Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

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Chapter 12

A POWERFUL PLACE OF PICTLAND: LONG–TERM SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN THE FIRST MILLENNIUM AD

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12.1 Introduction

The discovery and investigation of the Craw Stane complex, Cairn More and the lower fort at Tap o' Noth have begun to fill a major lacuna in our knowledge of the development of Late Roman to early medieval power centres in this area of Pictland. However, their findings also have much wider relevance to our understanding of Britain and Ireland as a whole. While we have detailed information for elite centres in Britain from around the 7th century and later, there are far fewer sites that illuminate the 4th–6th centuries AD. In England, the most obvious materialisations of new power structures in the post-Roman period were the large residential hall complexes that emerged sometime in the late 6th to early 7th centuries AD (eg Hope-Taylor 1977; Hamerow 2012: 23, 102–9; Thomas 2013: 126; Brennan & Hamerow 2015; Blair 2018: 114–30). However, what characterised elite centres of the 5th–6th centuries AD, when settlement hierarchies are harder to identify, is much less certain (eg Esmonde Cleary 1989: 138–61; Ulmschneider 2011: 157–60; Hamerow 2012: 102–9). The situation is similar across Wales and western Britain more generally, with the 5th–6th centuries proving notoriously more difficult to address both historically and archaeologically (eg Davies 1982; Edwards & Lane 1988; Arnold & Davies 2001). Ireland is a stark contrast to this shortfall, with 5th- to 6th-century evidence providing a welcome relief from the major lacunae of the Irish Iron Age, but even here there are still fewer sites and textual sources to illuminate this period than that of the 7th century onwards (see Charles-Edwards 2000; O'Sullivan et al 2014; Stout 2017).

The Craw Stane complex and the hilltop settlement at Tap o' Noth both emerged within a Late Roman Iron Age context beyond the frontier of Roman Britain in the north-east of present-day Scotland. This is a period when the archaeological record for the area north of Hadrian's Wall has traditionally been considered sparse and suggested to have been characterised by crisis and collapse (Hunter 2007). The sites in the Rhynie valley developed throughout this period and reached their height in the 5th to early 6th century AD, with the abandonment at the Craw Stane complex in the mid-6th century and the cessation of activity at Tap o' Noth and Cairn More by sometime in the 7th century. These three sites provide rare evidence for continuity through the Roman Iron Age to early medieval period, but how and why did these sites emerge? What was their character and how can we interpret their function? Given that all three sites were in contemporary use in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, how did they interrelate? These are the questions this chapter will explore.

12.2 Interpreting the Rhynie landscape – 4th to 7th century AD

12.2.1 Pictish royal centres

With regards to the Craw Stane complex, the place-name and mapping evidence (Chapters 1 and 3) suggest that this was a place of nascent or consolidated royal power associated with an elite. There is generally little known of Pictish elite centres; the few relevant written texts we have for Pictland include references to sites that were fortified hilltop centres, but as is so commonly the case the sources tend to be 7th century or later. References to Dundurn in Perthshire, for example, cite it as the location of a siege in AD 682, and in the 880s the Alba king-lists refer to the death of King Giric son of Dúngal at the fort (Alcock et al 1989: 192–4; Woolf 2007b: 120; Anderson 2011: 267, 274, 283). The Craw Stane complex could have been a forerunner to these more elaborate and heavily defended elite centres that appear to be a feature of the 7th century onwards (Noble & Evans 2022: 102). However, the lowland situation of the Craw Stane complex (in only a marginally naturally defensive location set on a low knoll) stands apart from the hill- and promontory-settings of sites such as Dundurn and Dunnottar.

Pictish lowland royal complexes are known from later first-millennium AD sources but have previously been thought to date only from this late period. Their references occur from the 9th century onwards and are thought to mark a shift in royal focus from hilltop locations to the more accessible but less defensible lowland locations (Driscoll 1998: 169–70).

Lowland elite centres in Pictland include Forteviot in Perthshire, recorded as the *palatium* of Cináed son of Alpín (Kenneth MacAlpin) who died there in AD 858. Forteviot sits on a gravel terrace near the confluence of the Water of May and the River Earn, and the complex comprised a cemetery, church and early medieval carved stone monuments including two free-standing crosses which appear to have framed and marked the entry to the royal estate (Campbell & Driscoll 2020: Chapter 2). No trace has been found of the *palatium* itself, but the site appears to have been enclosed by a rectilinear enclosure and could have included timber halls and other buildings. The cemetery consisted of square and round barrows, flat graves and was centred around a square enclosure argued to have been modelled on a Roman Iron Age shrine (Campbell et al 2019: 91; Campbell & Driscoll 2020: 66).

Another later first-millennium AD lowland complex is thought to have existed at Meigle, Perthshire. The *St Andrews Foundation Legend Account B* states that the text was written by Cano son of Dubabrach in the *villa* of Meigle for King Uurad (*c* 839–42) (Taylor & Márkus 2009: 575, 579; Noble & Evans 2022: 117). Meigle has one of the largest known collections of Pictish sculpture that includes a series of cross-slabs. Like Forteviot, this may have been a royal centre with a church, or perhaps Uurad had a royal hall within an ecclesiastical complex (cf Woolf 2007b: 105, 313). However, no contemporary archaeological traces of a royal hall or associated buildings have been found in the landscape itself.

Similarly attested royal centres, not yet pinpointed archaeologically, existed close to the River Tay near Perth. The *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba* stated that King Domnall mac Alpín (858–62) died 'in the *palatium* of *Cinnbelathoir*' (Anderson 2011: 250). It is likely that this was in or close to *Rathinveramon*, the location of Domnall's death and of the killing of King Constantín mac Cuilén in 997 according to the king-lists of Alba (Anderson 2011: 267, 274−5, 283−4). The name *Rathinveramon* indicates this *palatium* was near the mouth of the River Almond, a tributary of the Tay, where Bertha Roman fort lies. The Roman fort could well have been reused for a Pictish *palatium* but unfortunately this is yet to be confirmed by investigation. Overall, the only broad correlations we can make between sites such as Forteviot and the Craw Stane complex are the royal associations and the relationship between some form of elite ritual, political and burial locale in a non-hilltop setting. However, the symbols of power deployed at Rhynie speak to a very different world than the late first-millennium AD monuments of Forteviot, whose overt imperial symbolism and Christian ethos underpinned their deployment and significance (Campbell & Driscoll 2020; Chapter 10).

12.2.2 A multinodal, multifunctional central place complex

It is unwise to consider any site in isolation when attempting to understand the evidence from the Upper Strathbogie valley. Clearly there were several foci in contemporary use, which served differing but complementary functions and held unique significance.

Perhaps the best comparison for the series of contemporary high-status places contained within the valley are the polyfocal and multifunctional 'central places' found elsewhere in early medieval northern Europe (eg Brink 1996: 238; Blair 2018: 125–31). This concept is most developed for Scandinavia, where over 20 years ago Stefan Brink highlighted the need to discuss central place complexes rather than focusing on the function of individual sites (Brink 1996: 238; 1999: 425; see also Hedeager 1992: 17; Skre 2010). Here it was noted that specialised and individual terms, such as cult place, assembly site or hall complex, did not fully characterise the range of activities being carried out at either an individual site or its wider landscape. Brink suggested that elite nodes of power did not comprise a single site or function but embraced many different facets. For example, they may have included a hall for gathering and feasting; a magnate's residence; places for production, trade and the collection of tribute; farms to sustain specialised craftsmen like smiths and other dependents; places for cult and ritual; a locale for military activity or mustering; accommodation for the king's retinue; a major cemetery (or multiple cemeteries); and a place for periodic assemblies of a wider polity. Such a listing includes just a portion of the type sites and functions that may have been present within particular elite landscapes. Moreover, the function of each location is likely to have fluctuated over time (Brink 1999: 434).

Brink proposed that these settlement districts were controlled by elite families but would attract a diverse range of people during assembly events, as documented at later royal palaces in Europe (Iversen 2009: 108). These would be held in the presence of the ruler whose power was sacral and militarily-defined, with justice giving and the proclamation of laws being further elements that marked the significance of these landscapes. Brink's work in Scandinavia was a clever combination of archaeological, historical and toponymic evidence. The rich archaeological record comprised halls, cemeteries, and artisanal workshops associated with such central places, while place-names, iconographic material and weapons deposits revealed both their importance as places of cult and ritual and the presence of warriors and retinues (Brink 1996: 241–2; 1999: 432; Hedeager 2002: 13; Larsson 2007). This richness of evidence cannot yet be matched in northern Britain. However, the findings of the work at Rhynie can provide inspiration to search for archaeological concomitants of all the different dimensions of power and authority that may have been integral to the emergence of similar central place complexes.

12.2.3 Assembling the evidence

Considering the Upper Strathbogie valley as a 'multifunctional central place complex' can provide several pointers for our interpretations. In terms of timings and tempos of activity in the first-millennium AD landscape, the sequence appears to begin with the settlement that developed on Tap o' Noth from the 3rd to early 4th centuries AD (Illus 12.1). Two main interpretations were explored in Chapter 10 for Tap o' Noth: a major regional settlement and a site of assembly. Should it have been a major year-round settlement, Tap o' Noth must have formed the focus for a very significant population that numbered into the thousands. In this respect, it seems unlikely that the settlement could have been supported economically by solely farming the immediate

Illus 12.1
Tap o' Noth reconstruction. Image © Bob Marshall/University of Aberdeen

hinterlands. The projected population living on the hundreds of platforms on Tap o' Noth is likely to have substantially outstripped the population of Rhynie parish even in the 19th century (around 1000 in 1841 – NSA 1845 (Vol 12)), which is substantially larger than the modern population of the area. Resource acquisition in the form of food renders and tribute from a much wider client-base (and perhaps the product of slave labour) may have allowed a major community living at Tap o' Noth to be maintained.

At Tap o' Noth could also have been a place of assembly, albeit of a character poorly attested in the archaeological and historical record of northern Britain. However, as briefly noted in Chapter 10, assembly has been identified as an important dimension of Scandinavian central places and possibly even a central function of the upper tier of elite centres. In Denmark, for example, the place-name Lejre, royal centre of the Skjoldungs, refers to 'a place with tents' implying that it may at times have been the site of temporary assemblies or courts (Niles 2007: 89). Later evidence from royal centres such as Gamla Uppsala also indicates that these were places where assemblies and cult gatherings took place, with Snorri Sturluson describing Uppsala as 'the assembly of all Swedes' (Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015; Semple et al 2020: 89).

At Tap o' Noth the scale of investment in the platforms and the presence of metalworking and amphora sherds and other exotica on the platforms indicates that if this was the locus for assemblies then these were not fleeting events – the scale of investment in place suggests extended and repeated periods of assembly

in a locale for gathering that must have had regional or supra-regional significance. Assemblies in Ireland could be of differing scales and significance from the local to the larger royal (*rígdála*), with legal glossaries suggesting it was the responsibility of a king to hold the latter on royal land. These *rígdála* were a provincial or inter-regional phenomena marshalled by particularly powerful kings (Bhreathnach 2014: 71). These events could be held annually or more intermittently, as well as being held on the hoof at times of crisis. The obvious part of Tap o' Noth that could be used in the actual events associated with assembly would be the summit Iron Age fort – the destroyed ramparts potentially acting as terracing for an audience, with a large central space sheltered out of the wind inside the ramparts for events such as proclamation, law giving and deciding on supra-regional matters such as setting the footing for war or peace, deciding on new leaders, and so forth.

At present it is difficult to differentiate between the two interpretations of Tap o' Noth – as a place of assembly or one of permanent settlement. In terms of the archaeology there were resonances between the form of the structure found outside Cairn More and the platform settlements at Tap o' Noth – it is only the landscape position of the Tap o' Noth structures that perhaps question a residential and permanent function.[1] However, the platforms at Tap o' Noth actually had more obvious floor layers than the structure at Cairn More and a range of objects and activity suggesting a great deal of investment in place occurred in relation to the Tap o' Noth platforms – amphorae vessels and large

locally made pots are unlikely to have been particularly portable and clearly metalworking was carried out on some platforms. The feeding of barley to horses on Tap o' Noth may indicate the over-wintering of animals (Chapter 8), again supporting the idea that this was in part at least a year-round settlement. There were no quernstones found on any of the platforms excavated, but these were rare at the Craw Stane complex and absent at Cairn More in the areas investigated – it could be that cereal processing was centralised or was carried out in zones that lay outwith the areas uncovered by the University of Aberdeen digs.[2] Overall, the evidence perhaps favours Tap o' Noth having been a permanent year-round settlement. However, the two interpretations of assembly and settlement may not be mutually exclusive – some of the platforms could have been permanently occupied whilst others could have been for an assembled community who gathered here at certain times of the year. Nonetheless, and no matter how we interpret the evidence, it cannot be doubted that Tap o' Noth must have been a hugely significant place in Late Roman and early medieval northern Britain, and it was undoubtedly this significance that enabled a royal centre to develop in the shadow of this spectacular hilltop settlement.

12.2.4 A very royal place

Elite focus began to centre on the Craw Stane complex in the late 4th century AD and endured until the mid-6th century (Illus 12.2). Its associated place-name, meaning 'place of or associated with a great king' (Chapter 3), suggests royal power was focused here, and though we cannot conclusively link the coining of the place-name to this early period, it seems likely given that the Craw Stane was abandoned by the 6th century and the known major sites in the wider landscape were abandoned by the 7th century at the latest. The place-name appears to have been particularly linked with the area to the south of the modern village of Rhynie – the very location of the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 3). This lowland element of early medieval occupation in the Strathbogie valley is likely to have been instrumental to some form of royal rulership associated with this wider landscape, and thus it was the emergence of this site that perhaps marked an important step in the rise to power of the individuals or lineages that controlled the Upper Strathbogie valley.

