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WETHER HILL, NORTHUMBERLAND: EXCAVATIONS 1993-98.

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(1) WETHER HILL EXCAVATIONS 1998

The fifth season of excavations by NAG at Wether Hill concentrated upon the timber-built sites (Area 3) to attempt to characterise the two enclosures and determine whether they included a settlement component. In addition a series of sample trenches across the wall surrounding the cairn (Area 4) on the E side of the field system was also undertaken.

Area 3: the timber-built complex

This complex is situated upon a natural platform on the E side of the field system ranged along the spur of Wether Hill (cf Topping 1998, 5, Fig 1). The platform is defined by a gully on its W and N sides, which was sampled this season by two test pits to attempt to establish its origins. The test pits were 1m square: both revealed a stratigraphic sequence that although lacking precise definition, did record a series of soil deposits derived from upslope (and the direction of the field system) within a generalised layer up to 44cms deep. These deposits suggest that the gully must originally have been more pronounced than at present. In addition, the scale of these redeposited soils from the adjacent fields indicates not only the intensity of arable practices, but presumably also the effects of natural erosion at what must always have been an exposed location. The question of whether the gully was a man-made feature excavated to define or create a partial boundary around the platform remains ambiguous. The test pit sections did not provide a definitive answer; the fractured nature of the bedrock in the base of the gully might equally be interpreted as evidence of human activity or simply glacial action.

The main focus of the fieldwork in 1998 was upon the central areas of both palisaded enclosures in an attempt to characterise their typology and function. Both were found to have been truncated by later episodes of cultivation, which appear to have reduced the stratigraphy considerably and affected the preservation of all but negative features. Previous excavations have established that the earlier palisade lying in the N part of the site was sub-oval in form with internal dimensions of roughly 20m N-S by 16m transversely. Approximately 75% of the perimeter has now been excavated and although the location of the entrance is unknown, the excavations demonstrate that it must be situated in the NE quadrant, perhaps mirroring the orientation of those cutting through both the hillfort defences and the earlier stratified palisade

within the fort.

The interior of the earlier palisade contained the much-reduced, fragmentary remains of the N arc of a ring-groove building (Plate 2). The ring-groove construction trench averaged some 0.30m in width and was up to 0.25m deep. No entrance survived, but originally must have been located in the lost S arc of the structure.

To the NW of the ring-groove a pit was discovered which had been disturbed in antiquity. This feature contained broken fragments of Beaker pottery (Plate 1) and several sherds of Peterborough Ware of Meldon Bridge style. This assemblage represents vessels with a chronological range from the Middle/Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age (*c*2500-1500BC). At the base of the pit a linear deposit of compacted charcoal was discovered lying upon the floor and side of the pit, perhaps representing the carbonised remains of a stake or timber fixture. The charcoal was collected for C14 assay, and demonstrated that the pit appeared to have been excavated in the later Neolithic (3740+/-70BP, Beta-124785). Further charcoal samples collected from the upper fill recorded that the disturbance had taken place in the later Iron Age, at a period broadly contemporary with the construction of the palisades (2200+/-60 BP, Beta-124784; see also summary below).

Within the later palisaded site, dated by C14 to roughly 200BC, the remains of a post-built building was discovered with an internal diameter of some 4.5m (Plate 4). The severely truncated post-holes had a maximum depth of 15cms, and were generally 80cms in diameter. In the SSE (at 152^{o}) lay two adjacent enlarged sub-oval post-holes that had a longitudinal length of 1.45m by 0.90m transversely: these probably represent the position of the entrance. The post-holes on the southern arc contained large numbers of potsherds and substantial quantities of charcoal, which was collected for C14 assay and demonstrated that the building also originated in the Middle/Late Iron Age and was contemporary with the palisades (2070+/-60 BP, Beta-124783; 2210+/-70 BP, Beta-124786). Although the pottery comprised mostly crude undecorated fabrics, several sherds had distinctive inturned rims, from at least two separate vessels, one larger than the other. These vessels resemble bowl forms, possibly with affinities to those found at Hetha Burn 1 (Burgess 1970, 22, fig 12 # 3, 4, & 10). The question of residuality in respect to these deposits is problematic as they might represent secondary deposits of relict midden debris swept into the packing of the post-holes during the construction phase, or could equally be contemporary with the use of the building.

