

# New evidence for the activities of Pictish potentates in Aberdeenshire: the hillforts of Strathdon

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## ABSTRACT

*The hillforts of the north-east of Scotland have suffered from a lack of archaeological excavation and models have been developed and redeveloped on very little evidence. Underlining these paradigms was the assumption that the bulk of the sites in the area were prehistoric in origin. This paper presents the initial results of a programme of keyhole excavation that examined construction dates of the discrete cluster of hillforts in what, in this article, is called Strathdon. A brief précis of archaeological research in the area will be presented, together with the unenclosed sequence from the immediate environs and the contemporary historical record, before the early medieval results of the research are summarised and placed in a regional and national context. As the excavations were restricted so too is the discussion, the results established a chronological framework for the hillforts in question but did not explore function or environmental background.*

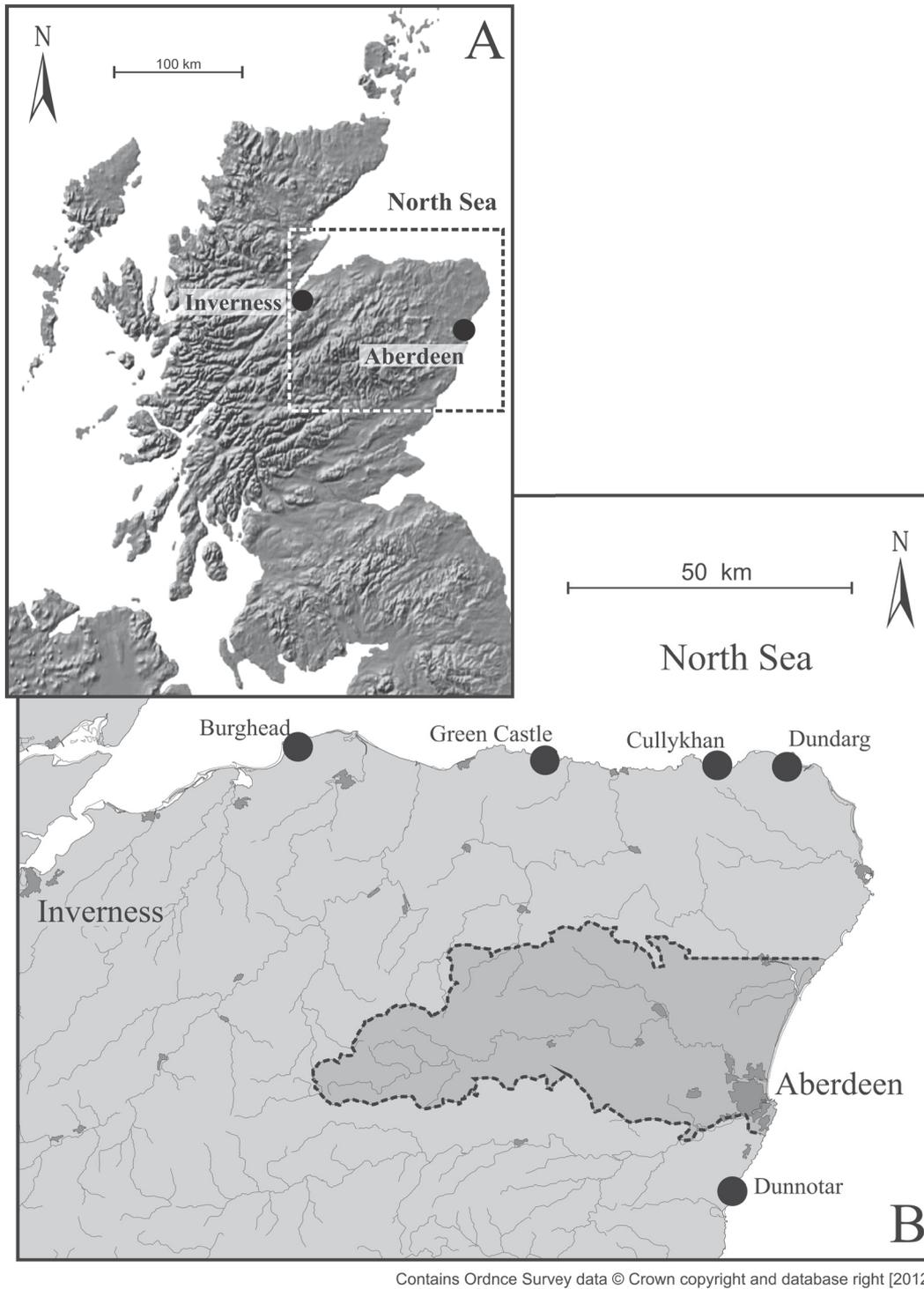
## INTRODUCTION

The Later Prehistoric and early medieval settlement record of north-east Scotland has, until very recently, suffered from the absence of an inventory, an intellectual framework and a tradition of excavation (Ralston et al 1983: 149). For example, the UK's Iron Age Research Agenda described Aberdeenshire as a 'blackhole' (Haselgrove et al 2001: 25), while in 2005, Cunliffe's *Iron Age Communities in Britain*, represents the area as a blank (2005: 74). However, most pertinently for this article, Alcock's 1988 map of early medieval power centres in northern Britain showed only four sites for Aberdeenshire, all along the coast, with the balance a void (illus 1). This situation remained unchanged for Alcock's Rhind Lectures (2003: 8), where the

most recently listed Aberdeenshire excavation on the distribution map was Green Castle in 1977 (Ralston 1987).

The rarity of hillforts in north-east Scotland has long been recognised (illus 2), as indeed has the general absence of enclosed sites north of the Forth (Macinnes 1982; Hingley 1992; Davies 2007), and of course, in the absence of dating evidence it is not clear what this distribution represents: single sites occupied and reoccupied over generations, an intense period of warfare, instability or social competition, or specific circumstances once every century or so over the millennia. The hillforts that are present have been the focus of at least three previous reviews (Feachem 1966; Ralston et al 1983; RCAHMS 2007), all of which came up with different conclusions from the same evidence. The latter study by

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ILLUS 1 Location of study area and know or suspected early medieval sites before this study (after Alcock 1988)

the RCAHMS proposed a six-fold scheme of the *c* 20 forts in the area of the valley system of Alford, Inch, Inverurie and Dyce (illus 1) – called Strathdon by this study – and an earlier draft of the RCAHMS’s work (Strat Halliday pers comm), though more accurately, this should be called Donside (RCAHMS 2007), however, given that previous elements of the project have been published referring to Strathdon, the name will continue to be used. The classification was based on survey evidence and is without chronological significance.

