

Crab apple processing: the contents of an isolated Neolithic pit at Courthill Farm, Inverkeilor, Angus

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with contributions by D McLaren, A MacSween and J Robertson

Introduction

Pits are commonplace in the Neolithic landscape of Scotland, and can be found in a variety of locations, usually associated with other features or more rarely as an isolated instance. They also vary in their contents, with some containing hoards, flint tools, lithics, pottery, plant remains, charcoal, human bone and other macrofossils. The variation in the structure of these deposits, their frequency and location within the landscape has led to contrasting interpretations of the nature of these features, as either ritual activity or the remnants of domestic activity; their meaning is perhaps neither entirely ceremonial nor completely mundane (Brophy and Noble 2012, 63). The discovery of an isolated Neolithic pit at Courthill Farm, Angus has provided a new opportunity to examine this pit-digging phenomenon in the context of eastern Scotland.

The site

In 2012 AOC Archaeology Group undertook the monitoring of a linear topsoil strip, approximately 9 ha in area, in preparation for the road re-alignment of the A92. The monitored area was located north of Inverkeilor, Angus, along the Lunan Valley (Illus 1).

During the archaeological works the topsoil strip revealed a single pit cut into the drift geology, towards the south-west end of the monitored area, within the footprint of a proposed drainage pond located at NGR: NO 6711 5128. The pit was sub-circular in plan (Illus 2), and measured 0.51m at its widest point and 0.15m in depth; its relatively shallow nature was likely the result of moderate plough truncation. The pit can be described as roughly bowl-shaped, with shallow sloping sides and a concave base. The fill of the pit was a uniform dark red-brown clayey silt, which was friable on excavation. The proximity of shallow bedrock and the position of the pit close to the edge of the field are both thought to have contributed to the survival of this

feature to the present day. Although now an isolated feature, it is possible that contemporary features nearby could have been destroyed by ploughing.

The pit was excavated in spits 5cm in depth, and the entire fill was recovered for sampling and analysis. The presence of large potsherds was noted within the fill, and it was revealed that the pit contained two Grooved Ware vessels, and one of the largest quantities of carbonised crab apples ever found within an archaeological context in Scotland. A distinct interface between the pit fill and the subsoil was identified, suggesting that it was quickly opened and backfilled, but further analysis suggests that the contents of the pit represented two distinct depositional events, one of abraded Grooved Ware and abraded cereals, the other of freshly broken Grooved Ware and freshly deposited crab apples and hazelnut shells. The presence of the Grooved Ware pottery, together with the subsequent radiocarbon dating of the charred crab apple seed (Table 1), indicates the Neolithic provenance of this feature.

