

Reconnaissance excavations on Early Historic fortifications and other royal sites in Scotland, 1974–84: 1, Excavations near St Abb's Head, Berwickshire, 1980

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ABSTRACT

This is the first of a series of reports of a 10-year campaign of excavations on Early Historic fortifications. The preamble considers the sampling and chronology of such sites, while a two-level report describes the identification of a large secular fort and an important monastery near St Abb's Head.

INTRODUCTION

In 1974, the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow, began a systematic campaign of excavations on fortified sites which were dated by historical references to the seventh–ninth centuries AD. A preliminary list of such sites was given in these *Proceedings* in 1976 (Alcock 1976) and was followed by a site by site discussion of the documentary evidence and visible remains (Alcock 1981a). It became apparent that these forts were certainly or probably royal; and the campaign was therefore extended to include the unfortified, but certainly royal, site of Forteviot. After 10 years, the field campaign has been ended, in order that the results may be fully assessed.

Preliminary accounts of all the excavations have already been issued, and it is now proposed to publish in the *Proceedings* a series of detailed excavation reports. These reports are necessarily site-related, but their implications have also been considered in the context of a wider synthesis (L Alcock 1986). It should be added that publication will not follow the order of excavation, but will be determined by the research resources available from time to time.

In the present paper, the general character of the campaign is set out as a necessary preliminary to understanding the individual excavation accounts. The first report, that on research in the vicinity of St Abb's Head, Berwickshire, in 1980, then follows. This, like the others of the series, is largely the work of a research assistant (in this case, Sally Foster); but of course I take full responsibility for the statements made.

HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

An extended discussion of the documentary evidence for each site will be presented in the individual excavation reports, but it seems desirable that a digest of the evidence should be given in

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this introductory section, together with a list of sites, especially because this differs from earlier lists (eg Alcock 1976; 1981a). It must be emphasized that the only concern of the campaign of excavations was with those sites where written evidence points to an occupation in the period AD 600–900. A wider list, including sites dated on the basis not merely of documentary sources, but of artefacts as well, will be found in E A Alcock (1986).

THE EXCAVATED SITES (illus 1)