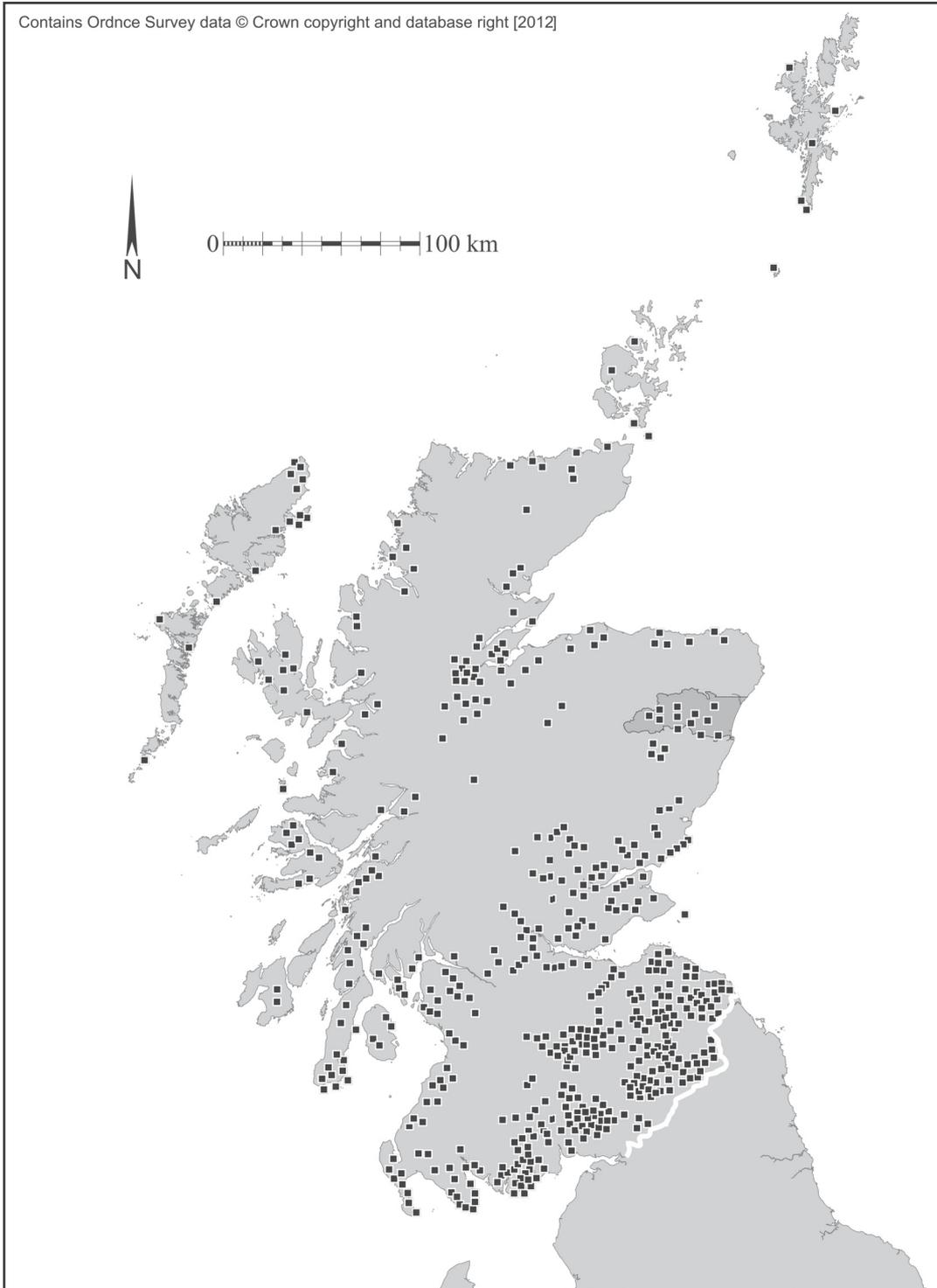
Throughout all of these reviews (Feachem 1966; Ralston et al 1983; RCAHMS 2007) and other synthetic works (Armit 2005: 45; Armit & Ralston 2003: 172), the sites were routinely considered to be prehistoric in origin, although clearly there was recognition of the potential for early medieval enclosure and activity in the region (Ralston 2004; 2007: 12). Certainly, with regard to Mither Tap, Bennachie, which dominates the region, a solid argument had been made for an early medieval origin on both the placename evidence (‘Ben of the Ce’) (Dobbs 1949) and the form of the fort (Feachem 1955: 76). ‘Ce’ was one of the so-called Pictish tribes mentioned in *De situ Albanie* and frequently associated with Mar and Buchan (Smyth 1984; McNeil & MacQueen 1996: 52). Indeed, early historic Irish writers were certainly aware of the name ‘Bennachie’ (Bruford 2000: 47–8). However, the accuracy of this text has been placed in doubt (Broun 2000) and intriguingly, the site was never included in any of Alcock’s reviews of the archaeological and historical evidence (1976; 1981; 1988; 2003).

On the basis of his reviews, Alcock hypothesised that early medieval enclosed sites in northern Britain were very rarely more than 2.5km from the coast (1988: 24). In addition, as recently as 2007, on the basis of the same evidence, it was possible to suggest that

there was an early medieval peripheral zone between Moray and southern Pictland due to the absence of hard evidence for enclosed sites in the inland portion of Aberdeenshire (RCAHMS 2007: 116).

The late 1990s and the new millennium saw a large volume of data produced from mitigation excavations. This data included a series of significant excavations in and around Kintore, Aberdeenshire (illus 3) that covered *c* 50ha and comprised material running from the Neolithic to the medieval, including an unenclosed settlement sequence from 1800 BC to AD 1000 (Rees 1996; Glendinning 1998; Alexander 2000; Cook & Dunbar 2008; Cook et al forthcoming). At the same time as this work was being published, evidence from the aforementioned Mither Tap, Bennachie, demonstrated a potential early medieval origin. Charcoal recovered from a hearth in its interior, uncovered during re-paving works, was dated to between AD 340–540 and AD 640–780 (Atkinson 2007). It should be stressed that this new evidence merely dates internal activity rather than the defences.

In order to explore the relationship between the unenclosed sequence from Kintore and the variety of hillforts in Strathdon, the author proposed to excavate one example from each of the six classes in the RCAHMS’s scheme. In the absence of significant funding, the author followed the approach undertaken by Alcock in his reconnaissance excavations (Alcock et al 1986; Alcock & Alcock 1987; Alcock et al 1989; Alcock & Alcock 1992): ie keyhole excavation. The work was undertaken over five years, in the author’s holidays, with students, local volunteers and support in kind from colleagues across UK archaeology. Explicitly, the aim was to date defences and fortifications rather than the site’s sequence. This paper presents the interim results of the



ILLUS 2 Distribution of hillforts across Scotland (after Armit 2005)

fieldwork, with specific focus on the early medieval sequence. No attempt is made to define ‘hillfort’, and the use of term follows Armit (2007: 26) as a portmanteau phrase to describe a variety of enclosed sites.

