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Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

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Chapter 1

POWERFUL PLACES

GORDON NOBLE

1.1 Introduction

The nature of the societies and the social, ideological and political frameworks that filled the chasm left by the decline of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD – both within and beyond the empire’s boundaries – is one of the most fascinating and longstanding debates regarding late and post-Roman Europe. Traditionally, our broad-scale narratives have focused on the transformations of the Late Roman World in mainland Europe that gave rise to so-called successor states (eg Wickham 2005). Evidence from the northern and western edges of Europe has been given less prominence; however, recent decades have seen evidence from more northerly regions such as Scandinavia provide increasing insight into first-millennium AD society and the transformations that happened at the edges, or even beyond, the Roman Empire in a late and post-Roman context (eg Brink 1996; Ringtved 1999; Hedeager 2011; Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015; Skre 2020).

Across its western reaches, in Britain and Ireland, the topic of how the kingdoms of the post-Roman period formed has been a subject of enquiry for many decades. The 5th–9th centuries AD are seen as pivotal for the development of society in post-Roman Britain and, like elsewhere in Europe, regions that were part of the Roman Empire have tended to receive the most sustained study. In England, the continuity between the Roman and post-Roman period is debated (eg Dark 2000; Wickham 2009; Fleming 2011, 2021; Gerrard 2016), but there were certainly radical shifts in economy, society and politics in many areas, with the migration of new peoples and lifestyles being major contributors to a new socio-political horizon. A key period of change in England came in the 6th and 7th centuries AD with the establishment of sites of royal and elite residence. New or renewed phases of work at key sites such as Lyminge (Kent), Sutton Courtenay/Long Wittenham (Oxfordshire), Rendlesham (Suffolk) and Yeavinger (Northumberland) have been revolutionising the picture we have of royal power in early England and its material traces (Brennan & Hamerow 2015; Scull et al 2016; Semple et al 2017; Thomas 2018; Scull & Thomas 2020). During the 6th and 7th centuries in England royal power came to be legitimated in

increasingly sophisticated terms, with the hall complexes functioning not only as residences but places and landscapes for displaying and reproducing kingly authority through wider practices of assembly, exchange and ritual. The evidence for kingship, ritual and elite residence also has rich foundations in Ireland, where a fulsome historical and archaeological record has led to sophisticated studies on kingship, ritual and residence (eg Bhreathnach 2014; Gleeson & Carty 2013; Gleeson 2017, 2021). The later prehistoric royal sites of Emain Macha, Crúachain, Dún Ailinne and Tara are well-known archaeological landscapes, comprising key monuments connected to public ritual, royal residence, assembly and inauguration (Warner 2000b; Schot et al 2011; Gleeson 2012). In addition to these a whole host of more minor royal sites are known from the later first millennium AD including high-status crannog sites, promontory forts and ring-forts (eg Warner 2000b; Gleeson & Carty 2013; Gleeson 2012; O’Brien & Hogan 2021). The historical sources, including the law tracts, for Ireland record the structures of kingship, the exercise of power and assembly practices within royal landscapes (Kelly 1988; Bhreathnach 2014; Gleeson 2015, 2017). The evidence for Ireland makes a strong foundation for tracking the development, ideologies and ritualised dimensions of kings and kingdoms in first-millennium AD western Europe.

In Scotland, in contrast, the topic of the formation of the early kingdoms of the first millennium AD, and the sites of royal residence and power, have seen much less study due to a dearth of both historical and archaeological evidence. Like Scandinavia, the Roman Iron Age and post-Roman periods are, for some regions of Scotland at least, virtually prehistoric in terms of written sources and the archaeological evidence is exceedingly thin on the ground compared to that of England and Ireland. For comparison, Scotland has struggled with dozens of archaeological sites known from the Late Roman and early medieval periods as opposed to the hundreds or even tens of thousands known from England and Ireland (eg Hamerow 1993, 2012; O’Sullivan 2008; O’Sullivan et al 2014). This deficit of evidence from the 3rd century AD onwards has resulted in the development of models of

