Culduthel Iron Age Craftworking Site

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The area around Culduthel has been settled from at least the Neolithic onwards, and finds of Mesolithic microliths in the area suggest activity even earlier. The building of the southern distributor road and new houses led to an explosion of developer-led archaeology and investigation. In one area on Culduthel farm, a crop mark of an isolated palisade of seemingly little importance resulted in survey and then large-scale excavation when it became clear the site was part of an extensive Iron Age settlement. Fortunately the site was not reused after its Iron Age activity, with subsequent damage only from ploughing, protected in places by hillwash.

Although not as many radiocarbon dates were obtained as would now seem desirable, with artefacts they allow phasing at the site. Early Iron Age occupation is represented by two partially superimposed houses, a clearance cairn and possibly the palisade. After a gap of perhaps a century the area saw intensive reoccupation spanning mainly 2nd century BC to early 2nd century AD. This latter period was divided into two phases, although it is not possible to tell how much time elapsed between them. The first part (Phase 3a) appears to have consisted entirely of workshops, with 10 workshop roundhouses and additional hearths, though it is not possible to determine if all were in use at the same time. However, many workshops show rebuilding of furnaces.

In the second part (Phase 3b), two large ring-groove roundhouses were constructed. They were rich in artefacts, including tools but also some high status imports including Roman objects suggesting a date between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD. The finds in one of the houses suggests deliberate deposition. One of the houses shows significant modification over its lifetime. Their exact functions are unclear.

The roundhouses were built with rings of internal posts, and most with entrance porches facing to the northeast. Three of the buildings had a narrow trench outside the rings of posts for an outer wall. The two largest, belonging to Phase 3b, were very big with an internal diameter of around 18 and 17m, some of the largest known from Scotland. Some of the buildings appear to have ritually deposited items such as iron weaponry placed in postholes during construction.

That the site was a high status settlement is in no doubt due to the quality of the finds and the evidence of glass, iron and bronze-working. The collection of iron slag is the largest identified in Scotland. The crucible and mould fragments are the largest recorded Iron Age assemblage in Northern Britain. It appears that these activities were taking place in the same area, in the same workshops. Five ironworking workshops were identified, each with bases for furnaces, and other buildings showed evidence of iron working. Enamel waste suggests manufacturing of elite objects such as the enamelled brooch found at the site. In addition, there were some hearths without obvious buildings. The quantity and similarities of the workshop buildings suggests that craftworking, particularly ironworking, was the main focus of the excavated area.

The artefact assemblage was particularly rich, including weapons, beads of various colours, holdfasts for joining wood, a few nails, tools for wood-, leather- and textile working as well as agriculture, personal decorative objects, harness equipment, a linch pin for a chariot, and querns which were mainly in secondary contexts where they have been deliberately deposited. The ironwork assemblage is one of the largest from Scotland. Lacking from finds were iron ore and there were few whetstones, both strange when considering the importance of ironworking at the site. Domestic pottery and cobble tools were rare, and only one spindle whorl was found, suggesting these buildings were not primarily domestic in nature if at all. The location of the domestic buildings for the settlement remains unknown.

Roman objects were also found, including coins and objects for personal adornment. These may represent direct contacts with the Roman world to the south, in the same way that the similar high status site of Birnie in Moray was receiving objects and coins, probably as bribes from Rome as part of a policy to secure peace across the frontier (Hunter 2007).

The date and reason the site was abandoned are not known. A thick deposit mixed with finds, slag and other residues covered the remains, to be in turn covered by hillwash. The last firings of the furnaces were in the early 2nd century AD. Before abandonment exotic objects were deposited, perhaps as a closing deposit. The deliberate end of the site raises a number of questions.

The site is important for so many reasons. It is incredibly rare to have such good industrial evidence, which indicate a major production centre. The scale of ironworking suggests Culduthel was producing, and probably controlling access, to elite iron objects. The roundhouses are amongst the best-preserved Iron Age examples in the Highlands. Clearly the Culduthel area was a major power centre in the Highlands. The publication due in 2021 provides further details and places the site in its local context.

Further information

Murray, Ross 2006 ‘Excavation of an Iron Age settlement and industrial centre near Inverness’, *History Scotland* 6, no. 5, 4-6.

Hatherley, C and Murray, R 2021 *Culduthel: An Iron Age craftworking settlement, Inverness,* Society of Antiquaries of Scotland: Edinburgh.

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