Picts and prehistory: cultural resource management in early medieval Scotland

Stephen T. Driscoll

Abstract

Prehistoric monuments are a conspicuous feature of royal centres in the early medieval Celtic world. This paper argues that this interest in the past represents conscious efforts to exploit the ancient monuments for political advantage in a period when new political structures were taking shape. This paper examines the situation in Scotland and considers some of the ideological issues raised by this active appropriation of the past.

> In the moor on the east side Druim-cruey [Arran], there is a circle of stones; the area is about thirty paces. There is a stone of the same shape and kind about forty paces west of the circle. The natives say that this circle was made by the giant Fin-Ma-Coul, and that to the single stone, Bran, Fin-Ma-Coul's hunting-dog, was usually tied.
>
> Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1698)

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, early medieval (500–1000AD) Scotland, like other regions of north-west Europe, saw a dramatic development of independent kingdoms. The ideology which underpinned these kingdoms was constructed from a mixture of native traditions and systems of knowledge from the Mediterranean world acquired through Christianity.

This paper focuses on the use of prehistoric monuments as the settings for royal centres. The use of ancient monuments in overtly political situations appears at the particular historical moment when these kingdoms begin to develop the mechanism of statehood (Driscoll 1991). Corresponding archaeological developments during this formative period

in the shaping of the political landscape include an increased prominence of burial and the erection of memorial stones. The goal of this paper is to explore the new mentality or ideology which this usage of ancient monuments reflects. Naturally the political motivation was to enhance the legitimacy of the dynasties utilizing the monuments, but an understanding of how they worked requires that we understand how they worked conceptually. The core of the argument offered here is that the early medieval value of the ancient monuments depended upon linear concepts of time which derived from writing and Christianity.

The phenomenon of constituting royal centres around notable prehistoric sites was characteristic of the northern and western Celtic regions (especially Ireland and Scotland) and is not to be found in those areas of Britain which were solidly within the Roman Empire and subsequently became Anglo-Saxon England. Northumbria, the northernmost Anglo-Saxon kingdom appears to follow the Celtic pattern. The reason for this Celtic response probably relates to the timing of the widespread introduction of literacy. Beyond the Empire it took place at a moment of political fluidity, when the political potential of the new technology could be exploited to gain political capital. Within Roman Britain literacy was introduced earlier and within a stable political environment, when there were less obvious opportunities to exploit the administrative and intellectual advantages of writing.

The raw material used to create the new royal centres were relics of early prehistory: megalithic tombs, standing stones, henges and earthen barrows and cairns. Now of course many are a mere shadow of their former glory, but we must allow that these monuments of the Neolithic and Bronze Age were distinctive, even dominant elements of the early medieval landscape. In every society, people make sense of their surroundings by giving places names and histories. In the Celtic world this process of signifying the landscape was very well developed and durable. Early Irish tradition even recognized this as a separate literary genre *dindshenchas*, the 'lore or history of noble places', which was concerned with such ancient landmarks. Although such traditions purport to be timeless, like any body of knowledge, *dindshenchas* is subject to historical and political forces.

Timeless or not, the association between prehistoric monuments and a supernatural Otherworld is deeply embedded in the mythical traditions of Ireland and Britain from the Neolithic tomb of Wayland's Smithy in Oxfordshire to Fin's stone circle on Arran. This association is sufficiently strong to account for the naming traditions which survived to the modern era in the Gaelic speaking world (Martin 1698). In this use of myth to explain landscape features, we catch a glimpse of the qualities once attributed to monuments which formed the landscape inhabited by the heroes of the Ulster Cycle, the earliest vernacular literature of the Celtic west (Mallory 1992), and by the peerless Celtic saints of the earliest Latin writings such as Adomnan's *Vita Columbae* (Sharpe 1995).

This survival of mythic nomenclature provides an insight into the meaning ascribed to the ancient religious sites used as the ceremonial setting for the rituals of Celtic kingship. In Ireland, contemporary texts make the relationship between the royal centres and prehistoric monuments explicit and this has been explored by a number of writers (cf. Aitchison 1994; Warner 1988). That these Christian realms were content to conduct their most central ceremonies in places which were believed to be creations of a pagan past tells us much about the underlying mentality of these peoples. On the surface this appears to

reflect profoundly conservative attitudes to authority; however, there are reasons to regard this as an innovative response to new social and political formations and new opportunities provided by literacy. The monuments with their associated lore can be seen as the building blocks of the royal centres, analogous to the fragments of myth and legend which were drawn upon in the contemporary construction of the Celtic literary corpus. This corpus is a disparate body of material that includes numerous royal pedigrees, origin legends and elaborate mytho-histories, much of which is explicitly political (cf. Bannerman 1974; Ó Corráin 1986).

Historical context

The formation of the medieval Celtic kingdoms was a complex process that extended over the fifth to ninth centuries and initially saw a proliferation of small political entities and large-scale population movements (Duncan 1975; Byrne 1973; Davies 1982). A major feature of this process was the cultural transformation introduced as Christianity was rapidly adopted during the fifth century. By the end of the seventh century Christianity was established in every corner of the British Isles (Thomas 1971, 1981). Literacy, part of the cultural package which accompanied Christianity, was enthusiastically used in all the Celtic realms to produce commemorative burial monuments within a generation or two of the conversion. Throughout the period under consideration here, literate skills appear to have been largely restricted to ecclesiastics, although they were often in the service of the secular élite.