#### THE UNENCLOSED SEQUENCE

The unenclosed settlement sequence from around Kintore starts around 1800 BC and stops in the mid-3rd century AD resuming again in the 7th century AD (Cook & Dunbar 2008: 31–4). This 3rd-century break has also been observed by Hunter (2007: 49) in the quantities of Roman imported goods in north-east Scotland, prompting him to suggest that Roman tribute, designed to maintain peace to the north of the frontier, was deliberately withdrawn from the local tribes and that this led to both internal instability and also eventually to the Pictish wars of the 4th century AD (see below). Whittington and Edwards (1993) suggested that contemporary pollen sequences also indicate a period of instability and collapse, with a decrease in cereal cultivation and woodland regeneration, although this evidence is widely disputed (Hanson 2003: 208–9).

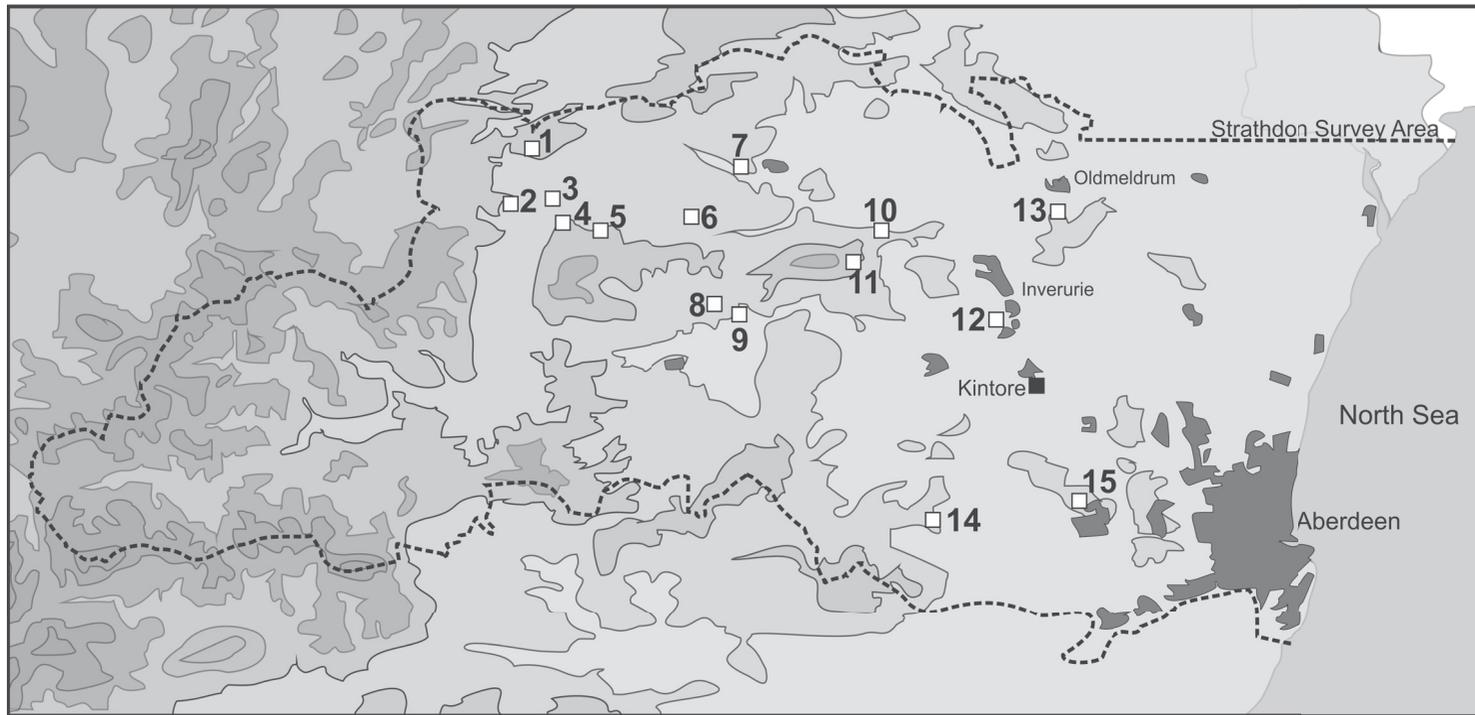
Within the sequence from the Roman marching camp at Kintore were several radiocarbon dates from isolated pits and ovens covering the 3rd to 7th centuries AD (Alexander 2000: 64; Cook & Dunbar 2008: 33). It may be that these dates reflect a much more transitory form of settlement, without significant physical footprints, as has been argued for in other periods of UK prehistory, for example, the Early Bronze Age (Bruck 1999). However, it may that the contemporary structures existed but have not been found and may, for example, lie under existing farms, as has been suggested for medieval settlement in Angus (Pollock 1985).

Within the study area there are a variety of Class I Pictish symbol stones (RCAHMS 2007: 118) that are argued to date to the around the 5th to 7th centuries AD (Foster 2004: 74–5), and these clearly reflect some form of activity – though precisely what is unclear. Clarke (2007) has argued that this appearance of Pictish symbols may be a reaction against the emergence of the Christian mission and a reassertion of a pagan identity.

From the 7th to 10th centuries AD archaeologically visible dwellings return to the Kintore sequence and comprise of rectilinear structures, some with underground storage and others associated with corn-drying kilns (Cook & Dunbar 2008: 149–60). It should be stressed that none of these features contained diagnostic features or artefacts and that without radiocarbon dating they would have remained unrecognised, a situation echoed elsewhere in northern Britain, for example north-west England (Newman & Brennan 2007: 74). While this is an extremely limited evidence base, it is assumed, for the sake of argument, that the outlined pattern does reflect something of the nature of contemporary settlement patterns and later in the article an attempt will be made to integrate it with the enclosed sequence.

#### HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

It is generally a mistake for a prehistorian to attempt to engage with history, however, in the case of the study area the sources are so few and far between that the bulk of the 1st millennium AD is virtually prehistoric. There are, of course, references to Roman incursions of Scotland, some of which will have penetrated the study area and there are also records of early church dedications (Fraser 2009). While the Roman evidence continues to be vigorously debated (see, for



Hillfort sites □

- 1. Tap O' Noth
- 2. Wheedlemont
- 3. Barflat
- 4. Cairnmore
- 5. White Hill

Kintore Excavation ■

- 6. Dunnideer
- 7. Tillymuck
- 8. Hill of New Leslie
- 9. Barmkyn of North Keig
- 10. Maiden Castle
- 11. Mither Tap
- 12. Bruces Camp
- 13. Hill of Barra
- 14. Barmekin of Echt
- 15. Hill of Keir



10km

ILLUS 3 Detailed distribution of hillforts within study area (after RCAHMS 2007)

example, Wooliscroft & Hoffmann (2006) and Breeze (2011: 162, 170)) for various discussions on the nature of the Gask Ridge), they invaded Scotland on at least three occasions from the 1st century AD to the early 3rd century AD (Fraser 2009: 15–42), there are also records through the 4th century of the so called Pictish Wars with tribes from around Moray raiding the far south over a prolonged period (op cit: 54–5). These campaigns were a mixture of additions to the Empire and punitive raids and it is likely that this underestimates the true number of incursions.

