Romans, Picts, and Development: Continuity and Change in Aberdeenshire's Archaeology and Informed Planning Decisions[1]

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Abstract

The inherent difficulties of archaeological research means that in some places considerably less work is undertaken than the discipline requires. The absence of high quality evidence means that site interpretations are often based on misconceptions or incomplete information. These paradigms become stagnant over time, leading to inaccurate statutory designations which in turn, through the resultant planning decisions, lead to the destruction or slighting of what were subsequently proven to be important remains. However, this process should not be regretted through hindsight but rather embraced, for it produces new evidence which leads to new and better paradigms and thus more accurate designations and ultimately better protection for all monuments.

Keywords*: Planning; policy; Roman; archaeology; Aberdeenshire.*

Introduction

Archaeology is the study of the past through the examination of the surviving physical remains of past activity; it is a technique rather than a period, and while it is generally perceived to apply to the prehistoric period it can in fact be applied to any aspect of human culture. This is important because it underlines the fact that the precise nature of an archaeological site, or indeed the potential for one in an area of no known archaeological remains, cannot be determined until the site has been subject to some

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form of testing: be it geophysical survey or ground breaking evaluation. This means that wider synthetic works and thus models and paradigms rely on extrapolations and assumptions.

It goes without saying that all research is hard work, all findings carry weight and significance. Nevertheless, unlike most other disciplines, archaeology is uniquely difficult. There is no real commercial benefit to be derived from the majority of archaeological findings, indeed in a planning context they are often described in a similar manner to soil contamination: as something to be removed. Archaeological excavation is physically demanding, takes place out of doors, involves earth moving equipment if its to operate at a sufficient scale, requires third party landowner permission, deals with many sites that are protected by legislation and there are only a very small number of active professionals to undertake it all.

State Policy

As across the developed world, significant archaeological remains are protected by the State. In Scotland this happens in a number of ways: the first is designating them under the Scheduled Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979, which identifies monuments of national significance (defined according a series of set criteria in Scottish Historic Environment Policy) and makes it a criminal offence to disturb these remains without the permission of the State, as guided by Historic Scotland. Scheduling seeks to preserve such sites in perpetuity and these monuments should not be developed except in exceptional circumstances. Consideration should also be given to the setting of Scheduled Monuments and to any development, such as housing or wind farms, that may detract from the wider landscape relationship, the visual experience and impression of the site. However, it is important to recognise that for whatever reason not all nationally significant monuments are Scheduled Monuments.

The second tier of protection is planning policy and guidance, previously in Scotland this was contained in *National Planning Policy Guidance 5* and *Planning Advice Note 42*, which have subsequently been replaced by *Scottish Planning Policy* and *Planning Advice Note 2/2011*. These documents, implemented through Local Development Plan

policies by each Local Authority, seek to preserve archaeological monuments *in situ* and to avoid direct and indirect impacts on them. However, where the remains are of less significance and there are overriding reasons for allowing the development to proceed, the policies and guidance allow for mitigation exercises such as excavation and thus preservation by record. The role of the archaeologist for each Council is, therefore, key to the survival of the wider historic environment as they must balance the protection of archaeology against a backdrop of allowing sustainable development and economic growth.

In order to implement these policies and designations one must of course understand and comprehend the underlying archaeological resource. To achieve this the majority of Council's in Scotland and Britain maintain a Sites and Monuments Record, now more commonly known as a Historic Environment Record, and associated professional service. These records, and the interpretations given to them by the professional service, are of course underpinned by the existing academic paradigm and knowledge base. Historic Environment Records are extremely flexible and can be rapidly updated as new research is made available to allow more accurate decisions to be made regarding future planning applications and other forms of land management. This continual refining of the records is of course dependant on that new research being undertaken in the first place.

Regional Variations

In many areas of Scotland archaeological research has been driven forward by a handful of individuals and in their absence research declines (e.g. Davis 2007, 268). In other areas, excavation as a result of development mitigation (e.g. excavation ahead of a road or a quarry construction and the destruction of the archaeological site) has led to significant results: e.g. South East Scotland, which is amongst the best studied areas in temperate Europe (e.g. Harding 1982; Haselgrove 2009). However, it is increasingly the case that known sites are avoided by development in order to preserve them *in situ* for future generations (as per *Scottish Planning Policy*; *Planning Advice Note 2/2011*), thus removing a valuable source of new data from the discipline.

