

Excavations at Drumcarrow, Fife: an Iron Age Unenclosed Settlement

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INTRODUCTION

In the course of the survey of Marginal Land carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland an unenclosed group of round stone-walled houses was discovered on Drumcarrow Craig, Fife, about 4 miles SW. of St Andrews (N.G.R. NO 454133). The group occupies an elevated, but not markedly defensive, position on the crest of a ridge that runs W. from the summit of the Craig; the height above sea-level is a little over 650 ft. The site enjoys an outstanding view to the N. and W. over St Andrews Bay and the valley of the Eden, while to the S. the rolling farm lands of the East Neuk present a pleasing, if less dramatic,

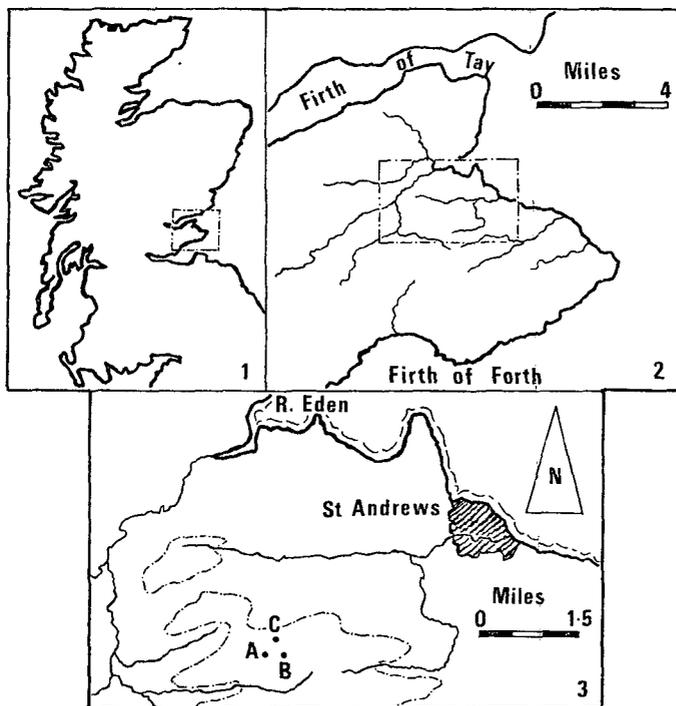


FIG. 1. Map showing location of unenclosed settlement. In lower part A denotes position of the settlement, B the broch, and C the fort at Denork; the 400-ft. contour is indicated

prospect. Two other monuments were discovered nearby in the same survey (fig. 1): on the summit of Drumcarrow Craig a broch-like structure (NO 459133) and, on a narrow rocky ridge lying at the foot of the Craig's northern slopes, the Early Iron Age fort of Denork (NO 455137).

The unenclosed settlement comprises at least three approximately circular stone-walled houses, of which the largest and best preserved appeared, before excavation, as a penannular, grass-covered bank about 1 ft. in maximum height and 5 ft. in thickness, enclosing an area which measured axially 24 by 27 ft. Several large boulders belonging to the inner or outer face of the house wall projected through the turf in places, and the entrance, situated on the E., appeared to be about 6 ft. in width. The second house, which lies 40 ft. E. of the first and appears to have been similar in construction, is less well preserved. It is represented by a slightly dished circular area measuring about 20 ft. in diameter, with several large stones from the wall-facing around the circumference. A third house, lying 20 ft. NE. of the second, and of approximately the same size, is likewise in a wasted condition. To the N. of the second house, and set on a little rocky shelf somewhat above the level of the rest of the settlement, there is a sub-circular platform, 14 ft. across, which may mark the site of a fourth house; it must be admitted, however, that it resembles the stance of a timber hut rather than the ruins of a stone structure.

In April 1962 the excavation of the largest (westernmost) house was begun by a small group, drawn largely from the pupils and staff of Madras College, St Andrews. The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Captain J. P. Younger for permission to conduct this investigation; to Mr Angus Lohoar the tenant of Drumcarrow Farm for invaluable assistance and storage facilities for tools while work was in progress; to Dr K. A. Steer and to the Rector of Madras College, Dr J. Thompson, for much useful advice and encouragement, especially in the early stages of the excavation; and, not least, to former colleagues and pupils, whose labours, often in the least clement of weathers, made this enterprise physically possible; finally to his wife, Kathleen, who shared in the direction of the excavation at all stages.

