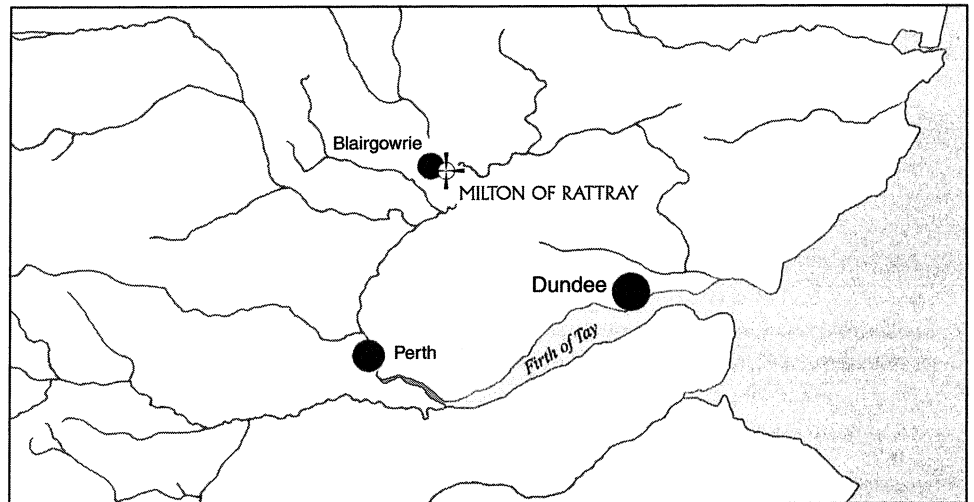
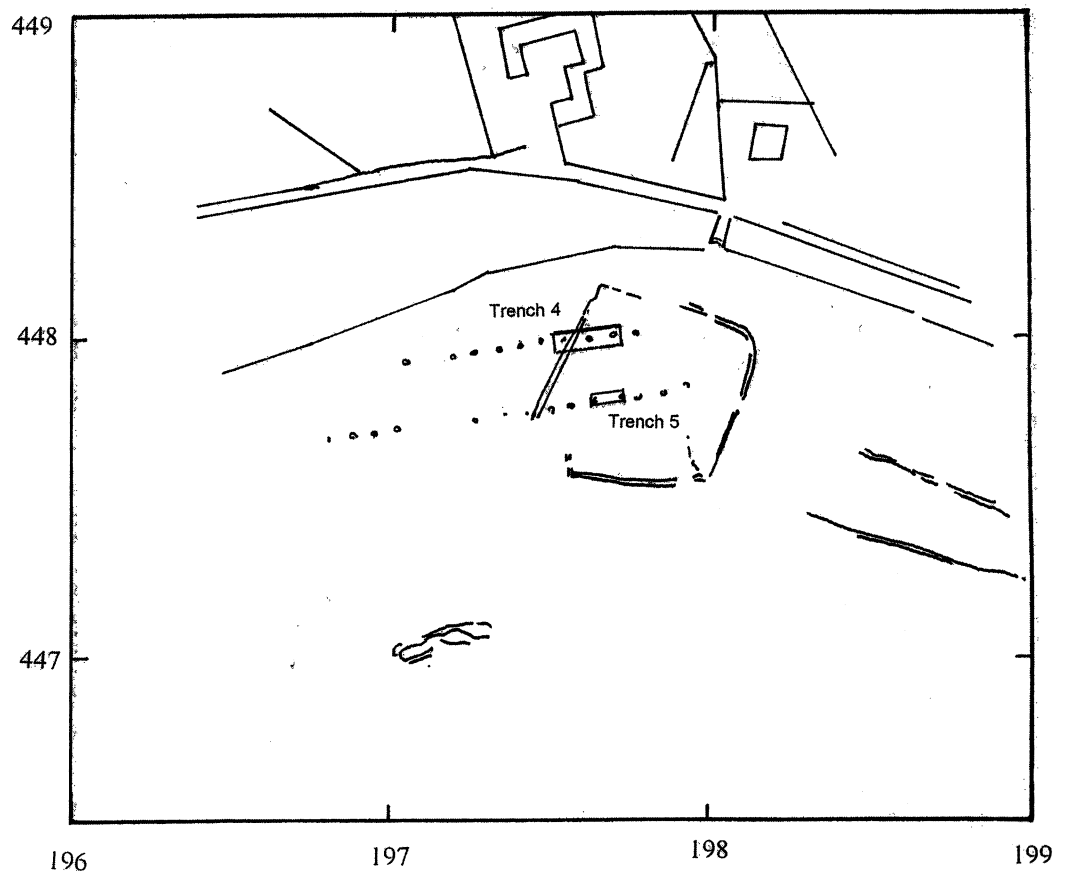




Illus 1 Location map (Crown Copyright: Ordnance Survey).



Illus 2 Transcription of the cropmarks and the locations of trenches 4 and 5 from the 1998 season.

Excavations at a cropmark site at Milton of Rattray, Blairgowrie, with a discussion of the pit-defined cursus monuments of Tayside

Kenneth Brophy

Introduction

As part of wider research on the cursus monuments of Scotland two short seasons of excavation were undertaken on a pair of parallel pit-alignments revealed by cropmarks near Blairgowrie, Perthshire. The site had been interpreted by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS 1994, 28) as a pit-defined cursus monument. The intention here is to relate the limited findings of the excavation and to place the site within its wider context of pit-defined cursus monuments in Tayside.