This combination of the difficulty of research, its virtual absence from certain areas, and avoidance of sites by development brings about continuity: interpretations, however tenuous and untested can become frozen and accrue a greater significance than they merit, simply because of the absence of any other information. Indeed such continuity can last for decades. In 1966 Richard Feachem of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) wrote a paper reviewing hillforts (enclosed settlements on hill tops) across Northern England and Scotland, in which he concluded with an appeal for fieldwork to test his theories, describing them as 'enlightened speculation' (1966, 60). Two further surveys, each a generation later, considered a smaller sub-set of the same data, without any new excavation, and each came to different conclusions (North-East Scotland: Ralston *et al* 1983; The Don Valley in Aberdeenshire RCAHMS 2007). The absence of new excavation and the shrinking area considered reflected the increasing costs and lack of resources available for study and thus the perpetuation of existing models.

Archaeologists have long recognised this problem: in 1983 Ralston described North-East Scotland as having 'no local long-term field-working traditions, no Inventories, and a record of excavation that is both intermittent and small scale' (*et al* 1983, 149). There was no significant change, beyond the expansion of the basic Historic Environment Record, by 2001, when a UK wide Iron Age Research Agenda (Haselgrove *et al* 2001), described Aberdeenshire as a 'blackhole', i.e. there was an insufficient volume of data to comment on.

The Nature of an Archaeological Site

Individual archaeological sites are unique collections of data-sets; each one has undergone multiple sets of processes and represents the surviving fragments of much more complex systems of activity. The nature of archaeological excavation is such that even the smallest pieces of research have the ability to change existing paradigms and models. Each new excavation produces previously unknown facts, mini-revolutions, the scale of impact of which depends of course on the background in which they occurred. However, this knowledge comes at a price as archaeological excavation destroys what it

studies, and while it is possible to sample a proportion of a site, leaving the bulk undamaged, this of courses restricts comprehension too.

Therefore in areas like Aberdeenshire the level of continuity of understanding individual sites based on limited information was such that excavations had the ability to overturn regional, national, and even international interpretations. This in turn emphasises the need to test and challenge existing models and ideas, to continue the momentum of the lessons learned from the North-East. Two Aberdeenshire case studies are offered to explore these issues: Kintore Roman Marching Camp and Cairnmore hillfort.

Kintore Roman Marching Camp

Marching camps are temporary rectangular defended areas constructed by the Roman army at the end of a days march, comprising a bank and ditch (Welfare & Swan 1995; Jones 2011). They are found across the limits of the former Roman Empire: from Scotland to Iraq and from Germany to Lybia (*ibid*). The camp at Kintore (NJ 78739 16232) covered an area of circa 44 ha and was first recorded in the middle of the 19th century (Courtenay 1868) but remained undated. The camp however was linked to the 1st century invasion of Scotland by Agricola and explicitly was not considered to have been used by the early 3rd century invasion of by Emperor Septimus Severus (Breeze 1982; D Breeze pers comm).

Previous research into marching camps across Britain indicated that while they were large impressive monuments, their interiors were devoid of features, the enclosing ditch and bank (if it survived) were considered the most important element (Welfare & Swan 1995, 21-2; Jones 2011, 79-86). At Kintore, a portion of the camp ditch that could be seen from the air (the bank did not survive having been ploughed out) had been protected as a Scheduled Monument. It is worth stressing that there was no other evidence for the camp other than this small stretch of ditch, which could not be seen from the ground. The rest of the projected area of the camp was included in the local Historic Environment Record, but this simply afforded basic management options through the planning process.

The Scheduled ditch represented less than 1% of the total monument, the balance being considered of lesser significance based on the existing knowledge base. It was very clear that there was a circular argument here; no one ever looked at the interiors of camps because there was no evidence for activity, which meant that no one ever looked at the interiors. An interpretation based on limited evidence had become a fact and dominated all debate, as well as subsequent designations and mitigation.