The earliest recognizable political entities in this Celtic world were small, local kingdoms. At one extreme was Ireland where it has been estimated there were about 150 kingdoms in the seventh century (Byrne 1973). The early evidence for political development in northern Britain is much less detailed, but Scotland probably consisted of perhaps a dozen kingdoms (Duncan 1975). Despite the differences in scale, close comparisons can be drawn between the nature of kingship in Scotland and Ireland, indeed it is possible to discern the common elements of a Celtic pattern of kingship (Binchy 1970). This article will focus on the Scots, whom for clarity we will refer to by their contemporary dynastic name Dál Riata, and the Picts. Dál Riata was the western littoral of modern Scotland and had close linguistic, political and religious links with Ireland. The Picts occupied the rest of northern Britain north of the firths of Forth and Clyde. Within these broad cultural areas it is possible to identify smaller polities, some of which are preserved in the historical record as little more than a name, some of which survived the Middle Ages as recognizable political units.

In the Celtic world contemporary texts have not survived evenly. Compared with the extensive Irish legal, genealogical, administrative and mythological writings, the Scottish records are meagre. Nevertheless, enough survives to demonstrate that profound similarities in social institutions extended across the Irish Sea. Literary creations, both legal and poetic, occupied a prominent position within political discourse and were primarily concerned to celebrate the dynastic success and social interests of an emerging aristocracy.

As a consequence the extensive genealogical tracts cannot be taken at face value,

because frequently they can be shown to have been manipulated to satisfy changing political circumstances (Dumville 1979; Ó Corráin 1971). Moreover, many, if not most, of the accounts which describe the origins of dynasties, tribes or ethnic groups extend beyond the historical horizon into late prehistoric times. Underpinning the accounts of tribal or dynastic origins is a deep interest in an ancient, at times archaic, past (McCone 1990). In the past the archaism in these texts has been taken as a sign of oral transmission which provides a window on the prehistoric Iron Age (Jackson 1964). More recent scholarship has established that this interest in a mythic past was part of a conscious literary construction and not the result of oral conservatism (Aitchison 1987). This conclusion rests upon the presence of Christian concepts and vocabulary which are embedded in even the earliest surviving sagas and poetry. Given the ecclesiastical monopoly on education in literacy this is not surprising. The essential point for this discussion is that the ancient, mythic past was politically valuable and occupied a significant place in the ideological strategy of the nobility.

Political discourse – the material dimension

Having sketched in the historical backdrop, we can turn to consider the use of ancient monumental features as focal points for royal ceremonial and administrative centres (Fig. 1). There are a number of practical difficulties in evaluating the significance of the reuse of ancient sites, not the least because in Britain and Ireland prehistoric sites and landscapes have been reoccupied during historic periods on an impressive scale. The significance of prehistoric monuments within the political discourse of the early medieval kingdoms has been long recognized in Ireland, but has not been systematically considered in Scotland, because almost all of the evidence is archaeological. In a discussion, which examined the question of continuity of use of ancient monuments into the early medieval period, Bradley suggested that such ancient monuments should be considered as political resources (1987: 3). Bradley moved the discussion from the Boyne valley in Ireland to the Northumbrian royal centre of Yeavering (Hope-Taylor 1977). He questioned the uncritical use of the term 'continuity' and focused attention on the specific reuse of the monuments. Significantly he observed that at Yeavering the reuse occurred after extended periods of neglect and showed little interest in the original ritual functions of the monuments. Bradley demonstrated that the ancient ritual use was so different from the early medieval that continuity could not be said to exist. However, he went on to observe that the monuments would have been defining features of the landscape, which influenced early medieval site layout and situation. Bradley was not particularly concerned to investigate the ceremonial context of the early medieval reuse, which is the topic of this paper.

Evidence from Ireland towers over this question. Without doubt Tara is the most famous place where prehistoric monuments form part of a royal centre. The inaugural site of the High Kings of Ireland is not unique. Similar relationships have been observed at most of the regional royal centres in Ireland (Wailes 1982) and at a number of sites associated with lesser kingdoms (Warner 1988; Herity 1993). Major monographs on the two most important of these sites, Tara and Navan, have just appeared (Newman 1997 and Waterman 1997), which document the creation of royal sites from a constellation of

Figure 1   Location map of places mentioned in the text.

prominent monuments dating from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. Across Ireland there is general interest in larger burial monuments, although not for new burials. Associated with the burial mounds were large enclosures and features which might be described as processual pathways. As far as can be seen from the excavations at the regional royal sites, they were not primarily residential (Wailes 1982; Waterman 1997). This is frequently at odds

with the *dindshenchas* and mythological traditions which describe them as having been royal seats (e.g. Mallory in Newman 1997). There is an archaeological consensus that these monuments served as centres for periodic public gatherings, the most momentous of which seem to have taken place at the inauguration of a new king. Regular fairs were also held at these places and such occasions were clearly of great political significance (Binchy 1958).

At the level of the petty kingdom, there is a contrast. Permanent residences of lesser royalty did embrace earlier monuments within their overall design (Herity 1993). At Knowth, one of the Boyne passage graves, a fortified residence was constructed for the kings of Brega on the summit of the substantial mound (Eogan 1977). The royal fort of Clogher (Co. Tyrone) may have been more typical. Here a prominent, earlier mound, perhaps an Iron Age barrow, was incorporated into the royal precinct by the earthen ramparts (Warner 1988). At Clogher, Warner interprets the mound as a possible throne mound, from which the king would have held court, received tribute, resolved disputes and exercised royal authority. In mythological terms the throne mound occupies a liminal position between this world and a spirit world. For instance, in the medieval Welsh story cycle, the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi,* the throne mound (*gorsedd*) provides access to the Otherworld and supernatural visions (Gantz 1976: 86; Rees and Rees 1961: 183–5). The ideological benefits of such a monument are self-evident.