Archaeological evidence from the Roman marching camp at Kintore (one of three within the sample area (RCAHMS 2007: 111–14)) demonstrates that there were at least two Roman occupations of the study area: initially in the 1st century and secondly in the late 2nd or 3rd centuries AD (Alexander 2000: 64; Cook & Dunbar 2008: 33). Given that normally very little or no internal evidence is associated with Roman marching camps (Welfare & Swan 1995; Davies & Jones 2006; Jones 2011), there is ample potential for the camp to have been reoccupied throughout the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. Indeed, there are several potentially relevant dates amongst the radiocarbon dating array (Alexander 2001: 64; Cook & Dunbar 2008: 33) that the excavators considered to be post-Roman, but could easily reflect late-Roman activity.

The sources are then silent until the 7th century when there were a series of placenames and church dedications that may reflect older establishments (Taylor 1996; 1999). To the south of Strathdon there is a record for conflict at Dunnottar, in 680 and Fraser (2009: 214) has argued that this was undertaken by the Verturian Pictish king, Bridei, son of Beli, operating from a Moray base. Unless this conflict took place by sea, it implies that the study area was either under

Bridei's control or that this was a prolonged raid culminating at Dunottar. However, these fragments merely serve to make the obvious point that in the study area, excavation is the only reliable source of data for the majority of the past.

#### THE HILLFORTS OF STRATHDON

The RCAHMS's Donside volume placed 18 forts and one cropmark enclosure in the following sequence, although it should be noted that the order has no chronological significance (RCAHMS 2007: 100–1 (illus 3)). A 20th site, Mither Tap, Bennachie, was not included in this scheme (ibid). The sites are focused on the northern and eastern edges of the Bennachie range of hills, although there is one site (Barmkyn of North Keig) on the southern side of this range. This may indicate that the sites are connected to the mains routes north/south and east/west around the hill range rather those going into it.

The classification system can be summarised as follows:

- (i) Type 1: oblong forts (Dunnideer and Tap o'Noth inner fort)
- (ii) Type 2: multivallate forts (Barra Hill and Barmekin of Echt (each has two phases))
- (iii) Type 3: large forts (Dunnideer outer enclosure, Bruce's Camp and Tillymuick)
- (iv) Type 4: very large enclosures (Hill of Newleslie and outer fort at Tap o'Noth)
- (v) Type 5: small enclosures (Wheedlemont, Maiden Castle outer enclosure and Barflat)
- (vi) Type 6: small thick stone-walled enclosures (Cairnmore, Barmkyn of North Keig, White Hill, Hill of Keir and Maiden Castle inner enclosure)



ILLUS 4 Plans of sampled sites with early medieval dates: A Maiden Castle, B Cairnmore and C Hill of Barra (A and C after RCAHMS 2007)

Two modifications are offered to this scheme. First, as both of the Type 2 hillforts, Hill of Barra and Barmekin of Echt have two phases (RCAHMS 2007: 98–9), Type 2a is therefore proposed to describe the outer multivallate fort with multiple entrances and Type 2b is to define the second phase: a univallate fort with a single entrance.

The second modification is more contentious, the Type 6 enclosures include two forms: those that could be roofed (Maiden Castle inner enclosure, Hill of Keir and White Hill) and those that could not (Cairnmore and Barmkyn of North Keig), although, of course, this does not mean that these smaller sites were necessarily roofed. Thus the author proposes that what were Type 6 hillforts become Type 6a and 6b, with 6a representing small, potentially roofable structures and 6b representing larger ones.

A total of six sites, which represented each of the different classes within the revised RCAHMS hillfort scheme, were selected for sampling: Bruce's Camp, Hill of Barra, Maiden Castle, Hill of Newleslie, Dunnideer and Cairnmore (Cook 2010a: illus 3). It should be noted that the reasons for selecting these sites over others were entirely pragmatic, ie ease of access, landowner willingness etc. Of the sites, only Hill of Barra, Maiden Castle and Cairnmore produced early medieval evidence (illus 4) and the results are summarised below, and will also include a précis of the work conducted by Dr Gordon Noble at Barflat (Noble & Gondek 2010; 2011).

This report does not detail those sites that had only prehistoric activity on them (Dunnideer (Cook 2010b); Bruce's Camp (Cook 2010a; Cook et al forthcoming) and Hill of Newleslie (Cook 2010a)) and a review of this evidence will be produced elsewhere (Cook forthcoming a). However, it is worth noting that these sites were dated to between

c 1000 and 250 BC (Cook 2010a; Cook forthcoming a).

It is not proposed to repeat the methodology or the detail of the results of the excavation, which are or will be published elsewhere. However, the approach undertaken by the author – keyhole excavation – is not without criticism. Therefore, it is proposed to make some specific comments about the methodology: trenches were located over ditches or on the inside of ramparts, the excavation proceeded in a stratigraphic manner, material selected for dating comprised large pieces of identifiable charcoal that had short taphonomic pathways from key contexts: eg, basal ditch fills, under or sealing walls and so on. In turn, these dates are used to argue for a framework for the site rather than date its sequence. While more excavation would have yielded more results, such larger exercises were beyond the resources of the author.

#### *Hill of Barra*

Hill of Barra (Types 2a and 2b; Cook 2010a; Cook forthcoming b: illus 4), comprises a hillfort with three ramparts, the inner rampart (Type 2b) blocks as many as three entrances in the outer two ramparts (Type 2a) and reuses one entrance in the south-east and therefore post-dates the outer enclosure. Overall, the interior measures 122m × 95m. The inner rampart is made of stone and measures 2.3m thick and 0.80m high, and is associated with a ditch, measuring at least 0.95m deep and 0.7m wide. The middle rampart comprises a soil dump and measures 0.23m high and 1.54m thick. The outer rampart is made of stone and has two construction phases and measures 1.75m thick and up to 0.65m high (Cook forthcoming b). A date of 2405 ± 35 BP (SUERC-28730) was recovered from the basal fill of the ditch associated with the inner enclosure, which, when calibrated to 2 sigma, gives a date of 560–360 BC. Therefore, both

the inner and outer enclosures predate 560–360 cal BC.

