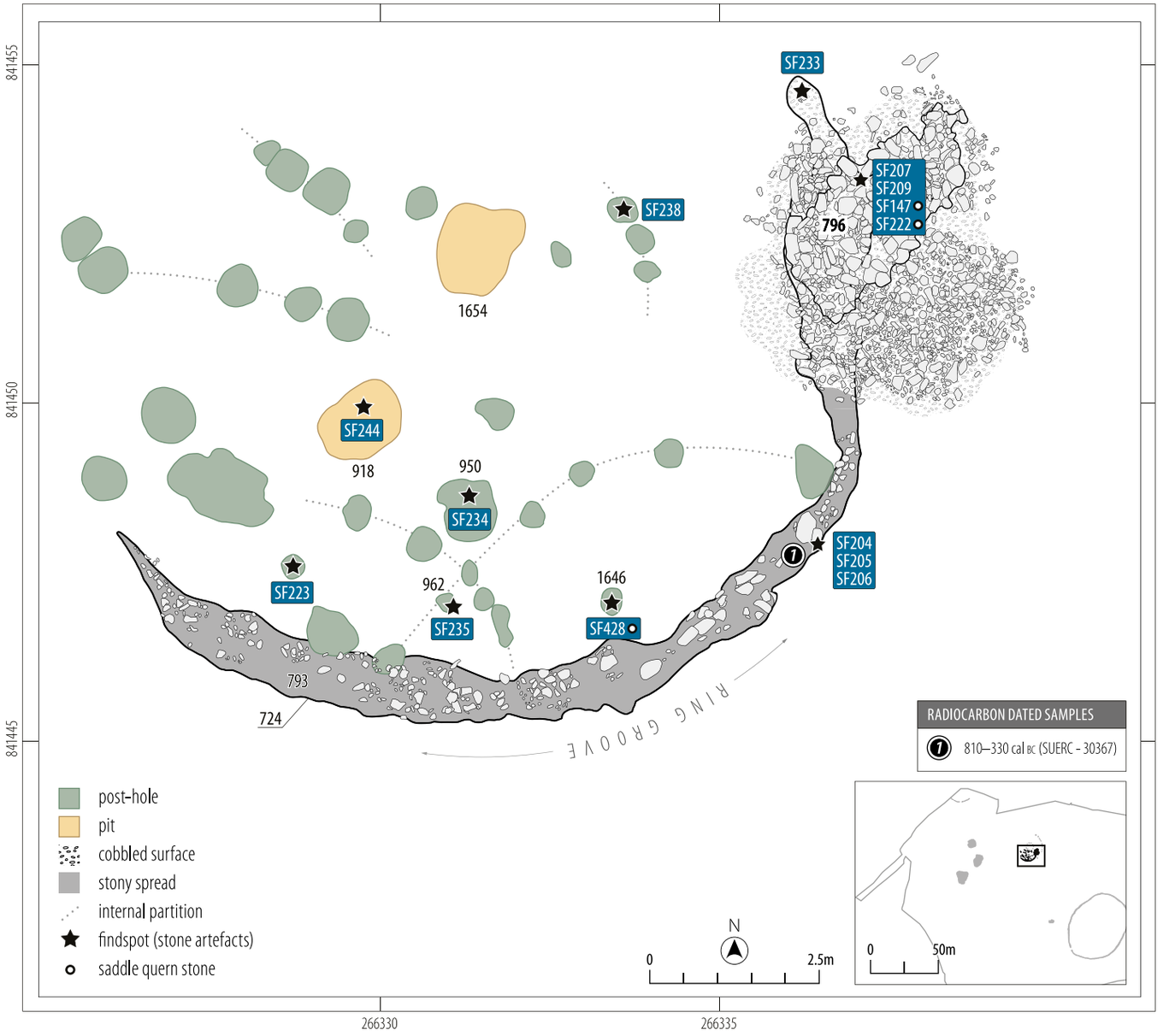


Illustration 3.5
Plan of House 3

Illustration 3.6
Pre-excavation photo of House 3 showing the location of SF0147

Illustration 3.7
House 3 after excavation

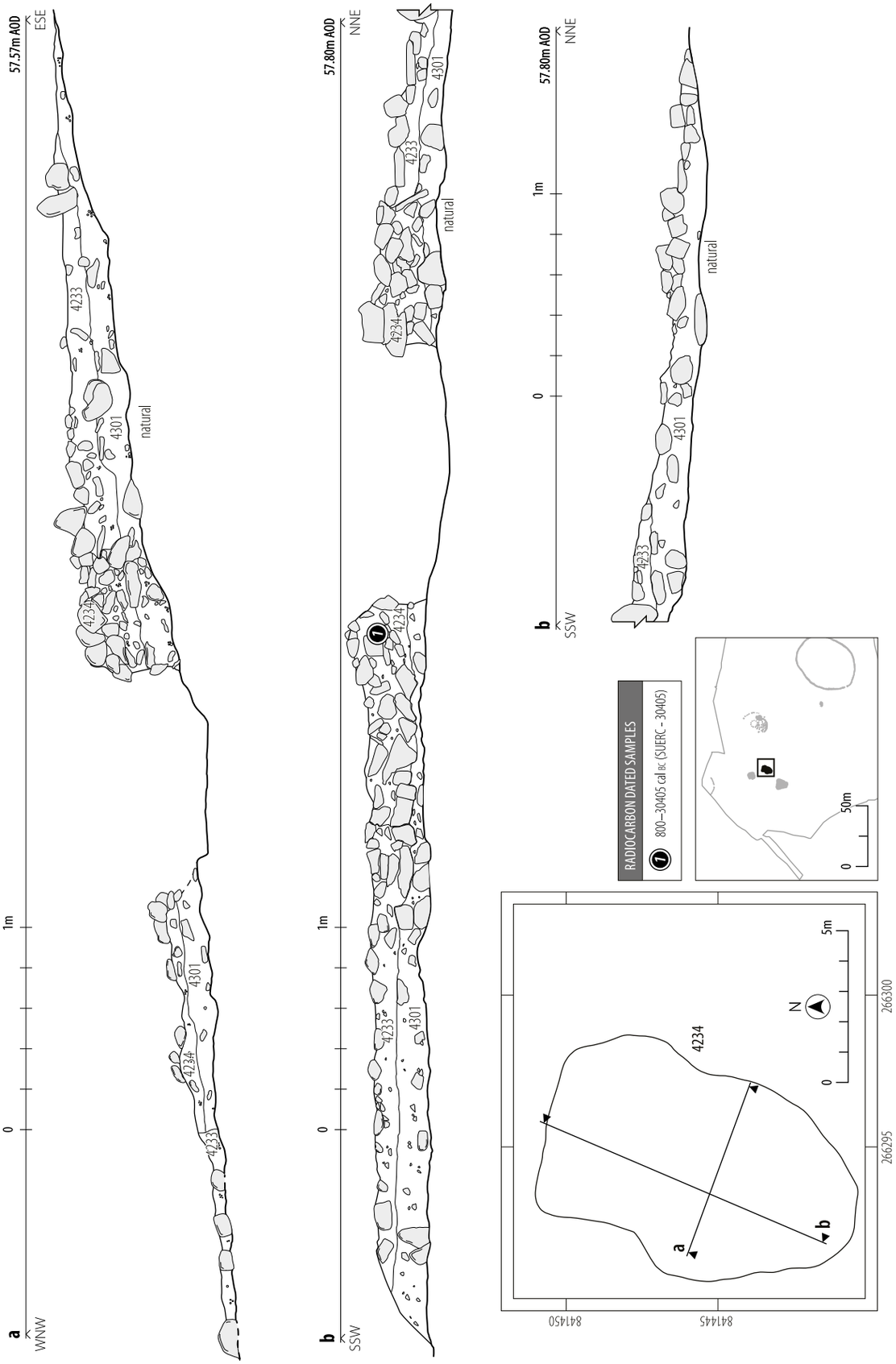


Illustration 3.8
Plan and section through Cairn 4234

Illustration 3.9
Cairn 4234 after the excavation of the central pit

of hazel nutshell, charcoal and burnt bone (detailed in the environmental section below). It is not clear if this activity related to the Early Iron Age occupations of the site or the earlier prehistoric activity identified.