In Ireland the conscious reuse of ancient monuments at sites of political gatherings and centres of royal authority was widespread. Mythological attributes of these monuments made them especially attractive sources of supernatural legitimacy. Their *dindshenchas* provided the sites with an antiquity which could be readily incorporated into the historical traditions of the ruling dynasty.

Evidence of reuse in Scotland

In Ireland the archaeological monuments can be linked with a considerable body of mythic lore and historical matter, so it is relatively straightforward to recognize the ideological processes at work. In Scotland the surviving historical evidence is slight and the archaeological evidence is less well studied. As in Ireland, it is possible to distinguish ancient monuments that are directly linked to royal Scottish residences from those which seem to have been used primarily as ceremonial centres; however, it is also possible to identify different types of usage which have not figured prominently in Irish discussions. Moreover, burial appears to have been much more important in the Scottish usage.

The relative poverty of the surviving Scottish traditional lore and mythology relating to known royal sites requires that the relationship between the early medieval peoples and the ancient monuments be established largely from archaeological evidence. This relationship can be established through a study of changing burial practices and the erection of sculptured stones. This in turn helps to establish the significance of prehistoric monuments found near royal sites.

The coming of Christianity stimulated the rededication of sacred landscapes. Venerated springs were transformed into holy wells and occasionally Christian symbols were carved upon monuments like Neolithic tombs (RCAHMS 1988: 50). This process of remaking

the landscape in the light of new beliefs provides a backdrop to our problem, the most prominent aspect of which was the renewed interest in burial at ancient sites. Christian burial activity in Scotland can be recognized with confidence, because it was accompanied by new rites and can be set against an Iron Age which showed comparatively little inter- est in burial rites (Hingley 1992:38). The archaeological visibility of Christian burials is a product of formally enclosed burial grounds containing oriented graves (Thomas 1971). In eastern Scotland the graves were frequently lined with stone slabs and are known as long cist burials (Henshall 1956).

In Scotland this increased interest in burial should be set against the growing evidence that during the Iron Age earlier prehistoric monuments were focal points for ritual activity, which did not include burial (Hingley 1996). This reluctance to bury in and around ancient monuments was overcome following the conversion to Christianity.

The presence of a possible Christian component in the archaeological sequence of a major prehistoric monument was first revealed at Cairnpapple (Piggott 1948). Here the final stage in the long sequence which included a Neolithic henge and Bronze Age cairn consisted of a set of four rock-cut pits oriented east–west. Owing to the soil conditions no bone survived, so it was impossible to be certain of the date or even if they were graves. Fortunately, the excavation of a ritual site with a similarly long sequence at Strathallan produced a strikingly similar late cemetery (Barclay 1983). Here the thirteen burials within the henge survived well enough to provide a calibrated radiocarbon age of between AD 700 and 820 (GU-1382).

The Strathallan and Cairnpapple cemeteries are small, but they do correspond to the simple enclosed cemeteries which have been documented throughout Scotland (Thomas 1971). Burial at prominent sites like henge monuments underscores the early medieval interest in creating a connection with older sites. This new burial tradition has recently been shown to be even more complex than previously believed with the recognition that cremated bone adjacent to one of the Bronze Age ring cairns at Clava was Pictish (R. Bradley, pers. comm.). Similarly, in the monumentally less well endowed area of north Sutherland, cremated bone has been recovered from within a Bronze Age hut circle with a calibrated age range of AD 400–640 (GU-4245, Donnelly n.d.).

In addition, new forms of monumental burial were also developed in the Pictish areas (Ashmore 1980). These consist of square or round barrows in cemeteries, some of which are associated with stone pillars carved with Pictish symbols (Close-Brooks 1984), which probably are a form of memorial stone. The square barrows have been identified from the Forth to Caithness and are particularly useful because their formal details are dis- tinctive enough to allow them to be recognized with confidence from aerial photography, even after they have been ploughed flat. At a number of sites square barrows can be seen to lie in close proximity to much more ancient monuments.

Prominent burial thus emerges as an important feature of early Christian Scotland. Direct associations link burial with earlier monuments, which may have been recognized as burial places, but, more to the point, were conspicuous landscape features. In Pictland the development of new monument types underscores this renewed interest in ceremonies associated with death.

An associated body of evidence which also displays an interest in older monuments is the explosion of monumental sculpture in the early Christian era (Allen and Anderson

1903). Many of the earliest monuments bear inscriptions which show clearly that they were memorials including the enigmatic Pictish symbol stones (Driscoll 1988b). The link with prehistoric monuments is nowhere more clearly represented than on the cross slab from Meigle carved from a cup-marked standing stone (RCAHMS 1994: 98). Although the cup-marks were mostly removed when the slab was shaped into a cross, some remained towards the base. A number of other crosses are thought to have been made from prehistoric standing stones because of their irregular form, as in the case of the Sun Stone at Govan (Ritchie 1994: 51–2), or because of their find spot. Unless one is prepared to argue that this represents opportunistic scavenging, then this must reflect another aspect of the reuse of ancient monuments.

An additional point about the revival of interest in standing stones is that it reflects a renewed interest in using stones to mark out the landscape (Driscoll 1988b). The use of standing stones was not a new invention, because the landscape of early medieval Scotland was already well endowed with standing stones. In the early medieval period the monuments were intended to mark out property and commemorate individuals.