Within a Strathbogie 'central place complex', it was likely this node that held the most diverse roles and functions. One significant role explored in this volume and other publications of the Craw Stane complex (Noble et al 2013; Grigg 2018: 46) is a relationship to cult and ritual. The ritualised dimensions of Scandinavian magnate residences have been underlined by the discovery of cult buildings at sites such as Uppåkra, Sweden (Larsson 2007), and ritual appears to have been a prominent part in both a pre-Christian and Christian context of the well-known royal hall complex at Yeavering, Northumberland (Hope-Taylor 1977: 95–118). Rulers at Rhynie may therefore have drawn upon ritualised elements of the site and its iconography to bolster and maintain their position. For example, the 'Rhynie Man' stone is likely to represent a mythical figure or a pagan god, whose axe may serve as a conduit for practices associated with sacral kingship (Noble et al 2013: 1147) (Illus 12.3). The depiction of the axe, with its very distinctive double-ended blade and extremely thin shaft, is a strong parallel for the axe-hammer found in the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 ship burial, which has been interpreted as an implement for sacrificing cattle

Illus 12.2
Reconstruction of Phase 2 Craw Stane complex. Image © Alice Watterson/University of Aberdeen

Illus 12.3
Rhynie Man: QGIS visualisation

(Dobat 2006). In a compelling article on the topic, Dobat wove together comparative imagery and textual associations to suggest strong links between cattle, animal sacrifice and a cultic ritual role that may have underpinned the status and position of early Germanic kings and chieftains in a pre-Christian context (Dobat 2006: 889; see also Henderson & Henderson 2004: 102). Some of the animal bone evidence from the Craw Stane site, notably the dominance of cattle remains, may well support such an interpretation (Chapter 8) (Illus 12.4).

The Craw Stane complex could have similarly been utilised in ritual ceremonies. While the elaborate timber enclosing works would have provided protection, they may also have acted as a viewing platform from which to witness ceremonial events. The position of the Craw Stane at a liminal entry point to the entrance of the complex and close to Structure 3 has resonance with the context of carvings that have been associated with prominent sites in south-west Scotland. At Trusty's Hill in Dumfries and Galloway, a pair of Pictish-style symbols (a double-disc and Z-rod and a serpent and sword) were carved on an exposed rocky outcrop at the entrance to the summit enclosure of an early medieval Brittonic fort and have been interpreted as part of inauguration rites within the Brittonic kingdoms of south-west Scotland (Toolis & Bowles 2017: 1, 137). At Dunadd in Argyll, a boar, an ogham inscription, a footprint and a rock-cut basin were similarly carved into rock close to the entrance of the summit citadel, and may have been used in royal inauguration ceremonies associated with the overkingship of Dál Riata (Lane & Campbell 2000: 18, 247–9; see also Nieke & Duncan 1988: 16). Similar functions could conceivably have been

Illus 12.4
A cattle sacrifice at the Craw Stane complex. This is pure speculation of course, but it is based on the suggestions of what the style of axe the Rhynie Man holds may have been used for. Image © Alice Watterson/University of Aberdeen

associated with the Craw Stane and Rhynie Man at the Craw Stane complex, given that they were situated at the entrance to the site and located adjacent to a building (Structure 3) that itself could have had some form of ceremonial or ritual function.

12.2.5 Residing at Rhynie

The possible ritualised role of sculpture and presence of specialised buildings such as Structure 3 do not rule out a more prosaic role for the complex. Some commentators have proposed that the site was purely ceremonial in nature (eg Carver 2015: 7; Grigg 2018: 46); however, this underplays the diverse nature of the recovered evidence and more fundamentally misunderstands the intimate blend of power that operated in this time period.[3] Elements of the Craw Stane assemblage, such as the locally made pottery, spindle whorls and quern stones, indicate residence of some kind was also a feature of the site. The faunal assemblage, and the dominance of cattle in that assemblage, can also be closely compared with other early medieval fortified residences in Pictland. This suggests that the Craw Stane complex may well have acted as an elite residence, at least at certain times of the year.

A relationship between sacred and secular power is found at elite settlements across Europe in the first millennium AD. The evidence from Yeavering, for example, suggests that cult and ritual played an integral role in dictating the spatial layout of the royal hall complex (Hope-Taylor 1977: 95–118). The interplay of cult and residence has also been explored in Ireland and Scandinavia; sites like Gamla Uppsala, Lejre and Lagore are argued to have performed many functions including assemblies and ceremonies, but elite residence (whether intermittent or permanent) may have been a central role from which these other functions sprang (Brink 1996: 237; Ringtved 1999: 50; Watt 1999: 173; Newman 2007; Hedeager 2011: 152; Schot et al 2011; Gleeson 2012; Gleeson & Carty 2013: 39).

The habitation component at Rhynie may have included the use of large timber buildings for residence (Illus 12.2). Structure 1 appears to have been the largest building in the complex, but the presence of Structure 4 suggests there may have been further buildings outwith its enclosing elements. We may also be missing structures due to the lack of earthfast timbers utilised in the regional architecture of this era (Chapter 11; Noble & Evans 2022: 32, 55–66). The buildings identified during the excavations may well have held different statuses and functions. Structure 4, for example, is one of the few places in which cereal grain was found in any quantity, indicating that the processing of cereals for consumption may have largely occurred outside the complex (though the presence of horse harnesses also may hint that this building may have been associated with the stalling and feeding of animals).[4] An unfinished quernstone recovered from the outer ditch fill suggests that objects associated with agricultural tasks were fashioned on site and may have been used in the everyday routines of subsistence and/or during grander occasions of assembly and feasting.

Residence was likely reserved for the elite and their followers, though this might have been limited to special occasions rather than year-round occupancy owing to the itineracy of royal households. However, the extent to which itineracy was the norm for first-millennium AD kingship in Britain and Ireland has been debated. In the case of Anglo-Saxon England, Blair has argued that early

rulership was characterised by 'extensive lordship', where a king constantly moved around the kingdom living off food renders (2018: 104). More fixed centres and a more permanent royal presence only became a feature of the late first millennium AD (Blair 2018: 104). In contrast, Gleeson (2021) suggests that the royal *iter* in Ireland may have been a developed feature of Irish kingship, with little evidence for kings controlling estates outside of their own dynastic lands or kingdom or having extensive rights to hospitality before the late 7th or 8th century. Indeed, the peripatetic framework may have only emerged once supra-regional kingdoms began to develop and in Pictland this may have been from the 7th century onwards (Noble & Evans 2022: 16; see discussion below). Either way, the residential component of the Craw Stane complex and the temporalities of residence are likely to have fluctuated through time. Particularly in its early years, the scale of the polity in which the Craw Stane complex was a part may not have been large enough to warrant the need for extensive hospitality, multiple residences or elite nodes. This could have changed as the polity expanded (or contracted) and with the waxing and waning of the fortunes of individual rulers. Thus the extent to which this was a residence, and the centrality of that residence, may likewise have fluctuated through time.

12.2.6 Crafting kingdoms

One clear role of the Craw Stane complex was the production and redistribution of wealth in the form of high-status metalwork.[5] The material signatures of both production and exchange, perhaps associated with acts of gift giving, indicate that these were prominent elements of the activities conducted at the Craw Stane, and provide close parallels to other early medieval elite centres of power (Campbell 2007: tables 16–19). Whether the Craw Stane complex was involved in year-round production, or attracted the intermittent patronage of craftworkers during times of assembly or when the king was in residence, is difficult to assess (see Alcock 1963: 55; Laing & Longley 2006: 174). While the majority of the production evidence comes from the final phases of the Craw Stane complex, artefacts were found from the lowest to the highest fills of the outer ditch, suggesting that metalworking was conducted throughout the lifespan of the complex. However, discerning the relative scale of metalwork production over time is problematic. The bulk of the evidence comes from deliberate infilling during the final phases of the site, and prior to that the site appears to have been kept relatively clean, with debris clearly deposited elsewhere (for example, within surface middens that no longer survive). Campbell's study of import and metalworking distribution at a range of early medieval sites has shown that interiors were often kept clean, with middens being built up as part of a staged process in which waste was eventually transferred off-site (Campbell 2007: 108). In this respect, it is only when this process was interrupted or the site abandoned that large middens tended to remain in situ. Nonetheless, as it stands, the Craw Stane evidence is one of the most extensive metalworking assemblages in early medieval Britain, with unusual and notable characteristics – eg the number of handpin moulds, the evidence for high-quality blacksmithing and silver refining (Cruickshanks; Chapter 8). All of this is particularly impressive given the plough-truncated nature of the site and the fact that only around 14% of its extent was excavated.

Illus 12.5
Wild boar cast in silver from a 3D reconstruction of one of the Rhynie animal moulds by artist Jennifer Gray. Were these gaming pieces? Image © Jennifer Gray

The focus of production appears to have been on elite markers of identity – handpins, brooches, other dress accessories and perhaps gaming pieces (Illus 12.5). The Irish *Críth Gablach* suggests that one of the attributes of a lord was a brooch of precious material, and certainly in Ireland brooch moulds are generally restricted to the highest status sites, where their exchange may have been a key conduit in reinforcing ties of allegiance (MacNeill 1923: 297; Etchingham & Swift 2004; Campbell 2007: 111). More generally, the production and circulation of metalwork between a leader and his followers appears to have been an important means of cementing the relationships of hierarchy and subservience (Nieke 1993: 128–9). Indeed, as *Críth Gablach* suggests, objects such as penannular brooches may have literally materialised these relations, perhaps being markers of roles within the royal court or insignia of allegiance within the military retinue of a ruler (Grigg 2015: 68–72). Other objects such as handpins that had their origins in forms found in Late Roman military contexts may have also been badges of elite status and military honour or prowess (Youngs 2007: 86; 2013: 415, 421; Gavin 2013: 430).

In general, group bonds would have been created and maintained through the gathering and redistribution of wealth. In Germanic contexts, kings were known as the 'givers of rings' or the

'breaker of treasure' (Nicolay 2014: 6; Skre 2020: 201). Wealth was clearly being accumulated and utilised at the Craw Stane complex and the presence of ingot moulds, possible silver-refining vessels and the production evidence more generally show it was being transformed and redistributed. The raw materials (and indeed possibly objects themselves) may have been the product of complex social processes such as tribute gathering and raiding. Precious metalwork would have provided one commodity to trade but other materials such as iron, animal pelts, leather goods, foodstuffs and slaves were also potential 'goods' that could have been exchanged with neighbouring polities and further afield (Alcock 1963: 53; 1995: 142; 2003: 129; Campbell 2007: 124, 129).[6]

12.2.7 *The feast of wine*

The amphorae and the glass sherds from the Craw Stane complex attest to high-status feasting and drinking. Feasting and the consumption of alcohol are well-known ways in which groups forge, underline and remake relations of power and status. Consequently, feasting is a major feature of socio-political group bonding and peer polity interaction in complex societies (Russell 2012: 377; Hayden 2014: 44; Hastorf 2017: 179–221). Feasting is also a recurring feature of 'gift economy' societies of the type suggested by the production and redistribution evidence at the Craw Stane complex (Russell 2012: 378). Feasts can be highly ritualised and imbued with socio-political, religious and economic significance, with the events often involving very obvious displays of wealth and power that can lead to other elements of status marking and bond creation such as gift giving, ritual ceremonies, storytelling, dancing, music and singing (Mauss 2002: 49; Russell 2012: 379). These activities often play upon and underscore social hierarchies and relations through cues such as seating arrangements or the dress worn by participants, alongside the visibility, actions and gestures of those hosting the events.[7] Feasts are consequently often at the centre of the political life of a socially stratified society and thus major conduits for social inequality, given the prestige it brings and the costs it entails (Hayden 2014).

In early medieval society, feasting was likely to fulfil the royal obligation of hospitality (Alcock 2003: 49), engendering the reciprocal duty of the beneficiaries to fight for their lord, as is implicit in this stanza from *Y Gododdin*:

> The generous chieftain of most bitter fighting,
>   A prince in the bloodshed after the wine-feast, Gwenabwy
> son of Gwen, in the conflict of Catraeth
>   *Y Gododdin* (Jarman 1988: 20–1).

The sherds of imported glass found at Rhynie are likely to have been fragments of drinking vessels used at the site, rather than raw material used to produce other glass objects and inlays (Campbell 2007: 92–6). It is highly likely that these vessels were used in episodes of feasting and drinking, the latter indicated in the *Life of Columba* which depicts the magus Broichan drinking from a glass (*uitrea . . . bibera*) while in the royal house of King Bridei (Anderson & Anderson 1991: 140–3). Such vessels may have been exchanged between elites during high-level economic and political exchanges (Campbell 2007: 39, 60, 92–6) (Illus 12.6). The amphorae too may have been related to drinking, with wine being a likely content

Illus 12.6
Replica of an Atlantic conical beaker with white trail decoration © Cold Case Whithorn project. Both beakers and a more unusual bowl forms appear to have been present at Rhynie (Chapter 7)

(though amphorae are also thought to have stored oil which again could have also been utilised in feasting). In general, the presence of these imports testifies to the continuation or reinvigoration of Romanised tastes in drinking and eating, traditions that were well-established amongst the Roman Iron Age elite of northern Britain during the 1st to 4th centuries AD (Alcock 1963: 50; Hunter 2007). While the number of vessels from Rhynie is relatively modest, it must be remembered that we are reliant on the chance preservation of vessel sherds and abandonment-phase deposits in a heavily plough-truncated site. The distance from the coast is also a factor, with Campbell (2007: 110) suggesting that the sherd count of such imports at inland sites should be multiplied by a factor of 20 due to the difficulties in moving such large vessels overland. As discussed in Chapter 11, Rhynie shares parallels with Clogher in Ireland, which has the greatest prevalence of imports on any Irish site and yet was 70km from the coast (compared to around 50km for Rhynie). The amphora sherds from Tap o' Noth also show that consumption of Mediterranean exotics was occurring at c 550m OD near the summit of the hill. The amphorae and glass recovered at the Craw Stane complex (and the foodstuffs they contained) would have been extremely rare and exclusive objects in Pictland. Their presence would have been a very visible marker of access to exotic goods and more refined culinary tastes and social customs, and a prominent indicator of the accumulated wealth of those hosting these feasts. These served to highlight the power of the hosts and the rarefied connections they could secure to procure the fineries of the feast.

