

The development of Scottish antiquarian records: 1600–1800

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The purpose of this paper is to review some early records of Scottish antiquities, to explore the circumstances that brought these records into being, and to consider the meaning attached to the notion of antiquity in the 17th and 18th centuries.

As a result of the great prestige of the *Statistical Account of Scotland*, commonly called the 'Old Statistical Account', as a source of local history, it is easy to assume that its notes on parochial antiquities, though referring only to the decade of the 1790s, provide the first Scottish examples of systematic antiquarian recording. Any such assumption, however, is far from the truth, notwithstanding the value of these notes, for certain purposes, to the archaeologists of today, as the collection of facts about antiquity, combined as it originally was with topographical survey and description, stretches back from the time of the *Account* for a matter of two hundred years. The present study may therefore properly begin with a word about the early topographical surveys, from which antiquarian collections came to be specialised.

A suggestive hint of the relationship between these two spheres of activity comes from contemporary developments in Tudor England. Here John Leyland embarked on large-scale topographical description in the 1540s, and readers were ready for Camden's *Britannia* in 1586. In Scotland (*Geogr Coll*, 2, v ff) Timothy Pont was already active at the opening of the 17th century, again in the field of topographical survey; but this work began to assume an archaeological colour when, after Pont's death (c 1625), his material went to Sir John Scot of Scotstarvet and, later again, to Sir Robert Gordon of Straloch and his son, the Rev James Gordon, minister of Rothiemay. The Gordons' function was to correct and complete the material for use in the Scottish section of Bleau's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, then in preparation but not published until 1654. Straloch's qualification for carrying out such work seems to have rested on 'collections', archaeological as well as purely topographical, which he had made on his own account; and the importance attached to his project is shown by the action of the General Assembly in granting, in 1641, his petition for reports to be submitted by every presbytery (*Baillie*, 1, 368).

The Pont-Gordon records next passed through the hands of Sir Robert Sibbald (1641–1728), who had been making 'collections for a geographical and statistical account of Scotland' for some time before his appointment, in 1682, as Geographer for Scotland (*DNB*, sv). In 1683 he advertised a project for a 'New Atlas and Description of Scotland' (*Geogr Coll*, 2, xix), and for this he selected material from the work of Pont, the Gordons and others. It is worth noting here that, although by this time Sibbald was himself producing strictly archaeological work, he was evidently still concerned with 'geographical and statistical' matters, much as in the older tradition. With the addition of some further collections made by Walter Macfarlane of that ilk (ob. 1767), this whole body of records has been published as Macfarlane's *Geographical Collections relating to Scotland*, the earlier descriptions, which refer largely to the 16th and 17th centuries, appearing

mainly in the second volume and the later ones in the first; regarding this later material the editor, Sir Arthur Mitchell, points out (op cit, 2, v) that the 75% that can be dated fall between 1721 and 1744, and of these, in turn, half between 1721 and 1724. The 18th-century material consists almost entirely of parish descriptions, and was evidently supplied by informants of various types; most of them are anonymous, and only four can be positively attributed to ministers. Macfarlane's records thus throw a good deal of light on what antiquities meant, before the middle of the 18th century, to a public larger than the circle of professed antiquaries.

The earlier descriptions (vol 2) are mainly concerned with what might be called guide-book information, bearing on natural features, waterways, churches, local economy and so forth, such antiquities as are mentioned being fitted into this framework. It is noticeable too that certain items which, for us, bear an antiquarian colour may have been included for other than antiquarian reasons. For example, the burgh cross of Nairn may well, at the date in question, hardly have ranked as an antiquity; the church at Kilpettill, twice mentioned, pretty certainly owed its inclusion to the dramatic way in which it was overwhelmed by sand, and that of Kilmalie to an agreeably gruesome association with a deposit of human bones. Even a chapel 'built of old' in Glengarry may have derived its interest from association with the vanished Popery. Antiquities in our sense may thus come down to some cairns, standing stones and stone settings, though these last, again, and some 'altar stones', probably attracted attention as places of 'pagan worship'.

