

II.

THE HILL FORT ON THE BARMEKIN OF ECHT, ABERDEENSHIRE.

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The Barmekin of Echt is an isolated and somewhat prominent hill, 899 feet in height, with a shape resembling an inverted porridge-bowl. Its lower slopes are covered with broom and bracken, while above there is heather and a remarkable profusion of blaeberrys, crawberries, and cranberries. The hill is best ascended from Echt village *via* Upper Mains, but another favourite mode of "taking" it is from Culfosie on the east side. On a clear day the view is very extensive, and includes the following well-known heights—Bennachie, The Buck of the Cabrach, Ben Avon, and Lochnagar. The low country towards Aberdeen is well seen, with the villages of Echt and Waterton, Dunecht House, and the Loch of Skene. A good local view of the Cluny and Monymusk districts is also obtained northwards. The great fort on the Mither Tap of Bennachie is in full view: from it the forts on Dunnideer, Barra, and Tap o' Noth are also seen, and the last in its turn commands a view of the Moray Firth. Thus on a landing of the Danes it would be an easy matter to arouse the countryside by fire-signals from fort to fort.

The Barmekin fort (fig. 1) consists of five concentric lines of defence, the inner enclosing a roughly circular courtyard, about 340 feet in diameter. This courtyard is girdled by the first of the five lines of defence—a massive drystone wall, about 12 feet thick, and still in places 5 feet high. Forty feet beyond this is the second wall, which also had been a formidable defence, probably at least 8 feet thick. Both these walls are now much plundered and cast down, and for the most part present the appearance merely of a mass of *débris* or rickle of loose stones, many of which are of enormous size. In a number of places, however, the walls still exhibit their ancient structure, and are seen to be carefully fitted together (fig. 2), the largest and smoothest stones being employed on the two outsides so as to secure a sort of facing. There are no marks of tooling on any of the stones. It is only in these places that the actual thickness of the walls may be fixed: elsewhere disintegration has spread out the rickle of loose stones over a far greater area than that of the ancient foundations beneath them. To give stability to the uncemented structure, perpendicular bonding stones are introduced at intervals, one or two of which have been exposed *in situ* by the collapse of the wall around them. Some of these bonding stones have been roughly wrought with shoulders—advantage being taken of their natural joints—in order

to grip the masonry above. A similar method of strengthening a dry-stone wall was reported by Dr Joseph Anderson from a number of the neolithic chambered cairns in Caithness.

The space between these two main walls is so wide that an enemy who had once succeeded in entering it would have had ample elbow-room to spread round the inner wall and develop an attack against its weakest

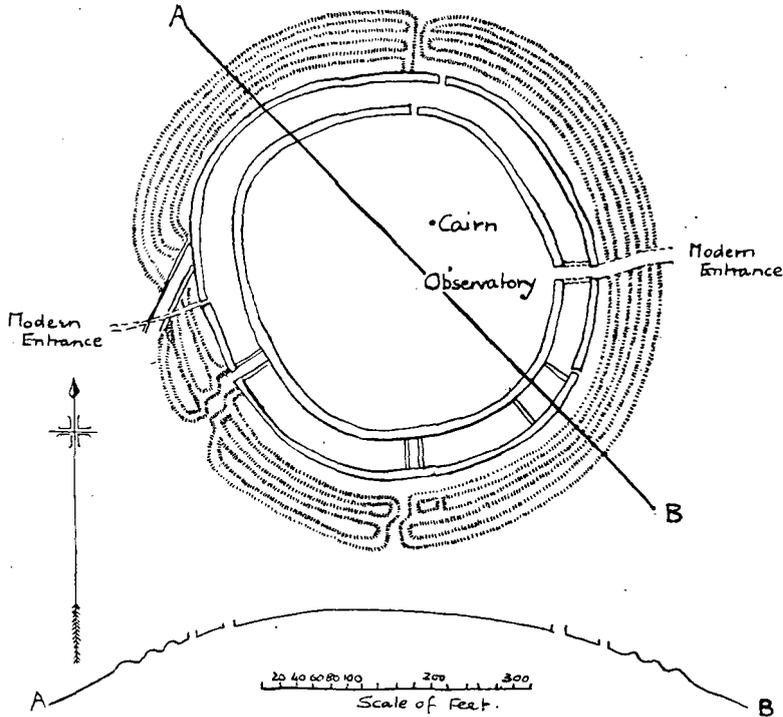


Fig. 1. Plan and section of the Fort on the Barmekin of Echt.

point. Accordingly this space has been crossed by a number of stone traverses connecting the two walls. These would restrict an intruder at any point to a comparatively narrow space, commanded by the defenders on the inner wall, where there would be no freedom of movement. A number of these traverses—rough stone walls about 3 or 4 feet thick—still remain on the south and south-west sides of the fort; and it cannot be doubted that they were once continued all round, though their foundations have either been removed or more probably lie buried in the coarse heath.

