

The background of the cover is a photograph of a landscape at dawn or dusk. A large, bright sun is positioned in the upper right quadrant, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and greys. Below the horizon, a dense field of tall, thin, vertical structures, possibly stone pillars or standing stones, stretches across the middle ground. The foreground is dark and appears to be a field of low-lying vegetation or a misty ground. The overall atmosphere is ethereal and ancient.

A Neolithic Ceremonial Complex in Galloway

*Excavations at Dunragit
and Droughduil, 1999–2002*

JULIAN THOMAS

A NEOLITHIC CEREMONIAL
COMPLEX IN GALLOWAY

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Front cover: Reconstruction of the Late Neolithic palisaded enclosure at Dunragit, looking toward the Droughduil mound. Image by Aaron Watson

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INTRODUCTION

Julian Thomas

Location, topography and geology

The modern village of Dunragit lies between Stranraer and Glenluce in Western Galloway, immediately to the north of Luce Bay (at approximately NGR NX 150576). The major road between Stranraer and Newton Stewart, the A75, runs ESE-WNW through the village, parallel with the railway that links Girvan with the ferry port at Stranraer. Both of these exploit the expanse of flat ground that lies at the foot of Challoch Hill, which borders on the sand dunes of Torrs Warren to the south. The road has been established since at least the eighteenth century, when it was constructed to serve the port of Portpatrick (MacHaffie 2001). The level ground is narrowest immediately to the east of Dunragit, at East Challoch, where Challoch Hill overlooks Luce Sands. Dunragit is thus located on a natural routeway, where the north-south axis of the Water of Luce turns westward to the isthmus between Loch Ryan and Luce Bay. Further west, the country opens up onto the Rhins of Galloway, while to the east the coast skirts the low uplands of the Machars. North beyond Challoch Hill, the land rises toward Cairnscarrow and Cairnerzean Fell. Overall, then, the location of Dunragit represents an area of gently rolling lowland sandwiched between the uplands to the north and Luce Bay to the south.

South from the village, the large mound of Droughduil Mote stands on the border of Torrs Warren sands. This is a major dune system covering an area of 1200 hectares, with a coastal frontage of approximately 7 kilometres (Cowie 1996: 14). The uplands to the north and west of Dunragit, and the northern part of the Rhins of Galloway

are composed of Ordovician sedimentary rocks, while the southern Rhins and the country south of Glenluce are Silurian rocks of the Llandovery series. A broad strip running southward from Loch Ryan, however, is composed of more recent sediments, principally alluvium and glacial outwash gravel. This provides the subsoil at Dunragit itself. The place-name Dunragit may be derived from Din Rheged, meaning the fort of Rheged, which would refer to the Dark Age kingdom. This name probably does not relate to the prehistoric sites, but to Round Dounan, a fort located on a natural rock outcrop overlooking Dunragit village. The fort is stone built, with a containing wall and an entrance passage. It has been argued to be of fifth or sixth century AD date (Reid 1952).

Challoch Hill rises abruptly north of the village, but from the A75 southwards toward Piltanton Bridge the ground drops no more than 15 metres over a kilometre or so. Between the road and the railway running 150 metres to the south lies what was once the major employer in the village, Dunragit Creamery. The creamery was opened in 1882, and was one of the earliest of its sort in Scotland. It merged with the Valleyfield Dairy Company in 1891 to form the United Creameries Company, and later was operated by Nestlé. In recent years the creamery has closed down, and the building is now used by a light engineering company manufacturing motorbikes (Stell 1996: 55). The land between road and railway has largely been under pasture in recent decades, but the fields south of the railway have been under the plough, and have revealed spectacular results from air photography. South of these fields, Droughduil Mote is located in an area of woodland managed by Forest Enterprise. At this point the

