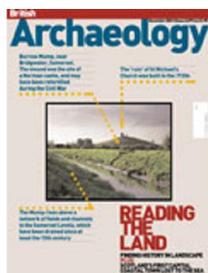


British

Archaeology



features

Citadel of the first Scots

Alan Lane reports on recent excavations at Dunadd hillfort in Argyll, where Scotland's early medieval kings were inaugurated

The hillfort of Dunadd is one of the best known archaeological sites in Scotland, and since the middle of the 19th century it has been regarded as the capital of the first Scottish kingdom, associated with the settlement of Gaelic-speaking Irish in Argyll in about AD 500. But how much of the popular perception is true? Was Dunadd the primary royal site of the Dál Riata, as these 'first' *Scotti* in Britain were called? And did it have anything to do with the Irish? The recent publication of excavations I directed at Dunadd in the 1980s allows us to make an assessment of these claims for the first time.

Dunadd's claim to be the capital of the Dál Riata was based on two historical references. The Annals of Ulster, one of the key sources of early Irish and Scottish history, contain a series of references to military action and royal activity at forts in Scotland. Dunadd figures twice in the annals.

In 683 we hear of the *Obsesio Duin Att et obsessio Dúin Duirn*: 'The siege of Dún At and the siege of Dún Duirn'; the second site being identified with another hillfort some 50 miles to the east in Pictish Perthshire. No explanation is given as to who besieged whom or the outcome.

The second reference is more revealing. 'Oengus son of Fergus, king of the Picts, laid waste the territory of Dál Riata and seized Dún At'. Oengus, or Onuist as his name may be more properly rendered in Pictish, was one of the most powerful Pictish kings of the 8th century and the naming of Dunadd in the context of the devastation of the Dalriadic kingdom implies that it was regarded as a place of special significance.

One other reference is sometimes claimed to refer to the site. The *Life of St Columba* written by Adomnán, the late 7th century abbot of Iona, says that Columba went to the *caput regionis* - the chief place of the district - where a ship from Gaul would arrive. Dunadd is often said to be the *caput regionis*, but there is no independent evidence (apart from the annals noted above) to establish this, or to show that the site was of such significance in the later 6th century when Columba lived.

There is no later historical information to show that the site remained important, in the way that Irish early medieval royal sites such as Tara clearly did throughout the medieval period. However in 1506 Dunadd was used for a series of royal proclamations, which suggest that as late as this it retained some symbolic importance in the West Highlands and Islands. Clearly, then, the historical evidence is sparse; and the basis of any claim for Dunadd's significance must lie with archaeology.

It is the unique group of carvings on the rock just below the summit fort which mark out the site as an exceptional location. The combination of a rockcut 'basin', two separate carved footprints, the incised outline of a boar or pig, and an inscription in the Irish linear script, known as ogham, cannot be paralleled anywhere in Britain or Ireland.

Late medieval descriptions survive from Ireland and Scotland which show the use of rockcut footprints in the process of Gaelic royal inaugurations and such footprint stones are known from various Irish royal sites. The 17th century Hebridean writer Martin Martin, for example, tells that the ceremony had been used for inaugurating the Lords of the Isles, as a symbol for the new Chief walking in the footsteps of his ancestors. Dunadd, then, was almost certainly the place of inauguration of the kings of Dál Riata.

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Great sites: Meols
David Griffiths on a
once-great port
now lost to the sea

Mystery script

The ogham inscription at Dunadd has been a matter of debate since it was first recognised in the 1950s. The initial interpretation was that it was an indecipherable Pictish inscription in a non-Indo-European language cut as an act of Pictish supremacy after the site was captured in 736. Now Katherine Forsyth, an ogham specialist at Glasgow University, has offered a new reading which suggests that the inscription is in Irish, though only partly decipherable, and possibly cut as late as the 9th or 10th century AD.

letters

On black and
brown rats,
medieval crafts and
cannibalism

If this is correct, it is key evidence of the continued importance of the site after the start of Viking settlement in western Scotland, and perhaps a sign that (as at Tara) the symbolic role of the site had not been forgotten after it had ceased to be a functioning stronghold.

issues

George Lambrick
on Government
policy on the
heritage

Dunadd was excavated twice before the modern excavations. Those of 1904 revealed the plan of a multiple enclosure stone fort, and a large assemblage of artefacts which were thought to date largely from the 5th-9th centuries. The second excavation in 1929 was more limited and recovered more finds but provided no more information about the date of construction and use of the site.

