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Bearsden

A Roman Fort on the Antonine Wall

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Chapter 22

CONCLUSIONS

The excavations at Bearsden were not undertaken under optimal conditions. The work started in a very different archaeological world from today. Inspectors of Ancient Monuments still existed and still excavated; there were no commercial units; the Central Excavation Unit for Scotland had not yet been established. The excavations took place each summer as part of my duties as an Inspector. As noted above, this had an advantage in allowing time for reflection between each season. The lack of stratigraphy also aided the work, allowing substantial areas to be examined

each season, though their size was always restricted by the nature of the site, and they were mainly directed to answering problems thrown up in previous seasons. In spite of these difficulties, the investigation of Bearsden was the most substantial excavation of a Roman fort on the Antonine Wall since the 1930s. The excavation and post-excavation work produced significant results.

One aim of the excavation had been to elucidate the plan of the fort and, with the exception of the south-west corner of the fort and the southern half of the annexe, this was largely achieved







Illustration 22.3

The latrine and bath-house following consolidation.

(subsequent work showed that the archaeological deposits in the latter area were substantially degraded). The plan proved to be eccentric, but based on a coherent framework, a grid measuring 5×4 *actus*, a considerable surprise. Clear evidence for a change in plan during construction has allowed Geoff Bailey to offer the suggestion that the addition of annexes to Antonine Wall forts began at Bearsden. Although the fort (and annexe?) was built by legionaries (or at least one stone building), the soldiers based here were presumably auxiliaries. The style of the barrack-blocks suggests that they were cavalry, and there may have been only 64 soldiers based at the fort. As this is less than the smallest known unit in the army of Britain, it suggests an association with another military installation in the area and the obvious link is with the neighbouring fort at Castlehill, a fort which has yielded an inscription of the Fourth Cohort of Gauls a mixed unit of infantry and cavalry. Bearsden yielded other surprises in the form of a timber headquarters building and, possibly, a timber forehall, both elements unique on the Antonine Wall.

A second aim was to elucidate the history of the site. This turned out to be very different from what was expected. First, there was only one period rather than the two which was considered usual at the time. Second, was the discovery that the enclosure mapped by Roy and others had been divided into a fort and annexe during construction and that it was possible to determine that some of the buildings within the fort had been erected for this fort (Bearsden 1). Their retention for use in the successor fort not only created an eccentric plan for Bearsden 2, but has led to a review of the evidence for the building of the Antonine Wall and a greater understanding of this process. The discovery that Roy's enclosure was divided into fort and annexe during construction also led to the possibility of an additional phase in the construction of the Wall with implications for military deployment on the Wall. The use of the *actus* in planning both forts implies that the construction of the first followed closely on the second, which casts severe doubt on Vivien Swan's 1991 suggestion of a significant break in the building programme

Illustration 22.2

The bath-house following consolidation from the west.

for the Wall. Two almost unworn coins of 153–5 indicate abandonment of the fort soon after that date.

The range of small finds and glass from the site is poor, but at least we have a collection which we can be sure represents the material in use at the site, though it is of course not possible to know how much was taken away when the fort was abandoned. The pottery is of considerable importance for it constitutes the largest collection of published Antonine pottery in Scotland, probably exceeding the sum total of the pottery from the other forts on the Wall. It has been studied to great advantage by Louise Hird, Vivien Swan, Paul Bidwell, Alex Croom, Kay Hartley and Brenda Dickinson. Of considerable importance is the evidence for much pottery being made locally, and some by Sarrius who already is known to have worked at Mancetter-Hartshill in Warwickshire and Rossington Bridge in Yorkshire and appears to have established a workshop at Bearsden. He was probably but one potter who worked in the Bearsden area. There appear to be links with the potteries at Holt, near Chester, the base of the Twentieth Legion which is recorded building at Bearsden. The existence of mis-fired vessels in the annexe and fort, including many by Sarrius, suggests that there was a kiln(s) relatively close to the fort if not within the annexe. Analysis of the clay used to make the pottery and of the grits in the mortaria has strengthened the evidence for local manufacture (some of the vessels made by Sarrius were not used). Another industrial activity at Bearsden appears to have been the recycling of glass, as indicated by the fragmentary state of the surviving pieces.

