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EXCAVATIONS AT WETHER HILL, NORTHUMBERLAND, 1999: *Final Interim Report*

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Summary

The sixth season of excavations by NAG at Wether Hill in the Ingram Valley completed the investigation of the later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pit discovered previously in Area 3. Further vessels were recovered from this pit associated with either a timber coffin or a later possible cist. Five ^{14}C dates record the depositional history of this pit.

Excavations began upon the hillfort, erroneously known in the literature as Corbie Cleugh (eg Jobey 1965, 49). A trench was laid across the defences and into a portion of the interior which would allow the sampling of all structural phases recognised from surface remains. Excavation and recording is at an early stage.

Area 3: the later Neolithic/Early Bronze Age Pit [3:006]

(This report is based upon that of the excavators, Jenny Vaughan and John Nolan)

In 1998 a pit (Plate 1) was discovered adjacent to a fragmentary ring-groove structure and within a (strictly undated) palisaded enclosure which was itself overlain by a later palisade with a chronological horizon of 2220±90 BP [at 2 σ cal BC 410-35] (Beta-89361) and 2180±80 BP [at 2 σ cal BC 395-5] (Beta-101731) (see Topping 1999, 2). The pit had not been visible as a surface feature, but was revealed when deturfing exposed a stone spread 1.45m N-S by 2.40m transversely. The stone spread was sampled to discover its character and found to be a pit. Sherds of Beaker and maggot-impressed wares together with quantities of charcoal were encountered indicating a complex depositional history; consequently samples were taken and the site backfilled for full excavation the following season.

The 1999 excavations began with the removal of the 1998 backfill (all excavated material was dry sieved on site, and bulk samples taken for flotation). Excavation quickly produced further Beaker pottery and maggot-impressed sherds[2] from redistributed material comprising the upper fills of the pit; this disturbance episode was previously found to date to the later Iron Age (2200±60 BP [at 2 σ cal BC 390-

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[1] NAG, c/o Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Newcastle, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU.

[2] The maggot-impressed sherds were previously presumed to be Peterborough Ware of Meldon Bridge Style, but have since been identified as Food Vessel by Alex Gibson.

60] (Beta-124784)) and broadly contemporary with the adjacent palisade (see above). The ring-groove structure nearby, although undated, could clearly be contemporary with either of the palisaded enclosures or the pit. The fact that it appears to respect the enclosure is no more of an indicator of association than the fact that it has no direct relationship with the pit. Unfortunately no organic deposits were recovered to provide a scientific date for the ring-groove to clarify its chronology.

As excavation of the pit progressed a heavily disturbed stone lining was revealed, which structurally appeared 'cist'-like of a single or double cellular construction. The stones used to build this structure appear to have been carefully chosen and although incomplete, a partial pattern emerged of alternating grey and pink Andesite slabs. At a depth of 53cms below the turfline and near the base of these slabs – and presumably indicating the depth of the Iron Age disturbance, a small Food Vessel was discovered, flattened and lying upon its side with its mouth towards the NW. No fragments of bone, burnt or otherwise, were associated with this vessel.

Excavation proceeded through a loose matrix of fractured Andesite and dark yellow/ochre sandy soil. Further stones were encountered beneath those previously described, perhaps representing packing or underpinning for the higher slabs. Increasing quantities of charcoal were recorded, particularly in the SW corner.

The loose matrix overlay a compacted surface of sandy silty soil with charcoal flecking which rested against the lower stones in the S, W and N. Another sherd of Beaker was embedded in this deposit. Beneath this a further loosely packed layer was encountered, which contained a flint ?burin and another comb decorated Beaker sherd lying against the stones in the S; a crudely decorated sherd of Food Vessel was discovered lodged below stones in the W.

Beneath the loose sandy soil carbonised wood was discovered on all sides of the pit. Compact deposits in the W, NW and E retained the structure of planking. During the course of defining this feature at the NW end of the pit, a complete but crushed rusticated Beaker (Plate 2) was discovered lying upon its side with its mouth aligned towards the S. A carbonised plank, subsequently interpreted as part of a lid, overlay the Beaker. A second timber that had formed the W terminal of a timber box-like structure or 'coffin' also overlay the W side of the Beaker. A flint flake was recovered immediately above this second plank and may have been associated with the secondary Food Vessel phase.