Between the two outer ramparts lay a ditch measuring 1.50m wide and 0.87m deep. Assuming that this ditch circles the whole of the site, it probably enclosed an area measuring 135m wide by 140m long. A date of  $1615 \pm 35$  BP (SUERC-28728) was recovered from charcoal from the primary fill of the ditch, calibrated to 2 sigma gives a date of AD 380–580 (Cook forthcoming b). This date indicates that the ditch was constructed before cal AD 380–580. However, it is argued that the actual cutting of the feature was likely to be very close to the radiometric measurement and certainly the date reflects the contemporary occupation of the refortified site.

#### *Maiden Castle*

Maiden Castle, Inch (Types 5 & 6a; Cook 2011: illus 4), comprises a bivallate enclosure measuring at maximum 40m east/west and 35m north/south, within which lay a circular thick-walled enclosure up to 20m in diameter (Type 6a). The outer ditch measured 3m wide and 0.75m deep, the outer rampart measured 4m thick by 1.6m high. The inner ditch measured 2.2m wide and 1.1m deep and the inner rampart measured 2m thick and 1.5m high (Type 5). The inner stone wall measured 2.25m thick and 1m high. Three radiocarbon dates were obtained from Maiden Castle, from below and above the inner rampart and under the inner stone-walled enclosure (respectively):  $1500 \pm 30$  BP (SUERC-22160),  $1495 \pm 40$  BP (SUERC-15909) and  $1540 \pm 40$  BP (SUERC-15908). Calibrated to 2 sigma they respectively date to AD 530–640, AD 500–650 and AD 420–610. All three of these dates are statistically indistinguishable and are argued to reflect activity pre- and post-dating the defences, which thus were constructed

between cal AD 420–650. First millennium AD decorated glass, a glass bead and evidence for non-ferrous metal working were also recovered from the site (Fraser Hunter pers comm).

#### *Cairnmore*

Cairnmore, Rhynie (Type 6b; Cook et al 2010: illus 4) comprises a double-banked sub-oval enclosure measuring at maximum 64m long by 48m wide (contra Feachem (1966: 72) which depicts the site as bivallate circular enclosure and is reproduced in Armit & Ralston (2003: 172)), it has an additional external ditch and rampart located solely at its south-east facing entrance. The inner rampart measures 1.6m thick and 0.4m high, the middle rampart survived 4.5m thick and 0.3m high, the outer rampart measured 1.3m thick and 0.2m high, the outer ditch measured 0.5m wide and 0.22m deep.

Charcoal from a destruction layer above the middle rampart yielded a date of  $1510 \pm 30$  (SUERC-32839), which when calibrated to 2 sigma gives a date of AD 500–630. In addition, charcoal from the foundation cut of the outer rampart gave a date of  $1580 \pm 30$  (SUERC-32840), which when calibrated to 2 sigma gives a date of AD 410–550. Within this same foundation cut were two brooch moulds and a pin mould that are likely to be early medieval in origin (Cook et al 2010). These dates indicate that the enclosure was both constructed and destroyed between cal AD 410–630.

#### *Barflat*

Excavations at the multivallate cropmark enclosures at Barflat, Rhynie (Type 5; Noble & Gondek 2010; 2011) uncovered evidence for early historic metalwork and imported pottery and glass, as well as radiocarbon dates indicating the site was constructed between AD 450–550 (ibid).

TABLE 1  
Radiocarbon Dates

| <i>Site</i>   | <i>Sample</i> | <i>Material</i> | <i>Description</i>                  | <i>Depositional context</i> | <i>Uncal BP</i> | <i>Calibrated 1-sigma</i> | <i>Calibrated 2-sigma</i> | <i>Delta-<sup>13</sup>C ‰</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Maiden Castle | Suerc-22160   | charcoal        | Charcoal under inner enclosure wall | primary                     | 1500 ± 30       | AD 530–640                | AD 540–600                | –27.9                         |
| Maiden Castle | Suerc-15909   | charcoal        | Charcoal within fill of ditch       | secondary                   | 1495 ± 40       | AD 500–650                | AD 535–620                | –25.4                         |
| Maiden Castle | Suerc-15908   | charcoal        | Charcoal under outer bank           | primary                     | 1540 ± 40       | AD 420–610                | AD 430–570                | –25.0                         |
| Hill of Barra | Suerc-28728   | charcoal        | Charcoal in basal fill of ditch     | secondary                   | 1615 ± 35       | AD 380–580                | AD 480–540                | –26.1                         |
| Cairnmore     | Suerc-32840   | charcoal        | Under middle rampart                | secondary                   | 1510 ± 30       | AD 410–550                | AD 480–540                | –26.0                         |
| Cairnmore     | Suerc-32839   | charcoal        | Destruction layer over rampart      | primary                     | 1580 ± 30       | AD 500–630                | AD 535–600                | –25.9                         |

## DISCUSSION

As the evidence is limited the discussion will simply seek to explore its potential and offer speculation, with the intention of provoking debate and stimulating more detailed research on these sites. The discussion will first consider the potential implication of an early medieval date from Type 6a structures, before considering the Strathdon early medieval settlement sequence. The evidence will then be extrapolated across the RCAHMS's scheme and the resulting patterns discussed. The potential factors and impetus to build hillforts will then be explored, before presenting the evidence in a regional and national context.

### *De novo early medieval Duns?*

Before considering the wider implications of the data, it is worth returning briefly to previous debates from Argyll regarding duns. Harding (1984; 1997: 122–33 & 2004: 129–32) has argued that small circular duns that could be roofed are cognate forms with the range of Late Iron Age stone enclosures found across Scotland (Complex Atlantic Roundhouses, brochs, duns, homesteads and ringforts). While many of those stone structures that could be roofed have clear Late Iron Age origins, they frequently display early historic reuse (Armit 1990: 55–9; Taylor 1990). This has given rise to considerable debate as to whether some of the structures are in fact *de novo* constructions from the early medieval period (Nieke 1990; Alcock 2003: 186–90). The dates associated from Maiden Castle's construction (Cook 2011) provide clear evidence for the possibility that this is the case.

### *The Strathdon early medieval settlement sequence*

The evidence from the various early medieval hillforts and enclosures from Strathdon

indicates that they were constructed between the late 4th and mid-7th centuries AD, there is also evidence for the use of their internal space in the 8th century at Mither Tap. However, there is no evidence in the 9th or 10th centuries for *de novo* constructions or even use, a pattern reflected elsewhere in Scotland (Driscoll 1998a: 169; Ralston & Armit 2003: 225).

