Survey work on Turin Hill, Angus

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Introduction

Turin Hill is a ridge of Devonian Lower Old Red Sandstone (NO 514 535), aligned south-west to north-east, located approximately 6 km north-east of Forfar, overlooking Rescobie Loch in central Angus (Illus 1). It commands extensive views along Strathmore and has long been recognised to have the remains of a hillfort on its summit. It has surprisingly received little attention in comparison to other sizeable Angus hillforts, such as the Caterhuns and Finavon Hill. In March 1998 a survey of the hill was undertaken as part of the University of Edinburgh’s Angus and South Aberdeenshire Field School. In addition to providing a training exercise for undergraduate participants, the primary aim was to produce a plan of the then observed archaeological features on Turin Hill and, extending a programme initiated elsewhere (Dunwell and Strachan forthcoming), to identify and assess the nature and extent of any threats affecting these remains. The work was grant aided by Historic Scotland.

Turin Hill stands out in its landscape, the upland block around Aberlemno, which also includes the well-known fort on Finavon Hill. Not only does it provide extensive views, but its cragginess is out of character with the more gently rolling landscape of the southern part of the interflue between the Lunan Water and the South Esk. The southern side of the hill is in large measure composed of three cliff lines (Turin Craigs) which step up, like terraces, from around the base at 175 m OD to the summit at 252 m OD; the uppermost free face is c 10 m high. The northern slope of the hill, by contrast, is much gentler and has no vertical rock faces. There are a number of bedrock outcrops on the summit and the subsoil across the rest of the hill is likely to consist of till and morainic drift. The present-day vegetation cover is a mixture of rough grass and heather used for grazing both cattle and sheep.

The Statistical Account (1791–99, vol XIII, 587), in the entry for Rescobie parish, describes the archaeological remains on Turin Hill as a ‘stronghold, or place of defence, consisting of various contiguous buildings, with a circular citadel about 40 yards in diameter. The situation has been well chosen, being secured by an impregnable rock in front, much like the face of Salisbury Craigs (Edinburgh), and of difficult access all around. It is now called Kemp or Camp Castle ...’. In addition, this account also refers to the geology of the hill, which was being quarried at that time in ‘workings astonishing to look at’. Subsequently, both Lewis (1846, 417) and Groome (1885, 249) also mention quarries on Turin Hill (Illus 2) for extracting grey paving stone and Old Red Sandstone conglomerate. It is also noted that the freestone from the quarries was valued for its colour and for taking a fine polish (Lewis 1846, 417).

Archaeological features on Turin Hill, more particularly the central circular homestead and oblong fort, are depicted on the first edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (Forfarshire 1865, sheet XXXIII) and are named ‘Kemp’s Castle’; extensive quarries are depicted east of the fort on the same map (Illus 2, top). Apart from an early sketch plan of the site by Christison (1900, 96–98, fig 48; reproduced here as Illus 3, top), along with a drawn elevation of some of the stone walling in the central circular homestead as it then survived (Christison 1900, fig 49), the only other published survey was undertaken by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) during the post-war marginal lands programme (Feachem 1955, 74–75, fig 3; here – Illus 3, bottom). Both surveys recorded the remains of smaller circular enclosures as well as the fort on the summit of the hill. These features have variously been termed ‘oval works’, or ‘citadels’ (Christison 1900), ‘circular defensive enclosures’ (Feachem 1955) and ‘duns’ (Feachem 1963, 106; RCAHMS 1978, 16, no 96). They are broadly comparable to a series of stone-built structures in Perthshire, described as ‘circular forts’ (Watson 1913; 1915) or ‘ring forts’ (Stewart, 1969), which Taylor (1990) has renamed circular homesteads and that term for these features is employed in this paper.
Illus 1. Location map.
Illus 2. Mapped surveys of Turin Hill (top: first edition Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, Forfarshire 1865, sheet XXXIII reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland; bottom: based on Ordnance Survey 1:10,000 map 1959, Crown Copyright).
Illus 3. Previous surveys (Christison 1900; Feachem 1955).
Vertical aerial photographic coverage of the hill is variable in quality. A run of photographs taken in 1946 is particularly clear. An enlargement was obtained from 106G/SCOT/UK128 frame 6023 (Illus 4) both to aid the production of the final drawing and to provide a general view of the site half a century ago so that any major changes could be identified. The major modern intrusion is evidently the vehicle tracks. Also noteworthy are some vegetation changes: the proportion of the hill clad in heath has declined since 1946. This image was also useful for obtaining information on the cliff lines of Turin Craigs.

