Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

Edited by Gordon Noble

Chapter 2

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

GORDON NOBLE AND MEGGEN GONDEK

2.1 The background to the investigations

The foundation for the work reported in this monograph was the Rhynie Environs Archaeological Project (REAP). Meggen Gondek (then at Durham and latterly University of Chester) and Gordon Noble (then at Durham, later Glasgow and now Aberdeen) formed REAP in 2005 to examine the group of Class I stones from Rhynie. Early work included a series of geophysical surveys and the excavation of a prehistoric roundhouse in the vicinity of the Craw Stane (Gondek & Noble 2015). However, it was not until the 2010s that the project really took off, with both directors now in permanent jobs and funding raised for initial pilot work at the Craw Stane complex in 2011 (Illus 2.1). The early aims of the REAP project were outlined in a publication by Gondek and Noble in *Pictish Progress* in 2011, a volume that followed a series of conferences marking the 50th anniversary of the

seminal volume *The Problem of the Picts* (Wainwright 1955). In that publication, it was noted that there was great potential for exploring the landscape context of symbol stones, with Rhynie proposed as an ideal case study given the concentration of monuments found in the vicinity of the village and the fact that the Craw Stane appeared to be in situ[1] (Gondek & Noble 2011: 282). As a result, the grouping of eight stones known from Rhynie offered the opportunity to investigate the potential relationships between the monuments and the landscape in which they were found.[2] The relatively open agricultural environment that formed many of the stone findspots, along with a range of other archaeological monuments, provided good opportunities for fieldwork and landscape approaches to be undertaken. The interlinkages between the monuments were seen as key:

Illus 2.1
The Craw Stane with Tap o' Noth in the background © Cathy MacIver

the symbol stones structured the field of action around them; they defined their own space/place, alongside other features that may no longer survive. The ceremony or actions around them, which may sometimes be archaeologically visible, represents the contextualised social moments we are interested in when we ask, 'what do these stones mean?' (Gondek & Noble 2011: 288).

In the 2011 chapter, Gondek and Noble produced a 'symbol map' (Gondek & Noble 2011: 289, fig 8.2) to draw out the associations and context of the symbols, with a northern grouping linked to the location of a probable early medieval cemetery (following RCAHMS 2007: 119–22). The clustering of hillforts around the symbol stone distribution was also highlighted, alongside the possible location of an early church centred on the parish church at Rhynie. However, as the aim of the landscape analysis was to consider the function and potential date of the Craw Stane enclosures, Tap o' Noth was only briefly mentioned. The occurrence of the enclosures at the Craw Stane was seen to provide a context for the erection and use of this impressive symbol stone and at least two of the other stones from Rhynie that came from the vicinity (No. 7 – the Rhynie Man, and Rhynie No. 8). The position of the Craw Stane at the entrance to the inner enclosure was considered a significant clue to the date of the enclosure complex, though the discovery of Bronze Age pottery near the Craw Stane indicated that the enclosures could also relate to multi-period activity including that of prehistoric date. Ultimately, however, the Craw Stane enclosures were interpreted as the ploughed-out remains of a 'ringfort' (cf Harding 2004: 238) and the 2011 chapter briefly examined Iron Age and early medieval examples of these in Scotland. Discussion also focused on multi-period settlement sites in the Northern Isles, such as the Broch of Gurness and Pool, where symbol stones have been found in settlements with Pictish period buildings. The authors then examined the potential ritual role of the Rhynie enclosures, with the location of an apparent palisade outwith the ditches seen as a reversal of the norm, suggesting the site was one where 'more specialised and perhaps ritualised activities were undertaken' (Gondek & Noble 2011: 300). The rich prehistoric remains of the Rhynie valley were seen as a sign of the reuse and reinvention of an already significant prehistoric landscape in the early medieval period (cf Bradley 1987; Driscoll 1998; Newman 1998; Campbell 2003: 55). The conclusion of the 2011 paper (written before the first field season at the Craw Stane complex in the summer of 2011) was that the chronology of the Rhynie cropmark enclosures was the pressing research issue to address.

Prior to the commencement of the first field season, scheduled monument consent was obtained for evaluative excavations at the Craw Stane enclosures. The rarity of an in situ Class I symbol stone was highlighted in the application, along with the potential for understanding the stone in relation to the associated cropmarks – either as a contemporary monument or reuse of an earlier enclosure complex perhaps of prehistoric date. The initial objectives were modest:

- Determine the character, extent and survival of the cropmark features
- Obtain material suitable for scientific dating of the enclosures and other features
- Develop a deeper understanding of the Rhynie landscape

The 2011 trench ran from the Craw Stane downslope to the north, encompassing all three enclosing elements – the inner ditch, the outer ditch and the palisade (Illus 2.2). Finds-rich deposits were located in the upper fills of the outer ditch and good dating material was found for all of the major features uncovered. The 2011 season therefore exceeded all expectations in terms of results, with radiocarbon dating indicating a 5th to 6th century date for the site and important sherds of Late Roman amphora, glass from western France, metalwork objects and metalworking evidence recovered (Noble & Gondek 2011). The first season was completed on a budget of around £4,500 scraped together through funding from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and internal funding from the University of Aberdeen and the University of Chester.

With the 2011 season dating the enclosures to the early medieval period and confirming the presence of in situ deposits broadly contemporary with Rhynie's carved stone monuments, the focus of the project shifted towards recording the major constituents of the monument through strip-and-map excavation (Illus 2.3). This involved evaluating the interior for the survival of internal buildings and assessing the associated economic and artefactual evidence. The work at the site continued as part of the Rhynie Environs Archaeological Project (REAP), directed by the Universities of Aberdeen and Chester, and excavations at the Craw Stane complex subsequently took place in 2012 and 2015–17. This period of investigation provided detailed insights into the Craw Stane settlement complex, with the strip-and-map approach characterising a large proportion of the complex whilst leaving more than 85% of the archaeology in situ (Chapter 5). In addition, the two square enclosures (Illus 2.4) identified by aerial photography near the village were targeted for excavation in 2013 and a programme of community-focused investigations concentrated on test-pitting in the village gardens, revealing further elements of the cemetery in 2014.

The research questions for the 2012–17 seasons were more informed and ambitious than the 2011 season and concentrated on the following:

- How can we characterise the activity at Rhynie? Was this a Pictish settlement/cult centre/fort or did it encompass elements of all of these?
- How did the Class I Pictish sculpture relate to the enclosures and related features? Were they contemporary with the settlement phases? What was their role and function in the early medieval landscape of Rhynie?
- Given our lack of understanding of the activities and nature of the interior of early medieval enclosures, what can strip-and-map techniques reveal about the ground plan of the enclosure complex at Rhynie?
- How did the site develop through time? Did it begin as an unenclosed settlement? How did the site end? Was the enclosure complex destroyed or deliberately dismantled?

Illus 2.2
The 2011 season – the initial trowel back of the first season of excavation at the Craw Stane complex enclosures

Illus 2.3
The most ambitious field season – 2016 at the Craw Stane complex. Tap o' Noth can be seen in the background

Illus 2.4
The square enclosures by Rhynie village © Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service

- How can we address the lack of Pictish domestic settlement in lowland contexts such as Rhynie? Given the lack of Pictish domestic architecture in mainland Scotland, what was the form and nature of the buildings associated with the enclosures at Rhynie?
- What was the nature of activities carried out on the site? Is there evidence for onsite production of metalwork and other craftworking activities? What type(s) of metalworking was conducted at this centre? Can we say any more about the importance of metalworking at early medieval centres of power?
- What are the limits of the early medieval site? What can wider geophysical, test-pitting and other investigative techniques bring to our understanding of the site and its extent?
- How did the Craw Stane cropmark complex relate to the cemetery located closer to the modern village? How did the cemetery develop? Did its growth go hand-in-hand with the development of the enclosure complex?

From 2017 onwards, focus on the Rhynie valley shifted to the wider environs and work was conducted as part of the University of Aberdeen Northern Picts Project (established in 2012). The potential to reconstruct the long-term development of the Upper Strathbogie landscape in the processes of state formation from the Iron Age to early medieval period was highlighted in funding applications submitted to HES in 2017 to help support the wider environs work. The Northern Picts: Rhynie Environs Project (2018–22) built on the legacy of the REAP project and aimed to characterise and date other sites in the Rhynie valley – the enclosures at Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More – to provide context for the development of the Craw Stane complex. The capabilities and the resources of the team working on the environs project were significantly boosted in 2017 by the awarding of a Leverhulme Trust Leadership Award to Gordon Noble for the 'Comparative Kingship: The Early Medieval Kingdoms of Northern Britain and Ireland' project. Rhynie was one of the case studies of that project, allowing Comparative Kingship researchers

to work on the excavation and analysis of Tap o' Noth and Cairn More. The palaeoenvironmental work reported on in this monograph (Chapter 8) was also conducted as part of the Comparative Kingship project, as was the historical contextualisation surrounding the development of the Picts and the nature of kingship, and the development of mapping and place-name analysis (Chapters 3 and 12).

The focus of the work on the environs of the Craw Stane complex involved obtaining robust chronologies and characterising the forts at Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More. The research questions posed at this stage of the project included:

- Was the Craw Stane enclosure complex part of a larger landscape of power that encompassed the Upper Strathbogie region?
- Did the Rhynie landscape resemble royal landscapes in early medieval or late Iron Age Scandinavia, Ireland or Anglo-Saxon England, which were polyfocal in nature with contemporary sites existing within a complex settlement hierarchy?
- How did the landscape of Strathbogie develop from the Iron Age to early medieval period? Is there evidence of continuity or was the Pictish central place at Rhynie built to reference an earlier Iron Age regional centre as a means of symbolically legitimising new forms of rulership?
- Was metalworking production restricted to the Rhynie complex or was it practised at other sites in the wider landscape?
- What can the Strathbogie evidence tell us about wider processes of state formation in early medieval Scotland?

Illus 2.5
Fred Murray, one of the project's most dedicated and 'colourful' volunteers
© David Denoon

Illus 2.6
Excavations at Tap o' Noth platforms T15–T17 in 2022

- How did the Craw Stane complex relate chronologically and functionally to sites such as Tap o' Noth, Cnoc Cailliche and Cairn More forts? Did activity at the Craw Stane complex in the 4th–6th centuries AD shift focus to Tap o' Noth oblong fort, as might be suggested from the dating evidence from sites such as Craig Phadrig? Or did the elite focus on this wider landscape end in the 6th century AD and move to other locations within Northern Pictland?
- How can this series of sites help us illuminate the crucial narratives surrounding state formation in early medieval Scotland?

