

EXCAVATIONS

AT

CAWDOR

1986



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by

PROFESSOR G. D. B. JONES

I. KEILLAR

K. MAUDE

EXCAVATIONS AT CAWDOR 1986

The Site at Easter Galcantray

(A) INTRODUCTION 1984-5

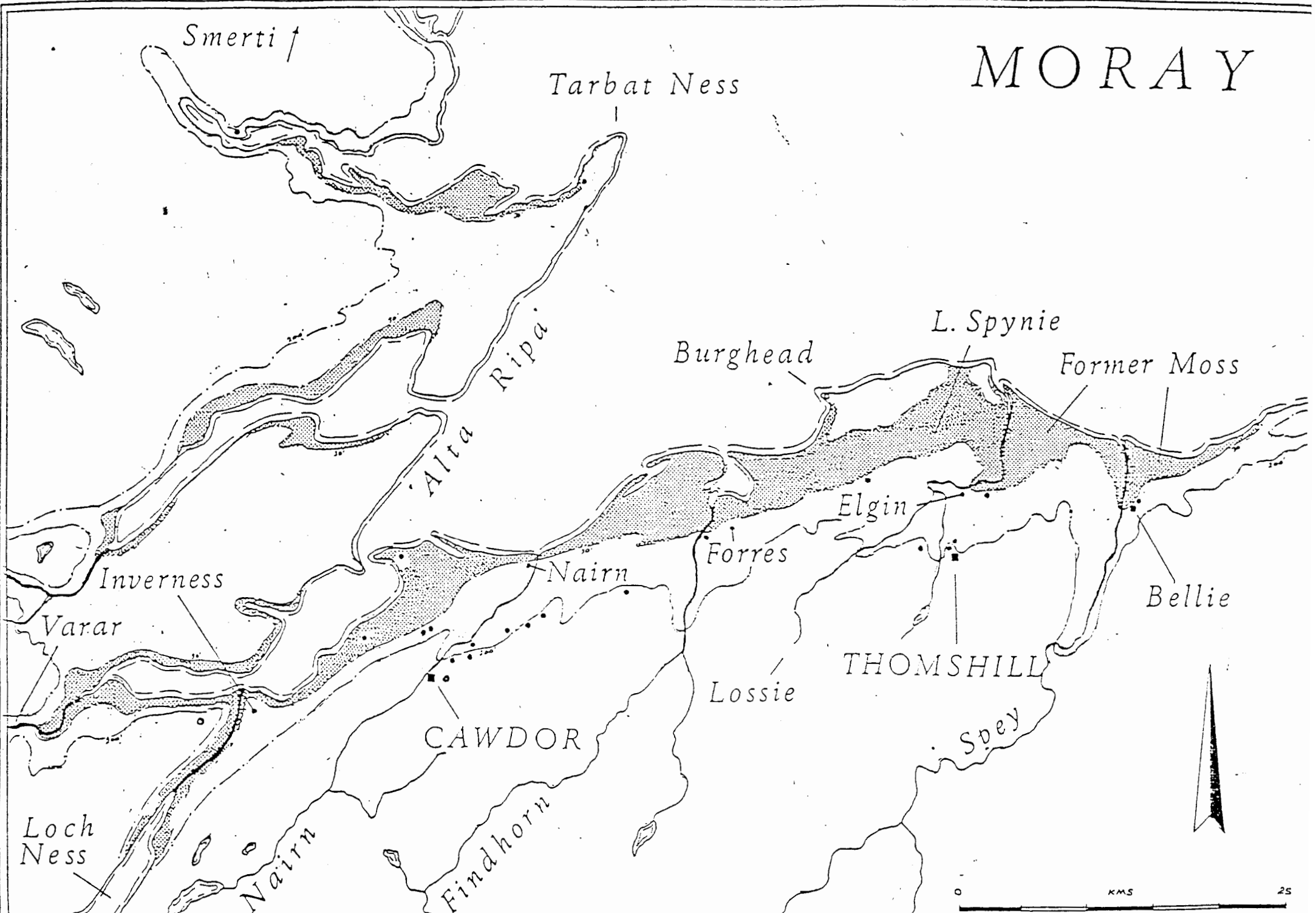
The problem of locating the battlefield of Mons Graupius, where Agricola defeated the Caledonian confederacy in A.D.83 or A.D.84, has long dominated Roman military research in north-east Scotland. This concentration on a single issue has perhaps obscured other possibilities, notably that the aftermath of the battle saw between A.D.83/84 and A.D.87 (when the legionary base of Inchtuthil was abandoned) further military consolidation in the Moray area, in or close to the territory of the Boresti, the one specific tribe mentioned by the historian Tacitus in the biography of his father-in-law, Agricola.

Since the authors' survey began in 1980, and was followed by initial aerial reconnaissance in 1982, the Laigh of Moray has been re-examined making allowance in particular for the great changes in coastal morphology since antiquity. As one result, a rectangular enclave flanked by a v-shaped ditch with ankle-breaker sump has been identified at Thomshill near Birnie, south of Elgin (N.G.R. NJ 211 573) followed up by extensive excavation by the Department of Archaeology, Newcastle University, under the direction of C.M. Daniels.

In 1984 aerial survey reached a new level abetted by particularly favourable crop development. The results of this research programme by the Moray Aerial Survey Group is presented separately along with data from related flying in 1985 and 1986. In 1984, however, a particular point of interest centred on the discovery of the southern side of another rectangular site heavily eroded by the River Mairn below the farm of Easter Galcantray 2 kms. west of Cawdor village. Trial excavation in 1985 established that both the western and southern defences were, like those at Thomshill, of v-shaped variety with a single recut prior to the demolition of the rampart. The size of the defensive ditch (some 4.20m across by 2.3m deep ruled out any interpretations of the site as a temporary one, a point further emphasised by the pinpointing of the south-western side of the south gateway, one of the major objectives of further investigation in 1986.

Before that work is described in this summary, however, it is essential to set the Galcantray site in its geomorphological setting, which is not readily apparent. Careful examination of the erosion pattern, however, will demonstrate that at an earlier period a site of several acres in size could have occupied the end of a central terrace in Strathnairn at this point. Moreover the moment when the morphology was radically altered to its present day appearance can be pinned down to a particular event, namely the great flood of 1829. The precise information on land lost through erosion in 1829 is related below by Sinclair Ross and should serve to correct any misconceptions about the setting at an earlier period.

