

Maiden Castle, Inch, Aberdeenshire: choice and architecture in Pictland

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Introduction

The RCAHMS survey of Strathdon characterised the various hillforts within the area into six types, on the basis of size and defensive system (RCAHMS 2007), though without any chronological significance. As no documented intrusive work had been undertaken on the sites it was unclear how the classes related to each other.

The Hillforts of Strathdon Project explored the chronological relationships between the various hillforts (Cook 2010). The aim was to undertake keyhole excavation, with local volunteers on a range of these sites to recover dating evidence. The project examined six hillforts over five years: Bruce's Camp (NJ71NE 3; Cook et al forthcoming), Maiden Castle (NJ62SE2); Dunnideer (NJ62NW1; Cook et al 2008); Hill of Newleslie (NJ52NE 31), Hill of Barra (NJ82NW 4; Cook et al 2009) and Cairnmore (NJ52SW 9; Cook et al 2010).

This paper presents an interim account of the work at Maiden Castle and proposes that the architecture of the fortifications represents a deliberate choice laden with meaning and significance. Two potential sources for the architecture are identified, the first, Iron Age hillforts and Complex Atlantic Roundhouses (and cognate forms) and the second, putative west coast early medieval duns and Irish raths. Finally, these potential choices will be set in the context of the dynamic religious and political situation in contemporary North-East Scotland.

Location and background

Maiden Castle (NJ 6942 2435) is located at the northern end of a rocky spur at the foot of the NE flank of Bennachie (Illus 1). The site is covered by a copse of mature beech trees, probably planted in the 19th century as part of the designed landscape of Pittodrie House (NMRS NJ62SE 12), but today the site and its immediate environs are dominated by commercial forestry.

While there are only limited prehistoric archaeological features within the immediate area of the site, they do include the almost ubiquitous Aberdeenshire archaeological remains of lithics and a Beaker within a cist (NMRS NJ62SE 4, 5 and 14; Cook and Dunbar 2008, 6–11). Of particular note within the wider

environs are Mither Tap (NMRS NJ62SE 1) and the Maiden Stone (NMRS NJ62SE 2; RCAHMS 2007, 105–7; 116; Figure 1).

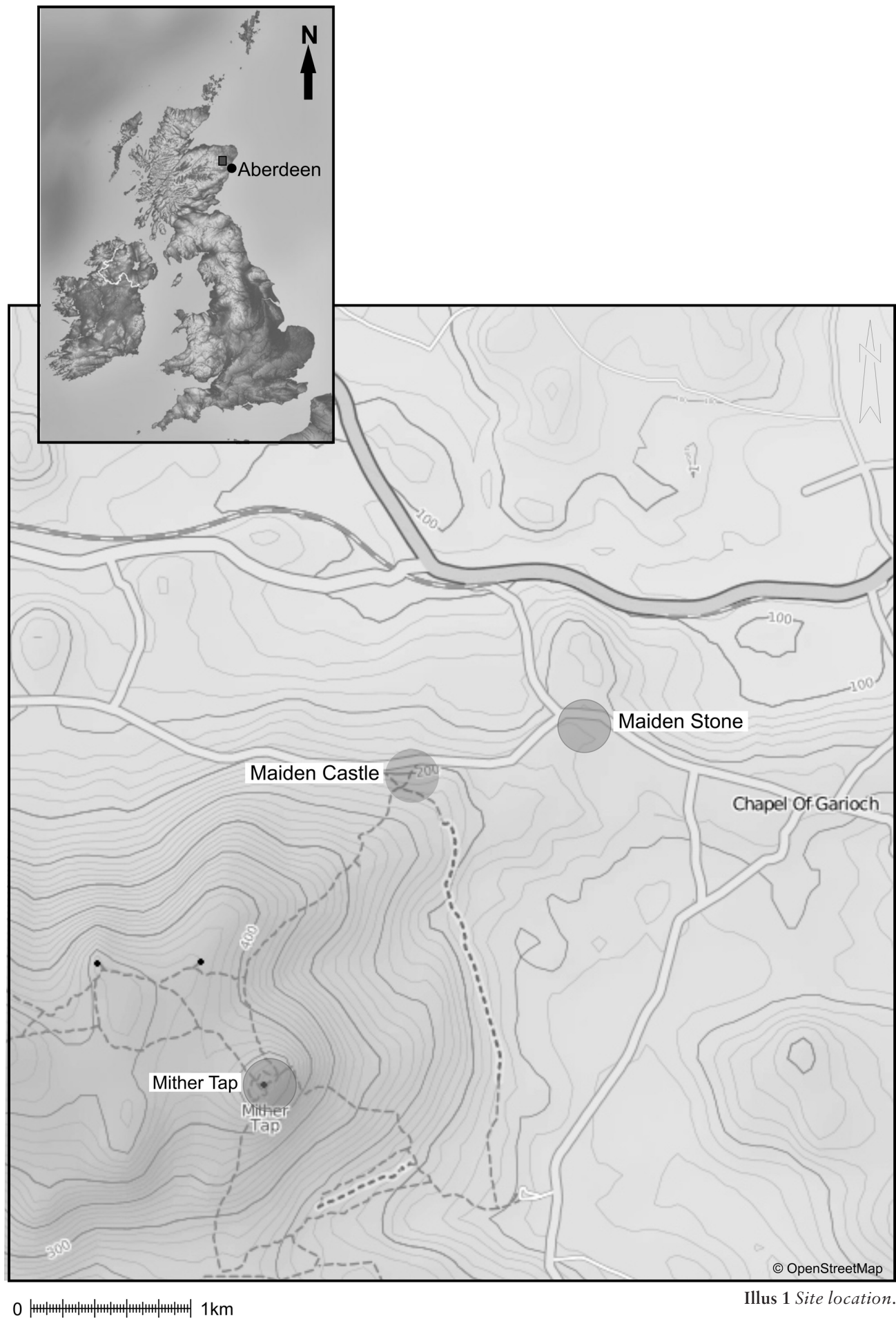
Mither Tap, which occupies the rocky summit of Bennachie, is one of the most spectacular hillforts in Scotland and dominates the surrounding area (ibid). While the fort itself is undated, charcoal recovered from a hearth identified during the construction of a new access path in its interior yielded radiocarbon dates indicating activity between AD 340–540 and AD 640–780 (Atkinson 2007). The Maiden Stone, which is a Class II Pictish symbol stone, carved in relief and combining Pictish and Christian iconography (RCAHMS 2007, 116), possibly dating from the eighth century (Alcock 2003, 283–4), lies approximately 1km NE of Maiden Castle.