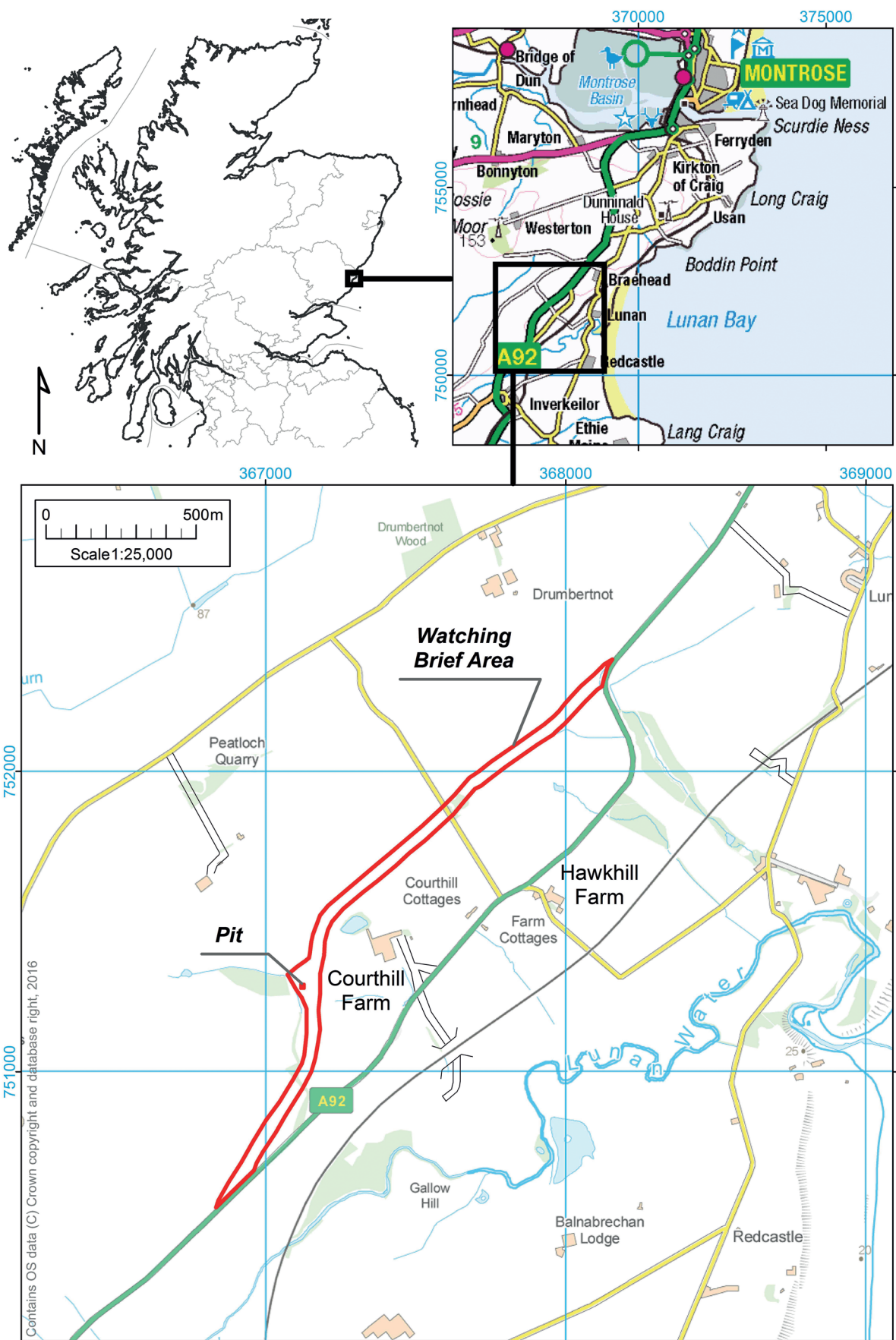
The ceramic assemblage

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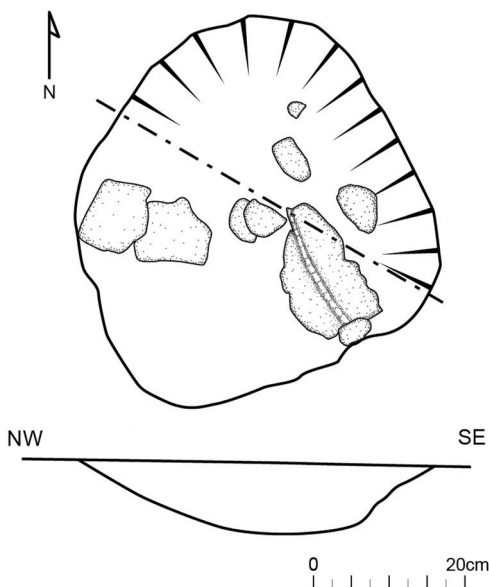
Vessel 1 (Illus 3) A squat bucket- or tub-shaped pot of hard-fired fine clay is represented by 2 rim sherds, 36 body sherds and multiple crumbs. Only rim, neck and body fragments survive, representing less than 20% of the circumference of the pot. The surviving rim sherds indicate that the pot is of large diameter, approximately 320mm at the mouth. The rim has an internal bevel and is rolled over on the external face. The body is split into two unequal zones defined by an applied cordon around the shoulder. Prior to decoration the exterior surface has been wet-hand smoothed. The cordon comprises two parallel horizontal applied bands separated by a band with impressed sub-circular regular-spaced hollows. Immediately above the cordon, and sometimes slightly overlapping, are a series of regularly spaced perforations (D 7mm). The upper zone of the pot is slightly rounded in profile with traces of applied decoration:

