**The Archaeology of Fortriu – Investigations on the Tarbat Peninsula**

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One element of the Northern Pictland project is focusing on the identification of regional and local centres of power in the prehistoric landscapes of the north-east of Scotland, primarily targeting the Moray Firth Lowlands. Work to date has centred on the Tarbat Peninsula in Easter Ross, potentially one of the key territorial zones within the early medieval Kingdom of Fortriu. The peninsula is rich in evidence of its role as an early medieval hub with a monastery and a series of elaborately carved standing stones dating from the 6th to the 9th century AD.

Archaeological investigations to characterize the landscape prior to and contemporary with this activity have begun on the most conspicuous settlements on the peninsula, a series of stone built monumental roundhouses located along both its northern and southern coastline. The investigations in 2013 identified three massively built Iron Age roundhouses, each located on prominent defended rocky knolls with extensive views across the peninsula and the Moray Firth. These impressive structures are the first indications that the peninsula was a busy and complexly divided prehistoric landscape up to 1000 years prior to the erection of the monastery and the carved stones. These monumental structures must have been impressive and dominate sites on the peninsula which allowed there occupants the opportunity to outwardly express their status and identity. They appear to symbolise more than a just a place to live and may well have represented territorial landholdings or the consolidation of power.

The initial results of these archaeological investigations are highlighted below.

**Tarrel Dun (PHOTOS 1 & 2)**

Located directly on the pebble shore of the east coast of the peninsula in the parish of Fearn is a site known as Tarrel Dun. Tarrel is a small rocky knoll with a sub-circular summit surrounded by sheer cliffs on the seaward side and accessed only from a steep slope running from the beach. At the base of the knoll is a large cave with entrance into its two chambers gained by pebble shore.

The investigations of Tarrel began with an initial survey to identify and map the possible structures on and surrounding the hill. Three walls were identified built onto the landward slope of the knoll; a wall curving around the edge of its upper summit and two further walls located at its base. On the summit a low earthen bank ran around the southern edge.

Archaeological excavations to explore the nature and date of these features were undertaken in September 2013. Excavation on the exposed summit of the knoll uncovered an unexpected find - a linear stone wall running the entire length of the summit, gently curving at its eastern end to a blocked entranceway (**Birds eye view of the wall under excavation - Photo 2**). The wall identified during the survey as encircling the upper summit of the knoll was shown to be the foundations of a once substantial structure built against the natural curving edge of the knoll. At the base of the hill a large rubble bank was uncovered, possibly demarking a pathway up the hill and defending its most exposed and vulnerable side (**Photo 1**).

Due to the precipitous nature of hill the excavations at Tarrel were limited and a lot of questions remain about the function of the walls we found. However, samples of charcoal and charred seeds recovered from beneath the wall on the summit and the one encircling the upper knoll have allowed us to pinpoint the date of this activity. Both walls appear to have been built between 800 and 400 BC, the early Iron Age in Scotland. It is around this time that we see the appearance of monumental stone-built roundhouses on the Atlantic fringes of Scotland, built of stone and commonly known as brochs or duns. It is possible that the knoll may have originally been the location of one of these monumental roundhouses, now only surviving as the base of the curving wall encircling the upper slope of the knoll. If this is the case over half of the hill appears to have eroded away, leaving only a fraction of the original building upstanding. These buildings are seen as defended domestic homesteads and often have internal features such as hearths, stone dressers and stairs. In some areas such as Orkney and Shetland these single storey forms further developed into architecturally complex multi-storey towers.

The wall on the summit of Tarrel remains enigmatic. Although it is clear that we identified a wall of a building or enclosure with a curved end and blocked doorway, its full design and function on this exposed and precipitous knoll remain a mystery. Dates from charred seeds recovered within its interior and recovery of a blue glass bead date its construction and use from around 800 – 500 BC, potentially contemporary with the curved wall below.

Further research will be required to explore the nature of the structures found on the slopes and the summit of Tarrel and seek parallels to them in other parts of Scotland. Evidence from across Western Europe suggests that Iron Age society was deeply embedded in ritual practice, often using watery locations such as the sea or lochs, as a focus. Precipitous places such as promontories, rocky knolls and cliff edges appear to have been used as the focus of this ritual worship, where the spectacular location of these spots may have been seen as closer to nature and their gods. It is possible that Tarrel fits within this tradition, the buildings identified on the hill serving a ritual function rather than a place to live.

**Easter and Wester Rarichie (PHOTOS 3 & 4)**

Easter and Wester Rarichie are two closely located rocky knolls situated at the base of the Hill of Nigg on the east coast of the peninsula. Easter Rarichie is a hill fort defended by a series of walls encircling its slopes and a large earthen bank around its base. It is crowned by a substantial stone walled roundhouse at its summit. Wester Rarichie has a large thick walled roundhouse of similar size to Easter on its summit. Apart from a modest series of gullies and banks located beside the roundhouse, it appears to have no defence or enclosure system parallel to those seen at Easter Rarichie.

Although these sites were well known about and archaeological surveys in the 1950’s had identified and mapped the upstanding structures on each hill, no excavation work had been undertaken to clarify the nature and date of their occupation. Archaeological excavations on the hills were undertaken in two seasons in April and July 2013. On Easter Rarichie the excavations focused on investigating the latest occupation of the roundhouse on the summit, the walls encircling it and areas on the hill which had obviously been artificially flattened. The investigations revealed that the summit roundhouse was constructed from 4m wide walls, suggesting that this building was a monumental structure designed to impress and be highly visible. Within the interior of the house was evidence of roof supports, internal divisions and a paved hearth. A single find, a fragment of coal bracelet, was recovered from the interior. From the charred seeds and charcoal analysed from the floor surfaces, the house was constructed and in use between 400 and 100 BC.

A trench through the two walls enclosing the summit showed these were substantial walls constructed in a similar fashion to the roundhouse. Dating of features identified in the area between these walls revealed that this space was in use at the same time as the house, with postholes and paving suggesting that it may have been the location of further structures such as lean-too shelters. A trench located on a flat terrace area immediately below the summit also had evidence of further structures and the edge of a possible gravel roadway or path.

The roundhouse located on the summit of Wester Rarichie was built of turf, the walls up to 5 m in width. Within the interior a series of postholes and one end of a possible rectangular structure with a well-worn entranceway were identified. Finds recovered from the fills of these postholes included animal bones, burnt clay and a fragment of coal bracelet similar to the one recovered on Easter. Although the two roundhouses were of different construction, their similar size, entrance orientation and wall thickness did suggest that they were built and in use at the same time. However, dating through charred seeds recovered within the interior of the roundhouse on Wester showed that this building was up to 400 years earlier than the roundhouse on Easter, constructed and lived in between 700 and 400 BC.

Excavations beneath the stone wall of the roundhouse on Easter Rarichie showed that there had been substantial occupation prior to the building of the upstanding structure. Although the nature of this occupation is unclear, one theory for the Rarichies is that the early Iron Age occupation of both hills was turf walled houses, constructed at some point prior to 400 BC. The house on Wester was subsequently abandoned in the later 1st millennium BC but the house on Easter was remodelled in stone and continued to be occupied. This theory may also help to explain why the investment of time and resources was more focused on Easter, clearly seen through the complex of walls and banks encircling the hill and the stone-built house, whilst the hill of Wester appears to be bare of enclosures. Perhaps the abandonment of Wester was a deliberate act, a decision to consolidate power and resources to a single settlement site at Easter Rarichie.