A Later Prehistoric House and Early Medieval Buildings in Northern Scotland.

Excavations at Loch Shurrery and Lambsdale Leans, Caithness, 1955

Alistair MacLaren, Ewan Campbell, Gordon Cook, Richard Hingley, Janet Hooper and LH Wells

TWO rescue excavations of occupation sites at the northern edge of a now rather sparsely occupied part of the interior of Caithness are summarised here. The sites lie near to one of the largest clusters of archaeological sites in the modern county. The full publication of these excavations is in electronic form in the *Scottish Archaeological Internet Report* series (MacLaren 2003). The present report is intended as an account of the significant findings, as these excavations are not well known, being absent from published surveys of Pictish or Viking & Late Norse archaeology. The first site was an Iron Age house, one rather different in structure to the majority of the small group of such buildings that which have been excavated in the northern part of the Scottish mainland. The main characteristics of the partially-excavated mound of the second site, Lambsdale Leans, are the presence of what appeared to be two extended inhumations and the remnants of possible structures associated with several layers of burnt material. The earliest–dated pottery, unstratified, comes from a grass-tempered handmade vessel (Norse-period?); most of the sherds were 12th-13th century in date.

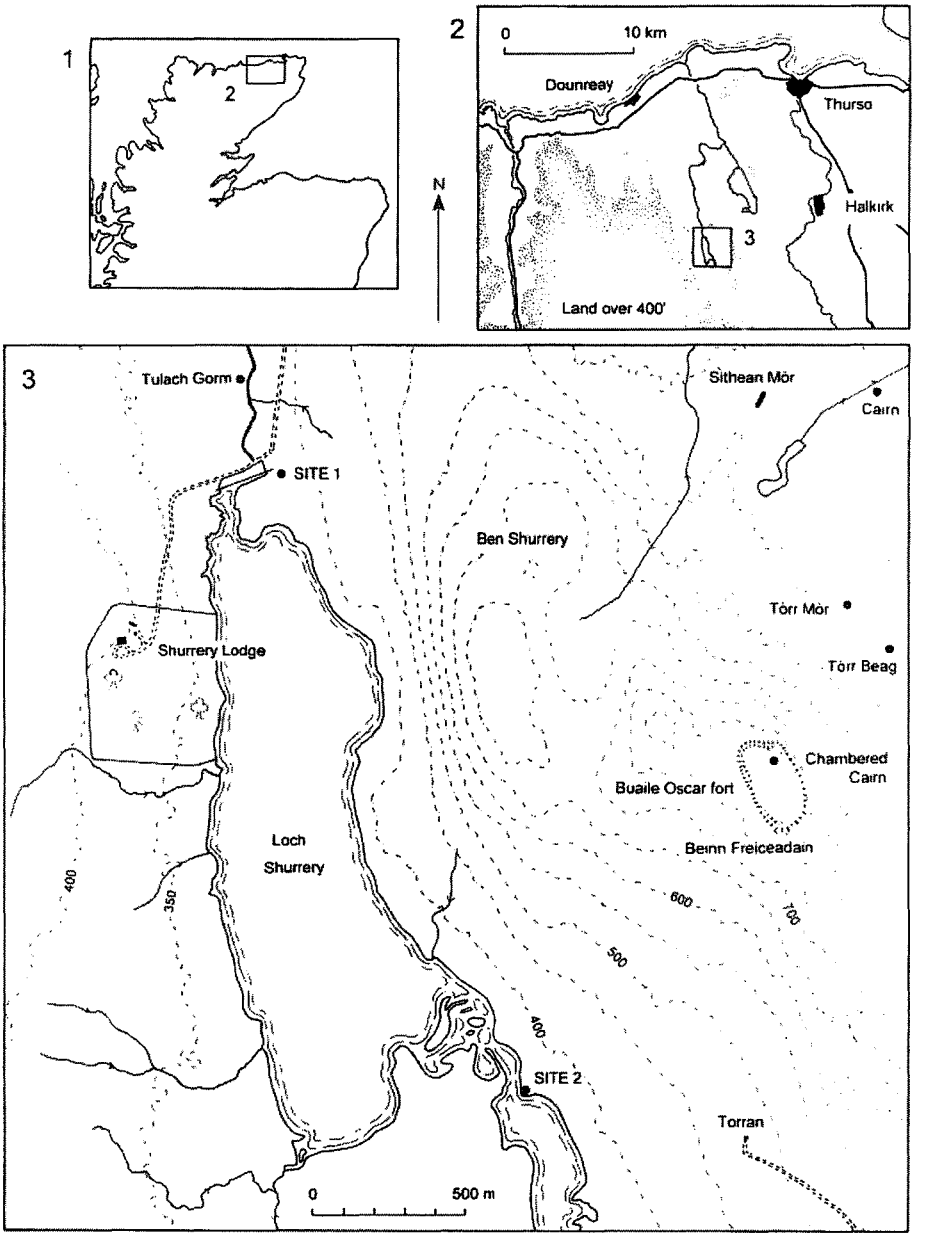

Figure 1: Location map.

The work outlined in this report was done by Alistair MacLaren over a period of six weeks between early October and mid November 1955, at the invitation of the then Ministry of Works.[1] The locations of the two sites excavated are shown on Figure 1. The two sites were apparently threatened by a dam built to provide a water supply for the Dounreay nuclear establishment, then under construction. In the event, both monuments have survived: they are nos. FOR 360 and 339 in the relevant volume of Mercer's survey (Mercer 1985) and Lambsdale Leans has been scheduled as AMH 459.[2]