MORAY



(B) THE GEOMORPHOLOGICAL SETTING BY S. Ross

Along its entire course the River Nairn occupies a glacially sculptured valley, widened out of all proportion to the present day size of the stream. Upstream of Daviot, where the A9 road crosses the valley, the river runs in a wide strath, which from the abundant deglaciation features probably was at one time occupied by temporary lakes. In contrast, downstream from Daviot, where the Nairn has cut a gorge through Moinian gneiss, it flows in a deep but gradually widening valley, flanked by a superb series of fluvio-glacial terraces. Here the river runs for a short distance on sedimentary rocks of Middle Old Red Sandstone age, and below Clava on alluvial sands and gravels into which it has cut a series of terraces. Exposures in side streams show that bedrock cannot be far below the surface. Upstream of Easter Galcantray the lowest terrace has begun to widen, and down-stream from the site quickly broadens out into a wide floodplain occupied by farmland.

The archaeological site is situated on the south bank of the river, 300m due north of the farmhouse of Easter Galcantray at N.G.R. (NH 811 484) and stands on the second terrace, 7.5m above river level. The River Nairn runs past as a small innocuous stream, but tributaries feeding in from the south-east flank enlarge the catchment area by draining a considerable stretch of land reaching up to heights of over 750m. The average rainfall over this basin is small when compared with regions farther west (1), but these averages of 650mm per annum near the mouth and of the order of 1100mm in the upper reaches mask infrequent very heavy falls and also falls of exceptional intensity occurring perhaps not more often than once in 100 years. Rainfall in 48 hours of 100 mm in the lower reaches and of greater than 250 mm inland were recorded on the 29th and 30th July 1956.

a) Erosion of the Site: The 1829 Flood

During such storms severe flooding occurs throughout the Nairn basin, and the floods of July 1956 in the valleys of the Nairn, Findhorn and Spey were on a scale equal to those in August 1829, the most devastating ever recorded in these parts. Perhaps the most dramatic account of flooding in the valley is that given by Sir T. Dick Lauder after the floods of 1829 (2). His descriptions of damage near Easter Galcantray include:-

Fifteen acres of valuable land at Cantray being entirely swept away. The gardens of the Mansion House at Cantray covered by sand: roods of the walls demolished and the houses of the miller and gardener inundated and ruined. The greater part of the low ground of Holme Rose together with the offices and mills flooded, with three feet of water measured in the stables. The access bridge over the Nairn to Holme, with a 55 foot span, entirely carried away - here the river was 100 yards wide. The house of a tenant farmer on the Haugh of Culbeg on Kilravock estate flooded to a depth of 5 feet, his entire farm covered by water and all his crop washed away. This resulted in his having to abandon the farm. Kilravock bridge was swept away and here the river shifted into a former channel and cut down so quickly that when the floodwaters receded it kept to this channel and the pre-flood line was deserted.

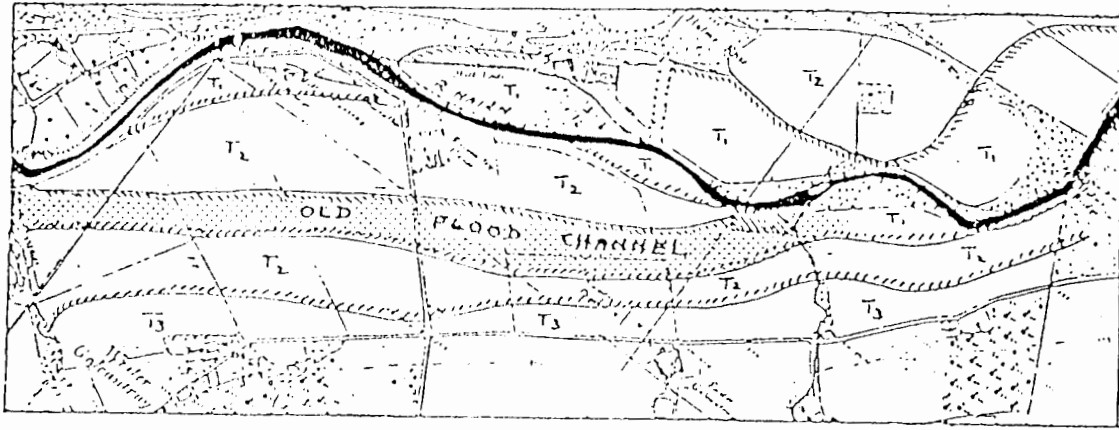


Fig.1. Valley of the River Nairn at Easter Galcantray showing river terraces and old flood channel.

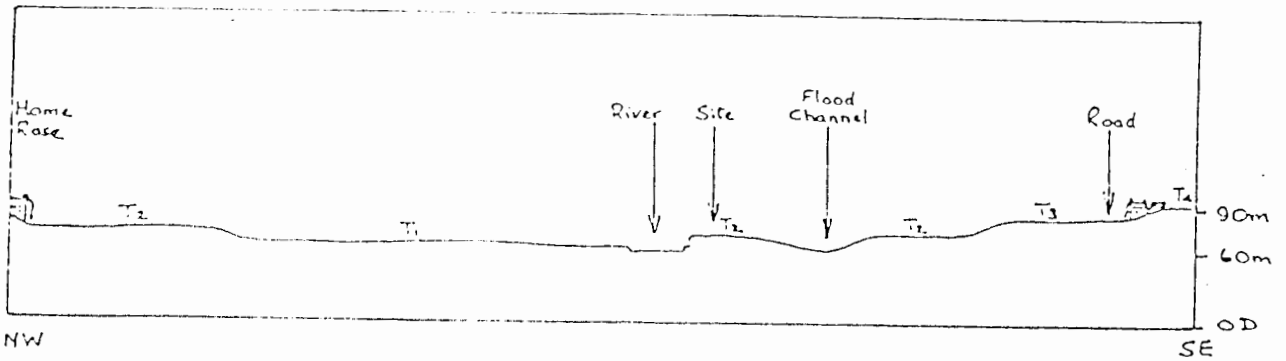
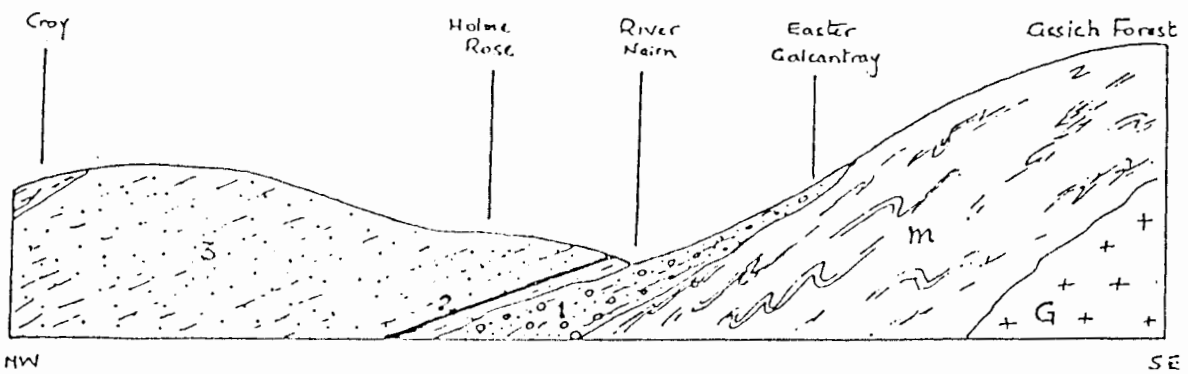


Fig.2 Cross section through the valley of the River Nairn at Easter Galcantray. (Vertical scale exaggerated).