Such feasts are also likely to have required more locally sourced food but preservation limits the insights that can be gained. Faunal remains were recovered from the Craw Stane but were very poorly preserved due to soil conditions (Chapter 8). Nonetheless, what was notable during the excavations was the ubiquity of charred animal bone and the number of animal bones did survive in a lowland setting of eastern Scotland where acidic soils almost always prevent bone preservation. Both of these observations suggest that there was probably a very large animal bone assemblage prior to its degradation. Like other elite secular sites of the period, such as Dinas Powys and Dunadd, it is likely that at least some of the animals were consumed in the context of feasting (Lane & Campbell 2000: 58, 96; Seaman 2013: 8). Cross-culturally, meat tends to be a frequent feature of feasting events (see Russell 2012: 378), and at Rhynie there was a notable percentage of pigs within the bone assemblage, reflecting a prevalence of pig bones that has been identified at other power centres in Pictland (Masson-MacLean et al 2023). Indeed, texts indicate that pork was the most prominent dish in early medieval Irish feasts (Kelly 1997: 358), and in Anglo-Saxon England pigs were high-status animals found mainly on elite sites (Banham & Faith 2014: 98).

12.2.8 A warrior ethos

One other dimension worth exploring is the use of the Craw Stane complex and environs in relation to warriorhood and weapons-bearing. Weaponry and the right to bear arms were largely controlled by the elite classes in early medieval Britain, with the ability to muster and lead troops into battle being the preserve of kings and lords (Alcock 2003: 31). In the Irish annals, kings are regularly mentioned in reference to armed conflict or warfare, especially against rival peoples and their leaders. In better documented parts of early
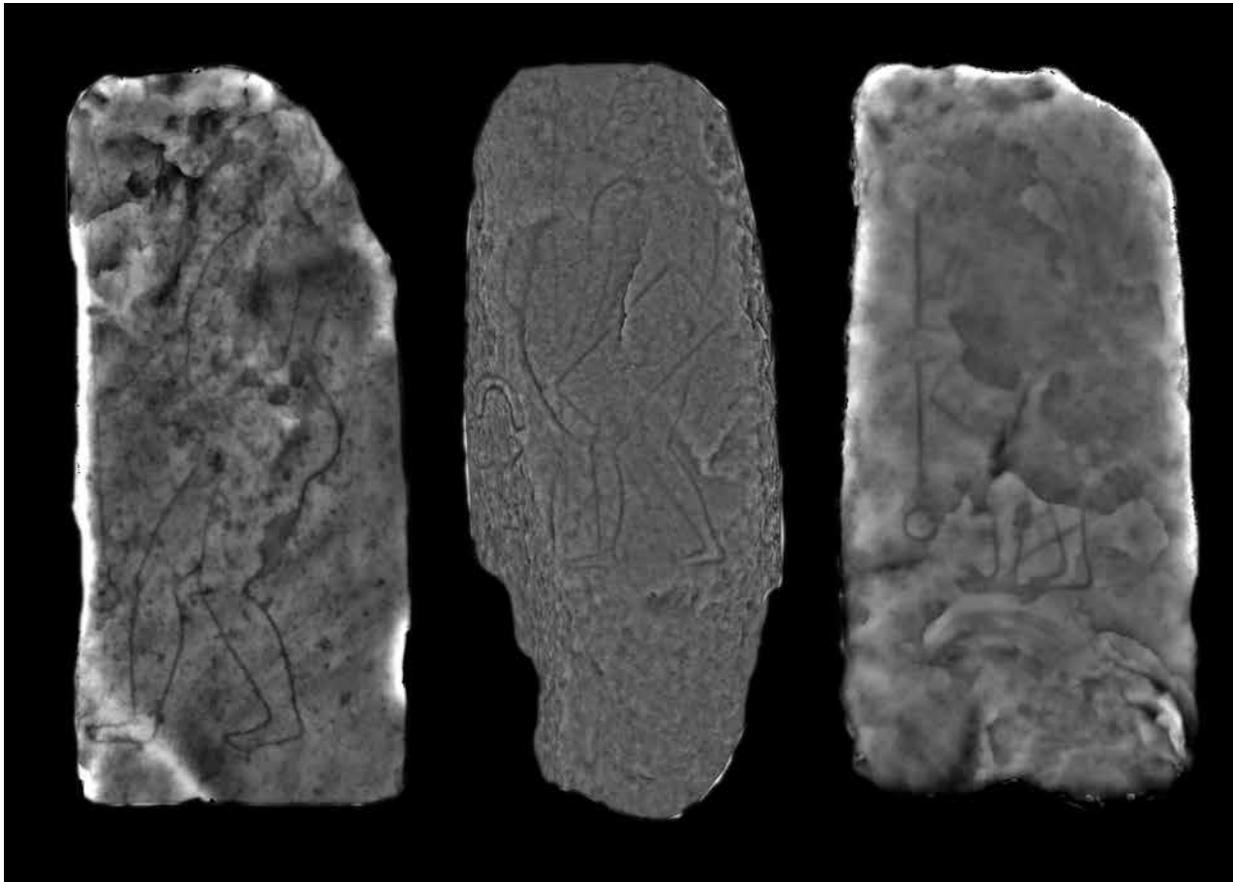
Illus 12.7
Warrior carvings from Tulloch (left), Collessie (centre) and Rhynie No. 3 (right) © Andy Hickie

medieval Britain and Ireland, kings and lords had personal war bands, bodyguards and sometimes war-leaders (Alcock 1972: 184; 2003: 55–6). Pictish war bands may be indicated in the *Life of Columba* which mentions Artbranán, an elderly pagan who is referred to as *Geonae primarius cohortis*, the leader of a military retinue from Ce (Sharpe 1995: n 149). Certainly from the 7th century onwards, when we have more detailed historical records for northern Britain, it is clear that war and warfare underpinned early medieval rulership – as was the case elsewhere in Europe. Elites in early medieval northern Britain were first and foremost leaders in war, with the ability to secure successful outcomes in conflict one of the main qualities sought amongst aspiring rulers (Woolf 2007b: 26).

Given that Tap o' Noth and the Craw Stane complex appear to have been foci for assembly, sustained a concentrated large population and hosted an elite residential, cult and manufacturing centre, it could be that this landscape was also one in which warbands were mustered. Warbands would have been necessary for the security of a polity; they could protect its boundaries and maintain a threat of violence needed to gather tribute and food renders from subordinates and vassals (eg Alcock 2003: 401; Bhreathnach 2014: 122). Weaponry has been associated with high-status sites of the period, with swords found on early medieval Scottish sites such as Dunadd and Dumbarton Rock and at elite Irish crannog sites such as Lagore and Balinderry (Campbell 2007: 111, tables 18–19). However, the recovery of weaponry is very rare, so the pattern-welded knife blade and sword pommel from the Craw Stane assemblage are unusual finds. The martial basis of the Rhynie elite society is perhaps also reflected in the carving of the warrior figure, Rhynie No. 3 – one of only a handful of warrior depictions in eastern Scotland (Hall et al 2020) (Illus 12.7). The gruesome appearance of Rhynie Man and the axe he bears are other symbols of violence and possible warrior attributes (Grigg 2018: 27).

The elaborate defences and fortification of the Craw Stane enclosures, Tap o' Noth and Cairn More further allude to the martial nature of society. The construction of defences appears to have been a means by which the bonds of subordination between followers and their king were embodied in early medieval society. Irish law tracts, for example, state that the clients of kings and lords were required to perform a fixed amount of labour, which included building and maintaining the ramparts of the king's fort (Kelly 1988: 30). In Anglo-Saxon England, fortress-building formed part of the 'common burdens' from the 8th century onwards (Wickham 2009: 163) and became a feature of the 12th-century kingdom of the Scots (Taylor 2016: 91–113). If similar obligations were present in early Pictland, constructing these defences on power nodes within the landscape would have helped cement and materialise the bonds between a ruler and their clients. The addition of the much more elaborate timber elements in

a secondary phase of the enclosure of the Craw Stane complex, and the addition of a rampart to Tap o' Noth in the 5th or 6th century, may suggest the labour and material obligations of a client community grew over time. The construction of these defences would have involved the organisation and control of substantial labour forces to provide both physical and metaphysical protection for the wider community who lived and perhaps gathered at these key nodes of power (cf Schødt 2003: 100; see also Nieke & Duncan 1988: 11; Warner 1988: 49).

In terms of defence and enclosure, one interesting aspect at both the Craw Stane complex and Cairn More is the contrast between the small size of the enclosed area and the monumentality of the defences. This is a wider phenomenon in early medieval Britain and Ireland with significant numbers of early medieval hill-forts and enclosures being relatively diminutive in terms of internal area vis-à-vis the scale of the surrounding ramparts (Seaman 2013: 10–1). The fact that such a small area was enclosed at both sites suggests only a very limited number of people could have occupied them at any one time. The labour force employed in the construction of the defences must therefore have been the product of a much larger population than the sites themselves contained (cf Alcock 1988: 26). While the defences may not have been designed to withstand prolonged attack, they would have provided some refuge against skirmishes and protection from raiders. The enclosing elements would have also marked those inside as being of a particular status, with the boundaries perhaps helping to contain as well as exclude. Hostages, for example, could have been present inside the Craw Stane complex. The Irish law tract *Críth Gablach* depicts 'forfeited hostages' in chains in the king's banqueting hall (Bhreathnach 2014: 67) but other hostages presumably experienced better conditions, as people could become hostages for various reasons (Kelly 1988: 172–6). While hostages are not mentioned in relation to the Picts, lesser subordination is found in the *Life of Columba*, which refers to dependent kings at the court of the Pictish king Bridei (II.42; Sharpe 1995: 196) and slaves in the Pictish royal court (II.33; Sharpe 1995: 181–2). In an earlier period, Patrick's 5th-century *Letter to the soldiers of Coroticus* claimed that slaves were bought by the Picts from Britons (§12, 14–5: Hood 1978: 37, 57–8). Therefore, slaves may well have been present in the Upper Strathbogie valley to help provision and maintain the households of particular elite lineages.

12.2.9 The dead of Rhynie

Closely connected with the multifunctional Craw Stane complex was a cemetery located a short distance to the north, perhaps along a routeway that would have passed by the complex heading south. Unfortunately, a proportion of the early medieval cemetery at Rhynie is likely to have been destroyed by the construction of the modern village. Nonetheless, fragments of information survive to suggest that a significant place of commemoration was located here, with the findspots of three symbol stones coinciding with the cemetery location (Logan 1829; Chapter 9). Estimating the size of the cemetery is difficult but it may have been extensive. Two unusual square enclosures were identified around 200m from the findspot of the warrior carving (Rhynie No. 3) near which funerary features were identified in the 19th century and during

the work of this project (Chapter 5). Antiquarian finds of cists during the construction of the turnpike road suggest that there were burials between the square enclosures and the northernmost findspots of the symbol stones (Henderson 1907: 163). Cropmarks and geophysical survey indicate that the cemetery may have also extended southwards (Chapter 5).

The square and round barrow cemeteries that emerged somewhere around the 4th or 5th century AD in eastern Scotland were a notable innovation (Maldonado 2013; Mitchell & Noble 2017). In this region, after the urnfield cemeteries of the Late Bronze Age, there was little in the way of identifiable or standardised burial types until the long cist and monumental cemeteries like that at Rhynie flourished in the late- and post-Roman era (eg Ashmore 1980, 2003: 35; Armit 2016: 116–22). As well as following wider trends marked by the greater visibility of burial monuments across Britain and Ireland in this period (see O'Brien 2009; Hines & Bayliss 2013; O'Sullivan et al 2014: 283–318), the occurrence of these cemeteries may mark a critical period in Pictland in which lineage, status, territoriality and claims to land became more visibly emphasised. With regards to social status, it cannot be coincidence that these formal cemeteries emerged in an era in which there may have been an increased emphasis on the importance of individual families and particular status groups. Monument building and the creation of new forms of mortuary practice often occur at horizons of social change and centralisation during transitional periods in the establishment of elites (Cherry 1978; Barrett 1994: 29–32; Whittle 1997: 45). Emulation, competition and the desire for status within an emerging society may therefore have been strong motivating factors behind the construction of monumental cemeteries (Maldonado 2013; Mitchell & Noble 2017). The construction of the cemetery at Rhynie was part of a wider phenomenon, but the potential size of this cemetery and its unusual proximity to sculptured stones and the two large square enclosures suggest that it may have been one of the more significant creations of this period. The cemetery, located at the crossroads of major routes through the valley, would not only have served as a site for ritual and the commemoration of the small group of people buried here but also have been a very visible and powerful demonstration of the authority and standing of the elite lineages who controlled this landscape.

12.2.10 Cairn More

In the Upper Strathbogie valley, the latest addition to the central place complex was Cairn More, an elaborate bivallate ringfort. The ramparts here show a very unusual construction that included dozens if not hundreds of timber posts. While the present evidence does not indicate that Cairn More matched the material or cultural richness of the Craw Stane complex, the investment in the elaborate defences certainly suggests this was a site of high social standing. Given its enclosed nature and small internal size, Cairn More must have been the domain of a single family or extended family group – though, like the Craw Stane complex, Cairn More also shows evidence for external structures outwith its enclosing wall. Ringforts of this type are few and far between in Scotland. Cairn More may therefore be interpreted as a lordly residence that was dependent upon the Craw Stane complex in the valley below. Notably, this smaller settlement stayed in use for a century after

the Craw Stane complex was abandoned, perhaps remaining a lordly residence even when the nearly royal centre disappeared.

Campbell has suggested that some of the high-status sites in the wider environs of Dunadd may have controlled access routes into Kilmartin Glen (Crone & Campbell 2005: 126–7; Campbell 2007: 134). Similarly, around Garranes, Co. Cork, a number of ringforts were found in the wider environs of Lisnacaheragh, the likely seat of the *Uí Echach Muman* (O'Brien & Hogan 2021). According to the 1770s plan of Kearn parish, roads from the south ran on either side of Cairn More; one to its west heading northwards and the other on its south side passing between Hare Hill and the higher Clova Hill. Thus its location may have been good for controlling routeways to the south and east of the Craw Stane complex. There is potentially a similar relationship between Mither Tap o' Bennachie and Maiden Castle in Aberdeenshire, with the latter sitting downslope from the summit nuclear fort.