The three new research sites posed significant challenges for the Northern Pics/Comparative Kingship team. Cairn More had previously seen limited investigation as part of the Strathdon Hillforts project (Cook 2011b); however, renewed investigations showed that the site was extensively covered by, and damaged by, gorse, which required a heroic effort by Rhynie local Fred Murray to clear it (Illus 2.5). This enabled the site to be tackled in open area excavation from 2018–20. Cnoc Cailliche (also known as Wheedlemont) was excavated in 2017 to provide an outline chronology for the site (Noble et al 2020b) which showed that the defences and internal settlement remains identified belonged to the Iron Age. The largest and most challenging undertaking of the environs project was Tap o' Noth, Scotland's second highest hillfort which loomed over the valley below (Illus 2.6). It was a site that the local community was immensely keen to see investigated but was a daunting challenge given its scale, complexity and relative inaccessibility. The initial focus of the work at Tap o' Noth was on the summit fort (2017–18) and in 2019–22 focus moved to the lower fort and platform settlements.

With these sites there were some clues to what the investigations might find. The previous work at Cairn More suggested a site broadly contemporary with the Craw Stane enclosures, while Cnoc Cailliche was thought to span the Iron Age to early medieval period given its morphology and discovery of Iron Age pottery at the site (NRHE ID 17215). At Tap o' Noth, there was little doubt that the vitrified oblong fort would prove to be Iron Age, given previous results at oblong vitrified forts of this type (eg Cook 2010). However, an early medieval phase was also hoped for based on evidence from sites such as Craig Phadrig, Inverness, where E Ware and other early medieval finds were found in secondary phases of occupation (Small & Cottam 1972).[3] The lower enclosure and platforms at Tap o' Noth were generally thought to be earlier than the summit enclosure (eg Halliday 1985: 238; Mercer & Tipping 1994: 5; Armit 1997: 57), an observation that proved to be the reverse of the actuality. As the work progressed and the number of Late Roman Iron Age and early medieval sites in the valley increased, it became clear that the extent of the first-millennium AD archaeology in the valley had been seriously underestimated and that the project had the potential to tackle research issues well beyond those relevant to the Upper Strathbogie valley.

2.2 A connected and resourceful place: the physical setting

GORDON NOBLE AND NICHOLAS EVANS

Rhynie is a small village, located in western Aberdeenshire in north-east Scotland (Illus 1.1, 2.7). The modern village is a 19th-century planned settlement on the site of an earlier village known as the Muir of Rhynie (RCAHMS 2007: 195–6, and see Chapter 3). Rhynie lies between the River Bogie, Ord Burn and Burn of Easaiche and sits at 181m OD, making it one of the higher settlements in Aberdeenshire. Though located not far from the Cairngorms National Park, it occupies a rich agricultural valley with close connections to more lowland areas in the east and north. The First Statistical Account of Scotland from the end of the 18th century records Rhynie parish as comprising around 20,000 acres of land with a population of around 836 in 1755 and 681 in 1797 (OSA 1791–9 (Vol 19): 291). The population had grown to over 1000 by 1841, with the main industry listed as agriculture (Wright 1845: 1016). The main watercourse – the Water of Bogie – flows to the east of Rhynie and the Craw Stane complex, from Auchindoir to the south as far as Huntly around nine miles to the north. There, it merges with the River Deveron which continues north-east to Turriff and ultimately to Banff on the Moray coast. The Bogie is noted for its brown trout, with salmon also known to swim in the river, but the watercourse is shallow and not navigable.

Today the population of Rhynie has declined to around 450 people. In a modern context, Rhynie can seem relatively isolated; situated at the fringes of Aberdeenshire, in a location far from the sea and nestled in the shadows of the uplands. Nonetheless, Rhynie is located in a strategic position at a natural communication node in the centre of a wide valley between the Cairngorms and Cabrach hills to the west and the Correen-Bennachie range to the east. The valley defines major routeways through the hills leading northwards to the Moray coast, the upper reaches of the River Don to the south, and to the River Dee and the Mounth beyond (RCAHMS 2007: 121; Brander 2014: 29). Other routes lead off east towards the Garioch and lower Don, and west through Essie and the Cabrach to modern Dufftown in the southern reaches of Moray (RCAHMS 2007: 121). In the post-medieval period, a drove road ran from Huntly through Rhynie and down to the River Don at Kildrummy – a route also shown on Roy's 18th-century map (Haldane 1968: page, map 1) (Illus 2.8). Roy's map is particularly revealing, as it demonstrates that the route through Rhynie from the Mounth was the most direct path from the eastern lowlands to Moray in the north. The routeways that pass through this landscape mean that Rhynie has often occupied a strategic and liminal position between the regional polities of eastern and northern Scotland.

The Craw Stane (Rhynie No.1) (Illus 2.1), the Pictish symbol stone that formed the focus of the initial stages of the archaeological investigation that this volume reports on, sits within the valley bottom to the south of the modern village on what are now the lands of Barflat farm (Illus 1.1, 2.7). The site is 200m away from the location of the old parish kirk which is adjacent to the river. The parish church was demolished in 1823 when a new church was built within the centre of the current village but the
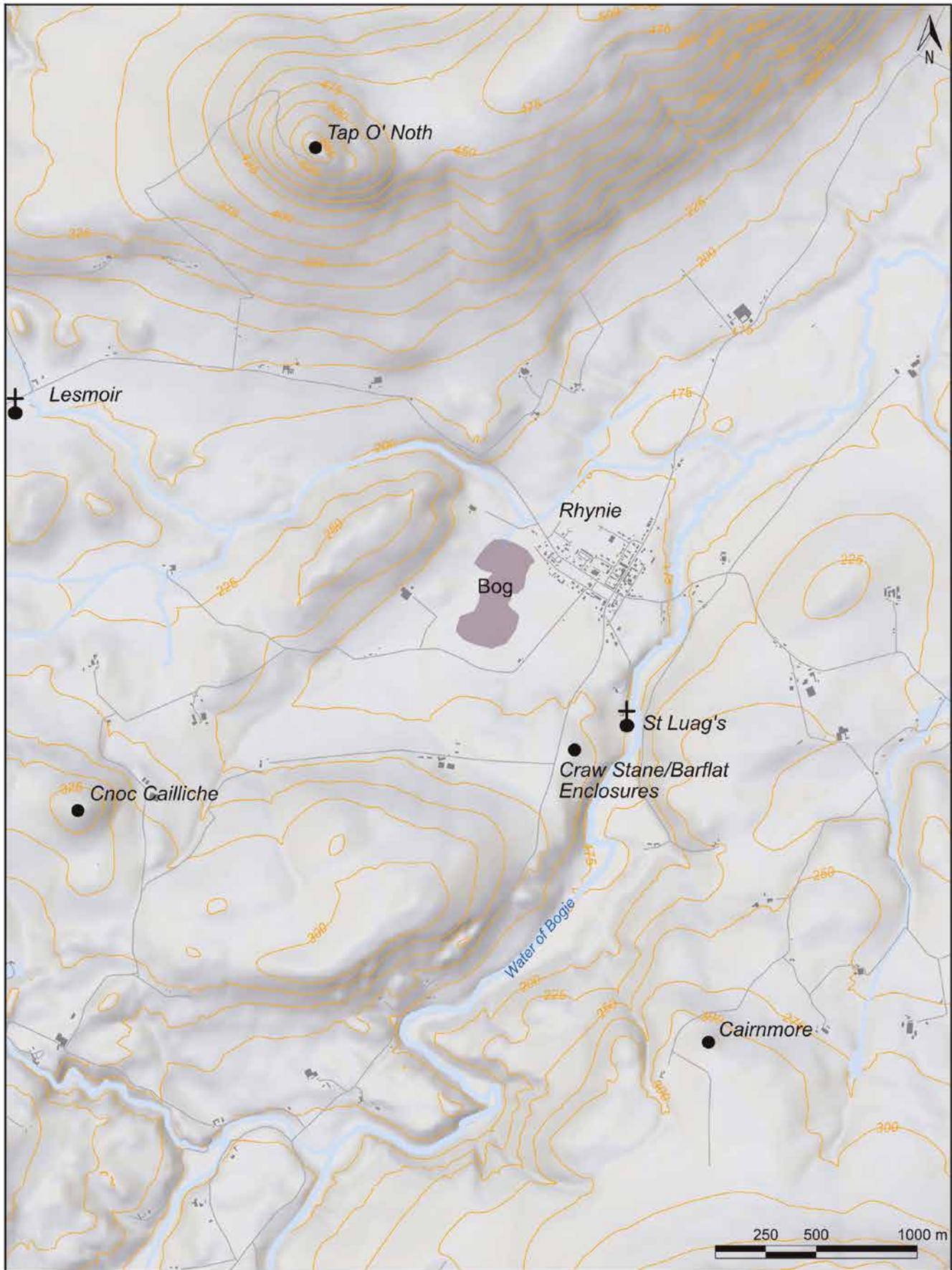
Illus 2.7
The Rhynie valley showing the position of the main sites investigated and a reconstruction of the possible extent of the Rhynie bog.
Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database rights 2024 Ordnance Survey

kirkyard remains enclosed by a rectangular boundary wall that houses gravestones and burial monuments dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, including a 1668 memorial to Alexander Gordon of Muirack (Shepherd 2006: 46). Near to the church is a mire through which the Water of Bogie flows (the site of the pollen core reported on in Chapter 8). Roy's Military Survey of Scotland suggests that the Craw Stane stood in proximity to a major routeway that connected the Strathbogie valley to the Don valley at Kildrummy (Illus 2.8).

Roy's map shows a bog to the west of the Muir of Rhynie, as does the Gordon estate plan of 1776 (RHP2554), which gives the extent of the moss as over 32 acres in size (Illus 2.8). Today, the small road which leads out of the village on its south-west side towards Cnoc Cailliche is known as Moss Road, and a small community forest which occupies a wet and boggy part of the landscape represents the drained remains of that bog. These 18th-century estate plans, local knowledge, aerial photographs and topography suggest that the bog extended much further than it does today (Illus 2.7). The presence of a large bog may have been part of the motivation for situating the Craw Stane complex in this part of the landscape, as the wetland would have provided peat for fuel and perhaps bog ore for metalworking.