Cobbled surface 3651

Situated to the south-west of Cairn 4234 was an amorphous area of rough cobbling also sealed by the hillwash. This cobbled surface or platform (*c.*9.5 × 8.4m) was formed from small rounded and sub-angular cobbles supported by loosely compacted dark-brown silty sand matrix that contained charcoal, burnt bone and 28 sherds of later prehistoric flat-rimmed domestic pottery, much from the same vessel (Vessel 4 – Illus. 6.2). One possible flint tool (SF0840) was also recovered. Slightly larger stones had been placed around the periphery of the surface to form a possible revetment.

The palisade

The large single-phase enclosure was located on a plateau of raised ground. It was an oval palisade ditch measuring 52m long (NE/SW) by 41m wide (NW/SE) with a 1.75m wide entrance on the south-west side (Illus. 3.10 and 3.11). The ditch was up to 0.8m wide and 0.7m deep with near vertical sides breaking sharply to a broad flat base. Where the ditch was situated on a slight down slope to the south-west it had been more affected by plough truncation and here the ditch was 0.3m wide and survived to a depth of 0.3m. Its sides here were shallow, and the base was narrow and concave.

Along the edges of the cut, large stones had been used as packing for posts (Illus. 3.12). The location of the posts was visible in section and, although it was not possible to discern individual post-settings in plan, it was clear that the timbers would have been closely set or potentially even contiguous. The fill of the ditch contained frequent large stones, presumably used as packing material for each post. At the entrance, the ditch widened to 1.15m and a post-hole was located at each terminal ([480] and [539]) (Illus. 3.10 inset), presumed to be settings for a gate. These cuts were lined with two tiers of flat, edge-set packing stones. The south terminal had one stone placed across the base to form a distinct footing or pad for the main entrance post. No artefacts were recovered within the slots excavated through the ditch or entrance post-holes.

As stated in Chapter 2 the single radiocarbon date obtained from a hulled barley grain sampled from within the main fill of the palisade ditch yielded a date of 2470–2240 cal BC (SUERC-30360). As hulled barley is identified as a crop from the Neolithic (Bishop et al 2009) the charred grain cannot be used as an indication of any period of activity and is thought to be residual.

Thirty features were located within the palisade, most clustered in the western half and all heavily plough truncated (these are shown on Illus. 1.6). Twenty-three were interpreted as post-holes, with the only clear structure being a 'four-post' structure. The four post-holes were arranged in a square, forming a structure with sides measuring *c.*2.8m, and all were *c.*0.4m in diameter and 0.2m deep. The remaining features were pits, none of which contained artefacts. Some had higher concentrations of charcoal and were interpreted as possible simple hearths or cooking pits. It is unknown if any of these features were contemporary with the palisade.

While the date and the use of the palisade at Culduthel is unknown the lack of material culture (especially any metalworking debris) recovered from the enclosure or its interior, does suggest that its construction and use predated the Middle Iron Age craftworking settlement in Period 3.