- M. Moine Schists. G. Granite. 1. Basement conglomerate.
 2. Clava fish band. 3. Leanach Sandstones.

Fig.3. Section showing solid geology. (Adapted from Fig 1 chapt.6 of the Sheet 84 Memoir).⁽⁵⁾

Interpretation

Today flood barriers and revetments line the banks, and at Easter Galcantray these protect farmland on the lowest terrace which lies 2.5m above the normal level of the the stream. Evidence of past flood damage can still be seen where the river has gradually swung across the lowest terrace, eroding this away completely in the north-west flank of the site, until in text-book fashion it began to undermine the second terrace causing part of the site to be washed away.

There is no direct evidence as to when this loss occurred, but John Davidson, who farmed Easter Galcantray for 54 years prior to 1986, recalled many spates in the river but none to compare with that of July 1956. He described how his seed-potato crop on the lowest terrace was washed away but that the only loss of land was the destruction of part of the retaining wall on the river side of the terrace. He stressed there was no visible damage done to the higher bank on which the site now stands. Some undermining must have taken place as in a second, slightly smaller, spate two weeks later some large trees which had withstood the first flood were carried away.

An old flood channel of the river can be traced across the fields on the south side of the river. It runs from a bend 2 km upstream near Balfreish, in a straight line, passing south of Rosevalley farmhouse, and skirting the south of the site, rejoins the normal course of the river just downstream. The channel, which is up to 100m wide, has been cut into the top of the second terrace almost down to the level of the first (5.0m lower), while a side channel cuts across the south-east corner of the site. Mr. Davidson described how the river flooded through these channels for 2 - 3 days in 1956 and continued out across the low ground on the other side through Holme Rose and Kilravock, matching the damage of 1829. This was the only occasion on which he saw water flooding in these channels. The field was in grass at the time and this prevented the topsoil from being scoured away. The pinpointing of likely weak spots in the banks of rivers and the downstream propagation of meanders are well understood (of Holmes 1978 (3)). At Easter Galcantray, once the meandering stream cut into the second terrace, there would be a bank of sand and gravel 7.5m high across its path, but this is no longer protected by the lower terrace. If that bank then stood at the critical point on the bend, a flood of the magnitude of that of 1829 could cut away a substantial proportion before the waters subsided, and the missing portion of the site could have been lost during one spate. Today the critical point has moved off downstream, and from the small amount of damage done in 1956 it had passed the site by then. This means we are looking at damage that could have occurred in 1829 or even before.

The original builders of the site, with an eye to the possibility of flooding, had chosen this second terrace as being well above the danger level and at that time standing well back from the river. When the Nairn first cut the old flood channel is not known, but from its width and smoothed contours it is of considerable age. Had there been any signs of part of an active drainage channel encroaching on the site, it would be unlikely to have been chosen. Bearing in mind the rarity of the occasions on which the channel had been occupied in recent times, it seems reasonable

to argue that a dry hollow on the south flank would enhance the defensive position, and that the side channel now cutting the eastern corner is a later feature.

The Site Geology

On the site itself, trenches dug in various positions cut into undisturbed strata of the terrace and reveal fluvial deposits of gravel and coarse sand exhibiting trough cross-bedding. The sets fine upwards from large cobbles to thin bands of pebbly sand, but no silt or mud horizons are seen, indicating deposition from fast-flowing streams of a periodic nature. The gravel consists of rock types typical of the valley - mostly psammitic gneiss, weathered granite and some sandstone. The beds are now well compacted and heavily stained with iron oxide leached from above. In the section dug through the 'ditch' near the southwest corner of the site, these stained and undisturbed deposits stand out in sharp contrast against the unstained 'infill'. The vertical distribution of the stones in the 'infill' is in keeping with their having been thrown in from the 'rampart' side.

Apart from a few scattered boulders, the largest rocks in the undisturbed beds are generally about 20 cm across. This is substantially smaller than the boulders and slabs used in the 'post-holes' and 'paved areas'. These large rocks are all of types outcropping in the valley not far upstream or uphill from the site - psammitic gneiss, flaggy sandstones, siltstones and conglomerates. One exception is a boulder of a brecciated granodiorite of an unusual and distinctive type occurring in situ near Inverfarigaig 35 km to the southwest (4) and is presumably an ice-transported block. It would be quite natural for there to be a scattering of larger rocks on the land surface round about and concentrated by natural processes at one spot in the same horizon on top of a fluvial terrace.

B. THE EXCAVATIONS - 1986 by G.D.B. Jones, I. Keillar and K. Maude.

Through the great courtesy of the new owner of Easter Galcantray, Mr. David Walker, a second season of excavation was made possible for a period of four weeks in July and August 1986. The 1985 trial excavations had established the presence of a major defensive ditch on the two surviving sides of the site, namely the west and the south. In 1985, one trench was so placed as to locate and confirm the presence of the butt end of the main south entrance, the other took advantage of the eroded bank of the river Nairn to first clear a section of the western defences and then through the courtesy of the previous owners Messrs. F. & J. Davidson to cut a conventional section across the same western defences within the present field limits. All the sections produced comparable evidence of a ditch which had undergone one recutting before the apparent deliberate demolition of the associated rampart, followed by a subsequent period of silting. As the geomorphological report has shown, the space available for this site in its form prior to the major river erosion of 1829 would have allowed the presence of a site up to five acres standing on a spur overlooking both the course of the Nairn and the spate channel to the south.

The Ditch Section(T.10)

The location of the site and the 1986 excavation trenches are shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

a) T.10 (Fig.3) was a partly machine cut trench designed to locate the defences in a suitable position at the south-western corner of the site. The result was the recovery of the best ditch profile yet seen at Easter Galcantray and one that again conformed to the pattern revealed in 1985. Fully reconstructed (the section was limited in 1986 because of the standing barley) the ditch width was approximately 4.20m across with a depth from present soil levels of 2.25m. The lower sump revealed after drying a second sump cut into it. It was clear from the section that the end of the second period had seen the deliberate demolition of the rampart as suspected in 1985 with subsequent silting to a level profile.

b) The Southern Gateway

The one surviving gateway revealed by the air photographs in 1984 was examined by area excavation, exposing the butt ends of both the associated ditches. The profiles of the defences of this section are again evidence of a V-shaped ditch (Figs.4 and 5) with a second phase re-cutting prior to demolition. On the eastern side it became clear that the ditch profile had in fact been slightly truncated at the upper level as water-lain stones covered the silted ditch, thus suggesting the passage of water along the spate channel at some stage. This evidence for flood deposition overlay the remains of two thin stratified deposits in both ditches containing some charcoal and pottery of the 12th/14th century resting on the almost level remains of the completely silted ditch.

