



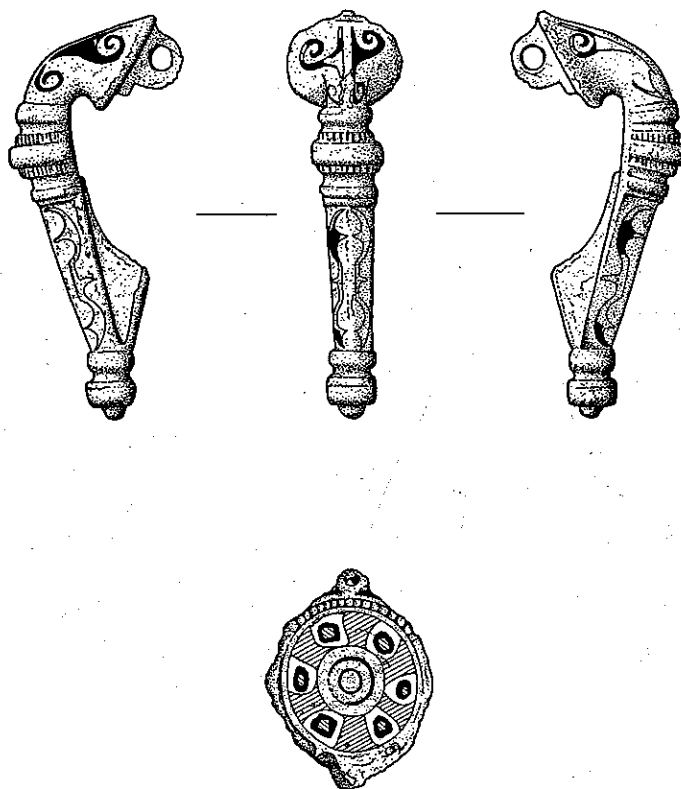
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# EXCAVATIONS AT BIRNIE, MORAY, 1999

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## SUMMARY

Excavations continued in 1999 on an Iron Age settlement at Birnie, Moray, where metal-detecting had recovered a disturbed Roman coin hoard. Earlier work had shown the settlement was in part contemporary with the coins, and it may have been the residence of a powerful local chieftain who had contacts with the Romans.

Work in 1999 concentrated on a roundhouse which had been partly exposed in 1998. This proved to be well-preserved, with burnt deposits which probably relate to its destruction after it was abandoned. These had sealed the remains of the internal fittings of the house. Although these were only partly excavated, they have the potential to give a rare insight into the structure of an Iron Age house. The house was large, some 14 m in diameter, supported on a ring of substantial posts. It was rebuilt once.

Excavation of an area around the house revealed a range of pits and postholes. It also uncovered a well-preserved medieval blacksmith's workshop. This was probably linked to the community which lived around the important church at Birnie.

A metal detecting survey found more silver coins from the hoard, as well as two Roman brooches. One of these is probably earlier than the coins, which indicates the hoard was not a one-off contact. This suggests the inhabitants of Birnie were indeed people of some importance, as they had connections with the Roman world on several occasions.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The programme of fieldwork at Birnie was stimulated by the discovery of a number of Roman silver coins (*denarii*) by Mr Hamish Stuart while metal-detecting. These were part of a scattered hoard - an unusual find so far beyond the Roman frontier. It was probably a gift or bribe to a powerful local chieftain to persuade him to keep the peace, part of the frontier politics used by the Romans to keep the province secure. Their date suggests they may be connected with the aftermath of the Emperor Severus's campaigns in north Britain in AD 208-211.

The discovery drew attention to a settlement in the field known from aerial photographs. Trial excavation in 1998 showed that one house at least was occupied around the same time as the coins. This connection between a hoard and a settlement is very rare – most hoards are chance finds where the circumstances and context are unknown. Was there other evidence to suggest this was a powerful local chieftain's settlement? Was there long-term contact with the Romans, or just a single event? Were the coins buried in a special or high-status part of the site, or were they buried away from the houses? Were they buried for safety or as a sacrifice? How did the site relate to the wider landscape? It lies beside Birnie Kirk, an early Christian site – did the first Christians come here because it was already an important power centre, or perhaps a pre-existing religious site?

These were some of the questions which led to the work on the site. They are outlined in more detail in the previous interim report (Hunter 1999). Trying to answer these is a long and painstaking business which will rely on evidence built up over several years of work. The 1999 excavations were intended to look at a small part of this. They took place for two weeks, from 31<sup>st</sup> July-15<sup>th</sup> August 1999, and had three aims.

- To examine the house exposed in 1998, to clarify its construction and history.
- To look at other features showing on the aerial photograph or uncovered in the 1998 trial excavations.
- To continue the metal-detecting survey over the field in the hope of finding more evidence of Roman contact.