Prior to the work reported on in this volume, there had been no previous environmental studies in the area to reveal in detail the character of the pre-modern valley through time in which Rhynie was situated. Charred assemblages from the excavation of a Bronze Age settlement in 2005 (Gondek & Noble 2015: 138) suggested the presence of alder, birch, willow, hazel, cherry and very small amounts of oak in the prehistoric landscape. The limited use of oak in a Bronze Age roundhouse, and the use of inferior timbers for building such as alder, suggested that oak was relatively difficult to source by the middle of the second millennium BC (Ramsay in Gondek & Noble 2015: 140). Naked six-row barley from the Bronze Age settlement is a sign that the cultivation of the landscape stretched back at least to the Middle Bronze Age. A pollen core from the mire downslope from the Craw Stane (Chapter 8) indicates local woodland in the first millennium AD that included both deciduous and coniferous trees, principally pine, alder and birch, but also some oak, ash and elm. It also suggests mixed farming in the vicinity of the site, with dung spores indicating grazing animals and cereal grains indicative of arable cultivation. Pollen and botanical information from the Tap o' Noth vitrified oblong fort also point to animal grazing and mixed woodland availability in the vicinity of the fort in the Iron Age. In the modern era, there were also uncultivated upland areas in the Rhynie area. The Gordon estate plan of 1776 (RHP2554) includes Tap o' Noth in a substantial area of commonty that could be used by neighbouring inhabitants for rough grazing. The same source depicts much of Quarry Hill to the south-west of Rhynie as uncultivated and undivided, perhaps hinting that this was utilised similarly (and also as a quarry). Nevertheless, the Strathbogie estate rental produced for its Gordon lords in 1600 indicates that rent in Rhynie parish primarily consisted of arable produce with pastoral agricultural rents (mainly cattle rather than sheep) a feature of its upland areas (Shepherd 2021: 88–91). This was in contrast to its western upland neighbour, Essie parish (united with Rhynie parish in the 17th century), whose inhabitants were obliged to provide livestock as most of their rent.
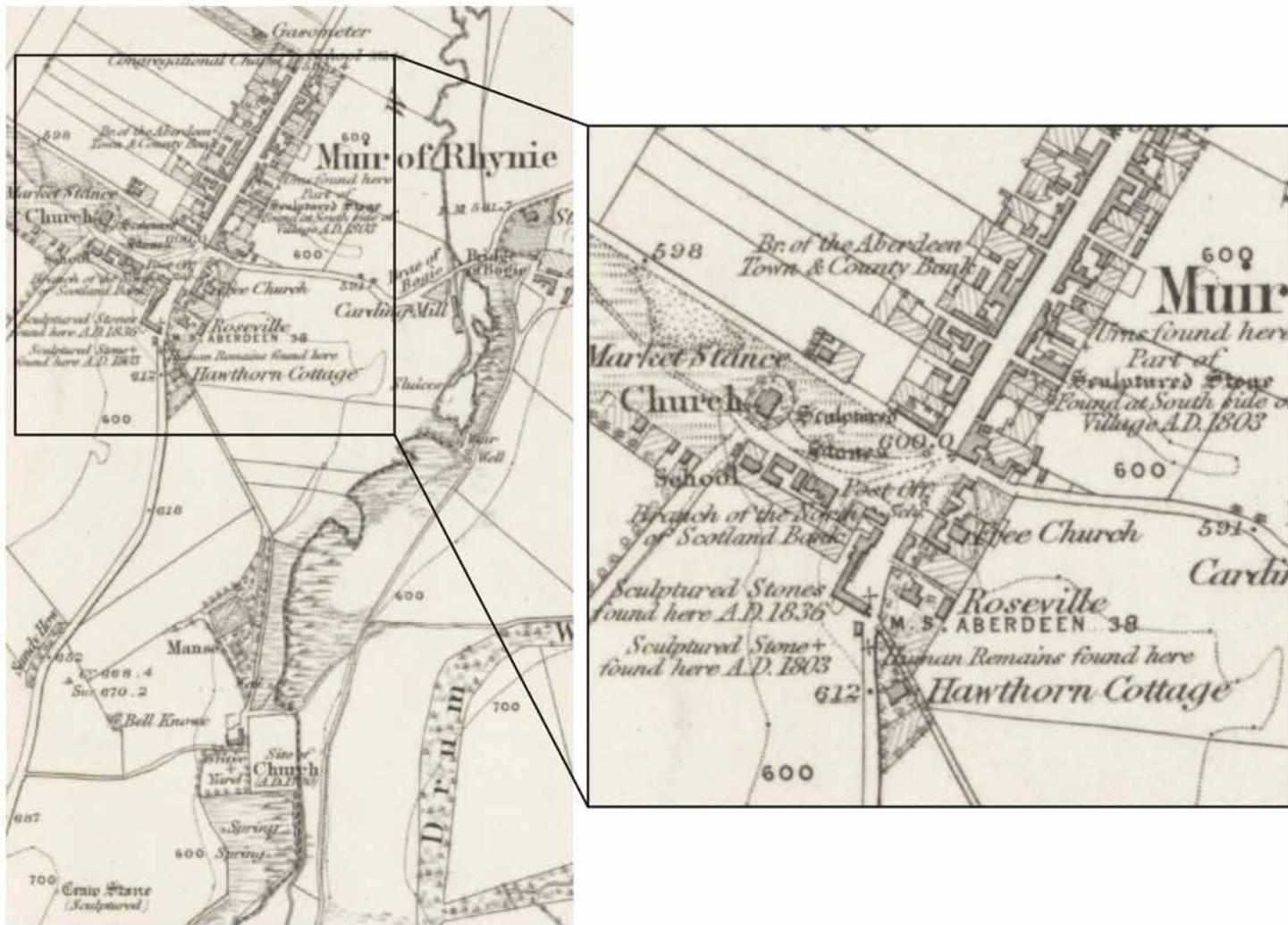

Illus 2.8
Roy's Military Map showing Tap o' Noth, Muir of Reny and the Kirk of Reny and the wetland area to the west of the village. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland under the Creative Common Attribution (CC-BY) licence 2024

However, Roy's Military Survey map and RHP2554 show that the Craw Stane complex in the 18th century was within but close to the southern extent of cultivated land beside Quarry Hill, with little arable land present to the south before Auchindoir (in the next parish) was reached (Illus 2.8). Analysis of Roy's map and RHP2554 also suggests that past cultivated land was broadly consistent with that cultivated today – ie it comprised an area to the immediate west of the Craw Stane, stretching westwards towards the fort at Cnoc Cailliche and also some land to the south close to the Bogie. To the north, the cultivated land in the 18th century circled the base of Tap o' Noth on all sides and the cultivable land stretched north-east towards Huntly and the Deveron. The Old Statistical Account of Rhynie (OSA 1791–9 (Vol 19)), written only a few decades after Roy's map, suggests that little 'improvement' had been carried out to the fields of the Upper Strathbogie valley at this time. Thus, Roy's map may give a broad picture of the land that would have been suitable for agriculture in earlier periods in this immediate area. The Old Statistical Account noted the soils of Rhynie parish as being very fertile, and by the time of the New Statistical Account (NSA 1845 (Vol 12)) over 50 acres of land are said to have been under cultivation in the parish. The account notes that improvement had taken place, with 'waste land' having been reclaimed – presumably this was the period in which the Rhynie bog was drained. Certainly by the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps the Rhynie bog was gone and the present character and layout of the modern village and landscape around had begun to take shape (Illus 2.9).
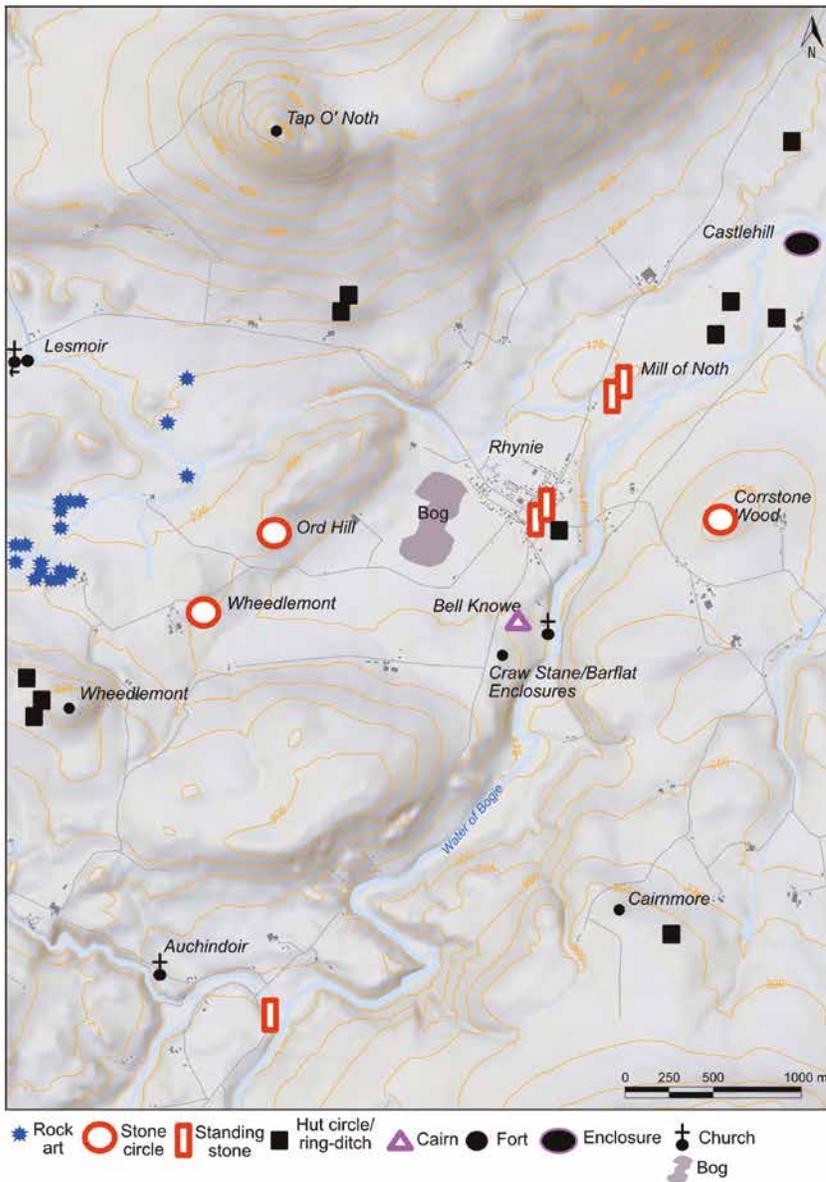
Illus 2.9
Rhynie Ordnance Survey 1st Edition 1870. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland under the Creative Common Attribution (CC-BY) licence 2024. The 1st Edition records a number of antiquities found near the southern extent of the village including 'sculptured stones' and human remains

Cairn More on the east side of the Bogie in Kearn parish is not depicted on Roy's map, but is found on a Forbes estate plan of *c* 1771 (RHP260/1). This shows muir ground immediately around the enclosure, though a few small 'poor', 'stony' enclosed arable fields are depicted just to its south and west, marking the limit of cultivated land, which is much more a feature of the more northerly and western parts of the parish. This Cairn More was near the edge of a large expanse of unenclosed land at the western end of the Correen Hills located at the southern end or beyond farms with mosses, muir and a little pasture land. The primary land-use mentioned in this upland area was the taking of 'turf' for fuel. RHP260/1 also depicts a number of folds for animals, perhaps primarily sheep, indicating that a mixed arable and pastoral economy was present (Shepherd 2021: 260–2), though the potential for change over time, means that, without contemporary data, this much later evidence need not necessarily correspond to the first-millennium situation.