The first and most obvious conclusion from this new evidence is that it almost fills the gap in the unenclosed sequence identified above. Archaeologically visible unenclosed settlement ended in the middle of the 3rd century AD. Between *c* cal AD 250–340, there was no evidence for any form of structure, enclosed or unenclosed, and the only activity comprised ovens and pits. Between *c* cal AD 340 and 650, hillforts and enclosures were used and constructed, with far more limited activity in the wider landscape such as pits and ovens. From *c* cal AD 650–1000, there were no more *de novo* hillforts, although there was some use of their interiors in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, and unenclosed settlement returned and included technologies associated with agricultural surplus and long terms transport or storage, ie corn-drying kilns and underground storage.

Looking in more detail at these proposed patterns, two potential causes for the initial appearance and subsequent disappearance of enclosure may be detected. Is it possible the instability caused by the removal of Roman tribute and the subsequent conflicts of the 4th century AD causes a societal collapse from which enclosed settlement emerges? This impulse may have been entirely practical in origin but subsequently subject to social competition, hence the variety of non-practical forms? The difficulty with this proposal is, of course, that in the early medieval period, evidence for enclosure is found across northern and western Britain

and not just the north-east, although it may be another contributory factor in this area. The subsequent abandonment of enclosures in the 8th and 9th centuries and the appearance of corn-drying kilns and underground storage may reflect either an increase in agricultural productivity caused by the medieval climatic optimum (Ross 2011: 8) or perhaps by some more root and branch change in landholding and society though which is unclear.

#### EXTRAPOLATION

Excavation has provided dates that suggest that Types 5, 6a and 6b hillforts and cropmark enclosures are early medieval in origin. Extrapolating this evidence across the RCAHMS's scheme suggests that there are a total of eight such sites in the study area (Maiden Castle (two phases), Wheedlemont, Barflat, Cairnmore, White Hill, Barmkyn of North Keig and Hill of Keir).

When the dates from Mither Tap and the re-fortification of Hill of Barra are added to the total, there appear to have been at least 10 early medieval hillforts or enclosures in Strathdon (illus 5). Given that the total sample of sites is 21 (the original 20 plus Hill of Barra's second re-fortification) this means that *c* 48% of the hillforts in Strathdon are either early medieval in origin or were used during that period. If, as will be argued below, Tap o'Noth could also have been utilized during this period then the percentage rises above 50%.

This is certainly a remarkable turnaround from the previous evidence of four sites in Aberdeenshire (illus 1; Alcock 1988: 41; 2003: 8), however, what does it mean? There are too few radiocarbon dates to attempt more complex levels of analysis, and it is possible that the evidence represents successive enclosures, perhaps with some level of evolution from simple to complex, as with Atlantic Roundhouses (Armit 1990),

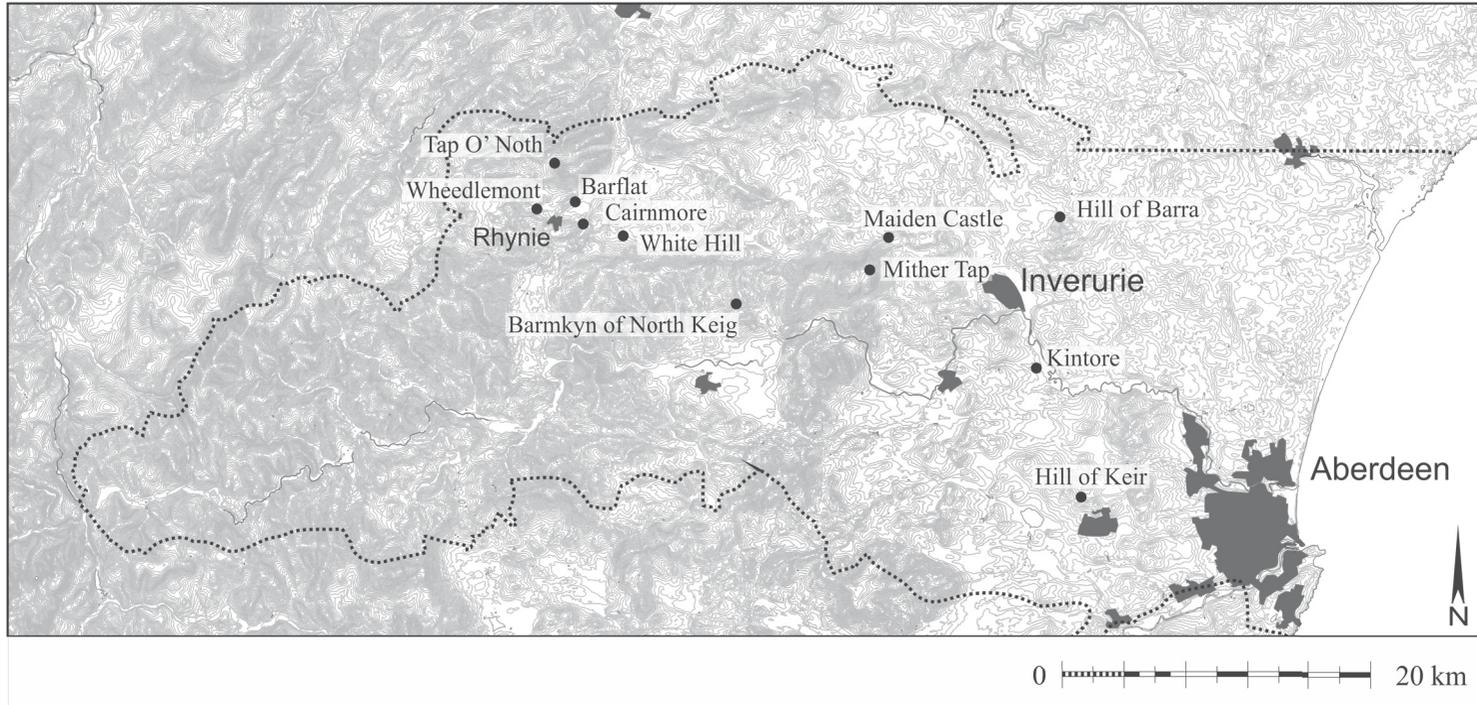
or alternatively, some form of hierarchical settlement pattern. From the dating evidence it is possible that many of the sites could have been contemporary and it is on this basis that the discussion will proceed.

Looking in more detail at the evidence, a number of patterns emerge: with the exception of the re-fortification of the Hill of Barra, the bulk of the sites are small; the richer material assemblage is found at the smaller sites and there are two clusters of sites: a discrete concentration at Rhynie (Barflat, Wheedlemont, Cairnmore and White Hill) and another more disparate one at Inverurie (Mither Tap, Maiden Castle, Hill of Keir and Hill of Barra).

The area around Inverurie is more developed (urban and arable) than Rhynie and there could easily have been some unrecorded loss of sites at this location. Each cluster is also associated with a group of Class I Pictish symbol stones (RCAHMS 2007: 124), there are eight stones around Rhynie, including the famous Rhynie Man (Shepherd & Shepherd 1978), and a more disparate nine between the southern edge of Inverurie and Kintore.

