

## 7. A ROMAN SIGNAL-STATION ON EILDON HILL NORTH, ROXBURGHSHIRE.

In 1950 the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments made a new survey of the great hill-fort on Eildon Hill North<sup>1</sup> in preparation for the forthcoming *Inventory of Roxburghshire*. The main features of this fort—notably the triple defences nearly a mile in circumference, and the numerous hut floors still visible within them—have been described in considerable detail by Christison;<sup>2</sup> but his account surprisingly makes no mention of a circular, ditched enclosure, 35 ft. in internal diameter, which is situated amongst the huts at the W. end of the summit of the hill.<sup>3</sup> No definite conclusion regarding the purpose or date of this enclosure could be drawn from the superficial remains. Although the huts of several Early Iron Age forts in SE. Scotland are characterised by similar ring-ditches,<sup>4</sup> a hut of this kind would be anomalous in the Eildon fort, where all the 300 or so surviving hut sites are of the ditchless, platform type. Nor,

<sup>1</sup> O.S. 6-inch map, Roxburghshire, sheet N. VIII; Nat. Grid ref. NT(36)/555328.

<sup>2</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, xxviii (1893-4), 111-9.

<sup>3</sup> The only previous reference to this enclosure appears to be in Milne's *Description of the Parish of Melrose*, 2nd ed. (1768), 2, where it is stated that "On the Head of the Hill may be seen the *Prætorium*, or the General's Quarter, surrounded with many huts." The term "*Prætorium*" was often fancifully applied by 18th-century antiquaries to enigmatic round structures or earthworks.

<sup>4</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXIII (1948-9), 2.

in view of the complete absence of any trace of an internal mound, did it seem likely that the ditch had originally surrounded a cairn or barrow. The size of the enclosure, and the suspicion of a causeway across the ditch on the NE. arc, suggested however that the work might represent the remains of a Roman signal-station of the type found on the Gask ridge, which exhibits a circular ditch but no rampart.<sup>1</sup> A signal-post crowning this natural eyrie at a height of 1327 ft. O.D. would not only provide a direct link between the fort at Newstead and the recently discovered fort at Oakwood, in the valley of the Ettrick Water,<sup>2</sup> but would also be visible from as far afield as Berwick, 30 miles to the E.; the Cheviot Hills, 20 miles to the SE.; Peel Fell and Greatmoor Hill, 20 miles to the S.; White Coomb, Broad Law and Dollar Law, 25 miles to the W.; the Moorfoot Hills, 17 miles to the NW.; the Lammermuirs, 15 miles to the N.; and Crossland, near St Abb's Head, 30 miles to the NE. Indeed, granted that the great strategic centre of Newstead would require the services of a long-range signal-post, capable of receiving and transmitting intelligence messages with maximum speed, no more suitable site could be found than the summit of North Eildon; for the top of the Mid Hill, though some 50 ft. higher, is out of sight of the fort.

In pursuance of this hypothesis, therefore, the writers, assisted by Messrs A. C. McLaren and J. C. Wallace, spent three days on the hill in April 1952, and a further three days in June 1953, during which time a section was cut across the enclosure from NNW. to SSE., the central portion and the E. quadrant of the interior were uncovered, and an entrance-causeway was identified on the N. side (fig. 11).<sup>3</sup> We are now authorised by the Commissioners to publish this note to amplify the short statement made in the *Inventory*.

The ditch was rock-cut and measured 7 ft. in width by 10–16 ins. in depth. The slight depth implies that it was not intended as a defence, but merely served to define the limits of the enclosure, and perhaps to keep the interior dry by draining the ground. The only object found in the filling was a piece of Roman tile which was resting on the face of the scarp, almost at the bottom of the ditch, at the S. end of the section.<sup>4</sup> On the N. side the ditch was interrupted by a roughly paved causeway, between the paving-stones of which were several fragments of native Iron Age pottery, and one chip of finer, buff-coloured ware, probably from a Roman coarse vessel. Excavation within the enclosure revealed that the natural surface, composed of weathered rock, had first been levelled and then covered with a pitching of stones 10–12 ins. thick; this pitching contained a scatter of animal bones, which, like the native sherds found at the entrance, doubtless represent the destruction, in the process of levelling, of an earlier, native occupation-floor. Search in the E. quadrant for a palisade, bordering the inner lip of the ditch, yielded negative results, but exploration in the central area was rewarded by the discovery of ten post-holes. Four of these holes, including a large double hole precisely in the centre of the enclosure, were of recent origin, and had simply been dug to hold bonfire-supports<sup>5</sup>; but the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv (1900–1), 25–31; Collingwood, *Archaeology of Roman Britain*, 58 and fig. 14 (especially No. 4).

