Rhynie, A Powerful Place of Pictland

Edited by Gordon Noble

Chapter 10

ROMAN IRON AGE AND EARLY MEDIEVAL RHYNIE I: TAP O' NOTH

Gordon Noble

10.1 Tap o' Noth lower fort

At 16.75 hectares, Tap o' Noth's lower univallate fort would have been the largest habitation in the Upper Strathbogie valley during the first millennium AD and one of the largest hillforts ever constructed in northern Britain. Prior to the excavations conducted during this project, there were few certain indicators that the site would date to this period, though a small but intriguing group of Roman items hinted at the possibility. This included three beads, plain grey ware and decorated Samian ware recovered near Tap o' Noth (NMRS ID 17206; Kilbride-Jones 1935: 448–54; Robertson 1970: 224–5). The pottery was said to be of a type likely to date to the early centuries AD; however, the whereabouts of this collection is currently unknown. Additional finds included an enamelled belt mount found through metal detecting to the north-west of Rhynie in 2002, in the area of Lesmoir (NMRS ID 267800). The belt mount is of 2nd-century AD type and has an unusual form that suggests it may have been a Roman military cavalry fitting (Curtis & Hunter 2006: 213). A number of Roman Iron Age finds are also housed in Aberdeen University's Marischal Museum, including beads, a Roman enamelled harness mount and a bronze terret (ABDUA accession numbers 17436-7, 15535, 15590, 15599 and 64918 – see Kilbride-Jones 1935 for a report on the bronze terret). Somewhat frustratingly, the latter two only have 'Rhynie' recorded as their findspots. However, the collection as a whole prompted Curtis and Hunter (2006: 213) to categorise the Tap o' Noth area as a potential major regional centre of the Roman Iron Age.

10.2 Chronology and Phasing

The radiocarbon dates obtained for Tap o' Noth lower fort and platform settlements indicate both a Roman Iron Age and early medieval use of the hillside, with overall activity likely to have taken place from the 3rd century AD onwards (Chapter 8). The dating suggests that platform settlements began to develop before the construction of the lower fort rampart, though it is possible

that the stone rampart and associated palisade replaced an earlier boundary of some kind (Chapter 4). Platforms continued to be added to the enclosure after the rampart was in place, and activity endured until the late 6th or early 7th century AD. This dating confirms that Tap o' Noth is by far the largest confirmed fort of early medieval date known in Britain. At almost 17 hectares in extent, it dwarfs the previous largest examples of South Cadbury (*c* 7ha) and Tintagel (*c* 6ha), both in south-west England, and more locally the formerly largest first-millennium AD hillfort was the *c* 5.5ha promontory fort at Burghead in Moray, Scotland (Alcock 1972; Barrowman et al 2007). In order to understand Tap o' Noth's roles and monumentality, it is clear we must expand the search for parallels beyond the sites traditionally considered.

10.3 Exploring parallels: the 'big forts' of the north

James O'Driscoll and Gordon Noble

There are over 60 forts in Britain that match or exceed the 16+ hectares enclosed by the Tap o' Noth univallate fort. These cover a range of chronological periods and are primarily located in southern England, with the Atlas of Hillforts listing only two examples across northern Britain that are near or exceed the size of Tap o' Noth: Eildon Hill North in the Scottish Borders and Traprain Law in East Lothian (Owen 1992). At over 18.8ha, Eildon Hill North is the largest hillfort in Scotland and provides the closest parallel to Tap o' Noth morphologically, occupying a similar hillform and enclosing hundreds of house platforms. It is positioned on the eastern summit of three hills and is strategically located to overlook expansive tracts of lowland to the east and south, as well as a major routeway defined by the River Tweed. This became the renowned Dere Street, a Roman military route used to connect the valley to the large fort of Trimontium at the north-eastern base of the hill (Curle 1911). The hillfort itself has often been labelled as the 'capital' of the Selgovae – a Roman Iron
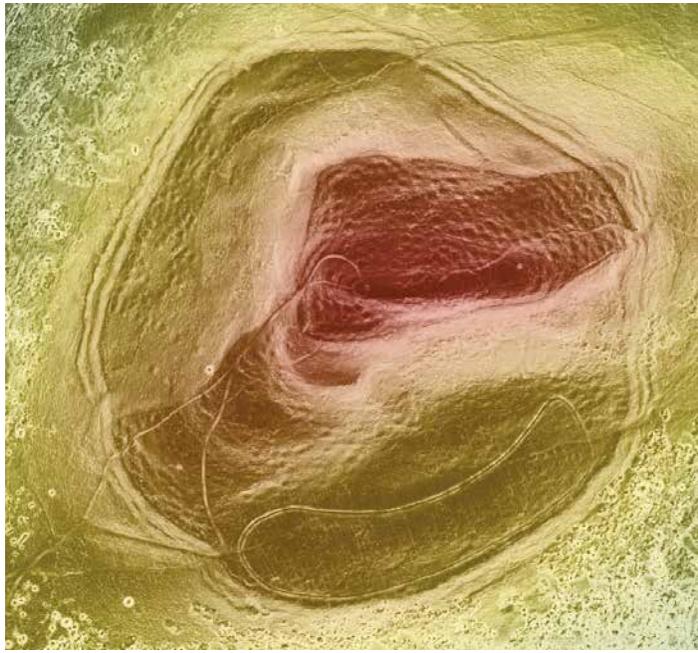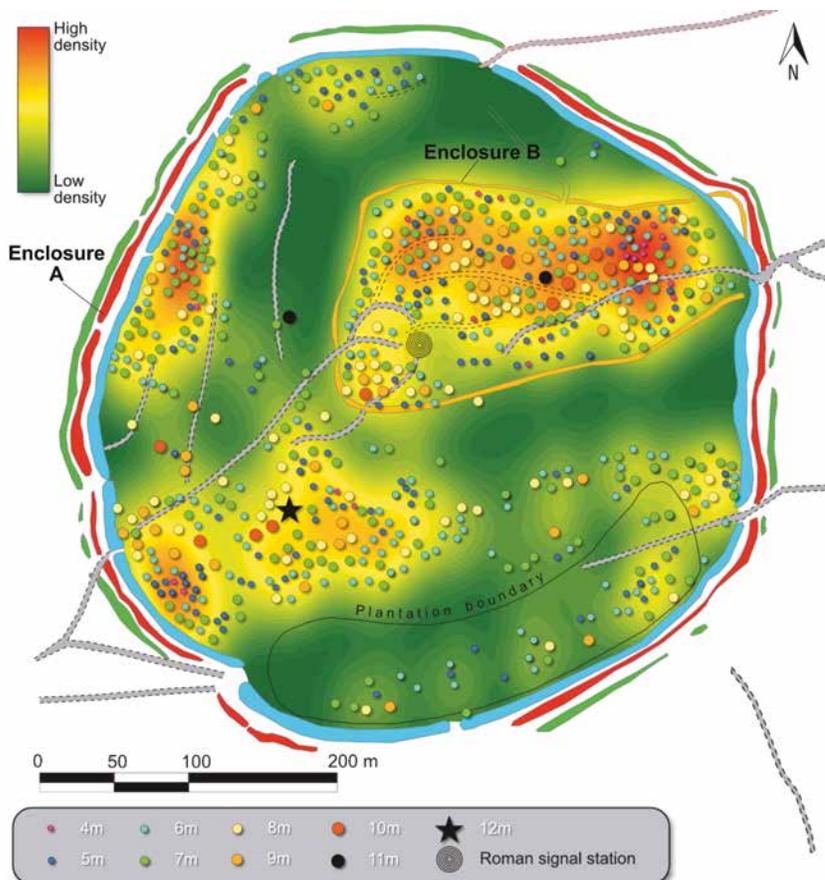
Illus 10.1
Photogrammetry model of Eildon Hill North, Scottish Borders

Illus 10.2
Analysis of the enclosure system and house platforms at Eildon Hill North

Age group mentioned by Ptolemy (Feachem 1966: 77; Hanson 1987: 93) – though it is perhaps best known for its Late Bronze Age remains.