The defences incorporate the remains of at least two successive enclosures. The earlier phase consists of a thick stone wall, and the latter comprising two banks and ditches which surrounds on the S and E. Under the RCAHMS' scheme the inner enclosure represents a Type 6 enclosure and the outer enclosure a Type 5 (2007, 100–1).

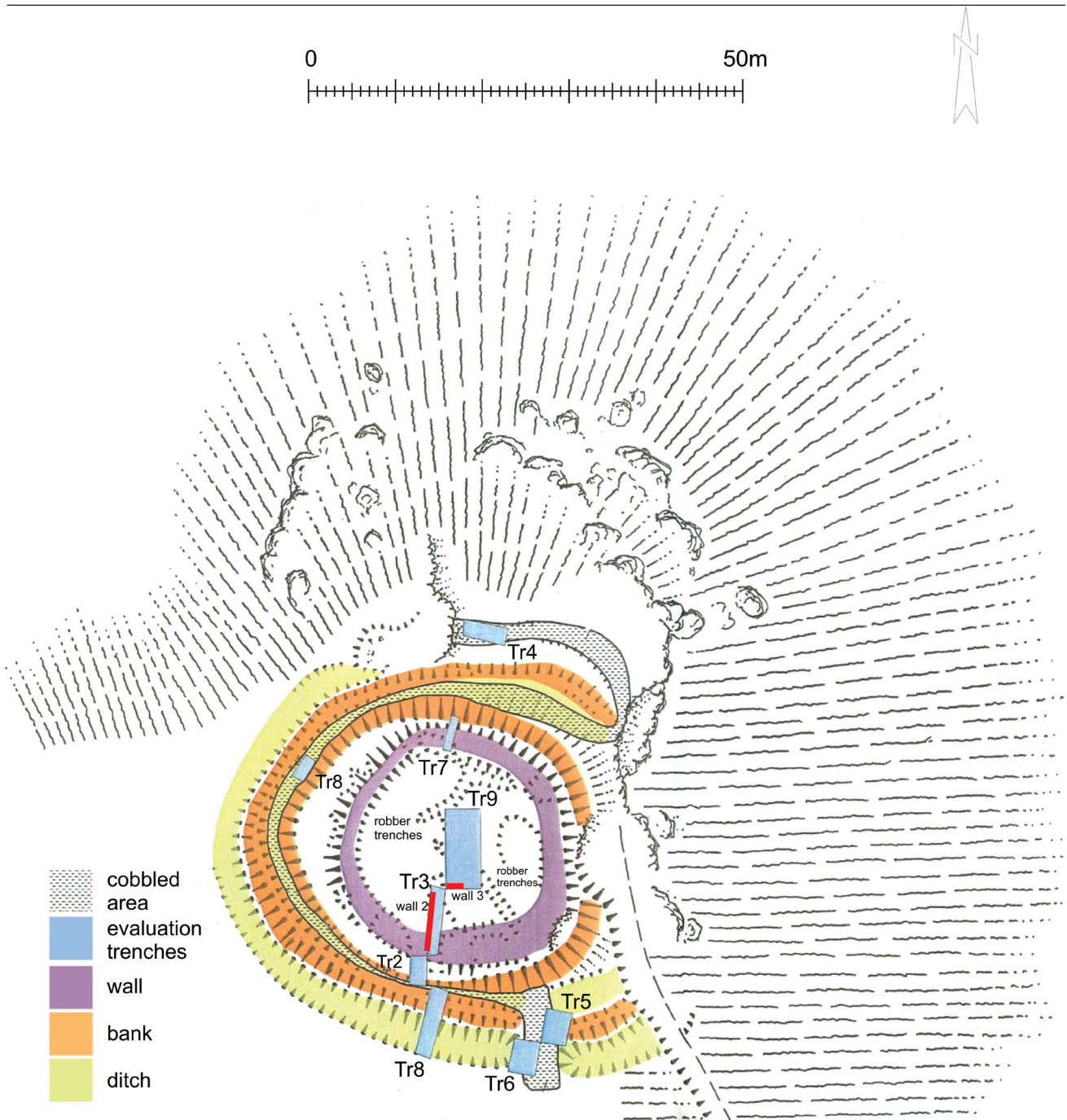
Results

Prior to the current works the site had been subject to a series of unrecorded excavations that had left 'robber trenches' across it (Illus 2). The current work was designed to be as non-intrusive as possible but at the same time to recover dating evidence from key stratigraphic relationships. The excavation thus focussed primarily on the pre-existing 'robber trenches' and only penetrated below the upper archaeological layers in limited locations, such as basal ditch fills and under banks and walls.

The inner enclosure occupies most of the interior of the fort, and measures about 20m in internal diameter (Illus 2). The wall (Wall 1) survives as a stony bank up to 4.5m in thickness and 0.6m in height and no entrance is visible. The underlying bedrock rises towards the centre of the site, and as a consequence there are deeper deposits around the perimeter than the centre. The inner enclosure is built over an organic rich deposit [329] full of charcoal and fragments of



Illus 1 Site location.



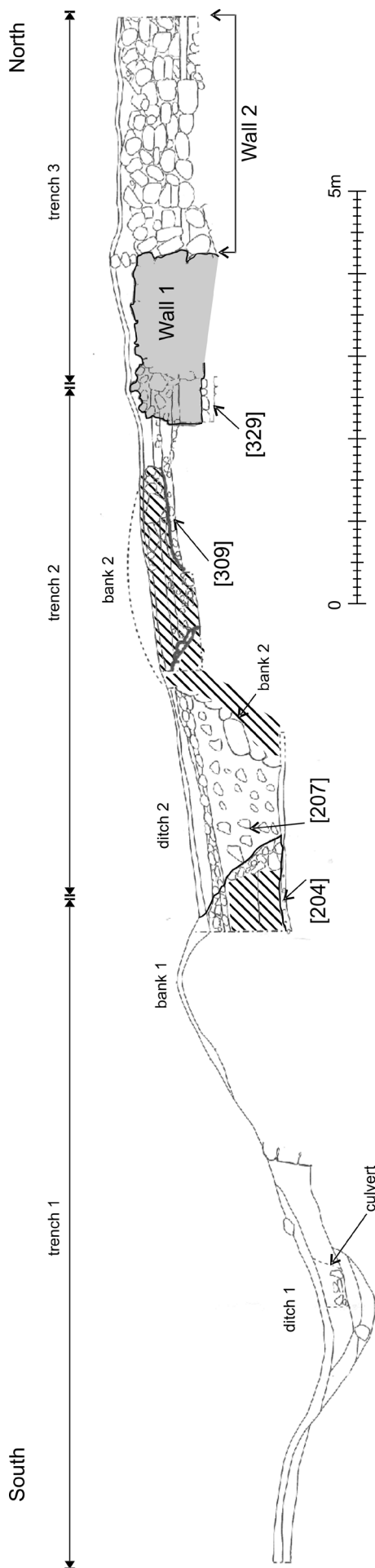
Illus 2 Plan of Maiden Castle with location of trenches and walls. (After RCAHMS 2007)

unidentifiable bone (Illus 3). It seems probable that this deposit represents an accumulation of midden material indicating pre-inner enclosure activity. A radiocarbon date from charcoal from this deposit yielded a date of cal AD 530–640 (SUERC-22160), so therefore the inner enclosure was clearly constructed after this date.