12.2.11 The wider landscape

The establishment of a major central place in the Upper Strathbogie valley was likely due to the strategic and connected elements of its landscape. It was situated towards the margins of the fertile lowlands of Aberdeenshire in a valley that gave ready access to Moray in the north, and Deeside, Donside and the Urie valley to the south and east. Many Scandinavian and southern Britain elite centres are similarly positioned on important routeways (eg Brink 2004: 209; Seaman & Sucharyna Thomas 2020; Seaman 2023: 426). The Upper Strathbogie valley was also located on the threshold of different landscape types that held various land-use potentials. Today,
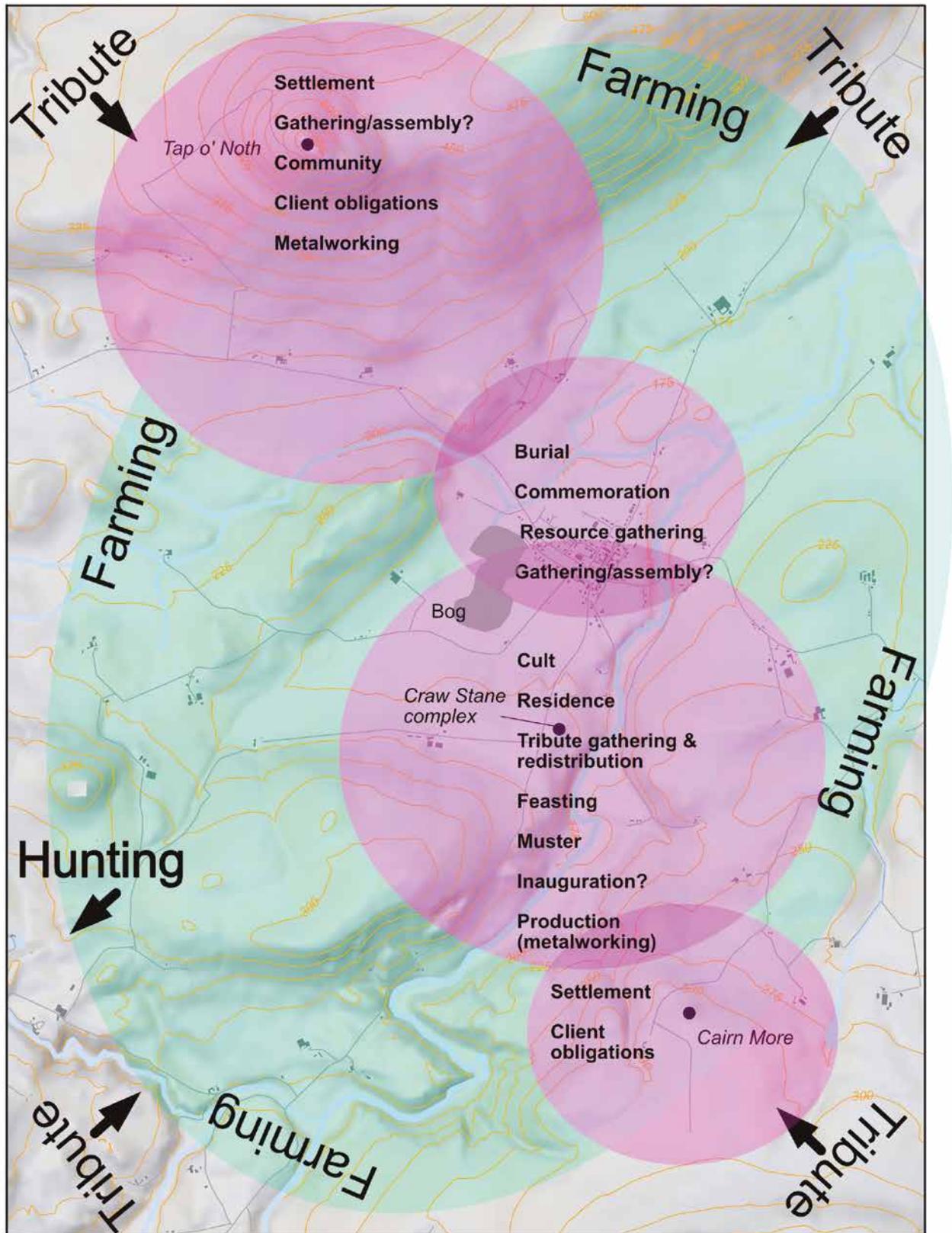
the valley bottom is characterised by the presence of good-quality brown earth soil that are well drained and suitable for both crops and pasture, while the valley is the western extension of a large area of productive soils that extends from the Urie and Don valleys to the east. The Macaulay Land Capability Classification for Agriculture map of Scotland marks the Rhynie soils as of average to high yield and suitable for a narrow to moderate range of crops (Illus 12.8). The pollen core from the Water of Bogie and the botanic remains from the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 8) suggest that a wide range of resources were available in the immediate catchment including mixed woodland, arable and pasture, and fruit- and nut-bearing trees. Even within the upper echelons of society, wealth and status would have ultimately come from an ability to marshal the resources of the land. The economic evidence from the valley is a reminder of the inseparability of landed wealth and status in this era.

Other resources may have made this region attractive. Rhynie lay at the edge of upland areas in the Cairngorm Mountains and Cabrach Hills that may well have been partially forested and provided the source of timber required for the enclosures at Tap o' Noth and the Craw Stane complex. These upland areas may have also provided a suitably rich landscape for hunting. The Cabrach contained royal and baronial forests in the late medieval period (McNeill & MacQueen 1996: 216–7), and the position of this valley at a transition between cultivatable lowlands and hunting upland zones mirrors the liminal position of some Anglo-Saxon and continental royal sites and potentially some of the enclosed sites of early medieval south-west England and Wales (Blair 2018: 104–6, 109; Seaman 2023: 426–7). For example, the Anglo-Saxon medieval royal centres at Cheddar, Somerset, and Rendlesham, Suffolk,
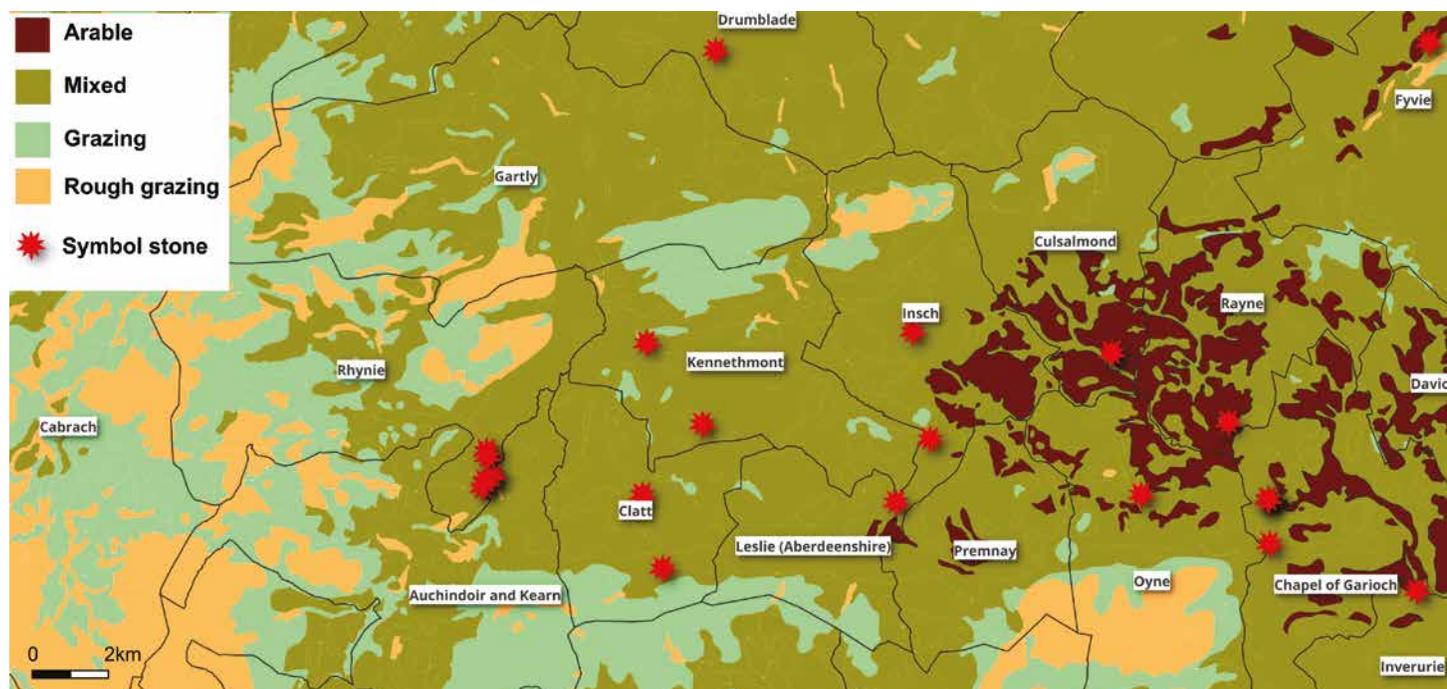
Illus 12.8
Macaulay Land Capability Classification for Agriculture map of Scotland in relation to the symbol stone distribution around the Rhynie and Bennachie areas. Base map © Soil Survey of Scotland Staff (1981). Soil maps of Scotland at a scale of 1:250 000. Macaulay Institute for Soil Research, Aberdeen

Tribute

Farming

Tribute

Settlement

Gathering/assembly?

Tap o' Noth

Community

Client obligations

Metalworking

Farming

Burial

Commemoration

Resource gathering

Gathering/assembly?

Bog

Cult

Craw Stane complex

Residence

Tribute gathering & redistribution

Feasting

Muster

Inauguration?

Production (metalworking)

Farming

Hunting

Settlement

Client obligations

Cairn More

Tribute

Farming

Tribute

0   250   500   1000 m

Illus 12.9
A polyfocal centre of the Upper Strathbogie valley: a potential model

were likely situated partly due to the proximity of favoured hunting grounds (Blair 2018: 112). Carolingian rulers similarly sited their centres in relation to hunting: Charlemagne's palace at Aachen was less than a day's ride from royal hunting grounds in the Eifel highlands, and his successor, Louis the Pious, held assemblies in the latter parts of the year at prime hunting locations (Goldberg 2020: 85, 106). At Rhynie, references to wild animals and perhaps the hunt can be found in the zoomorphic moulds at the Craw Stane complex (and possibly on the early motifs of Rhynie No. 5: Chapter 11) but unfortunately we are able to say little about wild animals in the faunal assemblage given the poor bone preservation (Chapter 8). Nevertheless, access to a different range of resources, and the proximity to good hunting land, may well have been important factors in the location of an elite focus within the Upper Strathbogie valley, since hunting was likely an activity carried out in the developing power centre.[8]

12.2.12 A powerful place

Overall, many lines of evidence converge to suggest that the Rhynie landscape, and particularly the Craw Stane complex, formed an important polyfocal nexus in which rulership was forged and maintained during a formative stage spanning the Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval period (Illus 12.9). Judging by the place-name evidence and the material wealth of the site represented by the scale of metalworking production including possible evidence of silver refining, it is clear that the Craw Stane complex was perhaps the key node in the orchestration and materialisation of rulership in the Upper Strathbogie valley. However, the Craw Stane complex must have derived some of its significance from its relationship with other major sites in the landscape, namely the enclosed settlement of Tap o' Noth (the largest enclosed settlement yet identified in early medieval Britain and Ireland) and the more modest enclosed site of Cairn More. Along with the cemetery, these three sites are likely to have formed a polyfocal complex or 'central zone' within the Rhynie environs (for discussion of the central zone model, see Blair 2018: 128–30, 174).

The Craw Stane complex can be associated with an elite group whose power was underpinned by a warrior ideology and sacral notions of kingship, and was most likely the inspiration for the place-name 'Rhynie'. Feasting, gift giving and ceremonial gatherings are likely to have been integral functions of rulership, though the complex may also have played a residential role. The agricultural production of the valley and the wider resources of its hinterland are likely to have underpinned such activities and highlighted the significance of the landscape. The rich artefact assemblage reveals the material wealth of this node of the central place complex with the evidence suggesting that the Craw Stane complex attracted talented craftworkers to this landscape, and within the site exotic foodstuffs were consumed and more local resources were processed and perhaps redistributed. All in all, a diverse range of activities are likely to have been hosted at the Craw Stane complex and each may have been integral to the administration of rulership in their own unique way.

Within the Craw Stane complex, we can envision the year-round presence or regular reappearance of the household of a Pictish ruler. The Irish legal tract *Críth Gablach* describes a king's house as having servants and guardsmen, the king's judge, wife,

steward, guests, poets, musicians and various other entertainers, as well as hostages given by the king's unfree clients and others taken from enemies, messengers or envoys from other polities (Bhreathnach 2014: 108–11). This is the kind of diverse community which may have resided at the Craw Stane complex. A source closer to home, the *Life of Columba*, refers to a Pictish king's *senatus* residing at the king's fort. This was most likely a core group of nobles or 'council' who supported the king and probably included the *familiares*, his close followers or retinue (II.33–5: Anderson & Anderson 1991: 142–7; Sharpe 1995: 181–4, n 301). In Bridei's case, his council also included his *magi*. While we should be cautious about this source given its Christian outlook, it seems plausible that in a pre-Christian context the king would indeed have had pagan intermediaries who may have orchestrated more ritualised activities at the Craw Stane complex and its associated cemetery. The figure of the Rhynie Man, so supernatural in appearance, may plausibly refer to figures such as a *magi* in the king's court.

The identification of the massive hilltop settlement at Tap o' Noth and its dating to the same era as the Craw Stane complex is perhaps the most startling find of the project. Tap o' Noth may have been a huge population hub for the area; a place of regional significance and a node where settlement began to coalesce from the 3rd century onwards. If this was the case, then those living on the hill must have been resourced by a much wider regional population bringing food renders and tribute. In this interpretation, the labour investment required to construct the platforms and rampart are testament to an enduring place of social and political significance in north-east Scotland during the Late Roman Iron Age and early medieval period. The scale of settlement and the complexity of society that it suggests were most unexpected for this era. We can also interpret Tap o' Noth as a place of assembly. Assemblies may have been held at particular times of the year, perhaps following harvest and major events such as Beltaine, Lughnasa and Samhain (or their equivalents), inaugurations, victories in war or a whole host of other potential events of intra-community interest (Russell 2012: 381). The ancient oblong fort at Tap o' Noth could have been a locale for assembling elements of the community for particular forms of assembly such as proclamations, meetings and religious festivals.