The remains of the gate (Fig.6) were slightly plough damaged and took the form of six major post-holes of which the best preserved lay to the south. The south-eastern pit retained the profile of a squared timber post

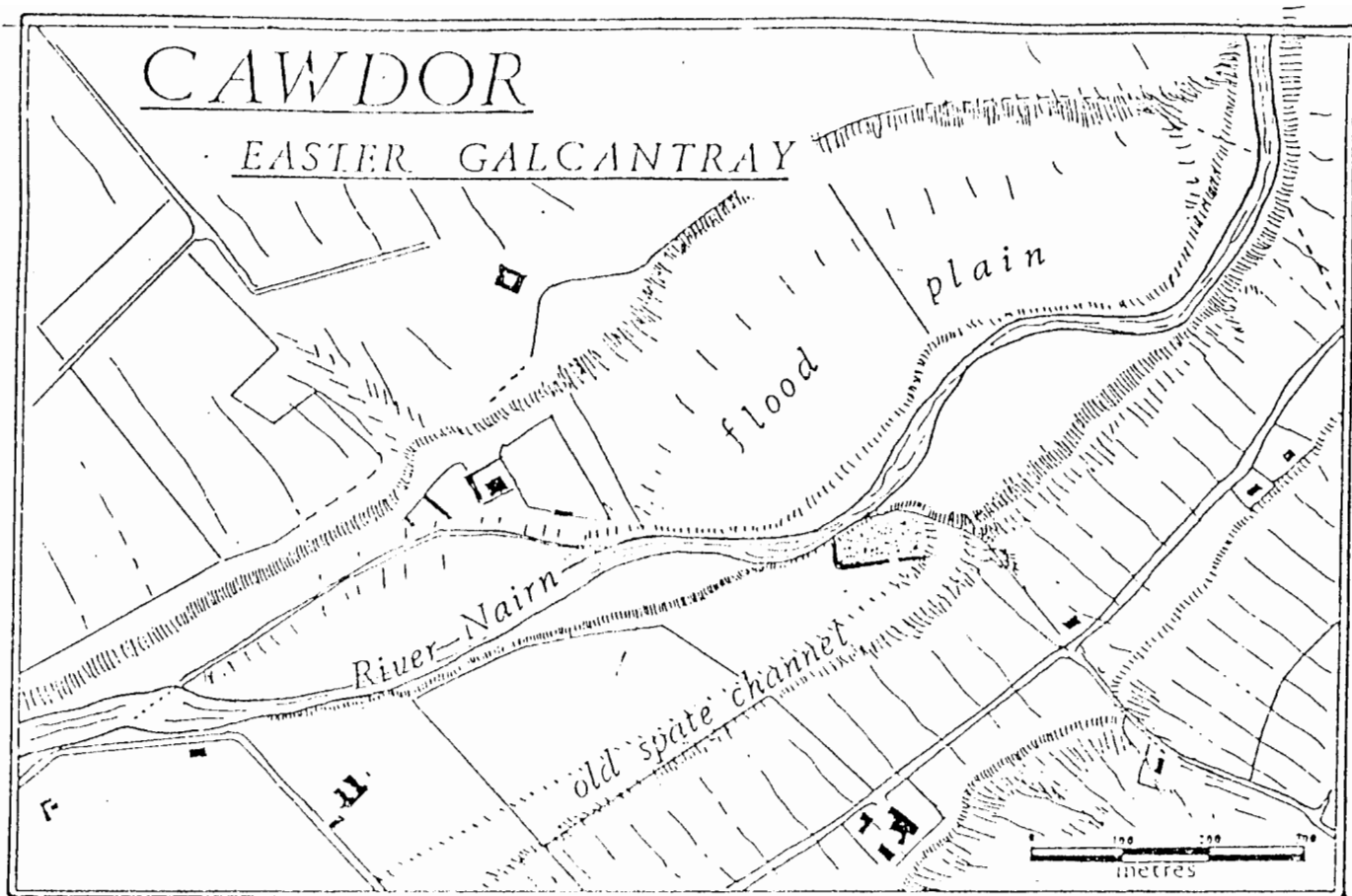


fig.1

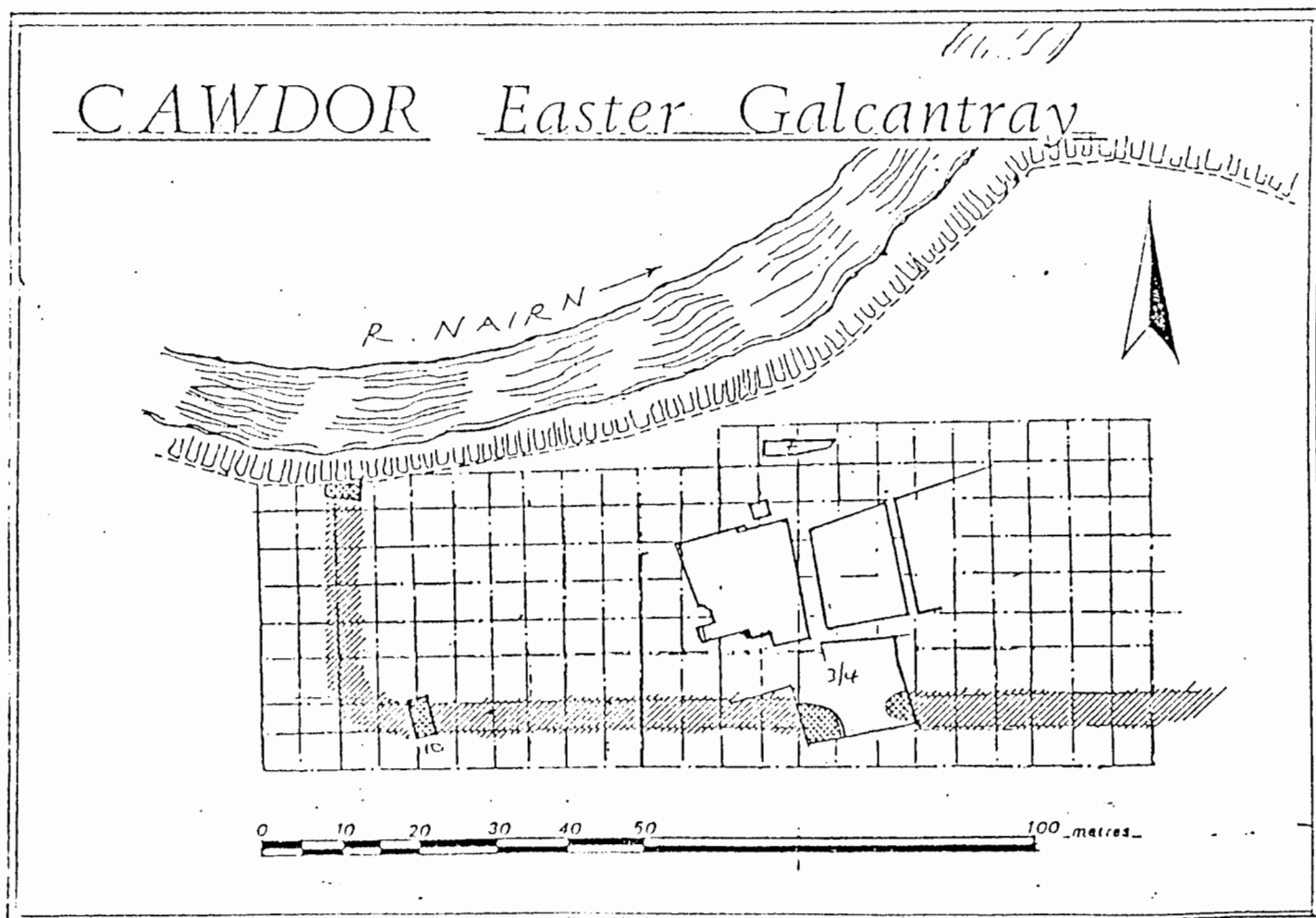
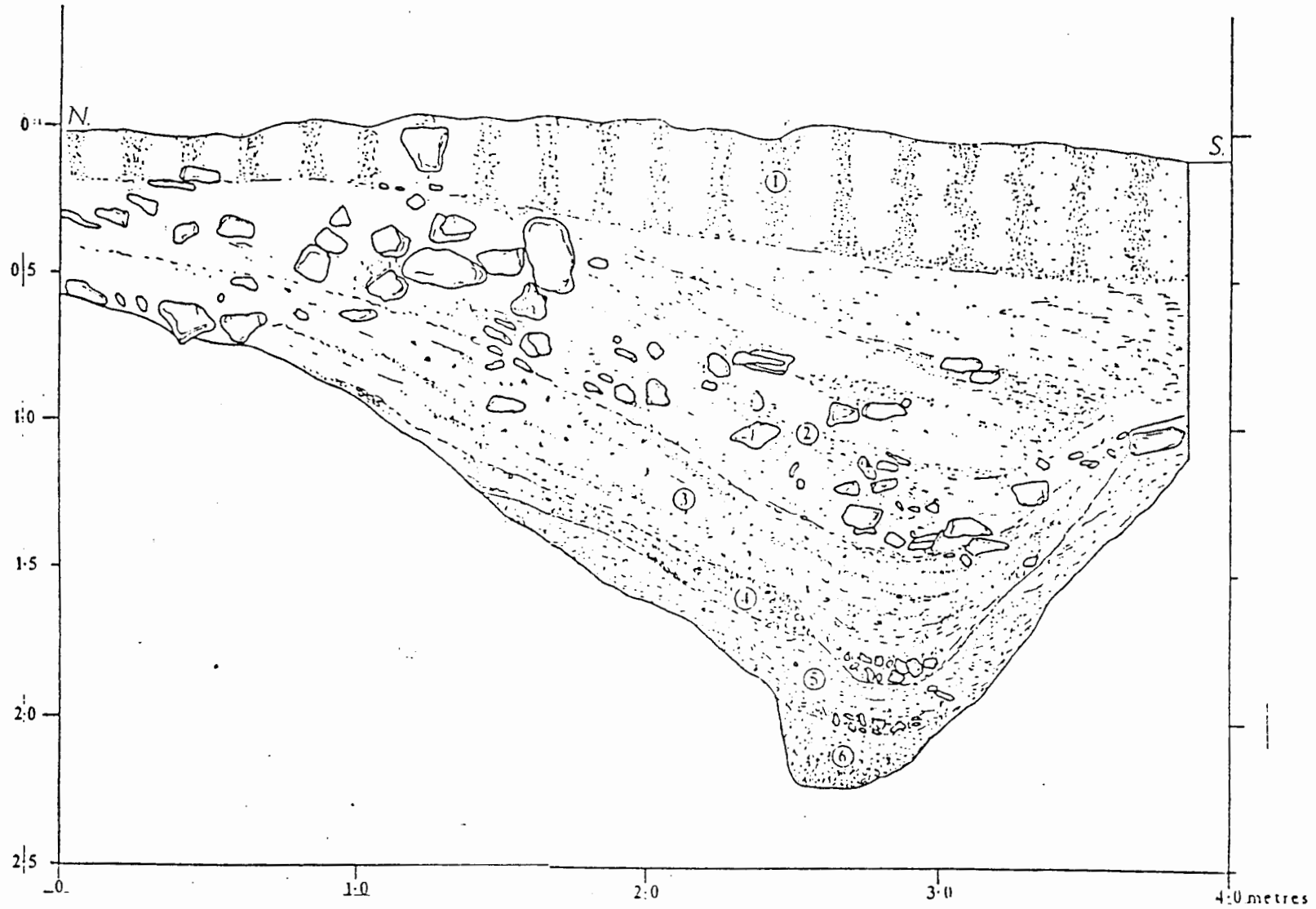