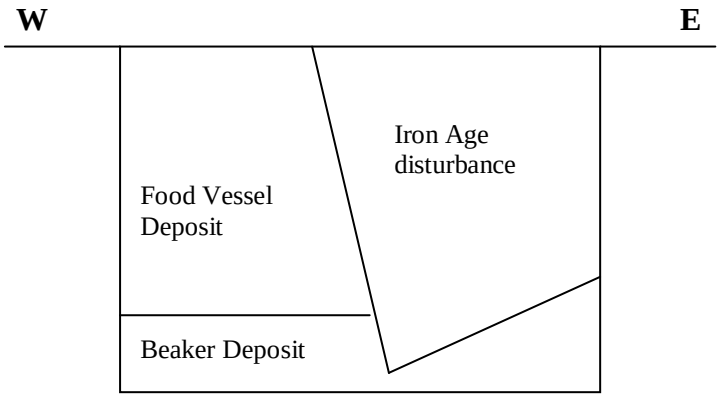
The timbers of the 'coffin' were carefully exposed and recorded at various stages. The pit as originally dug was oval in shape with maximum dimensions of 1.34m N-S by 1.96m transversely, with a depth of 0.68m. At both terminals the planks had clearly been placed on edge and wedged by stones carefully packed behind. The terminals had stood at least two planks high. A well-preserved lower plank at the W terminal measured up to 800mm to 900mm in width, the edges appearing to have been well cut and almost parallel. During decomposition the upper planks seem to have slipped down over those below compressing the structure. The grain of the timbers was still recognisable.

The structure of the timbers on the longer N and S sides was less clear. The pit sides had been cut near vertically, consequently requiring less packing than the more

obliquely cut terminal ends. The packing along the sides of the pit had an admixture of charcoal suggesting some structural movement of the timbers during decomposition. Traces of planking, possibly from the N side of the cist, were recorded in the NW beneath the 'lid'. Another substantial fragment 340mm long, 160mm wide and 20mm thick was found set vertically in the SE corner abutting one of the horizontal timbers. No jointing could be seen which might suggest that the timber structure was simply wedged together and held in position by the packing stones.

As the coffin possibly constituted the largest assemblage of prehistoric timber found to date in the Northumberland Cheviots, attempts were made to recover some of the larger timber elements in the hope of identifying the species, carbonisation processes, as well as evidence of tooling and construction. Unfortunately the most complete timber element disintegrated upon excavation, but others were lifted with varying degrees of success[3].

Schematic of the depositional history of Pit 3:006



Once the timbers and packing stones had been removed, the sides and base of the pit were cleaned and the edges defined. The pit had been cut through thick deposits of sandy yellow/buff clay down into the underlying Andesite. Small amounts of fine yellow sandy silt overlay the rock-cut base and sides of the pit filling cracks and fractures. This silt may have been eroded from the sides of the pit, or introduced during the construction of the coffin.

The base of the pit was slightly concave at the E and W ends, and the angularity of the fractured bedrock appeared to have been partly smoothed. No body stain was discovered, but the concave area at the E end was blackened and the sandy clay edge and silting was compacted with a reddish/purple tint, possibly suggesting that a fire may have been set in this end of the pit before the coffin and Beakers were positioned. This stained deposit was sampled for analysis.

[3] The timbers are currently housed in stable laboratory conditions at Durham University.

Preliminary post-excavation results

Processing and analysis has begun on the bulk samples, carbonised timber and the pottery assemblage from Pit 3:006. The current position can be summarised as follows:

Bulk samples[4]: at present these have been floated and await identification and analysis.

Carbonised timbers[5]: these have been identified as oak. The planks, unfortunately, comprised no complete radii, thus sapwood could not be identified.