<sup>2</sup> *Supra*, p. 81ff.

<sup>3</sup> Our thanks are due to the Buccleuch Estates Ltd., and to Lord William Scott, for permission to excavate; and to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland who provided a grant towards the cost of the work.

<sup>4</sup> The tile is unusually soft and thin for Roman manufacture, but bears on one side a trace of the semicircular scoring, done with the finger, which is often found between the flanges at the ends of Roman roof-tiles.

<sup>5</sup> All these holes contained the stumps of the original timbers, together with other miscellaneous debris (*e.g.* nails and pieces of tar) from the bonfires which have been lit on the site in living memory.

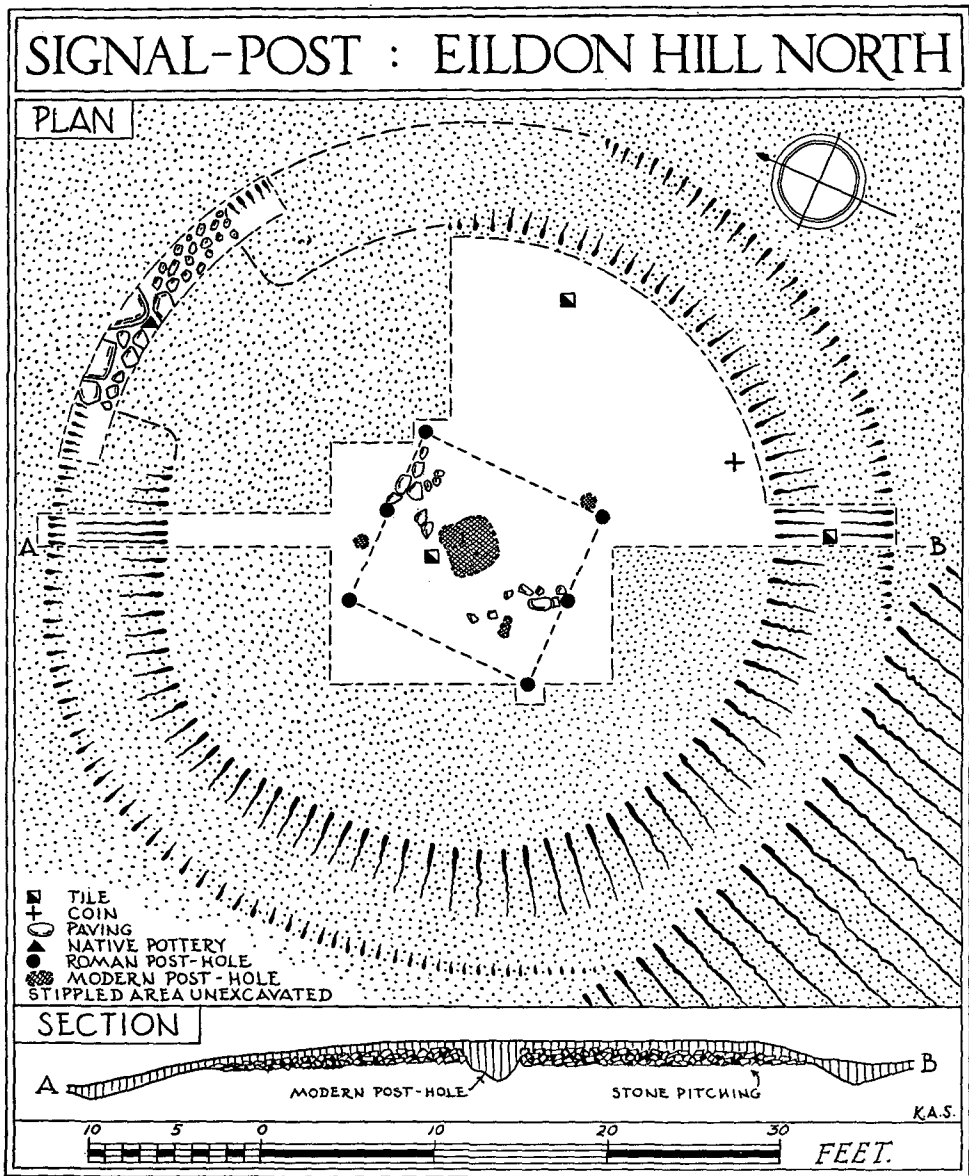


Fig. 11.

remaining six were similar in size, measuring 8–9 ins. in diameter and 3–4 ft. in depth, and defined a rectangular structure 11 ft. 4 ins. long and 10 ft. 6 ins. wide. Taken in conjunction with the features already described, there can be no doubt that this structure was a Roman signal-tower, built of wood in the Gask tradition; and additional proof was furnished by the discovery of three more pieces of Roman tile in the interior of the enclosure, one of which bears a notched decoration along one edge and may have been part of an antefix. The decision to roof the tower with tiles, rather than with lighter material (*e.g.* oak shingles), is understandable in view of the exposed nature of the site, and presumably explains the provision of six uprights in place of the normal complement of four. The two extra posts, in the centres of the N. and S. sides, would thus support the ridge-pole. The depth of the post-holes suggests that the tower may have been two storeys high, and a little evidence survived to show that the basement floor had been paved, but the position of the door (if such existed at ground-level) is uncertain.<sup>1</sup>

The only specifically datable relic found during the excavation—a worn *dupondius* of Trajan, minted in A.D. 116–7,<sup>2</sup> which was lying on top of the stone pitching in the E. quadrant—would seem to imply that the signal-post belongs not to the Flavian but to the Antonine occupation of the district, these being the only probable alternatives. On the other hand, since the coin was unstratified, it cannot be assumed that it was necessarily lost while the signal-post was in use, rather than at