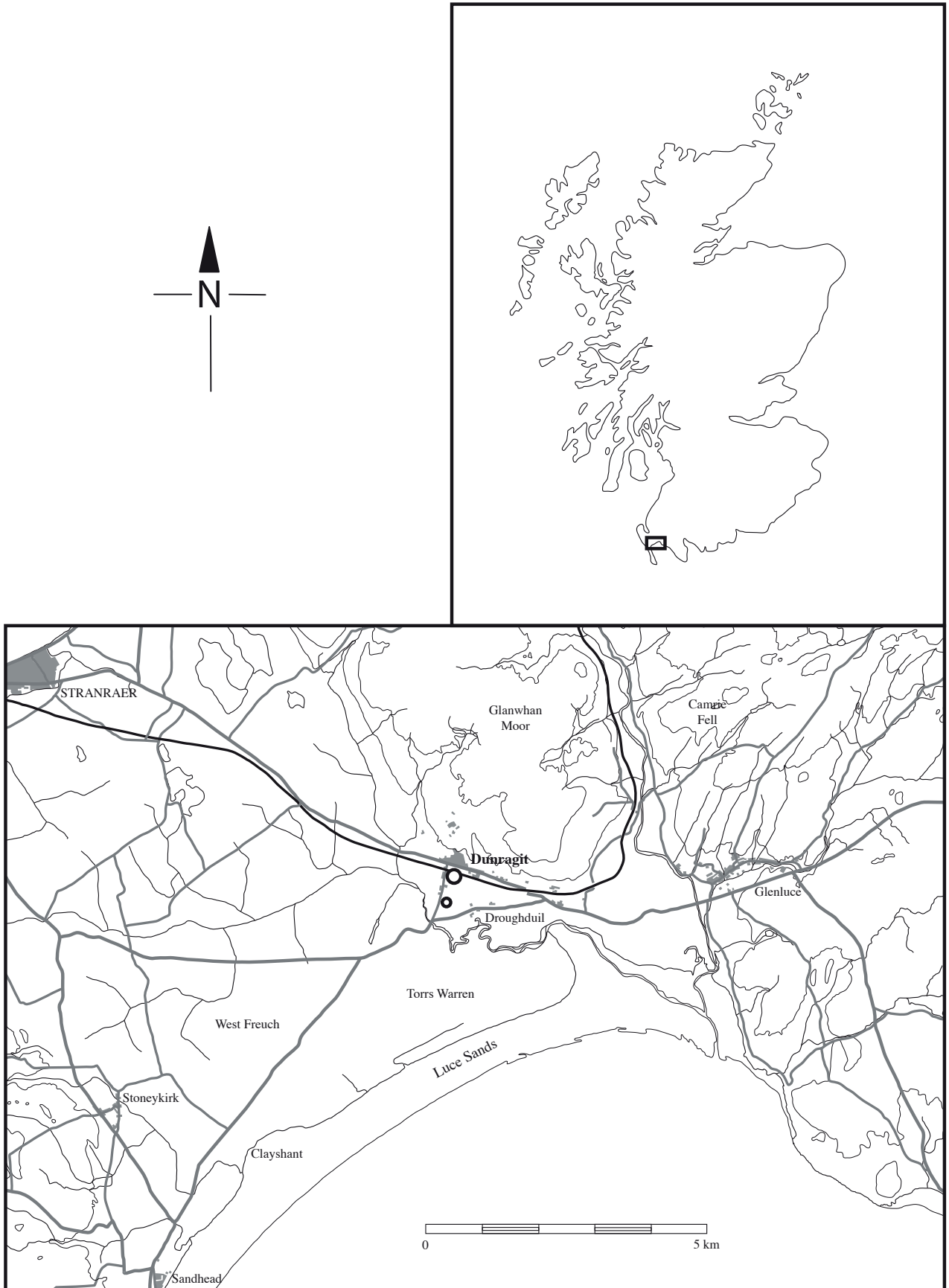


Figure 1.1 Dunragit, Galloway: location



Figure 1.2 Dunragit complex: central area of the palisaded enclosure, from the south-west



Figure 1.3 Dunragit complex: central area of the palisaded enclosure, from the north

subsoil is sandier, and the mound itself is set on an ancient sand dune. West from the A748 (which runs south from the A75) air photographic cover is far poorer, as the land bordering the road is taken up by a large nursery growing small conifers. South and east from the nursery a very flat expanse of land, the Freuch, is drained by Piltanton Burn and stretches toward West Freuch airfield.