Pottery[6]: the assemblage from the pit has been assessed and comprises two Beakers and the remains of three Food Vessels. The most complete Beaker is of rusticated type, the second is a comb decorated vessel, both have local parallels. The Food Vessels consist of a near complete small bipartite vase Food Vessel, the second appears to represent a tripartite form, and the third was too fragmentary to reconstruct. As with the Beakers, all Food Vessels had local parallels. In addition, two small sherds of a well-fired fabric would seem to represent an Iron Age vessel, presumably incorporated into the fill during the final disturbance of the pit.

During analysis the small bipartite vase Food Vessel was found to have a carbonised cereal grain embedded in its fabric, subsequently identified as straight hulled barley[7]. A second grain of an indeterminate species was also recovered[8]. In addition, close inspection of the inner surfaces of the vessel suggests that there are at least a further 8 seed impressions, an unusually large number for a single pot. Analysis of these impressions is currently being undertaken at the Centre for Archaeology, Portsmouth.

Further specialist analysis, including residue analysis, will take place on the complete pottery assemblage before conservation.

^{14}C dating[9]: Five dates overall have been processed from the 1999 season, three associated with Pit 3:006. Two of these were from samples of the oak planking associated with the primary Beaker phase, and gave assays of:

- 3670±50 BP AA-35523 (GU-8647) [at 2 σ cal BC 2199-1890]

- 3675±55 BP AA-35524 (GU-8646) [at 2 σ cal BC 2201-1886]

These dates correlate reasonably closely with that obtained from the oak planking during the previous season, which gave an assay of 3740±70BP (Beta-124785) [at 2 σ cal BC 2335-1935], and demonstrate sufficient chronological overlap considering the samples were derived from a long-lived species such as oak.

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[4] These are being processed by Jacqui Huntley.
[5] Identification and analysis by Jacqui Huntley.
[6] Identification and analysis by Alex Gibson.
[7] Identified by Gill Campbell.
[8] These carbonised seeds were despatched for AMS dating, being a short-lived species they give the potential for a close chronological context for the construction of the vessel (see below).
[9] The Northumberland National Park generously sponsored this series of dates.

The third ^{14}C date was obtained from the carbonised seeds discovered with the small bipartite vase Food Vessel (see above) which produced an AMS assay of:

- 3550±50 BP (Beta-139947) [at 2 σ cal BC 2020-1745]

The short-lived nature of this sample provides an added level of accuracy to this date range not available on those from the oak planking and produces a chronological context for the Food Vessel phase of the pit. This Food Vessel horizon closely follows that of the primary Beaker phase, the two depositional events arguably need not have been separated by more than 1-2 centuries[10].

The phasing of this pit can be tentatively summarised as follows:

Phase	***Context***	***^{14}C (at 2 σ)***
1	**Primary Beaker Phase.** The pit was excavated and lined with oak planking held in place by stone packing. A burial (or burials) deposit comprising two Beakers and what must have been an inhumation(s) was placed in this 'coffin', which was then sealed by a timber lid before backfilling the pit. A small cairn may have been constructed over the pit to mark the position of the grave. (NB. No burnt bone was discovered within the coffin – presumably untreated skeletal remains were dissolved by the action of the acid soils. Phosphate analysis on bulk samples from the grave may shed some light on the former presence of human remains).	Samples derived from oak planks: 3740±70BP [cal BC 2335-1935] (Beta-124785) 3675±55BP [cal BC 2201-1886] (AA-35524 (GU-8646)) 3670±50BP [cal BC 2199-1890] (AA-35523 (GU-8647))
2	**Secondary Food Vessel Phase.** The pit was re-opened and the timber coffin compressed, breaking the Beakers. A stone lining of alternating coloured andesite slabs was placed around the edge of the pit and one or more further inhumations may have been inserted accompanied by three Food Vessels. Again the burial deposit(s) would appear to have been untreated and did not survive the effects of soil acidification. The burial deposit must then have been sealed, probably by a small cairn.	Sample derived from carbonised seeds: 3550±50BP [cal BC 2020-1745] (Beta-139947)
3	**Iron Age Disturbance.** The final phase saw an episode of disturbance in the later Iron Age chronologically associated with the construction of the adjacent palisaded enclosures or the ring-groove structure/house. The pit was partly excavated and the comb decorated Beaker redistributed, the rusticated Beaker compacted, the small bipartite vase Food Vessel was flattened, and the remains of the other two Food Vessels scattered throughout the fill of the pit. Some comb decorated Beaker sherds were displaced outwith the pit on its E lip. The pit was then backfilled, the matrix incorporating the two Iron Age sherds.	Sample taken from unidentified twig charcoal: 2200±60BP [cal BC 390-60] (Beta-124784)

[10] Further analysis of these dates is anticipated using Bayesian Theory to help refine the chronological sequence.

