Looking over the Wall: the Late and Post-Roman Iron Age North of Hadrian’s Wall

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ABSTRACT

A consideration of the late and post-Roman periods north of Hadrian’s Wall reveals varied regional pictures. The north and west of Scotland showed little impact from events in the south. In the north-east, the critical period was the third century, in the aftermath of Severus’ campaigns when diplomatic links to the area were cut off, creating turmoil and leading to the emergence of the Picts as a major frontier threat. The south of Scotland shows signs of the emergence of larger-scale polities which were more closely involved with events on the late and post-Roman frontier.

This paper moves beyond Roman Britain in time and space, looking southwards over its shoulder. It considers two key issues. In what sense, if any, did Rome still affect the area north of Hadrian’s Wall by A.D. 410, and what impact did the tumultuous processes of the early fifth century have? We need to consider A.D. 410 in the *longue durée*, since dating, always a problem in this period, is a particular difficulty in *barbaricum*. I will try to take advantage of this with a long view on the third to sixth centuries.

Historical sources overwhelmingly take death, despair and calamity as their themes. A key topic is the unrest caused by Pictish raiding, culminating in the so-called Barbarian Conspiracy of A.D. 367 and still a running sore into the fifth century, while, from a century later, Gildas looked back on the ‘foul hordes’ of Picts and Scots (*De Excidio Britanniae* 19; Ireland 2008, 160; Maxwell 1987, 43). The Picts grab most of the headlines, both in contemporary sources and in modern scholarship. While I will touch on the dynamics of their emergence in north-east Scotland, I also want to consider the Atlantic zone and especially southern Scotland. The crucial question to tackle is the nature of fifth-century society and social change; from the archaeological evidence, was it a key time of change, or were other periods more critical? Crisis, riding the storm, or storm in a teacup?

Rome’s engagement in Scotland was a complicated one, with the fluctuating frontier and changing policies leading to differing impacts in differing times and places. To this mix we must add the markedly regional character of the Scottish Iron Age (here considered as a long Iron Age on the Scandinavian model, running through most of the first millennium A.D.; for background, see Harding 2004; Armit 1997a; 2003; Hingley 1992). As exemplars, we may contrast the Atlantic north and west, the north-east, and the south-east in the Roman Iron Age (RIA). Societies in the Atlantic, long concerned with monumental stone buildings (brochs), were less focused on architectural display by the early centuries A.D. Brochs continued, their shells reused, but they were no longer built; instead, the so-called wheelhouse and its variants, a dramatic but less outwardly impressive architectural form, was commonplace in many areas. This settlement pattern suggests relatively isolated individual units with small-scale hierarchies and little sign of larger polities. Only the restricted area of Orkney and Caithness may be an exception. Here ‘broch villages’ clustered round broch towers have been seen as signs of a more hierarchical society (e.g. Foster 1989; Armit 2003, 97–8). In most cases the villages post-date the broch construction (MacKie 1994), but Howe (Orkney) provides an example of a cluster of buildings around the rebuilt broch in the early centuries A.D. (Ballin Smith 1994; MacKie 1998, 23–4). Even in this area, the number of such sites suggests small- rather than large-scale social units.

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The north-east was the land of open settlements. Enclosed sites are rare and poorly understood; scatters of unenclosed roundhouses, best seen as long-lived large farms, were the norm. Within this some appear richer than others, but again no clear hierarchy is reflected in settlement forms. This may be contrasted with the south-east of Scotland, where a number of the largest hillforts show substantial Roman Iron Age occupation and markedly more finds than the surrounding settlements (which are a confusing mix of enclosed and unenclosed sites). Here we can perhaps identify larger-scale power structures and hierarchies (Hunter 2010). In presenting these regional contrasts, one needs to be wary of implicitly type-casting them as simpler or more complex societies. In all areas, increasing ornamental material indicates desire to indicate difference (whether in status or affiliation), but there was a marked variation in the nature of these societies.