The two distributions might be explained by the presence of north/south routes either side of the Bennachie range: the modern A96 at Inverurie, which is the same route used by the Roman marching camps (Breeze 1982: 133), and the A97 through Rhynie. However, there is both a qualitative and quantitative difference between the two clusters: some of the sites around Inverurie are larger (Hill of Barra) or more impressive (Mither Tap) than those around Rhynie, which tend to be small enclosures, although these sites lie in the immediate environs of the vitrified fort at Tap o'Noth, the second highest hillfort in Scotland (RCAHMS 2007: 103–5) and argued by this study to date to *c* 250 BC (Cook 2010b).

It seems likely that the smaller enclosures (Types 5, 6a & 6b) represent the typical



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Illus 5 Extrapolation of early medieval dating evidence across the RCAHMS scheme

enclosed settlement pattern, with the larger or more impressive hillforts (Mither Tap and Hill of Barra) used for specific functions. Before considering this, the variable size of the small hillforts perhaps indicates differing status, and certainly there are more Type 5 and 6b enclosures (Barflat, Wheedlemont, Cairnmore, Maiden Castle outer enclosure and Barmkyn of North Keig) than Type 6a (Maiden Castle inner enclosure, Hill of Keir and White Hill). However, which is higher status? Is this the difference between the equivalent of a hamlet and a village or a tower house and a village? Indeed, is this even an accurate comparison, given that Maiden Castle sits in both classes? However, until the function of these sites can be understood, any debate of their status must be restricted. Returning to the larger sites, it seems possible that as both Mither Tap and Hill of Barra were used or reused in this period so too was Tap o'Noth: given the prominence of the site it would be strange if it was not. However, quite what form such putative reuse would have taken is uncertain, although there is an inner enclosure within the oblong fort, it remains undated (RCAHMS 2007: 105).

Accepting that Tap o'Noth may also have been utilized during the early medieval period and the western cluster around Inverurie may have been diminished by subsequent development, is it possible these two areas represent different polities with the more impressive sites acting as caputs?

Certainly, Hill of Barra and Tap o'Noth have prehistoric origins and there was a tradition in both early medieval Ireland and Scotland of using such sites to draw legitimacy from the past for the present regime (Warner 1988; Driscoll 1998b). However, none of these sites are associated with any of the high status goods found at the smaller ones or indeed other caputs such as Burghhead or Dunadd (Edwards & Ralston 1978; Lane &

Campbell 2000), such material may remain as yet undetected as both have been subject to either extremely limited excavation or none at all.

If not caputs then perhaps such sites acted as refuges in time of war or disturbance? Certainly there are numerous accounts of disturbance and warfare across the early medieval period, for example, between 638 and 738 there are annalistic references to 10 sieges, five burnings, three destructions and one capture of strongholds or forts in what was to become Scotland (Alcock 1988: 31). Indeed, the burnt rampart at Cairnmore may represent some form of enemy action (Cook et al 2010). This proposal remains a clear possibility but one that cannot be further substantiated and such sites could have been used for a variety of purposes ranging from fairs, markets, religious functions and so on.

Another intriguing possibility involves the conversion of the north-east of Scotland to Christianity. This is clearly a complex and difficult subject and beyond both the evidence and the paper. However, mention has already been made of Clarke's (2007) suggestion of the appearance of Pictish iconography as a reaction to proselytising Christians and a reassertion of a pagan identity. Could the reuse of older prehistoric sites reflect the same process? Again unfortunately the evidence is too slight for further debate.

Regardless of any putative pagan response to Christianity, its wider adoption will presumably have altered existing power structures. Indeed, it may be observed that the distribution of Class I Pictish symbol stones is different to those with Christian iconography on them (RCAHMS 2007: 118, 124) which may indicate a shift in local polities. In this context, the reuse of Mither Tap, Bennachie, may be of interest. Johnson (1903: 38) and Watson (1926: 264) have suggested that an alternative meaning of Bennachie from 'Hill

of the Ce' is 'Hill of Blessing' in a Christian context. Perhaps this tentative evidence indicates a change of focus in the study area: from a pagan Rhynie or Hill of Barra, to a Christian Mither Tap, continuing to be occupied after all other local hillforts have been abandoned?

Mither Tap is certainly the most widely visible of the three sites and is close to the Maiden Stone, a Christian Class II Pictish symbol stone (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 66; RCAHMS 2007: 126), as well as two potentially early medieval Christian centres at Fetternear and Abersnethock (Fraser 2009: 110). However, to expand beyond this tentative suggestion on the basis of the available evidence would be folly.

#### SOCIAL COMPETITION OR WARFARE?

While mention of social competition and warfare has been made in connection with the use of the larger, more impressive sites in the study (Hill of Barra, Mither Tap and Tap o'Noth), the impetus behind the enclosure of the smaller, more common sites has not been discussed. There has been considerable debate as to the nature and meaning of enclosed sites, with interpretations ranging from prestige, stock control, keeping predators out, tribute to ancestors or gods and defence in times of warfare, etc (Bowden & McOmish 1987; Collis 1996; Ralston 2006; Armit 2007; Lock 2011). As has been demonstrated above, the historical and archaeological record provides ample explanations for the creation of enclosed space, both in terms of social competition or warfare during the early medieval period. Elsewhere in Scotland's past, social competition is often argued to be the impetus behind change, for example, the evolution of the various forms of Complex Atlantic Roundhouses of northern and western Scotland (Armit 1990).

The evidence is of course limited, but mention has already been made of the burnt rampart at Cairnmore, possibly representing enemy action. Certainly, if it was an accident one might imagine that it would have been cleared and repaired? On the other hand, a tiny site like Maiden Castle cannot seriously be considered defensive and yet it had a twin ditch and bank system and a massive internal wall, certainly Edwards has argued that the size and complexity of enclosures in early medieval Ireland is connected to status (1990: 33). Perhaps in this latter case, the apparent rapidity of architectural change on the site (Cook 2011) may be an indication of social competition and conspicuous consumption rather than defence?

It is likely that both defence and issues of social competition influenced the design and construction of these sites. However, what may be more telling is the negative evidence; there is clear historical and archaeological evidence for warfare, invasion and instability from the rest of what is now Scotland across the majority of the 1st millennium AD – from the Roman incursions to those of the Vikings and numerous internal conflicts in between (Anderson 1922; Alcock 1976; Alcock et al 1989; Alcock 1988; Alcock 2003: 117–201; Woolf 2007; Fraser 2009; Jones 2011). On the available evidence however, hillforts were only constructed during a fraction of this overall period: at an absolute maximum interpretation of the radiocarbon dates hillforts were constructed between *c* cal AD 380–650 and their interiors used between *c* cal AD 340–780, ie at most, 440 years out of potentially 1,000 (44%), although the actual period of use and construction could be considerably smaller, given the inherent wide error range in radiocarbon dates. It is also worth observing that to the immediate north-east of the study area there are no recorded hillforts at all but clear evidence for

contemporary occupation (Ralston & Armit 2003: 220–1), so very clearly, hillforts are not always the typical response to external pressure (see below).