THE EXCAVATION

The removal of only a foot or so of peaty turf revealed that substantial remains of the house still existed. The wall was, on average, about 6 ft. thick and in places reached a thickness of nearly 7 ft. It enclosed an almost circular area measuring 24 ft. in diameter and consisted of a rubble core between an inner and outer facing of massive blocks of stone; one of these, to the N. of the entrance, measures 3 ft. 11 in. in length by 1 ft. in thickness and stands to a height of over 2 ft. (fig. 2). Where possible, the wall has been founded on bedrock, but on the NW. the builders failed to find such a sure foundation, and the wall has in fact collapsed and been repaired at this point. The repair work is conspicuous because large boulders have been used throughout the thickness of the wall here and the rubble core is absent. The tendency to collapse will have been increased by the fact that the house has been built on a slight slope from N. to S. with little attempt, apparently, to level the foundations. Another collapse seems to have threatened, at some time, in the sector of the wall lying to the S. of the entrance and a crude buttress was built to relieve the outward pressure of the core.

At no point was there more than one course of facing stones preserved *in situ*; it was therefore impossible to be certain about the original height of the wall, although the small amount of wall-core debris found during excavation in and immediately around the house could be taken, along with general considerations of the structure, to indicate that the wall had never risen to a height of more than about 4 ft. (see reconstruction drawing, fig. 3).

Only a small part of the house floor seems to have been paved, the largest area being on

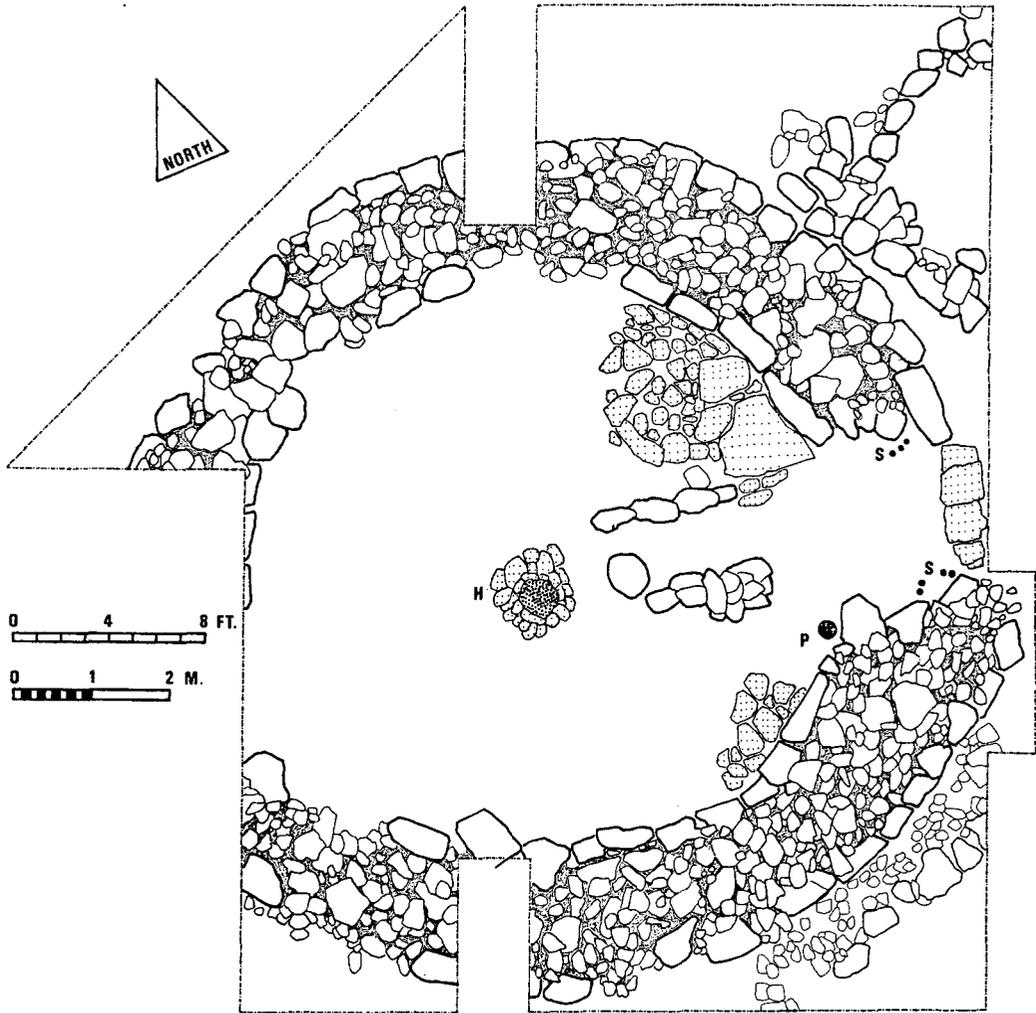


FIG. 2. Plan of the largest and westernmost house at Drumcarrow; H denotes position of hearth, P of post-hole, and S of stake-holes

