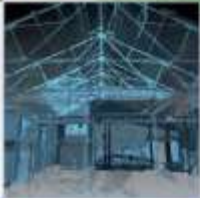


Cults Landscape Project Site 4 Excavation, Data Structure Report

20238-4
28th June 2010



ARCHAEOLOGY

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Cults Landscape Project

Site 4 Excavation, Data Structure Report

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Abstract

As part of the Scottish Wetlands Archaeology Programme (SWAP), further excavations were carried out at the dryland promontory site (Site 4) at Cults Loch, Castle Kennedy. A large area in the interior of the site was stripped, and further stretches of the enclosing works were excavated. Although the interior of the site was surprisingly featureless, evidence for several phases of palisade enclosure were recorded along with the remains of a substantial rampart defence. Waterlogged wood was recovered from beneath the collapse debris of the rampart on the W side of the site, at the interface with the semi-terrestrialised area of the loch.

Cults Loch, Site 4, Excavations March 2010

Introduction and Background

1. As part of the terrestrial component of the Cults Landscape Project, in March 2010 further excavations were carried out at the promontory fort, Site 4 (NX16SW 18)¹. The fort is located on the south side of the loch overlooking the artificial promontory (Site 3) and crannog (Site 1). Excavations at the wetland site (Site 3) have been ongoing since the initial evaluation in 2007, and in 2009 an evaluation of the terrestrial cropmark sites, including Site 4, was undertaken (Cavers and Crone 2009).
2. The results of the terrestrial evaluation were very promising, with the preservation of the cropmark sites found to be very good. Although the resistivity survey carried out in advance of trenching produced variable results, with some features detected strongly but others not at all, upon excavation most of the sites were found to be well preserved, with many more features than were visible on either geophysical surveys or aerial photographs.
3. The aim of the March 2010 excavation was to explore more fully the unusual promontory fort at Site 4; to explore the potential for structures located in the interior of the site; and to explore the defences enclosing the promontory.
4. The project ran for two weeks in March 2010. Weather conditions during the excavation were mostly poor during the fieldwork, with sleet and snow storms a regular occurrence, but archaeological visibility was generally good.

The Cults Loch Area

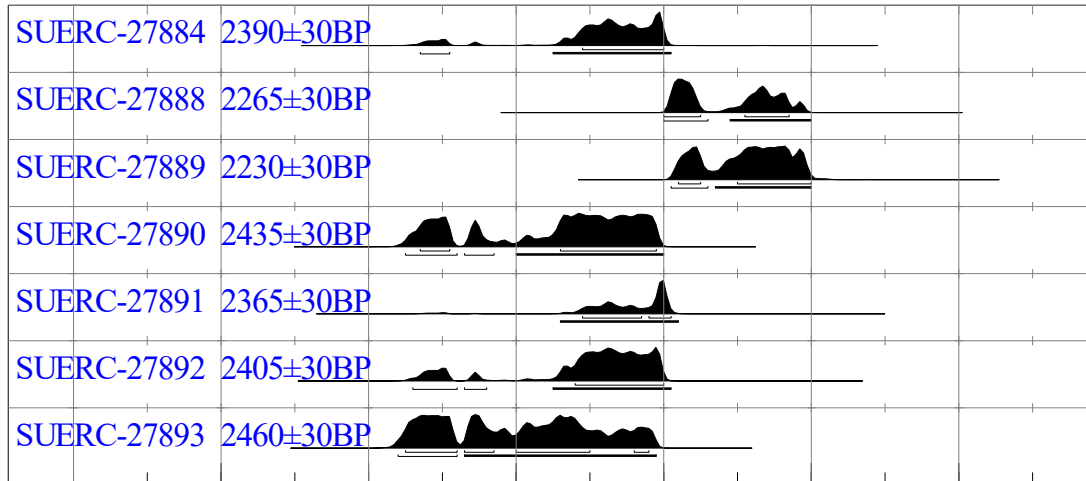
5. The area surrounding Cults Loch is good agricultural land, currently primarily used for pasture. The solid geology of the region is Ordovician greywacke of the Portpatrick and Glenwhargen formation and Permian sandstones of the Stewartry group. Superficial deposits are primarily Quaternary raised marine sands and gravels, manifesting in compact orange-yellow sand-gravel ranging to orange and yellow-white sand deposits in the area investigated.
6. The promontory on which Site 4 is located is a grassy knoll, with the marshy semi-terrestrialised area of Cults loch to the W, and the loch itself to the E. The artificial promontory site 3 is located c.30m to the NE of the promontory. The promontory is an unusual position for a defensive site, being overlooked by higher ground to the south.