The depositional history of this pit illustrates the reuse of an established burial location, with the implication that it remained a visible monument to the users of Food Vessels, who may then have also left behind an identifiable structure rediscovered by the later Iron Age groups. The presence of Beaker inhumation(s) in a timber coffin places this burial, nationally, in a minority with obvious parallels such as Linch Hill (Grimes 1960, 159) Irthlingborough (Halpin 1987) and Hemp Knoll (Robertson-Mackay 1980), although others are recorded in the Antiquarian literature (Inf. Martyn Barber). In addition, the accounts of excavations by the Berwickshire Naturalists Club in the mid-19th century at sites such as the (?) long cairn on Ewe Hill in the Ingram Valley (excavated during the early 1860's), describe the discovery of quantities of charcoal, perhaps representing another example of internal timber structuring from a local context (Tate 1862, 304). Interestingly the scale of the pit on Wether Hill is comparatively small (cf Thomas 1991, 37, fig 3) and may well have restricted the complexity of the burial and range of grave goods. If the two Beakers were contemporary – and being sealed together within a coffin may imply this - then Pit 3:006, statistically, would have been a very important burial.

Area 5: the hillfort (Plate 3)

Excavations began at Wether Hill fort within an area defined by Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC: granted 20th May 1998) on the S side of the fort, encompassing a narrow strip across the defences and an area of the interior. This part of the fort had been damaged by animal disturbance. The excavations were designed to study the constructional sequence and create a detailed chronology of the fort while repairing the sheep scrapes and other erosion.

SMC allows the sampling of several structural features visible on the surface, including:

- The site of an early timber-built house;
- A palisade trench bisecting the timber-built house listed above;
- Quarry ditches cutting into the palisade trench;
- The bivallate hillfort defences;
- A later stone-built round house that overlies the quarry ditch and part of the inner face of the inner rampart.

At this early stage in the excavations many features have only been superficially examined and recording is ongoing. To date the excavations have concentrated upon the defences and one of the later stone-built round houses: earlier features will be systematically explored in forthcoming seasons.

The defences (Plate 4), structurally, are of a composite form, with the inner rampart being of a different construction to the outer. The quarry ditch of the inner rampart is currently buried beneath the late stone house which itself has encroached upon the inner face of the rampart. At this junction a later rebuild of the inner face of the inner rampart has created a free-standing wall which leads obliquely across the quarry ditch towards the fort interior. This wall appears to have left no surface trace beyond the limits of the trench.

The stone built construction of the inner rampart features a prominent outer face of large boulder slabs, producing a rampart of some 4m in width overall. Some localised

robbing has occurred for the construction of a lambing pen and this may have reduced the scale of parts of the adjacent rampart, particularly the outer face that only survived as a single course in the trench. The rampart has a rubble core with a slight earthen matrix that included some charcoal flecks. Following recording parts of the rampart core were removed to reveal a transverse single course wall, perhaps part of a system designed to stabilise the rubble core and reduce lateral movement. Alternatively gang construction might be represented. Such a constructional technique has parallels with the putative later eastern rebuild of the outer rampart at Humbleton Hill near Wooler (RCHME 1997, 8) and at Ingleborough in N Yorkshire (Bowden et al 1989, 269) where similar internal cross-walls were recorded in the body of the rampart.

The natural scarp below the inner rampart at Wether Hill appears to have been artificially steepened, and then further enhanced by the addition of a clay and gravel deposit revetted by wooden stakes at the base of the scarp adjacent to the ditch. The ditch itself is rock-cut but with a comparatively level – but jagged - surface which lies no more than 0.45m below the present turf-line. Where the ditch meets the inner rampart an 'ankle-breaker' ditch has been cut roughly 0.3m wide and 0.5m deep.