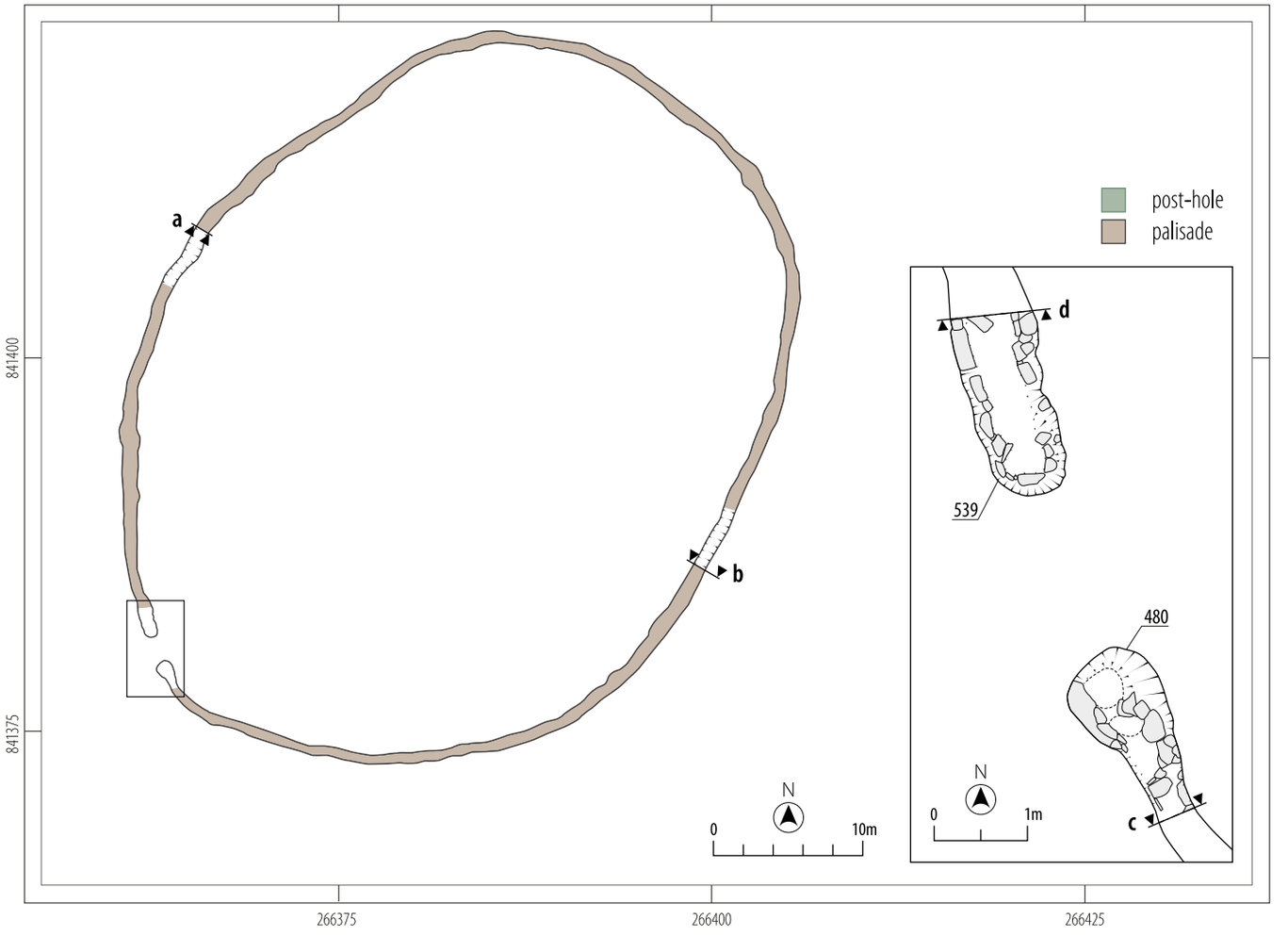
Hillwash

A large area of hillwash (3720) had formed within a natural dip in the topography of the site (Illus. 3.3). It sealed many of the Early Iron Age features described above and provided a clear horizon between the earlier occupation of the site and the Middle Iron Age settlement in a discrete area of the site. In addition to the cairns and the cobbled surface, several alignments of stake-holes were identified below the hillwash that formed possible curvilinear and linear fence lines. A group of thin ephemeral linear features interpreted as ardmarks were also located here. These were mainly oriented south-west to north-east and measured a maximum of 3m in length, with shorter ardmarks crossing at right angles. The date of the stake-holes and ardmarks is unknown.

Environmental summary for Period 2

Scott Timpany, Sarah-Jane Haston and Abby Mynett

A sample (196) was taken from an old ground surface (447) located beneath Cairn (295). The layer was found to contain an abundance of hazel nutshell (135 fragments) together with charcoal and burnt bone fragments (Timpany 2007). No dating evidence was retrieved from this layer and it may significantly pre-date the clearance cairn. The spread provides some potential evidence for foraging activity, which together with the charcoal and burnt bone, may represent the discard of domestic waste.