some later period. Architectural considerations, in fact, favour a Flavian date for the construction of the post, for, although the Gask series is undated, similar small wooden signal-towers on the German frontier originated in the late 1st century, and had, in most cases, been replaced by stone towers by the middle of the 2nd century; while detached stone signal-towers are already found on the northern frontier of Britain as early as the time of Hadrian.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it can hardly be a coincidence that the dimensions of the Eildon tower are precisely the same as those of the S. tower at the W. gate of the Agricola fort at Oakwood (*supra*, p. 91).<sup>4</sup> On general grounds, therefore, a Flavian date seems most probable for the Eildon tower, and it is reasonable to suppose that it would be succeeded, in the Antonine period, by a stone tower matching the stone signal-tower that is known to have existed on the summit of Rubers Law, 11 miles to the S.<sup>5</sup> These stone towers were not normally enclosed by a ditch, and leave no impression on the surface once the superstructure has been thoroughly robbed. Lastly, it is perhaps worth recording that the memory, if not the actual remains, of the beacons lit in Roman times may be ultimately responsible for the name which the three hills bear to-day. For although, in the absence of early forms, the etymology of the word Eildon is uncertain, Dr Schramm has informed us that it might well be derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Æled dūn*, the “Fire Hill.”

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<sup>1</sup> The signal-towers illustrated on Trajan's column have their doors at the front, facing the entrance to the enclosure, but in the case of the Black Hill signal-tower (*P.S.A.S.*, LXXIV (1939–40), 37–40) the door was at the back. Some stone towers, on the other hand, had no entrance at ground-level (*T. Cumb. and West. A.S.*, N.S., XXXIII (1933), 242).

<sup>2</sup> *B.M.C.*, III, no. 1053. We are indebted to Dr John Allan for this identification.

<sup>3</sup> *T. Cumb. and West. A.S.*, loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Professor Richmond's observations on the standardisation of Roman timbers in *P.S.A.S.*, LXXIII (1938–9), 151.

<sup>5</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, XXXIX (1904–5), 219–32; LXXXIII (1948–9), 172–4.