

# Excavations at the early and later medieval site of Ballachly, Dunbeath, Caithness, 2007–10

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## ABSTRACT

*Excavation and field survey at Ballachly, Dunbeath, Caithness in 2007–10 produced evidence which suggests the existence of a possibly early medieval and later Norse site centred around the hillock known as Chapel Hill, on top of which is located an, as of yet, indeterminate unicameral stone building. The site, already well-known for its Early Christian inscribed stones, lay within a substantial stone-walled enclosure of late medieval to early post-medieval date, possibly constructed to enclose an undeveloped burgh of barony, thought to be Magnusburgh, which was reported to have been licensed in 1624. Although most of the enclosed area did not yield evidence of occupation, two separate areas at the base of the hillock produced evidence for medieval industrial activity, including ironworking and a cobbled possible working surface. This activity post-dated a palaeo-channel, possibly reused as a ditch, and substantial stone wall, forming a possible boundary enclosure, whose lower-lying area has since been heavily disturbed by flooding and subsequent agricultural activity. Evidence of the site's association with an early monastery was not substantiated, though the site's character still suggests a former centre of some importance.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1996, whilst rebuilding a wall on his croft at Ballachly, landowner George Bethune discovered the upper portion of a probable upright cross-slab, which would come to be known as the *c* 7th century 'Ballachly Stone' (illus 1), subsequently followed by the unearthing of fragments from a further stone in the same vicinity (illus 2), a later interlaced cross-slab (Blackie & Macauley 1998: 9–10). With the 19th century discovery of the silver penannular 'Achavrole (Dunbeath) Brooch' of early 8th century date nearby (Anderson 1880), speculation about the site's early medieval (and possibly ecclesiastical) significance increased, already augmented by its

substantial radiating stone walls, ruins on top of its hill and local historic accounts of a chapel or monastery and associated churchyard (illus 3). However, investigation itself remained limited to non-invasive surveys and historical sources, until the initiative was taken in 2007 to conduct further survey work and trial trenching, followed by a three-year excavation project led by a team from the University of Nottingham.

## SITE BACKGROUND

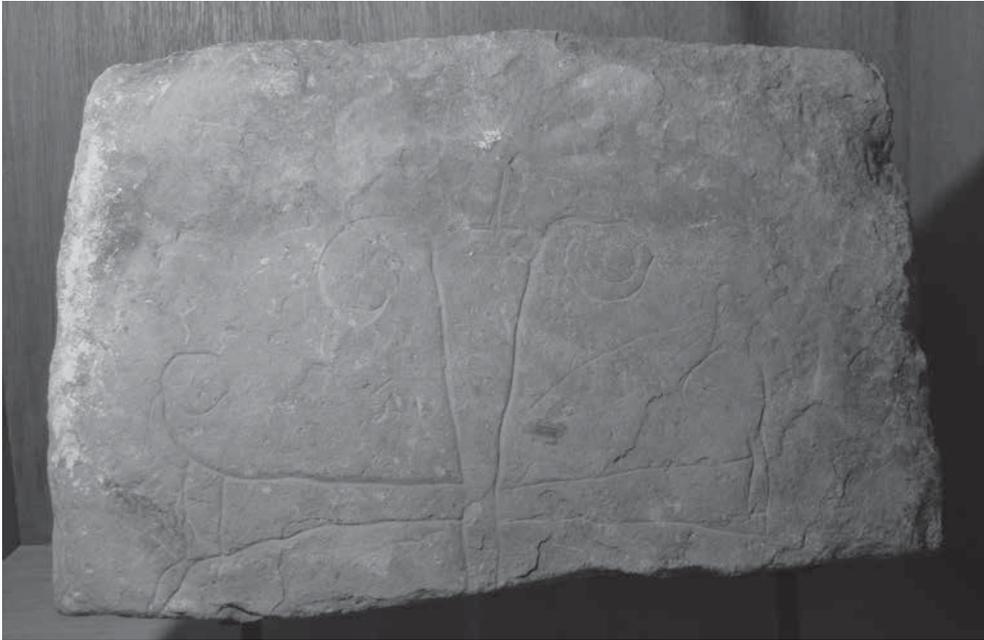
Ballachly is located at ND 1567 3035 in Dunbeath, Caithness, Highland Region, in the south-eastern parish of Latheron (illus 4), just over 1km from the sea. Chapel Hill lies

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ILLUS 1 Photograph of 'Ballachly Stone'



ILLUS 2 Photograph of interlaced stone

in a river valley just north of the main village settlement, at the point where the Houstry Burn and Dunbeath Water converge before opening out into the sea, a strath whose tranquil fauna and vegetation inspired much of the writing of Dunbeath's most famous citizen, local author Neil Gunn (eg Gunn 1937). Much of the site is a Scheduled Monument (Index Number 2704).

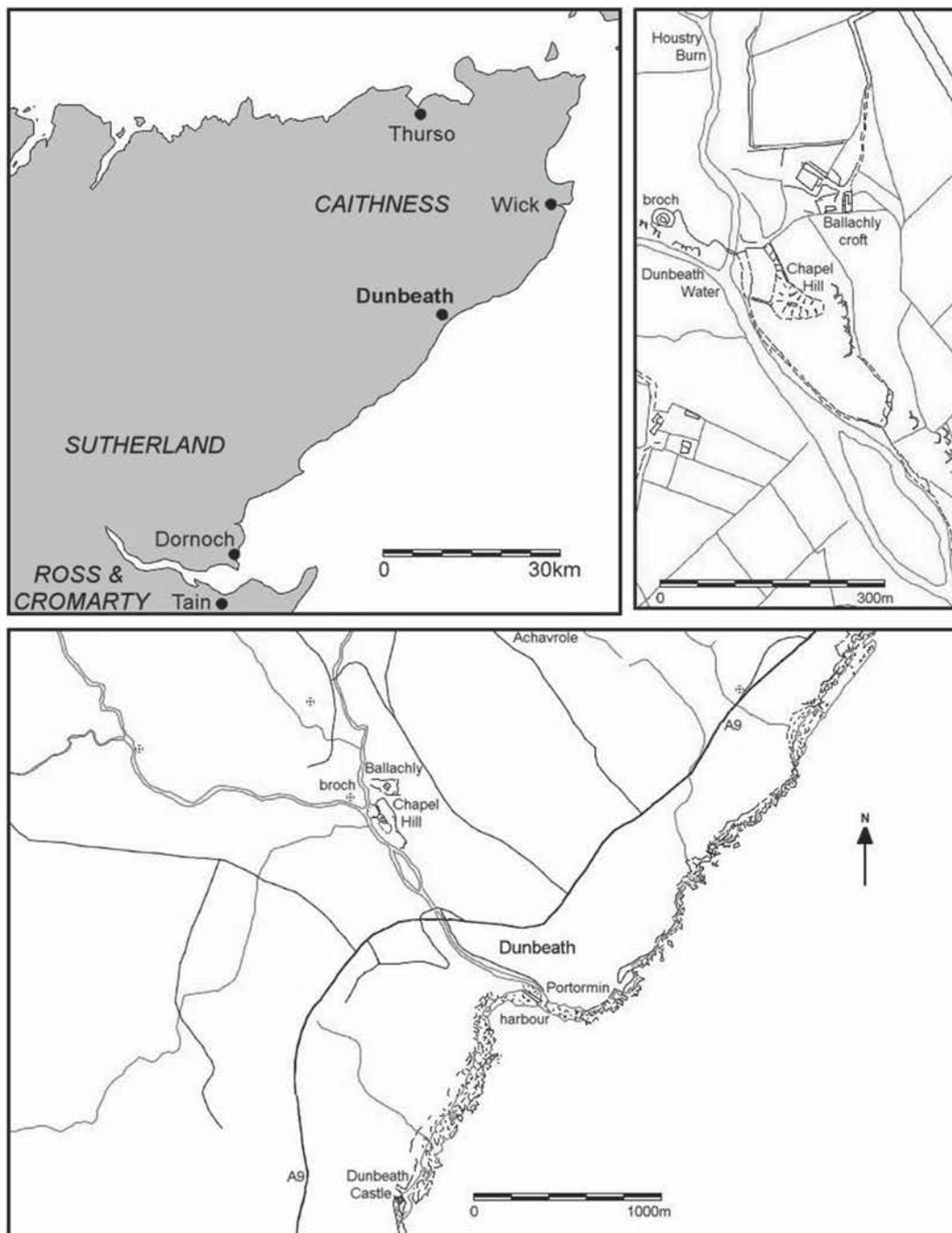
The geology is mostly composed of glacial sands and gravels (Berriedale Sandstone Formation), overlain in part by flood deposits from the river. Most of the site is low lying, but it is dominated by the central hillock, known as Chapel Hill, which forms the highest of three river valley terraces. Bounded by the Dunbeath Water and Houstry Burn, which forms a broad curve on the western and southern sides, the site is overlooked by high sandstone cliffs to the east, as well as the Dun Beath broch to the north-west, immediately opposite and in a prominent

position between the two waterways, and one of nine brochs of the strath area (RCAHMS site no ND13SE 17). Some of the present topography is of recent creation, most notably in the late 19th century when a path along the river was constructed, adjoining the site to the south and west, with the course of the burn also altered. The extant appearance is overall of a discrete space, defined by the burn's natural features and the high ground to the east, and dominated by Chapel Hill (illus 5).

On the top of the hill are a series of low walls, which form a roughly east/west aligned structure, initially thought to represent a late medieval or post-medieval chapel and described as such in the scheduling. Apart from these remains, the most notable man-made features of the site are two walls running out from the base of the hill, known from previous surveys as Wall A and Wall B, and a third, Wall C, on a



ILLUS 3 Overview of Ballachly from the south, with Chapel Hill and Wall A in the centre and the croft behind

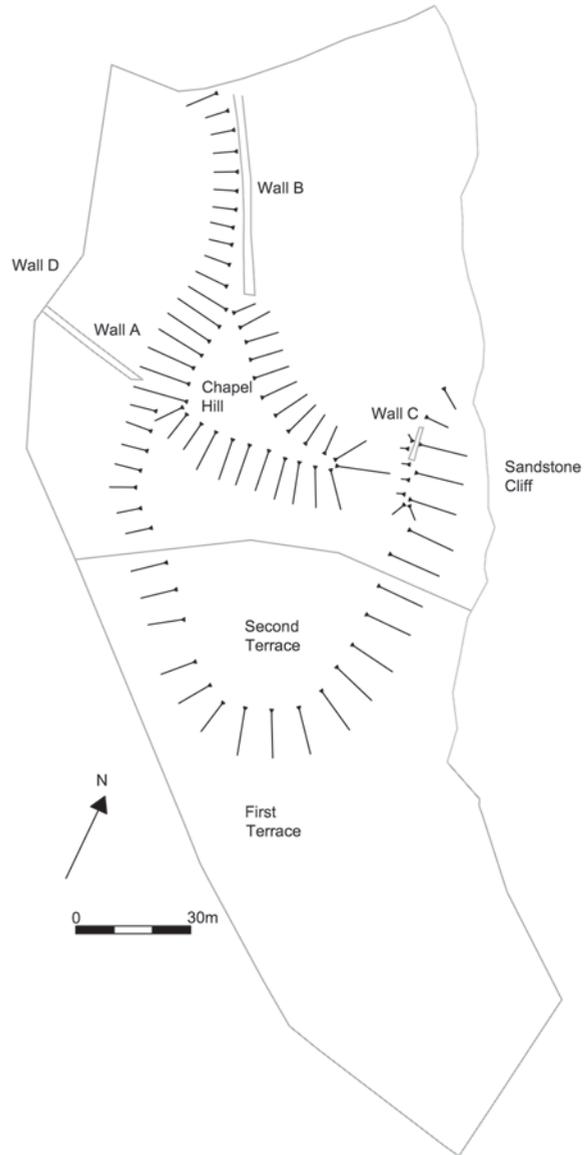


ILLUS 4 Site map

north/south ridge, which is less substantial than the other two.<sup>1</sup> A fourth wall, Wall D, runs along the side of the footpath bordering the Dunbeath Water, before turning north, with survey work by the landowner, Mr Bethune, indicating that a corresponding wall runs along the crest of the northern cliff, effectively enclosing the site. There are suggestions that Wall C may have continued to join the base of Chapel Hill to the east, but it has been mostly removed by cutting through the tail of the hill to form the eastern Drayhorse entrance. Chapel Hill, together with the low-lying terrace to the west bounded by Wall A and Wall B, form the scheduled area, the latter which was thought to represent the area of a graveyard, where antiquarian evidence suggested the disturbance of graves during flooding (see below).

