

Souterrain and later structures at Northwaterbridge, Kincardineshire

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In the course of construction of the approach road to the new upper Northwater Bridge on the A94 on the Angus-Kincardineshire border, stonework was located a few centimetres below the surface (NGR NO. 655665). Messrs Tawse, Aberdeen, the contractors, are to be congratulated on their prompt recognition of the probable archaeological value of the material and on informing Dr Trevor Watkins, who was excavating Dalladies, Site No. 2, nearby. Messrs Tawse generously allowed sufficient time to undertake a complete excavation of the site before its destruction.

The site lay at an altitude of 35 m on fluvioglacial outwash sands and gravels between the North Esk and Luther Waters. These outwash gravels, being well drained, in contrast to the heavy red clays of the Howe of the Mearns, have attracted prehistoric settlement at several places. The primary structure on the site proved to be a souterrain (fig 1), the greater part of which had been removed by the construction work before excavation. The remaining portion extended in a sweeping curve for some 14.5 m. The cross-section (fig 2) showed that a U-shaped trench had been cut in the gravels and large flat stones set on edge to form the sides of part of the structure. These side slabs were mainly of well rounded boulders of Dalradian rocks – obviously the product of surface collection from the outwash gravels. Where no side slabs existed, there was no evidence of socket holes from which stones had been removed. There was no evidence to show whether any part of the structure had been roofed over.

The souterrain was infilled with dark brown earth, clearly a topsoil which contained several fragments of very red, very friable sandstone which showed signs of intense heating. The upper layers of this infill were flecked with charcoal. There was no clearly defined floor to the souterrain; the top soil simply infilling the U-shaped constructional trench. Among the infill were the fragments of a small saddle quern which had been broken into at least two parts, both of which had suffered a fair degree of weathering before being completely shattered by intense heating. This has been reconstructed by, and is now preserved in, Dundee District Museum.

Paved Area. A paved area within the curve of the souterrain was located during a check to ascertain whether there were any associated surface structures. Unfortunately, this area was covered by a mere 6 cm of soil which had been compacted into a rock like texture by the frequent passage of bulldozers and other heavy equipment. The resulting very fragmentary remains were exposed and appeared to have been a flat paved-area built of sandstone flags probably obtained from the river cliffs some 1500 m distant. Small stones appear to have been packed into the interstices between the slabs. It was impossible to gauge the original dimensions of this feature, and no evidence of postholes could be located. The paving lay directly on sand suggesting that the ground surface had been prepared before the floor was carefully laid. It showed considerable signs of heating and quantities of charcoal were compacted on to the stones.