the N. side of the entrance where a flat outcrop of natural rock has been surrounded by an irregular patch of rough paving; elsewhere the floor seems to have consisted of rammed earth or rock outcrop. The hearth was subrectangular in shape, measuring about 3 ft. 6 in. by 3 ft. 3 in., and consisted of a rather loosely arranged setting of stones over the centre of which a skin of coarse clay had been spread to an average depth of half an inch; this was, of course, baked hard, but when discovered it had been much disturbed by root action. The position of the hearth was a little off-centre.

Leading from the hearth to the entrance was a passage or corridor, 7 ft. in length and a little over 2 ft. in width, defined by large, upright boulders. The corridor stopped about 4 ft. short of the entrance, but may have originally continued as far as the line of the inner face of the wall. A similar feature was noticed in the homestead at Scotstarvit,¹ also in Fife, and in a house belonging

¹ *PSAS*, LXXXII (1947-8), 241.

to the unenclosed platform settlement at Green Knowe, Peeblesshire¹; in both these instances, however, the construction was in timber.

The entrance, which lay on the E., away from the prevailing wind, was 6 ft. 9 in. wide. On the S. side of it, and just off the line of the inner face of the house wall there was a shallow post-hole measuring 7 in. across and 8 in. in depth. This seemed too slight to have been one of a series designed to support the roof structure and, indeed, subsequent investigation showed it to be the only post-hole in the house. Naturally the presence of natural bedrock so close to the surface

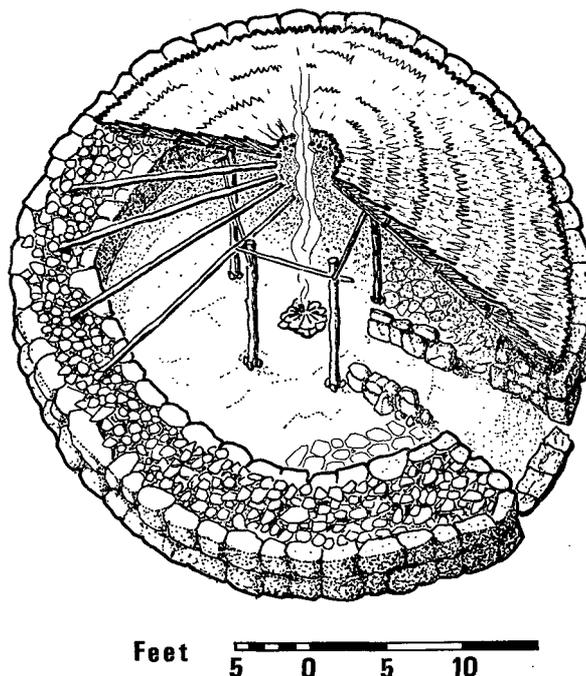


FIG. 3. Axonometric reconstruction of the Drumcarrow house

would have made the digging of post-holes a difficult if not impossible task. It seems probable therefore that the single post which stood in this hole must have supported the frame of the door, though there was no sign of a corresponding post on the opposite side of the entrance.

A raised threshold stone, 1 ft. 9 in. wide, lay across the entrance on the line of the outer face of the wall; it had been fractured in three places, either as a result of careless laying or possibly through prolonged use. Close to the walls of the entrance passage on both the N. and S. sides and just over 2 ft. inside the mouth of the entrance there were discovered several stake-holes measuring about 2½ in. in diameter and 6 in. in depth. There were three clear examples on the N. and two on the S.; there may indeed have been four on the S., but modern disturbance at this point made it difficult to be sure, and, in any case, their purpose must remain obscure.