social and economic collapse (eg Hunter 2007) with the continuities between Roman Iron Age society and that of the post-Roman period difficult to demonstrate, and developed kingship and political cohesion for regions such as Pictland has only been seen as a feature of the 7th century onwards (Fraser 2009; Woolf 2017a). Indeed, existing models of the development of late and post-Roman society in northern Britain have tended to characterise the polities that existed beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire as small scale, where power was transitory and much less developed than in more southern and central European areas. Minimalist views have at times considered regions such as northern Britain as comprising ‘peasant-mode’ societies (Wickham 2005) or ‘farmer republics’ (Fraser 2009) with a flat social hierarchy, which lacked developed structures of power and governance until the late first millennium AD or beyond. This perspective is perhaps a direct product of a historiographical and methodological tendency to rank these societies based on a set of evidentiary criteria such as coinage, charters and land-tenure, which are often used to map the ‘progress’ of kingdoms towards the state-like structures of governance and rulership seen to exist further south and east. In addition, these approaches tend to assume a unilinear socio-evolutionary model of political development, rather than considering the multiple pathways and longer-term trajectories by which early European communities were transformed during the first millennium AD. They also rely on the historical evidence rather than the materiality and spatiality of power that other sources of evidence can provide.

Scotland, with its repeated phases of Roman invasion and long-lasting influence, yet never permanent occupation, will have had different trajectories of development to areas that lay fully within the bounds of the Roman Empire. Until recently, the lack of evidence has hampered elucidation of what those trajectories might be; however, a new generation of field projects are beginning to have a dramatic impact on our knowledge of Scotland and of the archaeology of the Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval periods. As outlined in this volume, this new evidence is stressing much greater continuities between these periods than previously recognised and suggests quite different pathways to power in regions such as north-east Scotland that remained largely outwith the direct intervention (but not beyond the influence) of Roman society.

This monograph documents the archaeological excavations at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, and the wider Upper Strathbogie valley from 2011 to 2022, outlining and analysing the evidence for a major central place of Pictland as it developed from the c 3rd century AD through to the 7th. The excavations at Rhynie, and two nearby sites of Tap o’ Noth and Cairn More, have produced the richest dataset yet for considering the Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval period in Scotland. Included in the sites studied is the Craw Stane complex at Rhynie – the first non-hillfort elite complex of Pictland to be excavated – whose results have revealed the multifaceted nature of the use of this central place. The site, at its height between the late 4th and mid- to later 6th centuries AD, encompassed elements of an elite settlement, ceremonial centre and place with extensive craftworking. A series of sculptured stones stood in association with the settlement, and the iconography of these stones along with the wider archaeological evidence provides an illuminating evidence base for consideration

of the nascent power centres of early medieval northern Britain, with broader implications for the nature of power and rulership in late and post-Roman Europe. A few hundred metres to the north of the Craw Stane complex stood a contemporary cemetery, now partly overlain by the modern village of Rhynie. A number of Pictish stones also appear to have been erected in association with this cemetery, which was found to have phases of burial in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, but could well have had a longer currency of use. In the wider valley stood two contemporary sites: the spectacular fort of Tap o’ Noth and a complex ringfort at Cairn More. At Tap o’ Noth, settlement began to grow around an earlier Iron Age vitrified fort (400–100 cal BC) erected on the summit of the Hill of Noth. By the 3rd century AD, hundreds of house platforms had been constructed on the hill and by the 5th–6th century AD the hill was bound by a 16.75ha enclosing wall and palisade. Occupation endured at the site until the 7th century AD. At Cairn More, settlement extended from the 5th to 7th century AD providing a third site in contemporary occupation in the first millennium AD, all within five kilometres of one another. Together, they provide extraordinary new evidence for a period when settlement and elite centres have been exceedingly difficult to identify.

In the following chapters, the evidence and narrative will expand from the local and detailed towards the wider European context. The monograph comprises detailed examination of the excavated evidence and material culture from the Craw Stane complex, including analysis of one of Britain’s most extensive, best contextualised and most comprehensively dated metalworking assemblages from the period. This artefactual evidence not only provides insight into local practices, but has significant implications for understanding the cultural connections of the early medieval period in Britain. Analysis of the environmental sequence through pollen, phytolith and botanical remains is also outlined, along with the more limited evidence from the faunal material and charred assemblages. The interpretive elements of the monograph address research issues such as the role of hillforts and enclosed settlement, Roman Iron Age relations on the northern frontier, cult and kingship, the nature and development of rulership in the early kingdoms of northern Britain, settlement conglomeration, power and visual culture, and the material basis of early medieval polities. The major topics briefly addressed above, such as continuity between the Late Roman and early medieval periods, kingdom formation and the wider European context, will be largely paused until the final chapters. However, as the final discussion will hopefully show that the new evidence from Rhynie and the Upper Strathbogie valley can at last begin to make significant contributions to the key debates that surround this formative period of European history.