The previous discovery of two Early Christian inscribed stones that dated roughly to between the 7th and the 10th centuries augmented the evidence for an ecclesiastical site in the vicinity. The latter of these (Ballachly 2; RCAHMS site no ND13SE 133), now in three fragments, is what has been interpreted as the arm of an interlace cross of similar style to that on the upper panel of the ‘MacAlister’ cross-shaft at Rothesay on Bute (Fisher 2001: 80–1), though no precise parallels can be drawn. The former (Ballachly 1) is an even more unusual example of a cross-slab which appears to depict a cross either suspended or on a standard, with non-uniform cruciform attributes, elements of a tentative Chi-Rho and an associated fish symbol.<sup>2</sup> Often linked to baptismal waters, such as wells, the latter symbol also features in Irish and Welsh contexts, as at Llandeilo, Pembrokeshire and Fuerty, Co. Roscommon, of 7th to 8th century

date (Edwards 2007: 332–3; Lionard 1961: 120, fig 15.1). A Merovingian parallel at Cheminot (Moselle) also has a fish and cross and dates to the 7th century (Salin 1952: fig 86), whilst at Mayence in Germany, an example of a hanging cross depiction dates a century earlier (ibid: fig 42), and with the spiralled arm treatment of the



ILLUS 5 Plan of main features of site

expanded cross-arms, suggestive of Ionan and Irish work, the stone is not easily paralleled in western Scotland (Sheehan 1994; Fisher 2001, 23). With the additional recent discovery of the contentious Anglo-Saxon and Viking runes of the 'Portormin Stone' (illus 4) from the nearby beach (A Jones & M K C MacMahon pers comms), the significance of the site's sculpture is made apparent, even if nothing more can be ascertained about their source of production.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Documentation for Ballachly is very limited, though common for Early Christian sites in general in Scotland, and whilst a possible reference to the adjacent broch rather than the centre at Chapel Hill, the Annals of Ulster refer to the siege of Dún Baite in AD 680 (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983: 147). The place name itself is probably derived from *baile claidh* ('town of the burial ground') (Beaton 1909: 63). Timothy Pont's map, compiled from data assembled in the late 16th century and printed in 1613, shows 'Bal na chty', presumably Ballachly, as it is correctly positioned and marked conventionally with a church (illustrated and discussed in Morrison 1996: 74–5). The first reference to the existence of an ecclesiastical site is in *Macfarlane's Geographical Collections* (1726), which noted that:

Within a mile of the sea, upon the brink of this [Dunbeath] water is the chapel of Balclay. It is certain it was built in the time of poperie, and I can give no further account of it (Macfarlane 1726: 164, in Mitchell and Clark (eds) 1907).

A rather fuller reference is found in Bishop Forbes' report on his visit to Caithness in 1762:

A little north of the Castle, we cross the Water of Dunbeath, in which are plenty of Salmon and Trout, in a ford much like the above. On the North bank of this Water, on a little rising ground are the Ruins of a Religious House, of which I could get no account till I came to Thurso, where Dr Sinclair, a sensible, intelligent Gentleman, told

me it had been a small monastery called of old, the Chapel or Church of Peace. There is still a stone wall round the rising ground, which would appear to have been a garden of late (in Craven 1886: 191).

A further mention of the ecclesiastical site can be found in the Ordnance Survey *Name Books* for the parish of Latheron, in 1871:

The chapel and graveyard are said to have existed, the former from tradition, collected in the vicinity up till the dawn of the Reformation, and the latter till a much later period. A portion of it being still visible during the last century. The greater part of it was swept away, the coffins having been seen carried away by a great flood that took place, the 'burn of Houstry' overflowing its banks and submerging the graveyard, carrying away the greater portion of it. Little of it was exposed to view after that (*Latheron Name Book* 1871).

The First Edition 25-inch Ordnance Survey map of 1871 locates the graveyard not on the hill (where burial would have been difficult) but on the low ground at its base. The *Name Book* also provides information about the existence of a priest's house which was said to have stood on rising ground above the junction of the Houstry Burn and the Dunbeath Water, and stated that it was incorporated into later buildings. Therefore, the likeliest location of the priest's house may be on Chapel Hill, where the excavations have revealed several phases of building (see below).

A clue to the dedication of the foundation at Ballachly can perhaps be traced in the inventory of goods in Dunbeath Castle in 1501, which includes some ecclesiastical fitments – a statue of the Holy Virgin, made of bone (or possibly ivory), a gilt cross and a statue of St Ninian and St Magnus, possibly on the same stand. Whilst St Ninian represents the native ecclesiastical tradition, St Magnus was the native saint of the Norse in Orkney, with the cathedral in Kirkwall dedicated to him. Therefore, it has been suggested that the presence of a statue of Magnus in Dunbeath might point to a strong local association with the saint, possibly even

connected with the use of the name in the title of a burgh, *Magnusburgh*, in Dunbeath (Crawford 1990: 15), thereby tentatively tying both the church treasures and Magnus affiliation to the foundation at Ballachly itself.

As a trading burgh created under royal licence to John Sinclair of Geanies at Inver, Dunbeath in 1624 (Crawford 1990: 15), Magnusburgh's Charter lists 12 townships, ending with 'Ballachlay et Innurie'. Although it is usually assumed from this that the burgh was planned to be at Inver, there is no other evidence as to the intended location, and it may be possible that the chosen site was indeed Ballachly. The charter states that '*... et respectu ejus situationis et magne multitudinis populorum quotidie ad eam reparantium magnum commoditatem subiditis regis afferent si in burgum erigeritur...*' (*Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum*, 689, 30 July 1624, in Morrison 1996, 82), which has been suggested by Morrison to be a reference to its 'large multitude of people' and an aggrandising attempt to be granted a market and an annual fair, or in this case two, without the creation of a full burgh of barony (ibid: 82). Although Magnusburgh was not developed, it appears again with market and fairs in 1657 with reference to:

the toune of Innurie with lands, tenements &c. erected into ane burghe of baroney to be callit the burgh of Magnus-burghe, with libertie of welie mercat and faires, all erected into the barroney of Dunbeath (*Inquisitionum ad capellam domini regis retornatarum quae in publicis archivis scotiae adhuc servantur*, 25, 15 April 1657, in Morrison 1996: 161–2).

Thereafter it continues to be referred to into the late 18th century (ibid: 121), although an antiquarian photograph from c 1860s depicting a long-distance view of the site includes an indeterminate feature which appears situated along Wall D (illus 6), evocative of a tower-like structure and burgh defence at this time, though

of course not distinct enough for more than speculation.

#### REGIONAL BACKGROUND

Lowland Caithness was (and remained) overall a scarcely populated region, with no village in the whole of the Latheron parish until the 1790s. The area is characterised by its dearth of notable archaeological record between the Early Iron



ILLUS 6 Antiquarian photograph from c 1860 of Ballachly taken from the road to the south, with an indeterminate tower-like structure situated along Wall D

Age and later Norse era, with the exception of the distinctive 'wag' houses which are almost exclusive to Latheron, including the Wag of Forse (Omand 1993b: 21; Gourlay 1993b: 111–12). Given the difficulty in often distinguishing its 'Pictish' structures and agricultural landscape from those of the earlier Iron Age, little is known of its true history and development during the first millennium AD, with few, if any, of the high status fortified hillforts and dun sites which are prominent elsewhere in Scotland, such as Craig Phadrig at Inverness. Instead, the sculptural remains stand almost alone in their evidence, whether the generally pre-Christian Class I Symbol Stones or the Class II relief depictions which incorporate crosses into their iconography, including two ogham-inscribed stones from Keiss Bay Links and Latheron itself, attesting to Irish links (ibid: 112–17).

As with Ballachly, tradition and suggestive features, including sculpture, are all that

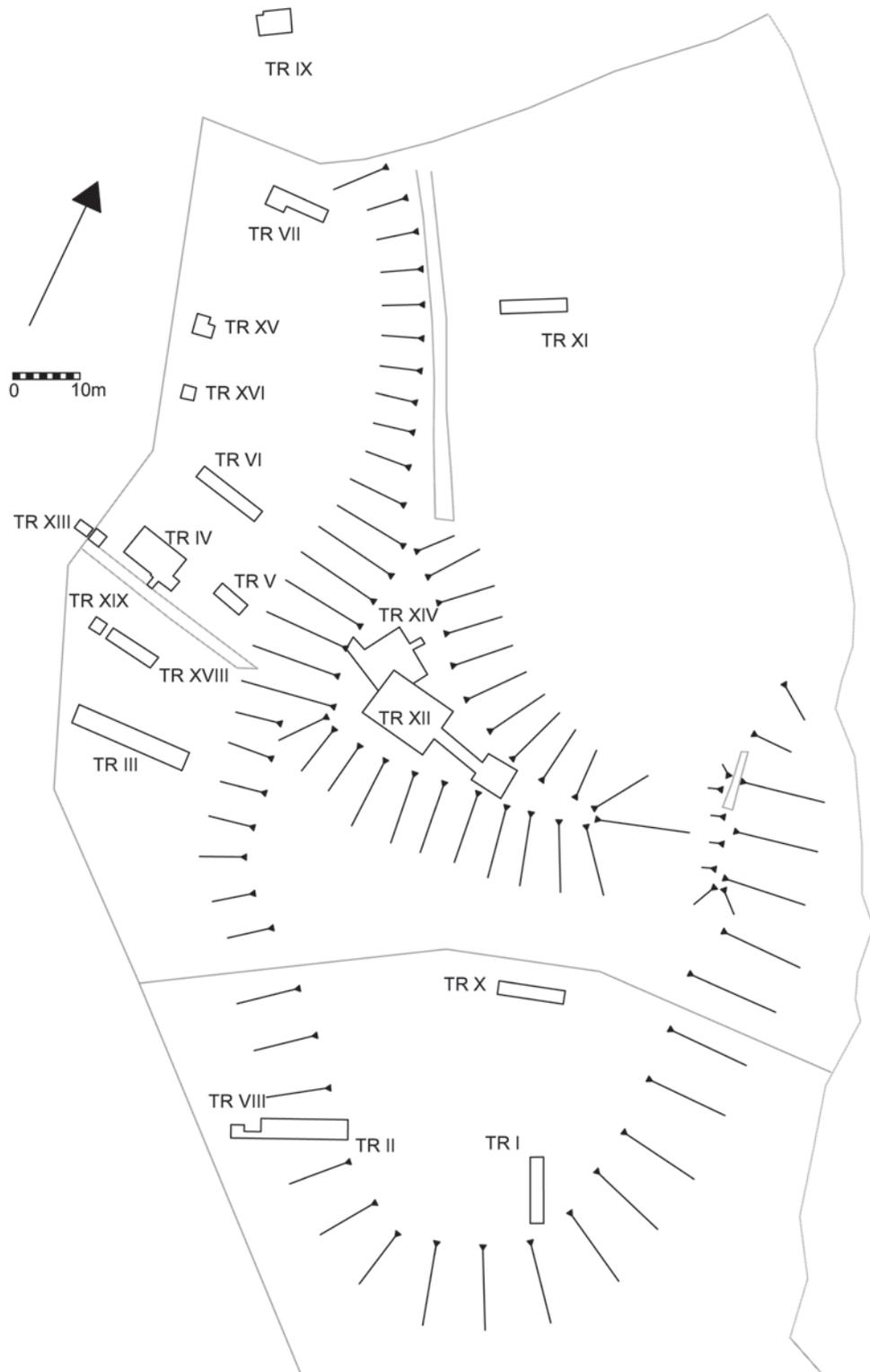
indicate possible ‘Celtic’ monastic sites in the region, for example, the promontory wall at Neck of Brough along Caithness’ northern coast, whose light build and position suggest a post-Iron Age date and superfluous use as defence (RCAHMS site no ND07SE 1), or the ‘chapel’ at nearby St John’s Point in which an incised cross-slab was uncovered (Nicolson 1922: 66–7). Although Caithness was an area largely comprised of Norse place names, there was a scattering of those with Celtic origins which survived the subsequent centuries of Scandinavian settlement, particularly in the Latheron region, including Dunbeath/*Dùn Bheathadh* (‘hillfort of the birch’), Latheron (‘mire, puddle’), and of course Ballachly itself (Omand 1993b: 21; Waugh 1993: 120–1), emphasising how strongly the influence of the indigenous population was retained in the area, even after Scandinavian colonisation.