Part of my research on cursus monuments was a concern with the processes of archaeological action and thought, including excavation and the presentation of the results. A common critique of traditional excavation reports has been that they are apparently impersonal, dry pieces of work with little room for subjectivity or the input of all those involved in the site (Hodder 1989; Tilley 1989). There have been attempts to produce more open, personalised and transparent accounts of digs. These 'experiments' have been undertaken at research excavations rather than under rescue or contract conditions, and have ranged from the use of excavators' diaries, to having all specialists work on-site, to the use of video and websites (see for instance Bender *et al* 1997; Hodder 1997 & 1999).

My excavation and this report reflect little of this post-processual methodology. However, whilst one author prepared this report, it reflects the contributions of participants in the excavation from on-site discussions, to notes in the daybook, to contributions to an online report. Space here restricts the excavation report to be more a multiple collaborative effort than a dialogue, but alternative versions of this report will be published on the internet simultaneously with this paper publication. Context sheets, drawings and daybook entries will also be published online. Nevertheless, this report does have some differences from a traditional report—for instance, an attempt has been made to structure the account by the chronology of the excavation rather than list a series of features in order of relative importance.

The site

Aerial photographic reconnaissance undertaken by the RCAHMS identified the cropmarks of two pit-alignments running across the flood plain of the River

Ericht in the summer of 1990 (NMRS number NO14SE 82). They have only been recorded on one occasion since, during the dry summer of 1992. The original classification of pit-alignments was soon revised to pit-defined cursus in light of the increasing identification of such sites across Scotland (RCAHMS 1994; Brophy 1999). The cropmarks of the 'cursus' are located in a low-lying field on the north bank of the River Ericht, with levees constructed on the banks to protect the agricultural land here. It is prone to flooding and the location of the 'cursus' would have occasionally been waterlogged. An artificial waterway defines the north edge of the field.

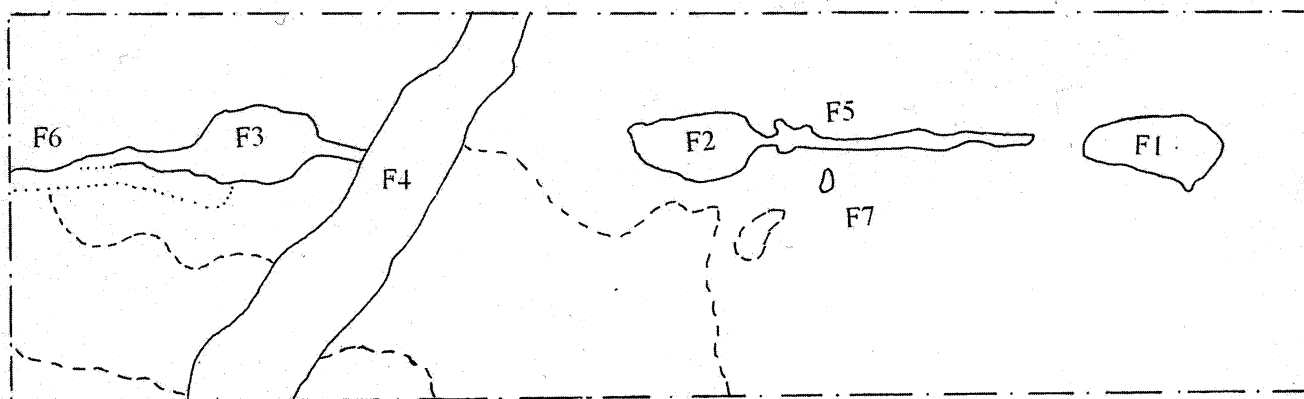
The pit-alignments run in an east-north-east–west-south-west alignment and are about 20m apart. The northern line is visible for about 75m, the southern for some 120m and there is a slight indication of a third parallel alignment a short distance to the north. The large pits are widely and regularly spaced, about 4m to 6m apart. There is no indication of enclosing terminals. Other cropmarks are scattered across the same field, many probably associated with more recent agricultural activity (NO14SE 81 and 83). A pair of parallel ditches, about 60m long and 50m apart, hook round at both ends suggesting that they may represent two sides of a ditched square enclosure overlying the location of the eastern end of the 'cursus'. Morphologically, and in terms of a location near water, the pre-excavation interpretation of this site as a pit-defined cursus was sound (see discussion below).

The excavation

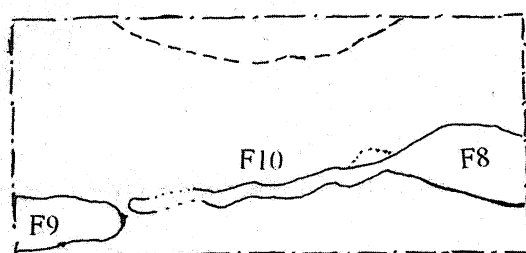
The excavation had very limited finances, time and aims. The objectives were primarily to discover the nature of the pit features, to look between the pits, to attempt to date the alignments, and compare the results with previously excavated similar sites. The first season lasted four days, in September 1997, when three small trenches were opened by hand: two over the suspected locations of pits and one placed centrally within the 'cursus'. The latter (Trench 1) contained no archaeological features.