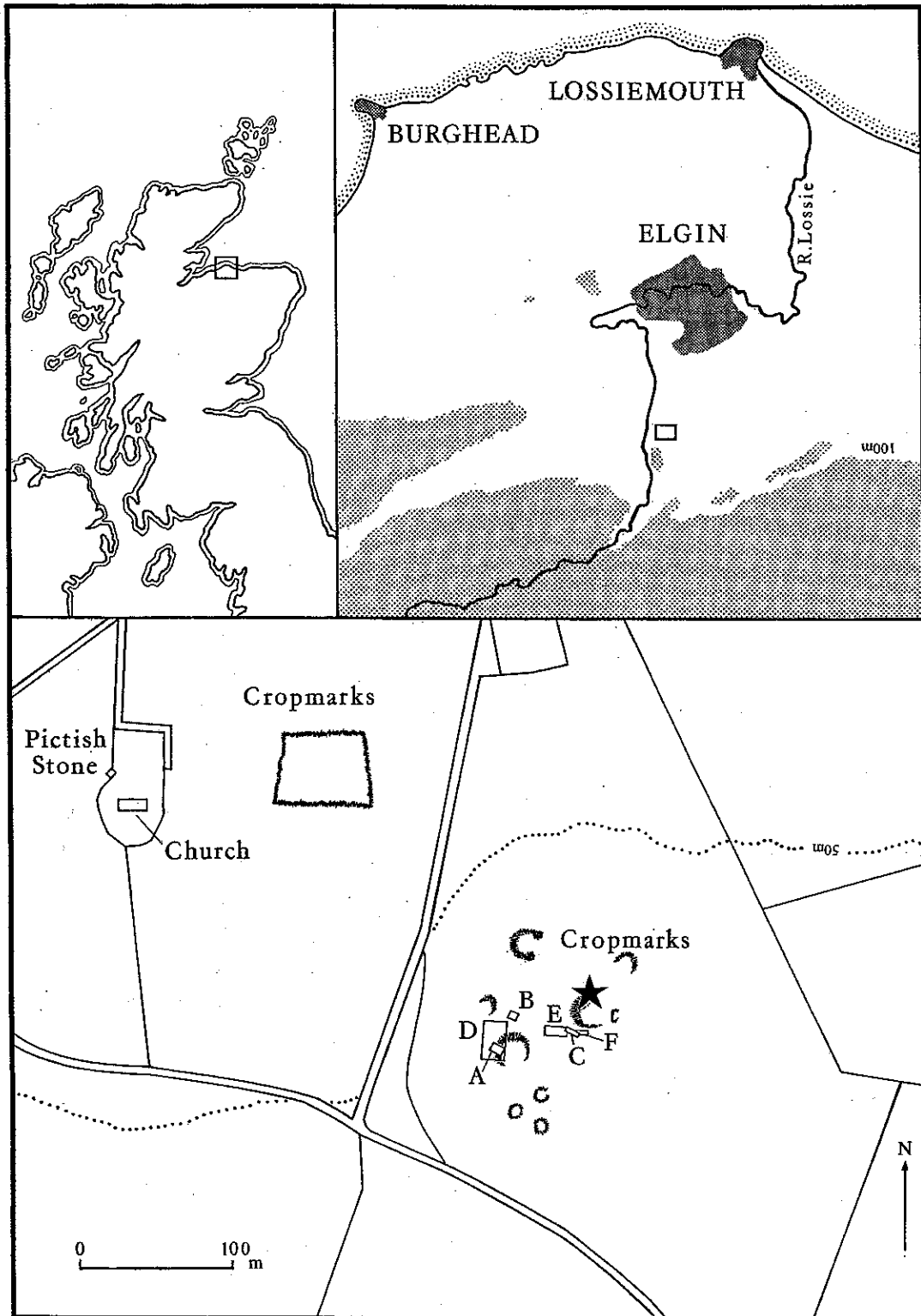


Fig 1 Location map. Cropmark positions are approximate only – earlier plots have proved inaccurate, and a revised one is awaited. The star marks the concentration of Roman coins.

## 2 EXCAVATION RESULTS

Three trenches were opened. Area D expanded the 1998 trial trench A, examining the house which was found and the area around it. Areas E and F looked at features noted on the aerial photograph and in 1998 trial trench C. Trench locations are on fig 1.

### Area D

An area of some 27 x 14 m was opened around 1998 trial trench A (fig 2). This was intended to expose about half of the house which was partly explored in 1998 and take in a reasonable area around it to the north and west to see what activities were connected with it.

### *The house*

The 1998 excavations had shown that the house was well-preserved, with charcoal-rich soils covering it which probably came from its destruction. A radiocarbon date from this charcoal showed the house was built most probably around AD 130-250, broadly contemporary with the coins.

In 1999 around half the house was exposed. Its survival varies. In the north half the house floor is slightly hollowed and the deposits survive well, but in the flatter southern half the plough has removed most of these, leaving just the pits and postholes which were cut into the natural sand. It would have been a large, impressive building – a timber-built roundhouse, some 14 m in diameter. The structure was supported on a ring of posts around 8 m in diameter. These posts were 0.2 - 0.35 m in diameter and dug 0.6-1.0 m into the subsoil to provide solid foundations. In both excavated examples the primary posts had been removed and a pit dug for a replacement post slightly closer to the outer wall (figs 2-3). This suggests the house was completely rebuilt at some point, although it needs confirmed elsewhere on the circumference to ensure it is not due to replacement of a feature such as a doorway. The replacement posts had been allowed to rot *in situ*, although they may have been cut down with only the bases left in the ground. Charcoal and ash destruction deposits covered the postholes.