Clearly, in the centuries of Viking occupation, Caithness was drawn into its maritime world, even becoming part of a political unit tied to the offshore earldom of Orkney, though as part of the Kingdom of Scotland as well, the situation was complex (Crawford 1993: 129–30). Although little is known of Dunbeath’s history in the so-called Viking Age, its position halfway between Helmsdale and Wick has made it a potential contender for the ‘hospital’ in the Latheron region at which an envoy passed the night in 1290 on their way to Kirkwall (Crawford 1982, 62–3), a pilgrimage stopover which would presumably coincide with the relics on the castle’s inventory. Wick (*Vik*) itself warranted mention in the *Orkneyinga Saga* and was the only noted settlement in Caithness in contemporary medieval maps, with its late 12th- or 13th-century castle a presumed Norse fortification (Omand 1993a: 11–12; Gourlay 1993a: 14). Much of the so far identified major Norse activity in Caithness is situated along its northern or north-eastern coast, such as the fish-rich middens at Robertshaven (RCAHMS site no ND37SE 4) and settlement at Freswick Links, suggesting Late Norse processing centres/

stations (Batey 1987), or the Viking burials at Castlehill, Reay and Thurso (RCAHMS site nos ND16NE 11; NC96NE 13; ND16NW 17). Norse activity in the southern part of the county is even more scarce and limited to such settlements as Lybster, where Scandinavian settlers took over what may have been a Pictish monastic site (Omand 1993b, 21).

Despite traditional notions of hostility between the Scandinavian incomers and native populace, even amongst the elite, including hostility between the Earls of Orkney and the native aristocracy, an influential mixed Celto-Norse culture was also created, leaving a lasting imprint on the region. Emerging alliances in particular between the native Gaelic speakers and Scandinavians were generated, including the intermarriage of Thorfinn Torf-Einarsson and his family, who are recorded as securing the support of the Scots kings against the Mormaer of Moray in the 10th century (Crawford 1987: 64–7). By the 11th century, the Norwegian crown accepted that Caithness was held as a fiefdom by the Orkney Earls from the Kings of Scotland, though with its Norse character retained, and with a similar situation in Sutherland to the south, as seen in Helmsdale’s Celto-Norse status (Imsen 2009: 11–12), Dunbeath’s diverse cultural position can be placed into context.

Situated upon one of the highest cliff-top shorelines in Caithness, the prominent castle at Dunbeath was first recorded in 1428, with its first lord Alexander Sutherland, whose daughter subsequently passed ownership on to the Sinclair family through marriage (RCAHMS site no ND12NE 1; Miller 1979: 146). Throughout the later and post-medieval era it changed hands numerous times, including multiple branches of the Sinclair families and capture by the Marquis of Montrose in 1650, often grouped with estates in Freswick, Keiss and Latheron (ibid: 147–9), the latter whose parish church was first built in 1734, though it may have been a site of ecclesiastical foundation in medieval times, possibly the ‘hospital’ along the pilgrimage route



ILLUS 7 Plan of trenches

to Kirkwall (Crawford 1982). As with many of the maritime centres of the region, the herring fisheries became prosperous in the 18th and especially the 19th centuries, despite its small harbour (Omand 1993c: 24), with croft-farming along the waterways of the interior, reflecting a range in industrial practices, as particularly drawn out at sites such as Ballachly, whose location and landscape features met a number of settlement needs.

#### PREVIOUS WORK

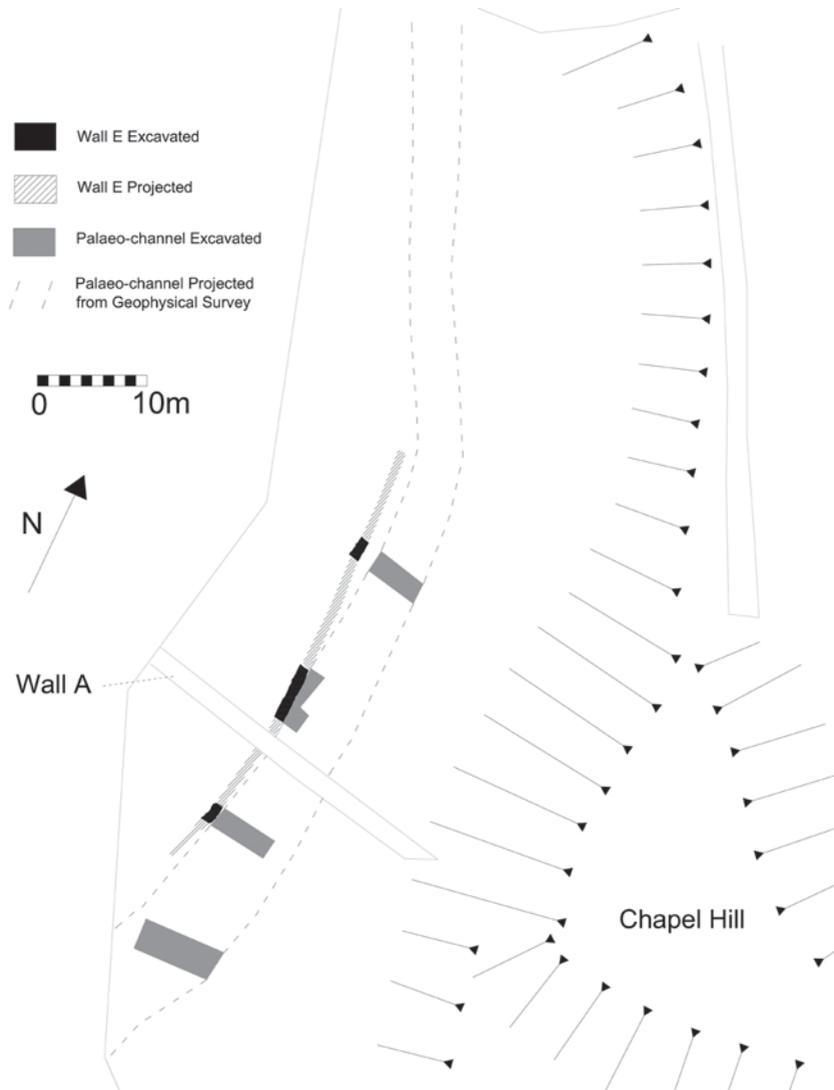
The most recent work prior to the present project were two phases of non-invasive survey carried out by GUARD Archaeology in 1998 and 2002, on behalf of the Dunbeath Heritage Trust and Historic Scotland (Banks & Hooper 2003), following the discovery by Mr Bethune of Ballachly 1 and 2 in a wall on the croft two years previously. Some of the results were very ambiguous as the site is not very susceptible to geophysical survey, thus further surveys were carried out in 2008 and 2009 as part of this programme of research, using resistivity and magnetometry, including a re-surveying of some of the area previously covered. In addition, a reconnaissance test traverse using ground penetrating radar (GPR) was carried out by Orkney Research Centre for Archaeology (ORCA) in 2008, followed up by a more extensive survey in 2009 (Saunders 2009). The results of these surveys were largely inconclusive, with little clear evidence of occupation, which was principally due to underlying glacial geology being of a nature unsuitable for geophysics, particularly resistivity, which mainly detected differences in the composition of the gravel terraces. However, the survey did suggest the presence of a ditch, or palaeo-channel, running roughly north/south to the west of Chapel Hill, which became the focus for both the targeted GPR and the excavated trenches, as well as another ditch which ran around the crown of the second terrace.

#### METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

The excavations had the overall aims of investigating the chronological development and functions of the site, with specific reference to the claim that it was an early medieval monastery and the historical references to Magnusburgh, achieved through a phased approach over four seasons, between 2007 and 2010. Broadly these aims can be split into three areas: to characterise the archaeology of the wider area of the lower and second terraces defined by Wall D to the west and the cliff to the east; to characterise the archaeology of the lower terrace within the scheduled area; and to clarify the development and function of the structures on Chapel Hill.

A pilot season in 2007 was aimed mainly at elucidating the results of the GUARD geophysical survey by re-surveying part of the area using resistivity and supplemental magnetometry. This led to targeted trenching outside the scheduled area, largely to calibrate the results of the survey and also start to characterise the archaeology in the area (illus 7). The second season in 2008 was aimed at continuing to characterise the area bounded by Wall D, outside the scheduled area, while also targeting trenches within it. Following this, the third season in 2009 continued to test outside the scheduled area, but the main activity was focused on the lower terrace and the top of Chapel Hill to investigate the evolution of the structures there. The 2010 season was centred almost entirely on Chapel Hill, with excavation concentrating on the area outside the buildings. On agreement with Historic Scotland, works inside the scheduled area were designed to elucidate the nature and extent of archaeological remains with the minimal amount of invasive investigation; as such archaeological remains and features were uncovered and left in situ.

Excavation was directed and supervised by a small research team from the University of Nottingham, who also oversaw much of the post-excavation work, including specialist analysis. Full stratigraphic details, finds records and the artefacts themselves are contained in the



ILLUS 8 Plan of palaeo-channel and Wall E, the latter encountered in Trenches XVIII, IV and VI

site archive deposited in the Dunbeath Heritage Centre.

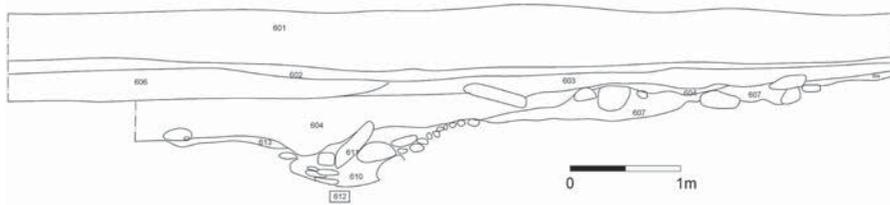
## RESULTS

### INVESTIGATIONS OF THE FIRST TERRACE

As one of the large walls radiating from Chapel Hill, Wall A remains one of the site's most prominent features, and along with Wall B and

Chapel Hill itself, seems to form an enclosed area which first attracted the initial scheduling and, as such, naturally became a focus for exploration. The archaeological investigations revealed a sequence of features of which little was expected and arguably raises more questions than answers.

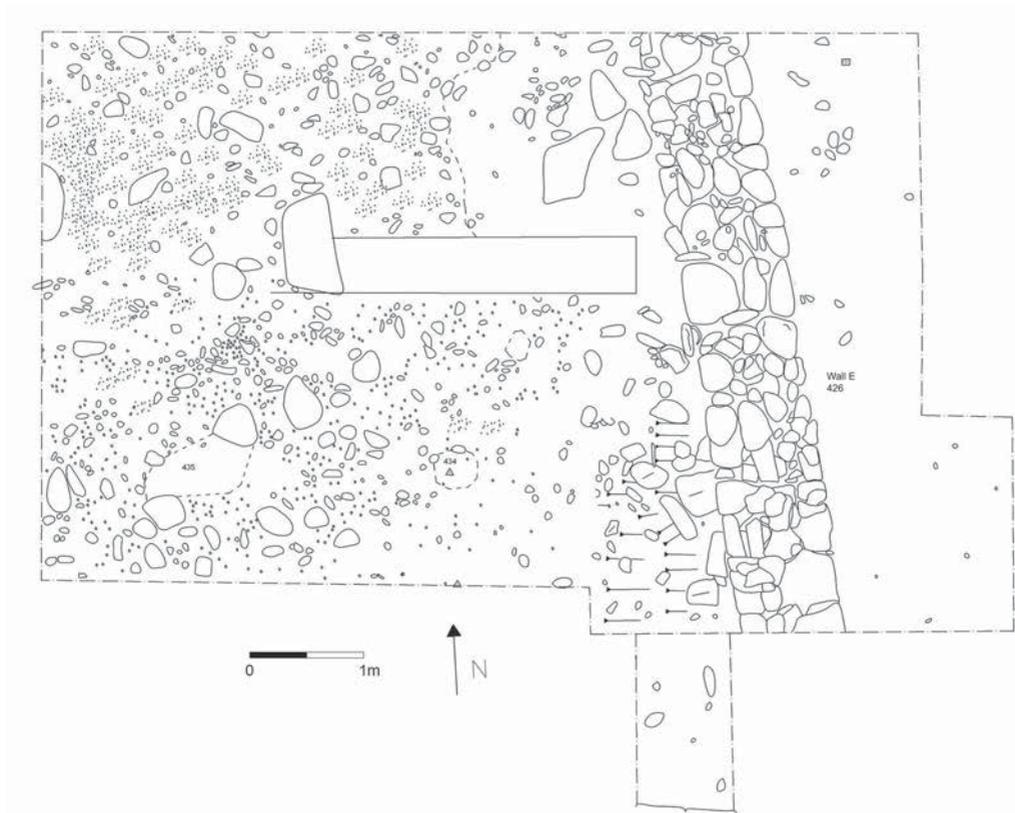
It became apparent that the earliest feature recognised was a palaeo-channel which ran in