The village of Kintore is located within an easy commute of Aberdeen and the area of the marching camp was proposed for development. While it would have been possible for the marching camp ditch to remain protected and the development altered to facilitate this process, Historic Scotland de-scheduled the marching camp ditch to avoid the considerable difficulties of managing a nationally significant monument stretching across multiple back gardens and thus ownership. It has to be noted that under this arrangement Scheduled Monument Consent would have been required every time someone wanted to dig their vegetable patch, a completely untenable position. Thus the development was allowed to proceed and any necessary mitigation to be handled as part of the planning process. The planning permission for the development was granted with the condition, following consultation with the Council's archaeology service, that a full programme of archaeological evaluation and subsequent excavation be conducted and paid for by the developer.

The author undertook the excavation between 2000 and 2006 (Cook & Dunbar 2008). The excavated interior of the marching camp (circa 30%) contained over 300 internal Roman features including rubbish pits, cooking ovens and evidence of structures. Dating evidence indicated that the site was occupied twice, the first in the 1st century AD and then again in the late 2nd or early 3rd centuries AD. The excavation produced clear, hard facts that have completely revolutionised our understanding of the interior of marching camps across the Roman Empire as well as the nature of the Roman invasions of Scotland (Jones 2011). On a more subtle level, the Kintore evidence points to the use of the camp by Severus. However, such is the strength of the existing paradigm that, as recently as the Arbeia Conference in November 2011 (www.arbeiasociety.org.uk), the possibility of a Severan presence in Aberdeenshire was still a matter of significant

controversy in Roman academe (Jones 2011, 111; D Breeze pers comm 2012; N Hodgson pers comm 2012). However, if the secondary occupation of the camp is not Severan then Aberdeenshire was subject to a previously unrecorded Roman invasion, which is potentially even more interesting.

Cairnmore Hillfort

The second case study is Cairnmore (NJ 5035 2494) which is located at the termination of a broad spur, Hare Hill, protruding north from the Correen Hills to overlook the plain between Rhynie and Insch.

Cairnmore was first recorded on the first edition 1867 Ordnance Survey, under woodland and comprising a single line of defence. The trees are present on the 1902 Ordnance Survey map but not the 1959 survey. This absence of trees allowed Feachem (1966, 72) to record two concentric lines of defense. However, the enclosure was subsequently reclassified by the RCAHMS as the collapsed remains a univallate oval stone enclosure measuring 52m from north/east to south/west by 45m internally, with an entrance to the south east and a gently domed featureless interior. By this point the interior was covered in dense impenetrable gorse.

Cairnmore was set in a regional context as one of a series of small stone-walled enclosures (RCAHMS 2007, 100-1). In effect what appeared to be an interesting unique enclosure was reclassified as being a degraded example of a more common site and thus potentially less worthy of designation and protection. No excavation was undertaken during any of the site surveys. The site was fenced off and became dominated by gorse, making it hard for anyone to appreciate what was there.

After three surveys over 100 years, the site was undated and assumed to be a degraded commonplace Iron Age defended settlement; as a result it was undesignated and as such there were no statutory restrictions on development in its vicinity. Therefore, despite initial resistance from the Council's archaeology service, it recently had a wind turbine cluster erected in its immediate vicinity which consequently impacted significantly upon the site's setting. As part of the development mitigation the author was given grant funding by the developers (The Greenspan Agency) in support of a community excavation

on the site. The mitigation also involved the clearing of the gorse from the site, the design of an information board based on the results of the excavation and a management plan to ensure the gorse coverage did not return.

Excavation by the author in 2010 (Cook et al 2010; Cook 2010) revealed a more complex story: the enclosure was oval shaped and did indeed comprise a pair of enclosures, although on a different pattern to that of Feachem's. In addition, there was a third outer bank and ditch. Two Pictish brooch moulds, a pin mould, and a crucible (A Heald pers comm) were recovered from the site as were two sets of radiocarbon dates clearly indicating activity in the middle of the first millennium AD, commonly referred to as the Pictish Period (Cook 2010).

Not only does this evidence indicate that the site is far more significant than previously thought, it adds to a growing body of evidence from Aberdeenshire (Cook 2010; Noble & Gondeck 2011) indicating a cluster of enclosed Pictish sites around the village of Rhynie (Cook forthcoming).

This represents a significant change to the current interpretation, which had been proposed in 1988 (Alcock). This existing model suggested that there were no inland defended sites in Aberdeenshire during the Early Historic Period and was still in currency in 2007 (RCAHMS 2007, 116). The full settlement pattern and its implications are still being explored but the information that has come from the work so far is being currently disseminated to policy and decision makers.