The inner face of Wall 1 is abutted by a wall (Wall 2) running perpendicular to it, and this in turn is abutted by another wall (Wall 3) perpendicular to it (Illus 2, 3 and 4). The collapse of both walls is sealed by further organic deposit [904] into which was cut a single post-hole [907], and the across the surface of which were a series of flat abraded stones, possibly reflecting their use as surfacing. In addition, [907] was associated with

linear arrangements of stones (Illus 4), interpreted as the edges of a building, possibly rectilinear. The fill of the post-hole contained a first millennium AD glass bead (Fraser Hunter pers comm) which gives a terminus ante quem for activity on the site. Intriguingly, various early prehistoric worked lithics, including a possible Mesolithic flint core, were also recovered from this same fill (Rob Engl pers comm), and they are presumably residual. The exterior of the inner enclosure is abutted by a further series of organic deposits [309] upon which the inner bank of the outer enclosure is built (Illus 3).

The outer enclosure measures about 40m from E to W by 35m transversely (Illus 2). The defences do not form a complete circuit and on the NE and SE they



Illus 3 East-facing section through trenches 1, 2 and 3.

rest on the edge of a natural escarpment that has been trimmed back by minor quarrying. The entrance is on the S, the easiest line of approach, and is marked by a well-defined gap in the outer bank and a causeway with a cobbled surface across the outer ditch.