Description of features
Turin Hill displays at least three main phases of fortification, as interpreted by Feachem (1955, 74–75), on the basis of the apparent superimposition of structures and this report will follow that sequence. For that author, the earliest was the large bivallate fort (Illus 5, fort 1) – Feachem’s ‘large enclosure’ (1955, 74) with its presumptively associated outworks. This may have been replaced by, as it was considered partially to underlie, an oblong fort (Illus 5, fort 2) on the summit of the hill, which is in turn clearly overlain by the central circular homestead (Illus 5, structure 4). On this basis, the western and eastern circular homesteads (Illus 5, structure 3 and 5), although not explicitly mentioned in Feachem’s analysis, probably also belong to this tertiary phase; the differences in preservation amongst these circular structures may suggest, however, that they were not all contem-
porary. In addition to these lines of enclosure, the hill also displays evidence of quarrying, which, although of limited scale on the summit itself, is extensive along the northern flank outside the sector occupied by the hillfort. Letters in brackets in the following sections refer to features annotated on Illus 5. In the following account, the features will be described according to the sequence identified by Feachem.

Bivallate fort and outworks

Fort 1 (Illus 5) forms the largest enclosure on the hill and consists of a bivallate fort and outworks. The area enclosed by the bivallate fort is 280 m, east to west, by 130 m, transversely, internally and amounts to approximately 2.7 ha (excluding the area enclosed by the outworks). It is characterised on its northern side by two terraced edges possibly representing the remains of either two ramparts with associated ditches or an inner rampart fronted by a ditch with a counterscarp bank on the outside. Although well defined at the eastern end and along the northern side, these lines of the ramparts become more difficult to follow at the western end. On the southern side, the enclosed area is protected uniquely by the cliff line and there is no upstanding indication of a bank at this position.

At the eastern end of the fort a mutilated bank (a) runs upslope from the cliff line and terminates close to the modern stone wall which traverses the site. The gap (b) between the northern end of this bank and the triple feature (c) may be an original entrance. This triple rampart (c) may have resulted from the secondary construction of a short section of bank along the summit of the inner terrace of what otherwise, along the northern side, is a bivallate enclosure. The gap (d), where the farm track cuts across these ramparts, does not appear to represent an original entrance. By contrast, the break in the ramparts at (e) does appear to be original, or at least of some antiquity, with indications of inturned terminals to the ramparts on either side of a slightly sunken trackway curving in from the north-west. The additional outer terraces on the west side of this entranceway may represent an elaboration contemporary with the use of the fort or could be related to the millstone quarrying (v) further downslope. Further westwards there is another break (f) in the outer rampart or counterscarp bank, but which is not matched by a similar break in the interior line, suggesting that the outer line could be earlier than the adjacent bank upslope.

The precise alignments of the inner and outer ramparts at the western end of this fort are unclear. Both can be traced easily to the north of the farm track, but are less well defined to the south. It is possible that the inner rampart continues along the crest of what appears to be a
natural ridge where a possible bank (g) can be discerned on the lower slope. The outer bank may continue as a slight terrace downslope of (g). The western limit of this fort may have been defined by a natural ridge with a hollow at its base (Illus 6). The latter’s western side (h) appears to have been artificially scarped and it is conceivable, as has been suggested in a number of the site descriptions (eg Oram 1996, 60), that this bivallate fort was never completed at the west end.

There are two sets of outworks downslope from the bivallate fort. The first is formed by an arc of rampart cutting off access up to the main ridge from the east (k). This rampart runs from a natural hollow (Illus 6) across the ridge to the cliff line on the south and has a shallow, irregular quarry ditch along its inner edge. It is best preserved at its north-western end, where the break (i) may represent an original feature. Almost halfway along its length there is another possible original break part of which has been disturbed by the excavation of two large quarry scoops (j); the bank (k) to the south of this point is also noticeably less well preserved. The gap in this bank on the south side of the modern stone wall may be original as it appears to share an alignment with those on the main fort at (b).