Discovery

The complex of cropmark features at Dunragit (focused on NX 14805735), was first identified from the air by Marilyn Brown of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland in 1992. A second series of photographs of the complex was taken in 1995, and together these images provide evidence of a remarkable group of prehistoric structures, bisected by the modern railway line (Figs. 1.2 to 1.5). These images show a large enclosure, composed of three concentric rings of what are now known to be post-holes (numbers 1 to 3 on Fig. 1.6). The middle ring of the enclosure appears to be associated with an entrance avenue leading toward the south, while the outer ring is more irregular, and is in-turned at two or three points on the southern side, which may represent less monumental entrances. Inside the inner ring there is a ring-ditch (4), and a second lies between the middle and outer post-rings on the western side of the enclosure (5). Immediately to the south of this ring-ditch a series of lines of post-holes or pits cuts across the enclosure on a northeast to southwest axis (6). In a similar position on the eastern side is a post- or pit-ring with a diameter of about 20 metres (7). Between

the two innermost rings of the enclosure immediately to the west of the entrance avenue lies a small penannular enclosure, opening to the east (8). Two smaller enclosures of a similar kind, each with an apparent central feature of some form, are found north of the railway line and east of the outer post-ring of the enclosure (9 and 10). The outer ring of the enclosure can be identified to the west of these structures, and a further arc of features lies further west still (11). This is clearly not part of the palisaded enclosure, and was eventually identified as the terminal of a post-defined cursus, of earlier date (see Chapter 3 below). North of all of these elements is a line of large features running parallel with the A75 and now identified as road quarry pits (12). Two more penannular enclosures are found south of the railway line (13 and 14), the larger of them apparently forming the westerly termination of an alignment of post-holes or pits, which runs for some 150 metres. South of the eastern end of this alignment is an enclosure with five flattened sides, again formed of post-holes or pits (15). South of this in turn are two further pit- or post-alignments, in which the constituent features are closely-set, and perhaps intercutting (16 and 17). Finally, southwest of the enclosure lies a ring-ditch surrounded by a ring of posts or pits, with an overall diameter of about 25 metres (18).

Most of these features are better defined in the fields to the south of the railway line, and it was to be presumed that various elements projected north into the pasture fields, where they were not all visible from the air. On morphological grounds, comparisons can be made between the Dunragit enclosure and a group of later Neolithic palisaded enclosures in Scotland, Ireland,



Figure 1.4 Dunragit complex: area north of the railway line



Figure 1.5 Dunragit complex: area south-east of the palisaded enclosure, with a pit- or post-alignment and a hengiform enclosure

Wales and England, which include Meldon Bridge (Burgess 1976; Speak and Burgess 1999), Forteviot (St. Joseph 1978; Noble and Brophy 2011a), Ballynahatty (Hartwell 1998), Mount Pleasant (Wainwright 1979), Walton and Hindwell (Gibson 1999). The inner two concentric rings of possible posts at Dunragit are well matched at West Kennet, while the distinctive entrance structure is paralleled at Meldon Bridge, Forteviot and Walton. With the exception of Meldon Bridge, all of these large palisaded enclosures are associated with groups of lesser features, as appears to be the case at Dunragit. At the time when fieldwork was undertaken at Dunragit, of the Scottish sites of this type it was only Meldon Bridge that had undergone extensive excavation. Since 2007, excavations have been undertaken by the Universities of Glasgow and Aberdeen at Forteviot and Leadketty (Noble and Brophy 2011a).