In the 18th century, however, the great pioneer antiquaries, at work mainly in England, must have been influencing opinion, and, in the Scottish context, particularly Sir Robert Sibbald. Although these writers represent a kind of *élite*, Macfarlane's first volume points to the existence of humbler antiquaries as well, and to a widening of antiquarian scope. Thus an inspection of this volume's index discloses a considerable group of castles and churches, and here interest has begun to be taken in architectural points – this is true of five churches and two castles, the description of Kildrummy Castle being creditably full and that of Pitsligo containing some actual dimensions. Some of the notes on churches cover dedications, sculpture and traditions of pre-Reformation dating, while healing wells are mentioned in connection with three of the group. Undifferentiated, perhaps, from ecclesiastical carvings are the standing stones and stone settings, which are mentioned seven times, as two of the standing stones are described as carved and one of them bears an unmistakable Pictish symbol. A Roman stone at Ardoch, presumably inscribed, is recognised, and two Roman camps and a fort, all at Callander; the fort may possibly have been the one at Bochartle, but a suspicion remains that this observer, like some of his successors, was misled by the conspicuous esker in the 'Roman Camp' policies. Less important items are the prehistoric burials, which are given passing notice in a few passages on cists, 'urns' and large cairns; while the only iron-age fort in the record is the one on Benachie, included probably as much for a piece of scandalous folklore attaching to it as for its antiquarian merit. It thus seems fair to conclude that the general framework of later antiquarian study had already been at least roughed out by the end of the 17th century.

Élite influence again appears in the next stage of Scottish antiquarian development, this time in the early activities of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. The Society, founded in 1780, propounded an ambitious programme comprising historical research conceived in the widest terms, learned discussion, and the conservation of documents and museum objects, all backed up powerful social patronage.¹ It bears all the marks of having been imposed from above, no doubt by the Society's founder, the Earl of Buchan, and his circle of enthusiasts, and evidence of this can be seen in the facts that two regional accounts, secured in the course of this programme and published in the Society's *Transactions*, one of Uphall parish and the other of Iona, are actually by Buchan himself; that notably sensible descriptions of some major monuments in Orkney and

of others in Lewis are respectively by so distinguished a person as the Principal of the Scots College in Paris and by a patently reliable fieldworker recording what he had seen himself; and that two of the three contributions by parish ministers² are wholly conditioned by the Society's policy of promoting all branches of knowledge and not archaeology alone. Thus the paper on Liberton parish runs to 97 pages but devotes only 9 lines specifically to ancient monuments, so-called 'obelisks', while the one on Haddington, of 80 pages, contains no section on antiquities. These accounts are written in terms of local history, economics and social conditions, and points of antiquarian interest only emerge from other contexts, rather as the Egyptian workmen's rations of onions, radishes and garlic emerge from Herodotus' account of the Pyramid of Cheops. Moreover, no less than 35 of the 50 papers in this volume are concerned with such subjects as literature, language, poetry, music, folklore and documentary records. It thus seems safe to infer that the Society's first publications are less reliable indicators of the current opinions of their day than is much of Sibbald's material for its own earlier phase.

A fresh situation developed, however, at the end of the 18th century, with the compilation, between 1791 and 1799, of the *Statistical Account of Scotland*. As is well known, this great collection of reports on all the parishes in the country was prepared by the local ministers in response to a circular letter sent out in 1790 by Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster; and its special importance for the present enquiry lies in the fact that each article was supposed to include, and in most cases did include, a section on the parochial antiquities. Sinclair's circular, in fact, contained five purely archaeological questions (*Stat Acct*, 20, xxiii), referring respectively to (a) 'crosses and obelisks', (b) monastic ruins, (c) 'Roman, Saxon, Danish or Pictish castles, camps, altars, roads, forts or other remains of antiquity', with associated local traditions, (d) finds of coins, etc, (e) tumuli, with notes on finds made in any of these which had been 'opened'. The language of this questionnaire shows at once that Sinclair and the Scottish 'establishment' were following the pattern attributed above to Sibbald and the 17th-century antiquaries; and the lead given by such a document, coming as it did from a source with *élite* status, may well have influenced its recipients. Further influence, again, could have come from the great English antiquaries, whose works were now available in print; as was also a considerable body of Scottish historical writing, which supplied a background of theory. The volume of their replies, however, is so large and so diverse that the writers' individual views inevitably show through; and these views may be taken as typical of educated people in general, as all had been brought up on a more or less similar curriculum of classical and philosophical subjects.

