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Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

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Chapter 13

CODA

GORDON NOBLE

So often our understanding of the late and post-Roman central places of northern Britain has been hindered by a lack of historical sources and the limited scale of archaeological investigations. Yet here we have been able to illuminate, in unprecedented detail, the development of a polyfocal and multifunctional ‘central place’ of the late Roman Iron Age and early medieval period in an area of Pictland that had seen little concerted work. The resulting monograph emerged from a project that started off with very modest goals but transformed into a much broader research endeavour with grander ambitions. This was largely due to its unprecedented success in uncovering sites that could address some of the big questions surrounding the development of Late Roman Iron Age and early medieval society. Some of this was serendipity, but it was also about having the funding and freedom to address uncertainties in the archaeological record and to take an evaluative approach to sites of unknown date or character at a landscape level. Academic funding has shifted somewhat to reward the next ‘big thing’, or indeed support projects that will deliver certainty in results. As such, there can be real difficulty in finding the funding framework for projects that are more evaluative and exploratory – in this respect, we have to laud the small charitable funders and the individuals who have donated funds to the University of Aberdeen Development Trust to allow this project to proceed, and to Historic Environment Scotland who latterly permitted the expanded scope and approach to come to fruition.

It was not so long ago that Pictish studies were characterised in unflattering terms – the research area languished ‘on the disciplinary peripheries’ (Grigg 2018: 8) and was seen to focus on a people ‘lost, found, repossessed or argued away’ (Carver 2011: 1482). As recently as 2011, Martin Carver wrote that the topic of the Picts was ‘ripe for archaeology, but archaeology has so far done rather little [for Pictish studies]’ (2011: 1483). The paucity of both historical texts and archaeology was seen as a major deterrent to wider engagement with the Picts, meaning that they were rarely integrated into wider academic studies of the early medieval period and were portrayed as part of a ‘vision of an isolated people adrift from time’ (Grigg 2018: 1, 5). Given the paucity of historical sources, archaeology undoubtedly had more to contribute and new discoveries were expected to reinvigorate the discipline by increasing the range of evidence to draw upon. New



Illus 13.1
The Craw Stane, Rhynie

discoveries could also help overturn established views of the Picts that had developed in relation to a paucity of evidence and the subsequent reliance on external models to try and fill its lacunae.

When setting forth research questions and objectives for the future of Scotland's archaeology, the Medieval Panel of the ScARF National Framework highlighted a need for new large-scale excavation projects:

However much progress can be made through survey or analogy alone . . . high quality excavation is needed. Excavation in Scotland has to move beyond the mechanistic techniques of trial trenches recorded by single context planning and stratigraphic diagrams alone to a multi-method approach (ScARF 2012: Section 1.4).

It was recommended that a freer approach to scheduled monuments should be taken on board by government agencies such as Historic Environment Scotland (HES) (then Historic Scotland), with small numbers of type sites 'released' for large-scale investigation rather than keyhole trenching that was identified as 'damaging' (ScARF 2012 referencing O'Sullivan 1999). Within the Rhynie Environs Project, HES responded favourably to research designs that moved beyond this approach and embraced the open area investigation strategy planned for the Craw Stane complex. Nonetheless, given the continuing difficulties in identifying early medieval sites, it was clear that no single strategy could address the issue and here the ScARF Medieval Panel comment was perhaps misguided. Keyhole trenching undoubtedly has its value (in the eyes of this author at least) and was the method of evaluative excavation that led to the successful identification of a number of 'new' early medieval sites in Aberdeenshire (eg Cook 2011a, 2011b; Noble & Gondek 2011).

Overall, the scale of investigation in the Upper Strathbogie valley and the project's interdisciplinary focus has allowed new understandings of Late Roman and early medieval society in north-east Scotland to be developed. Major gaps in our evidence highlighted by the ScARF Medieval Panel are beginning to be filled, including the formation of early medieval polities and the lack of early medieval settlement. The need for integrated landscape studies, interdisciplinary environmental research projects and better chronological resolution using large suites of radiocarbon dating from well-stratified sites with plentiful artefacts has also been addressed (ScARF recommendations 2.8, 3.7.1, 3.7.2 and 3.7.4, 6.4.5). The evidence presented in this volume provides innovative new insights into the development of a Pictish central place in a region that, up until recently, was seen as marginal within wider first-millennium AD society, a 'peripheral zone between the two power blocs of Moray and southern Pictland' (RCAHMS 2007: 116; see also Henderson 1958: 55; 1972: 166 for much older, but similar views on Aberdeenshire).

This perception of the nature and character of Pictish society, both in Aberdeenshire and beyond, can now be revisited. Rather than being marginal, Aberdeenshire may have been a central zone within Late Roman to 7th-century society. The clustering of

Pictish symbol stones in this region is certainly marked, and the new evidence perhaps brings light to the few brief references that we have in early sources, such as the appearance of the Pict Art-branán, *Geonae primarius cohortis*, 'leader of a warband in the region of Ce', in the *Life of Columba* (Sharpe 1995: 294, n 149; Kilpatrick 2021: 424–5). However, by the 7th century – the date at which our (albeit limited) literary sources begin to increase – there may have been a shift in the importance of this region. There are few (Class II) cross-slabs in the Rhynie area and few places identifiable from Aberdeenshire in later sources, with the exception of the much later references to Bennachie. By the beginning of the 7th century, the fortunes of the Upper Strathbogie valley may therefore have been beginning to wane. However, even after the end of Tap o' Noth and Cairn More there was not wholesale abandonment of the valley. The pollen evidence certainly suggests there was no major hiatus in the agricultural use of the valley, and by AD 800 there was a new period of intensification in land-use, attested to by increased burning and erosion. Nevertheless, it does seem likely that the 7th century marked a decline in the importance of the area. The lack of early Christian sculpture from the Upper Strathbogie valley, for example, suggests that no major early church centres were established here. Given the relative obscurity of this landscape into the high medieval period, it is interesting that a place-name associated with elite status endured, even if its royal focus had shifted elsewhere. It may be that Rhynie was seen as an important origin point for royal authority in north-east Scotland even in the centuries after the abandonment of sites such as the Craw Stane complex and Tap o' Noth, 'a foundational estate' for Pictish society (cf Brink 1996: 270).

So where can the study of Pictish central places go from here? While much progress has been made, we cannot rest on our laurels. The archaeology and early history of Pictland still remains far behind that of early medieval England or Ireland, and we continue to rely on these regions to interpret our evidence. As Brink highlighted more than two decades ago, there is a continuing need for interdisciplinary approaches to the study of central place complexes, even in areas with limited historical sources (1996: 268). Uncovering other 'Rhynies' will no doubt prove a challenge; even with later royal centres there have been huge issues in identifying the sites mentioned in our scant sources or uncovering the physical traces of those that can be located (eg Campbell & Driscoll 2022). New fieldwork initiatives need to allow for failure as well as success, and thus the search for these nodes of early medieval power must be ambitious, armed with blue-sky approaches and backed by adequate funding. Where we can identify such central places, culture resource managers need to be open to research that goes beyond minimal impact. They must recognise that, particularly in lowland zones, we are likely to be dealing with ever declining quantities and qualities of data given the regimes of ploughing, acidic soils and impacts of climate change that will continue to threaten our heritage resource in eastern Scotland. While these are exciting times in Pictish studies, there is certainly much still to do and many challenges to tackle.