The area surrounding the Dunragit monument is one that contains dense traces of prehistoric activity. Immediately to the south, the sand dunes of Luce Bay have provided considerable evidence of Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation, in the form of scatters of artefacts, hearths and burials (Davidson 1952; McInnes 1964; Cowie 1996). In the hills to the north, there are numerous Neolithic and Bronze Age cairns (e.g. Corcoran 1969a; b). Coastal southern Galloway also has an extensive distribution of rock art (Morris 1979; van Hoek 1986). It is conceivable that the Dunragit enclosure represents a focus for much of the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age activity, and that the central part of Luce Bay constituted a place of importance through much of prehistory.

Circumstances of the excavations

Between 1994 and 1998 the author had undertaken a series of excavations in the Dumfries area, investigating the Pict's Knowe henge, the Holywood cursus complex, and the post alignment at Holm Farm, with the support of Historic Scotland (Thomas 2007a). Following the success of these investigations, a campaign of work at Dunragit was proposed, in order to test the date and character of the features, and to assess the state of their preservation. Parts of the complex have been under the plough in recent years, and it was evident from the results of fieldwork that many of the cut features investigated were severely truncated.

Four seasons of excavation took place on the Neolithic ceremonial complex at Dunragit during 1999–2002. These investigations demonstrated that the large enclosure was of Late Neolithic date, and had been constructed using timber uprights in ramped post-holes. The largest of the post-rings had a diameter of around 300 metres, while the innermost had a diameter of perhaps 120 metres. Both the outer post-ring and the middle were composed of large uprights interspersed with smaller members, probably forming a continuous palisade and comparable with the structure of the Late Neolithic enclosure at Meldon Bridge in Peebleshire (Speak and Burgess 1999). Both of these post-rings had been single-phase structures, and in both cases the posts had eventually rotted out and been replaced by silting and collapsed gravel packing. These two outermost rings of post-holes also produced very little in the way of material culture. By contrast, the inner ring had largely been made up exclusively of large, free-



Figure 1.6 Dunragit complex: plot of features revealed on aerial photographs

standing posts, most of which had rotted away, but some of which had been deliberately removed, although in one short stretch smaller posts were present. The post-holes of the inner ring were considerably larger than those of the two outer rings, and it is possible that their digging had involved a conspicuous expenditure of effort. Where posts had been pulled out, a number of elaborate deposits had been placed in the crater left by the post-removal.

The enclosure had been preceded on the site by a post-defined cursus monument, one side and the terminal of which had been identified in the 1999–2001 seasons. The post-holes of the cursus were easily distinguishable from those of the enclosure, for in almost every case the post had been burned *in situ*. However, numerous other post-holes were located on the same axis as the cursus, extending beyond the monument itself. The coincidence of earlier Neolithic cursus monuments and later Neolithic enclosures on the same site is known from a number of other sites, including Dorchester on Thames in Oxfordshire, Llandegai in Gwynedd, and Thornborough in Yorkshire (Atkinson, Piggott and Sandars 1951; Lynch and Musson 2004; Harding 2013). This suggests that the relationship is not fortuitous, and that the significance that a location achieved through the construction of a cursus was a significant factor in the positioning of later enclosures.

The aerial photographs taken by RCAHMS that were responsible for the identification of the Dunragit enclosure also show two possible sets of entrances, both located in the area immediately to the south of the modern railway line. It is notable that the entrance through the outer post-ring does not respect that which is connected with the middle ring. The outer entrance opens to the southwest, while the middle ring entrance is aligned to the south. Given that both of these palisade-rings are single-phase structures, while the central post-circle has two phases of construction, it may be that the three concentric circles are not all contemporary. On the contrary, an interpretation is preferred in which the monument as a whole had two phases of construction, in each of which a timber circle was surrounded by a palisade, and in which the middle post-ring succeeded the outer, or vice-versa.