Gatherings of differing scales could also have been held within the Craw Stane complex or in the wider landscape. We know that Anglo-Saxon hall complexes hosted episodic assemblies – Bede's account of Paulinus spending 36 days at Yeavering in the 620s teaching and baptising is an example of how royal centres could attract a wide and diverse group to an elite power centre (*HE* ii.14: Colgrave & Mynors 1969: 188). Large assemblies within the Carolingian empire were also frequently held at royal centres (Iversen 2009: 108), and in Scandinavia major royal places were also used for annual or episodic gatherings.

If Tap o' Noth acted as a place of assembly, then these events must have been central to the orchestration of society in this region. The architectural investment suggests it was clearly not a place for one-off or intermittent assembly but instead a central node integral to social reproduction of a nascent polity of Pictland, whose rulership was unusual in this era for having reached a considerable and unusual extent (Wickham 2009: 151). The complexity of power centres such as that present within the Upper

Strathbogie valley may therefore have been integral to the rise of the powerful polities which constituted the Pictish kingdoms. Overall, the evidence from the Upper Strathbogie valley is a major step forward in our understanding of the transition from the Late Roman Iron Age to early medieval northern Britain and the pathways to power that led to the development of the early kingdoms in this part of Europe.

12.3 The development of kingship

What were the processes and trajectories that led to a major centre seemingly associated with a royal lineage emerging in the Upper Strathbogie valley in the Late Roman Iron Age? And what enabled this central place complex to endure till the 6th or 7th centuries AD? In recent years the consolidation of the Pictish over-kingdom as a cohesive polity has tended to be assigned to the late 7th century rather than earlier, and the idea of Pictish as an identity marker and political consolidation at all prior to this period has been questioned (eg Fraser 2009; Woolf 2017a). However, Evans (2022) has argued that Picti was known as a term in northern Britain from the Late Roman period onwards, but the continuity and development of polities and kingship remains a murky issue.

The Pictish king-lists place the origins of the royal line further back in time than even the earliest Roman references to the Picts, in what would generally be calculated as the first millennium BC (Evans 2011). However, while some of the earlier kings may have been real, the text was most likely a compilation of multiple sources and the prehistoric section demonstrably contains some fantastical elements (Fraser 2009: 226–7). Indeed, it is the late 6th century before we have a Pictish king confirmed in multiple sources: Bridei son of Mailcon, who according to Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* met Columba in Bridei's fortress at Loch Ness (II.33–5; Sharpe 1995: 181–4).

Examining our earlier sources, there are no certain references in any Classical sources to kingship north of the Forth, aside from an arguably medieval addition to Solinus's *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* which refers to the *Ebudae* islands off western Scotland having a *rex* (Mommsen 1895: 219). Tacitus mentions *duces*, 'leaders', from the Caledonian region (*Agricola* 29.4; Ogilvie & Richmond 1967: 111), and Cassius Dio stated that the peoples north of the Roman frontier, presumably the Maeatae and Caledonians, were 'democratic' though they had ἄρχοντεσ, 'rulers, chiefs, magistrates' (Cary 1927: 262–3), but he does not refer specifically to kings. However, there may have been some understanding of kingship in northern Britain. Ptolemy's *Geographia* has the name *Rerigonion* for (Loch) Ryan in Wigtownshire, containing Celtic *rīg*, 'king' in what was presumably a British-speaking area (Grigg 2015: 85–6; Chapter 3). There were also kings in Ireland, as evidenced by at least one place called *Rhegia* in Ptolemy's *Geographia* (Isaac 2004) and Tacitus's account of an exile who was 'one of the little kings' (*unum ex regulis*) on that island (*Agricola* 24.3; Ogilvie & Richmond 1967: 108). At the time of the Roman invasions in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, there are also references to kings and queens of the Britons south of Hadrian's Wall, though various kingdoms were eliminated as Roman rule was consolidated (Mattingly 2006: 90–1, 94–119, 138–9). Thus, a concept of kingship may have circulated within the early

centuries AD north of the Forth but may not necessarily have been present as an actual practice. The presence, nature and conceptualisation of kingship are unlikely to have remained static or uniform during the 1st millennium AD in northern Britain.

Little has been written on the origins of the Pictish kingdoms from an archaeological standpoint, and the scholarship on how early medieval polities north of Hadrian's Wall coalesced has tended to look south for models, particularly amongst the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England. Here, historical sources attest to the rise of hereditary rulership by the late 6th century and certainly by the 7th century, which appears to be accompanied by the onset of richly furnished burial traditions and the emergence of hall complexes (Scull 1993: 66; Scull 1999: 17; Yorke 1999: 25; Wickham 2009: 157; Scull et al 2024: 402). These kingdoms replaced polities where the hierarchies were relatively flat in the 5th and 6th centuries AD (eg Scull et al 2024: 405). Exactly how the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms emerged, and the relationship of these to the end of Roman Britain, has remained uncertain. For a start, the levels of continuity between Late Roman and early medieval southern Britain are a topic of huge and contentious debate ('the continuity-discontinuity debate' – see Gerrard 2013: 5). This has centred on the extent to which the end of Roman administration led to socio-economic collapse and the knock-on effects on post-Roman society (eg Esmonde Cleary 1989; Dark 1994, 2000; Faulkner 2000, 2004; Ward-Perkins 2005; Fleming 2022). While the specifics of this debate are difficult to resolve, there can be no doubt that society in the south of Britain in the 4th and 5th centuries AD faced immense challenges. These included socio-economic decline or transformation (Wickham 2009: 151; Gerrard 2013: 5, 73, 94; Fleming 2022: 32); massive changes in the material provisioning of settlements and the end of urban life (Fleming 2022: 32–3); large-scale migration and population change (Welch 1993; Heather 2009; Scull et al 2024: 405, 422); internal conflict, the usurpation of Roman rule and the end of formal taxation (Gerrard 2013: 7; Scull et al 2024: 421); the removal of the field army and major ruptures in the ability to enforce practices of government (Scull et al 2024: 421); and widespread social and cultural realignments more generally. While some of these impacts would have been felt in the 4th century, it was within the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of Roman administration that the kingdoms of southern Britain really began to take shape.

In his examination of the late 4th to early 6th centuries AD, James Gerrard (2013: 14) has characterised southern Britain's transformation as a shift from state control (where a civilian ideology was forefront) to a fragmented landscape of power in which personal lordship was 'backed by the point of a sword'. Changes in material culture during the 5th and 6th centuries reflected the growth of militarised ideologies, with the trappings of martial display becoming a very obvious element of the furnished burial tradition in eastern England (Gerrard 2013: 13–14, 201). Following the collapse of imperial control and the demise of Roman military protection and subsidy, the use of military retinues may have become one means by which authority was maintained in the much 'smaller worlds' of the post-Roman era in southern Britain (Gerrard 2013: 208, 249; Wickham 2009: 153; Fleming 2022: 187).

Further north at Hadrian's Wall, a similar process of fragmentation and the instigation of local rule has been suggested to

have occurred. The state-controlled military command of the frontier progressively disaggregated, with soldiers and their descendants perhaps forming war bands to exercise some semblance of local or regional control and to take power into their own hands (Collins 2012: 109). In western England and Wales, while the military symbolism did not find its way into the burial traditions, surplus resources and labour were put into the construction and refortification of hillforts in a post-Roman context. This was a different, but perhaps related, manifestation of the militarisation of society by emergent kings who surrounded themselves with armed retinues (Gerrard 2013: 117, 160, 265; Wickham 2009: 151).

While the processes of change that occurred in southern Britain may resonate with our interpretations of northern Britain, there are also numerous points of contrast. The complete absorption of southern Britain into the Roman Empire and the subsequent withdrawal of state administration would have had far reaching and disruptive consequences. The lack of continuity between Late Roman and post-Roman society would have been particularly notable for southern Britain compared to most areas of Gaul (eg Esmonde Cleary 1989; Dark 1994; Halsall 2013: 87–101, 174–81). In contrast, the social and cultural impact of the dissolution of Roman Britain north of the Firth of Forth may have been much less readily felt, but the opportunities for increased influence may have grown with the weakened military and civic organisation of those areas formerly under Roman administration.

In these respects, developments in southern England may not provide the best model for what occurred in Pictland. Instead, closer resonances may be found with other areas that lay beyond the edge (but not the influence) of the Roman Empire, such as parts of northern Germany and Scandinavia. Some of these regions also present with a similar absence of literary sources and rely more heavily on archaeological rather than historical evidence. Scholars in Scandinavia, for example, have been more willing to trace alternative trajectories for the emergence of the hierarchical warrior kingdoms that dominated the later first millennium AD. Here, the early centuries of the first millennium AD are considered crucial in setting the foundations of the societies of its latter half. In Denmark, for example, elite dynasties that emerged in the 1st to 4th centuries AD are suggested to have 'pioneered the development of the structured societal form that provided the basis for the emergence of the oldest kingdoms' (Storgaard 2003: 107). Despite its physical distance from Scandinavia, the influence of the Roman Empire has been seen as a catalyst for developments well beyond the frontier (Jørgensen 2003: 13).

In Scandinavia, the discovery of elite hall complexes that appear to emerge during the 2nd and 3rd century AD has led to major re-evaluations of the scale and complexity of first-millennium AD society.[9] One interesting model for social change has been developed by Dagfinn Skre, who argues that Roman influence in Scandinavia inspired a new type of leader in the early centuries AD – the *dróttinn* (2020: 193). The *dróttinn* was essentially a leader in war whose emergence was prompted by the territorial expansion of the Roman Empire, which escalated the 'martial proficiency and level of armament among neighbouring peoples' (Skre 2020: 222; See Skre 2025 for the most in-depth

study). Parts of northern Europe directly encountered Roman military forces, but Iron Age individuals and groups would have also served in the Roman army and experienced the military hierarchies and organisation firsthand. Skre also suggests that large units of Germanic *auxilia* settled in parts of Scandinavia around the end of the 2nd century AD, bringing with them new ideas around social and military organisation (Skre 2025: 13–14). These new polities were ideologically focused on the centrality of lordship and the apex position of a leader protected by a retinue. Skre proposes that the hall complexes of the 2nd–3rd century AD (inspired by a knowledge of Roman institutional buildings) were the economic and political centres of these new military leaders, who increased their power and wealth through military prowess and an expansionist ethos, building larger lordships that set the foundations for later developments in socio-political evolution. The hall complexes that these lords controlled had surrounding farms for followers, and these hall complexes were also manufacturing centres for the locality where long-distance trade was controlled. In the same era other developments took place such as the development of market sites and runic writing, stepping stones to increased wealth, social stratification and social advancements that allowed the crystallisation of new elite identities (Skre 2020: 222; Skre 2025: 13–14, 397–400).

Skre argues that the mid-first millennium AD marked another profound period of change, which may have gone hand-in-hand with the formation of yet larger-scale polities and a new form of leader, the *konungr* or **kuninga-* (Skre 2020: 197, 222–32; Skre 2025: 455), whose rise coincided with the demise of the Western Roman Empire that led to a reduction or cessation in trade and contact that had been going across the *limes*. As a consequence leaders refocused their commodity production and trade more closely on the Scandinavian homelands and on further regional expansion of their territories. In Skre's eyes these groups were creating a 'Rome in the North' on the back of the fall of the Western Roman Empire, based on the idea of one sovereign, a defined realm and where succession was defined by a dynastic hereditary system (Skre 2025: 559–60). Skre argues that archaeological examples of redevelopment and expansion at what became major royal centres, such as Gamla Uppsala, Lejre and Borre, can be traced to this period, and he suggests that the legitimacy of new rulers was based on an increased territorialisation of rulership, a more stable wealth base and forms of distribution, and a royal ideology and lineage with more developed forms of status and religious display (Skre 2020: 291, 229; Skre 2025: Chapters 13–15).

While there is a huge amount to digest with Skre's work, and much to debate, his underlying argument – in particular a shift to a more martial form of leadership in the early centuries AD and then to a more narrowly dynastic, ideologically differentiated form of rulership – could be relevant to the region north of the Firth of Forth. Of course, the territory that became Scotland is different from Scandinavia. In contrast to Scandinavia, a Roman presence did recurrently extend into the domain of Iron Age groups, including the 1st-century AD occupation of the lowlands up to the Mearns and the invasion of Agricola, whose temporary camps reached as far north as the River Spey (Fraser 2005, 2009: 17–22). In the 2nd century AD, the Romans again campaigned and subdued lands in the southernmost part of what would later

be Pictland, when the linear frontier was shifted north to the Forth and Clyde, the Antonine Wall was constructed, and some forts at sites like Ardoch were reoccupied (Hanson & Maxwell 1986). In the early 3rd century, lands north of the Forth were once again invaded in the major punitive campaigns of Septimius Severus and Caracalla in 208–11 who reached at least the Tay (Fraser 2009: 28). These interventions meant many communities within wider Iron Age society would have witnessed firsthand the Roman army in operation and reacted to Roman military campaigning.

One consequence of the Roman Empire may have been greater political consolidation of the groups that lived beyond its frontiers (Mann 1974; Heather 2009: 36–150). Certainly, the multiplicity of population groups that inhabited northern Britain according to Ptolemy's *Geographia* is not found in later written sources, which focus on only a few named groups. While it is likely that our limited textual evidence simplifies a complex web of local power structures, some political consolidation is probable. According to Cassius Dio, the Maeatae and Caledones who colluded to attack the empire in the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries were amalgamations of multiple polities (Cary 1927: 216–7, 262–3). Subsequent references are more limited, since Roman infighting and other frontier incursions dominate our sources from the 230s to 280s (Kulikowski 2016: 111–18, 137–201). However, after Rome's control of Britain was re-established by 297, conflicts in northern Britain resumed and often involved the Picts (*Picti*).