Royal ceremonial centres

The establishment of connections between political centres and ancient monuments is spectacularly evident at several prominent Scottish sites with royal attributions. In these instances the ancient monumental scheme for the landscape has been appropriated and transformed. The ancient monuments are not the central focal point but provide an impressive backdrop. They no doubt provided settings for related ceremonial activity, some of which presumably were attended by large gatherings. Hanging over this is the problem of what constitutes a 'royal' site, particularly given the limitations of contemporary documentation. In Ireland, Warner has argued for a cautious approach which requires documentary verification (1988). In Scotland such a minimalist perspective is not viable. A more constructive approach has been pioneered by Alcock (1981), which combines historical references with archaeological observations to make judgements about the social or political status of a site. Although this means that we are often lacking an explicit statement that a place was the residence of a king, the conspicuous citation by contemporary sources of fortified or architecturally dramatic places being the sites of battles involving kings supports the royal identifications. Without such contemporary references or excavation to support the evaluation of early medieval strongholds, Alcock urges caution (1988). However, it may be that by appreciating the correspondence between such forts and more ancient remains we may be able to recognize more unrecorded royal centres.

Just such a problem pertains at Dunadd, which has been identified as a royal seat of the Dalriadic Scots, perhaps *the* royal seat (Plate 1). Without getting involved in a discussion about its status *vis-à-vis* other contemporary Dalriadic royal sites, it is important to realize that the surviving references do not explicitly designate Dunadd as a king's seat (Duncan and Nieke 1988). Nevertheless we can be confident of its royal significance, because of the results of the archaeological investigations which have been conducted since the last century. The scale and design of the site's defences, the quality of the finds and the unique
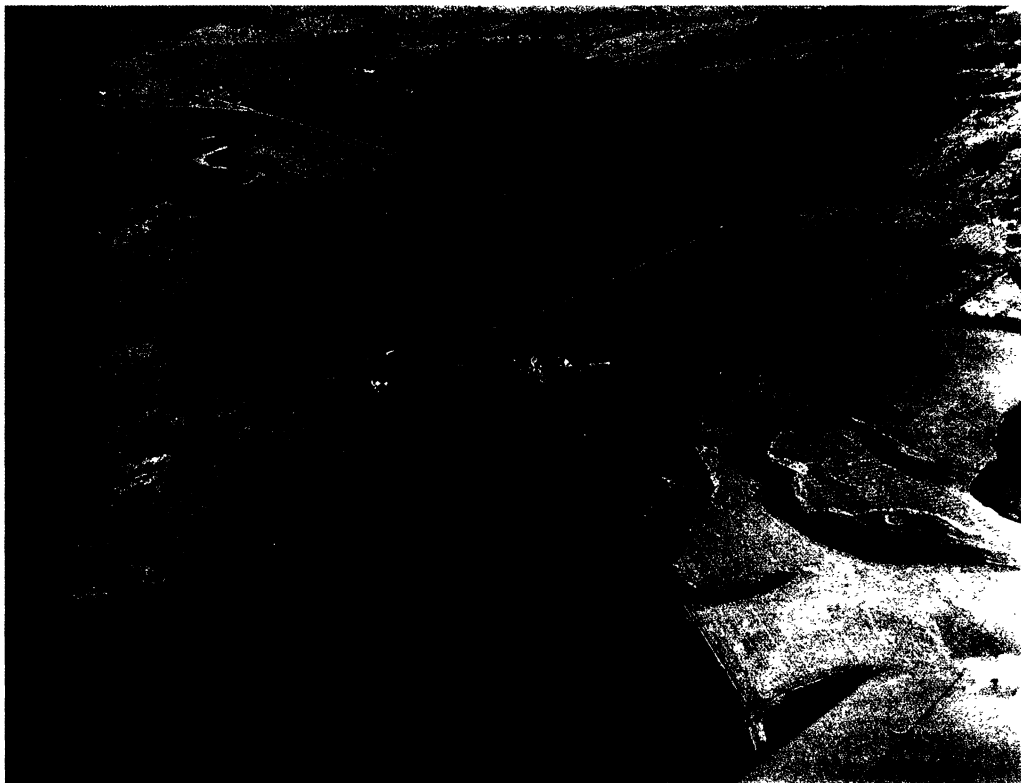
Plate 1   Aerial photograph of Dunadd from the west.

carvings all point to royal status. The carvings on the rock summit, which include a rock-cut footprint, a basin and a seat, are widely accepted as marking an actual royal inauguration place (RCAHMS 1988: 149–59). As remarkable as these features are, it is Dunadd's setting which is of special interest. Dunadd occupies an isolated rocky knoll in the centre of an open basin surrounded by craggy hills. Within the basin and particularly in the adjacent Kilmartin Glen is found one of the densest concentrations of prehistoric monuments in Scotland (Fig. 2). These include a stone circle, a henge monument, a Neolithic tomb and a number of exceptionally large Bronze Age burial cairns and even larger numbers of standing stones (Bradley 1993; RCAHMS 1988). The most dramatic of the cairns are a sequence of four which run along one side of the narrow glen. At the head of the glen, on a terrace which looks along the alignment of cairns, is the church of Kilmartin, the origins of which appear to be contemporary with Dunadd. These two places, the church and the royal site, have been positioned within this richly endowed prehistoric landscape with care.