The more elaborate of these entrances, connected with the middle post-ring, is composed of two parallel lines of features, which are presumably post-holes. It opens toward the south, and is aligned almost precisely on the large earthen mound at Droughduil, some 400 metres away. This mound presently stands in a plantation managed by Forest Enterprise, and had been cleared of trees shortly before fieldwork took place. It is located between the enclosure and the extensive dune systems of Luce Sands, and as such it stands in an area where the subsoil is much sandier than the outwash gravels on which Dunragit village has grown up. The mound is known as Droughduil Mote, and has been recorded as a medieval motte (Feachem 1956). However, the spatial relationship with the Dunragit enclosure is suggestive, and the site is

by no means representative of local castle mounds. Mottes such as Mote Slap at Sandhead are generally high-lying, and have a profile which is much more flattened than the Droughduil mound. Moreover, a number of large Late Neolithic mounds are known in Britain, and many of these are directly associated with henges or palisaded enclosures. The best-known example is Silbury Hill in Wiltshire (Whittle 1997a), but others include the Conquer Barrow in Dorset, perched on the bank of the Mount Pleasant henge and overlooking the palisade enclosure that it contains; The Marlborough mound (Wiltshire); the Hatfield Barrow, contained within the Marden henge (Wiltshire); and Duggleby Howe, which contained an important sequence of Late Neolithic burials, and is enclosed within a massive causewayed ditch (Kinnes *et al.* 1983). Excavation on the Droughduil mound in 2002 demonstrated that it had been constructed with stepped sides, and that a stone cairn had been constructed on its summit. A series of optically stimulated luminescence dates on the accumulated sand over the surface of the mound demonstrated that it was certainly not medieval, and was probably Neolithic in date.

Introduction to the report

In writing the report on the Pict's Knowe henge and other sites in the Dumfries area (Thomas 2007a: 4), a decision was made to present as complete as possible a record of the archaeological evidence, rather than limit the detailed description to the support of a particular narrative account of the sites. While it was recognised that any distinction between description and interpretation is artificial, since excavation is itself an interpretive practice (see Hodder 1999: 92; Lucas 2012: 215), the intention was to present a treatment which amounts to a 'handbook' of the set of deposits under discussion. The same philosophy is followed here. This approach arose from the author's frustration with excavation reports that presented only a summary of the stratigraphic information for a site, rendering the contents difficult to work with, and often mandating access to the site archive if the results were to be evaluated. As an observation, where a small site that may have produced only a few pits and post-holes is published, full details of all contexts are generally provided. Yet larger sites with numerous features are sometimes described in a more summary fashion. Ironically, it follows that the most important sites are occasionally published in least detail. The excavations at Dunragit and Droughduil were perhaps just at the upper limit of what can be fully addressed within a single-volume monograph. One particular justification for the fine-grained description attempted here is that the overall interpretation of the monumental complex rests to some extent on the cumulative effect of the individual stratigraphic histories of a great many separate

cut features. Ultimately, rather than choose some of these features to discuss in detail while arbitrarily neglecting others, a uniform level of description was decided upon. Each feature is fully described, and the original context numbers are retained from the field records, with Munsell universal colour values quoted for each deposit (Munsell 2009). This latter inclusion is arguably an unusual decision to make, but at this particular site colour values are of some significance, as subtle variations in hue were observed across the monumental complex and within individual features, contributing significantly to interpretation. Many of the feature fills in the eastern part of the principal excavated area, largely in Trench A, fell into the 7.5 YR series, while those further west in

Trenches AA and J were more likely to gravitate around the more yellowish 10 YR hues. This was undoubtedly related to variation in the subsoil, but it provided the background to important differences within and between contexts, most notably the recuts of the inner post-ring of the Late Neolithic enclosure. In some cases, the details of individual features are complex and intricate, and this level of detail is essential in order to understand their formation. In others the information is admittedly unexciting and repetitive, and it is not imagined that the casual reader will wade through the entire descriptive text. However, the intention is to provide a definitive account of the evidence from the Dunragit excavations with a consistent level of detail.