Collaboration and the geographical scale of contacts among barbarian groups, including Picts, *Scotti*, Saxons and others, appears to have increased in the 4th century with the *barbarica conspiratio* (the 'Barbarian Conspiracy' – AD 367–8) (see Fraser 2009: 54–8). Roman campaigning in Scotland may also have continued into the 4th century, with the text *Origo Constantini Imperatoris* stating that Constantius Chlorus died (AD 306) after obtaining a victory over the Picts, suggesting that the situation north of the frontier in Britain required repeated imperial interventions (Rolfe 1935–9, vol 3: 510–11). Ammianus Marcellinus described the *Picti* as a 'savage' *gens* in 365, two years prior to the 'Barbarian Conspiracy', who were 'harassing the Britons with constant disasters' (*Res Gestae* xxvi, 4.5; Seyfarth et al 1978, vol 2: 9; Rolfe 1935–9, vol 2: 586–9). Thus, the Late Roman period was marked by significant warfare and conflict, with more effective long-range attacks by late Iron Age groups on the empire and particularly vicious attacks by the Romans against these group in the 3rd and 4th centuries (most notably Severus's punitive campaigns).

It is in this context of an active military frontier and contact (including trade), with an advanced state-based military organisation, that new forms of society may have emerged. Military prowess and skills in warfare are likely to have been desirable qualities sought in leadership, with Cassius Dio remarking that in the years around AD 200 raiding and general martial ability appear to be a major determinant of who ruled the peoples north of the Hadrianic frontier (*Roman History*: Cary 1927: 262–3). Even the initial Roman invasion appears to have had an impact, with Tacitus stating that the leaders of the Caledonian polities appointed Calgacus as a war leader to fight the Romans (*Agricola* 29.4: Ogilvie & Richmond 1967, 111) – though the fact that his

Celtic name means 'swordsman' indicates that warfare was probably an established part of society in northern Britain. Following Skre's model, we can perhaps imagine the emergence of a class of military leader similar to his *dróttinn*, who cultivated lordships supported by hierarchical warrior groupings. This process may have become most prominent in areas to the north of the Roman frontier in Britain, with the expansion and contraction of the Roman presence beyond Hadrian's Wall creating waves of escalation in martial proficiency and leadership amongst non-Romanised groups around and beyond the frontier.

Roman frontier policy sought to control and divert such activity. It often provided material support to local leaders through gifts of money and objects, and sometimes military assistance, particularly for local rulers who gained Roman protection from their neighbours and increased access to Roman markets. The enemies of Rome were thus not only devastated by imperial armies, but also had heavy tributes imposed in the forms of grain, cattle, horses and men for the imperial army, and could even have internal affairs such as assemblies regulated and supervised by Roman officials (Elton 1996: 36–7, 48–51; Goldsworthy 2016: 366, 385–402; see Cassius Dio, *Roman History* Cary 1927, 12–17, 34–7, 58–61, 72–5, 314–15, 378–9). After the 230s, when Roman armies were pre-occupied elsewhere, this system probably broke down and is likely to have disrupted power relations. The dearth of coin-hoards identified in the archaeological record after this period may well be evidence of such a situation (Hunter 2007). However, it may also have enabled new structures to emerge, as trade and military connections with other frontier peoples could have developed – as is indicated by traditions of material culture shared with Ireland (Hunter 2007: 46–8). Less direct Roman intervention in the far north in the Late Roman period (in terms of attempts at conquest at least) may therefore have allowed more permanent landscapes of power to solidify.

These altering trajectories of Roman military influence in the north may provide a context for the origins of the multifunctional central place that developed in the Upper Strathbogie valley from the 3rd and 4th centuries AD onwards. First, some form of centralised settlement or place of assembly developed at Tap o' Noth, concentrating surplus material and labour resources. By the late 4th century, a more obvious node of rulership emerged at the Craw Stane complex. It is notable that the start date for the Craw Stane complex overlaps with the *barbarica conspiratio* events of the AD 360s, and the wider context surrounding this event may have been a further catalyst for the consolidation of power by a restricted warrior elite within late Iron Age society. The emergence of the Craw Stane complex might also correspond with the elevation of warband leaders perhaps initially associated with Tap o' Noth to a more exclusive (royal) status, with leadership centralised at a dedicated site for orchestrating and administering power. The position of these leaders may then have been assured in the generations that followed and power perhaps centralised through the dynamics of peer competition and competitive exclusion (cf Scull et al 2024: 403). Once the Roman administration had left Britain, and the organised state-led frontier system based on Hadrian's Wall had collapsed, the threat of the empire was removed. In this respect it is interesting to note the increased resource investment in the Upper Strathbogie valley in the 5th and early 6th centuries AD; the stone-built rampart enclosing the settlement at

Tap o' Noth was built and more elaborate timber works were likely constructed at the Craw Stane complex during this period. The development of the elaborate ringfort at Cairn More may have also begun in the 5th century, perhaps reflecting the growth of a wider elite and the development of dependent lordly sites.

Overall, whatever the exact processes and timings that led to the development of kingdoms and kingship in the north, the evidence from Rhynie, Tap o' Noth and Cairn More suggests that the social and political cohesion that underpinned the Pictish kingdoms had much deeper roots than originally believed. This ultimately permits a reappraisal of the continuities and connections between the Late Roman Iron Age and the early medieval period in Scotland. While militarised ideologies at the civilian level were an outcome of the collapse of state control in southern Britain, in the far north this was a process that had a much longer history and prominence. Rulership at the 'point of a sword' was a phenomenon that perhaps found new expression during the Roman Iron Age and did so in an area of intense military conflict at the northernmost limits of the Roman Empire. While the impacts of military intervention and conquest were first felt in the late 1st century AD, it was the events of the late 2nd to 4th centuries that further shaped the contours of northern society. Severus's massive and genocidal campaigns in Scotland occurred in the early 3rd century following a generation of trouble on the frontier. In the following generations no conflict is recorded, but in the late 3rd century our sources once again speak of conflict between the Roman military and Iron Age groups – this was the period (late 3rd century) in which the settlement at Tap o' Noth began to take shape. By the late 4th century, the Picts were able to muster warbands to take part in military raids that relied on long-distance connections to other barbarian groups. This may have required a more centralised social organisation that included sites of assembly where a large army or multiple raiding parties could convene – the kind of place that Upper Strathbogie was becoming.

12.4 Mapping early polities

Deciphering the type of area an elite centre at Rhynie might have served is very difficult, considering this is a place and time period for which the historical sources offer little to no clues. There is evidence that later land units inside the parishes of Rhynie and Kearn probably provided some food and resources to support the centres at Tap o' Noth, Rhynie and Cairn More (Chapter 3). In addition, it has been proposed that Strathbogie had once been more focused on Rhynie rather than Huntly (the later medieval caput of the lordship), so the territory here could have related to the core of the Tap o' Noth and Rhynie polity in its final 6th- and 7th-century phase. For England, it has been suggested that the origins of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms lay with relatively small territories equivalent to the size of a small English county or less (Bassett 1989; Wickham 2005, 2009). By AD 600, kingdoms such as East Anglia, Wessex, Deira and perhaps Mercia and Hwicce were around the size of two English counties, though the *Tribal Hidage* records much smaller polities still in existence even in the 7th century (Wickham 2005: 313; 2009: 151; see also Arnold 1997: 208–9). In early medieval Wales, the petty kingdoms recognised by land grants in the *Book of Llandaff* appear to have been small in

scale, no bigger than 15–20 miles across. These kingdoms fluctuated and were largely unstable, with their borders and extent defined socially rather than spatially (Seaman 2013: 13).

The evidence for Pictland is scant, particularly for the 4th to 6th centuries when the Craw Stane complex appears to have been active. Certainly for this period, it is not tenable to imagine a contiguous patchwork of kingdoms making up the areas that later became the core Pictish kingdoms at their height. Even in later periods there may have been areas that remained independent of royal authority and ones that resisted or embraced royal power to a lesser or greater degree (eg Fraser's 'farmer republics' (2009: 348) which draw on Wickham's 'peasant-mode' economic model (2005: 304–6, 536–47)). There will also have been propertied individuals of wealth and status, including a range of nobles and religious figures who retained at least some power and influence independent of kings. Nonetheless, the development of Rhynie may mark an important threshold in the evolution of elite society in north-east Scotland, with warrior leaders of the Late Roman to early post-Roman period laying the foundations for the more extensive kingdoms of the Picts in the 7th century and beyond. Whether these developments related to wider changes, such as a move from identities primarily based on population groups (like the Caledones, Verturiones and Maeatae) to more territory-based allegiances (such as Fortriu, Ce and Fife), is as yet unclear.

One possibility is that relatively extensive kingdoms arose earlier than the 7th century. If Adomnán's portrait of Bridei's late 6th-century court at all reflected the contemporary situation, then some Pictish kings had already begun to extend their dominance over substantial areas of land and sea. The presence of a sub-king from Orkney would certainly suggest that Bridei had overlordship of a territory stretching at least 150km northwards from his fort near the mouth of the River Ness (though it could be that Adomnán's writing represents the late 7th-century socio-political situation of his own time than the late 6th-century reality). Similarly, the *Annals of Ulster* contain two items (duplicates of the same record) in *c* AD 558 and 560 stating 'The flight before the son of Maelchon' (either Bridei or an otherwise unrecorded brother), which suggest Bridei was indeed a notable king who caused significant unrest and perhaps the displacement of opposing leaders and peoples. It may be that extensive political territories were already beginning to take shape in Pictland in the 6th century (and perhaps earlier) and that this formed the basis for the later Pictish kingdoms (Wickham 2009: 155).

We must therefore question whether it is possible to identify further contemporary or near-contemporary centres to Rhynie and assess the reach of these power nodes. Three main elements marked out Rhynie as a potential site of interest prior to excavation – its place-name, the unusual form of the enclosures at the Craw Stane complex, and a concentration of Pictish symbol stones. In terms of place-name evidence, it would be useful to explore names that contained the Celtic word for king (**rīg*) or other elements (like *dún*, *ráth* or *lios*) that could relate to Pictish power centres. Some exploration has been made of these names (eg Taylor & Márkus 2012: 359–60, 426–8, 477, 480) but there has been little concerted effort to combine the place-name evidence with archaeological and historical sources. With regards to enclosure morphology, there are few parallels in the cropmark record of eastern Scotland (Chapter 11) and indeed no clear-cut

Illus 12.10
The symbol stone at Broomend of Crichie, Inverurie

Illus 12.11
The horse symbol stone from Inverurie, Aberdeenshire. QGIS visualisation
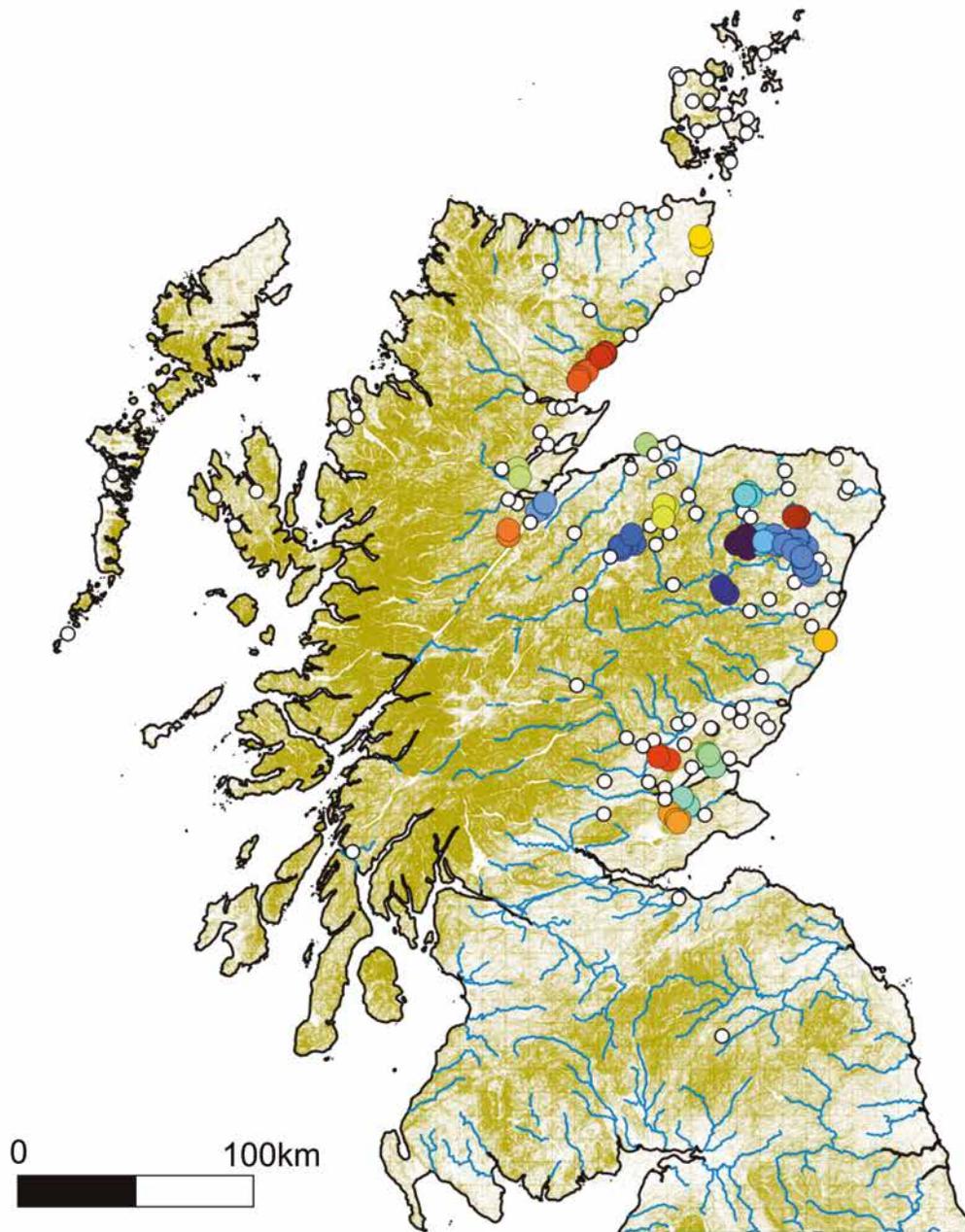based on an original model by Hamish Fenton

method for identifying forts or enclosures of the early medieval period based on morphology alone (eg Ralston 2004; Noble et al 2013; Noble et al 2020b).