In the absence of a series of recognisable post-holes it is impossible to be certain what kind of roof the house had. Nevertheless the very robustness of the wall is a sure indication that it was designed to take some considerable strain, in all likelihood the heavy downward thrust of the roof structure. No vertical post-holes were recognised in the thickness of the wall, so that it must be

¹ *PSAS*, xciv (1960-1), 79 ff.

presumed that the roof consisted of a radial framework of beams whose lower ends were buried in the wall core and whose upper ends were either tied together tepee-fashion, or, more probably, rested on a setting of posts grouped around the hearth; the near-central position of the hearth practically precludes the possibility of a single roof-support in the middle of the house. The bases of the setting of posts could have been cradled in the rock where natural cracks had formed rudimentary sockets; in fact several suitable fissures exist in the vicinity of the hearth, although none produced evidence of having been used in this way. The radial roof-beams would have been covered by lighter purlins and a layer of turf or thatch. In such an exposed position a further system of ropes and weights would probably have been needed to keep the topmost layers from blowing away.

On the NE., lying against the outer face of the house wall, are the vestiges of a rectilinear enclosure. It seems to have been of a fairly slight build, perhaps resembling, when complete, the stone-and-turf field dykes of the eighteenth century. All that remains is the western angle of the enclosure with the two adjacent sides now represented by lines of boulders or massive blocks of stone. Strangely enough it was inside this enclosure that most of the finds of native pottery were made during the excavation (eleven fragments out of eighteen). It may possibly represent a working area similar to the 'kilnhouse' discovered beside the aisled round house of Tigh Talamhanta, Barra.¹

FINDS

Pottery

The pottery, which was found inside the house as well as in the enclosure, comprised two different wares. The most common, Class A, was a coarse, hand-made ware measuring up to 20 mm in thickness, with a grey-black core and a roughly smoothed exterior varying in colour from buff to brownish-red; it contained numerous large grits. The nearest analogy is, perhaps, the fabric of many Bronze Age cinerary urns, a similarity which seemed to be echoed in form too. For although the fragments were neither large nor numerous they seemed to belong to a type that was either situlate or barrel-shaped in appearance, possessing a flat base, with no foot-ring, and a plain rolled rim. Body sherds show no sign of decoration. In short, the type belongs to a class of pottery which is in itself virtually undatable.

The other class, if it may be so called, is represented by only three very small fragments, one from the enclosure, the others from inside the house. This is a much finer ware of a well-levigated clay, chocolate brown in colour, containing minute flecks of a micaceous material and with an apparently burnished surface. Both fragments were body sherds, undecorated and with a smooth surface.

Class A 1 Rim sherd of vessel with plain, upright, rolled rim; maximum thickness 14 mm, found in the 'enclosure' to N. of house entrance; when first discovered it had a slightly greasy or waxy appearance² (fig. 4d).

2 Fragment of base, measuring 20 mm in maximum thickness, at junction with the wall of the vessel; found inside the enclosure in association with items 1 and 3 (fig. 4e).

3 Seven wall-sherds of average thickness 20 mm, found in association with items 1 and 2 above; several of these sherds had the waxy appearance noted in 1.

4 Five badly worn wall-sherds of indeterminable thickness, found on the floor of the house between the entrance and the hearth.

¹ *PSAS*, LXXXVII (1952-3), 88.

² Catalogue number in the National Museum of Antiquities: N.M.A., HD 1840.

Class B 5 Two very small wall-sherds measuring 8 mm in thickness, found in same context and position as item 4 above.

6 One very small fragment of same thickness as 5, found in enclosure.

Flint

1 A small ridge-backed knife of dark honey-coloured flint, found inside the house on top of bedrock immediately to the W. of the entrance; 42 by 18 mm (fig. 4c).

2 Trapezoidal flake of light honey-coloured flint, found outside the house beneath the buttressing on the SE. arc; possibly part of a scraper; 27 by 15 mm (fig. 4b).

3 Spaul of lustrous dark grey flint, found in the mouth of the entrance; 31 by 8 mm (fig. 4a).

4 Small waste flake of dark brown flint, found on top of paving inside the house NW. of the entrance.

5 Flake of coarse grey chert possibly used as a scraper, found outside the house on the S. arc.

Stone

A small assemblage of grinding, pounding or rubbing implements, all showing facets of wear and all fitting easily into the hand.

1 Slightly more than half of a stone rubber with one much-worn facet, found outside the house on the SE. arc; 10 cm in length by 7.5 cm in thickness.