CONTEXT: THE PREHISTORY OF LUCE BAY

Julian Thomas

Introduction

Luce Bay is a broad, shallow embayment located in the extreme southwest of Scotland, between the peninsula of the Rhins of Galloway to the west and that of the Machars, or the Whithorn-Wigtown area, to the east. The bay has an extent of 47,942 hectares, and is 31 kilometres wide at its outer margins, between Burrow Head and the Mull of Galloway. The headland of the Mull of Galloway is the southernmost point in the Scottish mainland. While the headlands are rocky, much of the bay is low-lying and sheltered from wave action. Toward the head of the bay there are extensive sandy inter-tidal sediments, while much of the remainder is no more than 20 metres deep below sea-level (Scottish Natural Heritage 2006: 10). As a result, the landward part of the bay is composed of a complex combination of sandbanks, sandy sediments and mud, with reefs and boulders. Although the bay was formerly a significant commercial fishery, the industry has declined in recent decades. In the northern apex of the bay lies Luce Sands, composed of imposing dunes together with scrub and saltmarsh. While some of the sand dunes are relatively stable, others are mobile, with the result that older land surfaces are continually being revealed and destroyed. The total extent of Luce Sands is around 1200 hectares, with a coastal frontage of 7 kilometers between Clayshant Burn and Piltanton Burn, the outflow of the Water of Luce (Cowie 1996: 12). Aside from its archaeological importance the dune system is a great natural significance, where over-wintering migratory birds roost, and where several rare species (including newts) are found. The sands were declared an Area of

Special Scientific Interest in 1955, and the bay and sands together were made a Special Area of Conservation by Scottish Natural Heritage in 2005. Between the 1930s and 1990s the sands were used as a training bombing range for RAF and allied aircraft based at West Freuch airfield. Several of the conical concrete bombing targets that date to this period are still visible. The sands represent one of the richest archaeological landscapes in Scotland, having produced over 8,500 artefacts held in the National Museum of Scotland alone (Cowie 1996: 14). Many of these have come from buried soil horizons periodically revealed by the ceaseless movement of the dunes.

Immediately to the north and west of the dunes lies an area of low-lying bog and moorland, known as the Freuch. Northward again is higher country, which rises eastward from the Water of Luce toward Cairnmore of Fleet. Historically, much of the importance of this part of Scotland has lain in its role as a point of departure for Ireland, and during the eighteenth century ships sailed between Portpatrick and Donaghadee. At this time the Wigtownshire coast was notorious for the smuggling of brandy, tobacco and tea, and garrisons were established at Port William and Sinniness in order to combat this problem. At this time the Old Military Road was constructed between Stranraer and Newton Stewart, part of which has now become the A75 (MacHaffie 2001).

Mesolithic and Early Neolithic

The shores of Luce Bay and Loch Ryan have produced numerous flint scatters of Mesolithic date, with a