A final trench was opened over part of the N perimeter of the earlier (N) palisaded enclosure with the intention of obtaining charcoal samples for C14 dating. As in previous seasons the construction trench contained many packing stones, some with voids marking post-pipes. However, no charcoal was recovered, therefore this enclosure remains strictly undated apart from its stratigraphic relationship to the later (S) palisade.

Overall, the excavations in 1998 have recorded the presence of buildings or houses within both palisades, arguably demonstrating the possibility of settlement within these enclosures. If the chronological span of the cross-ridge dyke is a reliable indicator of at least part of the chronology of the hillfort, then these sites will have been synchronous, forming an integral component of the later Iron Age landscape.

Area 4: the cairn

The only feature of the cairn remaining unsampled was the footings of a stone wall that encircled the cairn (see Topping 1998, 5, Fig 4). Three test trenches were set out across this wall in the NW, NE and the S; each examined a 2m section of wall. These test pits demonstrated that the wall had been set into a shallow construction trench 0.20m deep and up to 0.60m wide. No underlying features were recorded nor artefacts recovered; no organic deposits were encountered for sampling.

(2) A SPECULATIVE SUMMARY OF EXCAVATIONS UPON WETHER HILL, NORTHUMBERLAND, 1993-98

The NAG excavations on Wether Hill have made a significant contribution to the study of Cheviot landscape development. The Wether Hill spur, dominated by the multi-phase hillfort and field systems bounded by the cross-ridge dyke to the S, would traditionally have been dated largely to the Romano-British period. Such a simplistic chronological assumption was influenced by the *'Hownam Sequence'*, an interpretative framework originating in the late 1950's, which envisaged the organic development of sites leading from simple timber-built enclosures through to more complex stone-built multivallate forts, taking as a yardstick the eponymous site in Roxburgh which demonstrated such a palimpsest of constructional techniques. Thus the fort upon Wether Hill would have been placed towards the end of this sequence from the stratigraphic evidence of a palisaded site being replaced by the stone-built bivallate fort. However, although the Hownam Sequence is rarely contradicted (with the possible exception of sites such as Blackborough Hill, Roxburgh, where a palisaded enclosure lies undamaged within the hillfort and could be seen *arguably* as a later feature), it did not take into account the possibility that '*successive*' constructional techniques could actually also be contemporary, a factor demonstrated by more recent C14 dates. Consequently modern data has begun to show a more complex picture of site development, construction techniques presumably being influenced not only by raw material availability, but also driven by fashion and display so that the visual impact of the site became of equal importance to other considerations. Such a situation can readily be illustrated locally (albeit by single C14 dates) by Brough Law hillfort overlooking the palisaded settlement on Ingram Hill. Presumably social constraints dictated why of these two roughly contemporary sites, one enclosure was built upon a hilltop in stone while the other was constructed at its foot in timber.

Prehistoric artefact assemblages are equally ambiguous and unhelpful. Much of the prehistoric material culture of the local communities in the Cheviots remain – even now - relatively unfashionable for detailed study, and are poorly characterised with few typologies available to assist chronological ascription, particularly with undecorated pottery. Once beyond the easily recognisable wares such as Beaker or other incised and impressed types, the plain crudely built vessels comprising much of the archaeological record are simply undateable without C14 associations or links to other diagnostic artefacts. Hawkes' plea still echoes from the 1930's: we desperately need more detailed artefact studies, the production of corpora and the development of typologies for use in the Cheviots.