A second set of outworks is located to the south-east of the bivallate fort below the main cliff line. Here a low, arcing, bank (l) blocked access to this terrace. Along the edge of the cliff line to the west of the southern end of this bank there is a linear spread of rubble (m), built over lengths of outcropping conglomerate, within which it is possible to discern the remains of an internal wall face. The western end of this spread terminates where a farm track climbs up to the terrace from the south-east. There is no sign either that a wall existed along the top of the cliff to the west of this point or of a rampart, similar to (l), having blocked access from that direction. It is possible that many of the stones now in bank (m) could simply have been cleared from the terrace for agricultural purposes.

Oblong fort

Fort 2 (Illus 5) on the summit of the hill comprises the poorly preserved remains of an oblong fort measuring c 125 m from east to west by 38 m, transversely, internally, an area of approximately 0.3 ha. It is now considerably less well defined than it is shown on some of the earlier plans (Illus 3). The scale and nature of the ramparts vary: the area appears to have been considerably disturbed. At the western end of the fort, where previous surveys have suggested that it overlies the bivallate fort, the surviving earthworks are poorly defined (Illus 3). A length of the bank is clear at (p) but between it and the modern stone wall there are three linear channels (Illus 5), which may be robber trenches by
which the facing and rampart core have been removed. The best-preserved section of the northern rampart (q) is on the north side of the modern stone wall, although the top of this section is pitted, again suggesting stone robbing. The discontinuous nature of the southern bank (q and r) placed along the top of the cliff, set back a little from its edge, is again suggestive of disturbance, but here the evidence of tumbled debris, below the cliff, is indicative of collapse rather than robbing. Indications of a double rampart at the eastern end may be illusory since the zone between the inner and outer banks is pitted and is once again suggestive of demolition to remove stone. A modern stone cairn, built presumably of material from the adjacent rampart, stands on top of the northern terminal of the outer of these two banks, on the southern side of what may have been an original entrance into this fort. It is possible that the much mutilated state of the ramparts is a direct result of stone robbing not just for the construction of the modern dry-stone wall but also for the circular homesteads.

Central circular homestead

The central circular homestead (Illus 5 – structure 4) is the best preserved, despite being intersected by the modern stone wall. It measures c 34 m in diameter externally, over stone walls up to 3.5–4.0 m thick. The internal area thus enclosed is c 530 square metres. The wall is massively built with surviving internal and external faces, consisting of blocks up to 1.5 m x 1 m x 0.5 m, reveting a rubble core. The external face can be traced almost continuously around the southern half, although the internal face is intermittently less clear. By contrast, in the northern half only a couple of very short lengths of the external face are visible amongst the rubble which has collapsed downslope. The northern arc of the circular homestead overlies the northern side of the oblong fort. Although this circular homestead has been greatly robbed, its interior is mostly free from debris with only a scattering of stones and two small quarry pits visible in the southern half. A short stretch of dry-stone wall abuts the modern stone wall in the northern half of this homestead.

Eastern circular homestead

The eastern circular homestead (Illus 5 – structure 5), in contrast to the central one, displays no visible stonework on the surface. It consists primarily of two sub-circular, turf-covered earth-and-stone banks. Preservation once again appears slightly better on the south side of the modern stone wall. The outer edge of the outer bank is c 40 m in diameter, while the interior is c 25 m in diameter. The line of the bank is uneven and there is a particu-
larly large depression, perhaps a quarry scoop, on the northern side. On the southern side there are curvilinear depressions which may either be robber trenches or possible slots for timber palisades set into the surface of the bank. In the south-west quadrant there is a linear depression which appears to cut into the exterior of the outer bank and may continue across the inner bank. This feature may represent an old excavation trench, although there are no records of any previous archaeological investigations here. The inner bank measures 17–18 m in diameter overall and 10 m on the interior. It now stands up to 0.4 m high. The internal area is featureless.