Trench 2 was placed to investigate the third pit from the east end of the northern pit-alignment. At subsoil level the feature was 2.6m long and 1.2m across, the edge crisply defined by the contrast between the compact clay fill and the relatively pebbly gravel

Trench 4



Trench 5



KEY

- — — — — Limit of excavation
- — — — — Feature boundary
- - - - - Subsoil changes

0 5m

Illus 3 Pre-excitation plan of the features in trenches 4 and 5 (for their relative locations see Illus 2).

subsoil. The long axis of this elongate feature followed the alignment of the 'cursus'. Possible interpretations of this feature (F1) at this point ranged from a double or ramped post-hole, to a grave, or even a tree-throw (Illus 4).

On excavation this feature was shown to be a shallow flat-bottomed pit with a U-shaped profile and a maximum depth of only 0.35m. The fill was unitary, a yellow-brown clay with few small stone inclusions save for a cluster of large rounded stones up to 0.3m across in the centre of the fill. No burnt or carbonised material was evident in this fill, nor were any artefacts recovered.

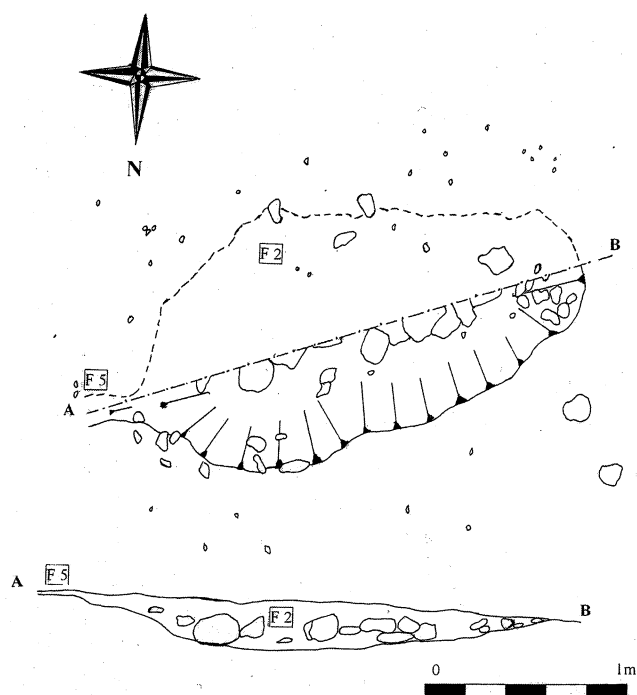
Investigations in Trench 3 a few metres to the west, failed to conclusively reveal the presence of a second pit feature which we would have expected to find here according to the transcription of the cropmarks (see Illus 2). A band of clay in the subsoil was initially interpreted here as spread fill from this feature (F2).

The first season revealed little data with which to work with. No datable materials or artefacts were recovered. There were, as far as I could tell, no parallels in the archaeological record for a parallel pair of alignments of elongated shallow pits and whether this was the actual form of the site was still unclear. We still could not rule out the possibility that this was a post-

hole (with the stones centrally placed in F1 being some kind of packing), nor at the time could we fully discount interpretations of graves, tree-throws, quarry pits or rubbish pits. The degree of truncation might have been an important factor in this, but the relatively recent introduction of modern ploughing here (within the last sixty years) suggests that these features were never substantial.

On our return to the site for two and a half days in February 1998, the objectives were once again to establish the nature of the pit features, by investigating a number of these features rather than one. A more concerted effort would be made to examine the pits not as isolated features, but in relation to one another. To this end two larger trenches were opened mechanically (Illus 3); one, an extension of Trenches 2 and 3 from the first season, the other located 25m to the south. The former contained at least three pit features and the west side of the square cropmark enclosure, the latter was sited on the southern alignment of pits.

After cleaning Trench 4 it was obvious that the three pits uncovered did not exist in isolation, with sinuous and narrow slot-like features running between two of the pits (F1 and F2) and from both ends of pit F3. The central pit revealed (F2) was longitudinally sectioned and shown to have the same character as F1 in terms of



Illus 4 Plan and section of pit F2.

both fill and plan. The fill was once again a unitary clay-like deposit and centrally located there were a number of large stones. Later in the excavation the third pit (F3) was cross-sectioned. It displayed most of the characteristics of F1 and F2, though it was rounder in profile than the other two and the upper half of the fill was slightly darker in appearance (although of identical texture).

The slot (F5, F6) was then investigated in three places (between F1 and F2, between F2 and F3, and west of F3). It proved to be an extremely slight feature that could well have been completely removed by the plough where it was no longer visible (just to the west of F1 for instance). The sides were irregular and width varied from 0.2m to 0.4m, although the depth was never any greater than 0.12m. It was flat bottomed and there was no evidence of any features cut into the bottom or within this 'slot' (such as stake holes or a fence line). The single fill was remarkably similar to that found in pits F1–F3 and when the relationship between the cuts of these adjoining features was investigated (F5 to F2 and F6 to F3) they were shown to have been dug at the same time, and presumably were filled simultaneously.