Some of the interactions these societies had with Rome are seen in the spread of Roman material culture across Scotland, geographically and socially. This was apparently targeted to wealthier sites (which show greater range and quantities of finds), and then spread within local social networks. Material which was locally socially useful was selected — ornaments and feasting gear, which played a big role in local power politics (Hunter 2001). Yet of course the march of
Rome was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm, as both archaeology and literary sources show. Resistance is always hard to excavate, but recent work has plausibly seen Dumfriesshire in south-west Scotland as an area of refuseniks in the second century, with a relative lack of Roman finds, an abundance of Roman forts and fortlets, and increasing arguments that the well-known siege works at Burnswark do indeed reflect a genuine siege (Campbell 2003; Keppie 2009; Hodgson 2009; cf. Breeze 2011). The idea of the northern frontier as a push-over, a place for easy politically-motivated gains, is losing ground; the needs of Imperial politics always played a role, but recent finds and new perspectives on old data indicate continuing unrest through the second century (e.g. Birley 1998; Breeze 2003; Hodgson 2009). This recurring theme is thrown into relief by the late second-century evidence of the troublesome Caledonians and Maeatae, whose unrest led to the Severan invasions. Yet the army was only part of the solution: archaeological evidence fills out the rather reticent historical sources in pointing to a diplomatic barrage reflected in a range of prestigious objects. This was targeted at central and north-east Scotland, and was apparently aiming to create a buffer zone to the south of the trouble-spots and buy off the trouble-makers — or foment further internal unrest, by favouring some over others (Hunter 2007).

The generally accepted view sees the genesis of the Picts in these troubles, as a process of confederacy and amalgamation of pre-existing units in the face of Rome (Mann 1974), as attested elsewhere (e.g. with the Goths or Franks; Heather 1994). Yet the archaeological evidence does not readily support this reading of the historical sources (which in any case require a degree of creative thinking to make the story stick; Hunter 2007, 3–9). In summary, archaeology points to disruption, not amalgamation. Comparison of the distribution of late third-/fourth-century finds to those of c. A.D. 160–250 (FIG. 2) highlights a prominent gap in the very area which was so heavily targeted for diplomatic gifts earlier (ibid., 23–37). This is best seen as a deliberate policy — arguably a desire to undermine societies in the troublesome area, building a dependence, a prestige goods economy, and then removing the foundations of it. I argue that the key agent and

FIG. 2. (a) Distribution of Roman finds A.D. 160–250; stars mark denarius hoards, dots other finds. (b) Distribution of Roman finds A.D. 250–400; stars mark sites with a wide range of imports.
catalyst was a new material — silver, in the form of denarii. This became valued as a prestige good which had no local equivalent and thus could not readily be replaced. In my view, the cutting of this supply undermined local élites, creating considerable unrest and upheaval.

This disruption is seen in other evidence — settlement loci, styles of architecture, art and material culture all change radically, with a virtual ‘black hole’ in the third and fourth centuries (Hunter 2007, 42–50; Fraser 2009, 60–1). There is (as yet) little evidence of centralised power centres emerging at this time (although the history of the major later Pictish power centre at Burghhead remains poorly known, and its origins may lie in the late Roman Iron Age; Shepherd 1993, 78–9). This contrasts to what we shall see in southern Scotland. It suggests not confederacy but upheaval, apparently leading to a quiet third century on the frontier (at least in Roman sources), but a notably more bothersome fourth century — the law of unintended consequences which so often afflicts imperial powers in their dealings with tribal societies.

Literary references to warfare and raiding at this time provide our first evidence in the north of extended long-range campaigning — and thus, by implication, the war band, sustained not by their agricultural toil but by surplus and plunder, able to operate away from home for long periods (Fraser 2009, 61–3). Archaeological evidence is notoriously elusive and intractable in this area, but this is our first clear sign of such a social unit. The limited late Iron Age evidence for warfare certainly shows evidence of ‘the warrior’ as a socially desirable, restricted identity, but there is no sign of the extensive militarisation seen in (for instance) middle La Tène Gaul or Roman Iron Age Denmark (Hunter 2012, 52–4). Increasing centralisation of political power would of course provide a context where specialist warriors could be maintained — but so too would the postulated upheavals involved in the Pictish ‘creation’, where existing family ties could be shaken and new ones forged, of honour rather than blood.