Instead, areas of Pictland with concentrations of (Class I) symbol stones may be one stream through which to target fieldwork. A notable concentration of stones can be found close to Rhynie around the modern town of Inverurie; these comprise a dispersed distribution of stones at Broomend of Crichie (Illus 12.10), Brandsbutt, Drimmies, East Balhalgardy, Keith Hall and the Bass of Inverurie (RCAHMS 2008: 14, 16, 20, 22, 26). The latter are a group of four stones which now stand in a graveyard next to a motte and bailey castle but were found in the walls of Inverurie's original parish church prior to its demolition in 1775. One stone that now stands at Keith Hall (RCAHMS 2008: 26) was found on the same area of Haughland between the Don and the Urie, meaning that five stones were found in proximity to their confluence. None of the surviving stones feature warrior or human figures like those at Rhynie, but there is an unusual image of a horse (Illus 12.11). Unfortunately, no sites are recorded at this location and much of the area has succumbed to modern development. In general, concentrations of symbol stones tend to be located in northern Scotland, with much smaller numbers of monuments found in the areas that encompassed the heartlands of southern Pictland (Angus, Fife & Perthshire). A simple cluster analysis in GIS that groups stones within 2km of one another shows larger concentrations of stones in the Urie-Don valley, in the mid to lower Spey, around Inverness, and around the Brora–Golspie area in Sutherland (Illus 12.12). However, little is known about the landscape context of any of these concentrations and much more could be done to understand their settings through targeted fieldwork. The Inverness area would certainly merit further attention – notable stones include two large animal carvings of boars at Dores and Knocknagael, and the warrior figure at Balblair.[10]

Returning to the Rhynie landscape, it is the traditions of the carved stone monuments that allow us to take some very tentative steps in identifying the potential catchment of the central place. Noble et al (2018a) have suggested a typological development for

Illus 12.12
Symbol clusters defined as groups of symbol-bearing stones within 2km of one another

Legend:
- Symbol stone
- Clusters of symbol stones where one example is within 2km of another

0   100km

Pictish stones that may help us identify monuments that could be broadly contemporary with the styles of carving found at Rhynie. The typology is based on the dating of sites that can provide relatively secure contexts for groups of stones and indicates that unelaborated carvings may belong to the earlier phases of the symbol tradition. This suggests that relatively plain symbols – as found in association with the 2nd- to 4th-century promontory fort at Dunnicaer, Aberdeenshire – were present in the earlier forms of the Pictish symbol tradition. A relatively simple but clear linear style is also consistent across the cluster of 4th- to 6th-centuries stones found at Rhynie, while more elaborate symbol forms with internal detail are found from the later 6th century onwards.

If we examine the Pictish stones of north-east Scotland, following the typological implications sketched out in Noble et al (2018a), then around five sites in Aberdeenshire have symbol stones that share characteristics with the Rhynie carvings (Illus 12.12). These examples have the same bold yet unelaborated style of carving found on the Rhynie monuments and include impressive standing stones such as the Picardy Stone. More modest examples, such as the stone from Newton of Lewesk, resemble the plaque-like stones of Dunnicaer (and Rhynie No. 8) and may therefore indicate an early date. The context of most of these stones is uncertain, but those from Tillytarmont and possibly the Picardy Stone may mark cemeteries (Stuart 1856: xxiv; Woodham 1975). Further west, a small number of sites in Moray also share

the simplicity of line and design remarked on in the symbols at Rhynie. These include a symbol stone at Mortlach that bears a Pictish beast and an unusual symbol resembling a double-sided clasp. Some examples, such as Congash, are relatively unembellished but show some greater internal decoration (eg within the arch of Congash No. 1).

Mapping stones that show a similar simplicity of line and unadorned carving style to that at Rhynie highlights an interesting concentration of examples in the upper stretches of the Urie and the Deveron, Isla and Bogie catchments – a distribution spread over an area of around 25km^2 (Illus 12.13). A distribution that broadly coincides with the size of territories that characterised the polities of early medieval southern Wales in the 7th century (Seaman 2013: 13). No putative early styles of carving are found on the upper stretches of the Don, along the Dee or further north in Buchan. A smaller concentration is found on the coastal plain of Moray, while there is also a dispersed group strung along the mid-upper stretches of the Spey/Fiddich from Mortlach to Dunachton. We tend to identify the Spey as an important dividing line in Scottish geography, but given the paucity of our historical sources we do not know if that was the case in the early first millennium A.D. Indeed, the stones showing style characteristics similar to that of Rhynie encompass western Aberdeenshire and the Spey catchment. Could it be that a region spanning parts of the Spey and western Aberdeenshire was the focus of a
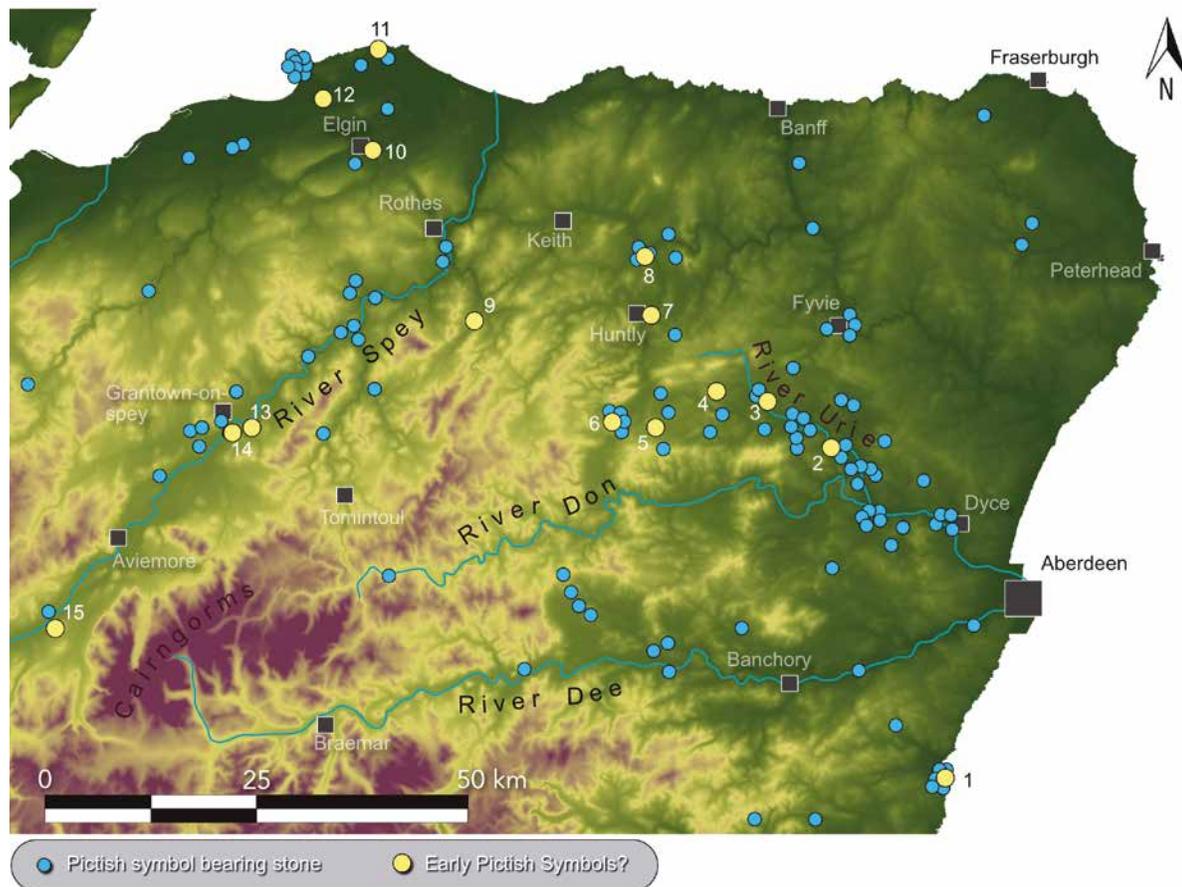
Illus 12.13

Pictish symbol stones bearing early characteristics: 1) Dunnicaer; 2) Drimmies; 3) Newton of Lewesk; 4) Picardy; 5) Clatt; 6) Rhynie; 7) Huntly; 8) Tillytarmont; 9) Mortlach; 10) Birnie; 11) Covesea; 12) Easterton of Roseisle; 13) Congash; 14) Inverallan; 15) Dunachton
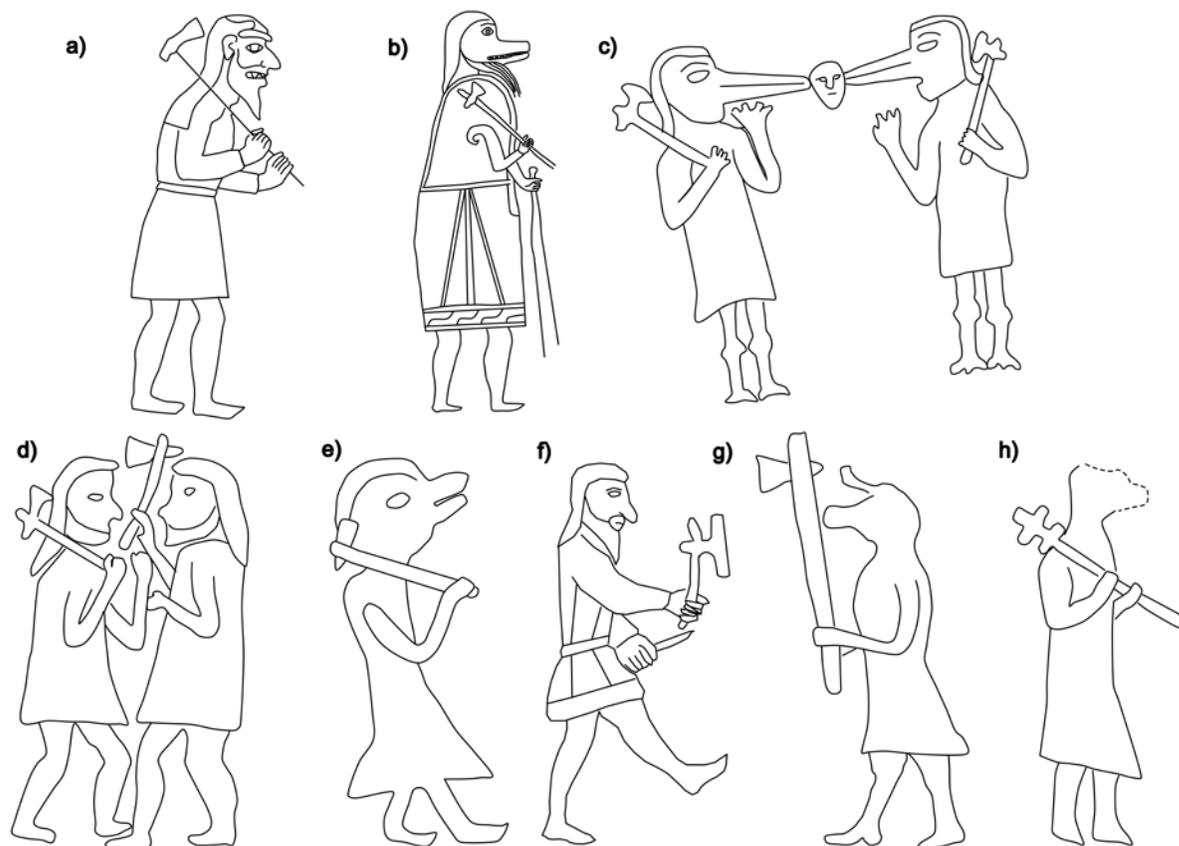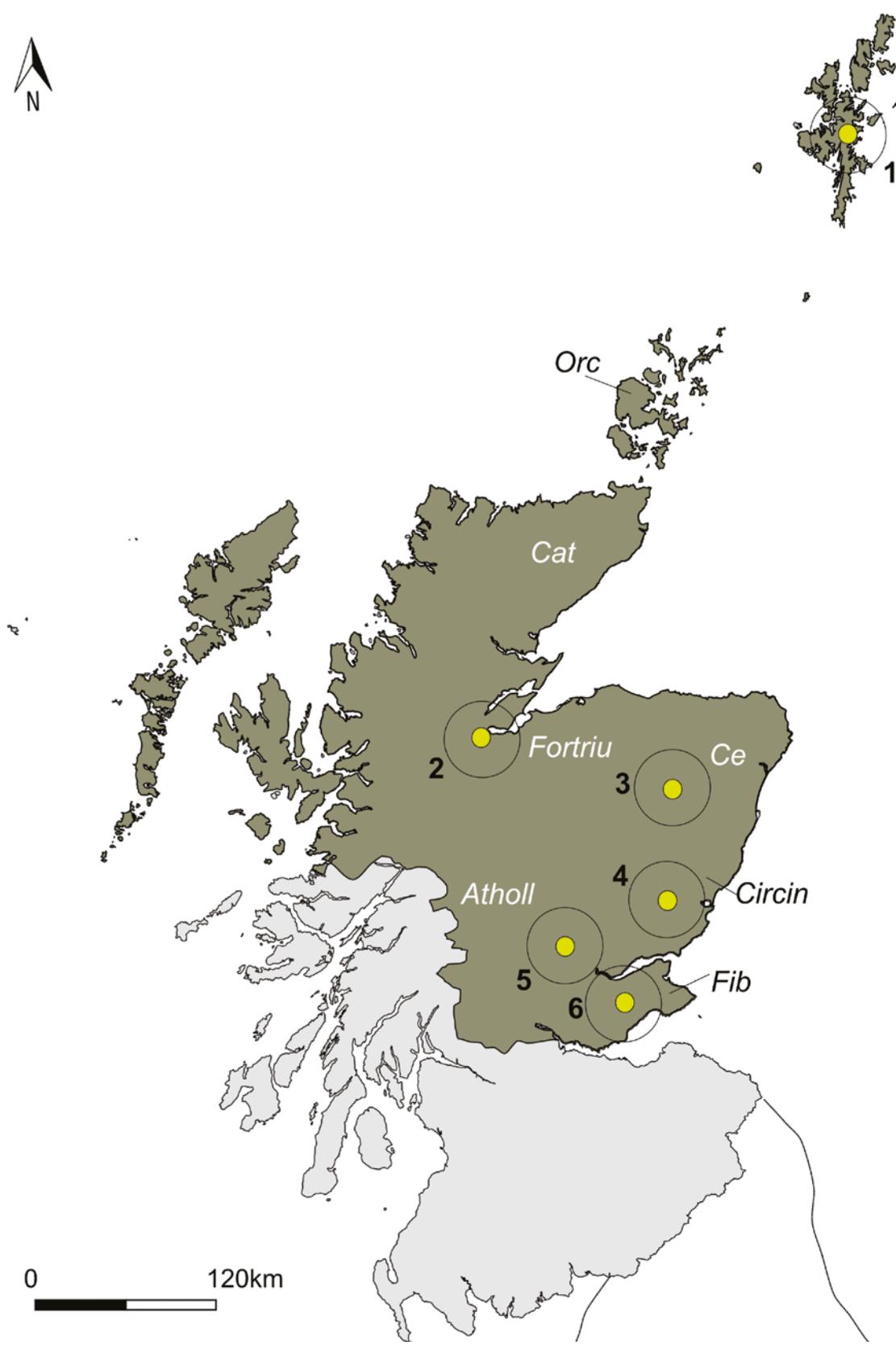
Illus 12.14
Axe-wielders from Pictish sculpture: a) Rhynie; b) Mail, Cunningsburgh, Shetland; c) Papil, Shetland; d) Glamis, Angus; e) Hunter's Hill, Glamis, Angus;
f) Golspie, Sutherland; g) Rossie, Perthshire; h) Strathmartine, Angus

developing Pictish polity? However, the case that the stones from this latter group belonged to the earlier phases of the Pictish tradition is the least convincing, and their chronology may stretch into the later 6th or 7th century.

