

## KILPHEDIR AND HUT CIRCLE SITES IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND

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The term hut-circle is rather old-fashioned but it usefully describes a type of field monument which, at least in Scotland, is more numerous than any other category. These annular banks of stones and earth, perhaps mantled in peat and covered with heather and bracken, have long been recognised as the remnants of the low stone walls of round houses. Diameters vary a great deal, from 5 or 6 m to at least 13 or 14 m internally. They can be overlooked all too easily on the ground or on an air photograph even by the trained observer; it is alarming to realise how many have been destroyed inadvertently by deep ploughing for forestry.

No overall distribution map exists; if it were to include what seem to be related types of monument such as the unenclosed platform settlements and the sites of other timber-framed round houses, the task would become even more difficult. As regards the hut-circles of the northern mainland of Scotland with which this paper is primarily concerned, it is only necessary to look at some of the sheets of the new Ordnance Survey 6" map of the Highlands<sup>1</sup> to realise how many can exist in just a square kilometre or two. What is known about the distribution suggests some interesting problems. For instance, eastern and central Sutherland have hundreds of hut-circles, perhaps about two thousand: very few have been recognised in the rugged and wetter west, but also there are very few in lowland Caithness<sup>2</sup>. Destruction on the deeper and intensively cultivated soils of lowland areas such as Cromarty is undoubtedly one factor, and the use of timber, sod, clay and similar impermanent materials for the walls has probably led to obliteration also. And, of course, there are marked differences in our regional knowledge of Scotland to be taken into account.

In spite of the great number of hut-circles, very few indeed have been excavated. Two have been examined in Sutherland, and the excavation reports are almost useless<sup>3</sup>. Many sites are undoubtedly difficult of access especially to modern transport. Excavations of hut-circles generally have usually yielded few artefacts, even pottery, and dating in the past often became guesswork. Thorneycroft's investigations at Dalrulzion in northern Perthshire are a case in point<sup>4</sup>. More recently, however, the work of Mrs Stewart and Dr Coles at Dalnaglar indicated the possibilities with newer techniques including pollen analysis<sup>5</sup>. With radiocarbon and thermoluminescence determinations becoming feasible, the position is changing

rapidly.

A personal interest developed while directing investigations at Rosal in Strath Naver, a settlement which was cleared for sheep in the early nineteenth century<sup>6</sup>. An intriguing problem became obvious in the form of an earlier and much more diffuse type of settlement indicated by numerous hut-circles appearing within the limits of the common grazings. The lands of Rosal may be traced back to the twelfth century in the documentary record but then there was an unbridgeable gap to the period of the hut-circles. The Sutherland Inventory of the Royal Commission, published as long ago as 1911, provided most valuable information on this earlier settlement pattern in general. Two main types were distinguished at that time.

1. By far the most numerous sites involved a simple circular enclosure normally set on a prepared platform made by quarrying into an upslope and spreading the spoil in a semi-circle immediately downhill. The encircling wall is often indistinguishable at the quarried side but appears as a marked crescentic bank over the built-up part of the platform. An average internal diameter is about 12 m. The entrance is often in the south-east. The houses normally occur in small clusters of perhaps 3 or 4, and at intervals of 50 or 100 m between each circle. Almost invariably these clusters are accompanied by a series of small mounds which were interpreted by the Commission as clearance cairns collected from small patches of arable land around.
2. The second type of hut-circle which was distinguished in the Inventory is relatively rare, less homogeneous in form and seems to be confined to south-eastern Sutherland. The walls are more strongly constructed and may be lined inside with slabs on end. The entrance is often elongated into a passage and in at least one instance is checked for a door<sup>7</sup>. A short souterrain may open off from inside the house<sup>8</sup>. These sites are normally in association, not with clearance cairns but with trailing banks and lines of boulders; in this case the larger stones have been disposed of on the edge of the cultivated land instead of being piled together in cairns.

In 1963, an opportunity arose to investigate the relationship between the two types of sites as distinguished in the Sutherland Inventory. Mr David Taylor and I were invited to organise an adult summer school in Archaeology by the Sutherland Education Committee. This is not the place either to discuss the School or to give an excavation report<sup>9</sup>, but it is necessary to pay a tribute to our helpers. The site was twenty minutes uphill in the moor for one thing, but also in the frequent evening discussions and visits to comparable sites, we were immensely grateful for the sustained stimulus of this singularly enthusiastic group, whose energy was at times almost uncontrollable.

