

The excavation of a small henge monument at Pullyhour, Halkirk, Caithness: interim report

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In the north of Scotland there are a number of earthwork monuments that have been described as 'hengés' or hengiforms'. They have a number of features in common. All are small circular enclosures, with an external bank, a wide internal ditch and a surprisingly restricted interior, but it is far from obvious whether they are more closely related to the ceremonial monuments of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, or to Irish ring barrows which resemble them in surface appearance. Until recently, none of the Scottish sites had been excavated and published. One had been investigated by Time Team without any result, although it was located not far from the find spot of the Early Bronze Age Migdale Hoard. Another had been recorded during road building at Lairg Sutherland and had a terminus post quem of 1350 – 1050 BC. It also included a cremation burial with a date of 1180 – 930 BC. The first research excavation did not happen until Easter this year, with the investigation of a well preserved earthwork at Pullyhour in Caithness.

The site was located on the side of a valley overlooking the Thurso River, in a position with evidence of Mesolithic activity. There had also been standing stones and a cist burial in the vicinity. The earthwork had a single entrance and a well preserved external bank (Plates 1 and 2). It was exactly aligned on the remains of large cairn on the opposite bank of the river. In Caithness, monuments of this kind normally date from the Neolithic; the closest comparison is with a passage tomb beside Loch Calder. The enclosure faced south and was also directed towards the full moon at midsummer which rises above the far horizon.

Excavation demonstrated that the earthwork was built in two phases (Fig.1). The first was a circular enclosure with a broad internal ditch which must have held water (Fig.2). It had been built in open country which was not used for farming. A date from the old land surface shows that it has a *terminus post quem* of 1620 – 1450 BC. In its second phase the enclosure was converted to an oval ground plan by widening the ditch on the inside. A small horseshoe-shaped bank was constructed on its inner lip, and the area inside it was cobbled. At the same time the outer bank was enlarged and its inner edge was probably revetted on by a rubble wall (Fig.2). This phase is

dated between 1320 - 1120 BC. A small post was erected in the centre of the enclosure.

The entrance was very narrow and was flanked by a stone kerb. Just outside it was a pair of posts. One was much larger than the other, and the base of the upright still survived (Plate 3). To our surprise it was a substantial piece of pine, a species which became extinct in Caithness at the end of the Neolithic period. This is confirmed by a date of 2580 -2340 BC. Its socket had been cut through the secondary bank, meaning that it could not have been erected before the Middle or Late Bronze Age. Not only had the builders aligned the enclosure on an ancient monument, they raised a massive post which must have been dug out of a bog. Its actual age could not have been known, but they would have been aware that it was a relic of some antiquity. The only artefacts associated with the Bronze Age structure were two flint flakes.

Finally, the monument was decommissioned. The rubble supporting the bank was pushed into the ditch and the entrance was blocked by a small cairn (Plate 4). The pine post was uprooted and the stones that had held it in place were smashed to pieces and used to cover its socket. There is no archaeological evidence of further activity on the site.

Acknowledgements

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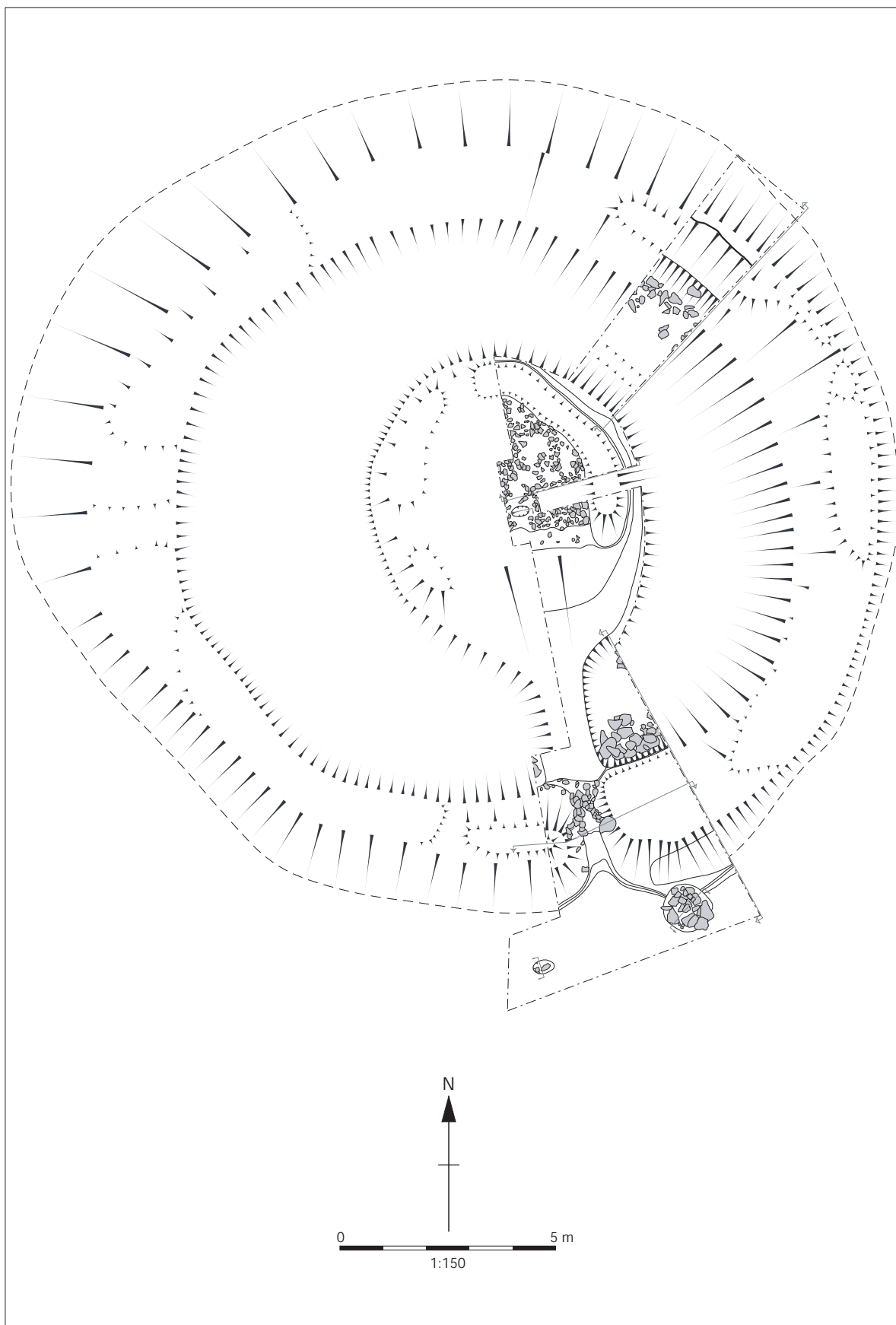