Peter Ellis

Regular column

In the 1950s Robert (RBK) Stevenson defined Dunadd and Dundurn as nuclear forts - sites with a central nucleus or citadel and looping lower enclosures - and argued they were part of a recognisable group of Dark Age capitals in Scotland. However, the defences of neither site had been dated and some archaeologists thought that both could be Iron Age, albeit with later use. Indeed Richard Feachem, the head of the Scottish Royal Commission, stated that Dunadd and Dundurn were Iron Age forts but 'reused - perhaps sporadically - and possibly repaired or improved by indiscriminating or desperate persons until as late as the 7th century' - a rather pejorative way to refer to Dalriadic kingship!

books

Prehistory in the
Peak by Mark
Edmonds and Tim
Seaborne

The recently published excavations provide for the first time an outline chronology for the site and its defences. Two phases of Iron Age activity have been dated, to between about 400-200 BC and about 100 BC-100 AD, with a substantial stone structure, probably a dun (small stone fort), on the summit in at least one of these phases. The main phase of construction of the visible walls of the fort, however, belongs to the early medieval period.

Shadows in the Soil
by Tony Waldron

Europe's First
Farmers edited by
T Douglas Price

An oval fort was constructed on the summit in the 4th/5th century AD. By the 7th century additional enclosures had been defended. Subsequently the summit fort was remodelled creating its distinctive pear-shaped plan, and at the same time the main outer enclosure wall was built, giving the site an angular appearance utilising the spectacular natural rock-cleft entrance.

Landscapes of
Lordship by Robert
Liddiard

It may be at this time that the demolition of the enclosure wall below the summit exposed the inauguration site on the skyline to emphasise its symbolic importance. Some of these later building activities seem to belong to the 8th, 9th or even 10th centuries AD. One radiocarbon date may even suggest use of the summit as late as the 11th/13th century.

CBA update

favourite finds

Once lost, twice
excavated. Richard
Brewer's came
from a museum
sub-basement.

The finds from the 1980/81 excavation tend to confirm the radiocarbon dates. There is Iron Age activity but the bulk of the finds can be bracketed 6th-8th century, with a few 9th-10th century finds. The site seems therefore to have functioned as an important centre from at least the 7th century till the 9th or 10th century, although the quality and quantity of evidence for different periods is varied.

Precious metal

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Although the modern excavations were limited, they produced a wealth of artefacts which throw important light on the socio-economic development of early Scottish Dál Riata.

**Editor Simon
Denison**

An exploratory excavation of one area produced evidence of a 7th century metalworking workshop. Over 900 mould fragments, 250 crucible sherds, as well as waste products, scrap metalwork, tools and raw materials were recovered. Scientific analysis shows the sophistication of the metalworking practices, with evidence for the working of gold, silver, copper alloys, lead, tin, iron and glass. Pins, buckles and discs were all being cast, but the moulds were mainly for penannular brooches.

Among these moulds are the fragments from casting a large compartmented brooch, similar to the series which includes the Hunterston brooch. This gold and amber decorated brooch, on display in the National Museum in Edinburgh, shows an intriguing mixture of 'Celtic' and Anglo-Saxon styles and is one of the classic pieces of early medieval 'Celtic' art. It was

found in Ayrshire, but its place of origin has long been disputed, with claims made for both Ireland and Scotland. The Dunadd moulds are important evidence to show for the first time that related brooches were produced in Scotland, and possibly as early as the mid-7th century rather than the conventional date after 700 assumed on art historical evidence. The Hunterston brooch may have been made at Dunadd.

The interaction of 'Germanic' and 'Celtic' art styles on the site is attested by the presence of Anglo-Saxon artefacts, and moulds showing Anglo-Saxon influence. As one of the most important royal sites of Dál Riata the site will have been visited by royal visitors, exiles, warbands and craftsmen from all over northern Britain and Ireland. Bede tells us of several future Northumbrian kings who sought refuge among the Scots to escape dynastic assassination by their fellow countrymen. Such figures may explain some of the pieces of Anglo-Saxon origin at Dunadd.

Some of the objects found are of the quality and richness of the Sutton Hoo jewellery, thought to have been created by a master craftsman at the East Anglian royal court in the early 7th century. Another piece from the 1929 excavations has recently been identified as similar to the horse gear from Sutton Hoo of similar date.

These finds, coupled with a newly-discovered trumpet spiral decorated hanging bowl disc and a stamped animal decoration (or *pressblech*) possibly from a bucket or drinking horn, show Dál Riata as at least one of the locations where the so-called Hiberno-Saxon style was developed, seen not only in the Hunterston brooch but also the Book of Durrow - the first of the great early medieval illuminated gospel books from Britain and Ireland which culminated in those from Lindisfarne and the Book of Kells.