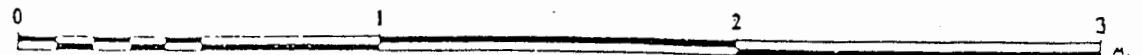
fig.2

CAWDOR Easter Galcantray

fig. 3



T. 10. East Face



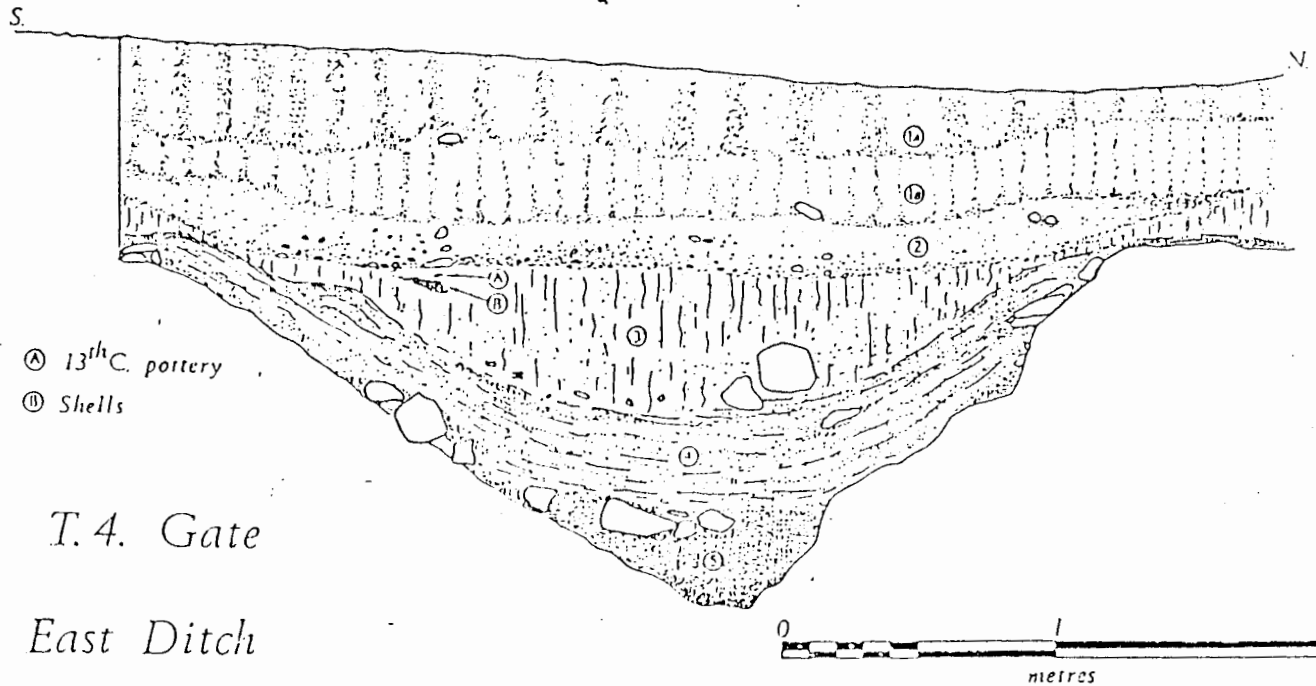


The square black impression of a post hole belonging to a timber building west of the south gate

