

The Hillforts of Strathdon: 2004-2010

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Having worked across Scotland and Northern England for the last 15 years I can say without hesitation that projects with Ian in Aberdeenshire always filled me with joy and renewed passion and enthusiasm for archaeology: without him this project would not have taken place.

Introduction

In *'In the Shadow of Bennachie'* the RCAHMS survey of the Strathdon area, the hillforts (throughout the paper 'hillfort' is used as shorthand to describe an enclosure whether on a hill or not) of the area were classified into a six-fold scheme, according to size and defensive system recorded (RCAHMS 2007, 100-1). Of course, the information was gathered through non-invasive survey, and it is unclear how these classes related to each other, as their dates were unknown. Using the same criteria of size and defensive system, albeit with a larger data set Ralston (*et al* 1983) proposed a different classification as did Feachem a generation earlier (1966). These conflicting classifications illustrate the essentially limited value of such attempts: without hard data they remain talking points to be reinterpreted once a generation. In order to further the debate - hard dating evidence from physical excavation is needed.

In what some have described as naïve, The Hillforts of Strathdon Project was set up in an attempt to characterise and date the type-sites of the area, through a programme of key-hole excavation on the variety of enclosures in the area. After six seasons of excavations on nine enclosures with local volunteers and students, this paper briefly summarises the key results in chronological order and the general conclusions.

Results

Hill of Newleslie (NJ52NE 31; NJ 584 254) comprises a bank and internal quarry ditch surrounding the hilltop. The earthen bank measures between 4m and 5m wide, and is 0.5m high. The internal quarry ditch is between 3m and 4m wide and 0.4m deep. The fort measures 359m E-W by 175m transversely. Excavation across the ditch and bank revealed no subsurface features or substance to the bank and the defences are interpreted as representing either the remains of a palisade or an unfinished hillfort. It is argued that the site may be a hilltop enclosure of Late Bronze Age date (Cook *et al* 2009).

Bruce's Camp (NJ71NE 3, NJ 7685 1900), comprises a vitrified hillfort c 2.7 ha in extent, with a single stone bank measuring 2.65m by 0.95m. The entrance lies to the north-west, where there are two outer walls, one built from robbed material from the vitrified inner wall (Cook *et al* forthcoming). Two radiocarbon dates were obtained, the first from the base of the collapsed inner rampart, 234-±3- BP (SUERC-12307); and the second from a burnt *in situ* timber post of 2280±35 BP (SUERC-12306). Calibrated to two sigma the dates give ranges of 540-360 BC and 410-340 BC. In addition, a Romano-British crucible was recovered from the interior (*pers comm* Fraser Hunter).

Hill of Barra (NJ82NW 4, NJ 8025 2570), comprises a hillfort with three banks, the inner bank blocks an entrance in the outer two banks. Overall the interior measures 122m by 95m. The inner bank is made of stone and measures 2.3-m wide and 0.80m high, and is associated with a ditch, measuring at least 0.95m and 0.7m wide, the middle bank comprises a soil dump and measures 0.23m high and 1.4m wide. The outer bank is made of stone and has two construction phases and measures 1.75m wide and up to 0.65m high.

(Cook *et al* 2009). A date of 2405 ± 35 BP (SUERC-28730) was recovered from the fill of the ditch associated with the inner enclosure, which when calibrated to two sigma gives a date of 560-360 BC. The outer enclosures therefore predate 560-360 cal BC.

Dunnideer (NJ62NW1, NJ 6-30 6360), comprises a multi-vallate hillfort with an oblong vitrified gateless enclosure at its core. This measures 67m by 27m and the rampart survived to c 4m wide and 1.2m high (Cook forthcoming). Two dates were obtained from the base of the collapsed rampart: 2180 ± 30 BP (SUERC-22161) and 2210 ± 3 (SUERC-28730). Calibrated to two sigma these date to 370-160 BC and 390-190 BC respectively.

Suttie (NJ81NW38.2, NJ 8133 1580), comprises a 42m diameter cropmark enclosure, the ditch measured 4.6m wide and up to 0.7m deep. A secondary fill within the ditch's fill was a thin charcoal deposit from which a 2 sigma date of 370-90 BC (2160 ± 40 bp) (SUERC-12918) was obtained from a piece of alder charcoal (Cook *et al* forthcoming). There was no trace of the recorded internal palisade.