Table 1 *The radiocarbon date.*

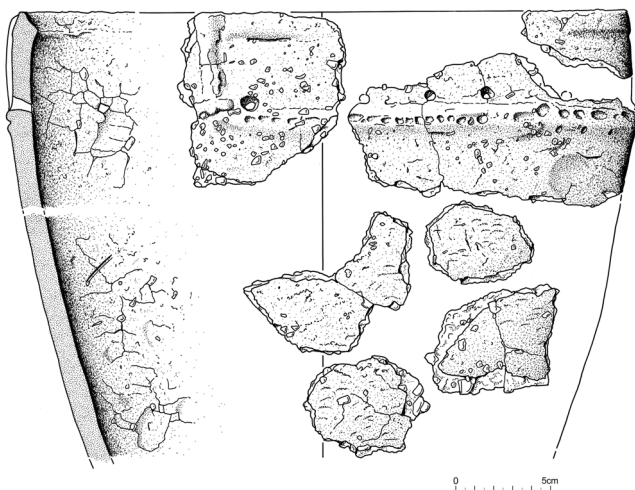
feature	species	SUERC no	radiocarbon date (age BP)	2-sigma calibrated ranges (cal BC)
pit fill	<i>Malus</i> crab apple	41337	4265 ± 35	3005–2992 2930–2861 2809–2757 2720–2705



Illus 1 Location map.



Illus 2 Plan and section of the pit.



Illus 3 Vessel 1. Scale 1:4.

an irregular wavy vertical band runs from the rim to the cordon, overlapping both. This vertical band and the cordon are overlain by a diagonally positioned wavy band. Below the cordon the body of the vessel is gently angled towards the now lost base.

The fabric is hard-fired fine clay with c 70% angular stone inclusions. The exterior surfaces range in colour from orange-brown to dark brown with a dark grey core. Both interior and exterior surfaces are abraded in patches. Thickness 14 mm; diameter at mouth c 320mm, weight 793.5 g.

Vessel 2 This vessel comprised 1 rim, 1 base, 4 body sherds; all heavily abraded. The rim is rounded with an interior bevel. The exterior surface has been wet-hand smoothed. Shallow, indistinct organic impressions mark the external surface. The fabric is hard-fired fine clay with c 60% angular stone inclusions and is grey with yellow-brown surfaces. Thickness 14 mm (base 16 mm), diameter c 320–340 mm, weight 74 g.

Discussion

Both vessels are examples of Grooved Ware, the production and use of which can be dated in Scotland to the Later Neolithic with a long currency of use between the 31st and 23rd centuries cal BC (Gibson 2010). Available radiocarbon dates for mainland Scotland have recently been usefully summarised by MacSween (2007), which suggest that the use of Grooved Ware on southern mainland sites is slightly later than those in the Northern Isles with dates generally confined to the first half of the third millennium BC.

The radiocarbon date from the crab apple pips (see below) places the deposition of the vessels at a comparable date to that indicated by the recent re-dating of Phase 1 deposits associated with Grooved Ware at Balbirnie, Fife, which provided a date span of the 31st to 25th centuries cal BC (Gibson 2010, 67, tables 2 and 3).