The double bank of this circular homestead is intriguing. It is unclear whether this was an original feature or if it is a result of stone robbing. If the former, these near concentric banks could represent the remains of a central circular roofed building surrounded by a banked enclosure. Alternatively these features may intimate the extremely denuded remains of a broch. Although rare in this area, three brochs are known close to Dundee at Hurly Hawk, Laws Hill and Craighill, where the latter two at least appear to have replaced earlier forts (Feachem 1963, 106; Taylor 1983), while at the western end of Starthmore there are the remains of a broch at Little Dunsinane (RCAHMS 1994, 51). It has also been drawn to the authors' attention (Sherriff pers comm) that a smaller structure at Baldrado, to the west of Turin Hill, was interpreted as the remains of a robbed cairn surrounded by a bank (Sherriff 1983, 294) and that structure 5 could be a larger example of this. The present authors feel this to be unlikely.

Western circular homestead

The western circular homestead (Illus 5, structure 3) is the least well preserved of the three; although it appears roughly circular on the ground, 35–40 m in diameter, in plan its circuit is shown to be flattened in places as a result partly of severe robbing and partly of collapse. On the flattened southern side, along the cliff edge, the external face has collapsed over the edge and the core of the wall has been exposed; the spread of tumble can be seen on the steep slope below. Wall core, including some large stone blocks, can be seen within the exposed section of the bank. This concentration of stone testifies to the construction material, otherwise not readily apparent from surface examination of this circular homestead. Its eastern side appears to be the best preserved, standing to c 1 m high. The northern side has been much disturbed, possibly during the construction of the modern stone wall. Two adjacent depressions on the north-west, close to the stone wall, may simply be large quarry scoops (the rest of the interior is covered in shallower depressions) or they could represent the remains.
of a bicameral structure, perhaps a house, built into the tumbled remains of the homestead wall.

Hut-circles

Two hut-circles, each measuring about 12 m in diameter over low grass-grown stony banks (Illus 5, s and t), and the stances of several timber round-houses, marked only by low, arcing scarp, are situated between the north-east corner of the oblong fort and the eastern homestead, to either side of the modern wall.

The latter include three depressions (u) on the southern side of the modern stone wall which are between 9 and 12 m in diameter. Although they could be natural in origin, the possibility that they represent the remains of structures, such as round-houses, should not be overlooked. There are further topographical irregularities in the vicinity of s, t and u which may represent the residual remains of other round-houses.

There is no visible evidence for the absolute dating of the roundhouses on Turin Hill and in terms of relative dating none of the houses can be associated with any of the phases of fortification, construction and use of the homesteads or, indeed, each other.

Artefacts and cup-and-ring-marked surface

The area around Turin Hill contains a large number of cup-marked and cup-and-ring-marked rocks (Sherriff 1995) and several have been recorded on the summit itself. These include two boulders recovered from within the collapsed wall material on the north side of the central homestead and an outer kerb stone on its southern side, which has at least 14 cup marks. Due to time restrictions only the best example was surveyed and marked on the plan. This is located on a flat piece of surface bedrock c 4 m east of the eastern circular enclosure and consists of four cup-and-ring marks and two cup marks (Sherriff 1995, 18, illus 9 no 33). Sherriff (1995, 20) has drawn attention to this concentration of rock carvings on and around Turin Hill and the possibility that these reflect a concentration of Neolithic ritual activity in the vicinity perhaps comparable to that around Kilmartin, in Argyll. It remains possible that the examples on the boulders at Turin Hill incorporated into the construction of the central homestead were brought to the site during construction and did not originate there. However, no such argument could be advanced for those on bedrock outcrops and it is interesting to speculate how many other examples may lie hidden beneath the turf.

A stone lamp was recovered from the interior of the central circular homestead (Boyd 1967, 4) and this was reported to be in the garden of Mr Jolly, the farmer at West Mains of Turin, along with an upper part of a rotary quern, which is recorded as having been found on the southern slope of the hill (ibid 1967, 4). Although nothing matching the description of the stone lamp is now present there, the upper stone of a bun-shaped rotary quern was recovered (Illus 7). Very little work has been undertaken on rotary querns in Scotland, apart from Caulfield’s discussion of their introduction and dating implications to sites in the Atlantic province (Caulfield 1980), and, as MacKie has recently pointed out, they are among the more undervalued artefacts of the period (MacKie 1998, 26). Collation of the types and dating evidence for quern-stones is long overdue. MacKie, however, has also recently published a short note on three examples from southern Scotland (MacKie 1995) and the example from Turin Hill appears similar to that from Balfron, Stirlingshire (ibid, fig 1, no 1) with a hole for a vertical handle in a lug projecting from one side of the quern. A date of somewhere between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD was suggested by MacKie for this variant. It is possible that the stone for the Turin Hill quern was quarried from the hill itself, although this would need to be confirmed geologically and none of the visible quarry hollows on the site can be attributed to the prehistoric period.