Bank 1, the outer bank, consists of a stone face with a soil core up to 3.5m in thickness and 0.5m in height (Illus 3). The outer ditch (Ditch 2) is up to 5m wide and 1m deep on the S, but it is of considerably slighter proportions on the N, where the line of the rampart has been reduced to little more than a scarp. The outer ditch cut a small pit, which contained a fragment of Beaker pottery, dating to the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (Ann MacSween pers comm). In turn, the upper fills of Ditch 2 were cut by a stone culvert, assumed to be an 18th–19th-century feature.

There is a slight depression to the inside of Bank 1, which was thought to be a quarry scoop prior to these works but upon excavation was confirmed as an inner bank (Bank 2) and ditch (Ditch 2). The ditch was 0.8m broad at its base and 1.2m deep and the stone bank was at least 1.5m thick and up to 1.3m high (Illus 3). Charcoal recovered from soil under this bank [204] yielded a date of cal AD 420–610 (SUERC-15908). This date is statistically indistinguishable from the date obtained from under the inner enclosure and may well relate to the same phase of activity.

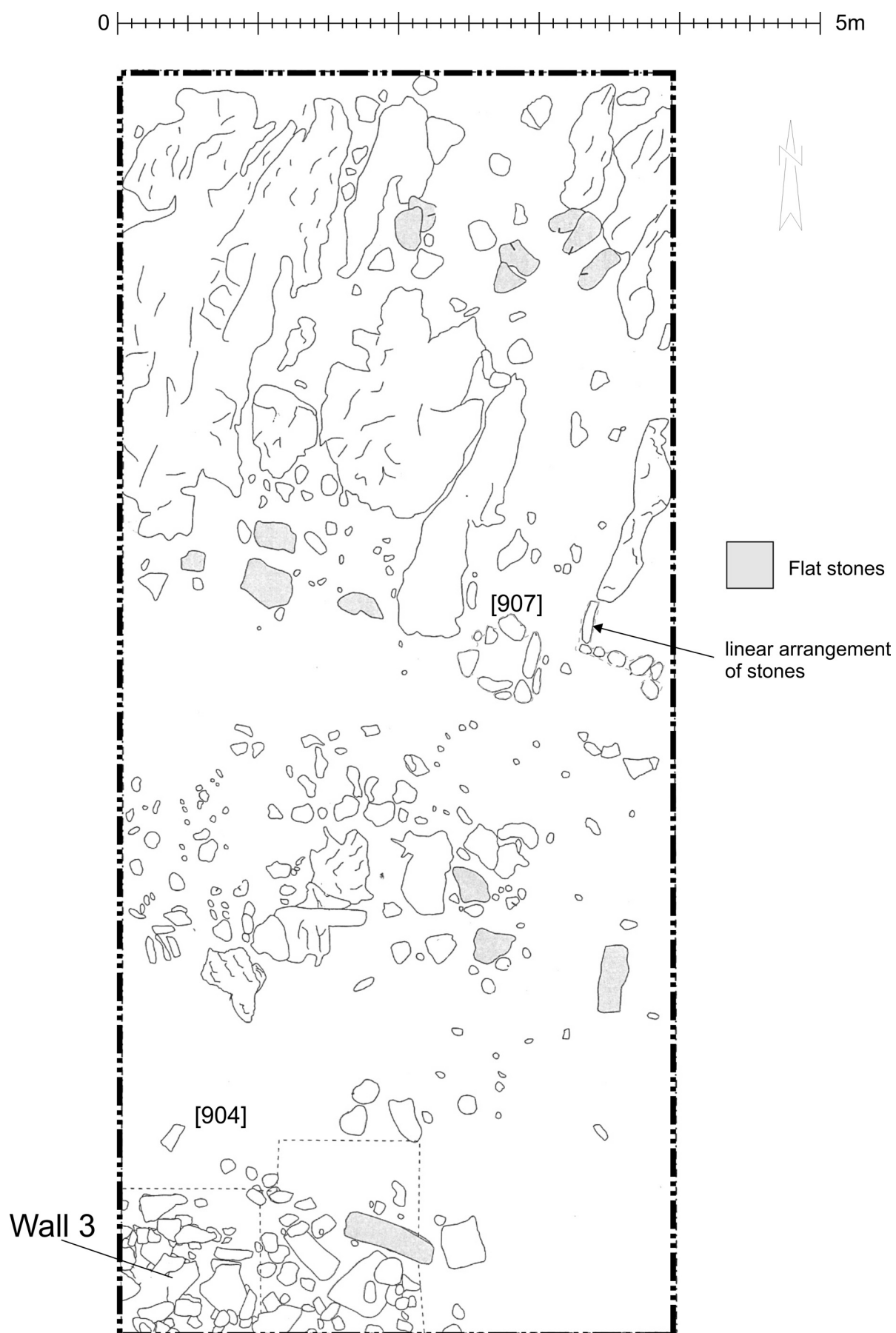
Ditch 2 was later backfilled and capped with a cobbled surface, presumably an area of hard-standing extending through the entrance and round the enclosure, terminating in a platform on the northern side of the site. Radiocarbon dates recovered from the fill of the ditch [207] yielded a date of cal AD 500–650 (SUERC-15909).