Outside these two main walls there are three subsidiary envelopes or

lines of defence. The distance between each was probably about 15 feet originally, though it is hard to be exact owing to the covering up of their foundations and filling in of the interstices. A like space seems to intervene between the innermost one and the outer main wall. At present these outer ramparts and the intervening spaces resemble the banks and ditches of an earthwork; but the frequent traces of stone all round the crests of the banks indicate that these merely cover the foundations of walls similar to though slighter than those which are still preserved. Evidently the three outer walls have been systematically removed to build dykes in the surrounding fields. Similarly it is clear that what have been described



Fig. 2. Inner aspect of second main Wall, looking north.

as "trenches" are simply the narrow spaces between the walls, which have acquired this appearance owing to the gradual covering up of the latter by loose soil and heath. The traces of stonework on the mounds are particularly frequent on the north and west sides, where numerous bonding stones remain upright in position. Without excavation it is of course impossible to give an accurate statement of the thickness of the three outer walls: clearly they were much slighter than the two main ramparts, and were probably not more than 5 or 6 feet thick.

Through this formidable system of defences there are at present a number of openings. Some of these are palpably modern; only three have any claim to be regarded as ancient entrances. They are on the north, south-west, and south faces of the fort. There are variations in detail, but the general principle is that the path, about 3 feet wide, is zigzagged through the defensive envelope—an arrangement which would materially increase the difficulties of forcing a passage. It is not

uncommon in early defensive works—for example, the well-known fort at Arbory in Lanarkshire may be cited. Occasionally, too, we find it employed in mediæval castles of a primitive type, such as Kinclaven, Auchen, and Dunolly. As an additional security the two southern entrances were carried across the wide space which separates the main walls between a couple of the traverses, set close together; and it is a remarkable fact that in the south-west entrance there is no trace of a gap in the inner of these walls, while in the south entrance no gap is visible in either the inner or the outer wall. The interspaces between the three outer walls are carefully closed where the entrances pass through them by lateral walls, which in the south-west entrance are formed of large stones set on end (fig. 3). A little east of the south entrance a stone

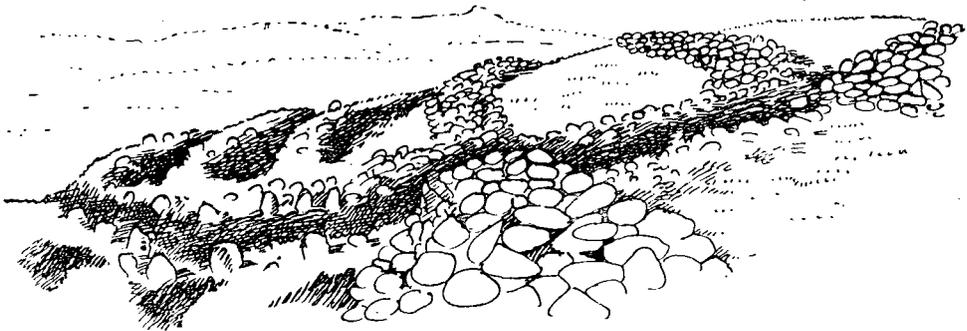


Fig. 3. View of S.W. Entrance, looking north.

traverse, very regularly built, is visible, connecting the inner two of the three outer walls, so that the same system of defence was probably extended to all five lines.

There is a very remarkable and puzzling feature on the west face of the fort. Here a raised ramp of earth, about 16 or 20 feet broad, revetted with great masses of stone, is carried diagonally across the three outer ramparts till it comes up against the outer main wall. In this wall there is no trace of an entrance—indeed, a very fine portion of the original facing is seen on the outside just at this point. The mounds of the three outer walls curve in towards this ramp in a manner which clearly proves its antiquity. A little south of the junction of the ramp with the outer main wall there is a modern breach in the latter, exposing a fine bonding stone *in situ*. Hence a narrow path holds straight down the slope, thus crossing the ramp obliquely. The stones which revet the ramp are mostly of enormous size, many being set on end. The whole structure, both in general character and in detail of building, recalls the “gallery” excavated by Miss MacLagan in the fort of Bennachie. A possible explanation is