CAWDOR

Easter Galcantray

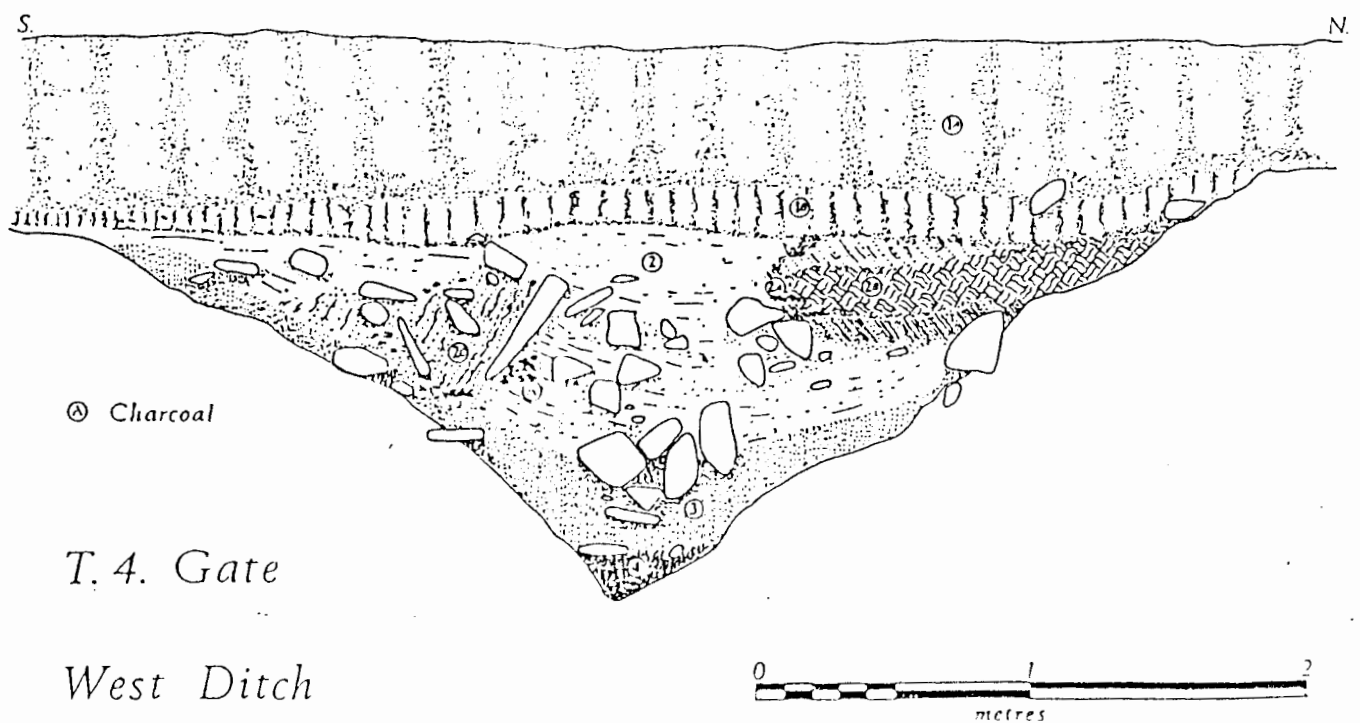
fig. 4

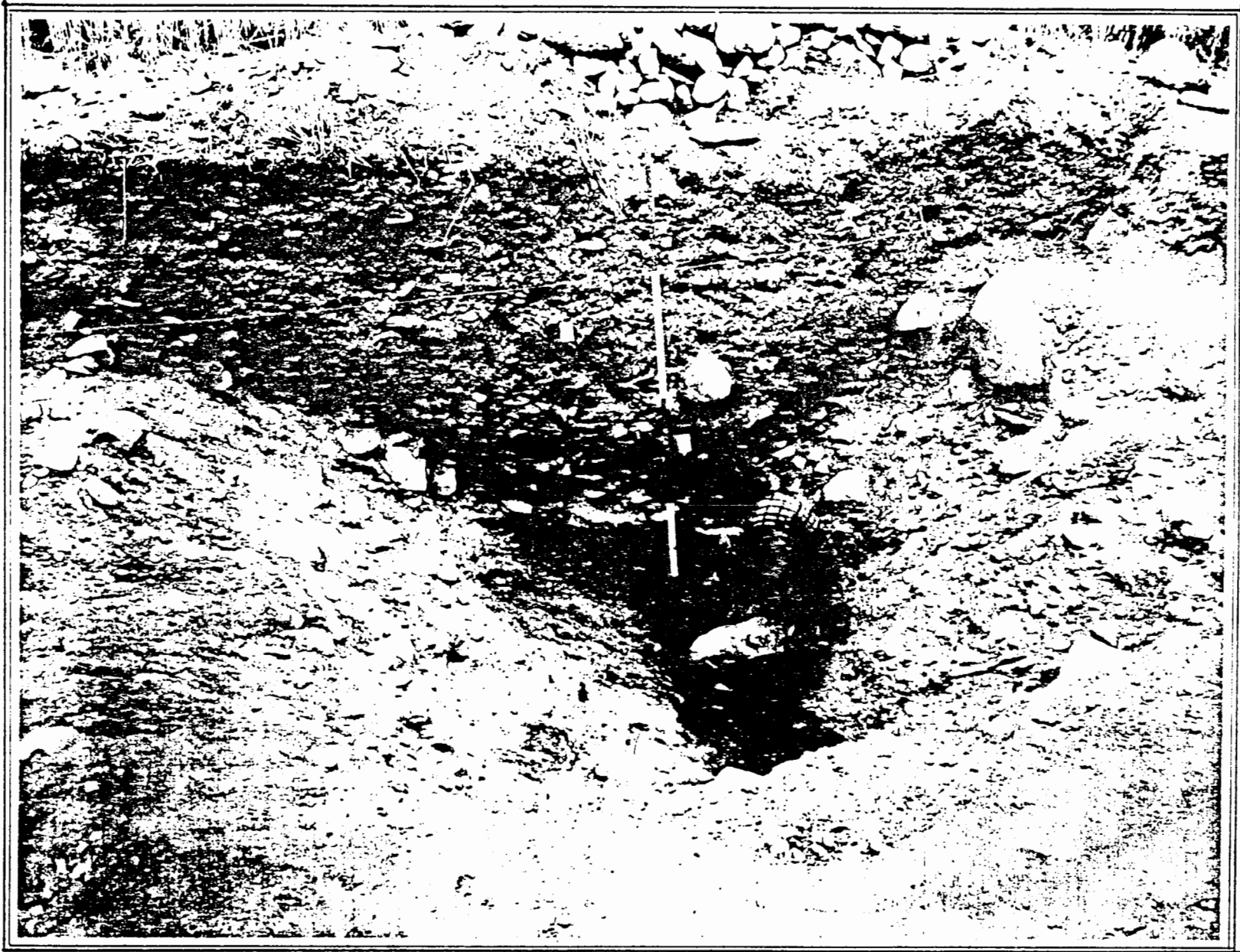


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Easter Galcantray

fig. 5





Trench 4. South-eastern ditch.

measuring 24 x 23cm. The south-western post-pit was more disturbed and indicated by a substantial chock-stone with another stone in position as the central door-stop. To the rear lay two major post-holes in each case cut into the gravel subsoil with dimensions of c.1.20m across by 0.80m deep. The overall pattern recovered from the gateway, therefore, was of six major posts flanking the door passage which measured 4.30m across and 5.30m deep. There was evidence of a single level of gravel paving obtained both at the back of the gate section and also in places on the exterior in the space between the two defensive ditches.

c) The Interior

Particular attention focussed in 1986 on recovering and identifying any building plans that might survive in the interior. To achieve this three large trenches were laid out to either side of the presumed internal road running from the gate. Partial traces of a gravelled interior survived but the thinness of the topsoil affected the clarity of recognition. To the east, however, two lines of substantial post-holes were recovered forming the southern end of a rectilinear building whose width was probably 4.10m. The post-hole form was of the normal variety with substantial chock-stones indicating the presence of the post-pit from a higher level. Bent nails indicating demolition were recovered from this structure along with certain other iron slag in small fragments. Daub was also recognised in this area.

To the west remains of a very substantially built structure were recovered in the form of two lines of massive chock-stones representing post-holes or post-pads flanking the western side of the central road. The eastern run of post-holes was found to continue in a trial trench where the profile of a square timber post was recovered. The timber impression was set amidst the chock-stones and it may be assumed that this building therefore extended north/south for a distance of at least 25m towards the river Nairn. A further area was cleared to the west of the building leading to the discovery of another row of post-holes some 2.7m to the west. Elements of a dividing wall running due west can be seen 8m to the north of the other southern corner where again elements of an east/west wall were located. At this stage it is not possible to make any suggestion as to the overall shape of the structures recovered save to suggest the minimum length of the building places it outside the normal.

As will be seen from the plan the alignment of the defences, the gateway and the two timber buildings recovered either side of the central road, all follow the same axis to within a degree. The evidence, therefore, suggests that the interior was laid out in a systematic way and the proposed 1987 excavations are designed to recover coherent plans of the timber structures in the interior.