1.2 Rhynie

Our story of the modern investigation of Rhynie begins on 10 March 1978, when a remarkable discovery was made just to the south of the modern village of Rhynie, which lies in the Upper Strathbogie valley, Aberdeenshire (Illus 1.1). On that day, the farmer Kevin Alston was ploughing the field in which the Craw Stane, a Pictish symbol stone, stood. The plough hit a large stone on which a fabulous carving – the so-called Rhynie Man (Illus 1.2) – was



Illus 1.1

Location map of Rhynie highlighting the location of the Craw Stane complex, Tap o' Noth and Cairn More. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database rights 2024 Ordnance Survey

RHYNIE



Illus 1.2

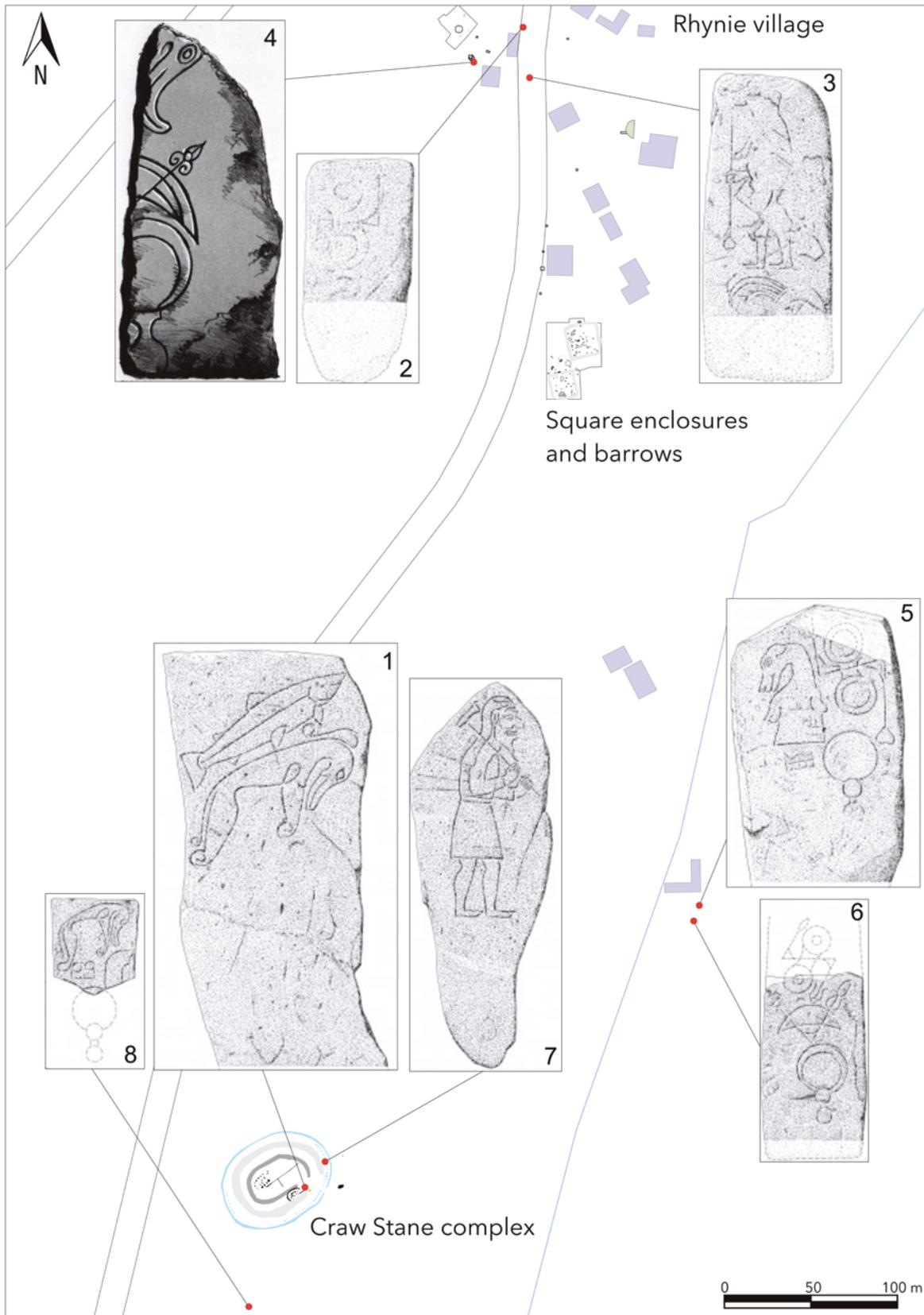
The Rhynie Man when first discovered in 1978. © Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service

revealed. A month later Kevin found another stone, bringing the number of identified first-millennium AD carved stones from Rhynie to a total of eight (Illus 1.3).