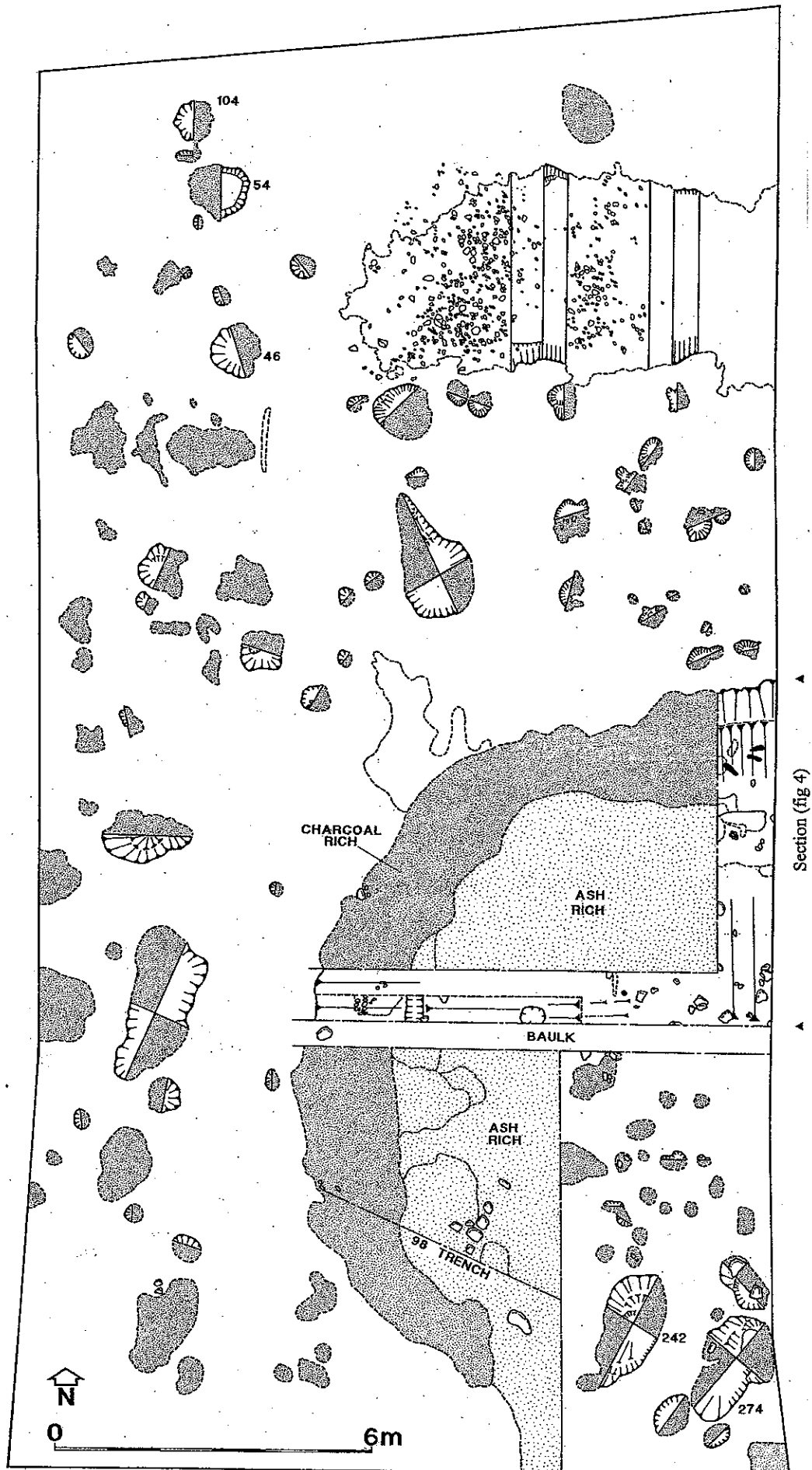


Fig 2 Area A plan. The roundhouse lies in the bottom right, with the ash and charcoal spreads partly excavated. The SW edge of the 1998 trench is marked. The smiddy is the elongated scoop, top right.



The outer wall was not very substantial. The house edge was marked by a slight scoop cut into the sand, and it would originally have had a wall of wattle or something similar. The scoop on the inside of the wall on the northern side might have been deliberate, to give more headroom inside the house, or it might have been created by erosion in this area.

The surviving deposits consisted of lots of burnt material – ash-rich soils over most of the house, with a halo of charcoal-rich soils around the edge (fig 2). These probably come from the final destruction of the house. Their survival is surprising in heavily-used arable fields, as they would normally be destroyed by generations of ploughing. They are a fragile and valuable resource, as this burning preserved some of the internal features of the house. These deposits were only sampled, but they revealed burnt stakes and turves which formed internal divisions and house fittings (figs 2, 4). This is an important target for further work: under the surviving deposits should be a very good picture of what the inside of a roundhouse looked like. It seems that the end of the house was deliberate, not accidental. The bases of the posts had been left in the ground but no charcoal was found in them, suggesting they had rotted and been replaced by soil before the remains of the house were burnt down. It may be the house was long derelict when it was finally destroyed, or that it was rebuilt again before its destruction with earthfast posts replaced by post pads or sleeper beams which left no traces. The small quantity of finds in the burnt soils also suggests the house was cleaned out before it was destroyed. The few finds included a copper alloy spiral finger ring found in 1998, a copper alloy mount, part of an iron sword, and some pottery. These are discussed below.

