Cromarty Medieval Burgh

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Recent excavations at Cromarty at the end of the Black Isle in Easter Ross are providing in depth evidence of Medieval occupation in a burgh. The project was organised by the Cromarty Medieval Burgh Community Archaeology Project, a charitable organisation formed after storm damage in December 2012 revealed archaeological deposits on the shore. Excavations led by Stephen Birch and Mary Peteranna took place between 2013 and 2016, producing a wealth of information about the Medieval and later occupation.

Detailed historical investigation was undertaken by David Alston and Richard Oram. Cromarty occupies a strategic location controlling the entrance to the Cromarty Firth and the ferry point across to Nigg and on to Tain. Although documentation does not mention Cromarty until the 13th century, it may have been founded earlier, or indeed expanded from an earlier settlement. Radiocarbon dates from the excavations are still awaited, but show activity from at least the 12th century. The area excavated was clearly the Medieval settlement, and fortunately the nucleus of the burgh shifted in later years resulting in well stratified deposits.

From the Medieval burgh there is evidence of foundations for houses, built with upright timbers and some with wooden beam foundations, and then walls of turf and wattle and daub. Building styles changed as time went on, with cruck frames appearing in the 13th century. A blacksmith’s workshop and grain kiln were also uncovered, with the kiln radiocarbon dated to the 1059-1259. Water was supplied from a well, which unusually had steps leading down it -and the gruesome discovery of a pony at the bottom.

Good environmental evidence was uncovered which will provide evidence of plants and trees growing nearby, food and climate. Barley, oats, rye and flax were cultivated, with evidence mainly in the 14th and 15th centuries. A large number of fishbones show the importance of fishing, particularly in the 13th and 14th century, probably on a commercial scale. Shepe and goat made up almost half the anijmal bones from c.1400-c.1550, with cattle around 36% in this period, different from more urban centres like Inverness where cattle predominate. The cattle at Cromarty may have been kept mainly for their hides. Horses, pigs and poultry were also found, and very few bird bones from 1400sonwards.

Finds include a large quantity of pottery, some imported from Yorkshire or even the Continent, but some probably made locally. These include a lot of jugs, but few pieces of domestic pottery. A bone tuning peg was found, only the second to be discovered in Scotland. There were also a number of spindle whorls and quernstones, the latter often re-used in buildings. These common objects are difficult to date, so these dated examples will provide useful dating. These finds from the excavation can be augmented by a large assemblage of metal detected objects found over the years, mainly on fields which had been spread from middens. They include seal matrices, heraldic pendants, annular brooches and an interesting collection of coins (see eg Highland HER MHG29565, MHG29493, MHG61498).

After perhaps a gap, new buildings appear in the 1500s, and in the late 1600s. Maps and documents provide a picture for the 18th centuries and later as the area became known as Thief’s Row. By the late 1800s this area was in decline.

The community archaeology project at Cromarty was and is exemplary in its planning and execution, combining detailed project design published prior to fieldwork, high-quality field execution across a large open area with embedded community participation. It is a good example of what can be achieved in a community project, involving the public, academics, specialists, and people of all ages. Skills workshops were held throughout the digging season, open to volunteers and others. In the course of the work, special research days were held where specialists were invited to work on the material and present their results in a seminar open to the public. Volunteers helped work on the finds. A small publication was produced (Vawdrey nd) pending the final report, and a website kept people informed about the results. The full excavation report will provide valuable information on Medieval Highlands, its connections, economy and history.

Further information:

[http://www.Medievalcromarty.org/index.asp?pageid=606107](http://www.medievalcromarty.org/index.asp?pageid=606107)

Vawdrey, Caroline nd Medieval Cromarty Uncovered. Four summers of community archaeology in a former Royal Burgh

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