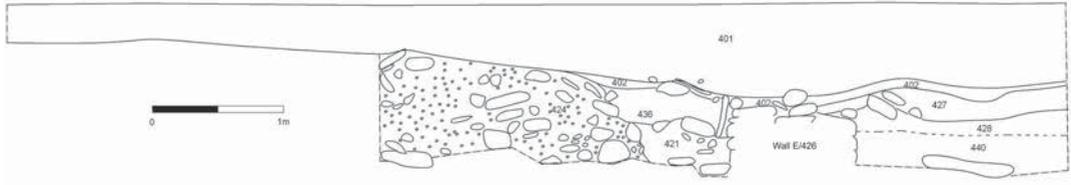
ILLUS 9 Section (south-facing) in Trench VI, showing ditch/palaeo-channel composition

a roughly north to south direction towards the eastern edge of the terrace. Indications of the channel were apparent at several points along the lower terrace, and were encountered in excavation in Trenches IV, VI and XVIII (illus 8), closely corresponding with results from both the resistivity and ground-penetrating radar surveys. The channel had formed through

natural layers of gravel terrace deposits which were apparent both to its west and east. Its upper fills consisted of a series of silts, which indicate that it probably contained water at some point, formed above a layer of large stones and boulders that are likely to have been deposited during high energy flooding events (illus 9), as apparent in the current



ILLUS 10 Plan of Trench IV, showing Wall E and ditch/palaeo-channel flood infill



ILLUS 11 Section (south-facing) in Trench IV

course of the Dunbeath Water. Only the later silting contained cultural material in the form of pottery, which dated to the 15th and 16th centuries, although a radiocarbon date from

the primary fill dated from *c* AD 1000. This broad date range indicates that the channel gradually silted over a long period and formed a long-lived feature on the site. Environmental

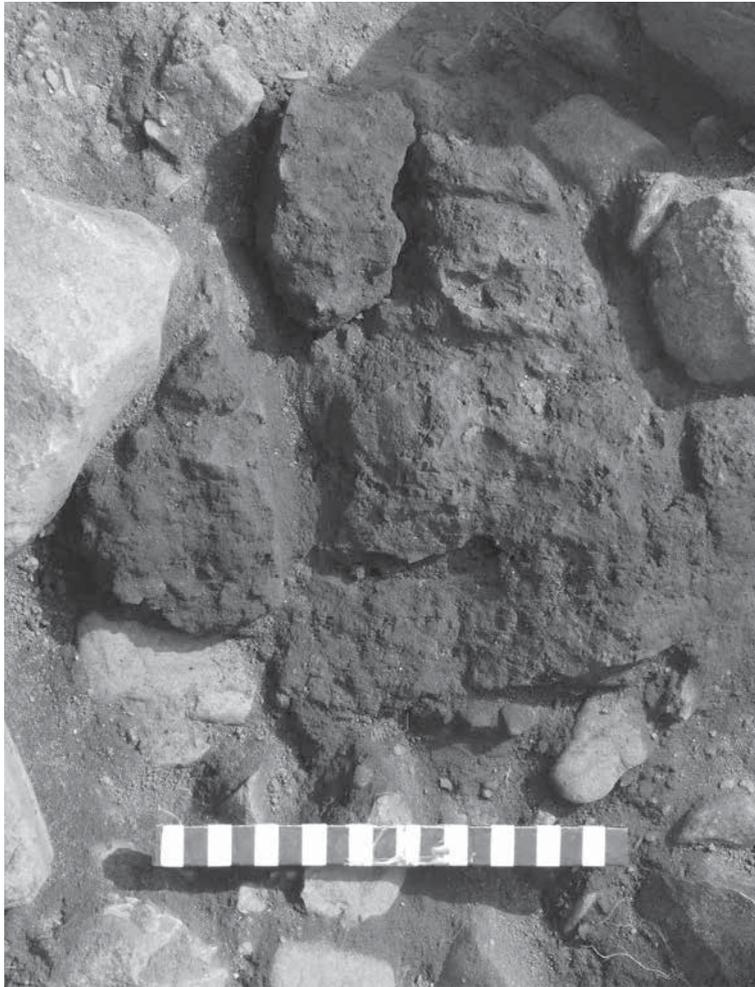


ILLUS 12 Photograph of Wall E in Trench IV (from north)

samples from the ditch were indicative of flood deposits which contained oats and barley, as well as fuel ash. It is unclear whether the channel was deliberately re-cut and utilised as a ditch, although such a prominent feature could possibly have been used as a delineating aspect of the site, especially given the later construction of a wall along its edge.

Whilst the channel was only partially silted, a wall (Wall E) was constructed along its western edge, directly on the silt and with a rough cobble foundation (illus 10 & 11). This wall was best

preserved in Trench IV, where its greatest stretch was uncovered (illus 12), and here survived to a height of up to four courses (c 0.6m) and 1m wide. Evidence for the wall was also uncovered in Trench VI, though more poorly preserved, as well as south of Wall A in Trench XVIII, confirming it as part of a substantial feature running along the western side of the site. In Trench VI a second wall, only 0.5m wide, was discovered immediately to the east running on a seemingly parallel course. Although the presence of the narrower, less well-constructed



ILLUS 13 Photograph of hearth lining in Trench IV (from west)



ILLUS 14 Photograph of Wall A with 'blocked-in' gap, from south

eastern wall seems to indicate a structure of a different phase or function, unfortunately there was no stratigraphic relationship between the two, making it impossible to say which came first or indeed if they were contemporary.

It was apparent that the channel was still partially open at this time and, along with Wall E, seems to have enclosed the western area of the first terrace, which may have formed a much larger area than it is today; the current course of the adjacent Houstry Burn bordering the west of the site may well have been formed much later. The palaeo-channel continued to silt up, as indicated by silts abutting the possible enclosure wall. At a subsequent point, Wall E appears to have been deliberately slighted. The lack of demolition material leads to the conclusion that the wall was deliberately demolished rather than left to collapse. The reason for this demolition is unclear but it may

be related to a re-organisation of the site in an attempt to better utilise the area. Activity upon the palaeo-channel silts was indicated by the presence of a hearth in Trench IV (illus 13), while further activity was also indicated by the discovery of a displaced bottom of a furnace or hearth, fired to a considerable temperature and then cooled slowly, possibly relating to industrial activity. Shallow hearths or working scoops extending onto the gravel terrace to the west indicate that activity is likely to have continued.

This whole sequence was sealed by an extensive mixed, midden-like deposit with much evidence for burning and fragments of burnt clay, including a tentative tuyère fragment, which could possibly be related to industrial waste activity or widespread destruction deposits, and perhaps significantly, the context was not encountered beyond Wall

A to the south. Environmental samples from this layer contained fuel ash slag, cinder, coal, barley, oats, heather and possible peat residue, along with vegetal tempered pottery and late-medieval wheel-thrown wares dating broadly

may have been truncated by later agricultural activity and flooding events. This deposit formed the latest cultural layer in the area to the north of Wall A.

It was at this time, or possibly later, that

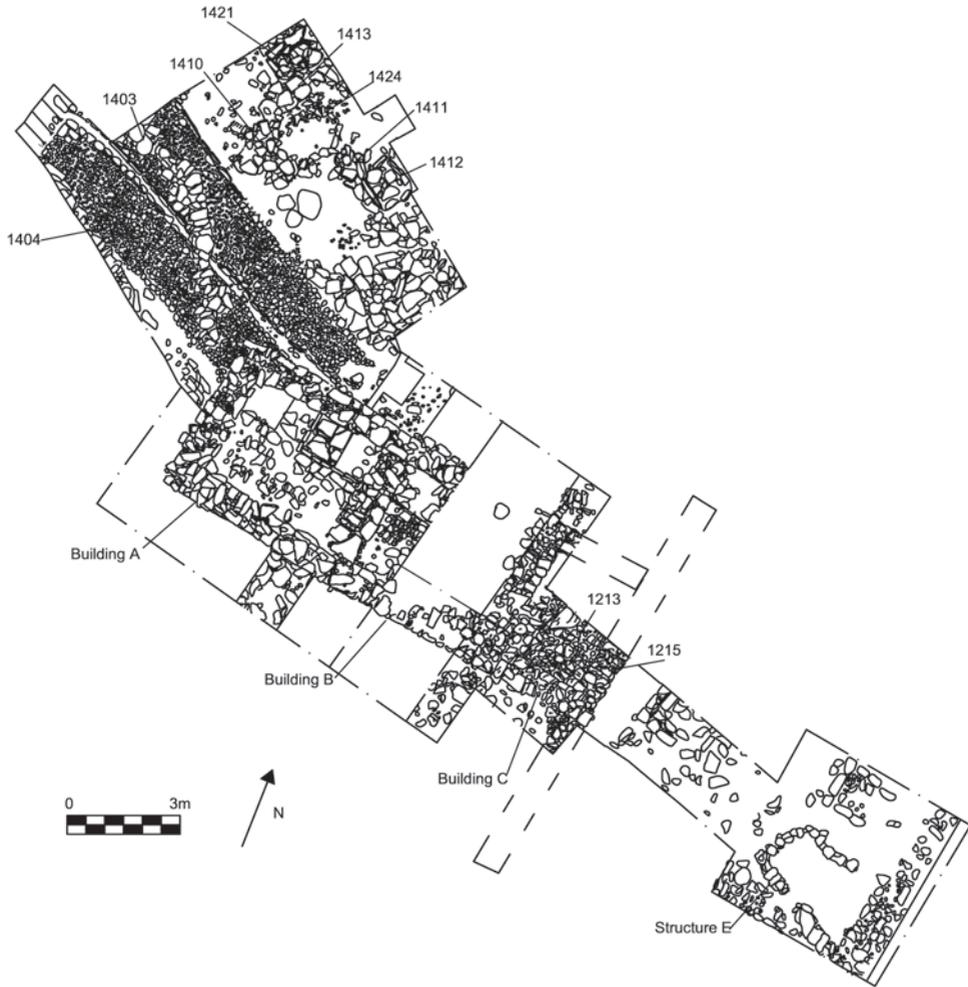
Wall A was constructed (illus 14). Although investigations provided no direct dating evidence, we can infer from several clues its position in the sequence. Wall A was built directly upon the gravel terrace, and was certainly built after the palaeo-channel had silted up and Wall E had been demolished. A further clue is that the extensive 'midden' deposit sealing the archaeological feature in Trenches IV and VI did not also occur in the trenches to the south, which suggests that Wall A existed by this time. As such, a date of construction in the 15th century is possible, though a later date is certainly feasible. Its function is less clear, as if constructed contemporaneously with the 'midden' deposit to the north, it is curious that there were no further indications of archaeological activity in this area. It is possible that the shallow depth of the topsoil in parts, particularly directly on the gravels to the west of the



ILLUS 15 Photograph of Trench III cobbles (from west on Chapel Hill)

to the 14th or 15th centuries. Small traces of these deposits in the western part of the trench indicate that it extended across the whole area, though due to the shallow nature of the topsoil to the west of the palaeo-channel, *c.* 0.1m, it

former palaeo-channel, may have caused some truncation of archaeological deposits, however the construction of Wall A may have indicated a further reorganisation of the area, with activity now more focused elsewhere.

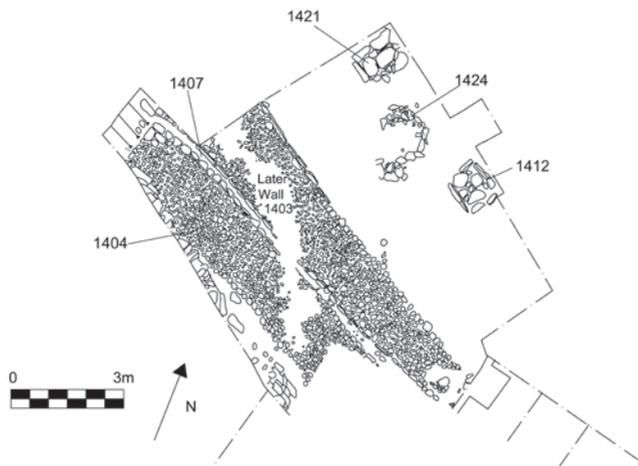


ILLUS 16 Plan of features on summit of Chapel Hill, Trenches XII and XIV

#### COBBLED AREA (WORKING SURFACE?) ON THE FIRST TERRACE

Evidence for activity encountered to the south of Wall A consisted mainly of an enigmatic cobbled surface, which was discovered on the first terrace in Trench III. The surface consisted of uniform sub-rounded stones, whose two parallel edges appeared to be running in a north-west/south-east direction (illus 15). The cobbles proved to have been laid in at least two phases, with the upper layer preceded by an earlier

phase, which was laid directly onto the silted palaeo-channel. Two body sherds of imported German Siegburg stoneware dating to the 15th to 16th centuries were recovered from between the cobbles, which are significant as they are not well represented in Caithness. The pottery helps to date the feature and indicates that it is likely to have been contemporaneous with Wall A to the north. The angle of the cobbles is curious as they do not align with any of the surrounding features such as the river or Chapel



ILLUS 17 Plan of earliest features on Chapel Hill: cobbles (1404), drain-like feature (1407) and working hearths (1412 and 1421)

Hill, making any interpretation as a pathway or road rather dubious. A function as a working surface is certainly plausible, as fragments of slag (totalling 0.4kg) were uncovered, although the presence of the imported pottery may hint at a commercial interpretation.