¹ NB The fort has previously been referred to as 'Site 1' (Cavers and Crone 2009). However, to avoid confusion with the crannogs in the loch the cropmark sites surrounding the loch have been renamed.

Summary of the 2009 Excavations and Radiocarbon Dating

7. The two trenches excavated in 2009 both exposed areas of the defensive enclosures surrounding the promontory (Site 4). In trench 2, the large enclosure ditch visible on aerial photographs was located and a slot excavated across it; two other ditches cutting off the promontory were also investigated. These ditches were large, with the central of the three over 5m wide and 2m deep. The evidence was slight, but rubble within this large ditch suggests that it was associated with an earth and stone bank, probably on the N side. In trench 1, a further large enclosure ditch, over 6m wide and nearly 3m deep was discovered, behind which a series of palisade trenches representing several phases of construction enclosed a range of pits and postholes, none of which appeared to form an obvious structure. The entrances through the ditches and palisades were found in trench 1, the southernmost of which had a 'baffle wall' slot across the entrance. To the north of the trench, an unusual arrangement of palisade slots formed an out-turned entrance, with a single charcoal rich posthole in the centre- presumably the centre post of the gateway into the interior of the site.
8. Several radiocarbon dates were obtained for the features in trenches 1 and 2 (see table 1). The southernmost of the large ditches in trench 2 returned dates for the fill in the 8th to 4th centuries BC, statistically identical to the dates from the fill of the largest ditch in trench 1, and for the central posthole in the out-turned entrance. A second phase of activity, indicated by dates in the range 400-200 BC, was suggested by the assays from the fills of the re-cut palisade slots to the N of the large ditch in trench 1.
9. No artefacts datable to these periods were recovered from the 2009 excavations. Only one artefact was recovered from the entire excavation in 2009, a fragment of a bi-facial flint knife, probably Neolithic in date.

Atmospheric data from Reimer et al (2004);OxCal v3.10 Bronk Ramsey (2005); cub r:5 sd:12 prob usp[chron]



1200CalBC 1000CalBC 800CalBC 600CalBC 400CalBC 200CalBC CalBC/CalAD

Calibrated date

Lab Code	Contex	Context description	¹⁴ C Age BP	Error	Cal range (2 σ)
SUERC-27884	142	Primary fill of large ditch	2390	30	730-390 BC
SUERC-27888	137	Fill of re-cut palisade slot	2265	30	400-200 BC
SUERC-27889	151	Fill of re-cut palisade slot	2230	30	390-200 BC
SUERC-27890	135	Fill of central gate post	2435	30	750-400 BC
SUERC-27891	148	Fill of large posthole	2365	30	540-380 BC
SUERC-27892	206	Fill of southern most ditch	2405	30	740-390 BC
SUERC-27893	206	Fill of southern most ditch	2460	30	760-410 BC

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates obtained from features excavated in trenches 1 and 2, 2009.

2010 Excavations

10. Excavation of four further areas within the interior of the promontory enclosure was carried out in March 2010. A JCB 3CX was used to strip the topsoil from four trenches. Following topsoil stripping, all trenches were cleaned and excavated by hand.
11. **Trench 3**
12. The first of these trenches, trench 3, was designed to extend trench 1 into the interior of the site, aiming to investigate the area immediately inside the gated entrance recorded in 2009. An area 10m by 20m was opened immediately adjacent to trench 1, located to the N (see figure 1, plate 1); trench 3 overlapped trench 1 by c. 0.30m. A range of features, very similar to those encountered in trench 1 was observed.
13. *Palisade enclosures*