The larger area opened allowed us to investigate one of the other cropmark features in this field – the square enclosure. The ditch cut across Trench 4 in a north–north-east–south–south-west alignment (F4). After cleaning it appeared to be up to 1.5m wide but this width and irregularity was shown to be mostly due to the spread of the ditch fill. The section investigated (immediately adjacent to F3) was 0.45m wide and at most 0.23m deep, with a steep-sided U-shaped profile. The fill was distinctly different from the features along the alignment, being a mid-brown gritty soil. This ditch

cut through 'slot' F6 although this was only recorded on one side of it.

One other possible archaeological feature was recorded in this trench, a small pit or large stake-hole just to the south of the section removed from slot F5. It was barely 0.1m deep with a fill of dark soil.

The second trench, located to investigate the southern side of the 'cursus', could only be recorded to a pre-excavation level (planned and photographed) due to time constraints. Two days of drying left visible two pit features joined by a slot, very much what we had already established for the northern alignment. The pits (F8 and F9) were longer than their counterparts to the north, and the slot feature noticeably more sinuous and irregular.

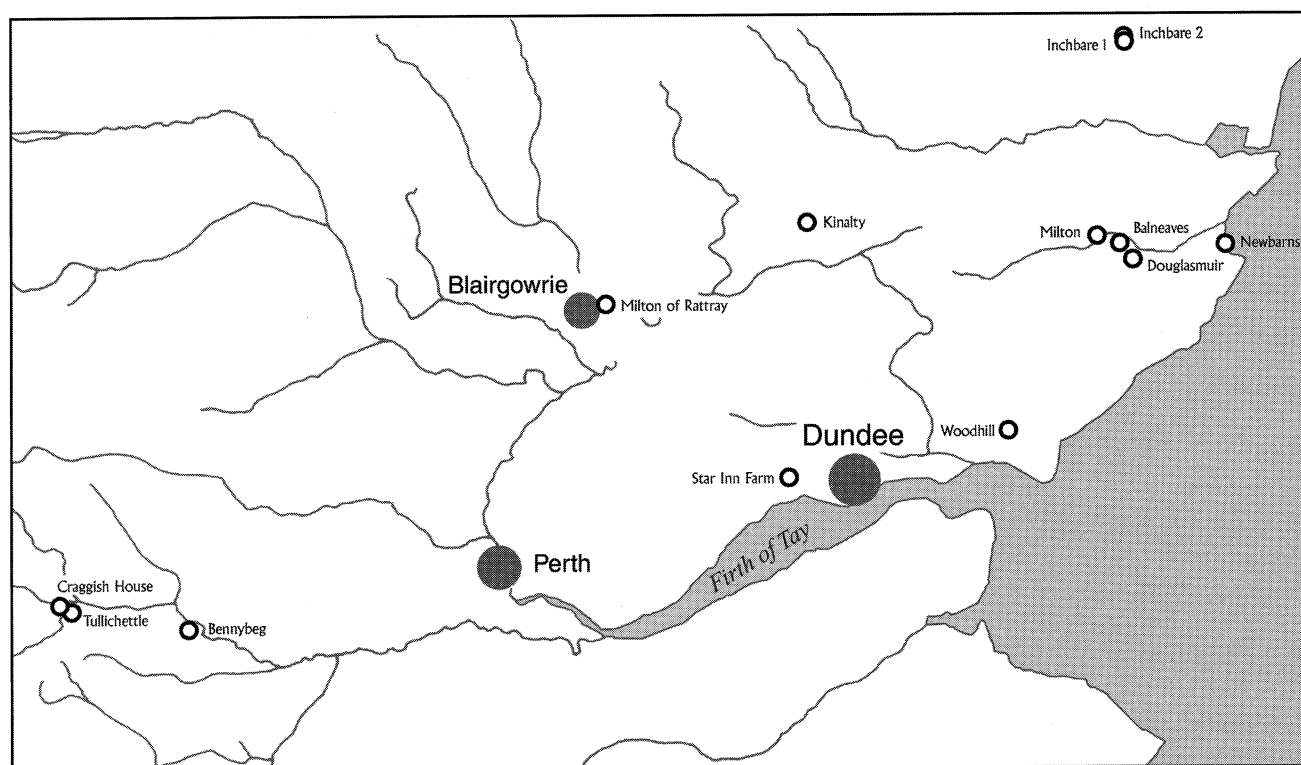
Interpretations

After this second season, we had established a rough chronology for the main features of this cropmark complex—the square enclosure was later than the northern pit-alignment (and by supposition the southern alignments as well). Unfortunately we had still no datable material whatsoever or any artefactual evidence, save for a few sherds of modern pottery within the fill of F2 which may have arrived there through plough action. However the nature (and date) of this site is still unclear.