The Royal Commission recorded three main enclosing elements at Eildon Hill North: a small oval enclosure on the summit (Enclosure C), a lower sub-rectangular enclosure (Enclosure B) which defines a flat summit approximately 3.25ha in size, and a massive triple rampart surrounding the entire hilltop (Enclosure A) (RCAHMS 1956: 307). However, recent photogrammetry survey by the University of Aberdeen has revealed more nuances which suggest the oval summit (Enclosure C) may in fact be an ancient trackway associated with the western entrance to Enclosure B (Illus 10.1) (see also Lock & Ralston 2017: SC3327). There is also tentative evidence for an earlier enclosing work which broadly follows the perimeter of Enclosure B at the north, though excavation would be needed to clarify this. The Royal Commission argued that the large triple banks of Enclosure A comprised a single phase of construction broadly contemporary with many of the internal hut platforms (RCAHMS 1956: 309), but the recent survey showed that the inner rampart of Enclosure A truncates Enclosure B, while the outer two ramparts kink to avoid the north-eastern corner of Enclosure A (as also noted by Lock & Ralston 2017: SC3327).

Partial excavation of Enclosures A, B and C by Owen (1992) failed to produce any material to date their construction, though pits sealed by the inner rampart of Enclosure A did provide Late Bronze Age dates. This was supported by further Late Bronze Age phases for a small number of excavated internal hut platforms. However, each excavated platform also produced Roman Iron Age finds and radiocarbon dates of the 1st–4th century AD. Artefacts from the core of the inner rampart of Enclosure A similarly included fragments of a 1st/2nd-century AD glass bead and armlet and sherds of 2nd to 4th-century AD Roman pottery; however, Owen (1992: 65) identified this mixed artefactual assemblage as evidence of modern disturbance (Henderson 1992: 43). More recent work by the University of Aberdeen and the Trimontium Trust returned a further series of Late Bronze Age dates from trenches associated with the ramparts of Enclosures A and B, but also secured a 5th- to 6th-century date associated with a hut platform near the summit (O'Driscoll & Noble forthcoming). While the new dates support that this was a major Late Bronze Age settlement, the new first-millennium AD date and the previous Roman Iron Age finds also suggest that the hillfort was extensively reoccupied during the first half of the first millennium AD in the same period that Tap o' Noth was constructed and in occupation.

The programme of photogrammetry survey at Eildon Hill North suggests a similar density of settlement here. At least 619 hut platforms were recorded within Enclosure A at Eildon Hill North. The majority of these – 274 examples or 44% of the total – measure 7–9m in diameter. Over 96% of the platforms measure 5–11m in diameter (595 platforms), with 22 smaller platforms approximately 3–4m in size (3.6%) and only two larger examples c 12m in diameter. The overall dimensions of the platforms and spread of platform size strongly correlate with those identified at Tap o' Noth (Chapter 4). The structures at Eildon also corresponds with the spatial distribution patterns at Tap o' Noth, comprising distinct clusters of average sized platforms with larger
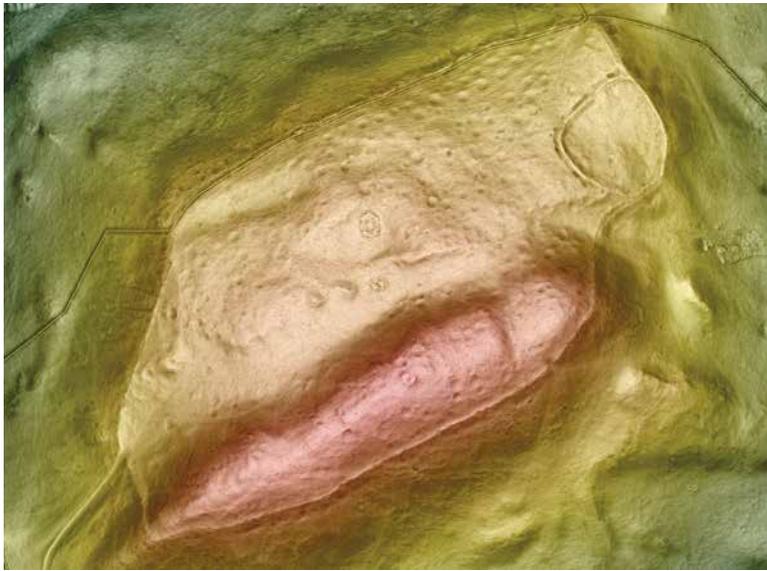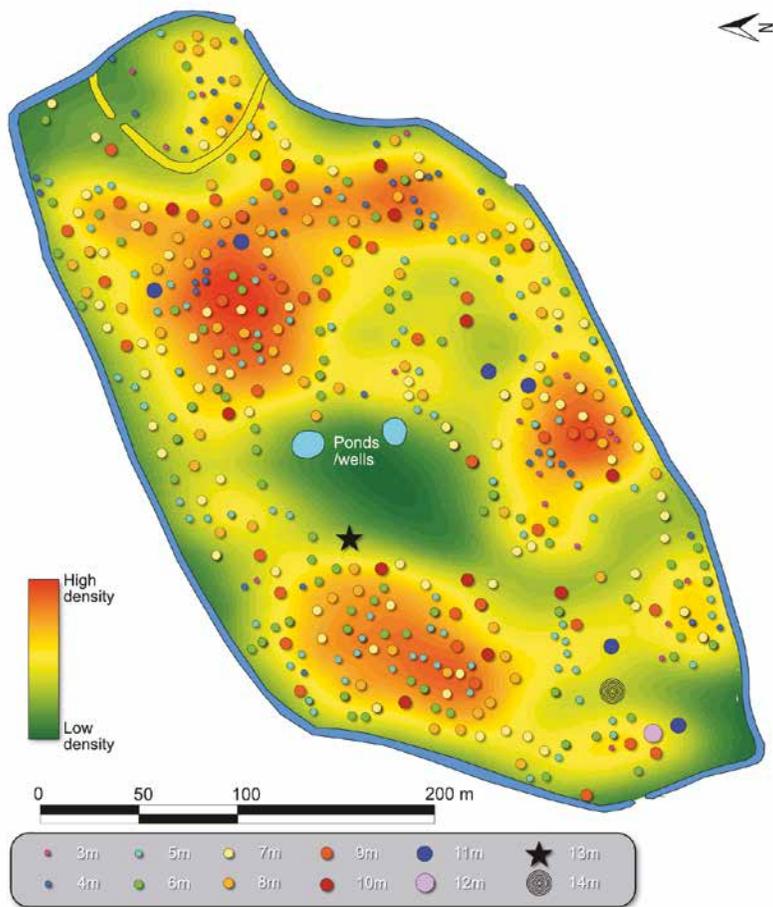
Illus 10.3
Photogrammetry model of Hownam Law, Scottish Borders