The decoration of Vessel 1 fits broadly within the known suite of decorative motifs known from Scottish Grooved Ware pottery (Sheridan 1999, 118–22, illus 12.6) but the combination of decorative techniques present is not typical. The decoration with horizontal and vertical applied bands fits most closely with the Durrington Walls sub-type defined by Wainwright and Longworth (1971, 240–2). The rows of perforations present above the applied cordon are particularly unusual (Henshall and Mercer 1981, 132). Although no identical pots are known, a small number of similar decorated vessels come from the Scottish mainland.

Two pots, one from Balfarg, Fife (Mercer 1981) and the other from Beech Hill House, Perthshire (Stevenson 1995), are closely comparable. At Balfarg the tub-shaped pot (Vessel 16) was decorated with at least two applied cordons decorated with a row of thumb or finger impressions. The upper cordon is flanked by a series of circular perforations and parallel incised oblique lines are present below the lower cordon (Henshall and Mercer 1981, 130, 132, fig 43, no 16). A similar decorative style is noted on a pot (vessel 19) from Beech Hill House, Perthshire which has pinched up horizontal cordon associated with a vertical pinched up strip and a row of perforations (MacSween 1995, 210–1, illust 19). Unlike the Courthill pot, the Beech Hill House example has a more ornate pointed scalloped rim with incised diagonal grooves in the uppermost zone of the pot.

In addition to those examples already cited, three squat bucket-shaped or tub-shaped vessels from East Beechwood Farm, Inverness were decorated with pinched-up or applied cordons flanked with at least one row of perforations and chevron-style incised decoration (MacSween and McLaren forthcoming), and at least one vessel (P32) from Stoneyfield, Raigmore, Inverness had been perforated (Simpson 1999, 131, illus 13.6.2). A tub-shaped pot with a row of perforations below the rim comes from Garrochar, Kirkcudbrightshire (Reid 1944) and there are perforated

sherds from Stevenston Sands and Coalhill, Ayrshire (noted in Henshall and Mercer 1981, 133).

Any discussion of the form and decoration of Vessel 2 is hampered by its fragmentary condition, but enough survives to suggest that it was likely to be a tub-shaped vessel of slightly smaller diameter than Vessel 1. No cordon or decoration is present on the surviving sherds but the exterior surfaces are pitted with what appears to be organic impressions. The abraded condition prevents precise identification but it is possible that these are traces of basketry impressions similar to that seen on Grooved Ware pot 32 from Stoneyfield (Simpson 1999, 131, illus 13.6.2) which may be the result of forming and moulding the pot within a basket.

The recovery of fragmentary late Neolithic pottery from isolated pit features is a common feature of early prehistoric archaeology in Britain (Thomas 2012, 1) and similar deposits are known throughout south-east Scotland from Mains of Kelly, Angus (Rees and Cameron 1998), Redcastle, Angus (Alexander and Rees 1997), East Beechwood Farm, Inverness (MacSween and McLaren forthcoming), Biggar Common, Lanarkshire (Sheridan 1997, 221) and Hillend, Strathclyde (Armit *et al* 1994), *inter alia*.

The range of associated material (see below) and the incomplete condition of the pots at Courthill suggests that the sherds are likely to have been discarded after breakage alongside other domestic refuse. However, the deposition together of freshly broken sherds of Vessel 1 and heavily abraded sherds from Vessel 2 is unusual and implies the deliberate bringing together of two disparate vessels, one old and one new, in a way that would not be expected if the deposit represents the simple discard of domestic rubbish. Rather than seeing these pottery sherds as mundane household refuse, the merging of old and new sherds with valuable food resources implies that deliberate choices were made which led to the selection of these particular sherds for deposition. The motivations behind these choices remain unclear but a similar practice of selective deposition has been noted in pits at Girvan, Maybole and The Carrick involving Neolithic Carinated Bowl pottery (Becket and MacGregor 2012, 58–61).