More positively we had established that the alignments were in fact a pair of linked or fairly continuous, if ephemeral, lines as opposed to pits existing independently of one another. Most likely, these lines consisted of simple open pits and connecting linear features. Perhaps it could be suggested that the pits held posts, or what we are actually seeing are the traces of an avenue of trees. Here the slot is accounted for by suggesting that this was used as a guide for the accurate layout of an avenue (although the alignments seem to curve slightly towards the eastern end). The pits, however, seem extremely well defined for tree throws. There is also the possibility that the slot itself did hold a fence or line of stakes, forming a more solid and imposing boundary. Whatever the form the features appear to have been back-filled in one phase of activity, perhaps deliberately.

Excavations at other pit-alignments in Scotland show no clear parallels to such a monument. Perhaps the closest parallel is a large pit excavated at North Straiton, Fife (Carter 1996). The pit, part of an irregular line of pits visible as cropmarks on aerial photographs was of similar dimensions (3.3m x 1.8m with a depth of 0.5m). The fills were sands, gravels and sandy loam, and the charcoal in the top fill was radiocarbon dated to within the range 3258–2900 cal BC, though these were probably not primary fills and may have been washed in. Carter (*ibid.*, 49) suggests that this may be a natural feature, and certainly it appears as part of a much less ordered alignment than Milton of Rattray.

Without ready parallels here, we turn to the cursus interpretation.



Illus 5 Distribution map of the pit-defined cursus monuments of Angus and Perthshire (Crown Copyright: Ordnance Survey).

The pit-defined cursus monuments of Tayside

Previous accounts of the pit-defined cursus monuments of Tayside deal primarily with site descriptions (see Barclay in Kendrick 1995; Brophy 1998). Here I wish to focus more on some interesting architectural traits that many of them share. From this discussion, and the evidence of previously excavated sites, we can return again to look at the interpretation of Milton of Rattray as a cursus monument.

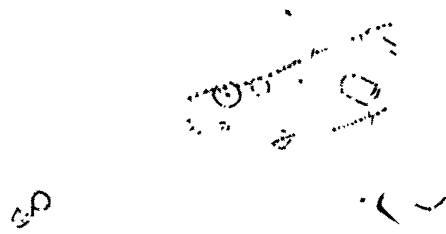
In all there are thirteen pit-defined cursus sites in Perthshire and Kinross, Angus and City of Dundee, more than half of the known cursus sites in these areas (Illus 5). This grouping represents about one quarter of the total possible cursus monuments so far recorded in Scotland. By their very nature, these sites are revealed only by cropmarkings from the air and as such must carry a few 'health warnings'. These are often complicated sites with potentially several phases of construction and embellishment (see for instance Barclay on Douglasmuir in Kendrick 1995, 36). Stratigraphy can only be inferred through morphology or supposition from the confusion of cropmarkings that often appear. Our concepts of 'phase' and 'site' become blurred. These cursus sites appear as unitary monuments, which may well be a false impression. Secondly, subtleties of the site may be invisible to us, as indicated by the slot features at Milton of Rattray. What we have here are a series of two-dimensional images that represent human activity in one location over an unknown period of time, leaving traces ranging from the intrusive to the extremely slight.

Whilst Milton of Rattray appears as an open-ended site with no obvious terminals, many other pit-defined cursus sites are rectilinear enclosures, often with one or more internal divisions. These sites usually are 20m to 30m wide and over 100m long. The longest, Milton, Friockheim, is a spectacular site, a pair of parallel pit-alignments running in a gradual curve and terminating just 40m from the Lunan Water. Both ends are square, and a series of internal pit-lines divide its full length of 590m into four relatively equally sized compartments, each about 25m wide. The relative chronology of these enclosures is impossible to determine from aerial photographic evidence alone (for example were the compartments contemporary or freestanding?).

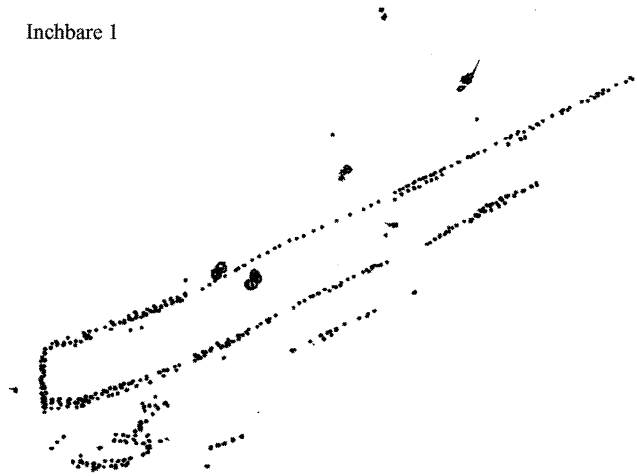
A contrasting site was identified by St Joseph (1976), who recorded a pair of pit-alignments running for some 240m to the north-west of Inchbare 1 (Illus 6). Although he regarded them as being a possible Dark Age site these were re-interpreted as the sides of a cursus and a similar site was later recorded to the north (Inchbare 2). Neither have a clear terminal or internal division, and each actually consist of a series of parallel alignments (Inchbare 2 has at least six of these). It is not entirely clear in either case which two actually define the enclosure or how contemporaneous these alignments may have been.