CAWDOR

EASTER GALCANTRAY

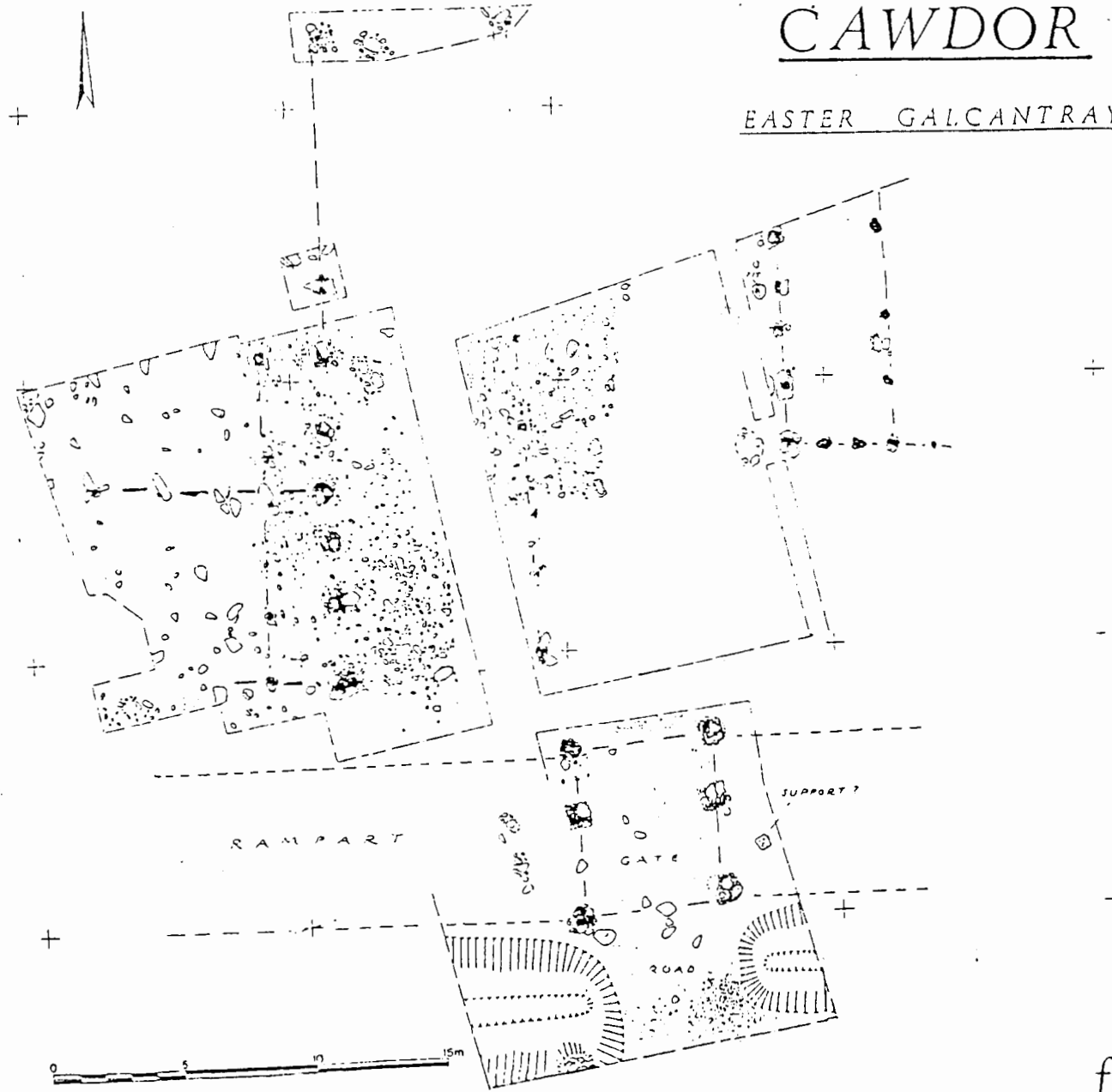


fig. 6

Chronology and Interpretation

It is evident from the emerging plan of the internal structure that the morphology of the site is consistent with that of a single period timber-built Roman fort (such as Fendoch) which was rapidly abandoned. In view of the predictable absence of finds (Fendoch produced nine pottery sherds from three seasons of excavations and only three sherds were diagnostic) chronological confirmation has to be sought from other means. This has recently been forthcoming from Carbon 14 dating undertaken by the Groningen Isotope Laboratory which has dated charcoal from the demolition deposit (T.1.5) in the western ditch to 1880 ± 20 BP; 80-130 cal A.D. (Grn - 14643). The material examined probably derived from the wattle of demolished internal buildings. On historical grounds (*inter alia* the construction of Hadrian's Wall etc) an earlier date in the chronological bracket should be preferred. Other C14 samples are also being processed. Some fragments of 13th to 14th century were located in the shallow uppermost fill of the backfilled and silted ditch and form a terminus for the time by which the site was effectively level.

Next, in view of the largely stereotyped morphology of forts by the late first century, some estimate may be made of size. The geomorphology has already been discussed in the second section of this report.

The area of the defences as shown on the air photographs measures some 138 x 40 metres, i.e. approximately 5520 metres (0.55 hectares). In assessing the overall size of the site prior to erosion by the river Nairn any estimate must be governed by the absence of any trace of the westgate along the western side, of which only approximately 38 metres survives. This means that less than half the site is represented by the crop mark phenomena, and has been eroded by southward movement in the present bed of the River Nairn. It would appear that the surviving area represents approximately 35 to 40% of the original site. Taking the lower figure this would mean that in its original form the site measured over the ramparts 1.45 hectares (3.75 acres). This would clearly place it in the category of a small infantry fort such as Car Gai, north Wales (1.6 hectares), (4 acres), or Tomen-y-Mur 2 (1.34 hectares) (3.3 acres). Indeed, the smaller quinginnery infantry forts on Hadrian's Wall are very close to this dimension at 1.42 hectares (3.5 acres).

The location of a Roman military site at Easter Galcantray, Cawdor, would not in itself be so surprising if the site was a marching camp. Many scholars have doubted the validity of the currently conventional view of the limits of the Agricolaan penetration into north-eastern Scotland. Undue attention to the quest for the battlefield of Mons Graupius has unbalanced a detached assessment of the geographical factors which, wherever the battle took place, make it essential for any conquering army, like the Hanoverian one of 1746, to penetrate into the Inverness area, whether before or after the confrontation. There is indeed antiquarian evidence from

a map of 1730 suggesting the possible existence of a marching camp on the Croy ridge north of the Galcantray site but this remain unconfirmed at present.

The location of an auxiliary fort, as opposed to a marching camp, however, changes our perception of Roman military dispositions. First the topographical. The presence of another military enclosure whether camp or, more probably, fort at Thomshill, 4 kms. south of Elgin, must imply knowledge of the route direct from the coastal strip into the middle Spey Valley later known in medieval times as the Monach Road. Likewise the presence of a fort at Easter Galcantray, Cawdor, implies a geographical knowledge of the major route from Strathspey over the Slocht Pass, currently followed by the major road and rail routes to Inverness. The fort at Cawdor does not lie on the coast, thus indicating again that the choice of site was probably determined by the pre-existing population and settlement pattern of which abundant evidence is now available from air photographic reconnaissance between Cawdor and Nairn. On the other hand one of the best available harbours lay c.5kms. away at the mouth of the inner Moray Firth where a triangular promontory (later distinguished of course by the siting of Fort George) creates a fine natural harbour protecting the inner Firth and leading past Inverness to the Beaully Firth. The probability of some communication by sea should not therefore be discounted. That it was not essential may also be argued because the presence of one fort implies that others must surely await discovery and there are indeed a number of further candidates for consideration.

The evidence of the recutting of the defences and their demolition also carries historical implications. In the post-glacial gravels into which the ditches are set recutting must have been an essential requirement of at least once a season. Thus the longest period of occupation to be postulated must be two years. On a shorter scenario the single major refurbishing common to the two western ditch sections examined in 1985 and the south gate defences might in that subsoil have been required within a matter of months; hence an occupation of one season only is possible, though perhaps less probable than two. Whichever proves correct, demolition on the orders presumably of Agricola's successor as governor was deliberate and thorough. The rampart scantling was thrown down in the ditch sump, then the body of the rampart; finally a second set of timber derived presumably from internal timber building was thrown into the backfilled ditch. This is the source of the C.14 dating. Demolition and withdrawal was a deliberate act with implicit historical connotations that are unlikely to apply to one site alone. This gives a fresh irony to the famous phrase of the contemporary historian Tacitus when he commented that under the Emperor Domitian Britain had been 'completely overrun yet just as soon abandoned', (perdomita Britannia et statim omissa) (Histories 1.2.6). Cawdor fort brings this generalisation to vivid, particular life. Indeed a possible textual reading of Agricola 38 may be that Cawdor formed one of the hiberna or winter quarters, in which Agricola placed his auxiliary troops after the final successful campaign of A.D.84 and the march into the land of the Boresti, (in fines Borestorum). More, much more, now clearly remains to be discovered of these brief, military dispositions of which Cawdor presently forms the northernmost example in the Roman world.

Acknowledgements

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