Wester Fintray (NJ81NW53, NJ 80886 15767), comprises a cropmark enclosure measuring c 25m to 35m in diameter. The ditch measured 1.5m wide by 0.8m deep. A 2 sigma date of 320-200 BC (2275 ± 40 bp) (SUERC-12916) was recovered from a piece of alder charcoal from the fill of a potential recut (Cook *et al* forthcoming).

Hill of Barra refortification (NMRS NJ82NW4, NJ 8025 2570), between the two outer banks dated to before 560 cal BC, lay a ditch measuring 1.50m wide and 0.87m deep. Assuming that this ditch circles the whole of the site it probably measured 135m wide by 140m long. A date of 1615 ± 35 BP (SUERC-28728) was recovered from the primary fill of the ditch, calibrated to two sigma gives a date of AD 380-580 (Cook *et al* 2009).

Maiden Castle (NJ62SE2, NJ 6942 2435) comprises an outer bivallate enclosure measuring at maximum 40m E-W and 35m N-S; within the enclosure lay a circular thick-walled enclosure up to 20m in diameter. The outer ditch measured 3m wide and 0.75m deep, the outer bank measured 4m wide by 1.6m high. The inner ditch measured 2.2m wide and 1.1m deep and the inner bank measured 2m wide and 1.5m high. The inner stone built enclosure measured 2.2m wide and 1m high. Three radiocarbon dates were obtained from Maiden Castle from below and above the inner bank and under the inner stone walled enclosure: 1500 ± 30 BP (SUERC-22160), 1495 ± 40 BP (SUERC-1-909) and $1-40 \pm 40$ BP (SUERC-1-908). Calibrated to two sigma they respectively date to AD 530-640, AD 500-650 and AD 420-610 (Cook *et al* 2008).

Significantly, Maiden Castle is the same size and shape as the Barflat enclosure (NJ42NE54, NJ 4970 2635) and thus may be roughly contemporary. Barflat is associated with the Rhynie cluster of eight Pictish symbol stones (RCAHMS 2008, 119-21). Perhaps, the stones were made on site or in memory of someone connected with Barflat.

Cairnmore (NJ 5035 2494, NJ52SW 9) comprises an oval trivalate enclosure, the outer enclosure comprises a soil bank and ditch, the middle a substantial stone wall and the inner a smaller stone built wall. All three defences are probably sequential but contemporary and while there are no radiocarbon dates yet, two brooch moulds and pin mould recovered from the foundation cut of the middle rampart are likely to be Early Historic in origin (Cook *et al* 2010).

Conclusion

As space is limited key conclusions will be made and not expanded upon.

Comparison with other regions suggest that hillforts in the North-east are rare (Armit & Ralston 1997, 181), suggesting their appearance may coincide with cultural 'high-tide marks' of their distribution in Britain, if this is the case what do their absences mean for

other regions? Placed in a national context this potentially gives Aberdeenshire examples a wider significance

The evidence indicates three periods of enclosure ranging between the Late Bronze Age (c 1000 BC), the Middle Iron Age (c 500 to 200 BC) and the Early Historic period (c AD 400 to 800), with the bulk of the evidence deriving from the latter two periods. While the more cynical archaeologist would suggest that we knew as **much without excavation, the intrusive work has** resulted in important fresh information being recovered.

Of particular interest is that the wide variety of enclosure forms present in the Middle Iron Age, all of which are associated with previously occupied sites, terminates with the construction and subsequent destruction of the oblong gateless forts at around c 200BC. In turn this coincides with the dramatic shift in unenclosed settlement patterns observed at Kintore, where c 1600 years of continuous roundhouse settlement was abandoned at around c 200 BC (Cook & Dunbar 2008). Clearly this period marks a significant social upheaval in the area.

Perhaps more significant is that without excavation none of the Early Historic enclosures could have been recognised as being Pictish, a pattern identified elsewhere in Britain (Newman & Brennand 1997, 74). This work, if extrapolated to the various other small enclosures and stone structures across Strathdon reveals a complex pattern of previously unknown Pictish settlement. For example, three of the sites, Cairnmore, Wheedlemont (NJ42HE -; NJ 4729 2604) and Barflat are all within 3km of each other. All of them are slightly different, Cairnmore is the biggest and is associated with metal working, Barflat with Pictish symbol stones and Wheedlemont has clear evidence for circular structures within its interior. How do they all relate to each other and to the Rhyndale Man that Ian and Lekky published in 1978 (Shepherd & Shepherd 1978)?

In conclusion, one almost feels that everything in Aberdeenshire starts and ends with Ian and while he will be missed his legacy will continue in the various strands of work he inspired.

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Excavations at Dunnideer Hillfort



Hillforts of Strathdon Project Team