2 Half of a hammer- or grinding-stone with one working-facet, fractured lengthwise, found in the entrance of the house; 11.5 cm in length by 8 cm.

3 A hammer- or grinding-stone, found outside the house on the S., with two working-facets; 10 cm in length by 6.5 cm.

4 A hammer- or grinding-stone, found beside 2, with one working-facet; 11 cm in length by 8 cm.

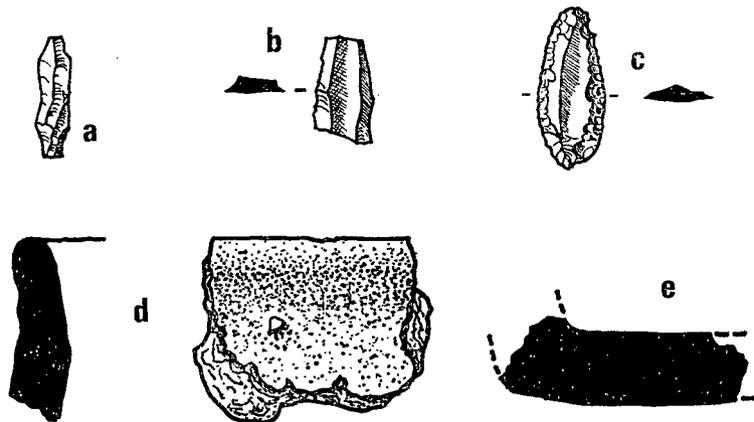


FIG. 4. The small finds: pottery and flint (scale $\frac{1}{2}$)

DISCUSSION

It is obvious that the date of the house is not indicated with any degree of certainty by the rather modest assemblage of small finds. Several analogies may indeed be suggested for this

material but, as a group, the pottery and stone tools indicate nothing more specific than an occupation of the site at some time in the late first millennium B.C. or in the early first millennium A.D. The stone objects – showing facets of wear probably caused by grinding rather than percussion – belong to a large class of implements which are found most commonly in brochs, round-houses, souterrains and wags in the northern and western districts of Scotland,¹ but also appear to have been used in the forts and settlements of the Tyne-Forth Province.² In such a case it is only reasonable that in seeking to date the occupation of the Drumcarrow house more closely we should also examine the nature of the structural evidence.

Unenclosed groups of 'hut-circles', grass-covered stony banks enclosing a circular area from 10 to 40 ft. in diameter, are by no means a new phenomenon in the field archaeology of Scotland. They figure largely in the Inventories of the Royal Commission dealing with Dumfriesshire, Wigtownshire, the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, Caithness and Sutherland, but more rarely in the later studies by the same body of the counties of Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles. As a class they have been little excavated, and even that little has produced less valuable information than might have been expected. Thus, certain examples on the moors near Muirkirk in Ayrshire seemed to have been 'inhabited' in the Early Bronze Age,³ while the excavation of a group of circles near Dalrulzion, Perthshire, produced evidence of occupation at the very beginning of the Iron Age.⁴ More recent work, especially at sites on the Sands of Forvie, Aberdeenshire,⁵ and at Dalnaglar, Perthshire,⁶ has tended to emphasise the early position such structures occupy in the Iron Age, although the excavation of examples at Kilphedir in Sutherland⁷ has shown that they were being built in this part of Scotland during the second century B.C. On the other hand a different picture emerges from fieldwork and excavation carried out in the Border counties of Scotland and England.⁸ To begin with, it has been possible to show that not all the structures described as hut-circles are in fact dwellings; many appear to be funerary monuments of the Middle Bronze Age.⁹ Moreover the past two decades have seen an immense widening of our knowledge of the development of round houses of timber and stone, especially in the Tyne-Forth Province. To summarise this work briefly, the general picture seems to be that round stone-walled houses of any description did not appear in S. Scotland before the Roman occupation in the late first century A.D., the earlier native settlements, forts and homesteads containing round timber houses of various types of construction.¹⁰ Thereafter the use of stone became widespread in native houses, most of which, if the evidence of the surviving examples can be applied to all, were either built inside the enclosing walls of settlements and homesteads, or belonged to groups which sprawled over the abandoned and ruinous defences of pre-Roman forts. Although the latter examples often occupy a naturally defensive position they ought properly to be considered as unenclosed. There is a small but reliable body of evidence to show that these houses belong to a period which begins in the second century A.D. and extends at least as far as the sixth. It is, moreover, likely that their appearance at this time is a direct result of Roman influence; the density of their distribution in areas known to be occupied by philo-Roman tribes has been pointed out elsewhere.¹¹

¹ cf. *PSAS*, LXXXII (1947-8), 283 f.; Erskine Beveridge, *Coll and Tiree* (1903), 174 ff.