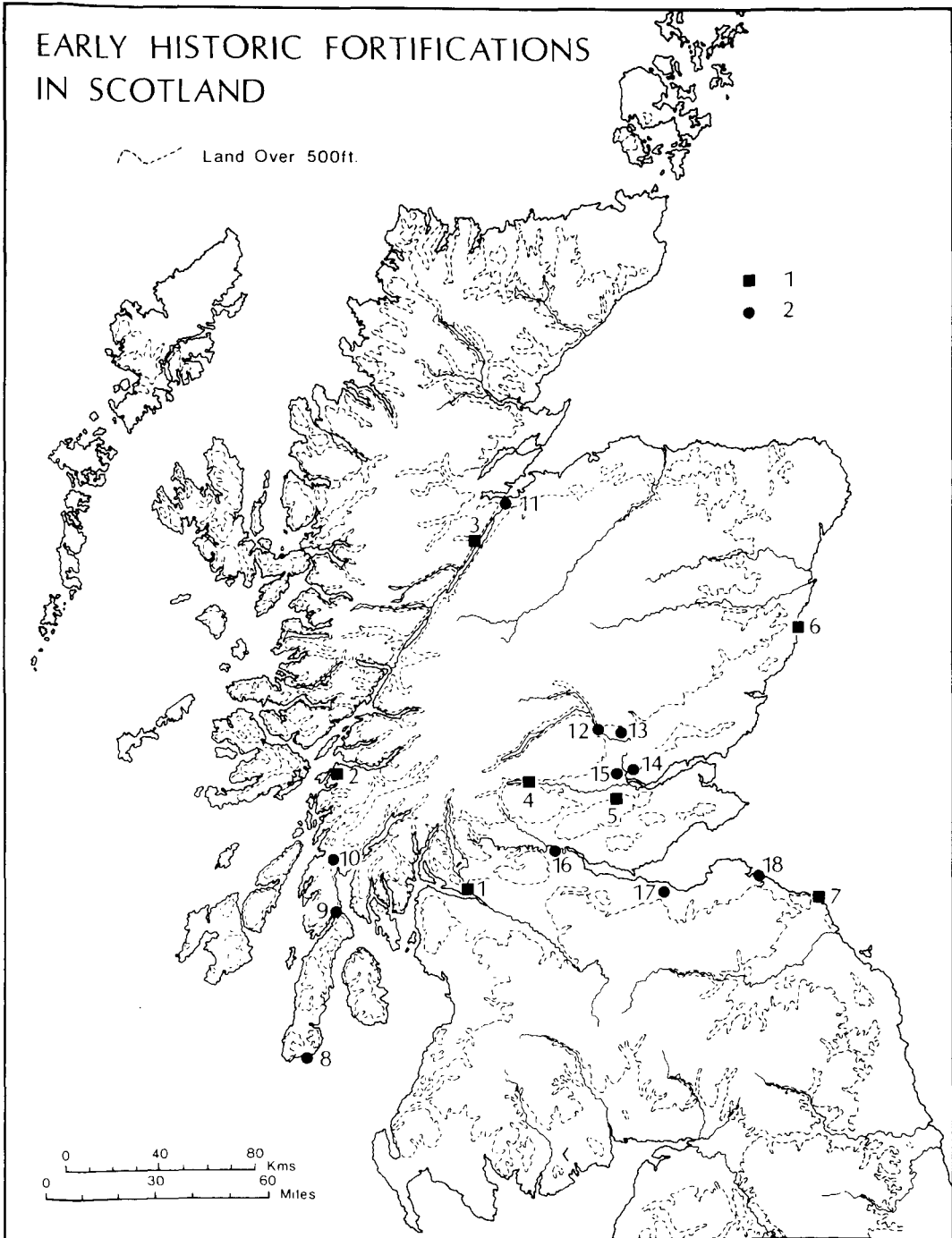
The first site to be examined, in 1974–5, was Castle Rock, Dumbarton. To quote only two secure references, this was described in AD 731 by Bede as a ‘strongly defended political centre of the Britons’; while the *Annals of Ulster* record its destruction in AD 870 by two Viking kings from Dublin. Artefacts and radiocarbon dates fully supported the historical chronology (Alcock 1976). From the Strathclyde Britons, attention then turned to the Picts at Dundurn in 1976–7 (Alcock & Driscoll 1985) and the Scots at Dunollie in 1978 (Alcock 1979a). Both places appear in the *Annals* as forts that were besieged, burned or destroyed in the late seventh and early eighth centuries. Again, both the radiometric dates and the artefacts are fully consistent with the *Annals*. (Parenthetically, it should be recalled that Scottic Dunadd is another historically-documented fort which did not, however, form part of the campaign, because its artefactual associations were already well known from other excavations: Christison 1905; Craw 1930; Lane 1984.)

In 1980, the campaign was directed to the British or Anglian fort implied in the names *Urbs Coludi* and *Colodaesburg*, given to a seventh-century Northumbrian monastery respectively by Bede and by Eddius, biographer of Bishop Wilfrid. The results are set out in detail below. The three final seasons of excavation turned again to Pictland: in 1981 to the Pictish (and subsequently Scottish) royal centre at Forteviot in the lower Earn valley, where no relevant structural or artefactual evidence was found (Alcock 1982); in 1983 to Urquhart by Loch Ness, where, as Adomnan tells us, St Columba had converted a noble Pictish household, and where pre-Viking period activity was demonstrated on the evidence of radiocarbon dates; and in 1984 to Dunnottar Castle, the most likely candidate for the seventh-century *Dun Fother* of the *Annals*. In fact, no trace of early activity was found beneath the castle, and an alternative identification may be needed (interim statement in Foster *et al* 1985).

From this brief catalogue, it will be clear firstly that the campaign ranged widely: indeed, the deliberate policy was to examine forts among each of the four nations or peoples of Early Historic Scotland, the Angles, the Britons, the Picts and the Scots. Secondly, the policy demanded a comparable intensity of field effort for each site: seasons of no more than three weeks, with a work force of 12 to 15 students and volunteers, and no more than two seasons on any one site, however complex or rewarding it might be. When the present series of papers has been completed, it will provide a basis for an informed judgement as to which sites might most profitably be explored further.