that this ramp was associated with a raised outer door in the main wall. In all likelihood the Barmekin was not occupied permanently, as the Bennachie fort seems to have been. Its characteristics are rather those of a *place d'armes* and entrenched camp of refuge, whither the inhabitants of the district could repair, with their household goods and cattle, upon notice of a hostile incursion. For such a purpose a wide main entrance would clearly be essential. Once everything was secured within the walls, this entrance would be blocked: then the narrow zigzag openings would remain the sole means of ingress and egress during actual siege. It may be, however, that the ramp was built during the construction of the fort, in order to facilitate carriage of the stores into the area.

The interior of the fortress is described by Dr Mitchell as "reduced to a uniform level"; in Miss MacLagan's section it is shown concave or saucer-shaped. Actually it is gently domed, and is clearly the natural, untouched, swelling summit of the hill. There are no traces of hut circles, but occasional protruding stones and a frequent hard feeling underfoot render it probable that the foundations of such exist beneath the heather. A large portion of glaciated bedrock is exposed on the north-west side. Within the enclosure is a modern cairn, and south-east of it a few broken masses of concrete indicate the foundations of the mounting for an astronomical telescope, erected here on the occasion of the Transit of Venus in 1882. In connexion with this, apparently, or when the trees on the hill were cut down, a cart-track about 10 feet wide was ruthlessly broken right through the enceinte on the east side; the stones then removed from the two main ramparts were piled up on either side of the cart-track in a manner which at first recalls the ancient traverses, though a close view at once brings into evidence the fortuitous arrangement of the stones. Except for the traverses, no foundations are visible between the two main walls. The width of this space is very remarkable, and it probably afforded shelter for the cattle and horses of the besieged inmates. Besides their defensive value, the traverses might be useful for parcelling out the animals according to their owners.

The absence of a proper water supply has frequently been noted in our ancient Scottish hill forts, but the existence of a well on the Barmekin seems to be indicated by a patch of marsh and rushes in the outer ramparts at a point a little east of the north entrance. In wet weather the so-called "trenches" here are filled with water—evidently the outflow from a spring on the summit.

This great fort has attracted considerable attention from antiquaries and topographers, local and otherwise. The description and plans of Skene, in the second volume of *Archæologia Scotica*, may be consulted; but the drawings of Miss MacLagan are entirely misleading. A fairly

complete bibliography is given by Mr G. M. Fraser in *Aberdeen Free Press*, 20th June 1913. In the *Proceedings* of the Society for the year 1889-90, mention is made of an axe "of greenstone, thirteen inches by three and seven-eighths, polished on each face at the cutting end, found at the Barmekin of Echt." Dr John Hill Burton, in chapter iii. of his *History of Scotland*, describes the Barmekin as "in some respects the rival of the Caterthun. The ramparts are not so vast," he continues, "but they are interesting from a higher state of preservation. There are some remnants of a face of masonry, leading to the supposition that the ramparts were not originally mere heaps of stones, but had been regularly built. The device for covering the entrance by zigzagging it through the several ramparts is still visible, and adjoining the fortress there are some of the circles commonly called Druidical. Of these we know nothing but that they stand where they are, leaving their relation to the fortress open to any amount of guessing."

After the signing of the National Covenant in the Greyfriars' Kirk at Edinburgh in 1637, war between the rival parties was clearly imminent, and the air was tense with expectations of strife. In these circumstances, what more natural than that the armed defenders of this ancient stronghold should rally in spirit to the scenes of their prowess, and by supernatural manifestations warn the world of coming bloodshed? The story is told in thrilling language by the parson of Rothiemay, who gives a wonderful and most circumstantial account of the ghost drums, cannon shot, and other eerie sounds which were heard on this hill and in the neighbourhood. For our present purpose the description which he gives of the fort is not without interest, as showing what views were held of its origin in the seventeenth century. "Upon the topp of this swelling hill," he tells us, "ther are to be seen old ruined walles and trenshes, which the people, by a receaved traditione, affirme to have been built at such tyme as the Pictes were maisters of Marre" (*History of Scots Affairs*, ed. Spalding Club, vol. i. p. 57).

I have to thank my friends Mr J. Hartley Henderson and Mr G. M. Cochran for help in preparing the plan, a work rendered very arduous by the roughness of the ground, and Mr A. Graeme Robertson for kindly supplying the photograph.