Against this chronological ambiguity, the results of the NAG excavations, and those of Durham University, can be seen to be gradually challenging some of the long-held preconceptions regarding landscape development. Now that NAG has a growing C14 chronology for various sites upon Wether Hill to set alongside a range of diagnostic artefacts, it is clear that archaeologically there is a great time-depth represented upon this hill top spur stretching from at least the Middle Neolithic period (*c*3,500BC) through to the present.

Provisionally, sherds of Peterborough Ware pottery in both the local Ford and Meldon Bridge Styles represent the earliest evidence upon Wether Hill. The precise context of the Ford Style sherd is still unknown (it was a residual artefact from a ploughsoil overlying the Middle/Later Iron Age palisades in Area 3; cf Topping 1998, 5, Fig 3), but allowing for the observation that most Neolithic impressed pottery is recovered from settlements in either pits or middens (Gibson 1986, 23), there is the implication that another early phase of activity remains to be discovered. It may be that chronologically the Ford sherd is associated with an earlier Neolithic phase than those of the Meldon Bridge Style vessel (particularly as the latter was found together with a Beaker in a sealed context), thus two separate and/or successive phases might be represented.

Later Neolithic activity is illustrated by middle to late style Beaker sherds from the pit (Plate 1) within the earlier (N) palisaded enclosure in Area 3, referred to above. The pit had been disturbed in the later Iron Age, presumably when the palisaded enclosure was built placing the construction trench less than 1m from the pit. The Beaker had been broken and redistributed throughout the fill of this pit. It is interesting to speculate upon the relationship this Beaker pit might have had with the robbed burial cairn roughly 35m to the S (Topping 1998, 5, Fig 4), and whether it could have been some form of satellite burial. Unfortunately a lack of scientific dates for the Area 4 cairn force the debate to rely upon the forthcoming specialist analysis of the associated lithics.

The robbed burial cairn in Area 4 is the most likely element of Bronze Age land use upon the spur. Total excavation has demonstrated that the cairn had been robbed by a central trench, and no evidence of secondary interments was discovered. Numerous Medieval/Post-Medieval pottery sherds were scattered amongst the disturbed deposits and presumably relate to the robbing episode(s). Considering that earthworks of ridge-and-furrow cultivation lie no more than 30m to the E of the cairn, it is conceivable that Medieval farmers were responsible for the robbing. No antiquarian documentation appears to exist.

Although little survived from primary contexts within the cairn, a broken flint blade with fine retouching (42mm in length by 28mm) was found stratified beneath the W edge. Near the centre of the cairn a fragmentary alignment of boulders was discovered in the NE quadrant, roughly aligned N to S and springing at a tangent from the perimeter. To the W of this feature, and towards the centre of the cairn, an intriguing rim sherd was recovered from a disturbed primary context. The sherd is of a fine grey fabric from a small diameter cup or bowl and has been wheel-turned. The shape of the rim shows strong similarities to an example found at Hartburn (Jobey 1973, 35, Fig 9 # 5) and considered to have been pre-Roman/Romano-British in date. If this parallel is accurate, then this could suggest that the cairn originated from a horizon later than the Bronze Age, and was thus associated with a major phase of activity upon Wether Hill when the field system, palisaded sites in Area 3, the cross-ridge dyke and presumably the hillfort were

all in use. Such a late attribution might help to explain the unusual location of the cairn, its lack of landscape prominence and its limited view shed, if the main focus was to view it from the fort and fields.