Millstone quarries

There are a number of small quarry scoops along the summit of the hill. There is, for example, a cluster on the south side of the modern stone wall c 60 m west of the western circular homestead (not shown on Illus 5). In addition there are a number of isolated examples in the interior of the central homestead and within the oblong fort, while two pits () have disturbed the outwork of the bivallate fort. These examples all appear to be outliers to the main concentration of quarry pits, which is located along the gentle northern slopes of the hill, outside the ramparts of the bivallate fort, and can be seen on the vertical aerial photograph as a series of dimples (Illus 4). Unfortunately, due to time restrictions, the full extent of these quarries could not be plotted and they have not been included on the plan. The main series stretches for at least 300 m east to west by 150 m transversely. In general these pits are c 3 m in diameter and around 1 m deep. In many, traces of bedrock ledges are visible while in others half finished millstones over 1 m in diameter are readily apparent. Although the majority of these quarries would have been for medieval or post-medieval millstones, it is possible that they reflect a longer tradition of extracting the rock on the site for quern-stones.

Erosion

One of the aims of the survey was to identify and
record any damage to the archaeological remains on Turin Hill. Although in general the state of preservation of the features can be described as fair and their condition is stable, there are a number of small areas of active erosion, including the effects of vehicles, gorse and rabbits. One major difference apparent from an examination of the aerial photograph taken in 1946 is the marked decrease in heather cover on the northern slopes of the hill (Illus 4), probably as a result of grazing. On the hill today there are sectors of evidently thin topsoil cover, especially on some of the earthworks, which may be susceptible to erosion, but few of these need cause immediate concern. The most notable area of natural erosion is on the southern side of the western circular homestead,
where the external wall face has fallen over the cliff, exposing the core material. The rate of erosion here is unknown but the loose nature of the wall core makes it potentially the most serious risk to the integrity of archaeological deposits on the site.

Discussion

The University of Edinburgh Archaeology Department’s Angus and South Aberdeenshire Field School survey has produced a plan of the complex suite of features on the summit of Turin Hill. However, without excavation the likely chronological range of these features can only be hypothesised by comparison to other similar sites. There are also clues, some unambiguous, some tentative, from the surface stratigraphic evidence and the juxtaposition of certain of the features noted above. However, the main focus of discussion must be whether the sequence can be assigned wholly to late prehistory or whether it extends into the early historic period. If the latter is the case then there must be implications for what this site means in relation to the known distribution of Pictish monuments and historical events recorded in the area.

Although large hillforts are, in eastern Scottish terms, not infrequent in Angus (Peachem, 1966; Ralston 1996, fig 10.4), in recent years the area has been generally better known for its crop-marks of open settlement (MacInnes 1982), such as the ring-ditch houses excavated at Douglassmuir and Inverkeilor (Kendrick 1995; Pollock 1997) and for the examination of its promontory forts (eg Wilson 1981; Ralston 1987). Peachem (1966, 82) noted only the unfinished work on Kinpurney Hill as being more extensive than the bivallate fort at Turin, but the planning of the subsequently identified and incomplete outermost work at the Brown Caterthun extends the area of that site. It is remarkable that the largest Angus hillforts all seem to be actually or potentially unfinished.

The closest comparison in structural terms for the bivallate fort on Turin Hill is on the large hillfort on the Brown Caterthun, which is visible from the summit of Turin 13 km to the north-east. Recent excavations (Dunwell and Strachan forthcoming) have indicated that its defences ranged in date from the 8th to the 2nd century cal BC. The appearance of the bivallate works on Turin Hill is most closely comparable in form to rampart B on the Brown Caterthun; this encloses c 2.4 ha – an area very similar to that within Turin. A radiocarbon date from this bank, which excavation demonstrated to be a stone wall with turf cap and breastwork fronted by terraces produced a combined date range of 540–380 cal BC (at 83 per cent confidence, combined GU-4599 and GU-4600). It is thus possible that the bivallate fort on Turin Hill and its outworks, too, belong to the middle of the 1st millennium BC. It is difficult to determine the relationship of the outworks to the bivallate fort and, although they are considered here to be later, it remains possible, for example, that the eastern rampart with its multiple entrances could represent an earlier enclosure (Sherriff pers comm).