2.3 Prehistory of the Upper Strathbogie valley

Gordon Noble and Meggen Gondek

The Upper Strathbogie valley is a rich, multi-period landscape, which is home to a significant concentration of prehistoric remains (Illus 2.10). Neolithic and Bronze Age remains tend to cluster in the more upland areas to the west of the modern village of Rhynie. For example, there is a notable concentration of rock art consisting of simple cup-marked monuments – a style which dominates much of the rock art of north-east Scotland (Gannon et al 2007: 73; George Currie pers comm) (Illus 2.10). Nearby, there is also a cluster of stone circles and standing stones, with a recumbent stone circle at Corrstone Wood (NRHE ID 17657) and settings of stones or remains of circles at Ord Hill (NRHE ID 17221) and Cnoc Cailliche (NRHE ID 17204) (Illus 2.10). A pair of standing stones at Mill of Noth (NRHE ID 17668) are also located on the outskirts of the village to the

Elements of the prehistoric past were seemingly reused during the Pictish period (Chapter 9). Rhynie No. 5 has cup-marks on its non-symbol face (and a series of intriguing zoomorphs on the symbol side: Chapter 11), and though the Craw Stane has no pre-historic carvings itself, its general shape and large size has encouraged the assumption that this is also a reused prehistoric standing stone (Clarke 2007: 39) (Illus 2.1). In 2005, an eroding cattle scrape to the north of the Craw Stane produced several sherds of an All-Over-Corded Beaker, which may indicate a Bronze Age internment had formerly been located on the knoll near to the Craw Stane (Cook 2005). However, the REAP excavations examining the cropmark complex around the Craw Stane found little evidence of Neolithic or Bronze Age activity aside from a redeposited Bronze Age faience bead in an upper fill of the inner ditch. Around 200m north of the Craw Stane, one notable prehistoric feature can be highlighted – the 'Bell Knowe', a probable Bronze Age cairn (Illus 2.10). It survives to 1.7m in height and is around 19m in diameter. The Bell Knowe has a modern story that it was named because it was the base for a wooden support that held the church bell (Eeles and Clouston 1958: 102; RCAHMS 2007: 121). Comparable accounts were used to explain other Scottish 'bell' place-names, but, as is possible here, the name probably originally referred to the bell-like shape of the feature (Eeles & Clouston 1958: 102; Taylor & Márkus 2012: 295–6; RCAHMS 2007: 121).

Alongside these examples of cairns and standing stones, the Rhynie landscape also contains the imposing remains of hill-forts, some of them of known prehistoric date and others that are (or were) assumed to be. The most spectacular Iron Age site in the Upper Strathbogie valley is undoubtedly the upper fort of Tap o' Noth, which dominates the skyline views from Rhynie (Illus 2.1, 2.6). The summit fort is amongst the best surviving examples of an Iron Age vitrified oblong fort, whilst the lower fort, around 17ha in extent, forms the second largest hillfort in Scotland (eg Halliday 1985: 238; Mercer & Tipping 1994: 5; Shepherd 1986; Shepherd 1996: 146). Cnoc Cailliche (Wheedle-mont) lies 3km to the south of Tap o' Noth (Illus 2.10) and comprises outer defences enclosing an oval area of around 0.11ha. Excavations in 2017 by the University of Aberdeen demonstrated that the site dated to 400–200 cal BC (Noble et al 2020b), making it broadly contemporary with the vitrified fort at Tap o' Noth. Early settlement in the Rhynie environs is also represented by the record of hut-circles and ring ditches, souterrains, and a number of Roman finds known from Tap o' Noth and the vicinity (Illus 2.10), providing a rich prehistoric background to the later remains (Chapter 9).

Illus 2.10
Prehistoric remains in the vicinity of Rhynie village. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database rights 2024 Ordnance Survey

north, whilst two standing stones were removed from the modern village itself in the 19th century and now lie at the entrance to the village square on the south-east side (NRHE ID 17186). Numerous cairns, prehistoric cists and urn burials are also known from the area (see Gondek & Noble 2015: 127, illus 2). Additional remains include prehistoric hoard sites in the wider environs: a hoard of eight Bronze Age flat axes is recorded as coming from the base of Finglenny Hill to the north-west of Tap o' Noth, a findspot overlooked by the Late Neolithic henge monument at Wormy Hillock (Coles 1969: 102; Cowie 2004: 258; Gannon et al 2007: 56–7, 76), and a hoard of Late Bronze Age swords were recovered from Brawland Farm, near Cnoc Cailliche (NRHE ID 17198).

2.4 The symbol stones and early medieval archaeology of Rhynie

GORDON NOBLE

The eight known early medieval carved stones from Rhynie comprise a range of different monuments of differing sizes, lithologies and character (Table 2.1) (Illus 2.11). They range from small fragments of what would have always been modestly sized stones (Rhynie No. 8) to very large intact examples (Rhynie Nos 1 and 7). The stones are all of geologies that would have been locally available and comprise granite, whinstone and gabbro.

They are all symbol stone (Class I) monuments, with no early Christian sculpture known from the Rhynie area. The stones are carved with a variety of symbols though certain motifs recur – eg there are three double-discs and Z-rods and three Pictish beasts (and a beast head) across the Rhynie assemblage. The symbol combinations are generally those found across the wider corpus, though the combination of two animal symbols on No. 1 is unusual, as are the two lone figures (Rhynie Nos 3 and 7). The symbols and figures are all carved with a certain simplicity of line, with little in the way of internal decorative embellishment to the symbol designs. Given the importance of the corpus, each stone will be considered in turn.

Rhynie No. 1, the 'Craw Stane', features a salmon and Pictish beast incised on the smoothest face of an imposing standing stone (Illus 2.11). The lines of the carvings are confidently incised but lack any major elaboration, such as internal accent lines found above the line of the beast's belly, which can be identified on other Aberdeenshire symbol stones such as Dyce, Tillytarmont, Ardlair, Broomend of Crichie and Tullich. The Craw Stane salmon motif is the only example present in the Rhynie corpus but can be found elsewhere in Aberdeenshire at Keith Hall and Kintore, which again feature more embellishment such as more detailed tails (RCAHMS 2008: 26, 28).

Rhynie No. 2 (Illus 2.11) is a very worn whinstone glacial erratic recorded as having a double-disc and Z-rod on one face. Logan (1829: 56, Plate IV) shows it before it was broken and his drawing suggests it had a crescent and V-rod below the double-disc and Z-rod. Certainty is lacking due to the condition of the monument, but like the others in the Rhynie corpus, the double-disc symbol appears to have been of a relatively simple style, with smaller concentric circles in each of the discs being the only additional ornamentation.
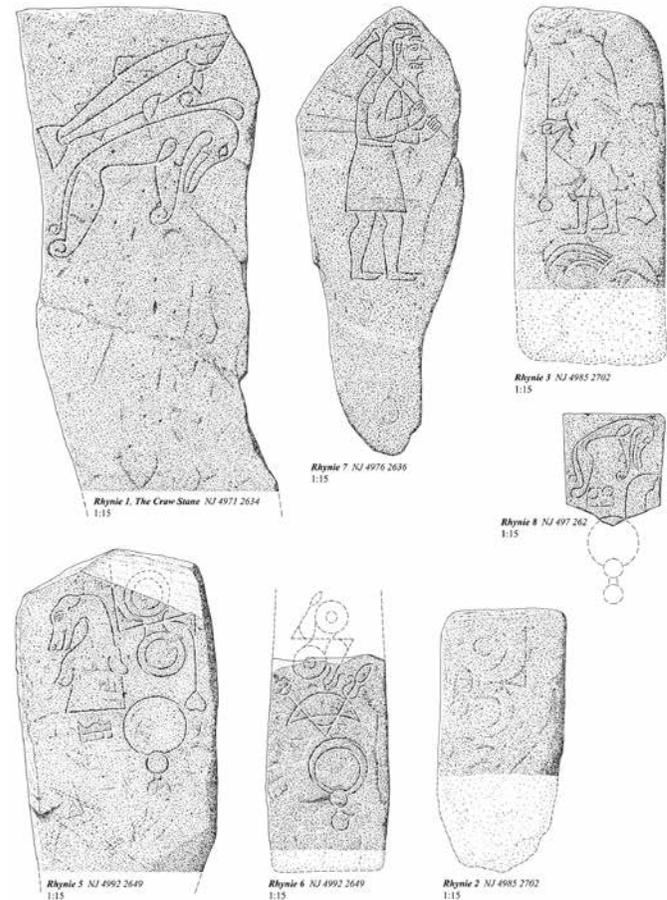
Illus 2.11
The seven extant Pictish symbol stones from Rhynie
© Historic Environment Scotland