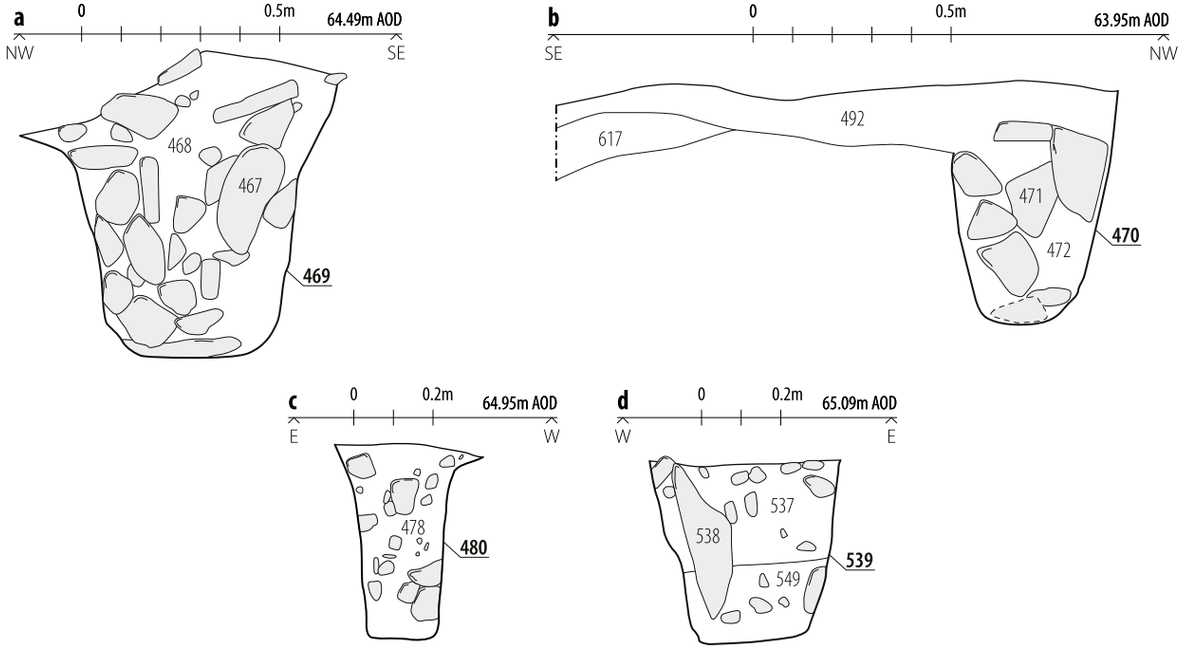


Illustration 3.10
Plan of the palisade

Illustration 3.11
The palisade (facing north-west)

Illustration 3.12
South-east terminal of the palisade

The Early Iron Age settlement

Evidence for Early Iron Age occupation at Culduthel comprises two overlapping roundhouses, a substantial palisade, three clearance cairns and a cobbled surface. Aside from the successive roundhouses, it is unclear if any of these features were in contemporary use. From the plan of these features it is tempting to characterise this occupation as the southern edge of an unenclosed settlement where houses gave way to fields with a fenced enclosure perched on the small hill beyond.

The most distinct feature placed within this phase, the palisade, is also the most difficult to date. Palisading is a simple technique to physically define a parcel of land or rejuvenate denuded earthworks and is often employed to create a defined area for internal domestic occupation. Palisade enclosures have a long currency in Scotland, from the Neolithic to the later medieval period. Their functions vary immensely, from the initial phase of a developing enclosure scheme, such as the Early Iron Age oval palisade identified at Broxmouth Hillfort in East Lothian (Armit and McKenzie 2013, 27-28), to an enclosure for a homestead such as at Ravelrig Quarry (Rennie 2013) or large settlement such as at Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007). Palisade enclosures of a much smaller scale have been identified as cropmarks throughout lowland Scotland. These are likely to have been ancillary structures used for stock control or, at the smallest scale, ring-grooves of large roundhouse.