Illus 10.4
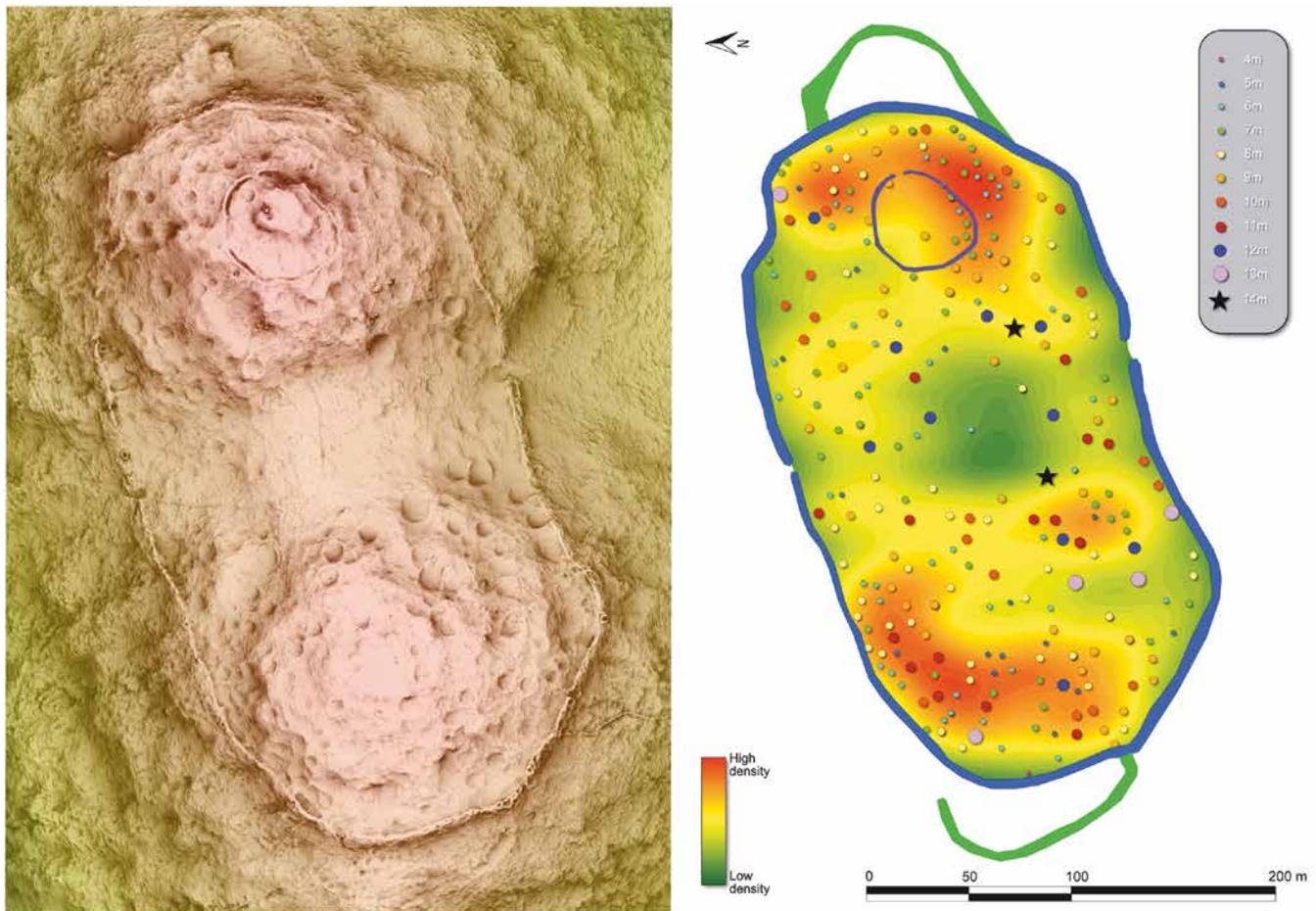Analysis of the enclosure system and house platforms at Hownam Law

examples, either individually or in small groups, at their periphery (Illus 10.2). A cluster of platforms on the upper plateau of Eildon's Enclosure B may have formed the original settlement nucleus before the fort was expanded. Nonetheless, the complicating factor at Eildon Hill North is that the dense settlement conglomeration may date to both the Late Bronze Age and first millennium AD. Only much larger-scale excavation at the site would show how this distribution relates to its chronological sequence and how many of the hut platforms are likely to be Roman Iron Age or later. Thus, the extent to which Eildon Hill North is a direct parallel for the Tap o' Noth is yet to be fully established.

Dating is in fact the key problem that precludes a meaningful consideration of most of northern Britain's large hillforts. Hownam Law, also in the Scottish Borders, is comparable to Tap o' Noth in terms of size (just over 9ha) and a dense concentration of up to 445 hut platforms in its interior (Illus 10.3). The site is enclosed by a single 4–5m thick rampart and the platforms similarly range from 5–11m in diameter and appear in clusters. Like many large hillforts in northern Britain, it has been assumed to be Late Bronze Age in date (cf Armit & Ralston 2003: 180), but the Tap o' Noth evidence can certainly encourage a pause for thought on the dating of this site. However, only excavation can reveal more about the chronology and character of Hownam Law (Illus 10.4). White Meldon (3.9ha) and Cademuir Hill (2.1ha), both in the Scottish Borders, and Old Fawdon (2.4ha) in Northumberland, are further examples of densely occupied large hillforts that merit consideration as potential parallels to Tap o' Noth, though again there is little in the way of dating evidence. Burnswark in Dumfries and Galloway (c 7ha) has early accounts suggesting the existence of over 150 hut platforms at the site; however, excavations have not identified any evidence of activity after the early centuries AD (Jobey 1973).

Another striking parallel is Yeavering Bell, Northumberland, which encloses a substantially smaller area (around 6ha) than Tap o' Noth but contains a dense occupation of hut platforms surrounded by a 6m-thick stone rampart (Illus 10.5 and 10.6) (Oswald & Pearson 2005: 98; Oswald et al 2006: 97). There has been considerable debate about the chronology of Yeavering Bell, with Late Bronze Age and Iron Age dates again generally favoured; however archaeological investigation of the fort, like Eildon Hill North, suggests at least some occupation during the Roman Iron Age (Oswald & Pearson 2005: 98; Semple et al 2017). Tate's 19th-century explorations of Yeavering Bell revealed occupation surfaces on each of the six hut platforms excavated, with one example producing a rotary quern and Roman period finds (Tate 1863; Oswald & Pearson 2005: 104; Miket 2013: 148). In 1958, Brian Hope-Taylor opened 13 trenches within the fort, eight of which targeted hut platforms. While details of these excavations are scant (Miket 2013), finds from Hope-Taylor's digs included Late Roman coins and sherds of Samian ware, reminiscent of some of the finds from the Tap o' Noth house platforms (Miket 2013: 148). Indeed, the juxtaposition between Yeavering Bell and the Anglo-Saxon royal centre at Yeavering (see Hope-Taylor 1977) is an obvious parallel for the relationship between the Craw Stane complex and Tap o' Noth, though at present there is no confirmed evidence for settlement on Yeavering Bell during the period of occupation of the hall complex, and the full chronology

Illus 10.5
Yeavering Bell, Northumberland

Illus 10.6
Analysis of the enclosure system and house platforms at Yeavering Bell

of the hillfort and associated platforms will need to await further excavations and scientific dating.