² e.g. *PSAS*, L (1915-6), 133 f.; *ibid.*, LXXV (1940-1), 103; *ibid.*, XCIII (1959-60), 200; *Arch. Ael.*, XL (1962), 26.

³ *PSAS*, XLVIII (1913-4), 373 ff.

⁴ *PSAS*, LXXX (1945-6), 131.

⁵ *Aberdeen University Review*, xxxv, No. 109 (1953), 150-71.

⁶ *PSAS*, xcv (1961-2), 134 ff.

⁷ *Discovery and Excavation Scotland*, 1965, 39 f.

⁸ See relevant Inventories of the Royal Commission in

Scotland and Jobey, G., 'Homesteads and Settlements of the Frontier Area', in *Rural Settlement in Roman Britain* (A. C. Thomas, ed.), 1-13.

⁹ cf. especially the excavations at Whitestanes, Dumfriesshire, *Trans. Dumf. and Gall. Ant. Soc.*, XLII (1965), 51 ff. and Weir Law, Peebleshire, *PSAS*, xcix (1966-7), 93 ff.

¹⁰ For a full description of this material see the introductory notes in RCAMS, *Roxburghshire*, 19 ff. and *Peebleshire*, 20 ff.

¹¹ Steer, K. A., *Arch. Ael.*, XLII (1964), 16 ff. and Jobey, *op. cit.*, 5.

Although relatively few examples have been adequately studied, these stone houses of the Roman period in S. Scotland and N. England seem to possess certain features not present in earlier houses of more northerly districts. They tend, for example, to be regular, well-built structures with solid walls, varying between 4 and 7 ft. in thickness, with an inner and outer face of fairly massive boulders enclosing a rubble core. They do not have the double-skin or cavity-wall observed in the Dalrulzion houses or possess the mural structures and souterrains discovered at sites in Caithness and Sutherland and at Jarlshof. The hearth is usually off-centre and well-made, and the floor at least partially paved; the entrance can be generously wide, usually facing S. or SE., and in some instances a raised threshold stone has been discovered.¹ The presence of a central roof-support has been noted, or may be inferred, in several examples, while in others the roof may have rested partly on a series of light posts. Nevertheless it seems clear that the thrust of the roof was largely borne by the stone walls, and in a few instances, where the walls have been built on sloping ground without adequately prepared foundations, the stress has proved too much and the structure has either collapsed or required to be buttressed. It will be seen that the stone-built house excavated at Drumcarrow possesses many of the features associated with houses belonging to the Tyne-Forth group. It has, for example, a typically stout, boulder-faced wall, which, despite its massive construction, seems to have suffered the type of collapse occasionally noticed on southern sites.² It is heavily paved in the half nearest to the entrance, as in the W. homestead at Crock Cleuch, Roxburghshire,³ and has the characteristically wide, flaring entrance facing a little S. of E., with a threshold slab. The hearth at Drumcarrow, though off-centre, was still too near the middle of the house for a central post to have supported the roof as in many of the Northumberland examples, but, apart from this, the roof structure will have been similar to that found in the southern sites. The absence of post-holes, apart from one beside the entrance, is paralleled exactly in round stone-built houses of the Roman period at Bridge House, West Longlee and Riding Wood in Northumberland.⁴

In short a comparison of the Drumcarrow house with its northern and southern analogues shows clearly that, structurally at least, it belongs to the Roman or sub-Roman south rather than the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age north. Admittedly it and its fellows do not appear to be enclosed, but neither are the scores of similar houses in the larger settlements which overlie the disused ramparts of pre-Roman hillforts. It may also be noticed that the Romano-British settlement at Glenrath Hope in Peeblesshire⁵ contains both semi-enclosed and isolated houses. In any case, enclosed or not, the basic resemblance between the Drumcarrow house and, for example, fully enclosed houses at Hownam Rings is too close for chance.⁶

It is unfortunate that the Iron Age in Fife has not been subjected to the same degree of rigorous study as more southerly counties of Scotland; only one site of this period in Fife has been excavated and published within the past twenty years, and only a handful of sites have been thoroughly examined at any time. There is, however, a quite considerable body of information about field monuments in the area, compiled, for the most part, by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, not only for the relevant Inventory but also in the course of their survey of Marginal Land. From this it is clear that far from standing alone in Fife, Drumcarrow may be just one of a considerable number of sites whose connections appear to be with the Tyne-Forth Province of the Roman or sub-Roman period.