#### CHAPEL HILL

Along with the area of the first terrace, Chapel Hill formed part of the Scheduled Area, and the partially extant structures and adjacent piles of rubble on the flat summit area warranted further investigation. The structures were within the scheduled area, thereby placing restrictions on the level of intervention, meaning that only turf, topsoil and demolition rubble could be cleared to archaeological levels, though due to the thin topsoil and lack of subsequent agricultural activity, a remarkable, and largely unexpected, sequence was observed (illus 16).

The first phase of activity was represented by a surface of well-laid cobbles (1404) measuring  $10.4 \times 3.4\text{m}$  (illus 17 & 18), with a central gully of angled slabs running along its length (1407). This feature sloped towards the centre (east) of

Chapel Hill, into an area which was obscured by later structures, with the cobbles appearing to form finished western and northern edges, underpinned by larger slabs along the latter, suggesting there was a need to strengthen the northern edge. The function of the gully and the cobbled surface is unclear, although several interpretations are possible, including a drain water-collection, or an industrial use. What is clear is that the cobbles were much earlier than the partially extant structures on the hill as they both overlay the cobbles and were on a completely different alignment.

To the north of the cobbled surface were two sub-rectangular stone-slabbed areas, delineated by stones set on end,  $1.1 \times 1.3\text{m}$  (1421) and  $1.1 \times 1.2\text{m}$  (1412), the former of which contained burnt clay, suggesting its use as a hearth. The burnt clay in hearth 1421 only survived due to being sealed by a later wall, and it is highly likely that the second structure (1412) was a hearth as well, albeit with the absence of burnt material. In addition there were other partial stone alignments suggesting a semi-circular feature adjacent to the slabbed areas (1424),  $c. 1.4 \times 1.6\text{m}$ . There was no direct stratigraphic

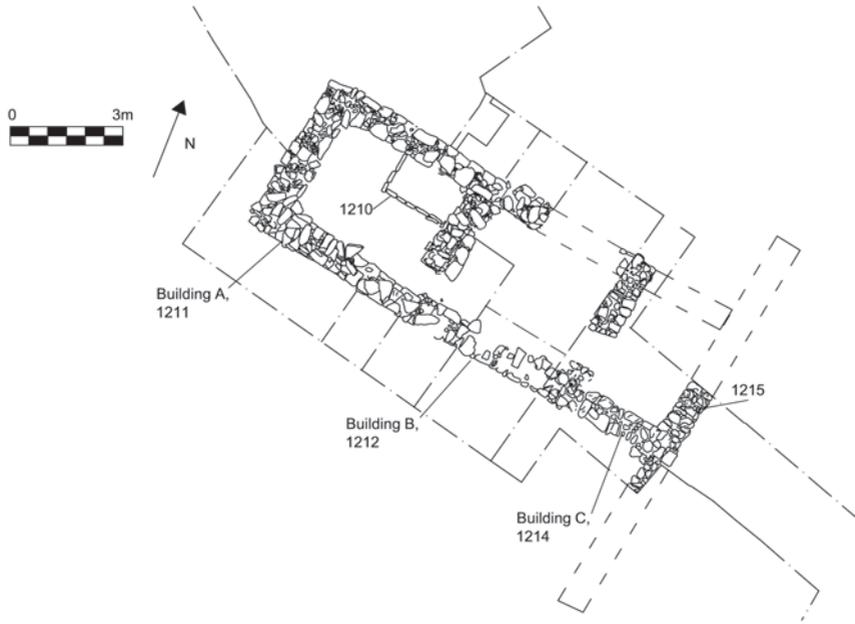


ILLUS 18 Photograph of cobbles and drain-like feature, also showing the relationship with Building A at the top of the photograph (from west)

relationship of the hearths with this early phase; as such they have been assigned to this phase based upon them being on a similar alignment to the cobbles.

The second phase consisted of the construction of a stone structure (1211, Building A) measuring  $5.2 \times 4.6\text{m}$  externally, with walls *c* 0.8m wide, and an entrance in the south-east corner, 0.8m wide (illus 19 & 20). A sondage in the north-west corner, undertaken with permission from Historic Scotland to obtain

dating evidence, revealed that this section was built upon the south-western area of cobbles (1404), but that they were removed within its interior where they would have extended beneath the floor. Significantly, Building A was constructed on a different alignment, and this, coupled with the cobble removal, suggests that it was built with no knowledge of their presence, implying there was a break in occupation. In the north-east angle of the building, a slab-lined feature (1210) (illus 21) was constructed,

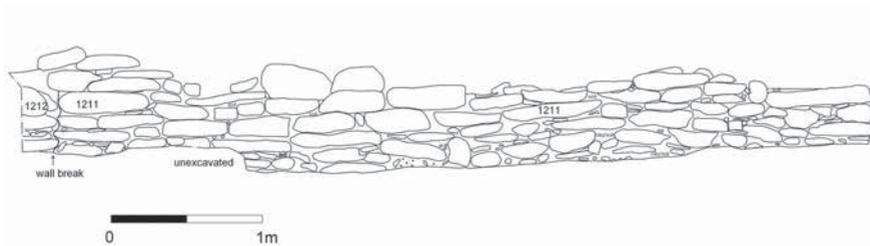


ILLUS 19 Plan of relationship of Buildings A–C on Chapel Hill

measuring  $2.0 \times 1.5\text{m}$  approximately, composed of upright slabs and with a slab floor. The largest of these uprights was about  $0.4\text{m}$  long and  $0.06\text{m}$  wide and rose to a height of about  $0.4\text{m}$  above the floor level. There were no archaeological indications for its function, and there is little evidence to suggest that it is contemporary with the construction of the original building, possibly having been added later. Patchy areas of clay on the floor of the structure, slumping out of the stone wall at various places, suggests

that the latter may have been mortared with clay, although this could again have been a later addition. At the western end of this northern wall, one of the exposed stone slabs in the top course was revealed to be marked with curved incised patterns (Ballachly 3 – see The Finds), presumably reused for construction at a later date.

Building A was later modified twice, firstly by an extension adding  $3.6\text{m}$  on to its eastern side (1212, Building B), with walls  $0.8\text{m}$  thick



ILLUS 20 Elevation (north-facing) of north wall of Building A on Chapel Hill

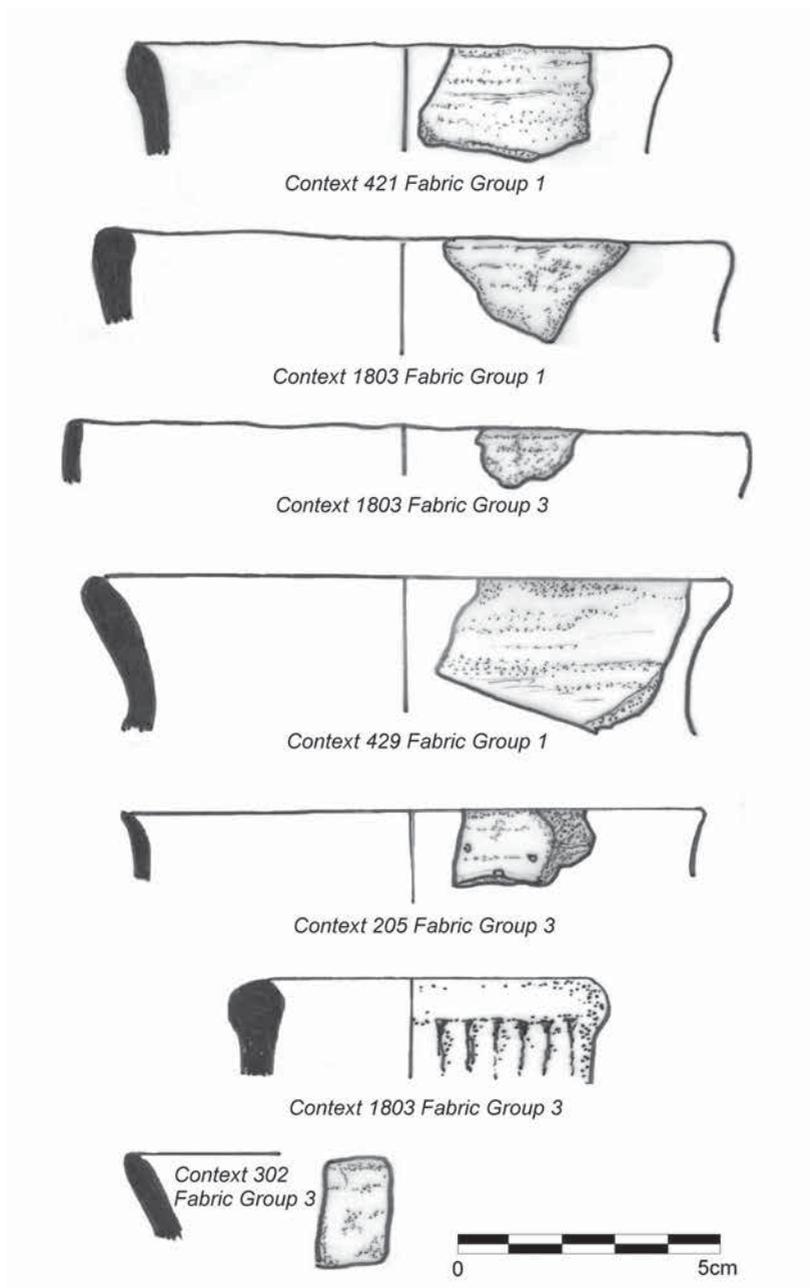


ILLUS 21 Photograph of slab-lined feature (1210) in Building A (from west)

and a partially cobbled floor (illus 19), though it could not be entirely cleared of tumble during excavation and therefore was not fully investigated. The second extension was to the east and extended Building B by a further 2.2m (1214, Building C), also a cobbled area (1213), although again the building was not fully cleared. This annex is of different construction to the structures to the west, involving the use of uprights, and appears to have had a southern entrance. Its eastern wall was clearly of a later

construction (1215), also built partially on the cobbles and running beyond the side walls across the width of Chapel Hill, though whether it replaced an earlier eastern wall of Building C is uncertain.

Further features were uncovered which could not be ascribed to any particular phase. At the eastern end of the hill an insubstantial robbed-out structure was encountered which was slightly trapezoidal (1216, Building E) and 2.86 × 1.2m (possibly up to 1.9m) internally,



ILLUS 22 Drawing of pottery rim sherds

comprising a single thickness of stones with up to three courses surviving (illus 16), unknown in function and date, although with what appears to be a line of paving in front. To the north of

Building A, two very denuded walls of poor construction (1403 and 1413) were uncovered above the cobbled surface (1404) and hearth (1421) respectively, possibly relating to later

use of the hill. Although only speculated, it is possible that the residual artefacts from Trench V's and XVIII's subsoil, sherds of pre-Norse pottery and a piece of copper alloy waste material which may be a possible mould ingate sprue, derived from activities on the top of Chapel Hill before being later disturbed and making their way to the base (see Discussion).

#### AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY ON THE FIRST AND SECOND TERRACES

Trenches I, II and VIII were excavated with the intent to investigate a low resistance linear anomaly revealed on the GUARD survey, which suggested the presence of a ditch encircling the top of the second terrace. Although no archaeological features were observed in Trench I, as the anomaly appeared to have been caused by a linear band of streams emanating from the terrace edge, excavation in II and VIII revealed that the natural stratigraphy of gravel, boulders and clay had been altered by agricultural activity, which was indicated by plough marks in the natural clay. Evidence for such activity was also uncovered downslope to the west onto the first terrace, accumulating in a considerable depth of soil, with natural mixed sand, gravel and large stones at its base. In addition, a much denuded wall was discovered in Trench II running along the edge of the second terrace, and may be equated with that visible on antiquarian photographs. Partial destruction of the wall by the 17th century was indicated by demolition deposits, dated by a Charles II bawbee discovered with the toppled stones.