Returning to Scotland, another parallel to the evidence at Tap o' Noth is Traprain Law, East Lothian. At Traprain there were two major phases of occupation of the fort, again dating to the Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age. At its largest extent, Traprain Law enclosed an area of around 16ha and a stone wall, known as the Cruden Wall, appears to be a late enclosure, perhaps dating to the 4th or 5th century AD (Close-Brooks 1983; Hunter 2013: 4, 6), but the chronological resolution of the sequence of enclosing works is poor. However, the Cruden Wall may have been built to enclose the later phases of the dense settlement remains on the western slopes of the hill and summit, where the tightly packed circular, oval and sub-rectangular structures provide an interesting parallel for the evidence at Tap o' Noth (Armit et al 2002; 2006; Hunter 2013: 6). The excavations by Curle and Cree (1914–23), and more recently by the Traprain Law Summit Project (Armit et al 2002; 2006), uncovered deeply stratified deposits that again attest to Late Bronze Age and Roman Iron Age occupation. There is also evidence for post-Roman occupation – most famously the 5th-century Roman hacksilver hoard (Hunter 2022: 386–7), but also high-quality locally made pieces such as a silver chain and moulds for a doorknob spear-butt, glass and beads, These latter finds indicate the site's significance extended into the 5th and possibly the 6th century AD. (Hunter 2013: 7; 2022: 386, 389; Blackwell et al 2017: 104). Comparing artefact assemblages between these sites is also challenging. Differing scales of excavation along with patchy contextual information and missing finds from older excavations hinders any detailed understanding of the scale and nature of activity over time. At a broader level however, certain aspects of the assemblages are repeated at sites such as Tap o' Noth and Traprain Law, such as the presence of Roman material and the evidence for skilled metalworking, indicating these sites had similar levels of wider contact and specialised craft production.

Overall, when considering parallels for the huge scale and density of interior occupation evident at Tap o' Noth in the first millennium AD, there are few sites in northern Britain that can be firmly brought into the discussion. However, looking afresh at some of the larger hillforts such as Eildon Hill North and Traprain Law allows us to build up a wider picture and it is clear that a fuller reassessment of the presumed chronology of at least some of these sites is needed. Of the examples highlighted above, Traprain Law is the best understood and certainly appears to have had a comparable phase of Late Roman Iron Age or post-Roman enclosure as evidenced by the Cruden Wall (Close-Brooks 1983). Elsewhere the parallels are less definite, though Roman Iron Age phases for the platforms at Eildon Hill North and Roman material recovered from at least some of the platforms at Yeavering Bell are certainly intriguing. While we should be cautious in seeing these larger hillforts as a unitary phenomenon, there do appear to be striking similarities amongst some of the larger hillforts of northern Britain and tentative findings that may suggest a wider (but as yet poorly attested) phenomenon of dense hilltop settlement during the first millennium AD. Certainly, the dating and character of these sites is one ripe for re-evaluation.

10.4 Parallels of known first-millennium AD date

In northern Britain, fortified sites dominate our knowledge of the form that central places of power and governance took in the second half of the first millennium AD (Alcock 2003: 179; Noble et al 2013; Noble & Evans 2022: Chapter 3). The literary sources for early medieval Scotland record sieges, battles and other important events that occurred at these locations, underlining their centrality in early medieval society. However, the sites that are identifiable from our limited sources provide few direct parallels to the site of Tap o' Noth. One issue is their dating; the classic 'nuclear' hillforts that we tend to associate with early medieval northern Britain appears to have been a feature of the 7th century or later, at least in their developed form, meaning that they existed largely after the time that Tap o' Noth had gone out of use (Noble & Evans 2022: 102). The other issue is their size; most early medieval forts tend to be relatively small – Dundurn in Perthshire, for example, is around 2ha in extent taking in the lower enclosures that surround the central stone-walled dun (Alcock et al 1989: 193–4, illus 3) (Illus 10.7). Dunadd, the 'capital' of Dál Riata, is less than 1ha in extent, and the early phases of this site are likely to have been even more modest, with at least some of the outer enclosures proving to have been late additions to the site (Lane & Campbell 2000: 8–18, 250–2). It could be that further settlement was located around the base of these forts but as of yet there is no clear evidence for this in the majority of cases. The one exception is East Lomond, where the remains of a sub-oval enclosure around 60m x 30m occupy the summit of the hill and a massive rampart and ditch appears to enclose a series of terraces on its south-west side (Noble & Evans 2022: 105–6) (Illus 10.8). The upper fort is unexcavated but morphologically provides a strong parallel for early medieval forts such as Dunadd and Dundurn. The lower slopes of the hillfort at East Lomond feature a *c* 2ha annexe enclosure that has only recently been identified through excavation and geophysical survey. The annexe is enclosed by a rampart that appears to date to the 5th–6th century AD and settlement remains of the 3rd–7th centuries have been found within. Multiple hearths and turf-walled structures suggest this was a densely occupied settlement, and a range of finds including Roman material, evidence for precious metalworking and post-Roman imports indicate the site was of a significant status. The evidence from East Lomond is reminiscent of that at Tap o' Noth, though as yet the settlement appears to have been more modest in size.