There can be little doubt that Dunadd was sited within this spectacular ritual landscape by design. The most recent archaeological investigations demonstrate that Dunadd was not a prehistoric foundation, but entirely an early medieval creation (Campbell and Lane forthcoming). Certainly in the later Middle Ages Kilmartin served as an important lordly burial ground and it seems reasonable to assert that its cemetery began much earlier.
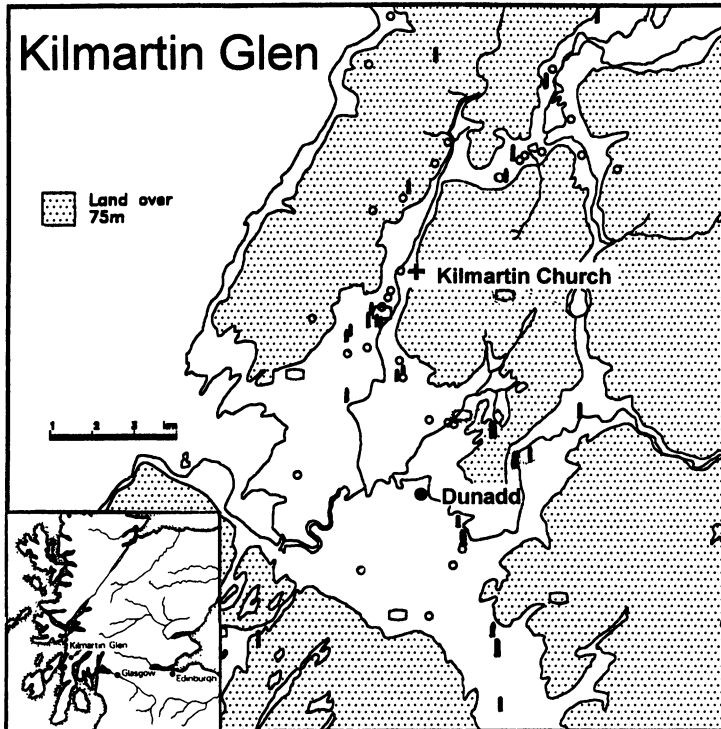
Figure 2 Location map of Dunadd and the principal prehistoric monuments around Kilmartin glen.

I Standing Stones, Henges and Stone Circles

o Cairns

◻ Neolithic Chambered Cairns

Dunadd is linked to Kilmartin by a 5km long string of monuments which become increasingly more impressive as one approaches Kilmartin. As a centre of power Dunadd's heyday was in the seventh and eighth centuries; by the ninth century it had lost its political significance as the centre of political gravity moved eastwards into Pictland.

Forteviot, in east-facing Strathearn, emerged in the ninth century as the residence of the earliest kings to rule over both Dál Riata and the Picts and is described in contemporary texts as a 'palace' (Alcock and Alcock 1992). Although there have been small-scale excavations, the most important new discoveries have been through aerial photography (Fig. 3). The tiny, modern village of Forteviot is believed to mark the approximate location of this royal residence and chapel, based upon the presence of fragments of sculptured stone, including architectural fragments, and cropmark evidence. About 250m away are the remains of one of the most substantial complexes of Neolithic ritual monuments in Scotland, including at least two henges, a timber enclosure over 200m in diameter and numerous barrows. These have all been ploughed flat but are revealed as cropmarks (Alcock and Alcock 1992: 231–4). Intriguingly, on the edge of the great enclosure, there are at least three Pictish square barrows. Additional square barrows dominate a group of
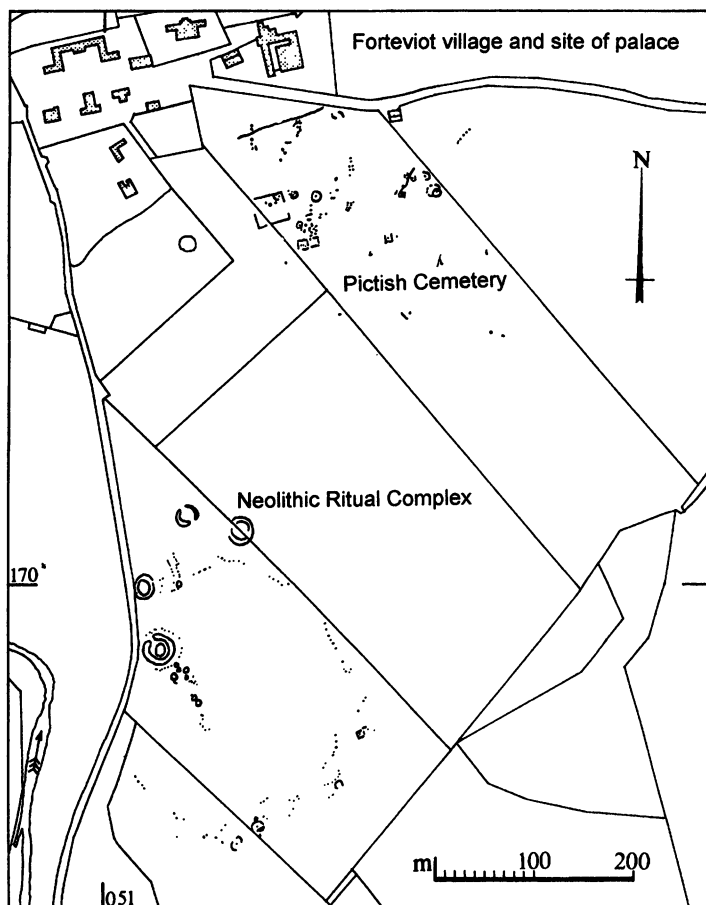
Figure 3 The Forteviot cropmark complex as transcribed by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Crown Copyright).

cropmarks interpreted as a Christian cemetery near to the presumed palace site. Comparisons have been drawn between the concentrations of henges at Forteviot and those at Milfield/Sprouston, a Northumbrian royal estate near to Yeavering (Smith 1991). As Bradley has pointed out in the case of Milfield, there can be no question of direct continuity (1987), but clearly the siting of the early medieval structures has been informed by the geography established by some of the pre-existing monuments.