Stone	Material/Condition	Size	Carvings/Symbols	Location	Info
Rhynie no. 1 The 'Craw Stane' NJ42NE 35	Grey granite/complete	H over 1.85m, W 0.9m, D 0.4m	Beast/Salmon	In situ at Barflat Farm	Reset in 1930s in concrete.
Rhynie no. 2 NJ42NE 22.01	Whinstone/very weathered	H c 0.96m, W 0.72m	Double-disc and Z-rod	Village square	Found during roadworks around 1836 near the Plough Inn at Rhynie and placed near Howies Inn. In 1864 it was taken to the market square.
Rhynie no. 3 NJ42NE 22.02	Whinstone/damaged	H c 1.35m, W 0.58m, D 0.3m	Warrior; S-shape	Village square	Found during roadworks around 1836 near the Plough Inn at Rhynie and placed near Howies Inn. In 1864 it was taken to the market square.
Rhynie no. 4 Mains of Rhynie NJ42NE 36	Granite?/destroyed	H c 2.4m, W c 1.8m	Beast/Crescent and V-rod/ Mirror	Destroyed/unknown	Recorded intact and standing at the Mains of Rhynie in the 18th century, the stone was broken up in 1803 for use as building stone. This largest fragment was broken up again for building purposes in 1826.
Rhynie no. 5 Rhynie, Old Church NJ42NE 32.02	Whinstone/fragment	H 1.63m, W 0.76m, D 0.23m	Early hunt scene; Beast head/Double-disc and Z-rod; Mirror; Comb	Churchyard	Found reused in the foundations of the old church during demolition in 1878.
Rhynie no. 6 Rhynie, Old Church NJ42NE 32.02	Red granite/fragment	H over 0.84m, W 0.43m, D 0.25m	Double-disc and Z-rod; Crescent and V-rod; Mirror	Churchyard	Found reused in the foundations of the old church during demolition in 1878.
Rhynie no. 7 Barflat The 'Rhynie Man' NJ42NE 52	Gabbro/complete	H 1.78m, W 0.70m, D 0.39m > 0.13m	Rhynie Man	Woodhill House, Aberdeen	Found during ploughing in 1978 downslope from the Craw Stane.
Rhynie no. 8 NJ42NE 53	Pink granite/fragment	H 0.43m, W 0.39m, D 0.16m	Beast/S-shape/ Comb/?Mirror	Churchyard	Found during ploughing near to Craw Stane.

Table 2.1
The Pictish symbol stones from Rhynie
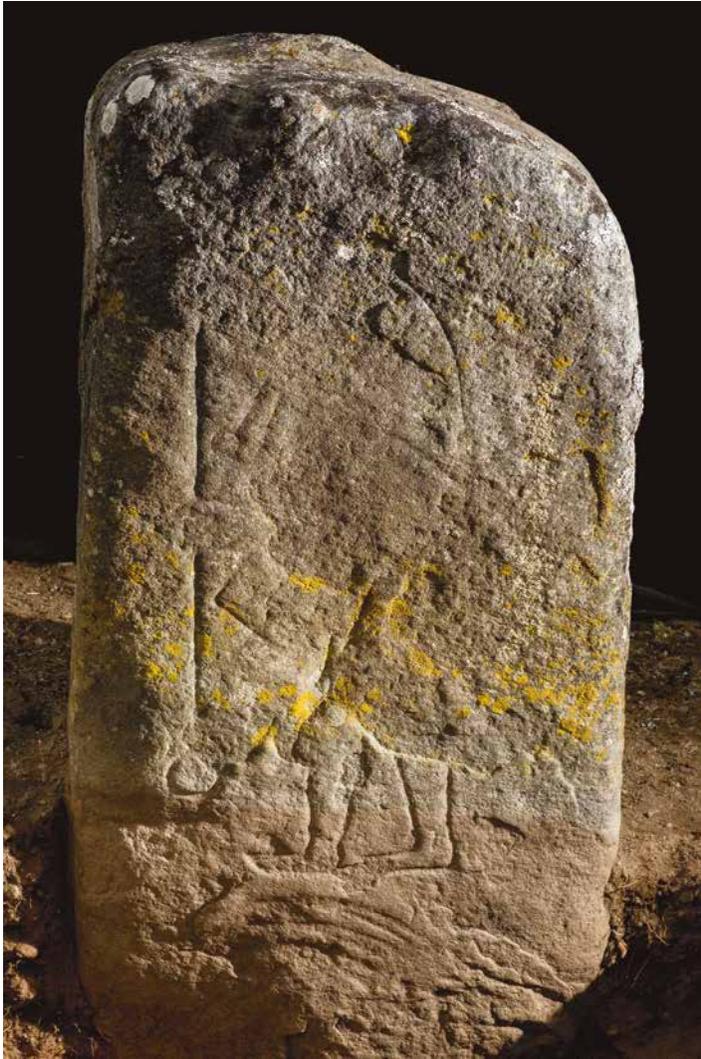
Illus 2.12
The warrior carving: Rhynie No. 3. Image © Michael Sharpe

Illus 2.13
Stuart's depiction of the warrior on Rhynie No. 3 (from Stuart 1856: Plate VII)

Unfortunately by 1903, Rhynie No. 3 (Illus 2.12), the warrior stone, was so defaced that it was difficult to see the carvings (Allen & Anderson 1903: 182); however, recent study has helped clarify its detail (Hall et al 2020: 130–2, fig 4) (Illus 2.11–2.13). The figure carries an elaborate spearhead with a possibly circular embellishment just below the blade and a circular butt. On the left arm of the warrior is a rectangular shield with central boss. Logan (1829: 56) suggests the individual wore a cloak, and there are possible suggestions of this on Stuart's image of the stone (Illus 2.13); however, delamination of the stone since the 19th century makes this interpretation uncertain (Logan 1829: 56, plate V). The warrior has close parallels with that featured on the Collessie stone and shares a similar funerary context (Hall et al 2020: 132, figs 2 and 6). A warrior figure is also depicted on the recently discovered Tulloch stone from Perth, which may have been similarly associated with a burial mound (Hall et al 2020: 129).

Rhynie No. 4, a now lost monument, appears to have displayed a Pictish beast, crescent and V-rod, and mirror carved onto one face of a granite monolith (Illus 2.11, 2.14). Early drawings of the stone are sketch-like but suggest that the Pictish beast was of a similar size to that on the Craw Stane and surmounted a large crescent and V-rod (Logan 1829: 56, Plate IV; Stuart 1856: Plate VIII). This was in turn situated above a massive mirror motif.

An unusual beast symbol with flippers, a double-disc and Z-rod, and a mirror and single-sided comb is carved on Rhynie No. 5 (Illus 2.11). The beast symbol resembles that found on a silver plaque from the Norrie's Law hoard, which also features the same double-disc and Z-rod as the Rhynie stone, though the designs of the Norrie's Law symbols are more intricate and elaborate (Noble et al 2016b: 734–5). As part of the recording of the stones for the project monograph an unusual set of motifs that seem to pre-date the Pictish symbols were identified on Rhynie No. 5 (Chapter 11).

Rhynie No. 6 is broken as a result of being used in the construction of a gate in the 19th century (MacLagan 1880) (Illus 2.11). It is a small slab of red granite that has part of a double-disc and Z-rod symbol, a crescent and V-rod, and a mirror. Again, the symbols are relatively simple, with little in the way of internal decoration other than concentric circles within the double-disc. The terminations of the V-rod are relatively plain and appear similar to those at the end of the V-rod on the lost No. 4.
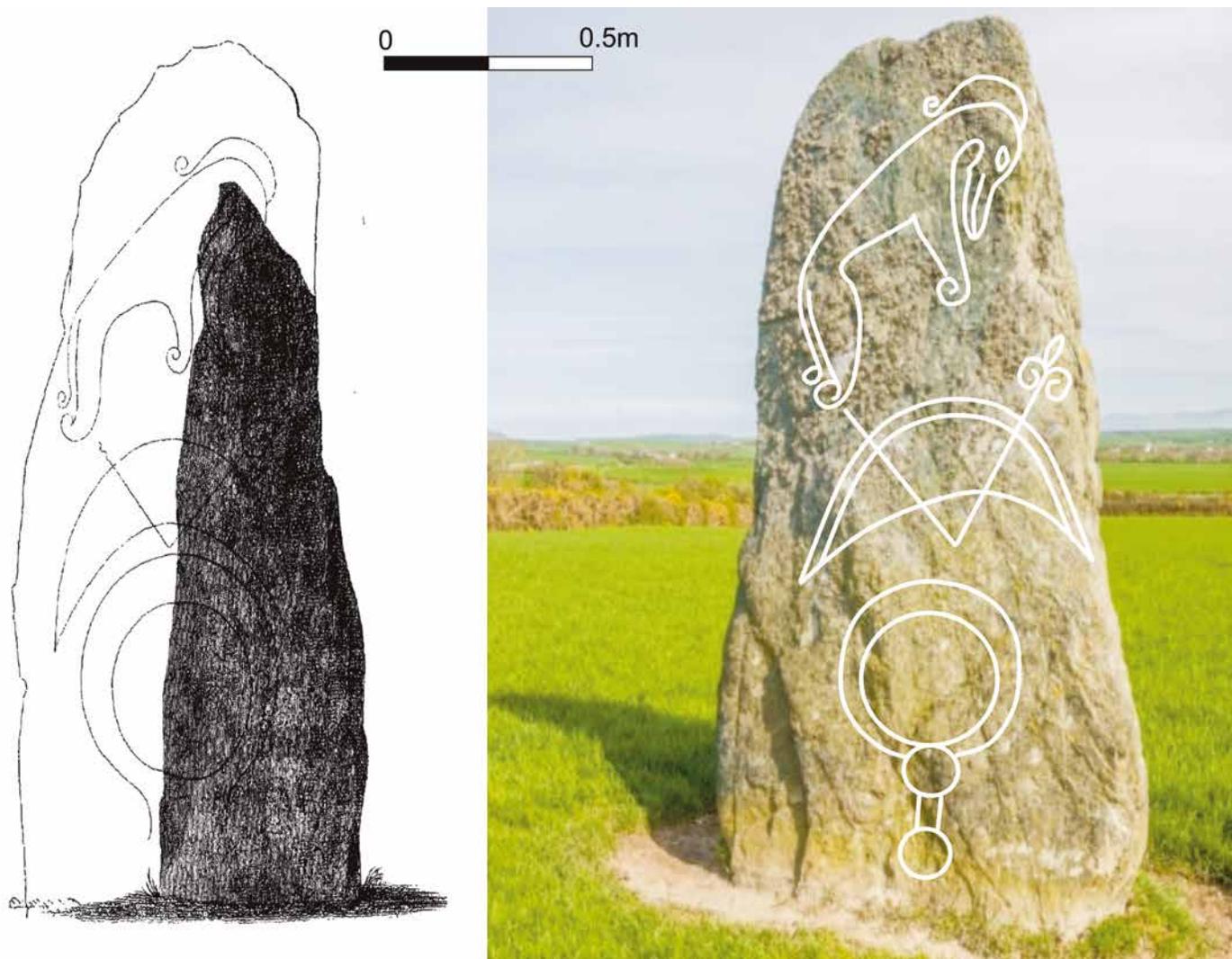
Illus 2.14
Reconstruction (right) of Rhynie No. 4 based on Logan's depiction from 1829 (left) (Logan 1829: 56, Plate IV)