14. Five curvilinear palisade slots were found within trench 3. Two of these, slots [363] and [365], ran N/S along the contours of the hill in the SW corner of the trench. These palisade trenches were 0.45 and 0.43m wide respectively, and ranged from 0.17 to 0.30m in depth in the excavated sections. The fills were typical of the archaeological deposits in the cut features in this area of the site, brown to brown-orange silty sands with occasional small stone inclusions. In the base of [363] a posthole cut 0.23m deeper than the base of the slot cut was observed (plate 6), supporting the interpretation of these slots as palisade trenches.
15. Continuity with trench 1 was established and two features which ran into the N baulk in trench 1 were recorded extending into trench 3. In the S of trench 3, a curvilinear feature [301] was observed emerging from the S baulk and curving for a length of c.5m before returning to the S baulk. This feature is the northern section of feature [101], the E section of the gated palisade enclosure recorded in 2009. The slots excavated across the feature in 2010 showed it to be similar in character to the other palisade slots, 0.28m deep and 0.8m wide at its widest, with a similar sandy fill. To the W of trench 3, feature [367] seems likely to represent the N continuation of feature [106], while palisade slot 365 seems likely to equate to feature [130], which had a terminus to the S of the gated enclosure.
16. Crossing much of trench 3 was a further enclosure palisade, with a similar form to those investigated in trench 1. Feature [325] emerged from the N baulk running N/S along the contour of the hill on a similar alignment to [363] and [365], before ending in a terminus near the centre of the trench and forming an entrance with slot [303], which similarly followed the contours of the hill and ran into the E baulk of the trench. The gap between the terminals of [325] and [303] was a space c.2.5m wide, between which a short curvilinear slot [319] was located just offset to the SW, in a similar fashion to the 'baffle wall' feature recorded near the entrance to the palisade enclosure in the S of trench 1. Palisade slot [303] had been re-cut on a slightly different alignment by feature [305], a slightly deeper trench that terminated in a possible post-hole, indicated by a much steeper sided cut. It seems probable that the large posthole [317] located between the terminals of slots [305] and [325] comprises a gate post similar in character to that between the out-turned palisades found in trench 1. The fill of [317] included several large packing stones.
17. *Internal features*
18. A range of internal features, very similar in character to those found inside the enclosure features in trench 1 were recorded (plates 4, 7 and 8). The majority of these were situated inside palisade enclosure [325]/[303]/[305], with very few features located between this enclosure and [363]. The majority of the features were postholes averaging c.0.4 to 0.5m in diameter; [307], [309], [327], [311], [331], [329], [332], [333], [335], [355], [351], [357], [353] and [345] were excavated. The fills of all of the above were very similar- orange brown silty sands with frequent small stone inclusions. Occasional packing stones were encountered, and charcoal flecks were occasionally present throughout the fills. These postholes were distributed in a broadly curving pattern, approximately parallel to the course of the enclosure [325]/[303]/[305]; none were intersecting so that it seems probable that they were all in use concurrently.

19. An unusual feature was located to the N of trench 3, comprising a large sub-circular pit c.2.0m in diameter that was barely visible in the surrounding natural, indicated only by the presence of a brown-orange, possibly heat-affected fill (350) (plate 5). Located at the centre of this pit was a further small cut feature [347], cutting into deposit (350) and filled by a grey-brown ashy deposit (349). On excavation, the main fill of the pit (350) was found to overlie a primary fill (379), a very dark brown-black greasy silty sand, with regular small stone inclusions. The deposit was suggestive of burning in-situ, but no charcoal fragments were noted. There are few indications as to the purpose of pit feature [349].
20. **Trench 4**
21. Trench 4 was located near the crest of the hill on the interior of the site, incorporating some of the slope overlooking the wetland promontory site 3. An area measuring 11m by 15m was stripped, and cleaned by hand. However, no archaeological features were recorded in the trench. Several gravel bands ran across the trench but on excavation these were found to be natural.
22. **Trench 6**
23. Trench 6 was located near the crest of the hill, incorporating some of the S-facing slope running towards trench 3. In the W of the trench, a palisade slot [601] was found, running on a similar N/S alignment to [325] in trench 3, continuing into the N baulk but with a terminus to the S, so that if [601] is associated with [325], there is more than one entrance through the enclosure. Two other features, probably postholes [602] and [603], located near the S baulk of trench 6, were the only other features in the trench.
24. **Trench 5**
25. Trench 5 was a strip trench, 25m in length opened on the W side of the hill, running as far as the boggy, semi-terrestrialised area of the loch. The aim of this trench was to test whether the defensive ditch excavated in trench 1 continued around the perimeter of the site. A ditch feature was located near the middle of the trench, and a box 5m by 5m opened around the feature to allow safe excavation (see plates 9 to 14).
26. In plan, the ditch appeared as a dark strip of gravelly sand (507), c. 1.5m in width running N/S, perpendicular to the trench; during cleaning, remains of a rabbit in a wire snare (SF2) were recovered in the upper levels of this deposit. This feature was accompanied on the E side by a line of sub-angular and sub-rounded stones, ranging in size from 0.11m to 0.36m across. In places these were several stones thick, suggesting that they had been deliberately placed as such and were close to their original positions. This line of stones appears to have constituted a footing or low revetment of a bank, c. 1.5m wide, the remains of which were indicated by a thin deposit of pale cream sandy silt (502). This revetment directly overlay a thin dark brown sandy silt (516) and a thin grey sandy silt deposit (510), interpreted as a possible turf and thin soil horizon onto which the revetment was directly placed. Immediately to the E of this feature, a linear palisade slot [501], with a U-shaped

profile and with a dark brown sandy fill similar to the other palisade slots on the site. It is possible that this palisade acted as an internal revetment for the bank.