Some 20m to the S and 15m to E of the outer bank of the outer enclosure (Illus 5) lay a series of cobbled surfaces associated with both non-ferrous metal-working (fragments of at least four crucibles were recovered dating to the Pictish Period), a fragment of Early medieval glass and a stone bead rough-out dating to the late Iron Age (Fraser Hunter pers comm).

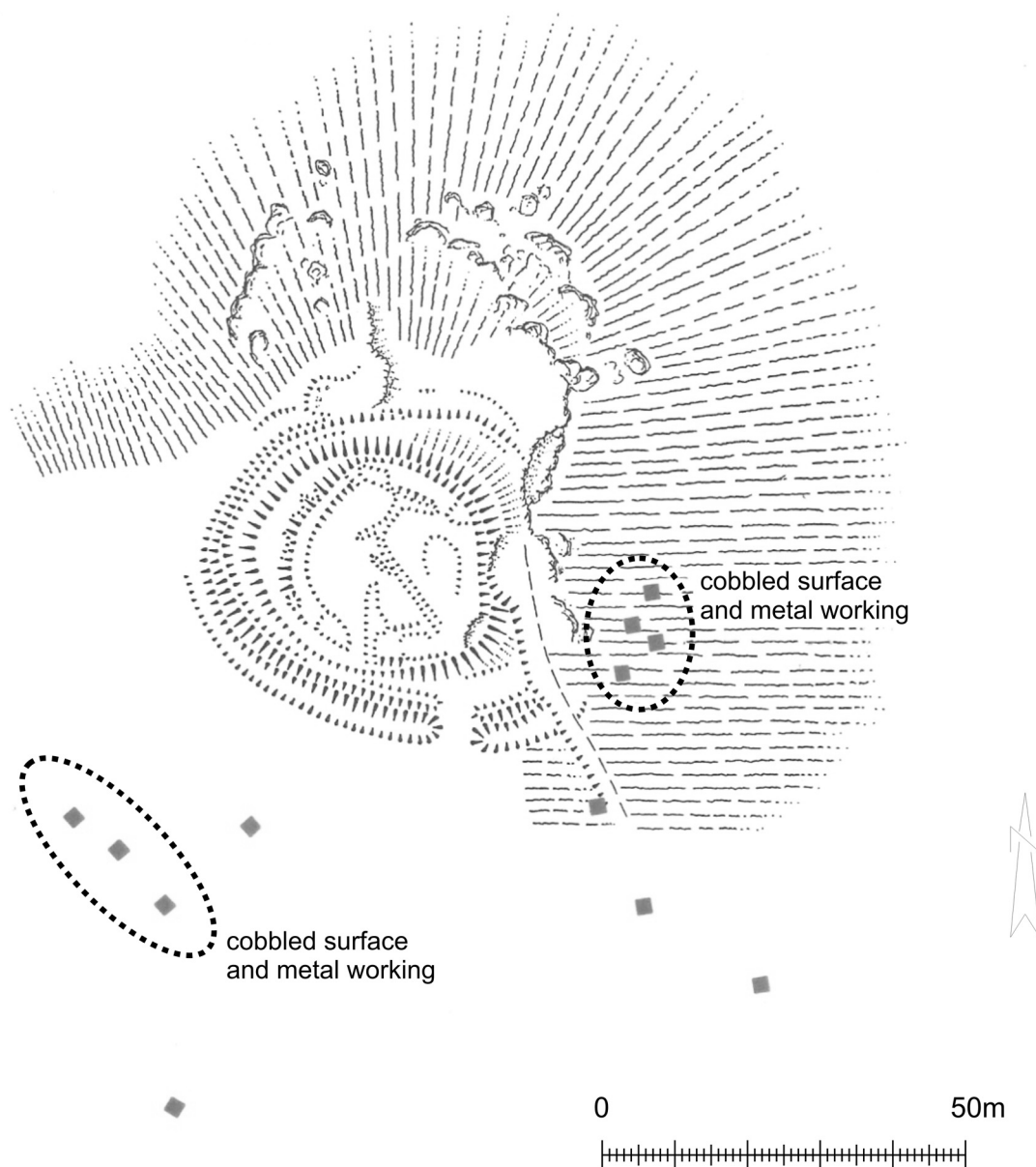
The preliminary results from both the radiocarbon dates and artefacts indicate that Maiden Castle was intensively occupied in the latter half of the first millennium AD and that it was surrounded by cobbled surfaces associated with manufacturing processes.

The site sequence may be summarised as follows:

- Phase 1* early prehistoric activity;
- Phase 2* late Iron Age activity;
- Phase 3* pre-enclosure Pictish activity which has generated midden deposits across the site;
- Phase 4* the Pictish stone enclosure (inner enclosure) is built;
- Phase 5* the impressive Pictish outer works (outer enclosure) are built;
- Phase 6* the Pictish inner ditch of the outer enclosure is infilled;



Illus 4 Plan of Trench 9.