These arguments do not rule out defence as a function and motivation in times of pressure and invasion for the enclosure of a site. However, it is apparent that hillforts are not the only response to instability and that certainly this study has not picked up the alternatives. Indeed, such putative evidence may be beyond archaeology if it comprised better trained armies, payments, use of mercenaries or simple retreat, and the insular historical record of the 1st millennium AD provides numerous such examples (Woolf 2007; Fraser 2009).

#### *Enclosure in the north-east beyond Strathdon*

This study has explicitly examined the discrete enclosed sequence of Strathdon and this raises the question: what of the area to the north-east, which, as has been observed, has no hillforts (illus 2)? There are a number of potential explanations: the area did not have a sufficiently high population, the evidence has been destroyed, there was a different social system, or the evidence has not yet been discovered or is archaeologically invisible. Certainly, the distribution of both Pictish placenames and find spots does appear to show a more disparate distribution than Strathdon (Ralston & Armit 2003: 220–1). It is also likely that some sites may have been destroyed before their recording but not in large numbers. A different social system is also possible, perhaps even involving some form of hierarchical relationship with Strathdon? However, it is equally likely that enclosures were used and they exist untested amongst the cropmarks or perhaps even hedges were used. There is simply not enough evidence to draw any conclusions, other than that more excavation is needed.

As was observed at the beginning of the article, the only other contemporary sites in the whole of the north-east of Scotland lie on the Moray coast, which of course is dominated by Burghead (Edwards & Ralston 1978) and the kingdom of Fortriu (Fraser 2009: 50–1). Given that we understand so little of contemporary relations, the coastal sites and those of Strathdon could potentially represent either outposts of the same polity controlling the interior between them or separate kingdoms. To the south, where historical evidence is available, there does seem to have been small Anglo-Saxon sub-kingdoms and areas of influence, almost ‘plantations’ within what would have been considered Pictish or British territory (Fraser 2009: 201). In the Strathdon context, perhaps the impetus behind its concentration of hillforts lies in the area having been captured and its subsequent defence or simply to prevent such an occurrence happening – although this is clearly speculation. It might be that these hillforts relate to the expansion of Fortriu’s hegemony from Moray to Kincardineshire between the late 4th to late 7th centuries (Fraser 2009: 214–15), or perhaps resistance to it?

#### NATIONAL PICTURE

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the volume of research into Scottish hillforts and enclosures, in addition to this study, work has been undertaken in Angus and South Aberdeenshire (Finlayson et al 1999), East Lothian (Haselgrove 2009), Western Perthshire (<http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/archaeology/research/projects/serf/furtherinformation/>) and research is currently proposed for eastern Perthshire (David Strachan pers comm). Of these projects, only the first two have been published fully, however, both programmes

failed to locate new evidence for early medieval hillforts (Dunwell & Ralston 2008: 88–9; Haselgrove 2009). This pattern echoes what Alcock proposed in 1988 and 2003, but is it real?

It has been long apparent that Scotland is not a homogenous zone and that there are numerous regions and sub-regions (Piggott 1966; Hunter 1997; Armit & Ralston 2003: 171; Hunter 2007b). Amongst the corpus of hillforts there are both clear regional patterns in overall distribution (Macinnes 1982; Armit & Ralston 2003: 181; Davies 2007) and regional forms with discrete distributions, for example, the oblong series (Feachem 1966: 67; Cook 2010b). In addition, it is clear that hillforts are constructed for specific reasons and factors, many of which could be local. Thus it may be that in early medieval Angus and East Lothian, hillforts were not constructed, and this is certainly possible, though this contention would surprise many (Cottam & Small 1974). However, it is as likely that, as with Strathdon prior to this project, archaeology has simply failed to identify early medieval sites.

For example, there are over 600 enclosures and hillforts in East Lothian (Cowley 2009: 206). The Traprain Law Environs Project (Haselgrove 2009) geophysically surveyed 30 enclosures and of these it excavated six. This added to an existing total of *c* eight excavated and radiometrically dated enclosures (Broxmouth (Hill 1982); St Germain's (Alexander & Watkins 1998); Castle Park, Dunbar (Perry 2000); Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007); Port Seton (two sites) (Haselgrove & McCullagh 2000); Traprain Law (Armit et al 2002) and The A1 upgrade (Lelong & MacGregor 2007)). While this list is clearly not exhaustive, there are unlikely to be significant quantities of other excavations missed by this author and the excavated sample is around 14, representing *c* 2% of the total.

This is simply not enough. Obviously the way to resolve many of these issues is to increase the data set. This has traditionally been achieved through either large-scale research programmes (eg, the Traprain Law Environs Project (Haselgrove 2009)) and/or well structured mitigation exercises (eg, The A1 Upgrade (Lelong & MacGregor 2007)). However, given that the current planning ethos stresses preservation in situ (Planning Advice Note 2/2011: Planning and Archaeology), this places a greater burden on research. However, in both the current economic climate and the spirit of crowd sourcing and capacity building, it is argued that low impact, tightly defined programmes of keyhole excavation, using volunteers, must be part of the overall package. Such work can achieve significant results for a fraction of the price of larger scale studies, as is hoped has been demonstrated by the *Hillforts of Strathdon Project* which cost *c* £10,000.

## CONCLUSION

Whilst a work-in-progress, *The Hillforts of Strathdon Project* has demonstrated the clear, hard benefits of both keyhole excavation and of working with the RCAHMS's typological schemes. The programme has increased the sample of known or suspected early medieval hillforts in Aberdeenshire and Moray over three-fold, from four to (potentially) 15 (including Tap o'Noth) and indicated that over *c* 50% of the small grouping of hillforts in the study area could date to this period, a highly surprising and unexpected conclusion that has dramatically altered our understanding of hillforts in the area. This evidence reflects a complex system, encompassing status, social display, religious changes, conspicuous consumption and responses to warfare. While a deeper analysis of these putative patterns

is beyond the current study, it is clear that even in the face of external invasions hillforts were not always a standard response and that their design and construction reflect internal factors and judgments too. Looking beyond Strathdon, the current absence of early medieval enclosures in Angus and East Lothian could result from such local decisions and factors, although it is equally likely to represent too small a sample size and that more excavation is required. It is hoped that the approach undertaken by the author, as well as the very speculative discussion, will stimulate both a more detailed examination of the sites and further such work across Scotland.

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