To test the ministers' response to Sinclair's circular, a 5% sample was taken of the parish articles. This covered 47 parishes, and although the resulting figures are not statistically valid they illustrate a number of points. Thus (a) fifteen ministers ignore the antiquarian questions and mention no antiquities at all – whether on account of carelessness, ignorance, resentment against the work entailed by Sinclair's whole project or, conceivably, scruples regarding a pagan or Popish past. (b) Enclosed works, not patently Roman, which are classed as 'forts' or 'camps' and are frequently described as Danish, take the lead with 19 out of 118 items, and this figure is raised to 21 if two brochs are counted in. (c) Remains of pre-Reformation churches and religious establishments, generally identified from records or by local tradition, together with one abbey and a cross, account for 20 items. (d) Castles and towers, usually ruined, and vaults which probably represent ruined tower-basements, come next with 17. (e) Tumuli and cairns, with three cist-burials, follow with a total of 13. (f) Stone circles, standing stones and megalithic monuments in general add up jointly to 10. (g) There are 8 Roman items, covering forts, camps and roads. (h) A few items each of post-medieval buildings, inscribed grave-slabs, vanished hamlets, linear earthworks and various finds of objects make a total of 21. (i) An even more heterogeneous

group of 8 includes mounds which seem to have been unrecognised mottes, a cave, an earth house, a non-Roman road and the Perth canal.

While these figures show that the ministers, apart from the silent fifteen, collaborated with Sinclair to the best of somewhat varying ability, and in so doing observed the established framework of classification, the quality of their personal views resides in their actual replies, and these accordingly call for closer examination. To test them, a list was prepared of 100 monuments judged to be such as ordinary observers might reasonably be expected to have recognised, and these were followed up in the accounts of their respective parishes and their inclusion or omission noted, along with any comments made by the writers. The following are some major points on which light is thrown by this comparison of list and replies.

Hillforts, to consider these first, are generally conspicuous enough to catch an observer's eye, and the 15 forts on the list that are mentioned in the parish articles are all fairly obvious choices. Some of the omissions, however, are rather surprising – for example, the very large work on Traprain Law, the Law itself being noted as a natural feature but without reference to the earthworks; Dunadd and Dundurn, with their 7th-century pedigrees (*AU*, s.a.682); and the impressive stronghold on the Mither Tap of Benachie. At the same time, the Druids, of whom more will be said below, show themselves even in this context, as the same authors who ignored Dundurn and the Mither Tap both volunteered information about 'Druidical temples'. Five of the forts included by the ministers are vitrified, but vitrification is discussed only in the case of Craig Phadrig, which had already been ventilated in print (Anderson 1779, 255 ff). Forts or 'camps' are frequently described as Danish, Pictish or Roman, and a defensive function is regularly attributed to all kinds of earthworks, to the exclusion of any idea of their peaceful use as ordinary farmsteads or settlements. It is true, of course, that most of the conspicuous earthworks are, in fact, defensive, but more remains to be said about this point and a return will be made to it shortly.

Brochs and galleried duns, all pretty plainly defensive, understandably attract attention, and as several brochs had already been mentioned in print (Gordon 1726, 166; Maitland 1757, 1, 145; Cordiner 1780, 105) the ministers' task was here comparatively simple. The omission of Mousa and Jarlishof is accidental, their parish (Dunrossness) being one of those which have no 'antiquities' section. The omission of Edin's Hall is harder to explain, particularly as the minister concerned (Abbey St Bathans) saw fit to mention such humdrum items as a burying-ground and the site of a monastery and a chapel. Dun Borerraig, selected for the list as being a fairly good specimen of a galleried dun, was not given individual notice, but the minister (Duirinish) was evidently familiar with brochs and galleried duns as he alluded to 'several towers' and gave a sensible description of galleried building-construction. He attributed the towers to the Danes, just as his colleague at Lerwick wrote of two 'Pictish castles', presumably Clickhimin and Burland.