The stones from Rhynie belong to the wider corpus of ‘Pictish stones’, which includes over 200 carved stone monuments with symbols, often found in pairs, known from eastern and northern Scotland (RCAHMS 2008). The first photographs following the discovery show the Rhynie Man stone lying on its side in the freshly ploughed field with the impact of the plough on the stone identifiable as white scars overlying the carving at the top of the stone (Illus 1.2). The colour photo and the archaeological scale bar to the right of the stone brings the image into the present, providing a snapshot of what must have been a period of great excitement, bafflement and awe on behalf of the finders and those who had to deal with the aftermath of this discovery – principally Ian Shepherd who was the regional archaeologist at the time. Today a find of this type would have been dealt with swiftly, but that dramatic day in March 1978 led to a much less exciting and more drawn out process of the stone being shifted from field to field and then via a tractor to Barflat farm, the residence of Gavin Alston, Kevin’s father, where it stood outside the house and latterly in a barn.¹ It was only in 1988 that the stone found its current

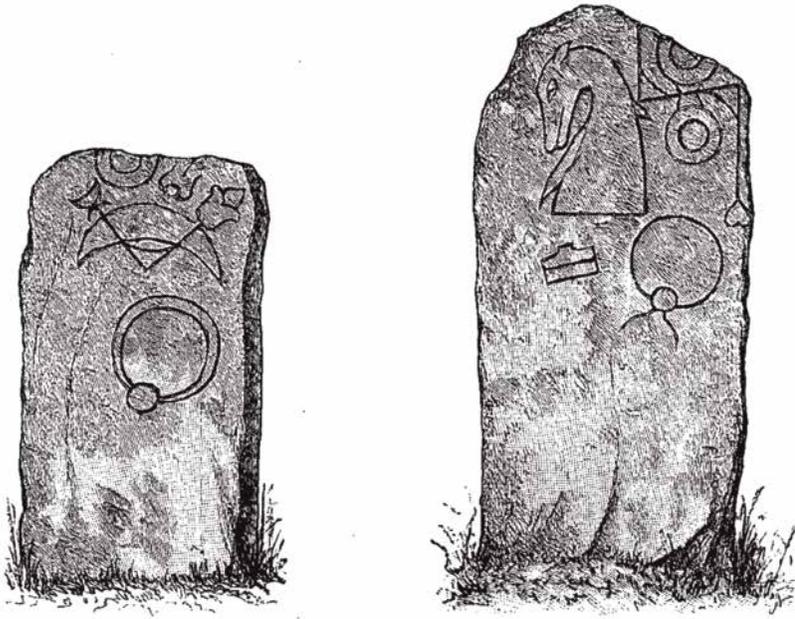
home, moved by Aberdeen Shore Porter’s Society to Aberdeenshire Council Headquarters at Woodhill House, Westburn Road, Aberdeen. Rhynie Man now stands sentinel, watching the daily throng of visitors and staff coming and going at the council headquarters, far removed from his original findspot in a field to the south of Rhynie. Who was this figure depicted on the stone. Why was it in this location? How did it relate to the other Pictish stones from this area? These are some of the questions that led to this project to find out more.

There had been interest in the Pictish antiquities of Rhynie from the 18th century onwards (OSA 1791–9 (Vol 19): 292), with accounts of the Pictish stones from the environs of the village beginning to proliferate in the 19th century (Logan 1829; Stuart 1856: 4; MacLagan 1880) (Illus 1.4). In the 20th century, Isabel Henderson identified Rhynie as a key area for the dissemination of the symbol stone tradition (1958: 54), but it was the discovery of Rhynie Man in 1978 that really began to focus archaeological attention on the remains of the valley, with more detailed accounts of the stones and the archaeology of the area, including newly identified cropmark enclosures, appearing in the 1980s–2000s (Shepherd & Shepherd 1980; Ralston & Inglis 1984, Ralston 2004: 39; RCAHMS 2007: 119–22). These earlier studies and