Illus 5 Plan of Maiden Castle, location of test pits and areas of cobbled surface and metal working. (After RCAHMS 2007)

Phase 7 a putative Pictish rectilinear structure is built within and abutting inner enclosure;

Phase 8 following the collapse of the Phase 5 structure and the accumulation of more midden material a further Pictish structure, possibly rectilinear is built involving earth-fast posts;

Phase 7 a series of possibly Pictish cobbled surfaces surrounding the site and involving non-ferrous metal working and associated with a fragment of early medieval glass are constructed; and

Phase 10 18th–19th century culvert cuts the basal fill of external ditch.

While a clear stratigraphic relationship exists between the phases of enclosure and of the internal activity, it is not clear how either the internal sequence of structures relates to the outer defences or how the external cobbled surfaces relate to any other aspect of the

site. However, it seems probable that within the early medieval phases there was no great hiatus in activity and that they are all, to some extent, successive.

Interpretation and discussion

Dating

As with any fieldwork in Aberdeenshire (Cook et al forthcoming), the excavation has produced trace evidence for both early (Mesolithic and late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age) and later prehistoric (Iron Age) activity, although the precise nature of both is uncertain. The later Iron Age stone bead rough out is more intriguing, as it is both rare (Fraser Hunter pers comm) and coincides with a settlement shift in the immediate area (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 335).

However, the evidence is simply too limited to comment further on.

Of considerably more significance is that the bulk of the activity on site occurred in the second half of the first millennium AD, which was completely unexpected (Strat Halliday pers comm). Both the inner enclosure and the outer bank of the outer enclosure were constructed over midden deposits which must have accumulated some time between the 5th to 7th centuries AD, and which may have originated from the same event. Precisely what this earlier activity was is unclear, but it presumably must represent domestic activity of some kind. Such material could have either been produced on this site by an earlier phase of settlement or perhaps moved to the site as part of the construction process, which was the case with the Pictish phases at Loch na Berie, Isle of Lewis (Murray Cook pers obs). However, the combination of the radiocarbon dates, and the Early medieval artefactual evidence (crucibles, glass bead and glass fragment) clearly demonstrates occupation.

The fill of the inner ditch of outer enclosure incorporated material of similar date. Unfortunately, this material could well have derived from the same deposits upon which both enclosure were built, given that this midden material was spread widely across the site. Thus the date cannot be used as a terminus ante quem for the infilling of the ditch with any confidence. However, the radiocarbon dating evidence indicates that the various walls and ramparts at Maiden Castle were excavated after cal AD 530–640. The similarity in dates implies the absence of later residual material on the site and so it is likely that the occupation of the spur was relatively short-lived.

The same arguments may be applied to the putative rectilinear building; while the glass bead within the post-hole could have been re-deposited, the absence of medieval or later pottery from the finds assemblage argues against a significantly later phase of activity, although the rectilinear structures on nearby Berryhill, interpreted as dating from anywhere the medieval period and the nineteenth century, were aceramic (Murray 2002, 218–9). However, the structure clearly respects inner enclosure and on balance it is argued to be related to the rest of the main sequence. In addition, while it seems likely that they were visible, it is not clear if the defences were still used at this period. However, Driscoll (1998a, 169–70) has argued the Picts moved from defended sites to open centres in the eighth to ninth centuries AD, a premise which would also support the broad sequence from Maiden Castle.

The works at Maiden Castle add to the increasingly complex and diverse picture from North-East Scotland in the second half of the first millennium AD. A period which sees the emergence of a Pictish identity, the expansion of Christianity and dynamic and fluctuating relationship between the other North British polities: Dál Riata, the British kingdoms and Northumbria (Alcock 2003; Foster 2004).

This accumulating archaeological evidence derives from a variety of sources and includes, a series of corn drying kilns and unenclosed structures from Kintore, ranging in date from the fifth to tenth centuries AD (Cook and Dunbar 2008, 155–6); the aforementioned hearth at Mither Tap (Atkinson 2007), the dates from which are statistically indistinguishable from those from Maiden Castle; and a refortification of the Iron Age hillfort Hill of Barra dating to the middle of the first millennium AD (Cook 2010). What all of these have in common is that the features would not have been identified as early medieval but for radiocarbon dating. A situation commented upon elsewhere in the UK (For England see Newman and Brennand 2007, 74).

The new date for Maiden Castle also raises the nature of its relationship with the Maiden Stone. While it is tempting to posit a relationship, such stones were easily moved and often have quite complex histories (Clarke 2007). However, Class II symbol stones are argued to date from the eighth century (Alcock 2003, 383–4) and therefore it is possible that the stone is later than Maiden Castle's defences, although it could be contemporary with the putative rectilinear buildings.

Function

The excavated sequence is assumed to represent domestic activity, some of which is in a defended context. The presence of so much midden material, in both earlier and later contexts is rare in early medieval mainland contexts though more common in the Western and Northern Isles. Many authors have commented on the ritual symbolism of accumulated midden material (Parker-Pearson 1996; LeLong and MacGregor 2007, 264–5) and it seems likely that large midden deposits may have represented some form indicator of wealth in early medieval society.