There are some notable examples in Perthshire including a strange pitted enclosure at Bennybeg, south of Crieff and the River Earn. (It lies on the opposite

Star Inn Farm



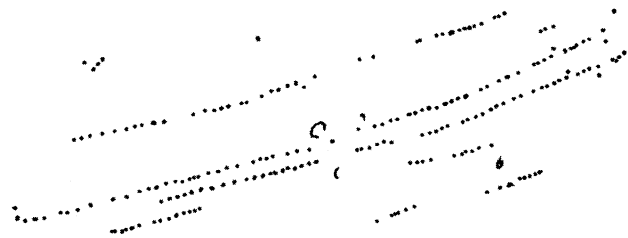
Inchbare 1



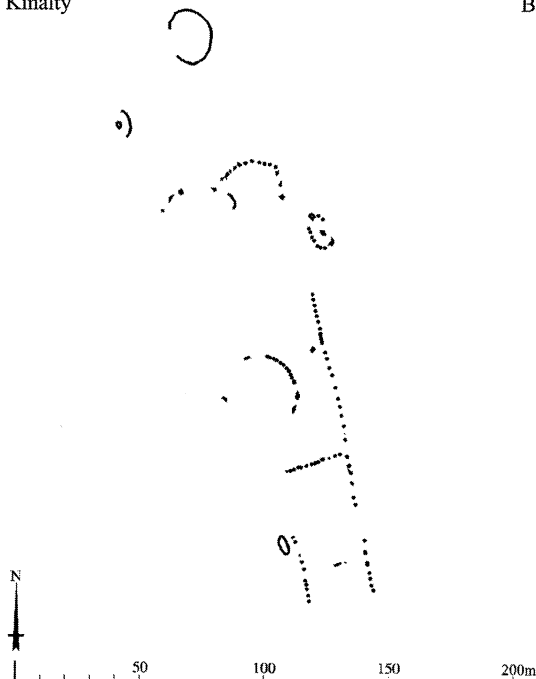
Bennybeg



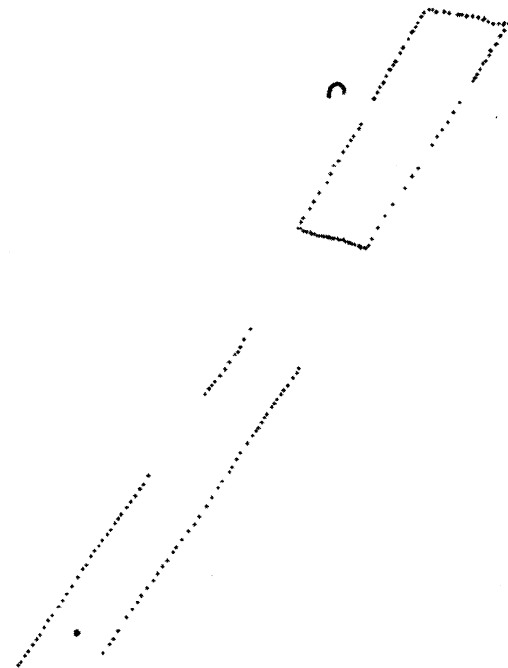
Inchbare 2



Kinalty



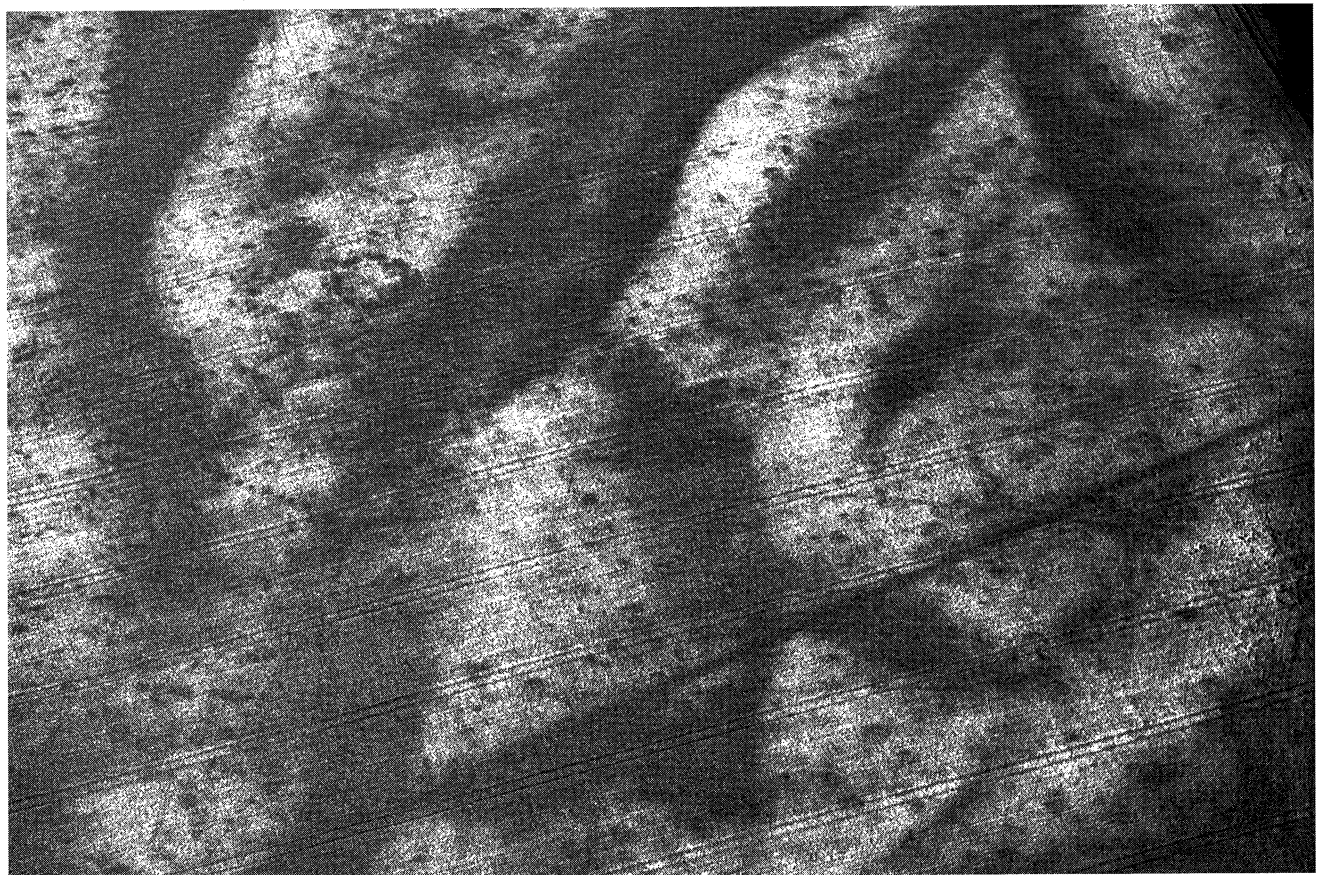
Balneaves Cottage



Illus 6 RCAHMS transcriptions of six pit-defined cursus monuments (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS).



Illus 7 Aerial photograph of Woodhill pit-defined cursus. It runs left to right across the photograph with the rounded terminal at the left (south-west) end (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS; Neg. No.).



Illus 8 Aerial photograph of Bennybeg pit-defined cursus. Running left to right across the photograph the 'horns' are visible at the left (north) end (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS; Neg. No.).

bank to, and aligns on, an enormous ditch-defined cursus monument measuring at least 410m by up to 135m at Broich). About 110m long, and 30m to 35m wide, it has square terminals. At the north end, a pit line projects from both corners, forming two sides of a U-shaped enclosure abutting the cursus (Illus 8).

Gordon Maxwell (pers. comm.) has recently identified two pit-defined cursus sites on opposing sides of the Water of Ruchill, south of Comrie. Tullichettle, 35m wide, runs west to east for a distance of some 175m towards an un-named knoll. There is no reason to doubt that it continues unrecorded beyond the field in which it has been recorded. Both sides are curved and sinuous. The nearby and similar Craggish House cursus is narrower but again has irregular sides that bow outwards at one point.

Other cropmarks sites superficially appear to belong to a similar tradition although each has a unique character. The only excavated example in Tayside is Douglasmuir, Friockheim (Kendrick 1995). An enclosure, 65m by 20m, with a centrally placed internal division, the pits here held large posts, spaced rather irregularly. Some posts were burnt *in situ* and radiocarbon dating of this burnt material placed the site within the period 3930–3390 calibrated BC (*ibid.* 33). Artefacts found included sherds of decorated Neolithic pottery and Beaker sherds (Cowie 1993). Some of these finds came from a group of pits and post-holes to the east of the enclosure. Even after excavation, the sequence of construction of this enclosure was impossible to determine (Barclay in Kendrick 1995).