The changing styles of indigenous material culture from the third to fifth centuries throw some further light on the processes involved. These show a very different series of connections from styles which went before (Hunter 2010). They show links with Ireland, the first substantial ones for some centuries, which suggest connections and perhaps diplomatic ties given historical form in the ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ (Laing and Laing 1986). But they show other links too — up and down Atlantic Britain, for instance (a pattern prefiguring later Insular art), and into the late Roman dioceses, with a cluster on Hadrian’s Wall and others deep in the South (Hunter 2010, fig. 11.5). Some of this may relate to raiding, although this typically leaves very little archaeological trace. More plausibly, we could consider the recruitment of mercenaries among neighbouring barbarians, a pattern already familiar on the Continent (White 2007, 196–201; Halsall 2007, 102–3, 197). Were northern mercenaries serving to protect the late Roman island from their own kind as much as from others?

This tale of woe and disruption suggests that the key moment in north-east Scotland is the third century rather than the fifth; with the decline of Empire, the decreasing written sources make the violent Picts less visible, but when they reappear in early medieval texts they are still inflicting mayhem on their neighbours — essentially, a typical early medieval warrior society. Centralisation of power in Pictland, as far as we see it in the form of hillforts, was a phenomenon of the sixth and seventh centuries (Alcock 1987, fig. 4; Ralston 1996, 137). But how do they compare to societies in other parts of Scotland over this ‘long fifth century’?

The Atlantic areas show a gradual rather than dramatic shift (e.g. Armit 1996, 162–78; Harding 2004, 262–85). Styles of architecture changed to more cellular rather than circular forms, but the settlement units generally remained small, with no sign of over-arching regional power centres until the seventh or eighth century. There were changes, with people using increasingly ornamental material culture such as ornate penannular brooches and Insular art. Some scholars argue that this reflects a shift in the focus of status display from the monumental house to material culture, indicating power tied to the person rather than the place (e.g. Armit 1997b, 252–3; Sharples 2003). This view has its attractions, although there is no simple either/or argument. Its origins lie instead in an increasing interest in ornamental material alongside a modified monumental architecture in the form of wheelhouses from the second/first centuries b.c. onwards. In general, it is fair to say that the fifth century was not a notably difficult time in the north and west, with evidence of gradual rather than dramatic change.
Southern Scotland shows intriguing patterns. It too saw changes around the late second/third century, with the apparent ending of ‘Celtic art’ and the development of new material forms such as variants of projecting ring-headed pins. There are also signs of settlement abandonment or retrenchment (Hill 1982; Haselgrove 2009, 230–1), although not so extensive as in the north-east, but an architectural shift from round to more sub-oval forms cannot be linked to this horizon of change, as it appears to have started in East Lothian before the Roman period (e.g. Lelong and MacGregor 2007, 193–7). There is a marked focusing of Roman imports, moving from their broad social spread in the early to middle RIA to a concentration on specific sites in the late RIA, especially big hillforts. Once again, the focus was on locally useful material — ornaments and feasting gear. The finds cluster particularly in the Tweed valley and East Lothian, suggesting a deliberate Roman policy of building links to east coast neighbours who could act as buffer zones against the Picts (Hunter 2010).

In our current state of knowledge, two main models can be advanced. One is that much of the population moved to big hillforts such as Traprain Law in uncertain times; the other, and more plausible, sees a sharpening of social hierarchies, with small groups on big hillforts exercising control over large areas, and dependent farmers in smaller settlements having much less material wealth. If we are looking for some form of amalgamation or federation into larger units it makes more sense in south-east Scotland, although even here it is not an easy argument; the small number of large sites also dominated the record in the early to middle RIA, and the limited scale of excavation on other sites must be a factor. Yet the changing distribution of Roman goods suggests an increasing focus of power, not just a decreasing availability of goods, and in the case of the best-examined site, Traprain Law, excavations support the view of it as a flourishing late RIA centre (Armit et al. 2002; 2006; Hunter 2009). If such sites were beginning to cast their nets of control wider, we again have the conditions for specialisation and the development of war bands.