Before excavation, the hut circle at **Loch Shurrery** ('site 1' on Figure 1) appeared as a low, grass-grown collection of stones spread over an irregular area, some 0.9 m in greatest height. It was situated within a few yards of the inner face of the dam at the northern end of the loch (NGR: ND 043 568).

The four cuttings made through the wall (Figure 2: three radial cuttings and the square cutting on the south-west) showed that it was constructed of a mixture of random rubble and soil, which rested on a thin foundation of flat slabs and rough cobbling. This core material was retained by an inner and outer face, and had a thickness of about

1 All the site drawing was done, under difficult weather conditions and severe pressure of time, by Mr William Boal of the Architects Department of the Ministry of Works. Both he and Mr P R Ritchie could not have been more friendly and co-operative in giving Alistair MacLaren all the help and advice they could. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the much kindly assistance given by Mr Jollans, resident engineer, and his assistant, Mr Charlton, and by Mr Mitchell, the chief foreman. Much of the equipment for the excavation was provided from MoW stores, with other equipment lent by the University of Edinburgh and Messrs Tawse (the firm building the dam).

2 Publication acknowledgments are gratefully made to Jim Rideout for the illustrations, and to Gordon Barclay of Historic Scotland who initiated the post-excavation work in 1996, as well as to the contributors of the pottery reports (Ewan Campbell), radiocarbon dating (Gordon Cook) and site discussion sections (Richard Hingley and Janet Hooper). The SAIR editor is grateful to Roderick McCullagh and Graham Key of Historic Scotland, to Sarah Winlow of the National Monuments Record of Scotland, to Thomas Small of Headland Archaeology for his digitisation work (through the good offices of Mike Middleton), to the referees for their helpful comments on the text, to Robin Murdoch for his comments on the glass and to Alison Sheridan (National Museums of Scotland, Dept. of Archaeology) and Simon Gilmour (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland).