Indeed the discovery at Dunadd of the yellow mineral colorant orpiment, which was used in various of the illuminated manuscripts including the Book of Durrow, is an important indicator of the role of sites such as Dunadd in the control of trade on the western seaboard.

This is confirmed by a wide range of exotic items including imported Continental pottery and glass and raw materials from as far as the Mediterranean. These finds enable us to see that Dunadd was a major high status residence in the 7th century engaged in manufacture and long distance trade, with surplus wealth spent on exotic luxuries and elaborately decorated personal jewellery.

The Irish connection

What, then, of the supposed Irish origin of the Scots of Dunadd? The story appears in Bede (8th century), and also in the Irish Annals and the *Senchus Fer nAlban* ('History of the Men of Scotland'), both of which contain 7th century elements but were added to in the 10th century.. But just as there is doubt about the scale of population movement which turned Roman Britain into Anglo-Saxon England, there is real uncertainty about how Irish Scottish Dál Riata was. In short, we don't really know.

Since at least the 1970s archaeologists have noted the contrasts between early medieval Argyll and Ireland rather than showing any archaeologically recognisable invasion or migration. Leslie Alcock concluded that if there was Irish dynastic takeover or population movement, the '*Scotti* came without luggage'.

Recently, my colleague Ewan Campbell, an early medieval specialist at Glasgow University, has gone further and argued that the historical evidence can be dismissed as dynastic propaganda by the later Scottish kings. He explains the well-attested prevalence of Gaelic (or Goidelic, the Irish form of the Celtic language) in early medieval Argyll as a form of language conservatism on the western seaboard rather than as evidence of population movement into the area from Ireland. The Brittonic form of Celtic (thought to have been spoken throughout Britain prior to the Anglo-Saxon conquest and still represented by Welsh, Cornish and Breton) is usually regarded as a later development of Celtic than Goidelic.

Unfortunately Dunadd provides scant support for either hypothesis since there is little evidence for the 4th or 5th century period when a dynastic takeover has been mooted. Indeed it would be difficult to point to much securely dated archaeology in either Argyll or the north of Ireland in those centuries. The wealth of Irish early medieval archaeology seems to be of later 5th and 6th century date while excavated sites in Argyll are rare.

There can be little doubt that there has always been contact between the north of Ireland and Argyll from the Neolithic onwards. The 12 miles of sea between Kintyre and Antrim provides a link not a barrier in spite of some dangerous waters, and the early medieval

documentation for Scotland makes it clear than seaborne movement was easier than land travel.

The Irish Annals and Columba's *Life* are full of references to sea travel, and to what may be Britain's first documented sea battle in warfare between two competing dynasties of Dál Riata. However, if Argyll was part of a Gaelic-speaking zone in the pre- Dál Riata Iron Age (as Campbell's theory requires), the sharp contrasts between the western Scottish Iron Age and that of Ireland need to be explained, as does the new linguistic boundary now required between Goedelic Kintyre and Brittonic Arran or Ayrshire just to the east.

Dunadd remains an important part of the landscape of central Argyll and is seen by many visitors every year. The modern excavations have provided a glimpse of the use of the site through more than 1,000 years from the middle Iron Age to the early medieval period, but only a small part of the site has been investigated using modern methods and it is clear that substantial and important deposits remain.

The 7th century deposits give a substantial view of a single phase when Dunadd was clearly one of the important fortified sites of early Dál Riata. But major questions remain about its significance in the 6th and 5th centuries when it might tell us something about the Irishness of Dál Riata. It was a place of inauguration of kings and may well have been the principle royal centre for a considerable period. Richard Bradley has pointed to the richness of the prehistoric ritual landscape in the Kilmartin Valley just to the north of Dunadd which again provides an analogy with the Irish royal sites.

But what was the fate of Dunadd when a Dalriadic dynasty took over the Pictish kingdom in the mid-9th century, or later when Scandinavian raiding and settlement impacted on the whole western seaboard? Were the inauguration carvings still being altered in the late 9th or 10th century as Forsyth's ogham reading may imply? Does the recognition of the use of the site in 1506 for royal proclamation and the resolution of feud indicate symbolic continuity as a Tara?

Dunadd still has much to tell us about the early history of Dál Riata and of Scotland as a whole, and only future excavation of the site and its surrounding landscape can begin to answer the questions which remain.

Alan Lane is a specialist in early medieval archaeology at the University of Cardiff. 'Dunadd: An Early Dalriadic Capital' by Alan Lane and Ewan Campbell was published by Oxbow last year at £45.00.