OTHER HISTORICALLY-DOCUMENTED FORTS

Among other historically-documented forts which have not been excavated, the most definite identification is that of *Etin* or *Din Eidynd*, mentioned both in the *Annals* and in British poetry, as Castle Rock, Edinburgh. The fortified place which Bede called *urbs Giudi* may likewise underlie Castle Rock, Stirling, but this is by no means certain (contrast Rutherford 1976; Jackson 1981). *Aberte*, besieged in AD 712 according to the *Annals*, may be the headland of Dunaverty in Kintyre. *Dynbaer*, where Bishop Wilfred was imprisoned in AD 680, is certainly Dunbar, and probably the rock stack on which the medieval castle was built. The royal fortress of Brude, visited by St Columba, may be the hillfort of Craig Phadraig, which certainly has appropriate artefacts and radiocarbon dates, but



ILLUS 1 Map of Early Historic forts and other royal sites in Scotland. 1 – sites excavated 1974–84: 1 Dumbarton; 2 Dunollie; 3 Urquhart; 4 Dundurn; 5 Forteviot; 6 Dunnottar; 7 St Abb’s Head. 2 – other historically documented sites: 8 Dunaverty; 9 Tarbert; 10 Dunadd; 11 Inverness; 12 Dunkeld; 13 Clunie; 14 Scone; 15 Inveralmond; 16 Stirling; 17 Edinburgh; 18 Dunbar

Inverness itself should not be ruled out. *Castellum Credi*, according to the *Annals* the scene of a battle in AD 728, may possibly be an early reference to Scone, while *Tarpert Boitter*, burned in 712 and 731 seems likely to be Tarbert, Loch Fyne: it should be added that the *Boitter* qualifier has never been explained. Among ninth-century sites *Cluana* is the fortified hill of Clunie beside the loch of that name between Dunkeld and Blairgowrie. Dunkeld is mentioned along with Clunie in an account of Danish ravaging in the mid-ninth century, but it is uncertain whether the reference is to King's Seat, Dunkeld, above the narrow gorge of the river Tay, or to the valley bottom beside the cathedral. To complete this list, *Rathinveramon*, 'fort at the mouth of the Almond', is possibly the Roman fort of Bertha, beside the confluence of the Almond and the Tay.

ON SAMPLING EARLY HISTORIC FORTS

In one respect, the tactics of these excavations may appear distinctly outmoded: all but one of the sites were examined principally by cross-rampart trenches, rather than by some statistically controlled sampling of the interior. These tactics may, however, be readily justified. In five out of seven cases, the site was initially identified because of the 'fort' element (*dun* or *burh*) in its name. This indicated that fortification was a major element in the site's very existence; and it was therefore good policy to concentrate on examining those features which were essential to the site's basic function. Moreover, the building and destruction of defences, while they may not tell the whole history even of a fortification, none the less represent major phases of public activity or social endeavour. Dating evidence is likely to occur in a firm structural context. Finally, given the overall length of ramparts, a trench 3.0 m wide may be regarded as minimal sacrifice.

By contrast, however well the strategy is designed, sampling the interior may produce artefacts with no structural context: evidence, no doubt, for activity on the site, but not necessarily relevant to its functioning as a fort. Given the high level of intrasite variability which has been recognized on sites where the interior has been widely explored, even the best devised sampling may fail to produce a comprehensive picture of the range of activities. Finally, there is a high risk that some, at least, of the sampling units may sacrifice the fragile remains of drystone or timber buildings, which could only have been understood, or even recognized, in an open area excavation.