The human-like figure on Rhynie No. 7, dubbed the 'Rhynie Man', is around 1m tall, with pointed teeth and carries an axe with a very narrow shaft over his right shoulder (Illus 2.11). The individual wears a sleeved tunic with a belt at his waist, and his feet are pointed like that of the warrior on Rhynie No. 3. Another distinguishing feature is the hair which flows midway down his back. Katharine Simms has recently suggested that the individual's hairstyle resembles the tonsures worn by aristocratic youths or sons of kings (*maicc ríg*) while they were members of warrior-bands, though the specifics of this interpretation seem speculative (Simms 2020: 405). Closer to home, the hairstyle of Rhynie No. 7 resembles that of the warriors depicted on the Collessie stone in Fife and the Tulloch stone in Perth, though in these cases the hair seems to have been short rather than long at the back (Hall et al 2020: 130–2, figs 2 and 6). A similar tunic/long hair combination is seen on the Balblair stone, Kilmorak, but the individual on this stone carries a club or stick rather than an axe (RCAHMS 2008: 70, 80; Hall et al 2020: online supplement fig 4). A similar axe is depicted in the hand of a tunic-wearing figure on the stone from Mail, Cunningsburgh, Shetland, but in this case the individual has an animal-like snout and a set

of vicious-looking teeth and appears to be part-human, part-animal and/or wearing an elaborate mask and outfit (Turner 1994).

Rhynie No. 8 (Illus 2.11) is of a different character than the others in the group. While it is broken, it is likely to have always been much more modest in size that the other stones. It resembles in size and form the stones that Alcock (1996) characterised as 'stelae' or 'plaques' (Noble et al 2018a: 1342). It shares similarities with the stones from Dunnicaer, particularly Dunnicaer No. 1, though the full length of the Rhynie example is not known. The stone is of pink granite and is carved with a Pictish beast, a curvilinear symbol, a single-sided comb and part of what is likely to be a mirror. The comb is a simpler version of the one found on Rhynie No. 5 and resembles the example found on the stone at Nether Corskie, Aberdeenshire (RCHAMS 2008: 34).

References to the Pictish symbol stones at Rhynie (Illus 1.3) stretch back to the 18th century, with the Old Statistical Account describing carved stones from the village (OSA 1791–9 (Vol 19): 292). A stone which may have been the now lost Rhynie No. 4 is referenced in this account, with the entry stating: 'a large stone, about five feet diameter, on which there are some hieroglyphical

characters, and standing on the moor of Rhynie, is said to have been erected in the memory of [an] engagement' (OSA 1791–9 (Vol 19): 292). The earliest detailed archaeological account of carved stones at Rhynie can be found in Logan (1829), whose *Observations on Several Monumental Stones in the North of Scotland* refers to a number of stones from the village and describes the finding of graves and cairns in the vicinity of those recovered from the southern edge of the Muir of Rhynie settlement. Logan's paper was read to the Society of Antiquaries of London and is imbued with 19th-century romantic notions of druidism and mysticism, but nonetheless provides an otherwise useful account of the discovery of the stones. Following Logan, Rhynie appeared in early surveys of carved stones including *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Stuart 1856, 1867). In the first volume of this seminal work, Stuart recorded the Craw Stane (Rhynie No. 1 or the *Cro* or *Crow Stone* as he called it) as being in situ in a field of Mains of Rhynie farm and illustrated a number of the other Rhynie stones (Stuart 1856: 4) (Illus 2.13). His second volume in 1867 recorded the four Rhynie stones previously identified by Logan.

In the following decades, Christian MacLagan (1880) documented the finding of two further stones in 1878 (Illus 1.4) and Allen and Anderson (1903: 182–4) recorded in detail the six extant stones at that time. In the 20th century, the Rhynie stones made occasional appearances in art historical studies of the wider corpus, with the most in-depth analysis being that of Henderson (1958: 54) who saw Rhynie as an area of strategic importance for the spread of the symbol stone traditions from northern to southern Pictland. Archaeological interest in the Rhynie stones grew dramatically in the 1970s with the discovery of the Rhynie Man and one further symbol stone discovery increased the collection to eight (Illus 2.11). The discovery and parallels for Rhynie Man, and the small symbol-bearing slab (No. 8) discovered by ploughing in 1978, were published in an article by Ian and Alexandra Shepherd in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Shepherd & Shepherd 1980).

The eight Rhynie Pictish symbol stones known today were found in a variety of circumstances. The Craw Stane (Rhynie No. 1) still appears to stand in situ (although it was reset in concrete following its collapse during a storm in 1930) and it would appear that Rhynie No. 4 was also upright when recorded in the Old Statistical Account. The Ordnance Survey First Edition map and Ordnance Survey Name Books state that when the turnpike road was being constructed for the modern village in 1836, 'two standing stones [that] interfered with the line of communication were dug up and placed bedside the principal Inn then existing in the village' and subsequently moved to the centre of the market square in the village (ONS Name Book 1865–71). These are likely to have been Rhynie Nos 2 and 3, but they appear to have already been disturbed by this point as Logan states that Rhynie No. 2 was found while ploughing a field near the village, and Rhynie No. 3 is said to have been found under a stone cairn (Logan 1829: 56). Thus, it seems that the stones had already been moved by 1826 when Logan composed his paper for the Society of Antiquaries of London. Reference to them being dug up again implies they had been set upright near the village inn by 1836 and had been shifted once more when the turnpike road was constructed. The larger Rhynie No. 4 stone was unfortunately not treated in the same manner and was recorded in 1803 as having been broken up for reuse in buildings locally, with a fragment reused in a schoolhouse and then built into a stable. However, by 1826 the

larger portion was also broken up and by 1903 all fragments were lost (Allen & Anderson 1903: 183). Rhynie Nos 5 and 6 were recovered from the foundations of St Luag's church in 1878 (MacLagan 1880: 11–13) and Rhynie Nos 7 and 8 discovered during agricultural operations (Shepherd & Shepherd 1980). The Craw Stane remains the largest surviving stone but Logan's account (1829: plate IV) suggests that Rhynie No. 4 was even larger. The findspots of the stones follow a rough north/south linear distribution, with three stones found to the south, two from the modern churchyard and three from the outskirts of the modern village (Illus 1.3). The stones are considered further in Chapter 11.

The discovery of Rhynie Nos 7 and 8 led to yet more discoveries and in the summer of 1978 the cropmark enclosures (Illus 1.5) around the Craw Stane were identified by Ian Shepherd as part of the Aberdeen Archaeological Surveys programme of flying in north-east Scotland. This programme of recording took place from 1977 to 2007 under the Grampian Regional Council and latterly Aberdeenshire Council following local government re-organisation in 1996 (Aberdeen Archaeological Surveys 1979). Ian Ralston also took photographs in 1978 and the site was photographed regularly from then onwards. In the early 1980s, Ian Ralston and Ian Shepherd highlighted the enclosures as potentially being contemporary with the stones and an important site for future investigation – sentiments which were repeated in later publications (eg Ralston & Inglis 1984: 17; Shepherd 1983: 331 – see also Shepherd & Greig 1996: 43; Ralston 2004: 39). Rhynie made regular appearances in more general accounts of the Picts, though was rarely accompanied by any in-depth analysis of the context or character of the landscape or the stones themselves, and the enclosures were only occasionally mentioned (eg Ritchie 1989: 6, 18; Foster 1996: 75; Alcock 2003: 166; Henderson & Henderson 2004: 87–8, 123). In the 2000s, the RCAHMS survey *In the Shadow of Bennachie* (2007: 119–22) outlined a more detailed study, dedicating four pages to the archaeology of Rhynie as a case study in the landscape setting of symbol stones. The RCAHMS account highlighted the probable significance of this landscape in the early medieval period, referencing the well-connected routeways through the Rhynie valley at the junction of which the symbol stone concentration and Craw Stane enclosure complex lie, and stated that this may have been a contributing factor to the significance of this landscape through time. The cropmark record was also showcased, with the Craw Stane enclosures suggested to be contemporary with the stones (RCAHMS 2007: 123). Two square enclosures located by the village (Illus 2.4) were interpreted by the RCAHMS as being part of a Pictish cemetery and earlier records of human remains being found in this area were also pointed out. However, the hillfort of Tap o' Noth and the symbol stones and archaeology in the wider valley bottom were not connected, with each discussed separately in chapters on the Iron Age and early medieval periods respectively.

In the wider landscape, early medieval occupation was first confirmed at Cairn More fort during evaluation of the site by Murray Cook in 2010, as part of *The Hillforts of Strathdon*[4] project, which built on the survey and classification work that had been conducted in the RCAHMS *In The Shadow of Bennachie* volume (Cook 2011b). This project targeted six smaller hillforts in Aberdeenshire with the objective of exploring the sequences of activity in, and relationships between, enclosed and unenclosed later Iron Age to early medieval settlement. Cairn More overlooks Rhynie

but is actually located in the parish of Auchindoir and Kearn and comprises a double-banked ringfort. Cook's keyhole excavation of the ramparts secured two samples for dating which produced determinations centring on cal AD 410–630 (Cook 2011b: 216–17). Evidence of non-ferrous metalworking was also found at the site, including pin and brooch moulds (Chapter 7).

Another site of potentially early medieval date was the former parish church of Rhynie, which was sited downslope from the Craw Stane complex. The dedication of this church is uncertain, but the existence formerly of a prominent natural boulder on the slopes of Tap o' Noth called Clochmaloo or Cloch Maluidh (MacDonald 1891: 254–5; Simpson 1932: 86; MacDonald & Laing 1970: 142), which reference Moluag (an affectionate form of Lugaid of Lismore), makes it plausible that Rhynie was also dedicated to this saint. The Moluag association found in this parish is part of a potential cluster of dedications to this Gaelic saint in the wider region (see Chapter 3). A number of geophysical surveys were conducted around the parish church by the Northern Picts and Comparative Kingship project, but no definitive enclosing elements suggestive of an earlier establishment

were identified. To the north-west of Rhynie is the medieval parish church of Essie, enclosed by a sub-rectangular boundary wall. No memorial stones pre-dating the 18th century are evident at this site (NRHE ID 17222) and again geophysical survey failed to show up evidence of any earlier enclosure around the modern church wall. No early Christian carved stones have been found at St Luag's or at Essie.