#### THE FINDS

The finds were comparatively few in number, and, for the most part, badly preserved due to the adverse soil conditions. Apart from a fragment of waste from a possible casting sprue (from Trench V), three fragments of copper alloy were recovered from medieval contexts (Trenches

III and VI) and iron was also poorly preserved. Bone survived when it had been burnt.

#### THE POTTERY

##### *Fabric Group 1: Late Iron Age (c 6th to 10th century)*

This fabric was well-fired with fine sandy inclusions and flecks of mica, a feature also of the later pottery from the site which might point to a local source for the clay. The sherds were nearly all small and included only three rim sherds and one basal sherd (illus 22). Given the small size of most of the sherds (average size 6cm<sup>2</sup>), the minimum number of vessels could not be estimated. All seem to have come from hand-made flat-based jars with everted rims. The closest parallels for the material is from the Wag of Forse, Caithness, a few miles north of Ballachly where they are assumed to have been of 6th to 10th century in date (Curle 1940–1: Pl XII).

The late Iron Age pottery of Fabric Group 1 was almost all recovered from trenches at the base of the hill, with examples being found within Trenches III, IV, VI, VII, XV, XVI, XVII and XVIII, with the largest number coming from Trench XVIII (22) and only two sherds being recovered from the top of Chapel Hill. All this pottery was found associated with later pottery or was found in stratigraphically later deposits; as such, their exact provenance is unclear but does indicate a certain level of activity on this site in this period.

##### *Fabric Group 2: vegetal-tempered hand-made ware (c 11th to 14th century)*

The second category of pottery comprised a type of ware distinctive of late Norse contexts in Caithness and elsewhere in northern and western Scotland. This comprised hand-made pottery with vegetal tempering (not merely pottery with surface vegetal impressions) burnt out in the firing. At Freswick, Caithness, the medium appears to have been dung (Gaimster

1995: 137), but at Ballachly, as at Freswick, there were seed impressions on the surface of the vessels, most probably of oats. Typical of Ballachly and Freswick was 'sandwich' firing, with light buff exterior surfaces, though not all the sherds displayed this to the same degree, and some were dark brown throughout. The vegetal-tempered ware comprised featureless body sherds with two bases.

A total of 43 sherds were recovered, all from deposits at the base of the hill and with examples found in Trenches II, III, IV, V, VI, VII and XVIII. With the exception of three sherds from Trench XVIII, all were extremely abraded. The majority of the pottery was found in contexts associated with late medieval wheel-thrown ware, suggesting a later date for their use, although, given the high rate of residuality on this site, this is debateable. Sherds from the mixed industrial deposits in Trenches IV and VI represent the most secure deposits and are more likely to reflect a better chance of dating. Radiocarbon dating from layers associated with these deposits suggest a 14th- or 15th-century date.

This type of vegetal-tempered ware is represented as far north as Jarlshof, Shetland (Hamilton 1956: 187–9), and Kirkwall, Orkney (MacAskill 1982: 405), as well as Freswick (Curle 1939; Morris et al 1995: 136–8). At Jarlshof, the ware was in use into the 13th and 14th centuries, while at Freswick Castle it was in use in the 11th and late 13th to 14th centuries (Gaimster 1995: 137).

*Fabric Groups 3–6: late medieval wheel-made ware (15th to 16th century)*

Fabric Group 3: This fabric was an orange sandy ware with well-distributed angular quartz sand and mica inclusions and with sparse, irregular red iron oxide, some displaying partial thin yellow or orange glaze. This is the largest of the four fabric groups with 46 of 54 sherds, and again appears similar to Fabric 12 in the Freswick series (Gaimster 1995: 139). Once more, most comprised small body sherds, with three rims

and no bases, and all came from trenches at the base of the hill.

Fabric Group 4: A second group comprised five sherds of hard-fired jugs with corrugated bodies which are orange-brown, one with spots of glaze. These were found in Trenches IV and XVIII.

Fabric Group 5: A further sherd was of off-white with light green glaze, from Trench XVIII. Mica dusting again pointed to local clays.

Fabric Group 6: This comprised two body sherds of imported German Siegburg stoneware, both from 306 in Trench III. This is represented in some quantity at Kirkwall, Orkney, and Scalloway, Shetland (Hall & Lindsay 1983: 567–73), but is not hitherto represented in Caithness.

*Post-medieval wheel-made ware*

This was confined to the topsoil and mostly comprised white glazed and transfer-printed pottery of the later 19th and 20th centuries. Some earlier Staffordshire pottery was also present, including two sherds of the 18th-century fabrics, and a sherd of slipware of the 19th century.

CLAY PIPES

Fragments of clay pipes and pipe stems were recovered from the topsoil, mostly of 19th-



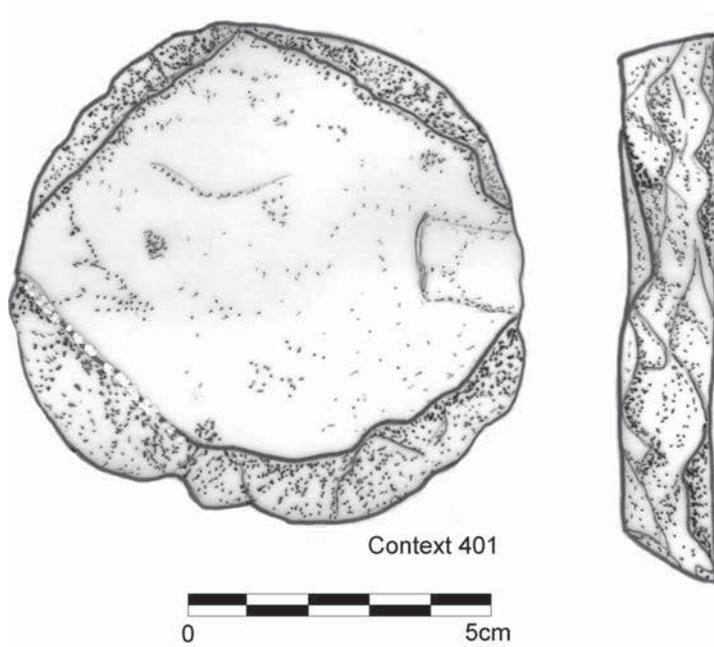
Context 602



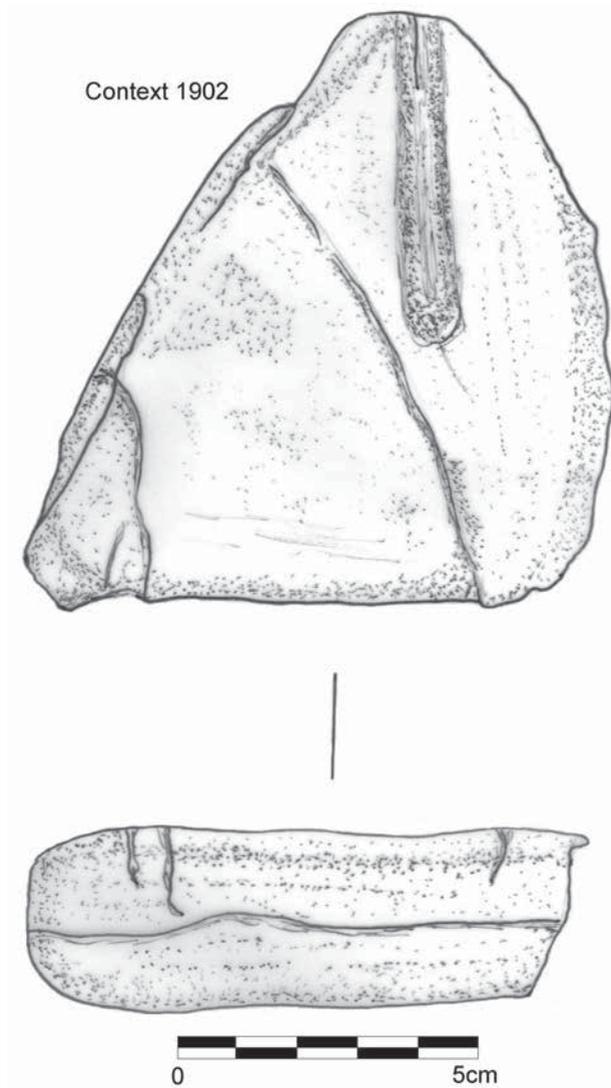
ILLUS 23 Drawing of clay pipe stamp (602)



ILLUS 24 Photograph of incised fractured slab from Building A



ILLUS 25 Drawing of sandstone pot lid (401)



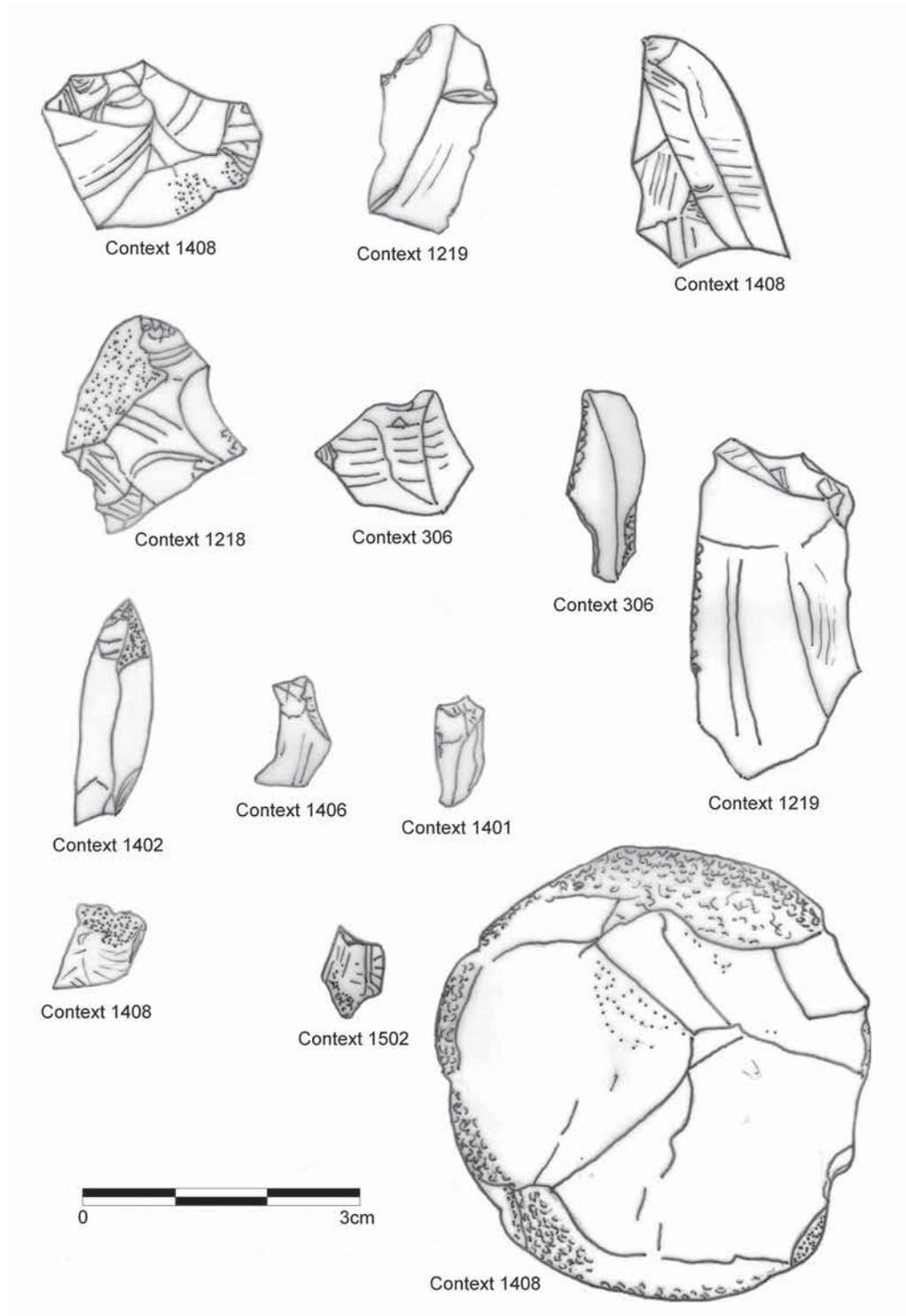
ILLUS 26 Drawing of whetstone (1902)

century date, but one early 18th-century bowl had a maker's stamp on the base spur (from context 602 – illus 23) and one stem had a partial maker's name in a roller stamp band (from context 401). These appear to be Dutch, with the stamp a crowned CL (?) possibly of Cornelis Luijnenburg, a pipe maker of Gouda of *c* 1726, though Luijnenburg stamps continued to be used

until the 1930s. Dutch pipes are widespread in Scotland and occur as far north at Scalloway Castle, Shetland (Davey 1983: 586).