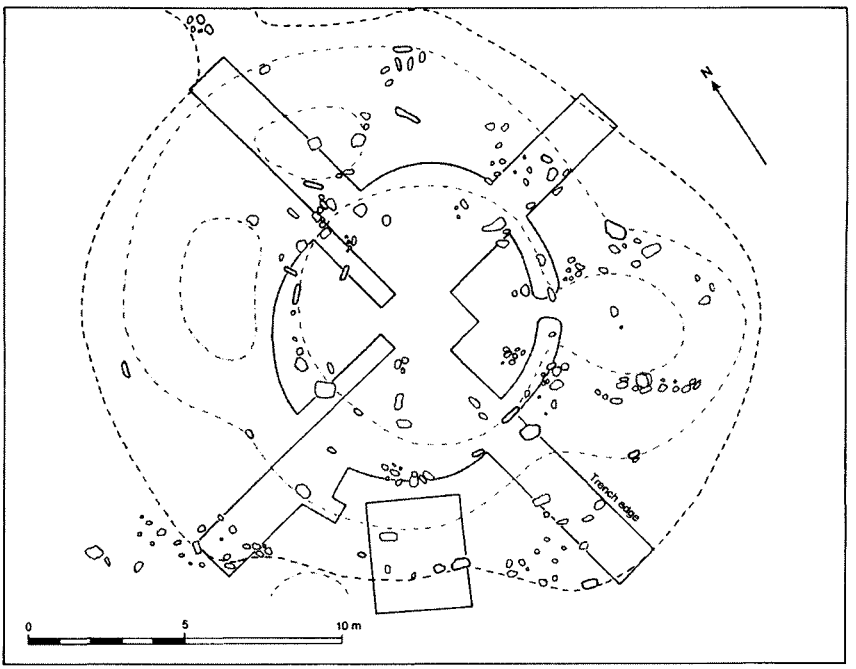

Figure 2: Loch Shurrery hut circle: contour survey and trench plan.

2.4 m overall. Some 1.2 m outside the outer face, there was slight evidence of what may have been a second outer face; this could indicate that, for stability, the wall had been built with an internal strengthening revetment, or it could suggest a rebuild. The inner face of the wall was revealed for three-quarters of the circuit and, round the north-eastern and south-eastern arcs, was found to consist of a series of substantial blocks founded on a thin base of flagstones and having the gaps between them filled with earth and small stones. The south-western arc of the inner face was different: from the inner south corner of the entrance towards the south-east, the face was built entirely of flagstones laid horizontally. The reason for the change in construction used on the south-western arc may have been associated with the entrance, where bonded coursing had also been incorporated; and this could suggest that the entrance and adjacent sections of the wall were the first parts of the circle to be built.

Figure 3: The entrance.

The entrance (Figure 3), facing west-south-west, had an average width of 1.2 m. Except for two shallow courses of flagstone forming the base of the inner corner, and one large slab immediately to the west, practically all of the northern lining-wall of the passage had been robbed or dislodged. The southern side of the passage, however, remained fairly intact to a height of 0.46 m. The side-walls were checked at a point some 1.07 m from their inner ends, leaving a projection on each side for the door to bear against. Just inside the check, a single thin slab was firmly set on edge transversely across the passage to form a sill rising 0.18 m above the floor. The floor was paved with large heavy slabs, the interstices filled with small cobbling. This paving extended into the interior of the hut for a distance of 1.5 m.

In the interior, sufficient flagstones remained in position to support the interpretation that the floor was originally composed of paving bedded on a layer of rough cobbling set into the natural clay subsoil. Situated just off centre there was a sub-rectangular hearth,

consisting of a paved area measuring 1.02 m by 0.66 m, which was defined by a kerb of thin slabs set on edge; the hearth floor was covered by a layer of burnt material mixed with small stones.

Three sherds of pottery were recovered from this site, but none retained diagnostic features. All are handmade and had been fired at a low temperature. Pottery of this nature has been made in western Scotland from the Iron Age until recent times, and it is difficult to date sherds which are undecorated and do not show the vessel form. However, an Iron Age date is the likeliest here.

Two samples of the charcoal were submitted for radiocarbon dating (see below). Both fragments were of Alder (identifications by Dr Mike Cressey). The calibrated age ranges are determined from the University of Oxford calibration programme (OxCal v3.9) Washington Quaternary Isotope Laboratory, Radio-carbon Dating Program 1987.

Because of the limited nature of the excavation at Loch Shurrery, the main value of the evidence about the hut circle relates to its structure and dating. The excavated remains represented a medium-sized oval house with a west-facing entrance. It had an off-centre hearth of rectangular construction. It was rather different in structure to the majority of the small group of such sites, which have been excavated in the northern part of the Scottish mainland, as it did not appear to have an internal ring of post holes postholes. In addition, its western entrance is not matched at the other sites, where entrance orientations are to the south, east or south-east. The wall of the Loch Shurrery house was fairly thick and the excavation suggested that it was complex, while the entrance passageway was quite long. The existence of door checks is also an unusual feature and may relate to the entrance structures of brochs and other substantial roundhouses. Two samples of charcoal from the hearth inside the hut circle produced calibrated radiocarbon date ranges (at 2-*sigma*) of 210BC to 20AD (91.9% probability) 346 - 4 cal BC and 210BC to 20AD (92.8% probability) 341 cal BC - 1 cal AD. As we have seen, it is likely that most of the excavated, undecorated pottery is also Iron Age, part of a broad tradition of very coarsely tempered pottery. Not-withstanding evidence of extended occupation, the whole period of construction and occupation may have occurred within the Iron Age.