The dating of the oblong fort on the summit of Turin is also problematic. It may represent the robbed remains of a timber laced fort originally similar to that on Finavon which lies 2.3 km to the north-east. Although the surviving wall there is more massive, being 6 m thick and up to 4.8 m high, the overall proportions of this fort, 153 m long by 30–38 m wide internally, are closely comparable to those of Turin Hill (125 m by 38 m; cf Peachem, 1966 fig 5). Unlike the summit enclosure on Turin, from which no such evidence has been reported, Finavon’s principal defence is heavily vitrified like many of the series of oblong forts. Another feature differentiating Turin from many of these is the gate apparent at its eastern end; many of the other examples seem from surface evidence to have been gatewayless. Finavon was excavated by Gordon Childe in 1933–4 and by Euan MacKie in 1966 (Childe 1935, 1936; MacKie 1976). MacKie obtained radiocarbon dates from occupation deposits against the inner faces of the rampart which on calibration indicate that the fort was used from the 7th until the late 5th/early 4th century or even later BC. This agrees well with the radiocarbon date from a structural timber at Greencairn, possibly from the vitrified rampart, 810–400 cal BC (2σ, N-1376), which may have been destroyed around 400 cal BC – 60 cal AD (2σ, N-1318; Wedderburn 1973, 6). This later determination compares favourably with the recent archaeomagnetic dating of the vitrified wall core at Finavon, which has dated the destruction of the fort to 200–100 BC (Gentles 1993, 19) and is closer to the radiocarbon dates obtained by MacKie which sit firmly within the first millennium BC (MacKie 1976, 211). It could be argued on this basis that the oblong fort, as suggested by Peachem, is later than the bivallate fort and could date towards the end of the 1st millennium BC.

The thermoluminescence age proposed for Finavon’s vitrified wall, averaged from four results, is much more recent: 640 AD ± 130 (Sanderson et al, 1988, table 3). As the evidence stands at present, there are thus very considerable discrepancies in the date ranges advanced on the basis of the various techniques for the vitrified wall at Finavon; it is, however, noteworthy that both the methods of directly dating the wall produce more recent results than the radiocarbon assays from its interior. Elsewhere in Angus and beyond there are sites where such oblong forts appear from field evidence to replace larger rampart enclosures: Denoon Law, Glamis is an example. At the White Caterthun, the oblong fort is thought to be the most recent in the construction sequence of enclosures.
around that summit (Dunwell and Strachan forthcoming), although there are presumptively later circular features within that enclosure (Halliday 1991, 21).

If the absolute date of the oblong fort at Turin remains to be established, the central circular homestead which overlies it is certainly later in date: but precisely when it was constructed and occupied remains open to interpretation. The series of circular homesteads on Turin Hill have been compared to those of Perthshire (Feachem 1955; Stewart 1969; Taylor 1990). One example, at Litigan, near Aberfeldy, was excavated in 1969 and charcoal found just above the subsoil produced a radiocarbon date of 800–1220 cal AD (2σ R-2728/1, Taylor 1990, 17). Another site considered by Taylor which has provided dating material is that at Queen's View, Strathmelle, where artefacts indicated occupation in the last quarter of the 1st millennium AD: there is a translucent yellow bead (700–900AD) and a stone lamp similar to one from Crossnacreery in Co Down which was dated to the 7th or 8th century AD (ibid 1990, 33). The report that a stone lamp had been recovered from the central ring fort on Turin Hill is thus intriguing, although nothing matching this description was identified in the garden at West Mains. Taylor considered – as did Watson – that these homesteads had originated in the west (possibly Ireland) and were perhaps spread north-eastwards with incoming Gaelic speakers, perhaps the Scots, between 500 and 800 AD (Taylor 1990, 64).