As described above, the precise nature of any domestic activity is unclear, although, while at the maximum end of recorded diameters (Hingley et al 1997, Pope 2003, 105–7) the inner enclosure could in theory have been roofed. While the site is clearly defensive, it is unlikely that it could have withstood a siege or serious attack. It may have been that the defences were designed to withstand short-scale raids. Alternatively the defences may have been for show, reflecting the occupant's status and command of resources (Bowden and McOmish 1987). Indeed the backfilling of the internal ditch and bank to construct a cobbled surface around the site's circuit, suggests that defence was not a primary concern. It is of course possible that the defences combined both practical and prosaic functions (Armit 2007). It may be that the infilling of the inner ditch was to increase the site's useful space, although there was no shortage of space in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps, the key point was to increase the space directly associated with the enclosure because more value was attached to it. Certainly, the interpretation of the role and function of contemporary nuclear forts, for example Dunadd, Argyll (Stevenson

1949, Lane and Campbell 2000) are predicated on such a hierarchical use of space.

Parallels

The RCAHMS' scheme (2007, 100) associates Maiden Castle outer enclosure with two other enclosures from Aberdeenshire: Barflat (NMRS NJ42NE 54) and Wheedlemont (NMRS NJ42NE 5). The three sites are roughly the same size and shape and are biv- or multivallate. However, neither site has an inner stone enclosure, although Wheedlemont does contain an oval bank similar to the inner bank of the outer enclosure at Maiden Castle (Murray Cook pers obs).

The Barflat enclosure is associated with around eight Class I Pictish symbol stones (RCAHMS 2007, 119–22) including the Rhynie Man (Shepherd and Shepherd 1978). The new dates for Maiden Castle prompt the suggestion that the Rhynie symbol stones and the Barflat enclosure are contemporary.

The RCAHMS' system links the inner enclosure to sites such as Cairnmore (NMRS NJ52SW 9; Cook *et al* 2010) and White Hill (NMRS NJ52SW 1; RCAHMS 2007, 101). However, there are significant differences in size amongst this seemingly homogenous group, to the extent that Maiden Castle and White Hill could conceivably have been roofed, while Cairnmore is too large to have been anything other than an open enclosure. A similar debate has been rehearsed regarding the duns of Argyll and the Western Isles (Harding 1984, 1997, 122–33 and 2004, 129–32), with the conclusions that the differences may be connected to issues of hierarchy and function and possibly chronology.

Recent excavation at Cairnmore indicates that it too is early medieval in date (Cook 2010). If one extrapolates the available evidence from Maiden Castle and extends the dating evidence to cover the RCAHMS' range of similar sites in Strathdon, there is a clear cluster of potentially contemporary activity around Rhynie, where three sites: Cairnmore, Wheedlemont and Barflat, all lie within 3km of each other. Quite what this cluster represents is unclear at present but taken together with the cluster of Pictish symbol stones it is a clearly significant early medieval focal point and is worth of further study.

Implications

The radiocarbon dates for Maiden Castle have implications for our understanding of chronology and form at a range of sites, underlining the fact that generic forms may have no chronological significance. For example, while early medieval multi-vallate defences are recognised at Clatchard Craig, Fife (Close-Brooks 1986) and from across western and northern Britain (Dark 1994), they continue to be dated to the pre-Roman period (Harding 2004, 93–5) simply on the basis of form. Thus the outer defences at Burghead, Moray and Inchtuthil, Perth and Kinross are considered

earlier than their early medieval interior (Alcock 2003, 193; Harding 2004, 94). The evidence from Maiden Castle and in addition Cairnmore, which has three ramparts at its entrance (Cook *et al* 2010) clearly challenges this view and supports Ralston's contention (2004, 21) that Burghead's outer defenses are early medieval in origin.

In addition, to return to the debate regarding the dating of duns from the west coast of Scotland, Harding (1984, 1997, 122–33 and 2004, 129–32) has argued that those duns that could be roofed are cognate forms with the range of late Iron Age stone enclosures found across Scotland (Complex Atlantic Roundhouses, duns, homesteads and ringforts). Those structures that could not be roofed represent a much wider date-range (*ibid*). While many of those stone structures that could be roofed have clear late Iron Age origins, they frequently display early medieval 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 with the construction of the inner enclosure provide clear evidence for the possibility that this is the case. Indeed, in his recent review of the roundhouse, Harding concludes that variants of circular roundhouses probably survived well into the first millennium AD (2007, 186).

Architectural influences

It is self-evident that any form of architecture that moves beyond utilitarianism expresses something about the builder/owner, be it power, status or identity. Bowden and McOmish (1987, 77) have argued for a link between the nature of enclosure and identity in prehistoric societies and Murray (1979) has commented on the link between house size and status in early medieval societies as expressed in contemporary written sources.

It therefore seems probable that the architecture employed at Maiden Castle had great significance for the occupants and that it expressed or reflected something particular about their status, power, ethnicity, religion and identity. Assuming that this is the case, the key question is; from where did they draw their inspiration?