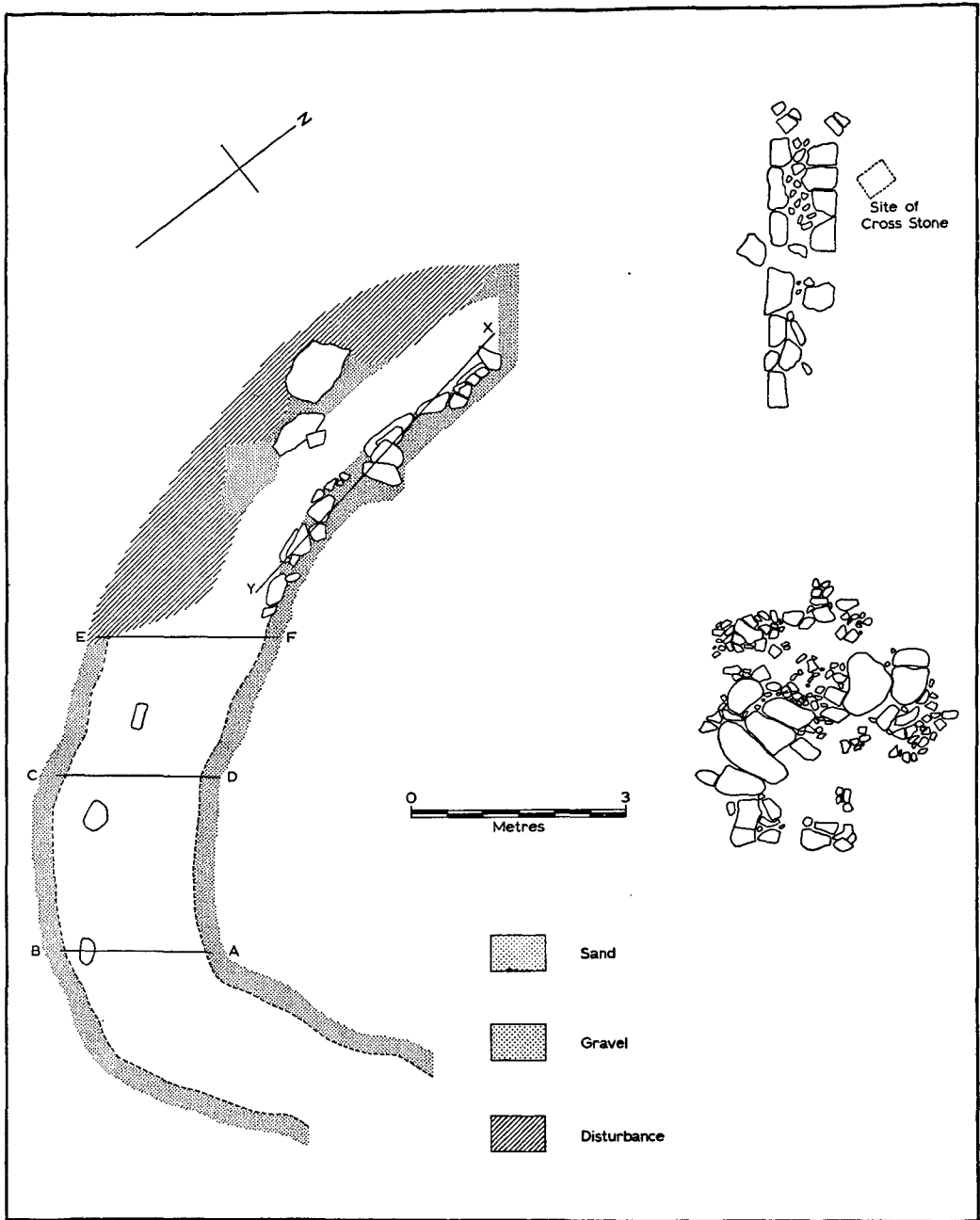


FIG 1 Plan of souterrain and associated structures

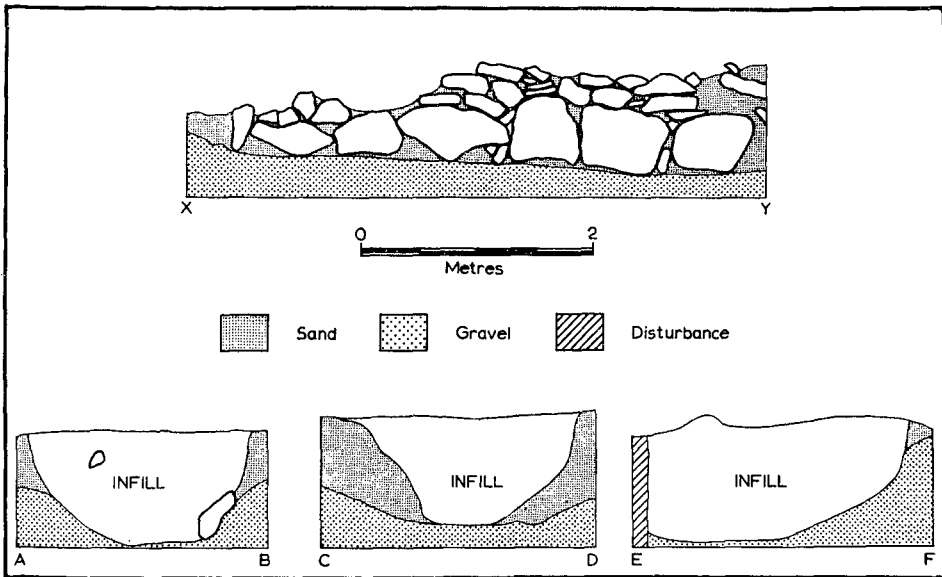


FIG 2 Cross-section of the souterrain

DISCUSSION

The souterrain horizon is particularly interesting in that it fits in well with the Angus group of souterrains as a whole, while showing certain unusual features. In appearance and apparent technique of construction there is close similarity to the Angus types. However, the latter are usually associated with clay soils whereas this example is dug into rough gravels. Observation and experiment showed that these gravels when cut to a vertical section have little cohesion and tend to slump after a very short time. Indeed this slumping was noted between the large side-slabs and two of these had been pushed inwards. Extremely careful and substantial construction would be required to build a stable souterrain in this material. It follows, therefore, that while the site afforded ideal conditions for surface dwellings in terms of good drainage, freshwater near by and potentially rich source of food supply, there were severe problems to be overcome if a large souterrain were to be added to the surface hut. The builders appear to have discovered this problem and never completed the structure which would explain the lack of any evidence of roofing, the lack of any floor level and small finds, and the apparent infilling of the trench soon after its excavation. The condition of the quern is important in this context in that the broken fragments had had time to weather before being shattered by heat and thrown into the souterrain. It follows that the souterrain was planned as an addition to a surface hut which had already been in existence for some considerable time.

LATER WALLING

To the N of the souterrain and its associated hut lay 3.8 m of a single course of walling 0.8 m thick. This consisted of roughly dressed sandstone slabs, the extreme SE stone having a well prepared 45° chamfer on the S side. The wall was founded directly on the gravel with no turf layer beneath. A small V-shaped ditch, filled with black earth, flecked with charcoal, ran

from the corner of this structure in a north-westerly direction. The nature of the infill suggests that it is most likely to be associated with the souterrain complex and not with the later walling though its purpose remains obscure. The natural gravels are extremely well drained and the absence of silt in the bottom of the cut confirms that it never served as an effective drain.