Illus 1.3

The eight Pictish symbol stones from Rhyrie and their findspots in relation to the modern village and the excavated sites described in the monograph.
 Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database rights 2024 Ordnance Survey



Illus 1.4

Christian MacLagan's depiction of Rhynie No. 5 and No. 6 carved stones (from MacLagan 1880)

accounts provided an intriguing picture of the rich archaeology of the Upper Strathbogie valley and the potential to link symbol stone findspots with a diverse range of cropmark and upstanding remains. This set the foundations for the current research and what transpired to be one of the largest research projects conducted in Scotland in recent decades. Dozens of students and volunteers from around Scotland and further afield descended upon the small village of Rhynie at least once a year to carry out fieldwork from 2011 to 2022, training in excavation and field investigation techniques whilst marvelling at the unfolding archaeology before them. That fieldwork, and the efforts of its participants, have begun to overturn our perceptions of the scale and character of the Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval society in north-east Scotland.

The investigations reported on in this volume began as the relatively small-scale Rhynie Environs Archaeological Project and work continued with subsequent HES- and Leverhulme-funded projects that have fleshed out the landscape context of the remarkable archaeological remains of the Upper Strathbogie valley. The initial focus of the project was the cropmark complex found in association with the Craw Stane, first identified through aerial reconnaissance by Ian Shepherd in 1978 (Chapter 2) (Illus 1.5). Excavations from 2011–17 found that the Craw Stane stood towards the entranceway of the enclosure complex which, in an



Illus 1.5

The cropmarks of the Craw Stane enclosure complex © Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service

POWERFUL PLACES



Illus 1.6

Rhynie Woman activities montage. Images © Hayley Keane

early phase, comprised ditches (and presumably ramparts) surrounding a low glacial knoll. In a later phase, an elaborate timber wall of oak posts and planks was built where inside and out a series of buildings stood. The excavations revealed a rich material assemblage including sherds of Late Roman wine amphorae imported from the eastern Mediterranean, sherds of glass drinking vessels from France and one of the largest assemblages of metalworking production evidence known from early medieval Britain, including the moulds and crucibles required to make pins, brooches and a range of other objects (Chapter 7). When an iron axe-shaped pin resembling that of the axe carried by the Rhynie Man was discovered, the ability of these remarkable finds to shed new light on the iconography of the carved Pictish stones also became obvious. On the outskirts of the village, a few hundred metres north of the Craw Stane, excavations in 2013–14 found traces of a contemporary cemetery and uncovered the remains of ploughed-out Pictish burial mounds, including the partially preserved remains of an adult female buried within a long cist in a square barrow. This was one of two burial monuments located next to two unusual square enclosures.

Work in the environs between 2017–22 followed up the work at the Craw Stane enclosure, with excavations targeting three hillforts that overlook the complex: Cairn More, Cnoc Cailliche and Tap o' Noth. The investigations at Cnoc Cailliche showed that this small fort (0.11ha) was constructed and occupied around 400–200 cal BC in the Iron Age (reported on in Noble et al 2020b). Cairn More is enclosed by the remains of two stone walls, the inner enclosing an area around 0.2ha. An evaluation by Murray Cook in 2010 suggested a phase of occupation in the period AD 410–630. The University of Aberdeen excavations revealed evidence for internal buildings at Cairn More and elaborate timber revetment for the ramparts, and obtained radiocarbon dates spanning the 4th to 7th centuries AD, activity which directly overlaps with the occupation phases at the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 5). Perhaps the most spectacular results of the environs project came from Tap o' Noth, one of the most imposing forts in Scotland (Chapter 4). The summit oblong fort is the second highest hillfort in Scotland and one of the best-preserved examples of a vitrified (heavily burnt) fort. Surrounding this structure is a massive 16.75ha enclosure forming the second largest hillfort

ARCHAEOLOGY SITE OPEN DAY
AT TWO LOCATIONS
TAP 'O' NOTH AND CAIRMORE
NEAR
RHYNIE
ABERDEENSHIRE

SATURDAY 10TH AUGUST 2019
FROM 10AM – 3PM
TOURS AT BOTH SITES BY THE FIELD ARCHAEOLOGISTS
SITES SIGNPOSTED FROM THE VILLAGE OF RHYNIE