#### THE GLASS

The glass was almost all recovered from the topsoil and comprised, for the most part, of 19th-



ILLUS 27 Drawing of flint and chert flakes

and 20th-century white and green bottle glass, a few fragments of which seemed to have been badly distorted by fire.

#### THE STONE

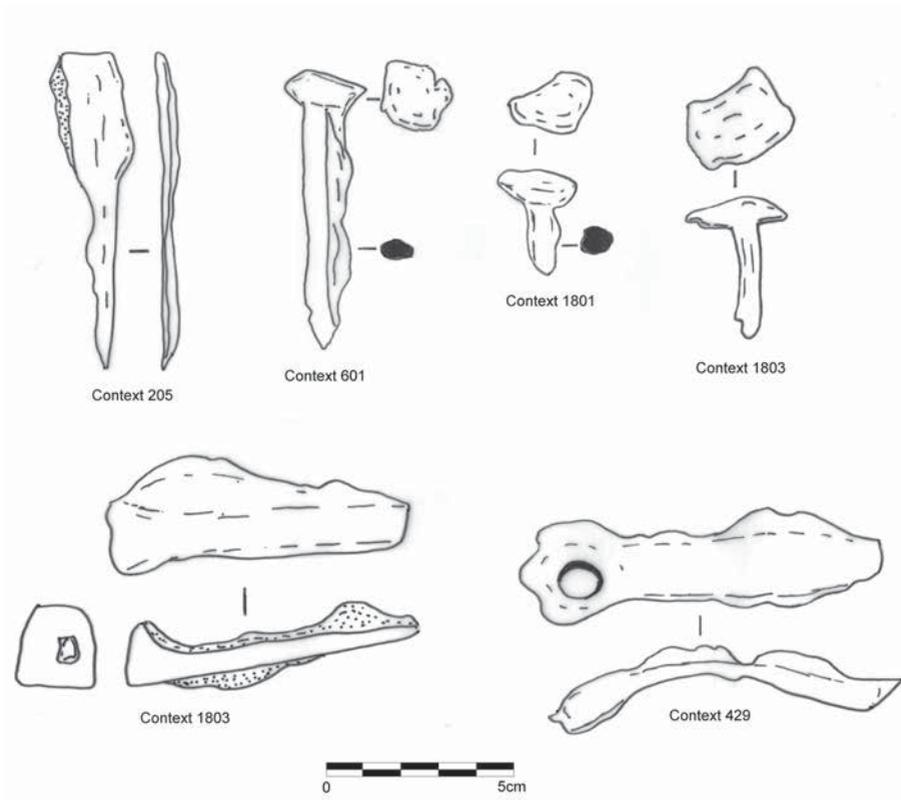
Finds of stone were few. The most notable were:

1. Fractured sandstone slab (Ballachly 3; illus 24), L: 240mm; W: 190mm; Th: 75mm, with incised curved lines. This was found built in to the wall of Building A as one of the uppermost exposed courses, and has been suggested as an unfinished expanding cross-arm similar to Skinnet 2 and Sandside 3 from Caithness, both datable to the *c* 8th–9th century (Blackie & Macaulay 1998: nos 13 and

28), though the pattern is too incomplete to draw proper parallel.

2. Sandstone pot lid (illus 25), Diam: 85mm; Th: 15mm, from context 401 (unstratified). Probably late Iron Age – a similar example came from Jarlshof (Hamilton 1956: fig 36/1).
3. Whetstone (illus 26), fine sandstone, W: 102mm; L: 94mm; Th: 30mm, with single groove from sharpening (3mm deep), from context 1902. Probably late medieval.
4. Sandstone maul or rubber, W: 140mm, from context 1407.

Worked flint and chert flakes (illus 27), some with secondary retouch, were found both in



ILLUS 28 Drawing of iron artefacts

contexts at the base of Chapel Hill and more particularly from Chapel Hill itself: 306 (two), 1218 (two), 1219 (three), 1401, 1402, 1406, 1408 (four) and 1502. Apart from one flake, which is possibly more diagnostically Mesolithic (306), the remainder were workshop debris of prehistoric character but not diagnostic of period. A hammerstone came from the drain in the cobbled area on Chapel Hill (1408). In addition, there were four waterworn quartz pebbles (Diam: 50mm) which may have been used as polishers (606, 1218 and 1408).

In addition to the incised slab found built into Building A on Chapel Hill (Ballachly 3), there was another stone from the rotationally collapsed wall next to it, displaying incised markings of indeterminate character, possibly glacial, though potentially man-made (graffito). Another stone of possible note uncovered within tumble on the hill, of roughly rectangular section and tapering towards the top, was furnished with a shallow socket *c* 30mm diameter and unknown in its function, and though tentatively once considered to have been part of a screen or shrine (cf Church Island, Co Kerry, O'Kelly 1958: fig 6), other explanations appear more probable.

#### THE IRON

1. Flattened iron bar with loop at one end (illus 28), possibly with loop at opposite end but now badly corroded, L: 97mm; W: 29mm; Th: 12mm, from context 429.
2. Square-headed wedge, L: 80mm; W: 20mm; Th: 15mm, from context 1803.
3. Square-sectioned bolt, L: 38mm; W: 29mm; Th: 25mm, from context 1803.
4. Nail, L: 76mm; W: 19mm; Th: 19mm, from context 601.
5. Nail, L: 29mm; W: 22mm; Th: 17mm, from context 1801.
6. Iron object, L: 85mm; W: 19mm; Th: 5mm, from context 205.

#### INDUSTRIAL WASTE

A considerable quantity of iron slag was recovered from contexts in Trenches III, IV, VI and XVIII, mostly from smithing but also some from smelting, the latter using coal (small pieces of which were also recovered) and other organic material, probably peat. Two fragments of a possible tuyère were found (in 404), along with several fragments of fired clay which, not being from pots, may have been from moulds (from 405 and 603), as well as what may be a fragmentary copper alloy sprue from a casting (506).

#### THE COINS

Three coins were found:

1. Charles II, second issue bawbee, 1677–9 (date illegible) (Stewart, 1955, no 244). Condition when lost, fair, from context 201/202 (interface).
2. Victoria, halfpenny, 'Bun head' issue, 1862, Spink, 1862. Condition when lost, VF, from context 1201.
3. George V, halfpenny, 1931, Spink, 4058. Condition when lost, VF, from context 1202.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL EVIDENCE

##### THE ANIMAL REMAINS

The Ballachly animal bone assemblage was entirely collected by hand and recorded using the reference collections and standard methods employed at the Bioarchaeology Research Laboratory, University of Nottingham (eg Schmid 1972). A total of 38 specimens were analysed, of which 23 could be identified as either cattle or sheep/goat; no other species were identified. The majority of the remains were fragmented tooth specimens, indicating the poorly preserved status of the assemblage, possibly due to the effects of the local soil pH.

TABLE 1  
Ballachly Radiocarbon Dates

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Uncal</i>	<i>Calibrated 1-sigma</i>	<i>Calibrated 2-sigma</i>	<i>Delta 13C ‰</i>
SUERC-21062 (GU-17719)	Charcoal: <i>Corylus avellana</i> (hazel)	308	A deposit of sandy silt overlying natural and under the later medieval cobbles, and therefore belonging to a period of flooding	970 ± 30	AD 1020–1050 (28.3%); AD 1080–1150 (39.9%)	AD 1010–1160 (95.4%)	–28.7
SUERC-21063 (GU-17720)	Charcoal: <i>Salix/Populus</i> (Willow/ Poplar)	414	This relates to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of Wall A	685 ± 30	AD 1270–1300 (49.8%); AD 1360–1390 (18.4%)	AD 1260–1320 (63.5%); AD 1350–1390 (31.9%)	–26.1
SUERC-21064 (GU-17721)	Charcoal: Alder	414	This relates to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of Wall A	350 ± 30	AD 1480–1530 (28.6%); AD 1550–1630 (39.6%)	AD 1450–1640 (95.4%)	–26.5
SUERC-21065 (GU-17722)	Charcoal: Alder	414	This relates to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of Wall A	380 ± 30	AD 1450–1520 (54.1%); AD 1590–1620 (14.1%)	AD 1440–1530 (61.6%); AD 1550–1640 (33.8)	–25.5
SUERC-21066 (GU-17723)	Charcoal: Alder	610	The bottom of the flood fill of the ditch	1095 ± 30	AD 895–920 (24.4%); AD 940–990 (42.8%)	AD 890–1020 (95.4%)	–27.2
SUERC-21067 (GU-17724)	Charcoal: <i>Alnus</i> sp (Alder)	803	Part of build-up of subsoil indicating continued agricultural activity over a long period	370 ± 30	AD 1450–1520 (48.8%); AD 1590–1620 (19.4%)	AD 1440–1530 (55.0%); AD 1550–1640 (40.4%)	–26.1
SUERC-27627 (GU-20746)	Charcoal: cf <i>Corylus avellana</i>	1208	This came from beneath a fill in Building B, and indicated that the building was still partly standing in the late 18th century or or later	135 ± 30	AD 1680–1770 (28.1%); AD 1800–1820 (7.8%); AD 1830–1890 (21.6%); AD 1910–1940 (10.7%)	AD 1660–1780 (41.2%); AD 1790–1950 (54.2%)	–25.7
SUERC-27628 (GU-20747)	Charcoal: <i>Alnus</i> sp	429 429	This relates to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of wall A	305 ± 35	AD 1520–1600 (50.7%); AD 1610–1650 (17.5%)	AD 1470–1660 (95.4%)	–27.8
SUERC-27629 (GU-20748)	Charcoal: <i>Alnus</i> cf <i>glutinosa</i>	429	This relates to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of wall A	375 ± 35	AD 1450–1520 (49.7%); AD 1590–1620 (18.5%)	AD 1440–1530 (55.3%); AD 1540–1640 (40.1%)	–26.3

A number of burnt fragments were discovered in Trench IV (428), which also produced quantities of slag, charcoal and occasional pottery. Two juvenile sheep/goat tibiae were recovered from a re-deposited context within the masonry structure on Chapel Hill (Trench XIV, context 1420) and are likely to have come from the same animal, no older than 1.5 years as both the distal and proximal ends are unfused (Getty 1975). Unfortunately, its singular nature and the overall assemblage size make conclusions impossible to draw.

#### RADIOCARBON SAMPLES

Radiocarbon samples were successfully obtained from Trenches III, IV, VI, VIII and XII, largely in an attempt to date prominent features in these trenches, namely the cobbles in Trench III, the walls and ditch running along the palaeo-channel, and the structures on top of Chapel Hill. Samples were submitted to the Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre (SUERC) (see Table 1).

Contexts 414 and 429 relate to the period of ironworking prior to the construction of Wall A and industrial debris from Trench IV and would support a late medieval to early post-medieval date for this activity, as suggested by the pottery. Context 308 was a deposit of sandy silt under the later medieval cobbles, therefore broadly confirming the post-medieval date. Context 610 came from the bottom of the flood fill of the ditch and suggests it had started to silt up from the 9th to the 11th centuries. Context 1208 came from Building B and indicated no more than that the building was still partly standing in the late 18th century or later.

#### DISCUSSION

##### PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY

The earliest human activity at Ballachly is represented by the scatter of lithic material both on Chapel Hill and on the low-lying ground

beneath. None were from primary contexts, and those from Chapel Hill, where they were most abundant and were associated with a hammerstone, may well represent material collected for re-use by the medieval occupants. This is a phenomenon commonly noted on other sites, such as the Mote of Mark, Kirkcudbright (Laing & Longley 2006: 100), or Dunadd (Healey 2000: 197–200), and it has also been suggested that flint working may have in fact been carried out on Early Christian sites (Alcock et al 1989: 220–21).

The possibility that there was early Iron Age activity on the site remains unproven. The construction technique with hollow walling employed in Wall B differed from the drystone method used in Wall A, possibly comparable to the technique employed in the Shetland stone-walled forts such as Clickhimin and Ness of Burgi (Henderson 2007: 153). Whilst this has led to local speculation for prehistoric origins to Wall B, its function for such an early period is difficult to guess, and though it may indeed be of a different date from Wall A, the late date of the latter may similarly see both walls as constructions associated with Magnusburgh.

##### LATE IRON AGE/EARLY MEDIEVAL ACTIVITY (c 6th to 10th century)

It is difficult to establish with some certainty the links in the occupation sequence between Chapel Hill and that of the first terrace. The first main occupation in the early medieval period may have been on the hill, for which the evidence was indicated by the stone-lined hearths and likely contemporary cobbles with central culvert. Although two sherds of Iron Age pottery recovered from the infill of the central 'culvert' is hardly firm dating evidence, it is suggestive of activity within this period on the top of the hill, with its construction technique much less complex than the Norse period drains at the Brough of Birsay (Radford 1959). There was no later medieval or post-medieval material associated with any of these features, and similar

rectilinear stone-lined hearths have been noted on several early medieval sites, for example Portmahomack (Carver 2008: 63, fig 3.14) and Kingarth, Bute (Laing et al 1998: 560, fig 5), making them possibly of contemporary date.