It is often argued that earlier monuments are exploited by later generations for their own particular needs, be it as a source of dressed stone (Eaton 2000) or for altogether more esoteric purposes (Hingley 1996). Within early medieval Scotland in the Western and Northern Isles late Iron Age Complex Atlantic Roundhouses continue to be used into the early medieval period (Armit 2003, 133–6) and late Iron Age mirrors appear on Pictish symbol stones (Foster 2004, 71). Other writers have argued explicitly that the Picts forged their identity from the past and in opposition to contemporary events. For example, it is argued that existing prehistoric monuments were used as backdrop

to legitimise local Pictish elites (Driscoll 1998b). Of course, how contemporary people understood prehistoric monuments is unknown and they might not have recognised them as anything to do with their ancestors but perhaps as numinous bits of the landscape with possible otherworld connections. Clarke (2007) has proposed that the appearance of Pictish symbols on orthostats re-emphasises an existing Pictish identity in the face of the Christian mission. Finally, descriptions in Roman literature of the native populations of northern Britain are argued to have been incorporated into their contemporary identity by literate 'Picts' centuries later (Fraser 2008).

In a similar vein it could be argued that the architecture at Maiden Castle also made deliberate reference to the past, the outer enclosure imitating the multi-vallate enclosures from previous centuries, for example the Hill of Barra, which was multi-vallate before 500 cal BC (Cook 2010). We would have to look further afield for the inspiration for the inner enclosure, as the Complex Atlantic Roundhouses and cognate forms of the later Iron Age, for example the homesteads of Perth and Kinross (Taylor 1990) are rare in Aberdeenshire (RCAHMS 2007) and yet these provide the closest parallels.

If one follows Níeke (1990) and Alcock's (2003, 186–90) arguments for an early medieval origin for some of the west coast duns, then the point of reference may, in fact, not be the past but rather the present, albeit a potentially Dalriadic one. Various authors have commented on the complexity of the historical records from the last quarter of the first millennium AD and the changing emphases put upon ancestors for contemporary political benefit, i.e. sometimes it was expedient to claim Irish origins and at other times it was not (Campbell 2001; Woolf 2007); might such claims also be reflected in their choice of architecture? The desire of the ruling Pictish elite to engage with the Irish political community is also reflected by the appearance of the Pictish king Brude, son of Derile, as one of the guarantors of Cáin Adomnáin (The Law of the Innocents protecting non-combatants) (Márkus 1997, 17). If he did indeed attend the synod of Birr (697), presided over by the King of Tara, he may have felt it appropriate to promote Irish elite styles at home. Certainly a similar process was undertaken in the 12th century by King David I, who introduced many aspects of Anglo-Norman culture to Scotland (Oram 2004).

Even if one does not accept Níeke and Alcock's arguments of *de novo* early medieval construction for west coast duns, there are certainly both similar and contemporary structures to Maiden Castle amongst the raths and ring-forts of Ireland, many of which have associated outworks (Stout 1997).

Current evidence suggests that at this point the Christian mission in Pictland was led from the west and Iona, and indeed there are several early church dedications in Aberdeenshire, all linked to abbots from Iona (Taylor 1999). Could the choice of a putative west coast or Irish architectural form, the circular stone built

roofed enclosure (the inner enclosure), potentially also reflect some demonstration of allegiance, or acceptance of Christianity? Elsewhere, the appearance of rectilinear architecture has been tentatively argued to reflect the spread of Christianity (Dunwell and Ralston 2008, 137). However, the available evidence clearly cannot support anything other than highly tentative speculation. Despite this the presence of early Christian activity in the area is indicated both by the ecclesiastical nature of the Maiden Stone and the name Bennachie which has been interpreted as connected with 'blessing' in a Christian context (Johnston 1903, 38; Watson 1926, 263–4).

Conclusion

The works at Maiden Castle have played an important part in expanding the existing repertoire of known Pictish settlement forms and underlines the fact that form can be without chronological significance, and that to further advance the debate more excavation and associated absolute dating is required. The potentially contemporary settlement sites across Strathdon indicate a much larger complex picture and one that will bear fruits if more closely studied.

It is argued that at Maiden Castle and across Strathdon architecture was an active medium used by the inhabitants to communicate messages of power, identity and possibly religion. The potential origins and precise statements made through the selection of building styles are complex, but certainly both older monuments and regional traditions could have represented a palette from which aspects were adopted and discarded as the occupiers saw fit. The selections made by builders and occupants indicate an on-going process of reconstructing identities in an age of fluctuating politics, to establish and/or support identity, lineage, authority or perhaps even religion.

While limited in their nature, the works at Maiden Castle have 'punched above their weight' and added flesh to the bare bones of the RCAHMS' excellent work by adding two new type-sites to the existing corpus, reflecting the complexity and possible meaning of design choice in Aberdeenshire.

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Abstract

Keyhole excavation undertaken at Maiden Castle as part of a wider study into Aberdeenshire hillforts, revealed two new Pictish site-types: a small thick walled stone enclosure (c20m internal diameter) and a surrounding double bank and ditch system. Artefact and radiometric dating places the site sequence within the second half of the first millennium AD. In addition, evidence was recovered for non-ferrous metal-working and putative rectilinear buildings. These findings are discussed in terms of the existing picture of Pictish Aberdeenshire.

Keywords

dun
crucible
early medieval glass
hillfort
Pictish
Strathdon

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