We worked in a side glen opening on to the north side of the Strath of Kildonan. There were about a score of hut-circles in four main groups, each of which had an example of the rather rare Type II hut-circle, and each was accompanied by both clearance cairns and boulder alignments<sup>10</sup>. The place name means the cell of Peter, and below, near the river, was a Clearance settlement to remind us of the problem raised at Rosal.

A group of four circles with the usual clearance cairns, on the lip of the deep glen cut by the Kilphedir burn, was selected for detailed study; subsequently a diminutive fifth example was recognised in the group (Fig. 1). There was one outstanding circle of the Type II category, No. 352 in the Sutherland Inventory, which was in close association with the characteristic trailing banks of boulders (Fig. 1, No. V). It emerged that this latter house had in fact been constructed out of a pre-existing Type I circle. Once we had established this point, it became obvious that a number of other Type II circles elsewhere in eastern Sutherland, had been built above, or set into the earlier Type I circles. The Royal Commission investigators had noted the evidence, but had described these re-occupied sites as Type II circles with a narrow crescent-shaped court or annex<sup>11</sup>. At first sight, the simple replacement of a group of five houses by a later, single dwelling seems to have been involved. On the other hand, the other three clusters of Type I circles at Kilphedir had each been replaced in the same way, so that what in fact had resulted was a much more widely spaced cluster of Type II houses stretching over a kilometre or more. The secondary settlement pattern is therefore to be described as one of isolated dwellings only with qualifications. Others of these relatively scarce Type II hut-circles also occur in widely spaced groups as at Kilphedir.

Very briefly, something must be said about the differences which were found between the two types of settlement. The full account is ready for publication but awaits a soil report.

Type I houses varied in diameter between 6 and 13 m internally though the pattern remained constant (Fig. 1, Nos. I-IV). The low stone walls, 1-2 m thick, were not more than half a metre high and formed a foundation platform to support the rafters of a conical roof; a gutter-like feature about halfway across seemed intended not for vertical timber walls but to take the ends of the rafters. Quite probably the houses were roofed with turf. An inner ring of posts supported this roof. The hearth was slightly off-centre in the best preserved example, where it consisted of a paved rectangle.

In all but one of the houses, sherds of thick, coarse pottery were found,

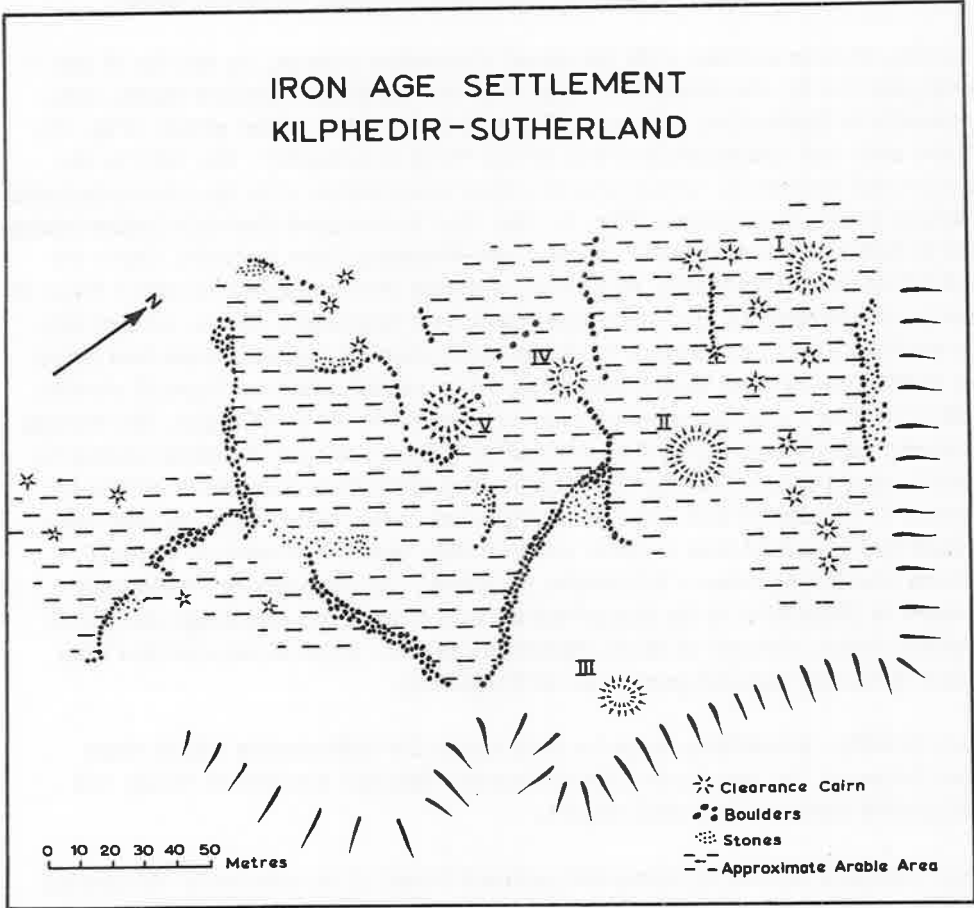


Figure 1.