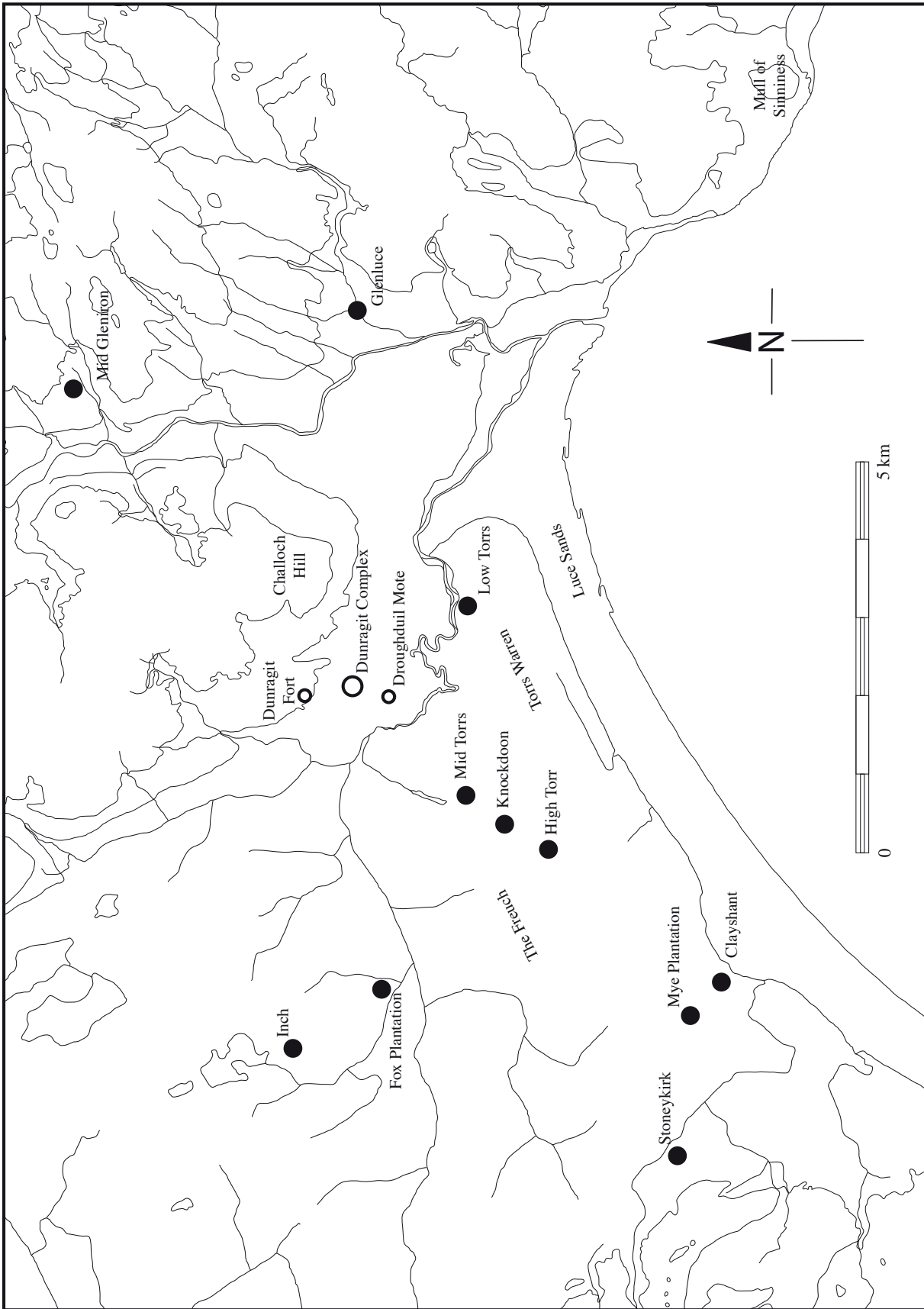


Figure 2.1 Luce Bay: locations mentioned in the text

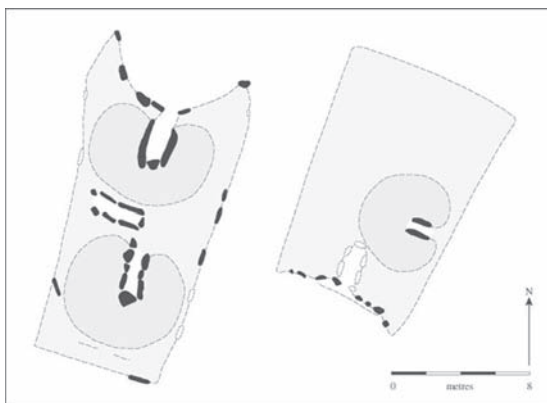


Figure 2.2 The Mid Gleniron chambered cairns, plans

particular concentration around the Water of Luce (Cherry and Cherry 1997; Coles 1963; Cummings 2001: 186). However, none of the sites in the Luce Sands area have been subject to the level of investigation seen further east at Starr on Loch Doon (Edwards 1996) or Low Clone and Barsalloch on the Machars (Cormack 1970; Cormack and Coles 1968). Traces of occupation in the Early Neolithic are equally extensive. McInnes (1964: 60) cited 92 Early Neolithic pots that had been recovered from Luce Sands. These included at least two fine, thin-walled, burnished, plain carinated bowls, which presumably date to the thirty-sixth century BC or earlier. Many of the other vessels are Cowie's 'heavy bowls' (1993: 16), with thicker walls and expanded rims, while some are shouldered bowls with an upright neck and sparse decoration. These probably date to the middle centuries of the fourth millennium BC. Other indications of Neolithic occupation are provided by stone axes, which are quite numerous in the Luce Bay area. Group VI axes from Langdale in Cumbria are the most common non-flint axe type in the former county of Wigtownshire. Williams cites 124 Group VI axes in the area, and seven Group IX axes from the source at Tievebulliagh in Antrim, while by 2011 Coles was able to refer to 240 stone axes in total (Coles 2011a: 142; Williams 1970: 111). Although the Antrim axes are less numerous, their presence suggests that the connection between Galloway and Ireland was already a significant one during the Neolithic. Twelve Group VI axes came from Inch parish, a little to the north of Dunragit, and 25 came from the parish of Old Luce. One axe of unknown source was found at Droughduil, and another at Dunragit schoolhouse, while a Group VI axe was discovered at Dunragit council scheme (Williams 1970: 118). Interestingly, the Star Site on Luce Sands produced forty-nine fragments of Group VI rock, suggesting the reworking of Langdale tuff axes amongst the dunes (Williams 1970: 120). Luce Bay has also produced a large collection of Arran pitchstone, including knapping debris (Coles 2011a: 145). Such an

extensive assemblage is rare elsewhere in Scotland, and as this material may have been valued for its aesthetic or symbolic qualities, it may be an indication that the area had already developed a particular importance during the earlier part of the Neolithic (Warren 2006: 37).