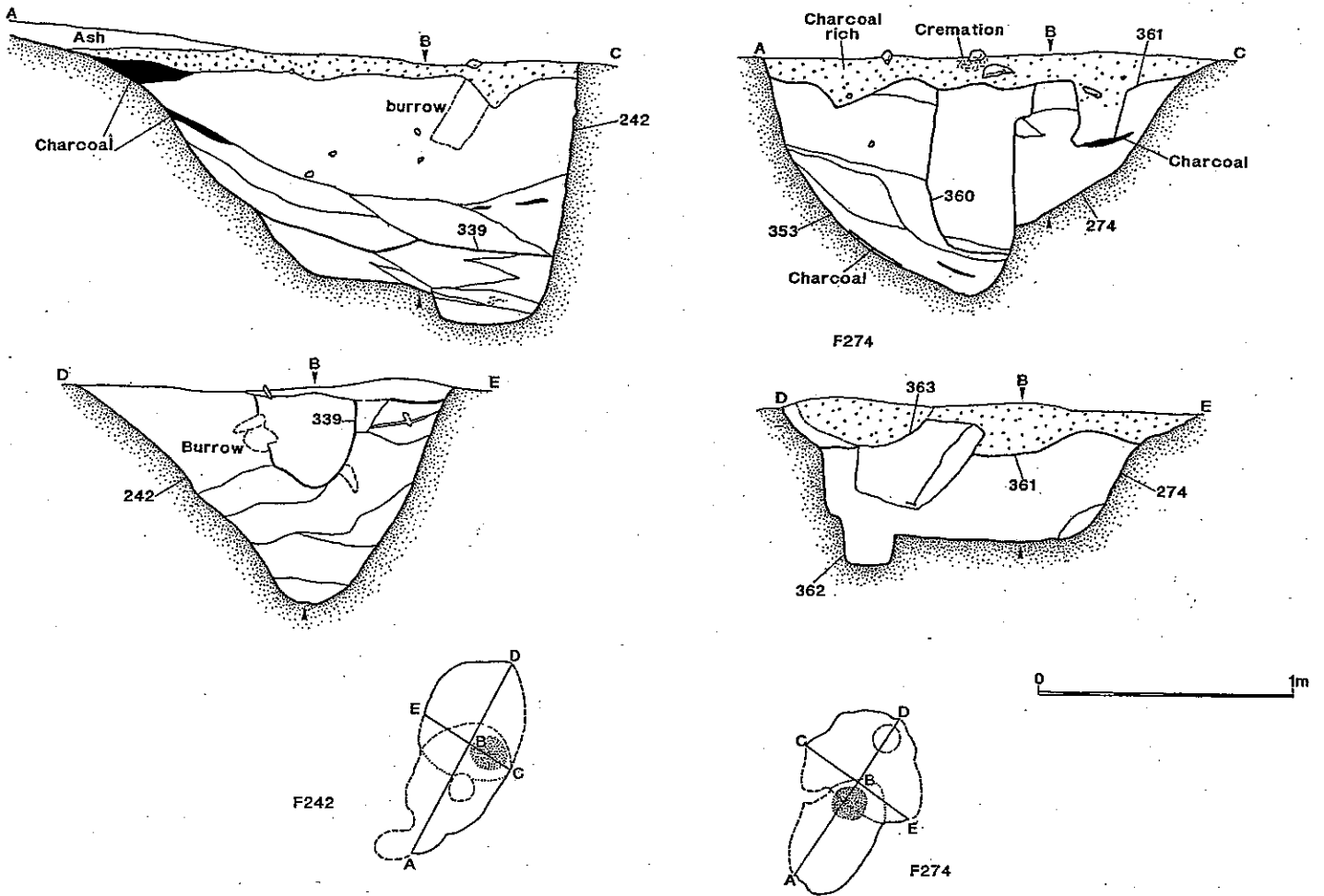


Fig 3 Quadrant sections through two of the main roundhouse postholes. The key plans below (not to scale) indicate where the sections were taken and reconstruct the original outlines of each posthole; the later posthole in each is the one nearer the bottom of the page.

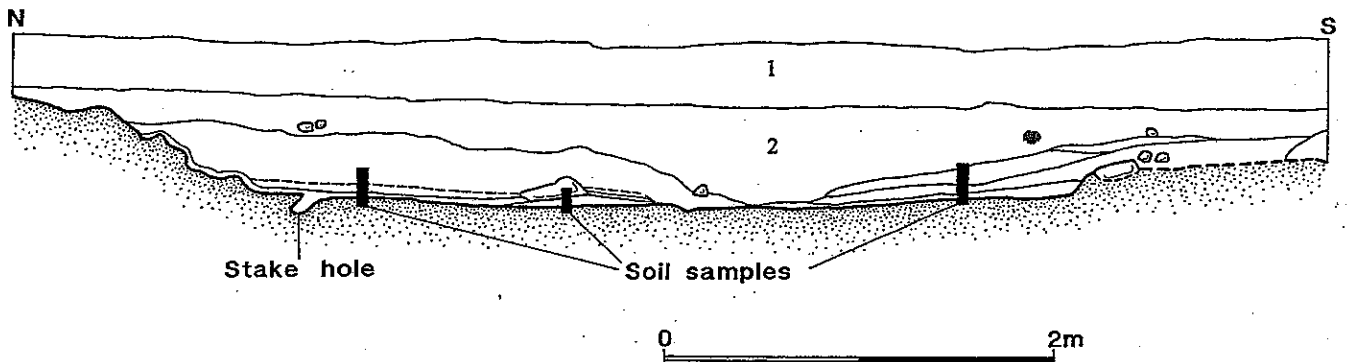


Fig 4 N-S section across the northern half of the roundhouse (marked on fig 2). Layer 1 is modern topsoil; 2 is medieval ploughsoil. The lower layers are destruction deposits and (the basal layer) possible floor deposits.

### *The medieval blacksmith's workshop*

At the north end of the trench was a long, sub-rectangular feature which showed up on aerial photographs as a dark splotch some 9-10 m long. The quantities of slag and other metal-working debris which it produced make it clear it was a blacksmith's workshop. A few pieces of pot from its floor deposits indicate it was medieval; radiocarbon dates are awaited to confirm this.

The workshop as exposed was a shallow hollow some 8 m long and 3.5 m wide; the eastern limit lay outside the excavation area (fig 5). On its south side were a series of postholes to support a wall. There were no similar posts on the north side, where a gully curved round from the west end, getting shallower and eventually petering out. This was probably a drain which fell out of use during the smiddy's life, as the floor eroded parts of its edge and it became filled with ashy slag-rich deposits from the metalworking. The hollowed scoop was probably created by erosion during the use of the smiddy. Attempts were made to patch it on a number of occasions and at one stage a cobbled floor was laid across the western end (fig 5c).

Pulling together these pieces of evidence, it seems the smiddy building lay at the west end of the hollow, defined by the gully and the floor, with the eastern part of the scoop being an outdoor area perhaps for activities such as shoeing horses. There is no evidence of a north wall, and it was probably an insubstantial structure with a sturdy southern wall perhaps supporting a lean-to roof. No evidence survived of any internal features such as a hearth or an anvil. Study of the slag and other metalworking debris by Andrew Heald showed that both iron smelting and blacksmithing took place here. The evidence of reflooring and the depth of deposits which built up suggest the smiddy was quite long-lived.

West of the smiddy were three unusual deep pits with charcoal-rich fills (fig 6). These appeared to have been used repeatedly for burning activities, and in some there were small stakeholes in the base. These are seen as charcoal burning pits, with the stakes representing the base of the structure made from the wood which was to be turned into charcoal. Charcoal would be the preferred fuel of a blacksmith, as it burns readily and does not contain too many impurities. Tests are planned to check this interpretation.