characterised by large and even sharp grits. The rims were either rounded or, more generally, pressed flat with a slight flange on one or both sides. No decorated sherds occurred and although many were very small, a bowl shape is indicated. In one house where the inner ring of posts had been renewed more than once and where a very high phosphate content was found in the soil, sherds from several pots were recovered. Those from the lowest occupation level were of a thin rather sandy fabric, and the uppermost, apparently belonging to the end of the occupation, were heavily gritted with steatite. Small quantities of this mineral occur locally, the nearest known deposit being about 40 km away near Lairg. Apart from the pottery, an occasional flint flake was the only other class of artefact.

Charcoal was extremely scarce during the first three seasons and trouble was caused in the early stages by small fragments of recently burnt heather stalks. There was no bone in the very acid podzolic soils. The first estimate of age in years came from soil and peat studies by Mr Romans and Dr Durno. They indicated that peat had begun to form over the deserted Type I circles a century or two after the Sub-Boreal to Sub-Atlantic transition, that is, somewhere about 2,300-400 BP<sup>12</sup> but they were very anxious for us to supply them with the date if at all possible. We accordingly undertook another season's work and at last obtained some burnt twiggy charcoal which was dated in Dr Alan Walton's laboratory in the University of Glasgow. His determination was 2370 BP  $\pm$  40. The two dates are so close that a figure about 2350 BP in round terms can be suggested, and by inference this would support the dating of the Sub-Atlantic to Sub-Boreal transition as being locally around 2500 BP. The other possibility of dating seems to lie in tests for thermo-luminescence in the pottery; the local granite might be a disturbing factor which would have to be discounted.

If we think in terms of a date somewhere around 400-450 BC for this Type I settlement at Kilphedir, one can only add that effectively its occupants may have been still largely stone using.

The Type II settlement offers some contrasts. The single house with which we were concerned in the excavations, had a higher, thicker wall lined on the inside with slabs, and the earlier hut out of which it had been constructed, had been modified to provide an entrance passage 5 m long. The house in fact had begun to resemble a dun; the idea that duns and even brochs were fortified houses and not miniature forts has been suggested by other writers. The hearth was oval and set within a curious alignment of boulders forming an open U in the part of the house opposite the door; there was a

saddle quern nearby. There had been an opening into the wall as though to a chamber but the structure had collapsed or been abandoned before completion.

Masses of charcoal occurred, all birchwood, and it would appear that the roof had fallen on top of the fire and gone up in flames. On the hearth were two potsherds of a rather smooth, hard ware; one had a slightly everted rim with dimples beneath - a sharp contrast to the usually coarse, gritty ware of the Type I settlement. Otherwise, a few pounders and a stone disc were the only artefacts.

These masses of charcoal have been dated several times. The first determination from the Lamont Geological Laboratory at Columbia gave  $2100 \pm 80$  BP while three determinations from Dr Alan Walton's laboratory gave later figures averaging 1965 BP. A date about the second century BC is broadly indicated.

The arable land over which the clearance cairns and boulder alignments occur, is somewhat smoother than the moorland outside even after 2000 years (Fig. 1). An exact limit could not be found, for there is no indication of an enclosing wall, ditch or palisade. The total area is less than two hectares and nearer one in the case of the boulder banks. This is pitifully small for the cereal crop of even the single Type II homestead. There was no direct evidence of stock rearing, however, but hunting, fishing and collecting were probably very important.

It is clear that when the huts and cairns were built, peat had not started to accumulate. By the time the Type II circle went up in flames, the blanket was creeping downhill and eventually came to smother the whole of these uplands. Mr Romans continually emphasised the extreme poverty of the soils in the first case, and was tempted even to doubt possibilities of cereal cultivation at all. A burst of plantago pollen seems to mark the cultivation horizon of the Type I settlement, but there is no such evidence to equate with the later boulder banks.