The principal monuments of Early Neolithic date in the Luce Bay area are chambered long cairns of the Clyde tradition, although the local examples are somewhat atypical, and potentially relatively early. At Mid Gleniron Farm, north of Glenluce and overlooking the Water of Luce, Corcoran excavated two long cairns with relatively complex structural histories. Mid Gleniron I was originally composed of two small oval cairns with simple orthostatic chambers, each with little or no discernable passage. These were minimal constructions, in which the surrounding cairn mass did little but provide support for the chamber (Corcoran 1972: 35). The two cairns were arranged one in front of the other, on the same axis. On the face of it, this would seem an unusual arrangement if the two structures were both to be used for interment and/or veneration, the southern chamber being hidden away behind the northern cairn. This would almost seem to imply that the positioning of the two cairns anticipated their later incorporation into a larger monument. This larger monument was a trapezoidal cairn 20 metres long, with a forecourt defined by a curved façade of upright stones and dry-stone walling, a surrounding kerb, and a third simple chamber in the western side of the cairn (Corcoran 1969a: 35). The construction of the façade a little to the north of the northern chamber had the effect of lengthening the chamber, and segmenting it into two spaces, on either side of the bracing stone (Noble 2005: 27). This might be understood as a deliberate means of creating a more divided space for deposition, in line with the segmented chambers more common amongst tombs of the Clyde group. Unfortunately, the only trace of a mortuary deposit within the cairn took the form of some scraps of urburnt bone in the southern chamber. The forecourt was later neatly blocked with a kerbed mass of stone, but it had originally contained three upright pillars of stone, and the surface showed traces of burning.

The second cairn, Mid Gleniorn II, was located a little to the southeast of the first. It contained a single small oval cairn, very similar to the two within Mid Gleniron I, with a simple chamber formed by two large upright slabs and a boulder kerb. Unlike the other two primary cairns, it was oriented toward the east. This was later encapsulated within a rectilinear cairn with a shallow forecourt defined by a façade composed of large stone uprights and sections of drystone walling (Corcoran 1969a: 60). A new, south-facing chamber had been added in the façade of the larger cairn, but this had been disturbed and several of the orthostats removed. In the upper layers of the chamber fill, sherds of Mortlake Ware and Food Vessel were present. The limited emphasis on segmentation