While these structures form part of the archaeological record for multiple periods, palisaded enclosures associated with settlements in south and south-east Scotland have been demonstrated to be an Early Iron Age tradition (Harding 2006 67–8; Armit and McKenzie 2013, 40). In contrast, the north-east of Scotland, which contains some of the most striking and seemingly well-preserved palisade enclosures in the archaeological record, has little in the way of a chronology for these structures. Their distribution in Inverness-shire and along the Moray coast correlates well to the low-lying land suitable for cropmark identification across this area (Illus. 7.1). These palisades are varied in size and form and appear to enclose both single roundhouses and small settlements. Most are circular or oval and fairly modest in size, ranging from 20m to 60m in internal diameter. This group includes both palisades located within the inner lip of ditched enclosures such as those seen at the two sites at Creich Mains in Sutherland (NH68NW 17) and the stand-alone post-built fences like the one at Culduthel. Features within their interiors are rarely revealed by aerial photography but in some cases, such as Aldourie Farm near Inverness (Harden and Bone 1990, 23), a 22m diameter palisade encloses a concentrically constructed central post-ring roundhouse. Other similar sized palisaded enclosure cropmark sites in Inverness-shire, such as Blackhill (NH74NW 122) and Ballindoun (RCAHMS 1979, 21), also contain single roundhouses while the considerably larger oval double palisaded enclosure at Balblair in Nairnshire (NH85NE 46) may have contained a small settlement.

As this site type has not been the focus of research, their true forms and chronology are not well understood (Feachem 1966; Ralston and Halliday 2009). Their considerable cropmark record and limited excavation evidence does however hint that palisade

enclosures were common across the region and many may be Iron Age in date.

Excavation of the palisade at Balloan Park in Inverness identified a narrow stone-filled gully, a similar construction to Culduthel. The interior of the enclosure was not exposed, and it remains undated. Its size (*c.*30m diameter) and the radiocarbon dated peripheral settlement activity suggests that it may have been an enclosed homestead of Early/Middle Iron Age date (see Chapter 1; Carter and Russell-White 1993; Wordsworth 1999).

The palisade at Culduthel would certainly have been a major building project for a community and must have been a conspicuous display of the community's wealth, identity and place. The similar oval palisade at Broxmouth Hillfort was calculated to have at least 500 timber posts around its 200m circumference, each at least 2m in height (Armit and McKenzie 2013, 27–8).

Due to the heavy truncation within the interior, its function remains unclear. If it was not settled its uses are likely to have been multiple and seasonally adapted, at times serving an important central place for the community to gather in private, and at others as secure storage for livestock and food. Its prominent elevated location on a low hill suggests that it would have been an imposing monument, a dominating feature within any contemporary settlement and identifiable across the wider landscape. Whatever its original function the enclosure perhaps only lasted a generation or two as it was not repaired or rebuilt and was left to rot in situ.

The evidence for domestic occupation in this period is the two dwellings of strikingly different design. Only the internal post-ring of the earliest roundhouse (House 5) survived intact with a curved line of posts and small post-/stake-holes defining the outer wall. The outer wall may have been constructed from turf, with the line of stakes and larger posts forming a timber revetting, encasing the outer edge of the wall. Turf-and-earth-walled roundhouses (also known as ring-bank roundhouses) are seen from the early part of the 2nd millennium cal BC (Pope 2015). These structures are mainly recognised in upland and coastal sites in northern England and north and west Scotland, a distribution that must reflect the survival of these fragile buildings in areas of less intense modern agricultural rather than a lack of decent timber (contra Reid 1989, 17; Reid 1993; O'Sullivan 1998, 109; Pope 2015). Excavation of Bronze Age turf houses in Scotland have recognised wattle and post revetting on both the inner and outer faces of the outer walls (e.g. Green Knowe in the Borders (Feachem 1963, 83); Lairg in Sutherland (O'Sullivan 1998); and on Arran (Barber 1997)) and in the Early Iron Age at Douglasmuir in Angus (Kendrick 1995, 62).

Iron Age turf buildings are less frequently seen in the archaeological record. Where they have been excavated in Scotland, they are often very large buildings e.g. Culhawk Hill in Angus with a *c.*20m in internal diameter (Rees 1998) and the Phase 4 roundhouse at Bellfield, North Kessock with a *c.*19m in internal diameter (Jones 2009, 15). House 5 is a large building, (*c.*18m in diameter) in the current corpus of structures identified for Early Iron Age Scotland. Substantial roundhouses of this size are seen widely throughout the British Isles from the Early Iron Age (*c.*800–400 cal BC) and are commonly regarded as the timber element of the wider phenomenon of domestic monumentality that developed from the early part of the 1st millennium BC (Halliday 1985, 246; Hingley 1992, 39). There are examples of Early Iron Age post-ring roundhouses of comparable size, such as House 1 at Bannockburn (Rideout 1996) and the double post-ring roundhouse at Ironshill East in Angus (McGill 2003), but substantial roundhouses on the whole appear to be more commonly ring-groove constructions in this period (e.g. Houses A and B, Phase 1 at Broxmouth (Armit and McKenzie 2013, 37) and at Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007)).