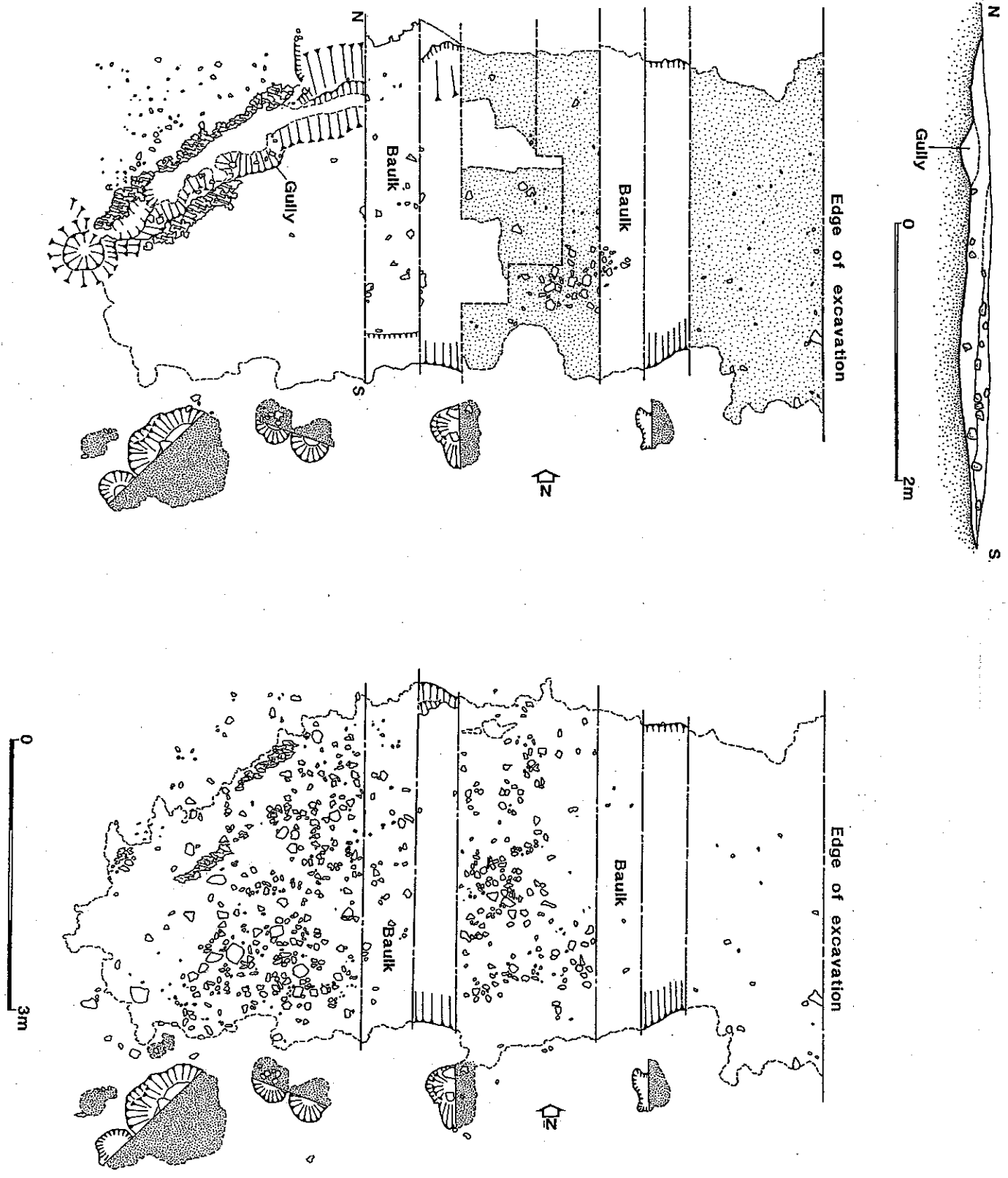


Fig 5 The smiddy. (a) Section. (b) After excavation (deposits not fully excavated are stippled). (c) Later floored surface.