The damage to monuments by centuries of ploughing has not affected Forteviot alone. Post-medieval agriculture has eroded the physical remains of major monuments elsewhere in eastern Scotland, the most important of which was Scone, the principal inaugural site of medieval Scottish kings throughout the Middle Ages. A contemporary description of Alexander III's inauguration of 1249 shows that as late as the thirteeth century the rites were conspicuously archaic. They included a reading in Gaelic of the king's genealogy back to Scota, daughter of Pharaoh (Duncan 1975: 552–5).

The focal point at Scone is the Moot Hill, a slight hillock, which may be artificial. Place-name evidence suggests that Scone had a significant church site from early medieval times (Clancy 1995: 106), but this was enhanced with the royal foundation of an Augustinian

monastery in 1114 next to the hill (RCAHMS 1994: 124–6). The abbey served periodically as a royal residence, but prior to that kings do not appear to have lived there. Amongst the treasures housed in the Abbey was the coronation seat, the 'Stone of Destiny'. The deeper prehistoric significance of the site was revealed during the 1980s by aerial photography, which recorded a concentration of prehistoric ritual monuments, including a linear sequence of burial mounds and a Neolithic cursus at Blairhall little more than a kilometre from Scone (Driscoll 1987: 347–51; RCAHMS 1994: 26). Once again an exceptional, if ploughed out landscape, provided a backdrop for an important ceremonial centre.

The interest in ancient monuments can be observed elsewhere in Pictland at less exalted sites, which have left little or no early medieval documentation, but seem to be likely royal centres. These include places which probably represent regional centres of kingship and places which were probably never of more than local importance. Three examples suffice.

Forfar occupies a central position in Strathmore, a broad, fertile valley in east central Scotland. Historical references indicate that Forfar was a royal estate from 1264 (Grant 1993: 77). It has long been suspected that it was the centre of a minor kingdom based in Strathmore, not least because of the antiquity of the nearby church of Restenneth and its proximity to the site of a pivotal battle in 685 between the Picts and the Northumbrians (Alcock 1996). Evidence for major prehistoric monuments here is scant, because of the intensity of modern agriculture and the size of the burgh of Forfar. However, it has recently been observed that Forfar occupies the centre of a striking concentration of Neolithic or Bronze Age cup-marked stones (Sheriff 1995). At Kilmartin Bradley has interpreted similar concentrations of rock art as marking the perimeters of the ritual complex (1993). If one extends this interpretation to Forfar, it emerges as one of the major focal points of prehistoric ritual activity.

Further north at Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, is another royal site which only emerges into the historical record in the twelfth century when a castle and burgh were founded to administer a large lordship (Stringer 1985: 68–79). Inverurie occupies a point of land between the confluence of two rivers. Until the last century an avenue of eighteen pairs of standing stones leading towards Inverurie survived in the valley bottom (Simpson 1944: 40–3; Ordnance Survey 1st edition Aberdeen Sheet 54). Part of this complex survives at Broomend of Crichie where there is a henge monument and several standing stones. The early medieval interest in these monuments is documented by the presence of Pictish symbols inscribed upon one of these stones and the presence of four more Pictish stones at the site of the Castle. At both of these places it seems highly likely that the later medieval prominence of these sites was because they already had long histories of being centres of royal authority.

The reuse of ancient monuments as sites of authority seems to have operated at an even more local level. Amongst the most ancient administrative structures of the early Scottish kingdom were court hills, a high proportion of which are identifiable by no more than their place-name, frequently a variation of *cuthill* (containing the Gaelic word, *cômhd-hâil*, 'assembly, meeting') (Barrow 1992). A number are suspected to be located on ancient barrows, while others clearly use locally prominent natural features. Few of these have been investigated, but at Coupar Angus, a small hillock, known to be the site of the regality court in the parish (Warder 1882: 127–36, esp. 134), has been excavated. It proved

to be a battered Bronze Age kerbed cairn which had only survived destruction because of its use into the post-medieval period (Stevenson 1995).

Political context and the ideology of reuse

Throughout the formative period of the Scottish state, kings required places to meet their subjects so that they could reaffirm their position as leaders. This was absolutely essential for a society constituted on kinship and personal lordship. The idea of a royal progress through the kingdom to collect rents and tribute (Alcock 1988) underpins our understanding of the significance of royal estates (thanages) as they evolved in the later Middle Ages (Driscoll 1991; Grant 1993; Driscoll in press). Nevertheless some centres loom larger than others.

At Scone later medieval accounts describe a harvest festival attended by the king (McGavin 1995), which may be compared with the fairs held at Irish royal sites (Binchy 1958; Aitchison 1994: 59–70). These gatherings provide a political context for the monuments. At such centres major ceremonial events, most notably the inauguration of a king, and more mundanely the administration of justice, were conducted on an ancient stage. Where tribute was paid, these gatherings served to reproduce the relationship between people and their leaders; at a time when the mechanisms of the state were still primitive, periodic encounters with the populous were essential. The prehistoric monuments at Dunadd, Forteviot and Scone were part of the royal administrative apparatus. As such they would have been politically charged places: the ideal setting for pseudohistorical accounts of dramatic dynastic upheaval, as in the case of the conquest of the Picts by the king of Dál Riata which was said to have taken place at Scone (Anderson 1922: 270–3).