2.5 The early medieval archaeology of north-east Scotland

GORDON NOBLE

In terms of early medieval archaeology, the north-east of Scotland is known for a distinct concentration of Pictish symbol stones and much of the work on the Picts in this area has been art historical or synthetic in nature (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 167). In their 1903 corpus of symbol stones, Allen and Anderson (1903: civ) highlighted the importance of Aberdeenshire with its large concentration of Class I monuments. Indeed, Allen and Anderson identified Aberdeenshire as the likely place of origin for the symbol stone tradition, an idea later
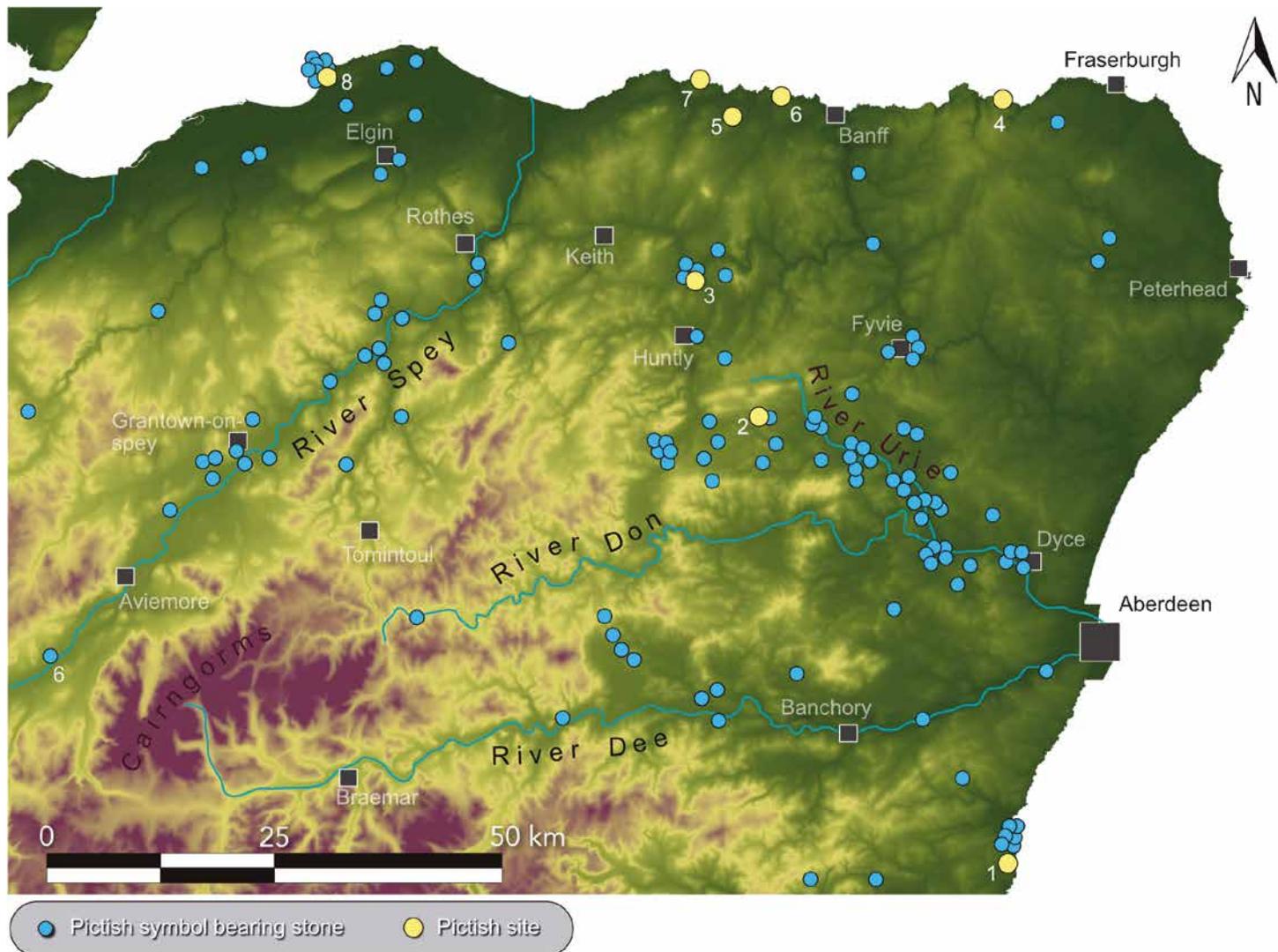
Illus 2.15
Identified Pictish sites in north-east Scotland (pre-2000). 1 Dunnottar (references); 2 Picardy; 3 Tillytarmont; 4 Cullykhan; 5 Gaulcross; 6 Green Castle; 7 Portsoy; 8 Burghead

challenged by Isobel Henderson (though as noted above, Henderson (1958: 54) did see Rhynie as an important conduit for the spread of the symbol stone tradition). However, few other archaeological sites of this period had been recognised prior to the 2000s (Illus 2.15) – an issue that was highlighted in Wainwright's seminal volume *The Problem of the Picts* (1955), where only a small number of locations in north-east Scotland were recorded. Archaeological evidence for all of Pictland was generally thought to be thin on the ground and sites in the north warranted little detailed discussion.

For many years, promontory forts on the south coast of the Moray Firth constituted the primary evidence for early medieval settlement in north-east Scotland. These were revealed from the 1960s onwards, with campaigns of fieldwork at Burghead (Small 1969) and Green Castle, Portknockie (Ralston 1980, 1987, 2004), both located in Moray. In the 1970s, Leslie Alcock undertook excavations at Dunnottar in Aberdeenshire, one of the very few sites in north-east Scotland documented in early sources, with two late 7th-century references in the *Annals of Ulster* to sieges at *Duin Foither* (Alcock & Alcock 1992: 267). Unfortunately, no traces of early medieval defences or settlement were found at the site. Although Alcock suggested that the fort may have been located further along the coast at the promontory sites of Dunnicaer or Bowduns, it seems more likely that the later castle, an important medieval royal castle of Scotland, has largely removed any traces of early medieval settlement on the stack. Prior to the 2000s, excavations at the multi-period promontory site at Cullykhan (Greig 1970, 1971, 1972) provided the only confirmation of Pictish period settlement on a fort in Aberdeenshire.

Antiquarian discoveries in north-east Scotland included part of a silver hoard from Gaulcross, Banffshire (now Aberdeenshire) (Stevenson and Emery 1964), and the discovery of a decorated whetstone from nearby Portsoy (RCAHMS 2008: 139). The silver objects from Gaulcross were first recovered during the removal of two stone circles at Ley Farm in 1838 but only three objects (a handpin, a spiral

bracelet and a length of silver chain) survived into the modern day and are now curated by the National Museum of Scotland. The findspot was surveyed by the Northern Picts Project team at the University of Aberdeen and National Museums Scotland in 2013 and the team recovered over 100 pieces of silver missed by the original finders (Noble et al 2016b). The new objects showed that this was a hacksilver hoard and the date of the hoard is suggested to be 5th to 6th century AD, making it broadly contemporary with the height of early medieval activity at the Craw Stane complex (Noble et al 2016b: 734–5). The Portsoy whetstone was found in the 1920s and comprises a small cylindrical stone of phyllite with carved human heads on either end – one apparently displayed on the end of a sword – with carvings of a fish, three crescents, an arch and tongs set between the two heads (RCAHMS 2008: 139; Noble et al 2016b: 737). The object is unique in the corpus, but the symbols resemble those found on carved Pictish stones.

The identification of new Pictish period sites occurred in Aberdeenshire in the 2000s, with a series of enclosed settlement

Illus 2.16
The impressive nuclear hillfort on the summit of Mither Tap o' Bennachie

Illus 2.17
Map of the approximate extent of the overkingdom of Pictland *c* 700 AD plotted, with Rhynie and the regions of Pictland labelled

excavations that took place as part of Murray Cook's *The Hillforts of Strathdon* project (Cook 2011a, 2011b). As noted earlier, Cook identified Pictish period occupation at Cairn More fort near Rhynie and also revealed Pictish occupation or construction phases at two further Aberdeenshire sites: Maiden Castle at Bennachie, and the Hill of Barra near Oldmeldrum. Excavations in advance of path improvements uncovered early medieval occupation phases at the prominent Mither Tap o' Bennachie hillfort (Atkinson 2007) (Illus 2.16), whilst development-led archaeology also discovered early medieval settlement remains at Kintore, Aberdeenshire (Cook & Dunbar 2008: 149). However, the sites identified in these contexts have tended to be poorly preserved due to their location in the intensively cultivated lowland zones of eastern Scotland.