The ecofact assemblage

J Robertson

The entire fill of the pit was processed by wet sieving and flotation, and a large assemblage of 618 charred macroplants was retrieved from 15 litres of soil. The results are presented in Table 2. A relatively large assemblage of charred macroplants was recovered, dominated by whole and chopped fragments of charred crab apple. The pit also contained a small number of charred cereals and hazel nutshell, as well as 16 fragments of charcoal which were too small to identify to species.

Preservation of the crab apples and hazel nutshells was generally good to excellent, whereas the cereal caryopses had suffered noticeable surface abrasion and morphological distortion. This made more detailed identifications of the cereals difficult and it was not possible to establish whether the naked or hulled variety of barley was present. The most obvious explanation for this differential preservation is that the wild plants and the cereals represent separate burning events with the cereal being exposed to more adverse conditions.

Discussion

Crab apples are the only apple species native to Britain and given their Neolithic date, these plant remains are unlikely to represent deliberate cultivation of domestic apples. Cross pollination and the accidental creation of hybrids cannot be ruled out, but given the small size of the two whole apples these correspond to the wild variety rather than to the larger domestic cultivated species. Furthermore, the Courthill crab apples are similar in terms of size to examples recovered from other sites in prehistoric Europe (Helbaek 1952, 112–113).

The survival of charred fruit remains is unusual given the fragile nature of species such as crab apple that typically do not survive the charring process. The most obvious explanation for their survival is connected with the way they had been prepared prior to charring. The majority of the crab apple fragments had been deliberately cut into halves and quarters (Illus 4a) and, while the external skin of the apples was finely wrinkled, the cut faces remained smooth and slightly

Table 2 *Charred macroplant remains*

vernacular name	common name	plant part	number
<i>Hordeum</i> sp(p).	barley	caryopses	20
<i>Triticum</i> sp(p)	wheat	caryopses	2
<i>Cerealia</i> indet	cereals	caryopses	35
<i>Corylus Avellana</i> L	hazel	nutshell fragments	36
<i>Malus sylvestris</i> Miller	crab apple	whole	2
		pericarp fragments	456
		seeds	67



Illus 4 *The crab apples.*

a *Part of the crab apple assemblage showing the fruits that had been deliberately cut into halves and quarters before being charred.*



b *These crab apples, archaeological (left) and modern (right), have been dried and cut in two prior to charring. The cut faces are smooth and slightly concave and the external skin is wrinkled and curves in over the cut face. (Note that modern wild crab apples are much larger than their ancestors due to generations of cross-breeding).*



c *One of the complete crab apples; this example only split in two after sample processing. The pips are clearly visible still in situ.*

concave (Illus 4b). Experimental work has determined that these distinctive differences are due to the apples being artificially dried prior to charring, rather than resulting from the carbonization process itself (Helbaek 1952; Robertson forthcoming). The recovery of intact crab apples is rare, as the heating process usually splits the fruit. The two whole crab apples had clearly been dried for an extended period of time which removed excess moisture and allowed them to survive exposure to the heat (Illus 4c).

Crab apples are naturally sour and, while edible, are regarded as unpalatable unless artificially sweetened. In the Scottish Neolithic honey may have been used to sweeten foods but crab apples can be naturally sweetened by drying them for extended periods of time. This allows the sugars within the fruit to become concentrated and would provide access to fruit over the winter period, when other food resources that could not be preserved were no longer in season. Roasting crab apples shortly after harvesting does not increase the sweetness of this fruit, and so there is no advantage to prematurely charring this fruit; it is more likely that the apples from this particular site were dried naturally and only exposed to heat during the cooking process.

Recovery of such a large concentration of crab apples within a single feature is rare on Scottish Neolithic sites. Crab apples have been recovered from other Scottish Neolithic sites, but usually in very small

quantities (six sites are listed in Bishop *et al* 2009, Table 3, but see also Littleour, Perth and Kinross (Barclay and Maxwell 1998, 58), Skara Brae, Orkney (Dickson and Dickson 2000, 247), Easter Raitts, Highland (Lelong 2000) and Maybole, Ayrshire (Becket and MacGregor 2012, 56). The largest assemblage previously recovered came from Dubton Farm, Angus, around 12 miles north-west of Courthill, where 252 or more crab apple fragments and pips were recovered from the fills of five pit features, all interpreted as of Neolithic or possible Neolithic date (Church 2002, 54–9).