Given the striking appearance of standing stones and stone circles, the inclusion of such monuments as those at Callernish, Brodgar, Stenness or Midmar, or the Dwarfie Stane, need cause little surprise. One may notice in passing that Callernish is described as Druidical. As regards omissions, though neither Old Keig nor Auquhorthies is mentioned by name, they are presumably covered by the term 'Druidical temples' recorded as occurring in both the parishes concerned. The Kintraw monolith has disappeared in the confusion of the Kilmartin article, to be mentioned shortly. It may be questioned how far the ministers, or for that matter Sinclair and the antiquarian establishment, distinguished stones bearing Pictish carving from the 'crosses and obelisks' of the former's questionnaire; but it is true that the Aberlemno group and the Maiden Stone, the only examples selected for inclusion in the list, are both mentioned, the latter with a reference to the illustration in Pennant's *Tour* (1776).

Apart from Maes Howe, which could hardly fail of inclusion, cairns, chambered and other,

are treated with less than justice. The famous Kilmartin group, though receiving a bare mention, has suffered, like the Kintraw site, from the minister's mishandling of the subject – he begins, for example, by stating that the parish has no antiquities, but adds a footnote on 'some cairns or heaps of stones' near which were 'great stones standing on end' and measuring up to ten feet in height. The great cairn at Camster is not mentioned at all, though its parish is credited with Pictish houses, 'hillocks', and three castles, which are perhaps to be interpreted respectively as opened-up chambered cairns, intact small cairns or mounds, and ruined brochs. The remains on Cairnpapple Hill, which must have appeared in the 18th century as a large mound with a peristalith, are likewise ignored, though standing stones and a 'Danish' camp are mentioned in the parish in question as well as Torphichen Preceptory. Russell's Cairn, notwithstanding its association with a notable murder committed in 1585, is passed over in favour of vaguely noted 'encampments' and 'tryst stones', the latter not readily identifiable in modern terms.

Despite a certain tendency to attribute native forts and miscellaneous earthworks to the Romans, the ministers seem to have had a rather better grip on their Roman than on their pre-historic antiquities. The Antonine Wall is mentioned in all the four parishes for which it was listed, and in Kirkintilloch it is given a long descriptive note. In Cumbernauld the Military Road is mentioned as well as the Wall, and in Falkirk the Camelon site is regarded as that of a former 'place of consequence', either Roman or native. The remains in Blackford parish are treated fairly fully, though Ardoch is not mentioned by name; Raedykes is recognised as Roman, and Lyne is passed over as being too well known to require further notice. The Newstead site is noted, but is regarded as that of an abbey, the name 'Red Abbeysteed' having been used of it since at least as early as 1743 (RCAMS 1956, 320). Dere Street is noted as a 'Roman causeway' in both Hownam and Oxnam parishes, and in the latter case is marked on a parish map; but the similarity of the accounts suggests that the Oxnam author was copying his colleague in Hownam. This impression is strengthened by the omission of the Pennymuir camps, in Oxnam, which lie close to Dere Street and ought to have been well known to anyone familiar with the road. The omission of Birrens is surprising, as the minister (Hoddon) was fully aware of other Roman remains – and in fact showed too much zeal in the case of Burnswark, where he attributed everything to the Romans, including the oppidum on the hilltop.

In their treatment of architectural antiquities, such as castles and churches, the ministers seem to have suffered from a certain lack of conviction. It is true that most of the churches and religious houses chosen for inclusion in the list are, in fact, mentioned, but this tells us little about the authors' own attitudes as such monuments are obvious choices. It may be noted, too, that Pluscarden and Restenneth Priors, Paisley Abbey and Dornoch Cathedral are all written up simply as objects of interest rather than as antiquities, that Inchcolm Abbey is mentioned in a non-antiquarian context, and that Dunkeld Cathedral is not called an antiquity though its structure is described in some detail. Rodil Church, however, receives fairly full antiquarian treatment. The minister of Kirkhill parish omits Beaulieu Priory but recognises a field of small cairns which had not been placed on the list, and in so doing is probably well ahead of his time. The omission of Cambuskenneth Abbey and Inchmahome Priory seems strange, and even stranger that of Kilbrannan Chapel, as this building stands close to an important castle (Skipness) which is described in considerable detail.