Traprain Law, some 30 km east of Edinburgh, is a key site of the RIA and the fifth century, could it but tell us its stories. It has been extensively excavated, but the upper deposits (dating in and around the fifth century) are hard to excavate, interpret and date, and more sustained modern excavation is badly needed. Yet the finds show that it received a wealth of late Roman material unparalleled in Scotland, pointing to its favoured status with the Empire (Hunter 2009). Most striking is the famous Hacksilver hoard, the Traprain Treasure (Curle 1923). The traditional idea of this as barbarian plunder is a weak explanation. Hacksilver is better seen as an economic phenomenon marking a transition to a bullion-based economy in unsettled times (Painter 2013). Its movement to Traprain could relate to various possible mechanisms. It could represent further diplomatic activity, with silver as subsidy to groups beyond the frontier. Supporting evidence comes from a range of finds which can plausibly be seen as late Roman diplomatic gifts. For instance, a concentration of remarkable finds in a small area of eastern Dumfriesshire (south-west Scotland) suggests this area just beyond Hadrian’s Wall was specifically targeted for diplomatic attention (Fig. 3). The gold brooch from Erickstanebrae has an inscription recording it as an Imperial donative of Diocletian (Curle 1932, 335; Guggisberg 2013); from the old Roman fort of Birrens comes a gold medallion of Constantine II Caesar, a type common elsewhere in the barbarian world as a gift (Bland 2012); while within a few kilometres, an inscribed gold bangle from Cove has recently been recognised in antiquarian records by Robert Janiszewski (2012). This represents a major change from the second century, when the same area was being pounded by the Roman army at Burnswark (see above). Far to the north, the fourth-century hoard of bronze vessels from Helmsdale (Sutherland), while less spectacular, could also be seen as diplomatic gifts (Spearman 1990).

Another potential motive for Hacksilver is payment for more material services rendered, specifically for mercenaries (Painter 2013). The blurring of the frontier as barbarian groups came into the service of the late Roman army is a well-attested phenomenon on the Continent, and the spread of material such as crossbow brooches highlights it (e.g. Keller 1971, 26–53; Rau 2013). Should Hacksilver be linked to the same phenomenon? Renewed assessment of the Traprain find (Painter and Hunter forthcoming; papers in Hunter and Painter 2013) puts the latest objects around c. A.D. 425–450, long after the formal ‘end of Roman Britain’ (whatever that
means). Who could be making such political payments or subsidies? Was there still an authority capable of conducting policy? The fragments in the hoard indicate links to a wider world. Here it may fit better into a picture of powerful warlords, northern contemporaries of those who developed from Roman garrisons on Hadrian’s Wall (Wilmott 2000; Collins 2009; 2012; 2013). It indicates some at least of the élite in southern Scotland were intimately engaged in the politics and chaos of the disintegrating frontier; indeed, the wealth of Traprain at this period suggests they were successful in taking advantage.

**FIG. 3.** A cluster of unusual late Roman finds in eastern Dumfriesshire. (a) Gold crossbow brooch from Erickstanebrae — a donative of Diocletian. (b) Gold medallion of Constantine II Caesar. (c) Gold armlet, Cove. *(a) National Museums Scotland (photo of a replica); (b), from Gordon 1726, pl. 1 fig. 4; (c) from Pococke 1773, pl. III fig. 4*
Surviving Hacksilber, of course, gives only a partial picture of the phenomenon, for much of it ended up in the melting pot. In a Scottish context, the wealth of silver in the early medieval period probably derives from recycling this late Roman wealth, as seen most clearly in the hoard from Norrie's Law, mixing Roman and Pictish fragments (Stevenson 1956). A striking example are the great silver chains, too often mis-named 'Pictish' (Henderson 1979; Youngs 2013). These are often argued as fifth- to seventh-century in date, though the evidence is poor. The main cluster in south-east Scotland correlates well with the area argued to show increasingly larger-scale political organisation in the late and post-Roman period; a second cluster in north-east Scotland north of the Mounth marks out the northern area of Pictland which became dominant in the early post-Roman centuries (Fraser 2009, 50–1). These chains take as their model the traditional indigenous status symbol of the torc, rather than the late Roman Imperial diadem or crown. In a similar vein, insular societies developed the indigenous penannular brooch as a symbol rather than taking the Roman crossbow brooch as a model, as happened on the Continent. The material of Roman contacts was reused, but not the symbolism.

We can start to look at the interplay of these emerging power centres in the south. While most pre-Anglian power centres in early medieval southern Scotland have also produced late Roman material, the converse is not true: not all late Roman power centres retained this significance into the succeeding centuries. Traprain is a case in point; significant activity continues into the fifth, perhaps even the sixth century, but is muted or non-existent thereafter (Hunter 2013). The great hillfort of Eildon Hill also fades in the early medieval period. In contrast, Dumbarton and Bamburgh, which have produced both early and late Roman material, emerge as substantial early medieval power centres. So too does Edinburgh Castle, where the tiny trenches so far possible under the medieval fastness have indicated significant late Roman contacts. The site is physically much smaller than Traprain, but it continued and flourished into the early medieval period while Traprain faded. In the differing paths of these two big hills may lie the lost history of this period in south-east Scotland. In this changing world, the smaller size and naturally-defined levels of craggier hills like Edinburgh or Dumbarton (so-called ‘nuclear forts’) were more suitable than the sprawling earlier hillforts, providing layers and hierarchies which symbolised the developing social order for these emerging leaders as they competed for and consolidated their territories.