There are, in fact, several homesteads or small settlements which fall into the same general

¹ For general use see *Arch. Ael.*, xxxviii (1960), 12; for an example at Crock Cleuch, Rox., *PSAS*, LXXXI (1946-7), 144 and Pl. xvi.

² e.g. in hut 2 at Bridge House, Northumberland (*Arch. Ael.*, xxxviii (1960), 9 f.).

³ *PSAS*, LXXXI (1946-7), 148.

⁴ *Arch. Ael.*, xxxviii (1960), 1 ff.

⁵ *RCAMS, Inventory of Peeblesshire*, No. 364.

⁶ *PSAS*, LXXXII (1947-8), 206 ff.

category as Drumcarrow, although the comparative scarcity of this particular type of structure N. of the Forth cannot be denied.¹ At Glenduckie near Newburgh (NO 281194) a large homestead, consisting of a single stone-walled house of ample proportions inside an oval enclosing wall, has succeeded a hillfort of probable pre-Roman date.² The house wall is at least 6 ft. thick and boulder-faced, with an entrance that is generously wide. The circular enclosures at Drumnod Wood (NO 337217)³ cannot be dated by reference to any nearby site of known date, but their character is so close to that of the last example that it seems reasonable to interpret them as a group of stone-walled houses like those at Drumcarrow. There are three houses in all, the biggest measuring 40 ft. in diameter inside a stoutly-built wall more than 4 ft. thick. The group is unenclosed but occupies an eminent position on the crest of a low hill. There is a similar group on Clune Craig, a little to the NW. of Lochgelly.⁴

Excavations conducted by Bersu at Greencraig (NO 324315)⁵ revealed a single circular house with a stone foundation, which was built into the subrectangular enclosing wall in the manner of enclosed sites in Northumberland; no datable finds were recovered but the excavator expressed a preference for a date in the sub-Roman period, and, indeed, the homestead does appear to be later than Greencraig hillfort which is presumably pre-Roman. The 'rectilinear and rectangular' enclosure at Auchterderran⁶ near the supposed Roman camp of Lochore no longer survives but is described in a manuscript account of the researches of General Melville. A silver coin of Pertinax, found within the SW. angle of the enclosure, led earlier antiquaries to identify it as a Roman camp, but there is no reason why it should not now be recognised as a native settlement or homestead in the Romano-British tradition. The recently discovered homestead on Wemyss Hall Hill (NO 374121)⁷ is similar in plan to the Greencraig site, and probably comes into the same category.

On Dunearn Hill, near Burntisland (NT 211872)⁸ there are three round stone-walled houses which are unenclosed but appear to have been built on the site of an early Iron Age hillfort when the latter was no longer used. The hillfort is also overlain by a defensive enclosure of presumed post-Roman date but the relationship between this and the stone houses is uncertain. The larger group of similar houses which overlies the early defence-works on Norman's Law⁹ must be considered to constitute a settlement comparable with the numerous examples in the Tyne-Forth Province which supersede pre-Roman fortified hilltop sites (e.g. Hownam Rings, Roxburghshire, and Kaimes Hill, Midlothian). The evidence from such settlements indicates occupation well into the third century A.D. and there seems no reason why the Norman's Law group, the Drumcarrow settlement and other similar sites in Fife should not belong to the same period.

¹ *Antiquity*, xli (1967), 148 f.

² *Roman and Native in North Britain* (I. A. Richmond, Ed.), 105.

³ RCAMS, *Inventory of Fife*, No. 324.

⁴ *ibid.*, No. 56.

⁵ *PSAS*, LXXXII (1947-8), 264 ff.

⁶ Crawford, O. G. S., *Topography of Roman Scotland*, 146.

⁷ The author is grateful to R. W. Feachem for drawing his attention to this site as well as Dunearn Hill and Glenduckie.

⁸ Feachem, R. W., *A Guide to Prehistoric Scotland*, 124 f.

⁹ RCAMS, *Inventory of Fife*, No. 193.