Of castles it is true to say that, although 6 of the 10 listed structures are mentioned, their treatment is distinctly slight, as if the ministers had felt unable to face the task of describing large complicated buildings. This impression is strengthened by the note on Caerlaverock Castle, which falls back on published descriptions by Pennant and Grose; and also by the one on Roxburgh Castle, as the Roxburgh article as a whole shows that the author was quite capable of

dealing with less demanding subjects. The reference to vitrified matter in the walling of Dunnideer Castle may or may not have resulted from the minister's own observation, as this point had already been noted in print (Anderson 1782, 87); the fable about the sheep with golden teeth is faithfully reproduced (Simpson 1935, 470-1). The omission of Scalloway Castle and Castle Sween follows from the fact that their parishes have no antiquarian sections; but mention of Dunollie Castle might well have been expected, particularly as Dunstaffnage Chapel, in the same parish but not placed on the list, is duly noted. In general, notes on castles and great houses tend to expand on feudal and genealogical matters, to the neglect of purely archaeological description.

Mottes were not recognised as sites of early castles until long after the time of the *Account*, but all the four mottes that were placed on the list are mentioned, no doubt on account of their striking appearance and proximity to inhabited sites. Some factual description is given of the Mote of Urr and the Doune of Invernochty, the minister noting, in the latter case, that he knows of other similar monuments outside his own parish (Strathdon).

Two kinds of monument which are apt to attract attention in the south of Scotland are cultivation terraces and linear earthworks. The Catrail, the chief example of the latter, had been described as early as 1726 (Gordon 1726, 102), and consequently its mention in some of the parish accounts need not necessarily mean that the ministers in question had observed the remains themselves. For this reason it was not selected for inclusion in the list, and a stretch of comparable earthwork, Heriot's Dyke, was preferred as probably providing a better criterion; but not only was this ignored, in its own parish account (Greenlaw), but the ministers of the neighbouring Cheviot parishes likewise ignored the cross-ridge dykes and longer linear works that are very common in their district. Equally notable is a lack of interest in groups of cultivation terraces. The three most conspicuous examples of these were listed, but all were ignored, although one of them, like the Catrail, had already been described by Gordon (1726, 114).

The upshot of the foregoing comparisons, with which antiquarian notes found at random in other parish accounts agree in a general way, seems to provide a fairly consistent picture. In the first place the minister's reports wholly bear out the late Professor Collingwood's ruling, that observers see only the things that they have been taught to look for. The standard historical works of the 18th century, available to men of these ministers' approximate age-group, were full of references to Picts, Romans, Druids and Danes; the historical process was presented as a succession of wars, with religion as a strong undercurrent; and this intellectual grounding has certainly influenced the general attitude to antiquity. Attention has already been drawn, in the discussion of forts and earthworks, to the effect of a historical system largely concerned with war, and an extreme example may be seen in the case of the field of small cairns, mentioned above, which was duly associated with a battle and the burial of casualties. It is noteworthy, too, how this war-based point of view continued to tinge antiquarian thought all through the 19th century.

Other examples of influence by learned authorities are provided by the Danes and the Druids. All educated persons would naturally have known of the Danish invasions of England, and of Canute's attainment of the throne, while raids by Danes nearer home likewise bulk quite large in histories of Scotland³; but in Scotland, at any rate, the name 'Dane' evidently covered Norwegians as well as men from Denmark, just as, in modern Gaelic, 'Lochlannach' is used of all three Scandinavian races. In the *Account* even brochs could be called Danish or Pictish, and in fact Picts and Danes, in combination, seem to have provided a pool of plausible answers to a variety of historical and antiquarian problems. The vogue of the Druids, likewise, provides an outstanding example of the influence of learned theory. The parish accounts are stuffed with references to the Druids and their works – monoliths, cairns with peristaliths, and stone settings in general almost inevitably came to be classed as Druidical temples, and in one