To turn to some broader issues. The downhill extension of peat at this period is a widespread phenomenon and blanketed many extensive areas besides Kilphedir. The landscape of the period of the hut circles and cultivation plots has been effectively protected in this way from later disturbance but, as at Kilphedir, the old settlements show through the peat over wide stretches of eastern Sutherland. This fossilisation of the landscape would account for the relatively large numbers of hut circles

as noted in the Royal Commission Inventory. There has been preserved for the archaeologist something very much more than the vestigial traces of a prehistoric settlement such as we are accustomed to study. It is at least reassuring to know that some of the best examples of this fossilised landscape are to be preserved, notably at Kildonan, the Ord at Lairg, parts of Upper Strath Naver and Kilphedir itself.

The total numbers of the population are of course a very different matter from the total number of sites which have survived. If all the Type I houses were occupied at the one time, the population would have been higher than just before the Clearances in the early nineteenth century when there was notable pressure on the local resources. These extremely poor upland soils must have been exhausted from the point of view of cereal cultivation after no more than a crop or two and frequent movement was almost certainly necessary. Nevertheless, many patches of apparently useful land had never been cultivated. The distribution of the Type I circles and cairns does not indicate a fine adjustment to environment; time had not allowed all the good areas to have been utilised. In other words, the whole Type I settlement pattern could have been produced by a small semi-nomadic population occupying the upland for no great length of time. From the Inventory descriptions and a little personal observation, the hut circles seem not to have developed sub-varieties except at the phase of re-occupation by the Type II houses, when the settlement may have been coming to a close. Under the circumstances, it might well be that colonisation began no earlier than the Late Bronze Age - Early Iron Age transition.

This attempt to take a realistic view of the small numbers which may have been responsible for the widespread settlements on the uplands of eastern Sutherland, should not in any way detract from the significance of the episode in general. The colonisation seems to indicate important developments in house type, economy and even in potting techniques, without any obvious antecedents in the Bronze Age in Scotland. Equally, however, there are obvious parallels to the Sutherland developments in settlement form, going back in southern Britain at least to the late second millennium BC, however remote and indirect the connections may be. If eastern Sutherland were at last coming into line with more southerly areas economically, then we must also involve northern Britain generally, for Sutherland can hardly be regarded as other than a remote corner of the much wider region.

If the occupants of our Type I circles are considered to be descendants of the previous Bronze Age and Neolithic population, several alternatives are possible. Perhaps the house sites of this earlier Bronze Age population

are being overlooked or confused with those of the later settlement. Perhaps over a period of time an expansion from the valleys and lowlands led to the occupation of what had formerly been the summer pastures. Perhaps a worsening climate at the beginning of the Sub-Atlantic and natural increase in numbers over the centuries led to this eventually unsuccessful attempt to extend uphill the total area of arable land. The idea of a Bronze Age population living down in the straths under somewhat drier conditions is not fanciful - Neolithic cairns, stone rows and Bronze Age cists occur near the Helmsdale River not far from Kilphedir, and 100 m below the general level of the hut-circles. Much more intensive field work might supply an answer to these implied questions.

Invasion hypotheses are currently unfashionable but colonists could have arrived by sea to the Helmsdale and other rivers and their deep estuaries on this coast. The situation is, in fact, very obscure. Directly across the Firth lies the cave at Covesea with its frustrating problem. Up in Shetland Mr Hamilton has argued for an invasion of Iron Age peasants for the so-called Late Bronze Age Village II<sup>13</sup>. It should perhaps be emphasised that the flange-rim pottery from the Type I circle at Kilphedir, although backed with steatite, seems to bear no comparison with the thick, coarse barrel-shaped pots, nor those with a marked carination, from Jarlshof. Mr Hamilton's evidence for invasion by an Iron Age element in the sixth century BC rests very largely on this pottery. The settlement involved, which was one of round houses, is markedly different from the preceding 'village' with a house type resembling the dwellings in Shetland described by Mr Calder as Neolithic<sup>14</sup>. These round houses at Jarlshof seem to have commenced, not with stone piers dividing up the interior, but with posts not unlike our Type I circles<sup>15</sup>. Later, the piers were added and short souterrains occur, opening off the interior of the houses. This would suggest comparison with our Type II hut-circles and perhaps indicate a later date than Mr Hamilton suggested. In the Clickhimin sequence, a later date would tend to bring the well-known 'forework' nearer in time to the broch with which it has such obvious affinities<sup>16</sup>.