FREE AND ALL WELCOME

RHYNIE WOMAN
POP UP DIGGERS CAFE
AT CAIRMORE SITE

FREE
TEA-COFFEE-SOFT DRINKS-CAKE-PIZZA-TOASTIES

PLEASE BE AWARE
LIMITED PARKING AVAILABLE NEAR SITES
BOTH SITES ARE ON ROUGH TERRAIN SO PLEASE WEAR SUITABLE
CLOTHING AND SHOES
TAP 'O' NOTH IS AN APPROX. 40 MIN HILL WALK FROM CAR PARK
CHILDREN MUST BE ACCOMPANIED
UNSUITABLE FOR PUSHCHAIRS OR WHEELCHAIRS

enclosure in northern Britain, within which lies hundreds of hut platforms recorded in earlier surveys (Ralston & Watt 1983; RCAHMS 2007: 103–5). Given the height and nature of its location, investigating the oblong fort was an exercise in extreme archaeology, with the vitrified walls and areas of the interior tackled over two gruelling seasons. The excavations on the summit revealed the buckled and heavily burnt wall faces of the fort and a well. Dating evidence showed that the construction and destruction of the site lay in the period 400–100 cal BC and there was no hint of later reuse of the site, despite a comprehensive set of radiocarbon determinations. The results from the larger fort were the most surprising of all of the dating results from the project. Due to its size and elevation, scholars had suggested the construction and occupation of the lower fort at Tap o’ Noth dated from a time when the climate was warmer, possibly during the Bronze Age (eg Halliday 1985: 238; Mercer & Tipping 1994: 5; Armit 1997: 57). Excavations in 2019 began to overturn that idea dramatically, with radiocarbon dates from two platforms and the rampart spanning the 3rd to 6th century AD period, dates that are broadly contemporary with the Craw Stane complex and Cairn More. LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys also revealed many more house platforms were contained within the lower fort – perhaps as many as 800 – making Tap o’ Noth the largest and one of the most densely occupied early medieval hillforts known in Britain and Ireland, and one with important Late Roman Iron Age origins.

The project at Rhynie was fuelled by a developing set of research questions that evolved from basic queries surrounding the chronology and character of the Craw Stane complex to much grander questions regarding the development of the kingdoms of early medieval Scotland. Project partners and supporters were key to the success of a project of this scale. In the first phase of investigations, a series of small grants were obtained to allow small- to medium-scale field seasons to be undertaken. From 2015 onwards, Historic Environment Scotland became a major funder due to the project’s ability to address national and international research agendas, but also as a result of its aims of providing training to a generation of students and to bring an understanding of a ‘dark age’ of Scottish archaeology to wider public attention.² Over the course of ten excavation seasons, more than 100 students were

trained in key fieldwork skills, working alongside a similar number of volunteers. Within a few years of working at Rhynie the project also began to become deeply embedded in the community. On the community engagement front, the project had the critical support of Rhynie Woman, a local artistic collective that ran hugely successful engagement initiatives alongside the excavations, including pop-up museums, fire festivals, tours of the archaeological sites and events at the annual Rhynie gala – tying community and archaeologists together in ways rarely achieved (Illus 1.6). The media profile of the project, including the social media ‘Northern Picts’ accounts, have also helped bring new audiences to a long-loved, but poorly understood, era of Scotland’s history. In terms of overarching research goals, many of the research questions were tied into Scotland’s first ever national research agenda, the *Scottish Archaeological Research Framework* (ScARF 2012), but many new topics and avenues of research quickly opened in the face of an unprecedented body of new archaeological material gained over an exciting and extended period of archaeological discovery.

In summary, the research documented in this volume started modestly but began to tackle big picture questions surrounding the transitions from the small-scale societies of the Iron Age to the early kingdoms of northern Britain. The results and conclusions are yet to be laid out, but in this volume we will propose that Rhynie was a key landscape through which the developing polities of northern Pictland were forged. This was a multifunctional landscape associated with Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval elite residence, assembly, tribute gathering, production and exchange, ritual and burial. It was a multinodal central place controlled by warrior kings, and it is through the archaeology of the Upper Strathbogie valley and the iconography and character of the material culture recovered that we perhaps get our best glimpse yet of the form and evolution of Pictish society in the period c 300–650 AD. Overall, the results of the excavations in the Upper Strathbogie valley provide an unexpected and unparalleled insight into an elite landscape of the Picts and their predecessors, and it is the role of this monograph to pull all these results together to tell a story of the Upper Strathbogie valley from the Iron Age to its early medieval height, and finally its fade into relative obscurity in later periods.