What further marked the Rhynie stones as distinctive was the inclusion of human or human-like figures. Such depictions are very unusual in the symbol stone (Class I) corpus and only a small number of parallels can be highlighted (Illus 12.14). For the warrior carvings, this includes examples from Collessie, Fife; Tulloch, Perthshire; and possibly Westerton, Angus (Illus 12.7). Balblair No. 1 in Inverness-shire also shows a possible weapon-bearing walking figure, though this figure is less martial in character as he wears a short tunic and carries a club or a staff rather than a spear (Stuart 1867: 72; Allen & Anderson 1903: 95; Fraser 2008: 80). As well as the warrior figure there is also Rhynie Man who wields an axe rather than a spear. Amongst the axe-bearing figures shown on Pictish symbol stones the closest stylistically (and probably in date) to Rhynie Man is the axe-carrier from Mail in Cunningsburgh, Shetland (Turner 1994) (Illus 12.14b). A number of axe-wielders are also identifiable on cross-slabs from Glamis, Papil and Golspie for example, but given that these are on Christian monuments they are likely to substantially post-date the Rhynie Man carving, perhaps being of 7th or 8th century date at the earliest (Illus 12.14).[11] The Mail stone is a particularly

intriguing parallel, given that the place-name Cunningsburgh derives from Old Norse *konungsborg* meaning 'king's fort' (Stewart 1987: 48–9). While obviously a later coinage, it could reflect the perceived high status of this site in the 1st millennium AD. Rune-inscribed stones from the site and its locale further attest to the importance of this location in the Norse period. Additional carved monuments from Cunningsburgh include two ogham-inscribed stones and a fragment of a stone with a double-disc and Z-rod and interlace that may be the remains of a cross-slab (Turner 1994: 317–19). To the south of the stone's findspot lies a broch or dun on a tidal islet from which a probable gaming piece in the form of a small, carved human figure was recovered (Goudie 1924: 17). This 'fort' (perhaps a reused broch), the sculptural evidence, and the place-name of Cunningsburgh may indicate the presence of a Pictish to Norse power centre in this part of mainland Shetland.

The parallels for the warrior figure depicted on Rhynie No. 3 suggest that other examples were also situated within locally and perhaps regionally important landscapes. The warrior figure at Collessie, Fife (Illus 12.7), for example, comes from the immediate vicinity of a square barrow cemetery (Mitchell & Noble 2017: 12, 27). Less than a kilometre to the east at Melville Farm lies another barrow cemetery. Both cemeteries are likely to date between the 4th and early 7th centuries AD, making them broadly

Illus 12.15
Class I Pictish stones with axe-wielders and weapons-bearing figures with 1500km² circles drawn around the findspots. 1) Cunningsburgh/Mail, Shetland; 2) Balblair, Inverness-shire; 3) Rhynie, Aberdeenshire; 4) Westerton, Angus; 5) Tulloch, Perthshire; 6) Collessie, Fife. Note the relationship of these findspots to the Pictish regions is speculative – see Chapter 3 and 12 for discussion of Rhynie's relation to Fortriu/Ce for example

contemporary with the Craw Stane complex. Collessie was probably the centre of a larger territory than its later medieval parish (Taylor & Márkus 2010: 46, 211). The name probably includes the Gaelic element *lios*, which in eastern Scotland often denotes the presence of an aristocratic residence or administrative centre, perhaps from the Pictish era (Taylor & Márkus 2010: 211; 2012: 426–8). Though the exact context of the Tulloch warrior carving (Illus 12.7) is uncertain (it was found during landscaping for the construction of a road), it similarly appears to have been located next to a barrow (Hall et al 2020: 129). Tulloch sits in close proximity to a number of later Pictish power centres and overlooks the final stretch of the River Almond that houses Bertha Roman fort, which may have been *Rathinveramon* (the fort at the confluence of the Almond) where King Domnall mac Ailpín, King of the Picts, died in AD 862 (Woolf 2007b: 104). At the same confluence, opposite Bertha and across the Tay, is Scone, the royal inauguration site of the kingdom of Alba and later medieval Scotland (Woolf 2007b: 134–8). Similarly, the Westerton stone is located just 4km south of Aberlemno, which has a notable collection of Pictish stones, and is placed a similar distance to the north-east of Dunnichen – one of the mooted locations of the pivotal 7th-century Battle of Nechtansmere (Woolf 2006). Recent excavation at Balbinny Farm, near to Aberlemno, has identified an oval-ditched enclosure of the same approximate dimensions of the Craw Stane complex. Evaluation of the site in 2019 produced 5th- to 6th-century AD dates for the ditch fills, suggesting that the Aberlemno landscape may have been the focus for a Pictish elite presence from the 5th century onwards (Noble & O'Driscoll 2023). The context of the Balblair stone is less certain, since it has no obvious large cemetery or high-status site in the vicinity, though there is a single possible barrow recorded by aerial photography in the same field as the stone (NRHE ID: 12692).

These stones and their distribution may therefore offer some clues as to the location of elite Pictish centres around the mid-first millennium AD. It is notable that the distribution of this group of carvings is fairly evenly spread across eastern and northern Scotland, from Fife to Inverness-shire, with a more distant example in Shetland (Illus 12.15). This is a distribution that extends more than 500km north to south. Given that these carvings are clearly of a similar tradition and likely to be elite expressions of power, their wide spread suggests sustained interaction between high-status groups over an extensive part of what were to become core territories of the later Pictish kingdoms.

The distribution of Pictish symbol stones and carving styles thus provides some interesting directions for future research, though it must be acknowledged that this is a highly speculative means of trying to assess the extent of Pictish socio-political groups. Zooming out to consider where other possible contemporary centres were located is also highly conjectural. Nevertheless, given the lack of historical sources for this period and region and the limits of archaeological survival, there is relatively little else to go on and this marks one of the few ways in which we can make tentative suggestions on these matters.

12.5 Abandonment

Just as the emergence of a site can offer insight into political and social trajectories, so too can its abandonment. The dates from both Cairn More and Tap o' Noth suggest early medieval occupation in the Upper Strathbogie valley continued beyond the lifespan of the Craw Stane complex, which appears to have been abandoned in the later 6th century AD. The staggered end dates for the three known settlement sites in the valley suggests that there was no catastrophic end to the polity that controlled this region. Rather, it seems there was a gradual shift away from the valley as a central place. By the 7th century, new types of elite fortifications and settlements were being consolidated in northern Britain – most prominently the complex 'nuclear' hillforts that became iconic elements of its early medieval archaeology. Few sites in north-east Scotland provide close parallels for these relatively small but complex forts, though the most notable example is Mither Tap o'Bennachie, just 20km to the east of Rhynie and visible from Tap o' Noth. The place-name Bennachie has been translated as 'Mountain of Ce', suggesting that Bennachie may have been a major site in this region in the period the king-lists were written down. Recent dating suggests 7th- and 8th-century AD activity on site. The site and region are possibly referred to in 10th- and 11th-century lists of Gaelic sagas under the title *Orgain Benne Ce*, 'The Ravaging of Bennachie' (Dobbs 1949; Fraser 2009: 109). The hillfort of Mither Tap consists of an upper citadel and lower enclosure surrounding a distinctive granite tor that is highly visible from the surrounding landscape. The importance of the Bennachie landscape appears to have extended into an earlier period, with the nearby ringfort of Maiden Castle dating to the 4th–7th centuries AD (Cook 2011a; Chapter 11). A sherd of continental glass from middens at Maiden Castle suggests the occupants had access to some of the same imports as did those at the Craw Stane complex. Mither Tap o'Bennachie continued in use after the abandonment of Maiden Castle and may have become one of the central places in Ce, its rise to prominence partly at the expense of the settlements in the environs of Rhynie. The Bennachie hill range overlooks a catchment including more productive land than Rhynie (Illus 12.8), hence the agricultural and economic potential of this area may have contributed to a shift in their relative significance. More locally, Lesmoir in Essie parish was perhaps Rhynie's main successor as a secular elite centre (Chapter 3).

Why the Craw Stane complex itself was abandoned in the mid-6th century, earlier than the other two major foci nearby, is an intriguing issue. As well as broader shifts in polity centres, natural phenomena and a whole host of other events and processes could have contributed to the abandonment of the Craw Stane complex. In much of Europe, including Ireland, there is evidence that the mid-6th century was punctuated by plagues, famines and major environmental catastrophes (eg Campbell 2007: 132; Fraser 2009: 68–9), and similar events are attested in England (Scull et al 2024: 406–7). Given that much of the population is likely to have survived only at subsistence level, and that plagues affected elites along with everyone else in society, if these phenomena reached Rhynie they could have undermined the site of rulership that existed at the Craw Stane complex.

Given the mid-6th-century date of the complex's demise, it is also important to consider the growing importance of Christianity across Pictland. Saint Columba is credited with having

converted the Northern Picts, with Adomnán stating that the saint founded many Pictish monasteries (II.46; Sharpe 1995: 203). Bayesian modelling for the Craw Stane complex suggests that it was abandoned by the 570s at the latest, but while Columba is credited with having brought Christianity to northern Pictland in the 560s, mass conversion in the Rhynie area by him is improbable; the process is likely to have been much more complex and drawn out than is perhaps credited (Clancy 2008: 363; Fraser 2009: 68–115). The winds of religious change may have already been felt in the elite circles of northern Pictland by the early 6th century, and the pagan associations of the site could have been seen as increasingly out of place in a changing medieval world. In Wales and south-west England, Seaman has linked a decline in traditional power centres, primarily hillforts and enclosures, to a resurgence in the Church and the growth of monasticism (Seaman 2023: 424). Likewise, the abandonment of rulers' sites has also been linked to the adoption of Christianity in Scandinavia, albeit in a different era to that of Rhynie (Skre 2020: 232). In Pictland, this religious change could well have led to major shifts in how power was administered and symbolised, perhaps resulting in the cessation of residence and ritual at a site intimately linked to paganism and sacral kingship. While these are certainly possibilities, the actual factors that led to the demise of the Craw Stane complex are difficult to uncover. Its abandonment could have been due to social issues such as local rivalries, the weakening of the legitimacy of the kings in the light of contemporary events, or more general environmental and economic factors. Indeed, it could be that the combination of all of these factors saw the demise of the Craw Stane complex (and its ruler) but not necessarily the wider polity.

12.6 Conclusions

The investigations reported on here have revealed a polyfocal and multifunctional central place similar to those known elsewhere in early medieval north-western Europe. The nodes included a major non-hillfort elite complex at the Craw Stane and surrounding lowlands which comprised a high-status residence with cult dimensions, a major centre for production and exchange, and a contemporary cemetery. Overlooking this to the north was the remarkable site of Tap o' Noth, which may have been a major regional settlement and/or a site of assembly of regional or supra-regional significance. Cairn More, a very elaborate ringfort, stood to the south and was possibly the domain of a single family or extended family group. At the Craw Stane complex, some sort of elite focus took shape in the late 4th century and endured until the mid-6th century AD. This appears to have sprung up in relation to the site of Tap o' Noth, which began developing in the 3rd century. The place-name evidence suggests that it was the lowland complex that was the most instrumental node in the development of royal rulership in this landscape. Settlement began at Cairn More in the 5th century and may have served to monitor the southern and eastern routes into the valley. The whole valley may have been in control of warrior kings who resided (perhaps periodically) at the Craw Stane complex, where they feasted with clients, followers and possibly other rulers, gathered tribute and redistributed some of that wealth. Through multiple nodes, the social, jurisdictional and economic centralities of this royal place was enacted.

The origins of the central place and the social hierarchy that emerged may have related to the frontier situation of northern Britain with the arrival of the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD with the military presence beginning to shape society in the north in new ways. By the mid-millennium, rulership at the 'point of a sword' may have been emphasised by the need for a martial ethos in the face of conquest attempts and punitive retribution by the Roman military. Opportunities to attack the Romans, and to take control of plunder and trade, would have also encouraged the consolidation of elites with substantial armed forces. Simultaneously, the failure of the Romans to engage more aggressively in Pictland after AD 211 could have given the peoples north of the Forth the space and opportunity to develop and solidify these new power structures. Overall, our understanding of the nature of late and post-Roman central places of northern Britain has been hindered by the lack of historical sources and the limited scale of archaeological investigation, but also perhaps by conceptual divides between the Late Roman Iron Age and the 'early medieval'. The evidence from the Upper Strathbogie valley goes some way to build bridges between these two eras and provides a rich dataset for future reconsiderations of the Late Roman to early medieval period in northern Britain.