Ovens were sought but not found. Their lack may be explained by the adoption, at least in part, of a different style of cooking, on a brazier, in a North African tradition, as supported by the discovery of fragments of braziers and pots with sagging bases for cooking on them. Swan argued that cooking in an African style indicated the presence of Africans at Bearsden, but Bidwell & Croom have suggested that this form of cooking, and therefore pottery manufacture, may have been brought to Bearsden by potters migrating from southern France. The appearance of the type of military boots known as *calceus* supports the evidence which suggests that this replaced the *caliga* during the Antonine period.

Plotting the distribution of pottery and glass across the site indicates food preparation and consumption in the barrack-blocks. Further, the different distribution of pottery in these buildings from others indicates different uses for the buildings as well as supporting the interpretation of those of a certain plan as barrack-blocks. The presence of a lamp in the officer's quarters of one barrack-block may point to the location of shrine. The quantity of amphora fragments in building 1 suggests its use as a store. There is a suggestion that the officers acquired a better class of pottery and glass. Bidwell & Croom have identified differences in the amounts of various types of vessels from other forts, there being more amphorae and mortaria but fewer flagons, other vessels perhaps serving the same purpose. Analysis of the distribution of the artefacts has benefited from the wider analysis of Roman forts in northern Britain undertaken by Rikke Giles, and in return I have been able to repay at least part of my debt by providing her with another site

for her analytical technique. She has been able to identify the similarities and differences between Bearsden and other forts and the growth of her data base will help future researchers. In relation to Bearsden, her analysis has aided interpretation and understanding of individual buildings.

The botanical report prepared by the late Camilla Dickson is of singular importance. Camilla described the environment of the area in the pre-Roman period, but most importantly analysed the diet of the soldiers. Wheat formed a major part of the soldiers' diet, with emmer, spelt and durum (macaroni) wheat all being represented. A wide range of other foods were eaten, some gathered locally, others imported from the continent. The work of Brian Knights led to the suggestion that the soldiers had a mainly plant-based diet, a conclusion which has yet to be replicated elsewhere. The discovery of moss in the sewage led to the suggestion that the soldiers used this material for cleaning themselves, a proposal which is now firmly embedded in the literature relating to Roman latrines. Analysis of the sewage also revealed that the soldiers suffered from worms. Study of the beetles showed that Bearsden suffered from the same level of infestation as other forts in Britain and that the climate was similar to that of today.

Bearsden lay on the very edge of the Roman Empire, near the western end of its far north-west frontier, yet the requirements of its soldiers linked it to places very far away. Commodities came here from southern Yorkshire, the English West Midlands, south-east and south-west Britain, northern and southern Gaul, southern Spain and elsewhere in the Mediterranean littoral. These included wine, fish-based products, figs and possibly wheat. Paul Bidwell has pointed out to me that the coincidence of different types of supplies from the same area suggests that the transport ships carried a variety of goods.

There is one important conclusion to be drawn from this discussion: the army built the Antonine Wall and its attendant structures and intended to stay. Supply chains were created; manufacturers and merchants came to service the army. Ironically, however, other aspects of life were absent. There were few items of domestic life found at Bearsden, material which is recovered from excavations in forts on Hadrian's Wall. This may relate to the poor evidence for a civilian community at Bearsden, though the two sections of clay and cobble foundations recorded west of the fort remain among the slight structural evidence for a civil settlement outside any fort on the Antonine Wall.

On several different levels, Bearsden has changed our view. The botanical evidence for the diet of the soldiers is of international significance. The strange plan of the fort not only reflects the pragmatic approach of the army, but also challenges those who believe that all Roman fort plans are the same and that nothing new can be learned from the study of Roman forts. The evidence relating to the creation of the annexe is important for our interpretation of the building of the Antonine Wall. The pottery, small finds and eco-artefacts aid understanding of life on the north-west frontier of the Roman empire and its links to the rest of the Roman Empire. Over all, we now have a report on extensive excavations within a fort and annexe on the Antonine Wall undertaken in a more scientific manner than in the past.