Prior to the discoveries at Tap o' Noth, the largest example of a known early medieval fort in Scotland was Burghead coastal promontory fort in Moray. The extensive defences of the fort covered an area of around 5.5ha, but only 2.5–3ha of this would have been usable space. Excavations at the site are ongoing but current dating suggests that the monumental ramparts (over 8m thick and up to 6m high) are of 7th- to 9th-century date, and most of the settlement remains are contemporary with the defences. As a result, the site does not provide a close parallel for Tap o' Noth in terms of dating, scale or topographic setting. The archaeology of Burghead perhaps shares similarities with what we might expect to find at late first-millennium AD *palacium* complexes including evidence for a church (Noble & Evans 2022: 108–11; cf Campbell & Driscoll 2020).
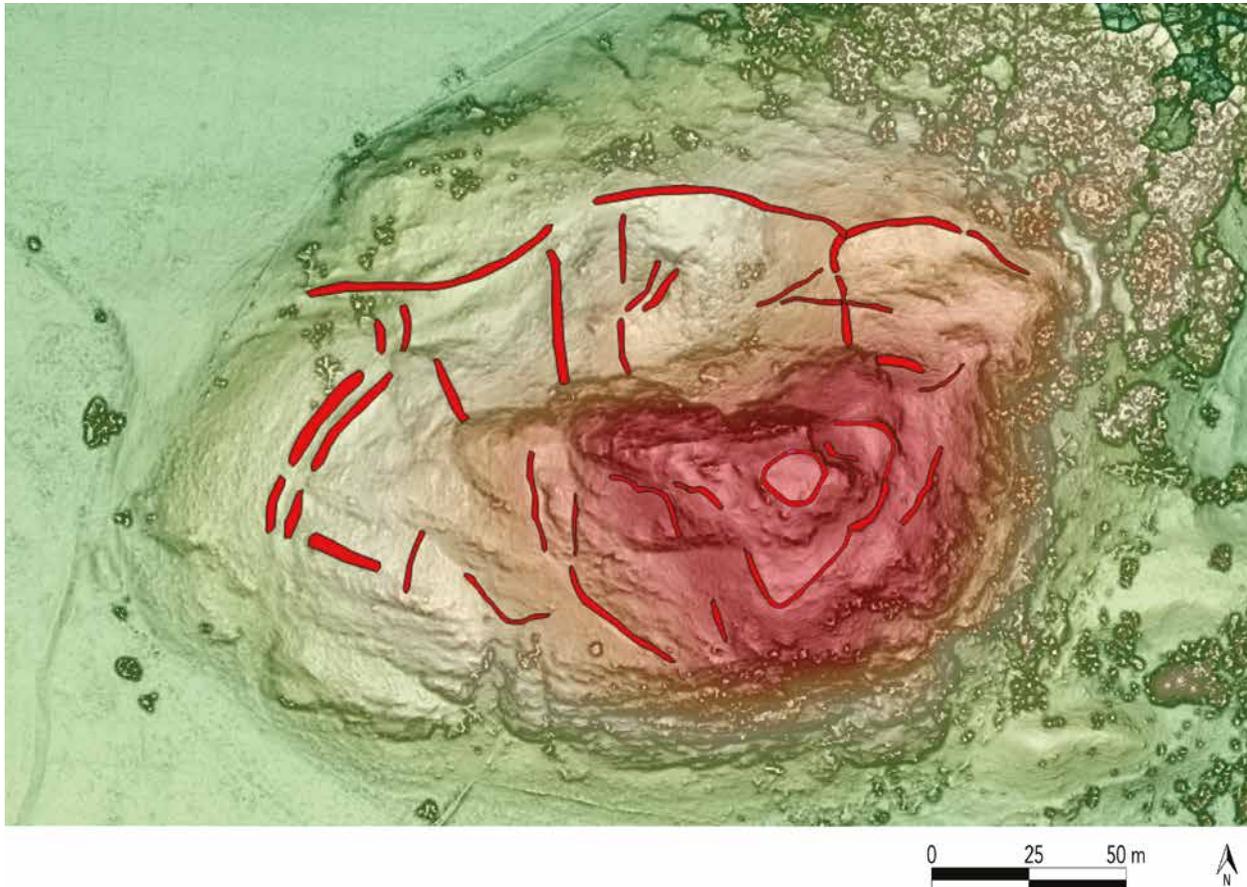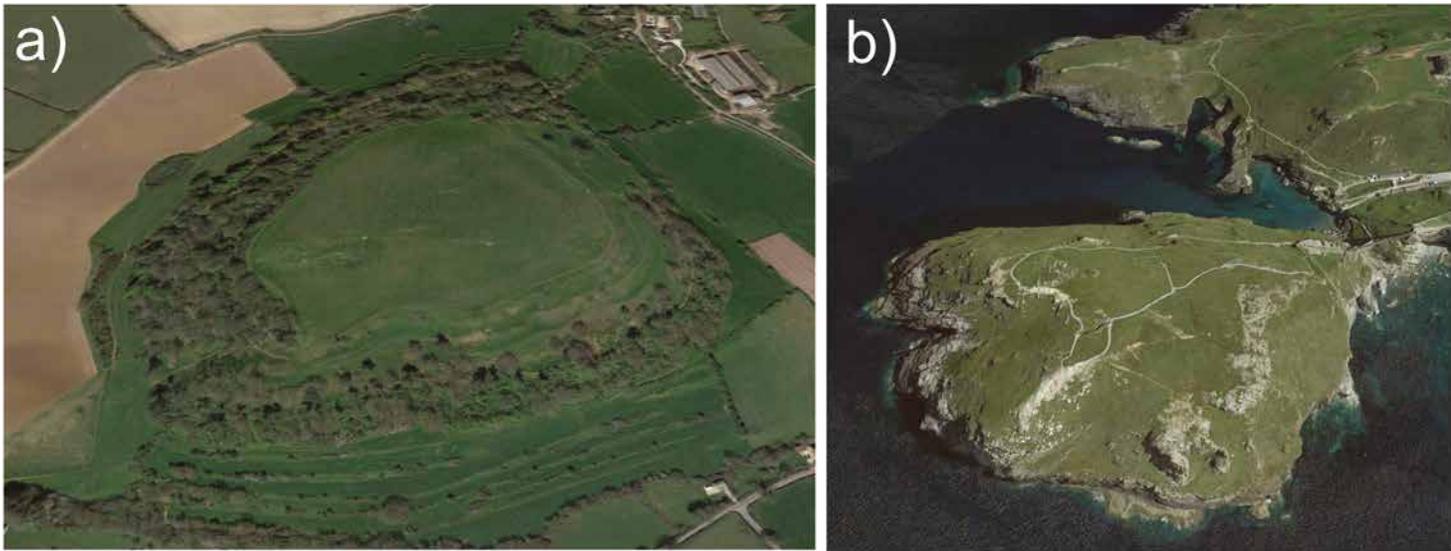
Illus 10.7
Dundurn hillfort, Perthshire – a classic 'nuclear' fort of central Scotland
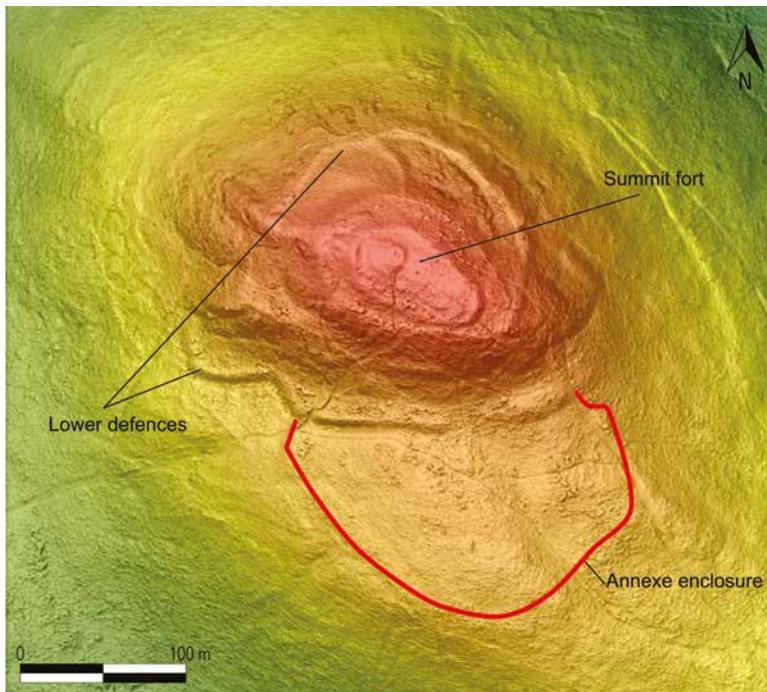
Illus 10.8
East Lomond, Fife – an annexe enclosure extends to the south-east of the
'nuclear' fort

Looking further afield, a Late Roman to early medieval hillfort phenomenon can be identified in south-west England and Wales (Seaman 2023: 420; see also Seaman 2016). In many cases these hillforts were small in scale, but larger examples can be recognised at sites such as Cadbury Castle in Somerset, Badbury Rings in Dorset, and Tintagel and Killbury in Cornwall (Seaman 2023: 436). Of these four sites, the sequences at Cadbury Castle and Tintagel are the best understood. At Cadbury Castle (Illus 10.9), refortification of a complex Iron Age multivallate fort took place in the late 5th century and involved the addition of a timber-framed rampart to the earlier defences, resulting in an enclosure of around 7ha that was entered via a complex timber gate (Alcock 1995: 27–9). Inside, numerous features were found including traces of what could have been a substantial hall-like structure and at least one further building. Finds included sherds of Late Roman amphora and African Red Slipware. Like Tap o' Noth, Cadbury Castle is located inland rather than on or near the coast, as tended to be the case with Late Antique power centres in the west of Britain and in Ireland. The number of Mediterranean imports at Cadbury Castle were larger than that discovered at Tap o' Noth, but if we consider Tap o' Noth and the Craw Stane complex as an interrelated set of sites at least from the 4th to 6th centuries AD, then the comparisons with Cadbury may be more warranted (see discussion in Chapter 12).