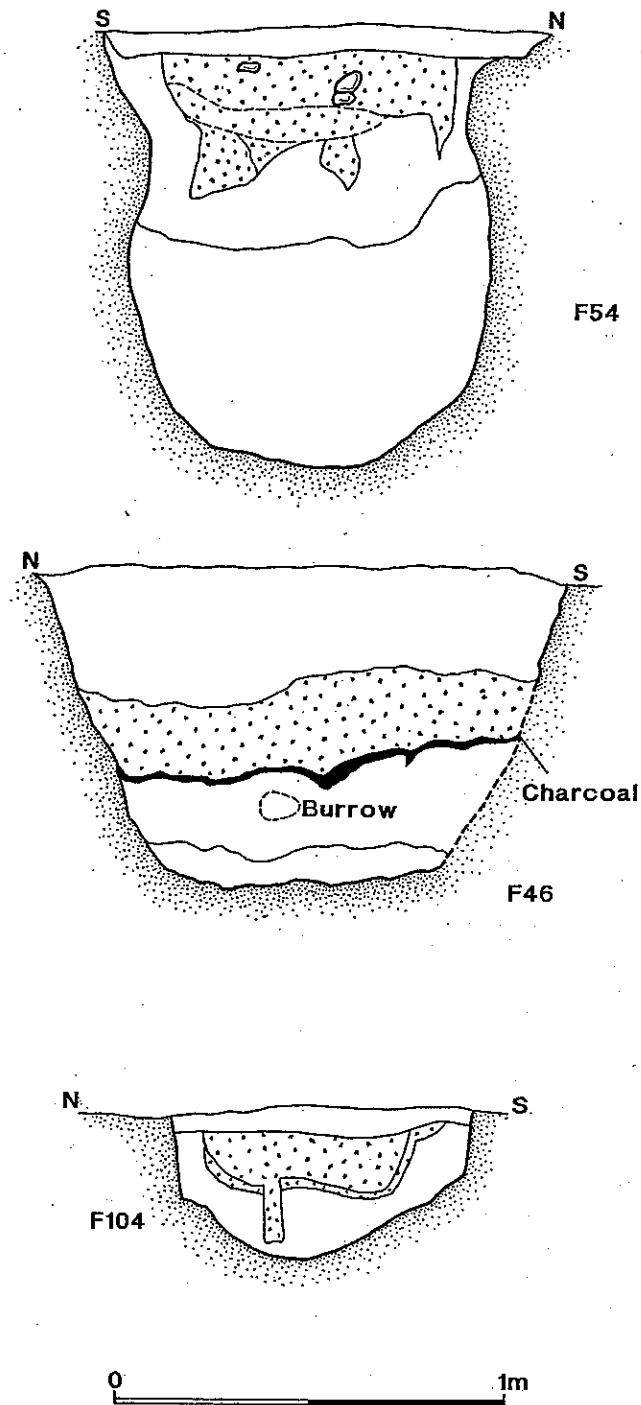


Fig 6 Probable charcoal-burning pits (see fig 2 for locations). Stippled layers are charcoal-rich, probably from the last burning.

### *Other features*

Few of the other features can be given a definite date or function. Very few contained any artefacts, although one produced highly fragmentary articulated sheep teeth which were put in the pit as either a complete head or a complete lower jaw. The deposition of articulated bits of animal is unlikely to represent simple rubbish disposal, and may be an offering of some sort - such offerings of animal parts are well-known in areas where bone preservation is better.

There were a number of small postholes which do not fall into any obvious pattern. These may be connected with activities around either the roundhouse or the smiddy, such as supports for haystacks. Many pits were also uncovered, but most produced no evidence of date or function.

### Areas E and F

There are hints on some aerial photographs of a possible palisade surrounding the area where the coins were found. In 1998 trench C was excavated to look for this, and found features which might be parts of a palisade, but in the small space excavated it was impossible to be sure. Areas E and F were intended to look in more detail at this. Because time was tight, all that was done was to remove the overlying topsoil and clean the trenches to show what was there, with some very limited excavation (see fig 7).

It was clear from this that there was no palisade in this area. However there are substantial archaeological features present which could not be interpreted without seeing more of them. They cannot be linked precisely to features on the aerial photograph, but appear to be close to another large roundhouse.

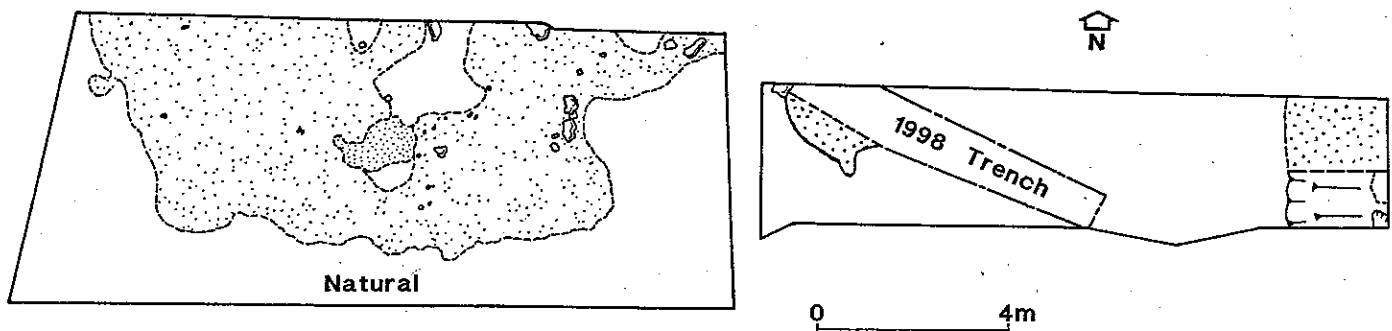


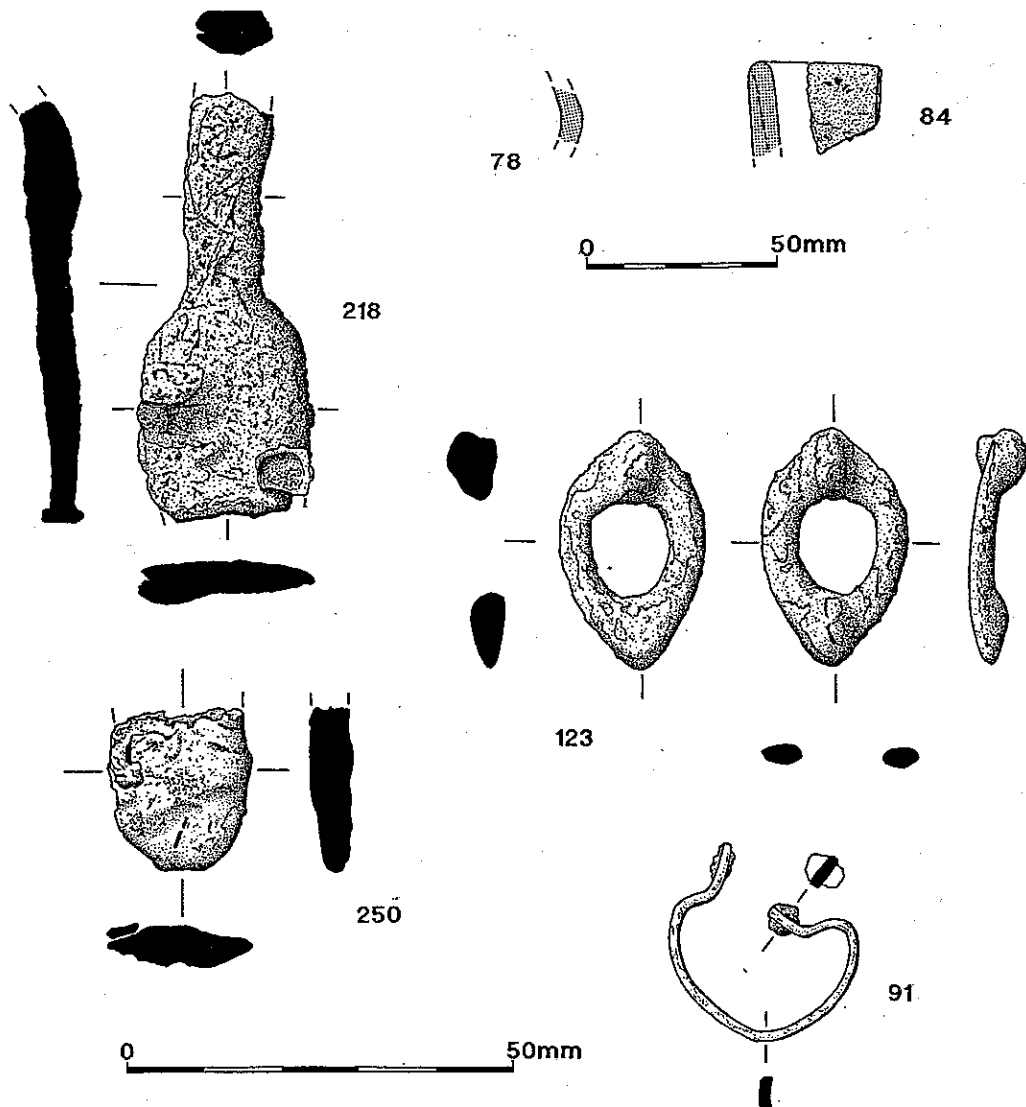
Fig 7 Areas E and F. Stippled areas are archaeological features.