In 2012, the Northern Picts Project at the University of Aberdeen was established to investigate the early medieval archaeology and early history of an area stretching from Aberdeenshire to Easter Ross, covering the probable extent of the Pictish provinces and kingdoms of Fortriu and Ce (Illus 2.17). The project undertook a series of excavations on Pictish period sites across Scotland and targeted a number of enclosed sites in the north-east from 2014–17 that have helped enrich a very impoverished settlement record (Illus 2.18). Sites with phases of activity dated to this period now include Doune of Relugas and Knock of Alves – two complex forts in Moray that show multi-period development (Noble et al 2020b). In Aberdeenshire, excavations in 2019 and 2021–2 fleshed out the chronology for Mither Tap o' Bennachie, and identified intensive occupation of this spectacular fort in the 7th and 8th centuries cal AD. A 7th-century phase of occupation was also recognised at the small ringfort at Hill of Keir (Noble et al 2020b). Probably the most important excavations of the Aberdeenshire-based Northern Picts research were conducted at Dunnicaer, just to the north of Dunnottar. Pictish stones were found at the site in the 19th century by youths from the nearby village of Stonehaven who climbed up on the sea stack at Dunnicaer and dug them up from what was described as a low wall around the edge of the stack. Excavations from 2015 to 2017
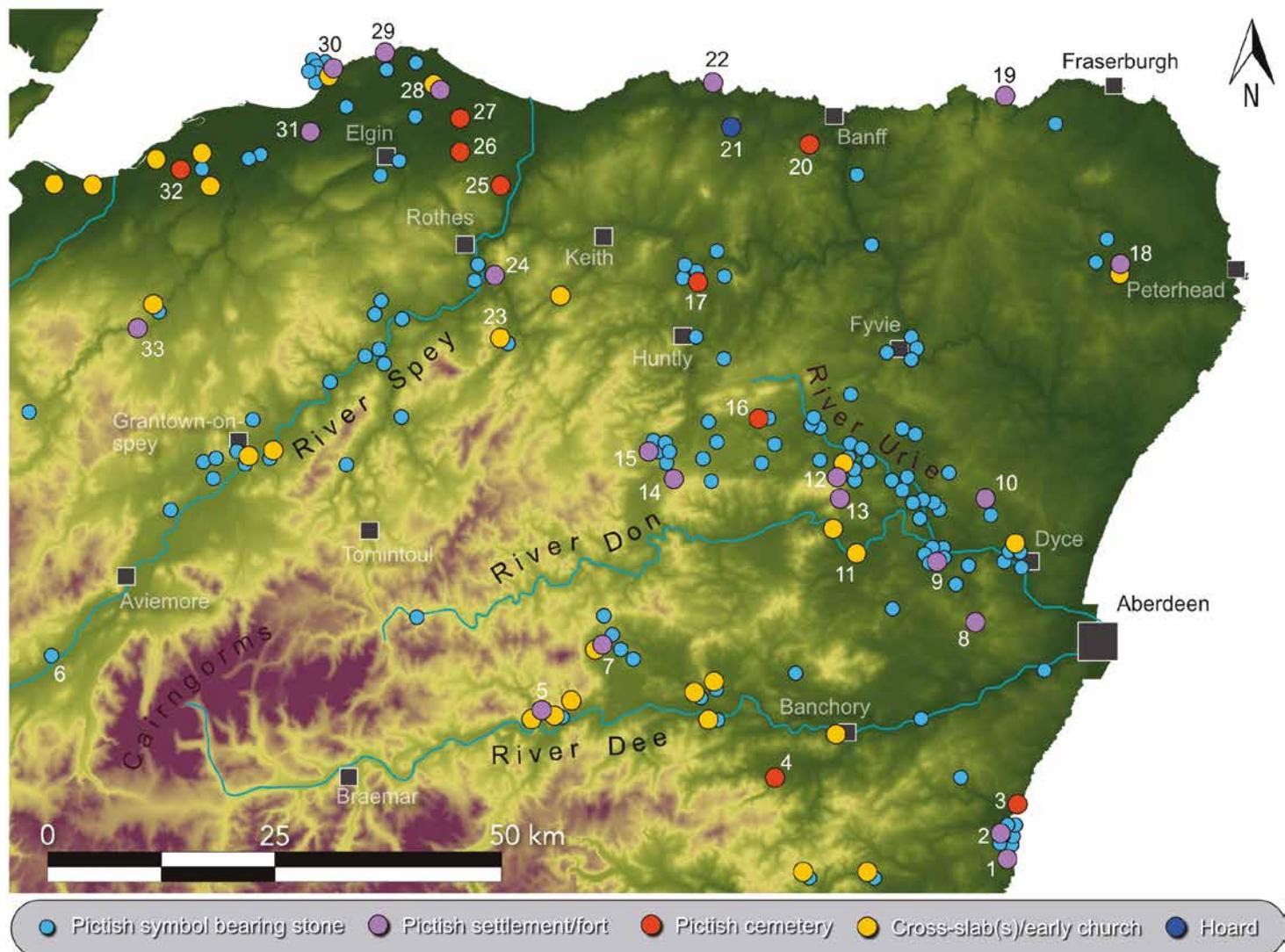
Illus 2.18

Pictish sites in north-east Scotland (sites underlined = ones with fieldwork/new analysis post-2000). 1 Dunnottar; 2 Dunnicaer; 3 Stonehaven; 4 Dalbreck; 5 Tullich; 6 Dunachton?; 7 Migvie; 8 Hill of Keir; 9 Kintore; 10 Barra Hill; 11 Abersnithock; 12 Maiden Castle; 13 Mither Tap; 14 Cairn More; 15 Rhynie; 16 Picardy; 17 Tillytarmont; 18 Old Deer; 19 Cullykhan; 20 Hills of Boyndie; 21 Gaulcross; 22 Green Castle; 23 Mortlich; 24 Dandaleith; 25 Orbliston; 26 Midtown; 27 Pitgaveny; 28 Kinneddar; 29 Covesea; 30 Burghead; 31 Knock of Alves; 32 Greshop; 33 Doune of Relugas

demonstrated that the site was a highly eroded promontory fort and the stones appear to have come from the ramparts of this settlement. The radiocarbon dates from the site centred on the 2nd to 4th centuries AD, including the rampart from which the symbol stones were recovered, pushing back the likely chronology for the emergence of the symbol tradition (Noble et al 2020a). The presence of rare and unusual Roman finds showed that the occupants of Dunnicaer were likely to have been elites in contact with the Roman world, despite the frontier being hundreds of kilometres to the south.

Tracing Pictish burial traditions in north-east Scotland has presented similar problems to its settlement record, though significant developments have occurred in recent years (Illus 2.18). Early work was conducted in 1856 when the area around the Picardy Stone at Myreton Farm in Aberdeenshire was examined. The stone was found to be standing on a cairn *c* 2.4m in diameter and an 'empty grave' was found on the south side of the stone, aligned east/west and around 2.1m in length (Stuart 1856: 4). Whilst this may have been a Pictish burial, only further excavation and dating could conclusively show this to be the case. In the 1970s, Woodham identified a square cairn at Tillytarmont in Aberdeenshire, which had been the findspot of five Pictish stones. The cairn was composed of water-worn stones and measured around 4.25m across. No trace of burial was found underneath, though this could have been missed in the fluvio-glacial sands beneath the cairn. Further west, upstanding Pictish cairns are known at the Highland sites of Garbeg (Wedderburn & Grime 1984) and Pityoulish (Rae & Rae 1955), but no upstanding cemeteries survive in Aberdeenshire.

Progress in identifying cemeteries in the east was significantly boosted from the 1970s onwards, with the onset of the previously mentioned RCAHMS and Aberdeenshire Council aerial survey programmes. The aerial evidence for Pictish burial traditions in northern Scotland was brought together by Mitchell and Noble in 2017 and cemeteries of square and round barrows have been identified in Aberdeenshire at Hills of Boyndie and Balmakewan, with possible examples at Dalbreck and West Balhalgardy – though the number remains fewer than that of other regions likely due to the limited occurrence of cropmarks in this region (Fraser & Halliday 2011: 312). The dating of long cists from Stonehaven has also proven successful in identifying examples of Pictish period burial (Mitchell 2019) and additional cemeteries have been identified further west at Greshop, Pitgaveny, Midtown and Orbliston in Moray. Other than the cemetery at Rhynie (Chapter 5), the only excavated monumental cemetery in north-east Scotland is Greshop (excavated in 2016), but unfortunately no human remains survived in the acidic soils (Mitchell et al 2020).

Early Christian sites from early medieval Aberdeenshire are not generally well documented, with few historical sources or references in early texts. One exception is a place called Ner, associated with obituary notices of two individuals both later regarded as saints in Irish chronicle notices in *c* 623 and 678 (Clancy 2008: 367–8). Ner may relate to Fetternear in Aberdeenshire, which contains the Gaelic element *foithir* plus *Ner*. The later obituary notice was of a Nechtan, perhaps the saint to whom, in the hypocoristic form *Mo Nithoc*, the nearby Abersnithoc (originally Eglismonithoc) was dedicated. This church was also dedicated to St Finnan, who may be the Uineus, abbot of Ner, who died *c* 623 (Clancy 2008: 368–71). This site is located near Braehead Farm, 2.5km north of Monymusk, the church to which Abersnithock belonged in the early 13th century (NRHE ID 18051). Ruins of a small rectangular chapel and rectangular enclosure overlooking the River Don survive here (RCAHMS 2007: 129) and in 2022 a vallum enclosure was identified around the church site, with deposits dated to the 8th to 9th centuries AD (Noble et al 2024).

There are many saints likely to have Pictish origins who appear in the early 16th-century *Aberdeen Breviary*: St Mayoc – associated with Dalmaik on the Dee; St Caran – linked to Fetteresso and Premnay; and St Voloc – to whom Dumeath and Logie (Ruthven) in Mar were dedicated (Clancy 2008: 377; Macquarrie 2012: 10–15, 44–8). However, little is known about these saints or the places with which they were associated. Aberdeenshire is home to an early surviving Christian manuscript, *The Book of Deer*, a 10th-century gospel book written in Latin with added later marginalia in Gaelic (Forsyth 2008). Archaeological attempts to find the early church establishment at which this book was written have been compounded by a lack of evidence and modern development around the old parish church at Old Deer, yet recent work at the nearby Cistercian abbey (founded 1219) has found early medieval features and provided dates throughout the later first millennium AD (Ali Cameron pers comm). Survey and excavation in 2013 at Tullich in Deeside, Aberdeenshire, identified a series of enclosures around a later chapel site and conservation work revealed a number of new stones, with the corpus from this site now comprising a Pictish symbol stone and more than a dozen incised crosses, suggesting it was the location of an important early Christian site (Clancy 2008: 371–4, 392; Geddes et al 2015). A collection of sculpture from Dyce, Aberdeenshire also indicates the presence of another important church, this time centred on the Don (RCAHMS 2007: 126, 128, fig 7.11). Small-scale testing of a circular enclosure around the church at Migvie in 2019, a further later chapel site, suggests an ecclesiastical settlement was present here in the 7th–8th centuries cal AD (Noble et al 2024).

Overall, the evidence for the early church in Aberdeenshire remains sparse. As yet, no site of the scale of Portmahomack or Kinneddar (Carver et al 2016; Noble et al 2019a) is known from Aberdeenshire, and the area is notable for its relatively few early medieval cross-slab monuments compared to other regions. While investigations have been limited, the evidence from northern Pictland, or Pictland more generally, suggests little significant impact of the church before the late 6th century and the main period of development appears to have been the 7th century and later – ie towards the end or after the main floruit of the Rhynie, Cairn More and Tap o' Noth sites that form the focus of this volume.