Between the hearths and the cobbles were scattered stones, which included a sub-circular setting of stones adjacent to the hearth, tentatively interpreted as a working area, although some may have been padstones for the uprights in a timber structure. The cobbles were carefully laid and edged with upright stones demarcating their northern edge, with similar stones used to define the central culvert. The most probable explanation for the cobbles and culvert, which ran downwards towards the centre of the hill, was the collection of water needed for activity on the summit, whether domestic or otherwise. No finds were recovered from Chapel Hill that could be directly associated with Early Christian industrial activity, though some finds from the area at the base of the hill may have been derived from activity at the top, notably a piece of scrap copper alloy and possible mould fragments, which may have been deliberately cleared from the summit as at other early medieval sites such as Dinas Powys and Longbury Bank in South Wales (Campbell & Lane 1993: 61). White quartz water-worn pebbles were found in various contexts on Chapel Hill, and though it is tempting to associate their derivation with a *leacht* or special grave, there is no evidence to substantiate this. The two sherds of pottery from the hill, and the more extensive assemblage from the base, is indicative of pre-Norse activity, as is Ballachly 1, the earliest of the carved stones with its possible Chi-Rho and fish symbol (Blackie & Macaulay 1998: no 8; Laing 2010: 90), discovered up the hillside at the current house. If, per local belief, this Early Christian incised stone related to any structures found during excavation, it would indicate a date potentially as early as the 7th century for the earliest ecclesiastical activity at Ballachly, based on parallels for the iconography represented. Unfortunately, the pottery stands alone as

definite evidence for activity of this period, and based on the mixed nature of its stratigraphy, its association with the uncovered features and structures can only be speculated.

#### THE NORSE OCCUPATION PHASE (c 11th to 15th century)

The next phase of development of the site may have been in the Norse period or just before. A stone wall (Wall E) was constructed along the western edge of the partially silted palaeo-channel. It is likely that this formed an enclosure, possibly monastic, on the land between Chapel Hill and the river, utilising an existing old water course, which may have formed an enclosure ditch, defining an area which would have extended west towards the river. The area may originally have been much larger, and the current course of the river may have been formed much later. Such enclosures and the zoning of terraces are well-known in early medieval monasteries, as at Kingarth (Laing et al 1998) and Iona (Ritchie 1997), and may not have been much earlier than the beginning of the 11th century at Ballachly, which is the date provided by radiocarbon from the primary fills of the channel. Such activity seems to have been destroyed by subsequent flooding and agriculture, though the evidence for this consists predominantly of local accounts which tell of stone-lined graves being swept away. Such an event may even have changed the course of the river and washed away much of the former enclosure.

During this postulated Norse phase, further activity may have taken place on Chapel Hill. Evidence would suggest the cobbles were no longer in use, and Building A was constructed partly overlaying them, though they were removed from the interior of the building and replaced with a floor of clay, stones and probably peat, similar to that used on other Norse-period sites, most notably Freswick Links (Curle 1939: 92). This building also involved the incorporation of a fragmentary carved stone in its masonry, possibly of early medieval date, similar to the

interlace-decorated stone built into a wall on the Ballachly croft, most probably of the 10th century, though not enough survives to establish parallels. Within Building A the enigmatic upright slab structure was constructed, though it is not bonded with the former and could be of later date, and although there are a number of possible interpretations, there was no occupation material associated with it, and no evidence for a hearth. The construction of the slab-lined feature appears similar to others in Norse constructions such as at Freswick (*ibid*: building VII, 88, fig 4) or Deerness, Orkney (Morris & Emery 1986: 325), therefore it is not impossible that it is likewise Norse and ecclesiastical, rather than secular in use. Although one possibility is that it was a tank used for baptism, with Norse baptisteries in Iceland, comparable examples of the period in Scotland are lacking, such as the once presumed baptistery at Hoddom, Dumfries, now interpreted as a tanning shed (Lowe 1999: 41; Lowe 2006: 47) and the unfortunately unexplained similar feature at Inchmarnock, Bute (Lowe 2008: 87, fig 5.12).

Whilst Norse period settlement on Chapel Hill itself is only speculated, it is certain that at some point towards the end of this period the palaeo-channel continued to gradually silt up, abutting the stone wall which was constructed along its western edge, as seen particularly in Trenches IV and VI.

#### THE LATE MEDIEVAL/EARLY POST-MEDIEVAL PHASE (15th to 19th century)

Although documentary evidence suggests the church/chapel continued in use to the Reformation and beyond, it seems unlikely that any possible monastic activity did as well. Sometime in the 14th or 15th centuries, the enclosure wall (Wall E) was demolished and sealed by an extensive layer containing evidence for industrial activity which sealed all earlier deposits, particularly apparent in Trenches IV and VI. Wall A seems to have been constructed at this time, and may be connected with the

development of the settlement subsequently named Magnusburgh, along with the area of cobbles examined in Trench III, and pieces of iron slag and late medieval pottery, including Siegburg stoneware. Based on such finds, it is possible that this was a market area where ironwork (and presumably other commodities) was traded, though alternatively, the imported pottery may represent the consumption of 'elite' goods at the site, with the metalworking evidence indicating small-scale local production and the cobbles a working surface.

The wall around the second terrace at the base of Chapel Hill was constructed at the same time or slightly later. This wall was still partially visible in the late 19th century, as attested by photographs, albeit much denuded, whilst its demolition was probably dictated by 20th-century agricultural needs, and it may in fact have been constructed in the 17th century, with the Charles II bawbee in the tumble possibly belonging to its period of use rather than destruction. Whilst this inner enclosure wall may possibly relate to the 'garden' mentioned by Craven in his later 19th-century account, the low-lying ground beyond the terrace within the outer wall was probably used for farming, as the depth of soil which contained late medieval pottery in Trench II/VIII was consistent with a long period of agricultural use.

On Chapel Hill it is probable that the annexes, Buildings B and C, were added in this period to Building A, possibly converting the main primary building into the 'priest's house' mentioned in documentary sources, though it has to be noted that, despite only partial clearance, there was no evidence of domestic occupation, such as a hearth. Building E and its robbed-out state are difficult to interpret, possibly a shelter of some sort, but clearance of tumble certainly established its original rounded form and led to its interpretation as a possible clochán-like structure. The last evidence for activity at Ballachly, and Chapel Hill in particular, comprises the clearance and use of Building A as a shooting hide, which seems to have been

in the second half of the 20th century, and the subsequent construction of a plough marker on top of the denuded wall on its south side.

## CONCLUSIONS

Whether or not the structures on top of Chapel Hill were ever utilised as a church – or indeed in a religious fashion at all – is not known, and without further direct evidence which clearly places activity into an ecclesiastical setting, place name evidence and local speculation must stand alone. Certainly, there is nothing about the current structure to contest either a medieval date or church-type building, although with the entrance in the south-eastern corner, if anything, suggesting against it, and it must of course be conceded that incorporation of an inscribed stone into Wall A's fabric no more makes it a medieval chapel than Ballachly 1 and 2's later insertion into the farm croft buildings. It is possible that the current structure overlies an earlier chapel, however this must remain conjecture, with the documented priest's house and later ancillary buildings the most likely interpretation, the latter possibly serving as a small 18th- or 19th-century farmhouse, which, given the limited approach and summit area, would presumably have been on a small domestic scale.

This of course leads to the overarching question of whether Ballachly was indeed a monastic centre, something which excavations have still been unable to fully establish. Certainly, the massive radiating walls and their possible function enclosing the precinct have largely contributed to such notions, being of an overall type which is suggestive of Early Christian monastic sites, such as Reask in Co. Kerry (Fanning 1981), despite differences in style. However, the late medieval date of Wall A (if not the others) and its relationship overlying the earlier Wall E would seemingly rule out an association with early medieval monastic activity. The function of Wall E remains enigmatic, although its medieval date is clear,

and it is difficult to interpret as anything other than an enclosure wall, demarking an area along with the palaeo-channel, which together may have functions as a form of 'vallum'. Yet, it is difficult to establish affinities due to the paucity of securely dated evidence from Caithness, and indeed there is no parallel within the area.

Several common characteristics of early Scottish monasteries may be met at Ballachly: the possible re-use of an Iron Age site, as at Portmahomack (Carver 2008) and St Ninian's Isle, Shetland (Barrowman 2012), which could have been tied to the adjacent broch taken as the intended centre raided in AD 680, though this could as easily be elsewhere in Dunbeath; a potential focus as a cult centre, which may be seen through the place name of Magnusburgh and the ecclesiastical fitments later listed in the castle's inventory; the evidence of zonation, as at Whithorn (Hill 1997), including areas for craftworking, burial and field systems, though the industrial activity in Ballachly's scheduled area appears to be, at earliest, late Norse in date, with only documentary evidence to suggest former use as a graveyard; and of course, production of cross-slabs and other sculpture, which the three Ballachly stones more than attest to, although unfortunately, the distribution of their discovery locations make it difficult to ascertain where their original context may have been placed. However, despite site morphology being overall suited to a monastic site, the evidence for such, including the sculpture which may suggest ecclesiastical associations as late as the 10th century, is entirely circumstantial.

Firmer evidence for activity at the site lies in the later medieval and post-medieval phases, represented in the mixed burnt deposits and midden area north of Wall A, Wall A itself, and the cobbled surface south of it. Combined with the possible tower-like structure along Wall D, evidence of ironworking and presence of late medieval imported ware, it is more than feasible that an undeveloped, though aspiring, burgh could have existed at the site, clearly utilising and adapting a prior settlement and coinciding

with the later documentation of Magnusburgh. Though the known extent of the activity is limited due to the excavation scale, it appears to be focused on the lower terrace immediately west of the hill, with little evidence for structural activity to the north of Wall A, although this evidence may have been truncated by later agricultural use, such as took place to the south beyond the second terrace.

There is no doubt that Ballachly is a site with highly unusual features and characteristics, and with its sculptured stones, enclosing walls or multi-annexed building on top of the hill, it has no close parallel in this region. Although finds were sparse, late Iron Age to post-medieval pottery attests to the longevity of activity, whilst evidence for hearths, fragments of industrial waste and imported pottery suggest a centre of some importance. The unique nature of the incised and carved stones supports Neil Gunn's literary designation as a 'religious centre of some importance', even if direct evidence has not been found to augment it, with the main focus in later centuries likely shifted in status to a trading burgh. Each period represented has opened up as many new questions about the nature and extent of occupation as have been answered, but the evidence for sculptural production, industrial organisation and trade, whilst reflective of the intermingling Celto-Norse culture which had developed in the region, certainly suggests implications beyond a northern Scottish context. Overall, excavations at Ballachly have generated new insights into its distinctive landscape character, potentially calling for a refocus of investigation and research away from traditional notions of monastic and burgh settlement, whilst making it clear that there is still a great deal to discover about the history of both the site itself and of the surrounding area.

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#### NOTES

- 1 The walls are of drystone construction and incorporate roughly coursed large facing blocks, with a rubble core, with boulder-based footings to the two largest, Walls A and B. Wall A, the western/southern wall which runs *c* 30m in length, is of drystone construction with coursed solid blocks and survives to a height of 3m (though is denuded in its middle section) and is *c* 1.9m thick at the base, tapering to 0.6m at the top, with a blocked 'gap' in its western half which tapers slightly in width downwards, *c* 2m wide (see illus 14). Wall B, the northern/western wall, is of hollow rubble drystone construction and is longer at just over 50m in length, but a similar width as A, with the amount of surrounding tumble suggesting its present maximum height of 0.8m could have been similar to Wall A's. Wall C is similar in surviving height and width to B, though only *c* 15m in length in what remains.
- 2 Though only the upper portion of the depicted cross survives, it is likely to have had an extended

lower shaft, suggestive of skeuomorphic wooden predecessors through its overlying vertical shaft over the cross-arms. More debated is the iconography of the corners of the cross-arms, with the hook-shaped symbol on the upper right arm possibly representative of the moon (in conjunction with the spoked spiral symbols which may symbolise the stars/sun), or a tentative Greek rho letter, though the latter may be the less likely, considering the rarity of Chi-Rho depictions in the region. Facing the centre of the cross is a fish symbol (interpreted as a salmon), which, given its context, may suggest further Christian connotations.

## MAPS

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