Tintagel in Cornwall is the most famous of the south-west sites, whose coastal promontory settlement provides a loose but

Illus 10.9
Major Late Antique hillforts of southern Britain: a) Cadbury Castle; b) Tintagel. Images © Google Earth 2024

intriguing parallel to Tap o' Noth in terms of dating, finds and size (again particularly if we consider Tap o' Noth and the Craw Stane complex together: Chapter 12) (Illus 10.9). The islet at Tintagel extends to around 6ha but contemporary remains on the adjacent mainland, including a cemetery and finds of Late Roman amphorae, may suggest that the 5th- to 7th-century power centre extended beyond the promontory itself (Nowakowski & Thomas 1992). Following excavations in the 1930s and 1950s, Tintagel was interpreted as a monastic settlement for much of the 20th century (eg Radford 1935). However, from the 1970s onwards it was re-interpreted as a major elite centre, with the extensive assemblage of Late Roman amphora vessels and fine tableware including African Red Slipware from the excavations seen as key indicators of high-status secular activity (eg Burrow 1974; Thomas 1982). A fire in the 1980s revealed dozens of earthworks on Tintagel and up to 80 rectangular structures across the whole of the headland, suggesting the site was much more extensively settled than previous research had suggested (Bowden & Jamieson 2016). Excavations in the 1990s put the chronology of the site on a firmer footing, with the first absolute dates suggesting that post-Roman activity extended from the 5th to 7th century AD (Barrowman et al 2007). More recent excavations at Tintagel took place in 2016–17 on the southern terrace of the headland, which identified fragments of sub-rectangular buildings, extensive midden deposits and a finds-rich assemblage that dated to the mid-5th to early 6th century AD (Nowakowski 2019: 65, 69; Nowakowski & Gossip 2019). This included thousands of sherds of Late Roman Amphora 1 and 2, D-ware and African Red Slipware, alongside dozens of fragments of imported Atlantic glass. Parts of crucibles and furnace lining also suggested that metalworking was a feature of activity at the site. This early phase was built on level surfaces that had been quarried into the slopes of the promontory, and the buildings of this period lay under stone buildings of a later phase of occupation dating to the 8th and 9th centuries AD. As well as the post-Roman evidence, indications of activity on the site including structural evidence, a number of finds and an inscription

of 3rd- to 4th-century AD date that may suggest an official Roman presence. This hints that the elevated significance of this locale may have extended back to the Late Roman Iron Age (Barrowman et al 2007: 309–13).

Overall, while there are few direct confirmed first-millennium AD parallels to Tap o' Noth, the larger defended settlements of south-west England provide some intriguing if broad parallels to Tap o' Noth. Some of the Late Antique hillforts of south-west Britain are likely to have been regional centres serving wide communities, with the fortification of sites such as Cadbury Castle requiring access to resources many times greater than that of even multiple households (Campbell 2007: 122; Seaman 2023: 436). At face value, centres such as Tintagel and Tap o' Noth can seem like quite different site types; however, the level of investment in marginal but easily defended topographic features, the remodelling of unpromising topography, and the evidence for extensive and dense settlement provides compelling parallels. Indeed, Tintagel is an important site to consider given that the Late Roman amphorae found at Tap o' Noth itself, and more abundantly at the Craw Stane complex (Chapter 11), may have ultimately come from direct or down-the-line exchange with this major import centre in southern Britain (Gerrard 2013: 176). Cadbury Castle too shows evidence for high-status activity including imports and at 7ha is also relatively large, though again it does not match the staggering scale of Tap o' Noth. It does, however, match the inland location of Tap o' Noth and the reuse of an Iron Age site is a feature of both – again further analysis and dating can begin to set the rather exceptional evidence from Tap o' Noth in a wider context.

10.5 Platform settlement architecture at Tap o' Noth

In Scotland, the roundhouse tradition that had dominated the settlement record for over two thousand years becomes much less evident in the archaeological record from around the 3rd century AD, with a dearth of settlement evidence traditionally characterising the mid to later first millennium AD (Hunter 2007: 48–50; Noble & Evans

2022: Chapter 2). The dense concentration of platforms on Tap o' Noth therefore provides a startling contrast to the traditional absence of settlement in the Late Roman Iron Age and early medieval periods in northern Britain. While the exact form of individual structures on the platforms at Tap o' Noth is difficult to identify due to the lack of earthfast structural remains, both circular and sub-rectangular forms are likely to be represented (Chapter 4). There is some pre-existing evidence for the continuation of roundhouse traditions in Scotland into the later centuries of the first millennium AD, though it is very limited. A roundhouse at Portmahomack, Easter Ross, for example, has been dated to dated 670–940 AD (Carver et al 2016: 68–9). Development-led excavations in the eastern lowlands have also occasionally identified truncated post-rings that suggest roundhouse architecture may have endured into the later first millennium AD (eg Dunbar 2012: 12; Cook 2016: 22). Rectangular structures are known to have been in use in the same period as Tap o' Noth, with evidence from Traprain Law and Dunnicaer in Aberdeenshire indicating rectangular forms of architecture were present from at least the 3rd–4th century AD (Noble et al 2020a; Hunter 2013: 6). Settlement forms in the Northern and Western Isles in the later first millennium AD tend to be better preserved due to the construction of buildings in stone, and here we find a diverse range of cellular, round and rectilinear house forms (Noble & Evans 2022: Chapter 2). What the Tap o' Noth evidence underlines is that increasing settlement diversity appears to have occurred in Scotland from the Late Roman period onwards. The platforms at Tap o' Noth could be considered relatively modest in size, given that even the largest examples are much smaller than the grandest Iron Age roundhouses known at sites such as Culduthel in Inverness-shire (Hatherley & Murray 2021). However, when we compare the structures on Tap o' Noth to contemporary roundhouses like that at Portmahomack, they are similar in size. Indeed, in early medieval Ireland the average early medieval roundhouse was only around 4–7m in diameter (Lynn 1994: 92; O'Sullivan 2008: 231), and the largest excavated building in early medieval Ireland was the 11.2m diameter structure found at Moynagh Lough crannog in Co. Meath, dated to the 6th–9th centuries (O'Sullivan et al 2014: 99).

10.6 Settlement centralisation, wider trajectories and settlement function

The length of the rampart and area enclosed at Tap o' Noth along with the number of hut platforms suggest a significant population conglomeration at the site from the Late Roman Iron Age through to the late 6th or early 7th century AD. The specific interpretation of the evidence from Tap o' Noth is explored further in Chapter 12, but for now there are a number of interpretive lines to consider that revolve around the permanency (or otherwise) of the settlement and its place in wider settlement tradition(s). We can ask whether this was this a permanent, year-round settlement, or one used on a more seasonal basis, perhaps as a major assembly place for the region.