The outer rampart appears to have a composite construction comprising dumps of clay that seem to have stabilised an outer component consisting of unstructured rubble. This rampart now survives no more than 0.8m above the old land surface. Little evidence has thus far been discovered for any internal structure to this rampart. Considering the uneven surface of the outer scarp of this rampart, it may have been designed to function as a variant of the *'chevaux-de-frise'* principle to create an uneven surface for those attacking the fort. In the absence of a true wall face and any real structure to this rampart, the identification of such an obstacle remains a strong possibility. A further steep-sided 'ankle-breaker' ditch lay at the foot of the outer scarp of this rampart. The excavation of this feature is unfinished.

The later stone-built roundhouse (Plate 5) within the SMC area was cleaned and planned. The walls are mostly of unstructured rubble with some internal facing visible in the SW. An entrance was discovered in the E with (to date) a single post-hole on its S side. No built hearth has so far been found.

Upslope from the roundhouse the course of the palisade had been backfilled and covered with stone slabs. A small paved area lay to the NW of the roundhouse, possibly representing another levelled feature or a fragment of a surfaced courtyard.

Post-excavation has produced two ^{14}C assays from contexts within the hillfort, one from each of the ramparts:

- 2070±45 BP AA-35526(GU-8644) [at 2 σ cal BC 199-cal AD 48] from hazel (*Corylus sp*[11]) charcoal from the rubble core of the inner rampart.
- 2145±45 BP AA-35525(GU-8645) [at 2 σ cal BC 359-47] from birch (*Betula sp*) charcoal from the core of the outward-facing rubble component (? 'chevaux-de-frise') of the outer rampart.

[11] Species identification by Jacqui Huntley.

These dates, although only single determinations, allow two possible interpretations: firstly, that the outer rampart precedes the inner, or secondly, that the overlap in the date ranges indicates contemporaneity. Further excavation and scientific dating will clarify these questions of chronological sequence.

The final abandonment of the fort may correlate with the ending of maintenance of the cross-ridge dyke, and might define the end of (?) permanent settlement on the summit of Wether Hill (cf Topping 1999, 5-6).

The detailed analytical surveys of the hillfort drafted by RCHME at 1:2500 in 1988 and by Keith Blood and Basil Butcher at 1:250 in 1997, complement the excavation data. The evolving developmental history can be summarised as follows:

Phase	***Context***	***^{14}C (at 2 σ)***
1	A summit cairn constructed.	
2	A group of unenclosed timber-built houses are sited on the hilltop. One truncates part of the summit cairn, which also appears to have been robbed and reduced in height.	
3	A palisaded settlement replaces the unenclosed group of houses.	
4	The hillfort is built. Quarries encircle the hill creating a level platform and spoil for the inner rampart which is stone-faced. A shallow ditch generates earth and stone for the outer rampart, supplemented by clay from off-site sources. Some of the timber houses may be contemporary with this phase. Other timber houses were built in the quarry scoops.	Sample of birch charcoal from outer rampart: 2145±45 BP [cal BC 359-47] (AA-35525 (GU-8645)); Sample of hazel charcoal from inner rampart: 2070±45 BP [cal BC 199-cal AD 48] (AA-35526 (GU-8644))
5	The hillfort was abandoned and three stone-built roundhouses were constructed in the SE, two partly overlying the inner rampart.	
6	Maintenance of the cross-ridge dyke ends, and perhaps by implication the roundhouses – and settlement on the hilltop - was abandoned.	Sample derived from peat: 1590±60 BP [cal AD 370-615] (Beta-101730)

Undoubtedly the hillfort sequence will prove more complex than the surface evidence presently suggests, particularly if, for example, none of the timber houses proved to be contemporary with the defences. However, the excavations by NAG do offer the opportunity to unravel some of these questions and make a major contribution to our knowledge of hillfort development and chronology in the Borders.

Excavations by NAG will continue during the summer of 2000 between 23rd July and 2nd August.

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