Lab code*	Sample material	Age (^{14}C years BP)	d^{13}C (‰)	Calibrated age range
AA-24947	Sample 1: Alder (Alnus sp.) 3.1g	2095±45	-28.1	210BC-20AD (91.9% probability) (cal BP 2160-1930)
AA-24948	Sample 4: Alder (Alnus sp.) 3.3g	2090±45	-28.0	210BC-20AD (92.8% probability) (cal BP 2160-1930)

* University of Arizona AMS facility.

Table 1: Loch Shurrery hearth radiocarbon dates.

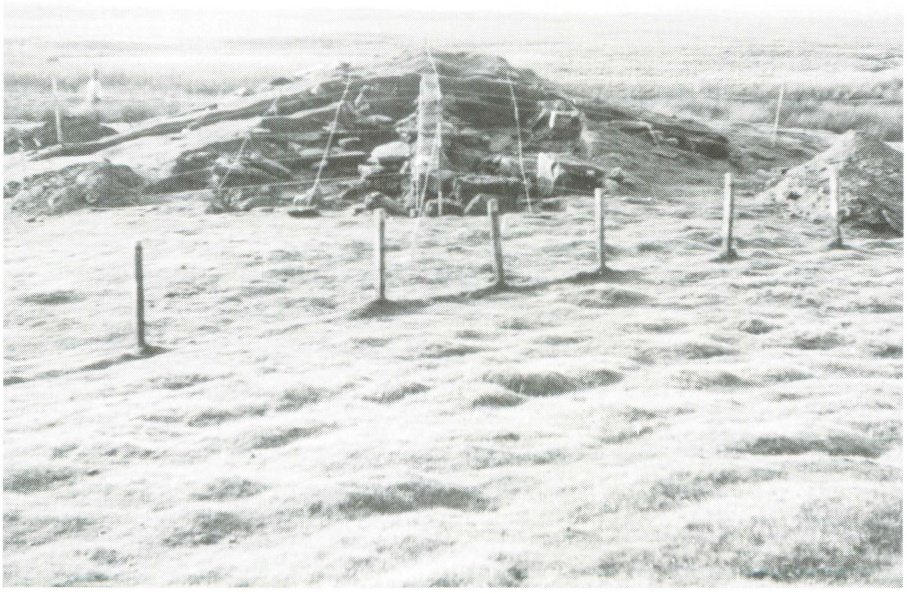

Figure 4: Lambsdale Leans mound: view from the east.

The mound of **Lambsdale Leans** ('site 2' on Figure 1) lies in Reay parish, situated on low-lying ground at the head of Loch Shurrery and close to where its main tributary (the Torran Water) enters the loch from the south. Before excavation, the site (NGR: ND 051 548) appeared as a grass-grown mound, about 2 m high and an irregular oval on plan, measuring about 22.9 appeared as a grass-grown

mound, about 2 m high and an irregular oval on plan, measuring about 22.9 m in length by a maximum of 16.8 m transversely. Enough stripping was done, mainly in the eastern half of the mound (Figure 4: some 130 square metres approx.), to reveal that it was largely composed of a mixture of sand and earth, in which there was evidence of stone structures associated with layers of burning, which suggested two occupation floors. The partial skeletal remains of two adult females were recovered, together with a few sherds of pottery.

The pattern of excavation trenches was laid out in order to provide a longitudinal section of the mound and, running towards it from each side, a series of cross-sections. Their layout was developed in order to expose stone structures as they became visible within the body of the mound (Figure 5).

Extending the excavations eastwards exposed what appeared to be the foundations of a sub-circular structure. Additional cuttings were made on the north and on the east, so that the eastern arc of the