10.6.1 Site of assembly?

While Tap o' Noth was clearly a large settlement with a significant density of buildings, it is possible that the site served a specialised function and was perhaps only used intermittently. Sites of seasonal or episodic assembly are thought to have played a crucial role in the structuring of early medieval societies across north-west Europe and appear in written sources relating to the 6th to 12th centuries AD (Pantos & Semple 2004; Iversen 2013: 5–6, 11; Semple & Sanmark 2013: 518; Semple et al 2020). These sources suggest assembly sites were places of periodic gathering for law making and judgements, though they could also be associated with a range of social roles and purposes such as festivals and markets, feasting and game-playing, and events associated with royal inauguration and peripatetic kingship. In the Nordic world, ritual and myth also played an important part and could be interwoven into the proceedings of assemblies (eg Løkka 2013: 25; Riisøy 2013: 30–1; Semple & Sanmark 2013: 519).

Unfortunately, we know very little about assembly practices in Scotland. A tradition of popular courts existed in the later medieval period (see O'Grady 2014) but earlier practices and places of assembly are much more difficult to draw out – though attempts have been made to trace such practices back to the Iron Age and to sites such as Eildon Hill North (eg Driscoll 2004). Moot Hill in Perthshire is the most prominent example of a later assembly site in Scotland, with the Chronicle of the Kings of Alba recording the proclamation of law at the 'Hill of Faith' at the royal *civitas* at Scone in AD 904 (Driscoll 2004: 74; O'Grady 2018).[1] Moot Hill is a large, flat-topped, oval mound that stands near Scone Palace on a terrace overlooking the River Tay. The later kings of Scotland were crowned upon the mound on the Stone of Scone; however, the antiquity of this practice is unknown. Direct archaeological dating of Moot Hill and a *thing* mound in Dingwall, Highland, suggests both are most likely to be 11th–12th century in date, and the Stone of Scone is first recorded in the 13th century AD (O'Grady 2018: 142). At medieval court sites in Scotland, the archaeological traces of assembly practices are slight; sites appear to have been sited on natural hills and/or reused prehistoric mounds that show little in the way of architectural elaboration in relation to this activity. Though the archaeological investigation of Scottish court sites is still in its infancy, as of yet no first-millennium AD examples have been confirmed (O'Grady 2014).

Assembly practices are better known in other parts of Britain and Ireland. In Ireland, historical sources suggest multiple different types of assembly were common in the early medieval period, the most important of which was the *óenach*. The *óenach* was the principal political assembly of each kingdom and was convened on an annual or biannual basis, when the entirety of a community came together to negotiate and renew ties of allegiance (Gleeson 2014: 171, 2017: 79). While it does appear common to find a place of inauguration and another for wider assembly both within a single royal estate, they could also be spread throughout a kingdom (Warner 1988: 53; Gleeson 2015: 33, 43–5). Assemblies could be held on hills, mounds or at prehistoric complexes, and various temporary structures might be erected including huts, enclosures and mounds or platforms (MacCotter 2008: 49–51; Bhreathnach 2014: 67–77). Very few *óenach* assembly sites have seen targeted excavation and as such their exact character, chronology and development is not well understood.

The archaeological identification of lower-scale assembly sites in Ireland has been proposed through interpretation of a relatively recently identified site type known as the cemetery-settlement. O'Brien (2009) and Gleeson (2015: 43) argue that these sites were

local community centres for assembly and burial for specific kin groups within a *túath*. Cemetery-settlements are enclosures that contain burials but host a range of other activities within their interiors. They are usually found in lowland locations and the enclosing elements appear to reflect phasing, with more enclosures added as the cemetery and contemporaneous activities expanded over time. It has been suggested that the majority of cemetery-settlements tend to cluster near parish boundaries and near *ferta* (ancestral burial places) (eg Gleeson & Ó Carragáin 2016: 104; Gleeson 2017: 75). However, the evidence from cemetery-settlements is quite enigmatic and open to interpretation, with other assessments stressing the settlement dimension of these enclosures alongside evidence for crop-processing, metalworking and consumption. The cemeteries have also been suggested to have been part of small familial church sites (eg O'Sullivan et al 2014: 306–11).

In southern Britain, the archaeological traces of assembly tend to be slight, with most appearing to have been held in open-air settings with little in the way of architectural elaboration. Written sources provide similarly few indicators of the formal infrastructure utilised in assembly events (Semple 2013: 90–1; Blair 2018: 105; Semple et al 2020: 7, 14, 17). However, sources suggest that sites for assembly included hills, forest groves and river crossings, and an amphitheatre-style structure is known from the royal centre at Yeavering, which may have been used during occasions of assembly (Hope-Taylor 1977: 119–22; Semple 2013: 90–1; Blair 2018: 105; Semple et al 2020: 7, 14, 17). Given the apparent predominance of open-air gatherings, this latter site speaks to a much greater architectural investment in assembly events.

In Scandinavia, assembly is thought to have been a major aspect of prominent royal centres such as Lejre in Denmark (Niles 2007: 89) and Gamla Uppsala in Sweden (Ljungkvist & Frölund 2015).[2] The archaeological signature of these large-scale assemblies is poorly understood, although some traces of buildings and activity zones have been found. For example, small enclosures with clusters of buildings set around an open courtyard area have been identified at Norwegian court sites (Storli 2010; Semple et al 2020: 159). The majority of these Norwegian court sites date to the first millennium AD and have been interpreted as *thing* sites that functioned at a supra-regional level.[3] The buildings identified have turf and timber components, and some artefactual material has been found during excavation, but in general the sites and enclosures are very modest in scale and the material culture assemblages meagre (Semple & Sanmark 2013: 526).[4] Buildings known as *búðir* or booths have also been found at Icelandic assembly sites, most notably at the main parliament site at Þingvellir in south-western Iceland, though again the traces of these are relatively modest and there is no evidence of enclosure, nor are they situated in hilltop locations (Semple & Sanmark 2013: 527).

Overall, none of the sites across Britain or Ireland provides a good parallel for Tap o' Noth as an assembly site. Few of the sites above show much in the way of investment in enclosure or in substantial settlement remains. The hilltop location is also difficult to parallel, and while the cemetery-settlements of Ireland provide some links in terms of enclosure and settlement traces, the exact function of these sites remains to be fully understood, and again they do not match the topographic position of Tap o' Noth. Assembly was clearly a crucial part of the functioning of early medieval society and is attested to historically, but as yet the

archaeological signatures of these events and practices have been less successfully traced and characterised (see Semple et al 2020 for an extended discussion). Assembly practices are particularly poorly represented in Scotland and, if Tap o' Noth was a seasonal assembly site, it was of a character hitherto unrecognised in the region. The possible role and place of Tap o' Noth is further explored below and in Chapter 12.

10.6.2 A large-scale settlement?

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Given both the scale and density of settlement at Tap o' Noth (even if not all strictly contemporary), one possible interpretation is that the lower fort at Tap o' Noth was a complex, year-round settlement centre of regional significance. Certainly, the huge resource and labour investments required to build both the fort and the platforms is an indicator of long-term investment in a place that was utilised for between 260 and 390 years (Chapter 8). The construction of a 1.5km long and 4m wide stone bank and associated wooden palisade enclosing the site, alongside the hundreds of platforms dug into the tenacious subsoil of the hill, is a substantial sign that the hill was not used for only a few days a year nor only very intermittently. Nor does it seem likely that the platforms were a palimpsest built up over many centuries, given the overlap in dating of the platforms sampled and the close fit between the overall distribution of platforms and the extent of the area enclosed by the rampart. Settlement was found directly against the enclosure and platforms were situated cheek-by-jowl within, giving the appearance of a densely and intensively occupied site. Indeed, the necessity of such substantial and large enclosing works is questionable if there was not a large settlement or some form of activity to contain.