### 3 THE FINDS

The excavations produced a range of finds (fig 8). Slag was most common, but there was also prehistoric and medieval pottery (the latter mainly from the smiddy), and some coarse stone tools and early prehistoric flints. Charlie Murray kindly examined the medieval pottery from 1998 and 1999, and it was almost entirely 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century.

The roundhouse produced some Iron Age pottery and a couple of metal finds. There is a copper alloy strip which appears to be a mount for some organic object, and the handle and part of the blade of an iron sword (fig 8, nos 91, 218). The blade appears to have been snapped deliberately, and it may have been an offering as part of some ceremonies accompanying the house's abandonment. Some of the other finds, notably the intact finger ring found in 1998, may also have been such offerings. Further excavation of these deposits would be necessary to take this interpretation further by looking at the overall pattern of finds in the house.

Fig 8 Selection of finds. Pot 78, 84; iron 218; silver 250; copper alloy 91, 123.





The most interesting artefacts were found as part of the metal-detecting survey by Hamish Stuart. He located eight more *denarii*, their dates and wear indicating they too were part of the hoard. This brings the hoard total so far to 28 coins – a breakdown is given in table 1. The latest coin so far is of AD 194-5. This year's finds allowed us to get a better idea of where the focus of the coin distribution was (marked as a star on fig 1). A lump of melted silver was also found (fig 8, no 250). While this cannot be closely dated, it is not what you would expect as a stray find in any random field, and points to silver-working taking place. It is tempting to suggest that this was the fate of some of the silver coins – bullion which was melted down to be turned into jewellery, as they were of no use as currency so far from the Roman world.

Emperor	Number of coins
Vespasian	4
Domitian	1
Trajan	3
Hadrian	2
Antoninus Pius	4
Marcus Aurelius	3
Lucius Verus	2
Commodus	6
Septimius Severus	2

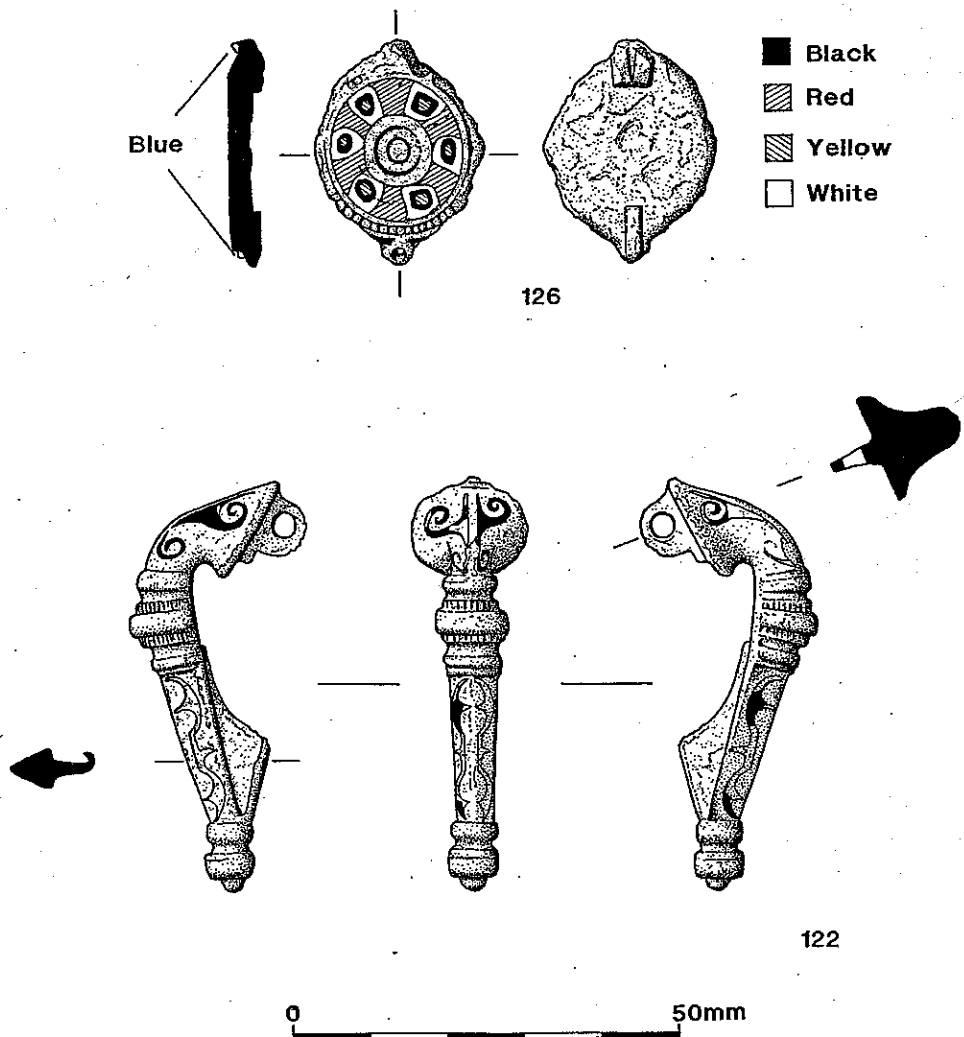
Table 1. Coins from the hoard. An additional coin was misplaced by the finder before it could be recorded.