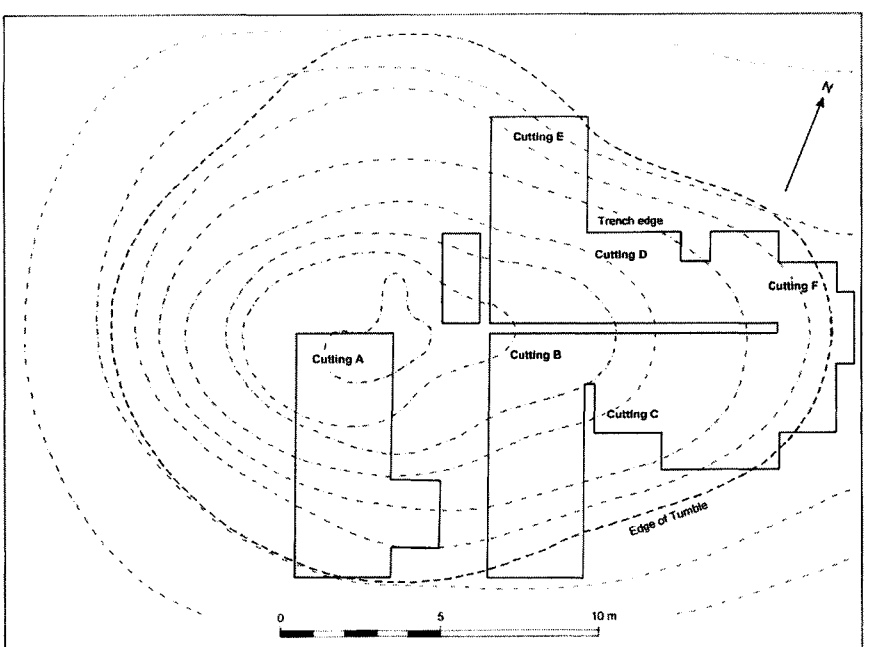

Figure 5: Lambsdale Leans mound: contour survey and trench plan.

sub-circular structure was completed and, what appeared to be part of the northern side and north-western angle of a rectangular structure was exposed. It was at this point that the weather broke, and seven full days were lost to persistent heavy rain, while three others were showery, leaving only four days uninterrupted. Progress was so severely delayed that it became clear that there would not be time to do further excavation, so that the lower levels were left undisturbed.

Almost all the pottery is unstratified (the exception being a medieval rim and three bodysherds from the top burnt layer) and therefore can only give a possible indication of the overall date range of occupation of the site. None of the sherds look prehistoric, and most appear to be medieval. The earliest sherds are from a single grass-tempered handmade vessel whose form cannot be determined. This type of fabric is often found in Norse-period assemblages in the Caithness region, though in other areas such as the Western Isles grass-tempering is not chronologically significant, being found in Iron Age and later fabrics. Two other pottery sherds are from handmade vessels but have no distinctive features. They could belong to the Late Iron Age or Norse periods.

Most of the remainder of the sherds fall into a generally later tradition of medieval oxidised wheel-thrown vessels. There are a number of different fabrics though they share similarities. Two rims are present: they appear to be from small globular pots, which by comparison with the few northern or western assemblages are probably of 12th-13th centuries AD date. The fabrics are not particularly well-fired, and are probably of local production. There are no examples of identifiable 13th-14th century types such as East Coast White Gritty or Red Sandy wares which were widely distributed. There is a scarcity of identifiable post-medieval wares, which one would expect if occupation had continued into the 17th century or later. The glass is the only other object which object that might be late in date, but is also unstratified. Robin Murdoch kindly comments that it is part of the kick-up from a wine bottle, of small diameter and hand-finished, late 18th-early 19th century.

The human remains (analysed in 1956 by L H Wells) are those of two individuals: one (Lambsdale I) represented by the left half of the

skull and mandible with fragments of vertebral column, pelvis and limbs and the other (Lambsdale II) by the hinder half of the skull with no other associated parts. Lambsdale I is clearly shown by the remains of the pelvis to be female. Lambsdale II represents a younger, but still fully adult individual, and from its slender build was probably also female.

The main characteristics of this partially-excavated site are the presence of what appeared to be two extended inhumations and the remnants of possible structures associated with several layers of burnt material. Lambsdale Leans itself was a natural mound, of elongated shape and composed largely of sand, into which were set the burials and structural remains. The burials (one certainly female, the other probably so) were not in cists. The structural remains, while not fully excavated, accord well with the general tenor of the available evidence of later first millennium AD buildings in the north of Scotland. Both structures at Lambsdale Leans had floors comprising roughly laid paving, edged with upright slabs, and with an outer kerb of stones. The earliest–dated pottery sherds, unstratified, are from a single grass-tempered handmade vessel whose form cannot be determined. Overall, on one interpretation the Lambsdale Leans evidence favours a context within the Early Medieval period in Caithness. The pottery however, being mostly 12th-13th century oxidised wheel-thrown vessels, can be seen to support the suggestion that occupation on the site may have begun in the Medieval period.

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