Other excavated pit-defined sites in Scotland have not produced any evidence of features between the defining pits or post-holes. Three of the excavated examples have been shown to have been bounded by standing timbers—Bannockburn 2 (Rideout 1997), Holm (Thomas 1998) and Upper Largie (Terry 1997), whilst a pair of parallel alignments of shallow rounded pits ran across the pipeline trench at Fox Plantation, Wigtownshire, and were interpreted by the excavator as a cursiform setting (MacGregor *et al* 1996). The latter is the nearest parallel to Milton of Ratray although still obviously different in character—the pits are much smaller with no features between them and only 20m stretches of each alignment were recorded.

What were these places? They have generally been considered as ritual sites, although use as stock enclosures has also been proposed. From the limited evidence we have (cropmark and excavation) I want to suggest that these were special places (for an unknown period of time) marked by physical boundaries, actions and social meaning. I will explore this through briefly looking at some themes apparent at many of these sites.

The most comprehensively investigated ‘cursus’ in Tayside is undoubtedly the Cleaven Dyke, Perthshire, a site which bears little comparison with many of the monuments in this discussion, sharing only their probably Neolithic origins and length. The detailed

contour survey of the Dyke showed that, far from being a unitary construction, in fact the earthwork was a project for an unknown number of generations, adding segments to the monument in a south-easterly direction (Barclay & Maxwell 1998, 47–52). This segmented trait has been recognised for the ditches of cropmark cursus sites including Drylawhill, East Lothian (Armit 1993), Curriestanes and the Holywood sites, Dumfriesshire (Cowley & Brophy forthcoming), and Drybridge, Ayrshire (Brophy forthcoming).