Another notable site with a continuity from late Roman Iron Age to early medieval introduces another part of the story. The site is Whithorn — the cradle of Scottish Christianity, at least according to Bede, a full century before Columba at Iona. The supposed founder, Ninian, has fared badly under the sceptical gaze of revisionist historians (Clancy 2001), but an inscribed stone provides clear evidence of a fifth-century Christian presence at the site, and indeed evidence of spoken, not merely literary Latin (Forsyth 2009), though whether it was a religious site in its earliest phases rather than one where Christians lived is a point of debate. Archaeology puts Whithorn in the broader context of a range of early Christian Latin-inscribed memorial stones in southern Scotland, extending to the Wall zone and down the ‘Celtic west’ (Thomas 1992; O’Brien 2010, 111–12). This can be understood as an engagement with late Roman Christianity as the Empire faded. It remains unclear how socially widespread this early Christian adherence was, but here its relevance is the evidence of continuing links to southern Britain for the inhabitants of southern Scotland.

One might even argue that the use of Roman models increased as the power of the Empire waned, with Rome being reinvented as a role-model and influence now it was no longer a threat. This is suggested in this evidence of literacy and the use of Latin names in early king-lists and other sources (Morris 1973, 17; Fraser (2013) provides a valuable current view of the material). Groups in the south of Scotland were involved in the late and post-Roman world and its culture, and thus intimately concerned with the problems of the fifth century. Yet a broad reading of the evidence shows little crisis here — it was part of a long-term process, not a sudden end. The supply of late Roman material goods may have served to bolster the position of the increasingly influential centres noted above, but the lack of supply from the fifth century onwards was clearly no major problem, as many of these sites continued to be critical in local politics. Access to late Roman prestige goods, while desirable, was clearly not fundamental to social power at this period. Ewan Campbell’s (2007) work shows only limited overlap between sites receiving late
Roman goods (third to fourth century) and those obtaining late antique eastern Mediterranean material in the fifth and sixth centuries; there was apparently no pressing need for an alternative source of exotica. Campbell does argue, however, that a continuing desire for late Roman ‘style’ may lie behind the focus on glass vessel imports in British areas rather than Gaelic ones in the sixth and seventh centuries, and the selection of unusual imported pot styles, such as mortaria, in the E-ware trade of the seventh century (Campbell 2007, 135).

There is a marked contrast between the southern Scottish evidence and the area of the Picts. James Fraser has argued that, while the wide cultural connections of the Picts are clear in their art and the sparse historical references, they avoided visibly Roman style (such as Latin names or script) until much later than the south (2009, 375–9). Is this division a creation caused by Roman influence and impact, or the re-emergence of much older divisions and cultural fault lines at the Firth of Forth?

When we take a northern view of a.d. 410, or at least the processes which this totemic date symbolises, signs of upheaval are few and far between. The societies of southern Scotland were more drawn to Roman ways, as models and influences, and were more involved in the messy aftermath of Empire, but there is at present little evidence of major social change in this time. Indeed, the fifth century may have been a time of opportunity, as the newly-emerging power units were more like ‘equals’ in terms of scale rather than dealing with an empire. As the reality of an imperial neighbour faded, Rome became a potent tool for powerful leaders to show their ambition — there was no ‘end’ to Roman influence, but a series of reinterpretations. The Atlantic zone rides smoothly over the period, while in the north-east among the Picts, major change happened rather earlier. Indeed, if we wanted to pinpoint a time of crises and problems it would be the third century, not the fifth, in both north-east and south-east Scotland; in the former, this was a time of disjunction and change, in the latter a time of coalescence and, perhaps, power-grabbing by the few. In this the influence of Rome, advertent and inadvertent, was a key factor. For the North, the key anniversary is not a.d. 410, but 210, the last campaign of Severus and its aftermath, which had far more disruptive effects.

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