Prior to this project, Tap o' Noth and some of the large hillforts such as Traprain Law and Eildon Hill North have occasionally been considered as northern and perhaps late examples of the Iron Age oppida tradition (Feachem 1966: 77–82). Oppida in general date from the 2nd century BC to 1st century AD in western Europe. Many comprise large, enclosed, agglomerated settlements, with some examples hundreds of hectares in extent. Ten hectares is often the cutoff used to define an oppidum (Fernández-Götz 2018: 136). In northern Britain, only the hillforts of Eildon Hill North, Traprain Law, Hownam Law and Tap o' Noth would be a match or near match for this criterion. Scholars such as Feachem (1966: 79) have interpreted hillforts of this scale as minor oppida, with discussion focusing on examples in the Scottish Borders such as Eildon Hill North. Feachem interpreted the platforms there as being broadly contemporary and suggested that the site housed a population in the thousands. He argued for a complex social structure at these settlements, with the hillfort community at the settlement apex of the region and the community itself organised in relation to a steep social hierarchy (Feachem 1966: 79). Subsequent authors have been more sceptical of the labelling of any of the large hillforts in Scotland as oppida (eg Ralston 1979: 488). Indeed, Ralston (2015: 207) has cast doubt on the unitary nature of the larger hillforts of Scotland highlighting their heterogeneity and has questioned Feachem's mapping of 'oppida' that was focused on size alone (see Feachem 1966: 78, fig 13; see also Halliday & Ralston 2009: 467; Halliday & Ralston 2013). With regards to Tap

o' Noth specifically, the chronology for this fort is later than that generally ascribed to the oppida phenomena in Britain (see Chapter 8 for dating analysis).

10.6.3 The Late Antique hillfort phenomena

Given the chronology of Tap o' Noth we can also explore Tap o' Noth as part of the 'Late Antique' hillfort phenomenon. Across Europe, particularly in regions of Spain, France and Germany, there was a trend towards the (re)occupation of hilltops between the third/fourth and *c* 7th centuries AD (eg Brather 2006: 154–9; Quast 2008: 266; Walter 2016: 20). The rise of this late hillfort phenomenon seems to have come about as the fortunes of major lowland urban centres declined and coincided with the reduction or removal of overall state control and influence in areas of the Western Roman Empire. As with hillforts in general, the role of these sites has been debated, with functions ranging from military fortifications to sites of refuge, religious centres, and regional and/or supra-regional centres of power. Some sites in Provence, for example, have been suggested to have had a major administrative function situated in boundary locations, though these regional interpretations are unlikely to work for such a diverse phenomenon. The size of enclosures in Provence, for example, ranges from *c* 0.1ha to 7ha, indicating that even at a regional level these Late Antique sites had a variety of different roles and statuses (Constant et al 2015: 376).

Geographically, the closest examples are the Late Antique sites of Wales and south-west England, of which Cadbury Castle and Tintagel were outlined earlier. The construction and reoccupation of hillforts in this region has been identified at around 30 sites, where they are generally associated with the administration of power of peripatetic rulers of the 5th to 7th centuries AD – though some certainly emerged in the Late Roman period (Seaman 2023: 420; Alcock 1963; Campbell et al 2023). Like the wider phenomenon, the sites of south-west England and Wales seem to emerge around the time when the towns and infrastructure associated with Roman Britain were beginning to decline and be abandoned, appearing in particular at the western fringes of Roman Britain where Roman control appears to have always been weaker. Like elsewhere in Europe, these hillforts can range dramatically in size but the largest examples are interpreted as regional centres and provide the best parallels for Tap o' Noth (Seaman 2023: 426) Like Tap o' Noth, there is some evidence that the southern British examples were part of wider networks of power or broader 'central zones' that encompassed places associated with trade and production, assembly, ritual and religion, and economic specialisation. Individual sites themselves may also have encompassed a range of these functions (Seaman 2023: 426–9).

10.7 Site of inauguration?

A final role for Tap o' Noth in the first millennium AD can be briefly considered, if only to rule it out. On the lower slopes of Tap o' Noth at Scurdargue lies the Giant's Stone, a large boulder said to have the imprint of a foot on its southern face (Macdonald 1891: 254–5). Macdonald recorded that the boulder was associated with giants who lived at Tap o' Noth and nearby Dunnideer hill, who would throw stones at each other. The footprint is said to have derived from one of the giant's halting a falling boulder with his foot.

Carved footprints are found on rocky outcrops across Ireland and parts of Scotland, where they have been connected to the inauguration of early to later medieval rulers. They also appear to have had a devotional role at churches and were closely connected to later folklore, meaning their exact role and date is unknown in most cases (FitzPatrick 2004: 108–22). In Scotland, the footprint carved into the living rock at Dunadd has been linked to the inauguration of the kings of Dál Riata; however, the chronology of this and other carvings is uncertain (Lane & Campbell 2000: 18–20; Campbell 2003: 46). There are no secure early medieval contexts for a stone of this kind in Ireland, whilst some of the Scottish examples have later medieval associations. The stone at Finlaggan on Islay, for example, was associated with the Lords of the Isles, and 17th-century records of its use in inauguration certainly suggest later associations (Caldwell 2003: 63–7; Hunter & Hunter 2017: 65). A stone at Beinn a'Chlaidh, Berneray, has also been linked to the Lords of the Isles (Hunter & Hunter 2017: 65). Hunter and Hunter (2017) brought together the sites from Scotland and reported a number of eastern examples including the Scurdargue stone. Not one of these has a secure association, with little in the way of historical references or even folklore traditions being known. Many also appear to be natural features, which is the case with the Scurdargue example.

During the Rhynie project, photogrammetry of the Scurdargue stone was undertaken. The 'footprint' was found to consist of a largely amorphous, vaguely foot-shaped depression/area, with no definitive traces of human modification or carving. The 'footprint' is also on a vertical rather than horizontal surface, so is not closely comparable to the carved examples from sites such as Dunadd. Thus, the Scurdargue example is unlikely to have had any role in early medieval rites or rituals and is not discussed further in this volume.

10.8 Conclusions

At the height of its use, the lower fort at Tap o' Noth must have been a staggering sight to behold – one of the largest hillforts of any period ever constructed in Britain. With over 800 houses and an enclosure almost 17 hectares in extent, it is of a monumental scale previously unknown in this time period and region. The wider parallels explored in this chapter suggest at present there are few parallels for such sites in northern Britain, though there are possibly similar settlement horizons at sites such as Traprain Law and Eildon Hill North, though in both cases the chronological spans of these sites and their enclosing works remain to be fully established. There are also wider questions as to what wider tradition Tap o' Noth can be ascribed to, or indeed whether the evidence recovered from there is to date unique. Oppida and the Late Antique hillfort tradition in Britain were both outlined briefly in this chapter. The former in western Europe appear to have proliferated in some cases at least in response to the expansion of the Roman Empire, the latter due to its decline. The later 3rd-century dating for the apparent initial occupation of the lower fort at Tap o' Noth may suggest the latter is of more relevance, but the relationship of the sites in the Upper Strathbogie valley to the expansions and contractions of the Roman presence in the far north is a topic returned to in Chapter 12.