We can recognise patterns of segmented construction at most pit-defined sites. Kendrick wrote of Douglasmuir that the ‘distribution of the post-holes was not regular and the enclosure was not strictly rectangular’ (1995, 32). The sides bow outwards then kink inwards again towards the centre to meet the septal alignment. An obvious clustering of the enclosing post-holes into short lines or arcs further augments this disjointed impression. Rideout notes this very effect at Bannockburn 1 and 2 (1997, 34) and Terry also discovered this at Upper Largie (pers. comm.). Cropmark sites clearly have bowed sides (Bennybeg, Craggish, Tullichettle, Kinalty) and a number of the cropmark have wobbly boundaries (Star Inn Farm, Woodhill).

Internal features are common to many pit-defined sites but are rare in ditched cursus monuments. One notable exception—Blairhall, Scone—has two internal ditch lines. This begs the question of whether they were internal divisions or actually terminals of smaller (earlier) enclosures (RCAHMS 1994). Perhaps the monument itself is segmented.

Internal divisions are often accompanied by changes in the width of the enclosure—often because the sides curve in to meet the central division, as at Douglasmuir, Woodhill (Illus 7) and Kinalty (Illus 6). At other sites the enclosure is narrower to one side of the division. Balneaves Cottage (Illus 6) for instance is noticeably wider to the north of its single internal division leading one to suggest that the two ‘sections’ of the cursus were constructed a different times. At Bennybeg (Illus 8) and Bannockburn the existence of a U-shaped setting abutting the rectilinear enclosure again suggests episodes of construction in the same location at different times.

These traits suggest that the monuments are more than merely one-off constructional events, erected, used and destroyed (or left to decay). Instead what we have is a group of places which were special, perhaps even before physically marked as being so (Tilley 1994, 35–67; Bender 1992). People returned to these places and added to the monuments in some way (a new enclosure, a new segment). Certain people built certain parts. Perhaps the old alignments were retained and reinforced by building them again and again, extending and embellishing (Inchbare 1 and 2; Illus 6). The cycle of burning and re-erecting timbers at Holm (Thomas 1998) and the digging and re-digging of pits at Bannockburn (Rideout 1997) emphasise this point.

Discussion

At this point we return to Milton of Rattray. Can we suggest that it was one of these special places? Looking at other pit- and post-defined cursus sites, most have at least one recorded terminal. Others have internal divisions and segmented sides. It is usual for a group of potentially contemporary sites (ring-ditches, pit-alignments, pit-circles, pits and so on) to cluster around the cursus. Milton of Rattray does not seem to fulfill these criteria. The character of the cropmark evidence itself is unique—the pits are more regularly and widely spaced than at any other known pit-defined cursus site, and have a distinct elongated character (borne out by the excavation).

However, Milton of Rattray does have a near continuous boundary (albeit slight) which is most certainly a characteristic of what we would call a cursus monument. The intermittent appearance of the 'slot' feature between pits (from an admittedly small area sampled) may have been the result of differential truncation, or of segmented construction. The general morphology of the monument does not preclude the existence of terminals, and there are precedents for cursus monuments being left open at least at one end: Stonehenge Lesser cursus (Richards 1990) or the cropmark cursus / bank barrow at Muirton near Lossiemouth (Brophy 1998, 105–6).

The lack of artefactual evidence is another cursus trait (see Hedges and Buckley (1981) for a discussion on this). Material deposits are very often secondary or in adjacent monuments rather than being primary deposits i.e. Monktonhall (Hanson 1984), The Cleaven Dyke (Barclay & Maxwell 1998) and Douglasmuir (Kendrick 1995). The slight nature of the pits is also not necessarily a diagnostic feature. The possible cursus at Fox Plantation, near Stranraer, was defined by a series of relatively shallow rounded pits (MacGregor *et al* 1996). Finally, the location on a riverbank and under a very real threat of flooding is not unusual—both Inchbare 2 and Milton are closer to rivers and would have been equally vulnerable. The relationship between cursus monuments and water is postulated elsewhere (Brophy forthcoming).

What we cannot do with any degree of certainty is to say what Milton of Rattray was. At the end of the day whether we label this place as a cursus or pit-alignments or an avenue is hardly important—these are present conceptions imposed on places that are clearly of the past. What we can say is that the majority of linear monuments discussed in this paper appear to be concerned with permanency, with marking the landscape in ways which will not easily be forgotten (banks and ditches) or failing that marking it again and again and again. These special places we now can only see as cropmarks were once important places worth preserving and maintaining for future generations. By way of contrast at Milton of Rattray we have a set of features which did not make a visual impression, and may have been open for an extremely short period of time, a temporal and fleeting imprint on this riverside place.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

Two short seasons of excavation were undertaken on a cropmark site called Milton of Rattray, near Blairgowrie, Perthshire. It was hoped to show that the parallel pair of pit-alignments there were part of the pit-defined cursus tradition in Scotland and the excavation results are summarised in the first section. A wider discussion of pit-defined cursus sites in Tayside is covered in the second half of the paper placing Milton of Rattray within some kind of context.

Keywords

air photography
cropmarks
Neolithic
pit-defined cursus
pits
Tayside

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