The dating of circular homesteads uniquely to the early historic period, however, is contentious since it is based on so little evidence. The datable artefactual material mentioned above could simply indicate later re-use of an earlier settlement. This is a problem also found in the dating of dry-stone structures in the west of Scotland, such as brochs, where often the only chronologically diagnostic artefacts may be argued to be related to re-use of the site and cannot be used to date the initial construction and occupation. It is worth noting that excavation proved two structures at Aldclune, Perthshire, which share some of the characteristics of the circular homesteads, to be of Iron Age date (Hingley et al 1997) although some of the artefactual remains (most notably the Aldclune broch) initially suggested a 9th-century AD date. It is possible, therefore, that the circular homesteads on Turin Hill could date back into the latest prehistoric period. However, not all the circular homesteads on Turin Hill need be contemporary and they could represent a sequence of rebuilding; each new structure could conceivably have robbed stone from a previous structure. This might explain the apparent differences in preservation of the homesteads and would suggest the central one was the latest. Alternatively, although all are of a comparable size and circular in form, these structures may not be related in terms of their original structural form.

The dating of sites on the basis of their morphology and character is fraught with difficulties as the excavation of Clatchard Craig in north Fife demonstrated, where the dated elements of what was believed to be an Iron Age hillfort proved to be of early historic construction (Close-Brooks 1987). If indeed the circular homesteads belong to the early historic period then the presence of three of them on top of a major hillfort located in the heart of the Pictish (minor) kingdom of Strathmore invites speculation as to the function of the site. In a recent article Driscoll suggested that Forfar may have been a royal centre in the early historic period ‘not least because of the antiquity of the nearby church of Restenneth’ and its proximity to the site of the battle of Nechtansmere 685AD (Driscoll 1988b). The tendency for royal centres to focus on areas with concentrations of prehistoric monuments is a theme pursued by Driscoll and he mentions the concentration of cup-marked stones to the east of Forfar as a case in point (ibid). However, these arguments could also be advanced for the immediate area around Turin Hill, including Balgavies Loch, around which most of these prehistoric rock carvings are concentrated (Sherriff pers comm). Driscoll, following Ritchie’s discussion (1995) in which she accepted the late dating for Finavon’s vitrified wall produced by thermoluminescence, recently pointed out that the Pictish cross slabs at Aberlemno reflect an established tradition of religious patronage and that the thane responsible for this patronage may have been based on Turin Hill (Driscoll 1998a, 51). The Class I symbol stone and the later cross slabs at Aberlemno may have been boundary or route markers on the way north-eastwards to Brechin and the original church of Aberlemno may have been located at Aikenhatt, north of Finavon fort (Ritchie 1995, 8).

In addition to the important site of Aberlemno, the priory of Restenneth lies to the south-west of Turin Hill. Although the surviving architecture at Restenneth has been argued to be from the late 11th or early 12th century AD (Fernie 1987, 397), the site is reputed to be the location of a stone church built c 710 AD at the request of the Pictish king Nechtan mac Derile (Simpson 1964). It is interesting to note that Restenneth is overlooked by another circular homestead, Rob’s Reed, which lies c 1 km to the north-east. It is clear much of the early historic activity in the area is in fact focused closer to Turin Hill than Forfar.

This review of the archaeological features on Turin Hill has demonstrated a potential level of reuse of this site which is perhaps unique in Angus and poses questions as to the significance of this hilltop location. The discussion has necessarily had to focus on the upstanding remains; whether or not
these relate to an Iron Age enclosure or a Pictish centre (or both) cannot be determined without excavation but the importance of the site within the local settlement pattern, as first mapped by Cottam and Small (1974), should not be underestimated.

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Archiving

The complete archive will be deposited in the NMRS, while reproducible elements will be supplied to the Aberdeenshire and Angus Sites and Monuments Record.

References


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Abstract

A survey of the complex suite of archaeological features on the summit of Turin Hill was undertaken and a plan produced. The features described are interpreted as a bivallate hillfort with outworks, an oblong fort, three circular homesteads, possible house stances and extensive millstone quarries. In the absence of excavation, the likely dates and functions of these remains are assessed in relation to comparable sites in Angus. The surface evidence for re-use of the site, one of the best upstanding examples of this in Angus, poses questions as to the particular significance of this hilltop location.

Keywords: survey, hillfort, circular homestead, later prehistoric, early historic