The pits at Dubton Farm, which also contained a similar mixture of wild and cultivated species, have been interpreted as ‘a utilitarian form used for a specific processing activity’, which was not domestic (Cameron 2002, 70). The quantities of crab apples found at Courthill are also very suggestive of processing on a semi-industrial scale and it is possible that its apparently isolated position is because it was near a particular locale in the landscape where this foodstuff was readily available.

Discussion

In summary, the archaeological remains recovered at Courthill Farm consist of a shallow pit which contained two Grooved Ware vessels and a large quantity of

carbonised crab apples, a pip from which produced a date spanning the late 4th to early 3rd millennium BC. The distinct interface between the pit fill and the subsoil had suggested that it was quickly opened and backfilled; however, analysis suggests that the contents of the pit represents two distinct depositional events, one of abraded Grooved Ware and abraded cereals, the second of freshly broken Grooved Ware, freshly deposited crab apples and hazelnut shells.

Neolithic pit deposition in Scotland

The Courthill Farm pit is part of a widespread phenomenon of pit digging associated with deposition practices throughout the Neolithic period that were 'the product of ritualised acts that [were] integral to cultural identity' (Anderson-Whymark and Thomas 2012, ix), the characteristics of which have been the study of research covering the breadth of the British Isles (Anderson-Whymark and Thomas 2012). The rich and varied artefact and ecofact assemblages recovered from these Neolithic pits has led to diverse interpretations of the nature of these features. As Brophy and Noble (2012, 63) observe, formerly polarised interpretations, where they are seen to represent 'either ritual activity (in the form of "structured deposition") or the remnants of settlement or domestic activity', are giving way to the view that their meaning may be 'neither wholly ceremonial nor completely mundane'. As more such features were found throughout lowland Scotland from the 1990s onwards, it was recognised that 'clear distinctions between ritual and mundane pits became less obvious' and that 'throwing or placing things into a hole in the ground could represent a rule-bound social performance as well as the disposal of gathered material no longer needed' (Brophy and Noble 2012, 64–5).

Brophy and Noble note that difficulty in the interpretation of these features in part derives from the diversity of contexts in which they are found. In Scotland they have been found in clusters, as at Dubton Farm (Cameron 2002); associated with settlements, *eg* ST07 at Forest Road, Kintore (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 67–73) and Cowie, Stirling (Atkinson 2002), and associated with monuments, *eg* Claish Farm, Perthshire (Barclay *et al* 2002, 94) and Littleour, Perthshire (Barclay and Maxwell 1998). Brophy and Noble, commenting on this diversity, and in particular the presence or absence of associated monuments, argue that, 'it is difficult to define pits as either wholly ritualistic, or wholly domestic, and ... [that] depositional practices were appropriate in a whole range of contexts and locations' (Brophy and Noble 2012, 74).

Isolated pits also occur, as at Brackmont Mill, Fife (Longworth *et al* 1967) and Carzield, Dumfries and Galloway (Maynard 1993), but they are comparatively rare in the Scottish Neolithic (Brophy and Noble 2012, 69), and it is possible that the Courthill pit was not an isolated example. The pit was remarkable for

its shallow depth (0.15 m) and had clearly suffered truncation. During excavation the plane of the rock was observed to rise up to the north-east and south of the pit, forcing any plough to be lifted up and over the pit, and thus affording it some protection. It is therefore very possible that associated structures might have been destroyed by ploughing and erosion and that the pit might be the surviving remnant of a more extensive site.

Seasonal crab apple processing?