The historicial context for the reuse of these monuments is the emergence of the new political structures. Clearly enough, the monuments are being drawn upon to provide a legitimacy for the new structures, but how did that work? Attention has been drawn to the increased interest in burial and memorialization and how this was manifest at the royal sites. However, to understand this fully we must posit a change in concepts of time and the past, which allowed the old sites to be linked to the new political order in a direct way. Prominent burials and nearby residences provided physical links, but conceptual links were also necessary.

The most obvious sources for new concepts of the past are the technology of literacy and the notions of time bound up with Christianity. Linear notions of time are central to Christianity theology, but it is only one of three distinctive conceptions of time used by the Church. Belief in God establishes the existence of eternity, a condition which is absolute and timeless. The liturgy is the means by which people in this world can come into contact with God and eternity. Christian worship is constructed around a seasonal cycle of liturgical festivals which celebrate events in Jesus' life. These events establish a fixed point of reference within the progress of human salvation and presume a profoundly historical, linear perception of time. The point about Christianity is not simply that it provided a vehicle for disseminating linear notions of time in this region, but it also established a means of connecting those notions with eternity.

Bradley has rightly drawn attention to the influence of non-linear concepts of time on

perceptions of monuments in prehistoric societies (1987) and Sahlins has characterized the sorts of social and political strategies which arise under this sort of time as *mytho-praxis* (1981), because action is influenced by a mythic framework in which events are seen as reoccurrences and not unique. The introduction of literacy changed all that, because a familiarity with texts promotes linear concepts of time (Goody 1977). Control of such concepts can be a powerful political tool (Driscoll 1988a: 168–73), because unique linear sequences of inheritance can be constructed that follow a particular trajectory including some, while excluding most. In its naked form this is the linearity expressed in genealogies, such as those recited at royal inaugurations. The burial activity at these monuments can be seen as an attempt to establish a physical relationship between recently dead kin and an ancestral past, thereby establishing a claim of descent. In situating royal activities at these sites a sense of political ownership and historical legitimacy was claimed, which sought to develop exclusive access to positions of authority and secure popular support.

From this perspective the appropriation of the ancient sites is a creative act, comparable to the fabrication of the pseudo-historical accounts intended to explain the origins of a people or a dynasty. As we have seen, all ancient places had a meaning, a *dindshenchas,* which transformed an old tomb into a cultural object to be ordered and modified to serve political ends. Linear time is also an essential concept in the construction of histories and of genealogies. Such a concept of linearity is equally essential to understand how political capital might be made from incorporating ancient sites into the ceremonial landscapes of political power within the Celtic kingdoms.

In reading the *dindshenchas* about the Druim-cruey stonecircle built by the giant Fin-Ma-Coul with which we began, one could be forgiven for assuming that the past of the world was timeless and inconsequential. I hope to have shown that in Scotland the interest in managing ancient monuments as a cultural resource had a political consequence which was most pronounced at a particular historical moment during the formation of the Scottish state.

Acknowledgements

Department of Archaeology
University of Glasgow

References

Aitchison, N. 1987. The Ulster cycle: heroic image and historical reality. *Journal of Medieval History*, 13(2): 87–116.

Aitchison, N. 1994. *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland. Monuments, Cosmology and the Past*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Cruithne Press/ Boydell and Brewer.

Alcock, L. 1981. Early historic fortifications in Scotland. In *Hill-fort Studies* (ed G. Guilbert). Leicester: Leicester University Press, pp. 150–80.

Alcock, L. 1988. The activities of potentates in Celtic Britain, AD 500–800: a positivist approach. In *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (eds S. T. Driscoll and M. R. Nieke). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 22–39.

Alcock, L. 1996. The site of the battle of Dunnichen. *Scottish Historical Review*, 75: 130–42.

Alcock, L. and Alcock, E. A. 1992. Reconnaissance excavations on early historic fortifications and other royal sites in Scotland, 1974–85. 5: A, Excavations and other fieldwork at Forteviot, Perthshire, 1981. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 122: 215–87.

Allen, R. and Anderson, J. 1903. *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries.

Anderson, A. O. 1922 (1990 reprint). *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500–1286*. Stamford: Paul Watkins.

Ashmore, P. 1980. Low cairns, long cists and symbol stones. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 110: 346–55.

Bannerman, J. 1974. *Studies in the History of Dál Riata*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

Barclay, G. J. 1983. Sites of the third millennium bc to the first millennium ad, at Northmains, Strathallan, Perthshire. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 113: 122–281.

Barrow, G. W. S. 1992. Popular courts. In *Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages*. London: Hambledon Press, pp. 217–46.

Binchy, D. 1958. The fair of Tailtiu and the feast of Tara. *Eiru*, 18: 113–38.

Binchy, D. 1970. *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*. Oxford: O'Donnell Lectures.

Bradley, R. 1987. Time regained: the creation of continuity. *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 140: 1–17.

Bradley, R. 1993. *Altering the Earth. The Origins of Monuments in Britain and Continental Europe*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Byrne, F. J. 1973. *Irish Kings and High Kings*. London: Batsford.

Campbell. E. N. and Lane, A. forthcoming. *Excavations at Dunadd 1980–81*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

Clancy, T. O. 1995. *Annat* in Scotland and the origins of parishes. *Innes Review*, 46: 91–115.

Close-Brooks, J. 1984. Pictish and other burials. In *Pictish Studies* (eds G. Watson and J. Friell). Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, British Series 125, pp. 87–114.

Davies, W. 1982. *Wales in the Early Middle Ages*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Donnelly, M. n.d. The excavation of a Bronze Age hut circle at Rhiconich, Sutherland, Highland District, 1993. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*.