It must be recalled that there is a broch at Kilphedir, a fine specimen on a high shoulder overlooking the hut circles and arable land, and set within a deep ditch<sup>17</sup>. A date for the Type II circles in about the second century BC comes very near to the date of the earliest brochs (about 50 BC has been suggested<sup>18</sup> though it could be earlier). It is intriguing to note that if the broch is to be considered as a fortified house - a tower-house<sup>19</sup> - the average diameter of the interior is much the same as for the northern hut circles. The Type II houses may have elongated entrance passages up to



the average thickness of a broch wall, and they may be rebated for a door. The short souterrain opening off the Type II circle just across the burn at Kilphedir (No. 345), ends in a beehive chamber and the passage as a whole bears a striking resemblance to the short galleries ending in corbelled chambers which occur at ground level in many Caithness brochs, for instance at Crosskirk. A central ring of posts was noted in the broch at Dun Troddan<sup>20</sup>.

There is no need to force this comparison further but it is important to realise that the last stages of the colonisation which has been under discussion must be very close in time to, or even contemporaneous with the period of broch building. The complex of features comprised in a broch tower must surely have been synthesised in a cultural background similar to that of our later hut-circles.

In conclusion, what little personal field-work has been undertaken on the Type II circles, indicates considerable variation in detail. They could link with the circular structures with stone pillars to hold up a flagstone roof occurring in southern Caithness; Curle characterised them as 'wags'<sup>21</sup>. It is doubtful whether the differences between Type I and Type II circles is at all clear cut and the second may well have emerged from the first. The contrast between the clearance cairns and the boulder banks may be more obvious than significant, though a change in cultivation methods could be involved. The distribution of both types of settlement must extend further south. A description of the remains in the Howe of Cromar in Aberdeenshire, for instance, suggests a pattern of hut-circles, clearance cairns and alignment in conjunction<sup>22</sup>. How this may connect with sites such as Dalrulzion, Dalnaglar, and with such categories as palisaded and enclosed platform settlements, must lie beyond the scope of this paper.

#### Notes

1. E.g. OS 6" Sheet NC 91 NE (Kilphedir) or NC 63 NE (Dalharald, Strath Naver); the larger circles are termed 'enclosures'.
2. RCAMS Inventory of Sutherland (1911), p. xxiv and Caithness (1911), p. xxxvii.
3. Curle, A.O. 'On the Examination of Two Hut-Circles in the Strath of Kildonan, Sutherland', PSAS XLV (1910-11), 18.
4. Thorneycroft, W. 'Observations on Hut-Circles near the Eastern Border of Perthshire, North of Blairgowrie', PSAS LXVII (1932-3), 189.

5. Stewart, M.E.C. 'The Excavation of Two Circular Enclosures at Dalnaglar, Perthshire', PSAS XCV (1961-2), 134.
6. Fairhurst, H. 'Rosal: a Deserted Township in Strath Naver, Sutherland', PSAS 100 (1967-8), 135.
7. RCAMS Inventory of Sutherland (1911), 120-1, no. 345.
8. *Ibid.*, 109-10, no. 318.
9. A detailed report by Fairhurst, H. and Taylor, D.B. in preparation for PSAS.
10. OS 6" Sheets NC 91 NE and NC 92 SE.
11. E.g. RCAMS Inventory of Sutherland (1911), 114-15, no. 327.
12. Durno, S.E. & Romans, J.C.C. 'Evidence for Variations in the Altitudinal Zonation of Climate in Scotland and Northern England since the Boreal Period', Scot. Geog. Mag. 85 (1969), 31.
13. Hamilton, J.R.C. Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland (1956).
14. Calder, C.S.T. 'Stone Age House Sites in Shetland', PSAS LXXXIX (1955-6), 340.
15. Hamilton, J.R.C. *op.cit.*, 32.
16. Hamilton, J.R.C. Excavations at Clickhimin, Shetland (1968).
17. RCAMS Inventory of Sutherland (1911), 104-5, no. 307.
18. Piggott, S. 'A Scheme for the Scottish Iron Age', in Rivet, A.L.F. (ed.), The Iron Age in Northern Britain (1966), 9.
19. Piggott, S. 'The Archaeological Background', in Wainwright, F.T. (ed.), The Problem of the Picts (1955), 65.
20. Curle, A.O. 'The Broch of Dun Troddan', PSAS LV (1920-1), 83.
21. RCAMS Inventory of Caithness (1911), p. xxxix (under 'Galleried Dwellings').
22. Ogston, Sir A. 'The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Howe of Cromar', 3rd Spalding Club of Aberdeen (1931), 22.