Table 1: SUMMARY OF CHRONOLOGICAL CONTEXTS UPON WETHER HILL

Date	***Site***	***Context***
Middle Neolithic	3	• Residual Ford Style Peterborough Ware from ?late Iron Age ploughsoil; • Flint artefacts.
Late Neolithic	3	• Beaker and Meldon Bridge Style Peterborough Ware from pit [3740+/-70 BP, Beta-124785]; • Flint artefacts.
Bronze Age	?4 3 & 4	• Robbed burial cairn; • Flint artefacts.
Early Iron Age	?5 ?3	• Earlier palisaded enclosure stratified beneath hillfort; • Early palisade on E side of field system.
Middle/Later Iron Age	3 3 3 1 1 5	• Later palisaded enclosure on E side of field system [2220+/-90 BP, Beta-89361; 2180+/-80 BP, Beta-101731]; • Post-built structure (?house) within above listed palisade on E side of field system [2070+/-60 BP, Beta-124783; 2210+/-70 BP, Beta-124786]; • Disturbance to Beaker pit [2200+/-60 BP, Beta-124784]; • Cross-ridge dyke built [2170+/-70 BP, Beta-89362]; • Some cereal cultivation [pollen monolith]; • Hillfort.
Romano-British period	1 5	• Cross-ridge dyke still used; • ?Hillfort inhabited.
Early Saxon	1 1	• Abandonment of cross-ridge dyke [1590+/-60 BP, Beta-101730] and ?hillfort, *c*AD650; • Some cereal cultivation [pollen monolith].
Medieval		• Broad ridge-and-furrow cultivation; • Shieling.
Post-Medieval		• Narrow ridge-and-furrow; • Bridleway; • Estate boundaries.

The earlier Iron Age is as yet poorly represented. Relative stratigraphy would suggest that the fragmentary palisaded enclosure underlying the hillfort could date to this period, as may the sequentially later stone-built defences. However, beyond these features little structural evidence can be identified currently.

Much more evidence exists for the Middle to Late Iron Age period, roughly the 4th to 3rd centuries BC onwards. The later of the two palisaded sites in Area 3 was in use (the earlier palisade need not have pre-dated the later by any significant amount of time), and the cross-ridge dyke had been constructed across the spur. The presence of the dyke implies the existence of the hillfort or at least the underlying palisaded settlement. The adjacent field system on the summit of the ridge to the N of the fort must also have been in use, particularly during its cord rig phase. The chronology of the cross-ridge dyke suggests that the hillfort and field system must have remained in use into the Romano-British period, and from the evidence of the pollen analysis, cultivation continued into the early Saxon period (inf A Davies). This evidence is of crucial importance as it demonstrates that settled agricultural practices continued from the Iron Age through the Romano-British period and into the sub-Roman era. Of equal importance is the implication that the hillfort remained occupied, thus filling one of the traditional settlement voids in the Cheviots - ie, that local groups continued to inhabit roundhouses even following the Roman withdrawal and there was not the introduction of a novel house form that was diagnostic to this period. If the evidence from the cross-ridge dyke is an accurate indicator, then the hillfort may have been abandoned simultaneously at roughly AD650, broadly coinciding with the occupation of the Anglo-Saxon palace at Yeavering. It may be that Saxon land division began to make inroads into the hills at this time, perhaps displacing some traditional communities.

The scale or duration of post-Roman/Saxon activity is at present unclear, although the pollen data from the cross-ridge dyke suggests a growth in heather grassland and an episodic decline in cereal cultivation (inf A Davies). This might reflect not only wetter climatic conditions but also a change from mixed agriculture to predominantly pasture. The evidence of the earthwork palimpsest might suggest that these changes occurred following the abandonment of the broad ridge-and-furrow cultivation on the E side of the spur during the earlier Medieval period, perhaps around the late 13th century when political events led to successive cross-Border forays. This period would have been one of great instability in this part of Northumberland (witness the burnings of Ingram church in 1296, for example). Such events must have forced farmers to convert their livelihood into *'moveable wealth'* such as sheep or cattle that could be driven elsewhere when invasion threatened. This trend was never reversed and upland grazing still predominates today.

To summarise, the excavations by NAG upon Wether Hill have shown that people lived and farmed on this spur from at least the Middle Neolithic period through to the present, an almost unbroken record of some 6,000 years of human activity.

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