Within this later building lay two carved stone fragments. The first (pl 23b) appears to be the upper portion of a 'primary cross-slab' of Early Christian Type (Thomas 1971, 112-24). It measures 0.33 m in width at the head and has a thickness of 0.10 m. Each side bears the pecked outline of what has probably been a simple Greek or Latin cross.

The second stone (pl 23c) measures 0.43 m by 0.38 m and has a thickness of 0.10 m. The outer margin is wrought with a band of nail-head ornament above a chamfer-arrised rebate. The nature of the ornament suggests that the stone is of thirteenth-century date, but it is uncertain whether it has formed part of a large recumbent slab, perhaps associated with a funerary monument, or of some architectural feature, such as a door-jamb. One face of the slab is cut to form a door-check, but this may have been done to fit the stone for secondary use.

The origin of these fragments is not known, but it is possible that the building of which they latterly formed part was a comparatively recent structure incorporating stones brought from some nearby site. If so, the fragments may perhaps derive from the ruined late thirteenth-century church of Nether Pert, situated less than 1 km to the S.

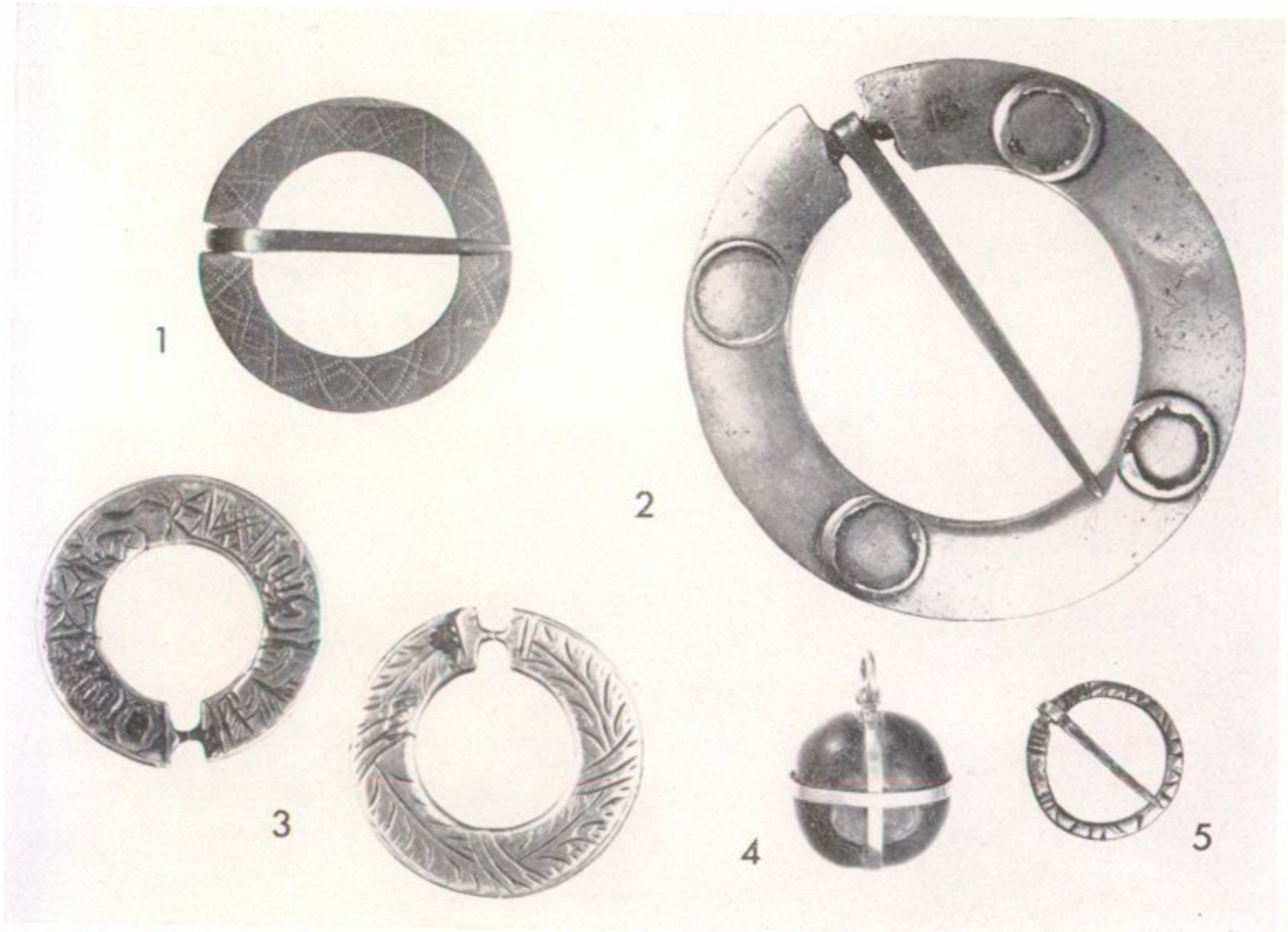
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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REFERENCE

Thomas, C 1971 *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*. London.

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a Mackenzie Collection, medieval brooches and bean charm (2:3)

b Northwaterbridge, cross-slab (1:8)



c Northwaterbridge, carved stone (1:6)