Similar assemblages of charred wild foods were uncovered in the cluster of pits at Dubton Farm, Angus (Cameron 2002), which lies less than 20 km to the west of Courthill. Dubton Farm has been interpreted functionally, as a crop processing site, where the small pits were seen as 'a utilitarian form used for a specific processing activity' (*ibid*, 70). The large assemblage of charred crab apples was seen as the by-product of attempts to preserve them in an edible, and easily transportable form, and the evidence from Courthill suggests that the same type of processing was being undertaken there. This processing activity would almost certainly have taken place in the autumn when crab apples are ripe, the preserved apples providing an important addition to a Scottish winter diet. Thus, both Dubton Farm and Courthill may represent seasonal processing sites, with domestic settlement located elsewhere in the landscape.

A ritual aspect?

However, the combination of the crab apples in a pit with two distinct deposition events associated with Grooved Ware vessels and other foodstuffs suggests that non-functional motivations were also involved. As Brophy and Noble (2012, 63–5) have noted, as more pits are added to the inventory of the Scottish Neolithic, the more the dichotomy between ritual and mundane appears to be artificially imposed. They have argued instead that while the event of pit digging was an everyday occurrence, it was a 'rule-bound social performance' (Brophy and Noble 2012, 66). In discussing similar sites in western Scotland Becket and MacGregor (2012, 61) suggest that the material selected for deposition 'collectively represented a culturally appropriate suite of materials, which when combined created additional potency and perhaps demonstrated an allegiance to a particular identity or beliefs'. If the Courthill pit is to be viewed as marking a seasonal processing site (the mundane) then the unusual association of pottery and foodstuffs in the pit may have been deliberately selected to physically mark the closure (at least temporarily) of activity in the area, and the evidence of two deposition events suggests that this was a locus that the community returned to.

The evidence for Neolithic activity around the Lunan Valley is increasing as research and commercial excavations focus on cropmark sites in the area (Dunwell and Ralston 2008), although none of it domestic in

nature so far. A possible cursus and Claish type structure have been identified at Balneaves and Boysack respectively (NRHE ref NO64NW 27 and 39), with a further ditch defined cursus identified on the southern shore of the Montrose basin (NRHE ref NO65NE 36). The ridge above the valley has produced Neolithic material in the form of chance findspots; these include a stone ball (NRHE ref NO65SW 43) and a hoard of polished stone axeheads (NRHE ref NO65SW 33) in the vicinity of Rossie Moor. Neolithic pits containing assemblages of Late Neolithic ceramic were also recorded at Redcastle, only a kilometre away from Courthill (Alexander and Rees 1997). The Courthill pit thus adds another dot to a landscape of non-domestic Neolithic activity in the Lunan Valley.

Conclusion

The fill of the feature at Courthill represents an episode of Mid-Late Neolithic activity, focused on the preparation of food, the bulk of which is represented by crab apple. The lack of *in situ* burning suggests that the cut itself is not a hearth, but a structured deposit of material which represents a single activity, in this case the preparation of crab apple for storage and/or consumption. However, the presence of curated ceramic material, both badly abraded and more recently broken Grooved Ware, as well as cereals, possibly recovered from a midden, suggests that the excavation and backfilling of the pit was not a simple functional matter of disposing of waste from food preparation, and involved the selection of material in a structured manner.

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Abstract

A bowl-shaped pit unearthed at Courthill Farm, Inverkeilor contained two Grooved Ware vessels and a large quantity of carbonised crab apples. The feature is dated to the late Neolithic and represents one of the largest quantities of crab apples ever found in an archaeological context in Scotland. This assemblage appears to represent crab apple processing, but the careful selection and deposition of the ceramic sherds hints at a more meaningful connotation. The interpretation of the pit and its fill is explored here within the wider context of the Neolithic pit digging phenomenon and structured deposition.

Keywords

cereals
crab apples
Grooved Ware
hazelnuts
isolated feature
Late Neolithic
pits
pottery

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