case Druids were connected even with a tidal sea-cave. This is naturally no place for a discussion of the literature of Druidism, but it is fair to point out that the men of the 1790s had grown up in the Druids' heyday, that they must have been familiar with the theories of Stukeley and the other prophets of the movement, and that they could hardly have escaped the influence of this current intellectual fashion. It is also perhaps typical of an age which was still deeply interested in religious questions – as witness George III's stand against Roman Catholic relief, and the repeated secession movements among Scottish Presbyterians – that the supposed Druidical monuments had to be temples, and not, say, places of popular assembly or the dancing-floors of unchancy beings like the Haltadans monument in Fetlar. The same tendency, as it were in reverse, may possibly account for the rarity of folklore traditions involving either legends of saints or surviving pre-Christian superstitions. The ministers' rather greater success with Roman than with other early remains, of which mention has been made above, may perhaps be partially due to a healthier literary background.

Along with these potential sources of outside influence, it is necessary to recall the handicaps under which the ministers worked. For example, to name some major ones, the antiquaries of their day possessed no theoretical framework into which their observations could be fitted, as the system of three Ages – of Stone, Bronze and Iron – was not published until 1836 (Thomsen), and consequently, failing typology and stratification, relics ranked as no more than curiosities for collectors' cabinets. No large-scale maps existed, photography had not been invented, and opportunities for informed discussion must have been extremely rare. Nor does it seem that interest was taken at that time in the nature of the societies that produced the monuments and relics – where, for example, or in what kinds of house the Druids' congregations lived, or why a certain fort should be attributed to Danes or to Picts, or even to Border raiders. It is only when allowance has been made for such factors as these that the ministers' own attitudes begin to be discernible; and here, while individual capacity naturally varies from one individual to another, some general tendencies appear. Thus it seems, as is hardly surprising, that the writers suffered from a serious lack of archaeological experience, as well as from some vagueness of approach; while closely allied to inexperience was the amateur's failure of precision in thought and statement. This last point is illustrated by the rarity of actual dimensions in the descriptions of ancient buildings. Here again, however, some further allowance must be made, as even experienced observers are often at a loss in dealing with obscure field-monuments; while in a society dominated by rural grandees it might well have been natural to think of, say, a castle in terms of its feudal associations, or of romantic episodes in its past, rather than of its cold architectural features. Yet sensible reporters could, on occasion, produce very passable descriptions, such as those of the Antonine Wall or of a sample of galleried construction, to which allusion was made above; the account of Castleton parish, by the Rev James Arkle, is notable for its sound antiquarian section. All in all, Sinclair's questionnaire may fairly be credited with two major achievements – the assembling of a very large body of useful facts, and the setting, or re-setting, of the stage for later antiquarian studies.

In view of what has now been said, the claim made at the beginning of this paper – that the pedigree of Scottish antiquarian fieldwork and records goes back ultimately to the surveys of Timothy Pont – seems to be soundly based; but there remains to be considered the picture of the ancient world as generally imagined at the end of the 18th century, and in which, for that matter, the antiquaries of the 17th century might have found little to question. It differs widely from our own, but it does not, on that account, call for any long and detailed discussion here. The comments already made on the work of Sinclair's correspondents suffice to indicate its nature, and the cumulative impression with which this work leaves us is that the men of the

1790s thought of antiquity, or at least of that slice of antiquity which preceded whatever they themselves accepted as history, as a series of individual phases lacking any real connecting thread. They present us, in fact, not with a historical narrative but rather with a succession of peep-shows.

NOTES

- 1 This programme, together with the Society's Royal Charter, is discussed briefly in Graham 1970, 243 ff.
- 2 The Society was employing Sibbald's method of circularising parish ministers; see Smellie 1792, 20.
- 3 A telling example is Buchanan, G, *History of Scotland* (translation 1762), 1229 and 1270 ff.

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