Discussion

Both case studies indicate a typical length of time between discovery of an archaeological site and active excavation into it: over 100 years in each case. This situation is repeated across the whole of the country. In addition, both sets of planning decisions and subsequent archaeological mitigation were entirely appropriate given the known information base at that time; however, as a result of poor existing academic paradigms and models, what are now clearly archaeological remains of international significance were destroyed at Kintore and the setting of a nationally important structure slighted at Cairnmore. It could well be argued that in both cases if the true nature of the

site had been recognised beforehand then neither development would have happened in its eventual form, as is clearly stated by both local and national government policy, which seek to preserve and enhance significant archaeological monuments.

However, it should be stressed that in both cases there was either nothing or very little to see on the surface, there was no loss of archaeological amenity, the true value of both sites lay in their academic potential and following their excavation this information is now readily available through the Aberdeenshire Historic Environment Record as well as accompanying academic publications (Cook & Dunbar 2008; Cook 2010; Cook forthcoming). In addition, the evidence from each site has resulted in significant advances and new interpretative models and thus designations are being revised, which will lead to better informed decisions about their management in the future and thus better protection for other similar sites across the country.

This process underlines the clear contradiction at the heart of archaeology as both a discipline and a tool to inform planning decisions: in order to better understand and thus protect archaeological monuments, one must destroy some of the data-set. There is of course a theoretical point at which the existing data-set becomes large enough for new evidence to contribute and confirm the existing model and thus perpetuate continuity of understanding. The experience though in Aberdeenshire, and many other areas of Scotland, demonstrates that the new evidence from each excavation still frequently brings only change to current models.

Does this mean that we should continue to accept this situation, to accept the loss of sites to save others? How can the situation be changed? More monuments could be scheduled by Historic Scotland but this would not deal with the 'unknown unknowns'. The most obvious solution, and indeed one envisioned in Planning Advice Note 2/2011, is for Councils to insist on predetermination evaluation exercises. The principle being that no decision on whether or not planning permission will be granted will be made until the developer has commissioned a ground breaking evaluation of the proposed development area, and either proves it does not contain significant archaeological remains, or alters the development design to preserve them *in situ*. Given the nature of archaeological remains this process does not always guarantee that no significant remains are present

and also represents a significant logistical and costly option that is not favoured by developers. In addition, a predetermination evaluation to assess the nature of a possible visual impact is simply untenable.

It seems to the author that the answer lies instead in direct engagement by the archaeological profession with the resource. More excavation must be undertaken, models must be tested and pushed and the results widely disseminated. Historic Environment Records should become forums for debate rather than just lists of assumptions and records of interventions. This places an enormous burden on those few archaeologists in Scotland: both those in Historic Environment Records and across the wider profession. The day-to-day management of the archaeological resource through the planning process leaves little spare resource at the Local Authority level of government, but the need for the most up-to-date models and interpretations is critical for this management to be successful. Therefore the push and encouragement for this direct engagement should come from the Council's archaeologists.

The lessons from the two Aberdeenshire cases presented have already resulted in that Council's archaeology service reviewing key site types within the Historic Environment Record, sparked discussions around the role of regionally significant designations in policy, and pushed the need for a Regional Research Framework to the fore. While resources may be limited, as a focal point for joining the dots of evidence as they become available and presenting them to a wider audience, the *Historic Environment Record* can be an integral part in breaking down the barriers of continuity.

Furthermore, archaeology has never been more popular with the public and Scotland's history has long been a constant draw for internal and international tourists. The profession must think creatively, make connections, and ultimately exploit the archaeological record for both the good of the people and the record itself and potential models do exist to achieve these aims (Cook & Cook forthcoming).

Conclusion

Continuity and change are inherent elements in any academic discourse; however, the nature and significance of the changes occasioned by archaeological research in

Aberdeenshire underlines significant gaps and flaws in the previous underlying interpretation. That such paradigms stretch across Britain is all the more surprising. With specific regard to Kintore and Cairnmore these flawed models have led to both designation decisions and resultant planning decisions that, with hindsight, could well be questioned. However, it is the author's opinion that such decisions were correct in the context in which they were made and with hindsight were essential to the wider discipline, if only to underline the need for more excavation. Quite how this additional excavation is to be undertaken and funded is open to debate but that it must, is not open to question.

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