The construction of such a large house in the Early Iron Age at Culduthel potentially shows an affluent extended family group lived here, with a wide range of resources at hand, from skilled labour to prime managed woodland.

Overlying the southern side of House 5 was a ring-groove roundhouse (House 3). The outer wall of the house may have been constructed from planks or closely set posts. The ring-groove clearly terminated to the north of the entrance and there was no sign of a northern wall of the building. This missing section of outer wall may well have been a shallower cut in level ground but equally could have been an above ground structure, with the wall set into a sleeper beam or sections of moveable wattle panels. This latter configuration was mooted for the Bronze Age ring-groove roundhouses at West Acres, Newton Mearns (Toolis et al 2005, 489), where the excavators postulated that moveable wattle screens may have formed the wall along missing segments of the ring-groove.

Internally, an array of undated post-holes may have been phases of curved partition walls or fences to separate the space into different functional areas such as sleeping and cooking or stalls for livestock. Partitioning is a commonly seen feature in later prehistoric roundhouses. Linear radial partitions and elongated bays survive particularly well in stone-built structures (e.g. at Bu and Toft's Ness in Orkney (Hedges 1987, 140) but are also seen in timber houses (e.g. Douglasmuir in Angus (Kendrick 1995, 63)). Similar curvilinear divisions were identified at West Acres in Newton Mearns (Toolis et al 2005, 489). A *c.*2m wide 'corridor' is noticeably clear of post-holes running from the entrance to the centre of the building.

The in situ finds related to the construction of House 3 were fragments of saddle querns and their associated rubbing stones deliberately placed in post-holes and within the ring-groove as packing stones or post-pads. This practice of intentionally depositing querns within roundhouses, especially within post-holes and at thresholds, is a widespread later prehistoric practice (Hingley 1992, 32; McLaren and Hunter 2008; Waddington 2014) and the incorporation of querns into the foundations of Iron Age houses is commonly seen in Scotland (i.e. Dryburn Bridge, East Lothian (Cool 2007, 76), Broxmouth hill fort, East Lothian (Büster & Armit 2013, 143–7) and at Kintore, Aberdeenshire (Engl 2008, 223–6)). Querns would have been both potent symbols of agricultural life and esteemed tools within the household, and must have held pervasive symbolic meaning to the community long after their original function had passed (Hingley 1992, 32; Williams 2003, 237; Heslop 2008, 73–80). That these items were often deliberately broken and carefully placed suggests that they were part of a defined ritual practice (cf. Goldberg 2015, 216–17), potentially to connect the present community with their predecessors.

Once the timber superstructure of the house was gone, the ring-groove was backfilled and the entrance was levelled with cobbles and larger stones. Querns and rubbing stones were incorporated into the cobbling and rough paving laid at the entrance. The placement of querns and other utilitarian household items at the end of the life of houses is commonly seen in the Iron Age (Waddington 2014), and their deposition during the decommissioning of the house suggests continuity of the tradition seen during construction.

Ring-groove roundhouses can be identified from the Neolithic in Britain (e.g. at Kintore (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 81–3)), and were common in the Early Bronze Age in Scotland, developing from polygonal to circular buildings by the 1st millennium BC (Pope 2015, 180). By the Early Iron Age in southern Scotland, they were becoming grander in scale (i.e. at the hillfort of Broxmouth (Armit and McKenzie 2013, 37) and at Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007, 46–7) in East Lothian).

Due to the poor survival of House 3 and 5, their structural biographies are difficult to determined. It is unclear whether House 3 was a direct replacement of House 5, or an unrelated later event. The replacement of buildings and the reuse of house stances are both commonly seen through the Iron Age, perhaps demonstrating that the long-term tenure of the land by individuals or family groups was important. The deliberate closing of House 3, with the backfilling of the ring-groove and the levelling of the entrance, may be a deliberate act to bury the house at the end of its life or to level the land to reuse the plot.