

The Ring of Castlehill, Caithness – a Viking fortification?

by Eric Talbot

One of the most distinctive hallmarks of the Anglo-Normans in Scotland is the earthwork castle. Most castles of earth and timber were of the motte-and-bailey form, but occasionally there were constructed more basic defences, 'ringworks', which consisted of a circular or oval bank and ditch. Such a site, by nature, is the one under consideration; it lies half a mile to the south of Barroch Farm in the parish of Bower (NGR ND 282618).

In a recent article (Talbot 1974b) I included the Ring of Castlehill in a list of ringwork castles with some reservation since I had not visited it. The Royal Commission description (RCAMS 1911, 4) does, however, suggest a site of this kind, and a visit (30.7.75) bolstered my view that a medieval earthwork is in evidence. The ringbank has a diameter, internally, of *c* 28.5 m and has a maximum height of *c* 1 m. A well-defined ditch (*c* 10.5 m wide but relatively shallow) has a surrounding counterscarp bank, and there is a causeway across the ditch at the N side of the site. At this N side the eroded counterscarp bank has traces of stone walling on its outer face, which may be an entrance feature or the remnants of a revetment to the counterscarp bank. The outer side is, in fact, slightly higher than the inner, and this may indicate that it was externally revetted for its entire length.

For obvious reasons earthwork castles are rare in the north of Scotland. If the site is to be seen as a Norman-influenced form then a function as a campaign castle, or a more permanent fortification, built during William the Lion's activities in Caithness, might be invoked (Anderson 1873, 165; Crawford 1977). If the site is to be seen with a Norse background, a possible Orcadian parallel can be quoted. In recent discussion (Talbot 1974a, 40), I have suggested that at Cubbie Roo's castle, on Wyre in Orkney, the first phase might not necessarily be the stone tower, but the encircling stone-revetted earthen bank.

Enclosure earthworks of a compact circular or oval form represent a basic kind of defence, and it might be foolhardy to suggest that Castlehill and the enclosure at Cubbie Roo's castle may be a distinctive element in 'Viking' fortification. The view that some ringworks may have a Viking ancestry has been expressed in relation to Welsh research (Alcock 1963, 88-9) and the circular earthworks of Pembrokeshire, in particular, might include amongst their number some with a Viking origin. In England an attempt has been made to suggest possible Danish earthworks in the eastern counties (Dyer 1972).

The Ring of Castlehill is an enigmatic site. The setting indicates the use of boggy ground as a natural defensive feature. No aid can come, however, from an assessment of this siting. The earthwork lies close to a routeway which may have led from Huna to Watten but this does not bring us any closer to providing a date and background for the monument.

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