From the same general area as the coins came three other exciting finds – a piece of Iron Age metalwork and two Roman brooches. The Iron Age object is a copper alloy button and loop fastener (fig 8, no 123). What survives here is the 'button' part – there are marks on the rear where the loop once attached, and this would have been fastened to a strap, with the button being slipped through a hole in another strap to hold it. These fasteners were used particularly in horse harness. They are very unusual in the north-east, and this example may have been imported from southern Scotland.

The two Roman copper alloy brooches (fig 9) are interesting finds because they show that the coins were not a single isolated event, but part of a larger system of contacts. One is a safety-pin type known as a trumpet brooch (fig 9, no 122). It has swirling patterns inlaid with a dark substance termed niello. These are the commonest type of Roman brooch found on native sites in Scotland, probably because their shape and style reminded the locals of some of their own metalwork. However this example is more elaborate than usual because of its decoration. This suggests it was quite a high-status item. It dates to the late 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD and was manufactured somewhere within the Roman province of Britannia.

The other is more exotic – it was probably made in the Rhineland or northern France in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. These enamelled plate brooches were a speciality of the area, especially the more complex ones such as this. It originally had small blue enamelled spots at the edges of the main plate, which bears concentric circles of enamel (the enamel is lost in the inner circles). This is an unusual brooch, and would have been a valued possession (fig 9, no 126).

Fig 9 Roman brooches.



#### 4 DISCUSSION

The 1999 season was a very productive one. We were able to confirm that the site saw both Iron Age and Medieval activity as the 1998 fieldwalking had indicated.

The good preservation of the Iron Age house is very unusual in arable areas. In 1999 it was only sampled to answer specific questions on its construction and history, but full excavation has the potential to reveal unprecedented insights into the use of roundhouses in the area. We were able to show that the house was a big, impressive one which had been rebuilt once and was probably deliberately destroyed by fire at the end of its life. Over a number of years the aim is to sample several of the other houses in the settlement to see how typical this one is and how long-lived the settlement was.

The discovery of more coins improves our knowledge of the hoard and gives us a better idea of its location, but in many ways the most important finds were the two Roman brooches. These are directly relevant to some of our main research questions – is there any other evidence that this was a status site, and were the connections with the Romans a one-off or part of a broader picture? Although Roman brooches are not infrequent finds on native sites, these two are unusual in one way or another. This suggests the inhabitants were people of some importance, as jewellery was used, like today, as a way of signalling wealth and status. They also cast important light on the connections with the Romans, as they indicate the coins were not an isolated incident. The presence of the brooches suggests contact with the Romans over a longer timescale, as the trumpet brooch should be rather earlier than the coin hoard. In other words, the Romans (or their intermediaries, perhaps chiefs from further south) were doing business with the groups at Birnie on a repeated basis, building a relationship with them over time.

The discovery of the smiddy was a piece of good fortune. The 1998 fieldwalking indicated there was a scatter of medieval activity in the field, and further work should allow a better understanding of the range of buildings present. The smiddy would have been a central feature in the medieval settlement's life, producing and repairing tools, making nails, shoeing horses and so on. Given its proximity to Birnie Kirk, it

little work done on medieval rural settlement, and Birnie could be of considerable interest. Elgin itself has seen quite a lot of work on its medieval past – this will provide a chance to compare the rural hinterland.

It is hoped to continue work at Birnie over a number of years, to throw more light on this site and on other aspects of the wider landscape. Results so far have shown that it has the potential to cast important new light on our understanding of the Scottish Iron Age, and to tell us about the poorly-researched area of medieval rural settlements. While much of the picture remains cloudy, Birnie is already helping our understanding of Moray's past.

## 5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavations would have been impossible without the ready cooperation and enthusiasm of the farmer, Mr William Mustard, and his family, and I am most grateful to them. Hamish Stuart, the finder of the hoard, provided invaluable assistance with the metal detecting survey which is such a key component of the project. I am very grateful to Mike Church and Andy Heald for assisting with the supervising of the excavation and to the large body of volunteers, too many to name individually, who gave of their time so freely and with remarkably little complaint. Karsten Stevring made the practicalities of working in the middle of a pig farm much easier. The support of the Moray Society is an important part of the project, as is that of Ian Shepherd and Moira Greig, particularly for aerial photographs of the site. I am grateful to Charlie Murray for advice on the medieval pottery and Gerry McDonnell for discussion of the iron-working residues. Throughout, Ian Keillar has been a source of assistance and support which is much appreciated. The tolerance of René Harris in allowing her house to be overrun by scruffy archaeologists is remarkable, and is a major factor in making the work of the excavation supervisors so pleasant – our heartfelt thanks to her. Illustrations are by Alan Braby, except fig 1 by Marion O'Neil. All funding was provided by the National Museums of Scotland, thanks to the support of David Clarke.

It is a matter of considerable sorrow that Barri Jones, Professor of Archaeology at Manchester University, died in 1999, shortly before a planned visit to the excavations. Without his efforts in aerial photography in Moray over the years our knowledge would be much the poorer, and the potential of this site would never have been recognised. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Birnie excavations, and his loss is keenly felt.

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