Driscoll, S. T. 1987. The early historic landscape of Strathearn: the archaeology of a Pictish Kingdom. Doctoral thesis. Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow.

Driscoll, S. T. 1988a. The relationship between history and archaeology: artefacts, documents and power. In *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (eds S.T. Driscoll and M.R. Nieke). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 162–87.

Driscoll, S. T. 1988b. Power and authority in early historic Scotland: Pictish symbol stones and other documents. In *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralisation* (eds J. Geldhill, B. Bender and M. Larson). London: Unwin Hyman, pp. 215–36.

Driscoll, S. T. 1991. The archaeology of state formation in Scotland. In *Scottish Archaeology: New Perceptions* (eds W.S. Hanson and E.A. Slater). Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, pp. 81–111.

Driscoll, S. T. in press. Formalising the mechanisms of state power; early lordship ninth to thirteenth centuries. In *Scottish Power Centres* (eds S. M. Foster and A. MacInnes). Glasgow: Cruithne Press.

Dumville, D. N. 1979. Kingship, genealogies and regnal lists. In *Early Medieval Kingship* (eds P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood). Leeds: University of Leeds, pp. 72–104.

Duncan, A. A. M. 1975. *Scotland the Making of the Kingdom*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.

Duncan, H. B. and Nieke, M. R. 1988. Dál Riata: the establishment and maintenance of an early historic kingdom in northern Britain. In *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (eds S.T. Driscoll and M.R. Nieke). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 6–21.

Eogan, G. 1977. The Iron Age – early Christian settlement of Knowth, Co. Meath, Ireland. In *Ancient Europe and Mediterranean* (ed. V. Markotic). Warminster: Aris & Phillips, pp. 68–76.

Gantz, J. 1976. *The Mabinogion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Goody, J. 1977. *Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grant. A. 1993. Thanes and thanages, from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. In *Medieval Scotland Crown, Lordship and Community* (eds A. Grant and K. J. Stringer). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 39–81.

Henshall, A. 1956. A long cist cemetery at Parkburn sand pit, Lasswade, Midlothian. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 89: 252–83.

Herity, M. 1993. Motes and mounds at royal sites in Ireland. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 123: 127–51.

Hingley, R. 1992. Society in Scotland from 700 BC to AD 200. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 122: 7–54.

Hingley, R. 1996. Ancestors and identity in the later prehistory of Atlantic Scotland: the reuse and reinvention of Neolithic monuments and material culture. *World Archaeology*, 28 (2): 231–43.

Hope-Taylor, B. 1977. *Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*. London: HMSO.

Jackson, K. H. 1964. *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McCone, K. 1990. *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. Maynooth: Maynooth Monographs.

McGavin, J. J. 1995. Robert III's 'Rough Music': charivari and diplomacy in a medieval Scottish court. *Scottish Historical Review*, 74: 144–58.

Mallory, J. (ed.) 1992. *Aspects of the Táin*. Belfast: The Universities Press.

Mallory, J. 1997. *Emain Macha* and Navan Fort. In *Excavations at Navan Fort 1961–71* (D. M. Waterman). Belfast: HMSO, pp. 197–209.

Martin, M. 1698 (1994 reprint). *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* . Edinburgh: Birlinn.

Newman, C. 1997. *Tara – An Archaeological Survey*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy.

Ó Corráin, D. 1971. Irish regnal succession. *Studia Hibernica*, 11: 7–39.

Ó Corráin, D. 1986. Historical need and literary narrative. In *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford, 1983* (eds D. E. Evans, J. G. Griffith and E. M. Jope). Oxford: D.E. Evans, pp. 141–58.

Piggott , S. 1948. Excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian 1947–8. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 82: 261–94.

RCAHMS (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland). 1988.

Argyll: an Inventory of Monuments. Vol. 6 *Mid Argyll and Cowal . Prehistoric and Early Historical Monuments*. Edinburgh: HMSO.

RCAHMS (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland). 1992. *Argyll: an Inventory of Monuments.* Vol. 7 *Mid Argyll and Cowal . Medieval and Later Monuments.* Edinburgh: HMSO.

RCAHMS (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland). 1994. *South-east Perth an Archaeological Landscape*. Edinburgh: HMSO.

Rees, A. and Rees, B. 1961. *Celtic Heritage Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Ritchie, A. (ed.) 1994. *Govan and its Early Medieval Sculpture*. Stroud: Alan Sutton.

Sahlins, M. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Sharpe, R. (ed.). 1995. *Adomnan of Iona Life of Columba*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Sheriff, J. R. 1995. Prehistoric rock carvings in Angus. *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*, 1: 11–22.

Simpson, W. D. 1944. *The Province of Mar*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.

Smith, I. 1991. Sprouston, Roxburghshire: an early Anglian centre of the eastern Tweed basin. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 121: 261–94.

Stevenson, S. 1995. Excavation of a kerbed cairn at Beechhill House, Coupar Angus, Perthshire. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 125: 197–236.

Stringer, K. J. 1985. *Earl David of Huntingdon*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Thomas, A. C. 1971. *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*. Glasgow: Glasgow University Press.

Thomas, A.C. 1981. *Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500*. London: Batsford.

Wailes, B. 1982. The Irish 'royal sites' in history and archaeology. *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 3:1–29.

Warder, A. J. 1882. *Angus or Forfarshire*. Vol. III *Land and People*, pp. 127–36, esp. p. 134.

Warner, R. 1988. The archaeology of early historic high kingship. In *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (eds S.T. Driscoll and M.R. Nieke). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 47–68.

Waterman, D. M. 1997. *Excavations at Navan Fort 1961–71*. Belfast: HMSO.