27. Upon excavation of what appeared to be the fill of a ditch (deposit (507)), it became clear that the bank was not accompanied by a ditch as might have been expected based on the features excavated in trench 1. What had initially appeared to be natural subsoil into which the ditch feature was cut was in fact an overlying deposit of orange gravel (515). This deposit was very similar to the surrounding natural, and was virtually archaeologically sterile, and seems most likely to have derived from the bank. (515) overlay a black silty sand (508) containing very small flecks of charcoal, which in turn overlay an orange gravel deposit (505), very similar to (515). All of these deposits overlay the grey-brown sandy gravel (507). This deposit butted up against a deposit of sub-angular stones (514) averaging c.0.1m across in a matrix of brown/grey silty sand at the base of the slope. The source of these deposits is not entirely clear; it is possible that they derive from the primary collapse of the bank.
28. Directly beneath deposit (507) was a series of intermixed bands of natural sands and darker sandy silts (523), which lay directly on a steeply sloping face of natural sand and gravel (520). These bands were interpreted as alternately washed out and buried layers of natural subsoil, deriving from the steeply cut face of the slope. These washed deposits merged into much wetter, peat-like layers near the base of the slope. The highest of these, (512) was an orange-brown peat rich in mineral material, and contained frequent small stones and frequent roundwood twig fragments. Regular charcoal fragments were also noted in this deposit. At the base of this layer, where it met peat deposit (517), a layer of woodchips was encountered and at the base of the deposit, lying directly on the natural subsoil were two large oak timbers, T1 and T2. There was no evidence that these timbers were worked, but they must have been deposited before (512) accumulated, probably shortly after the cutting of the slope. Beyond the extents of (512), more archaeologically-sterile peats containing frequent modern tree roots were recorded.
29. *Trench 5-summary of interpretation*
30. The most plausible explanation for the deposits encountered in trench 5 is that the hill was cut to form a steep slope, over 1m high and sloping down to boggy ground or possibly even shallow open water. A stone footed bank with a retaining palisade was then constructed using the upcast from this cutting. Erosion of the newly cut natural face resulted in the intermixing of natural and archaeological deposits (523). Debris from activity close to the time of construction accumulated in wet ground at the base of the slope, preserving wood fragments and possibly debris from construction of the site in deposit (512). Following the dilapidation of the rampart, much of the upper bank material slumped down slope, while ploughing in relatively recent periods may have completely destroyed the remnants of the bank and moved the source natural material down slope to form deposit (515).
31. It is difficult to determine whether the features recorded in trench 5 can be equated with the large ditches excavated in the SW corner of trench 1. This seems likely, but no evidence for an internal bank was recorded in trench 1. A small deposit of large stones was found at the base of the large

ditch in trench 1, but it is difficult to ascertain that these derive from a similar footing/revetment to that recorded in trench 5. Further geophysical work on the promontory may help to clarify this, although it should be noted that the large ditch in trench 1 was not detected by the original resistivity survey undertaken in 2009.

32. **Conclusions**

33. The 2010 excavations at site 4 demonstrate the complexity of the enclosure works that were erected around the promontory. At least three phases of palisaded enclosure, in addition to a rampart and at least three substantial ditches were used to restrict access onto the site. The large scale of this construction makes it all the more puzzling that so little evidence for occupation, or any other activity in the interior was recovered. The complete lack of artefacts fitting a later prehistoric horizon is striking, even given the typical paucity of Iron Age material culture in Wigtownshire, and must force us to question whether the site was actually domestic in function.

34. The relationship of the site to the promontory crannog (site 3) is, of course, key to the interpretation of the relative functions of the sites. Central to addressing this question is the recovery of reliable dating material. Radiocarbon dates obtained from the secure contexts excavated in 2009 strongly suggest the contemporaneity of sites 3 and 4, in the latter half of the first millennium BC (although two phases were detectable in the dating from trench 1). The excavation of a further series of enclosures in trench 3 may suggest a further phase of activity or alternatively a further series of enclosures contemporary with the outer defences: this can only be tested by further radiocarbon dating. The recovery of waterlogged wood from beneath the collapse debris of the rampart in trench 5 may offer the opportunity for dendrochronological dating that could potentially allow correlation with the Cults promontory site. If this were possible it could provide a high-accuracy *terminus post quem* for the collapse of the ramparts. Although the interpretation of these oak logs is not easy in such a limited excavation, it is possible that they relate to debris deriving from the construction of the site. If dendrochronological analysis is successful, further excavation in the interface between wetland and dryland areas to investigate the character of this wood debris may be worthwhile.

**Cults Landscape Project
Excavations at Site 4, March 2010**

Section 2: Registers



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