Figure 1: The Pullyhour henge earthwork survey and excavations 2008

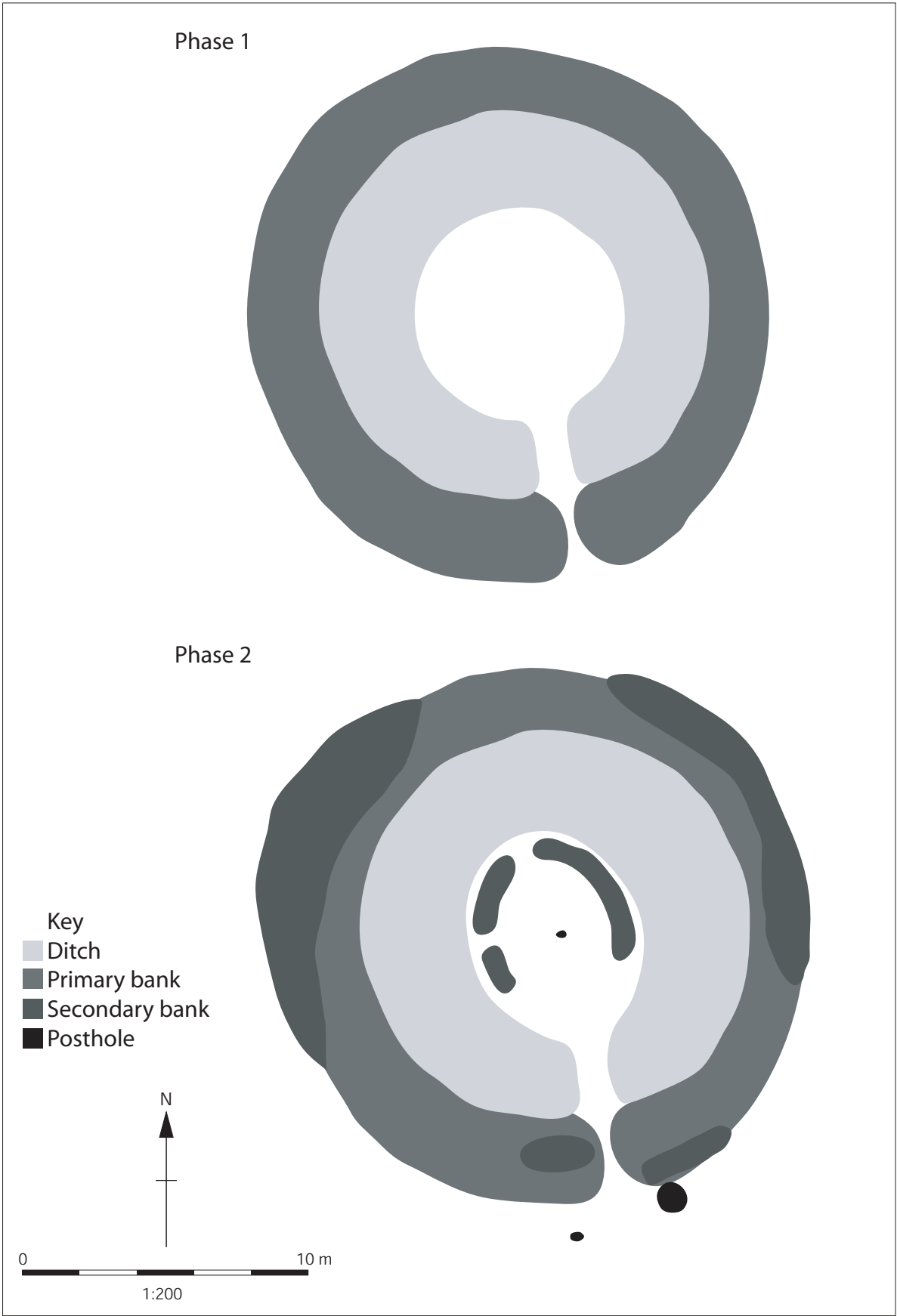


Figure 2: A schematic representation of Pullyhour henge phases 1 and 2



Plate 1: The Pullyhour henge pre-excitation. Facing north



Plate 2: The Pullyhour henge post-excitation. Facing north



Plate 3: The bog pine post in the entrance. Facing north west



Plate 4: Stonework blocking the entrance to the henge. Facing south