THE CHARACTER OF THE EXCAVATION REPORTS

A little should be said here about the character of this series of excavation reports. Firstly, as would be expected, they attempt to conform to the policy set out in the Editorial in *Proceedings*, 113 (1983); in other words, they are written as two-level reports. That is to say, the full account, with all details of structures, stratification, and finds will be published in microfiche. The text printed in the *Proceedings* will be an illustrated summary of the excavations, paying particular attention to major structures and finds, and setting out the basic evidence and arguments for the hypotheses and generalization which the excavation has generated. It is hoped that this summary will fulfil two major functions: to inform readers who are not themselves specialists in Early Historic archaeology about significant discoveries and interpretations in that field; and to guide specialists to the evidence presented in detail in microfiche.

Two important limitations to the presentation must also be explained. Firstly, as explicit excavation reports, these accounts are deliberately site-oriented. Each is concerned with a tightly-defined complex of archaeological phenomena, normally limited by clear, objective structural features, namely the site's defences. In other words, the report concentrates on the site in itself, rather than exploring its wider matrix, whether environmental, cultural or chronological.

This limitation no doubt will give the reports a somewhat old-fashioned appearance. Its justification is, in part, that the first responsibility of an excavator, and the first purpose of an excavation report, must be to present the evidence and observations arising from the excavation as speedily as possible. In the case of the present campaign, the wider research which would have been needed in order to present a larger background would have delayed inordinately the publication of the evidence. Beyond this, it is my belief that the correct place for the wider view is in a large work of synthesis. This I hope to present in another place.

The second limitation is that the reports are closely related to the strategy of the excavation-campaign: that is, to the identification of royal sites of the Early Historic period, and to the examination of their defences. But out of the seven excavations, only one, Dundurn, fell wholly and solely within the period of interest; whereas at four others – Dumbarton, Dunnottar, Dunollie and Urquhart – a large part of our field effort was taken up with features of the 12th century and later. Funds and expertise have not been available to study those later structures and artefacts fully. In consequence, they are dealt with in summary fashion even in the microfiched full account. It is hoped that there will none the less be sufficient information in the fiche to guide medieval and later students towards matters of interest to them.

CHRONOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Early Historic period is, by definition, one in which the basic chronology is established within a framework of dates derived from written sources. In the reports which follow, it will be found that the first pointer to a site is normally a historical reference, either with a built-in date, or with one which can be inferred both readily and reliably. But, in dealing with the chronology of structures, much use is made of radiocarbon dates; and artefact-typology is also cited as a chronological indicator. This introduction must therefore conclude with a comparison of the three methods: with the essential warning, however, that we are by no means comparing like with like. (For a wider discussion of these problems: Alcock 1971; 1973, 154–60; Alcock 1981a, 151–7).

Artefact-typology provides no independent basis for dating sites; rather it is dependent on a chronology established by other means. This is best demonstrated by the case of the pottery known as E ware, a range of cooking pots, bowls and beakers found widely on forts and settlements in Britain and Ireland. It has long been known from Dunadd, which has annalistic dates of AD 683 and 736; and on this basis it has been attributed to the late-seventh and early-eighth centuries. This is now confirmed by its discovery at Dunollie, which has a similar range of dates. This dating can then be transferred to other sites which yield E ware, provided it is recognized that the historical dates do not provide an all-inclusive dating bracket. There can be no reasonable doubt that the time-range of the pottery extends both before and after the Dunadd-Dunollie dates.

At first sight a date derived from a historical reference is both accurate and precise. This is particularly so in the case of the dated events in the *Annals*, which give the appearance of having been recorded year by year, contemporaneously with the events themselves. Less precise, but still presumably accurate, are the dates for events which are recorded as having happened in the reign of a particular king, whose regnal dates can be established from other sources. It must be recognized, however, that problems do arise with historically-derived dates. A minor one is that, during the Early Historic period, the beginning of the year had not been standardized at 1st January: dates in September or March were also possible. As a result, events occurring in the autumn or winter months may be misdated by a year – but no more – in either direction in terms of our present day chronology.

There are also two graver difficulties. Firstly, the system of *Anno Domini*, year of grace, chronology with which we are familiar was only slowly being introduced in western Europe through

the sixth and later centuries, replacing Roman or other pagan systems, as well as a Christian era which derived not from the Incarnation but from the Crucifixion. Consequently, we cannot be certain that the original source of a date was fully conversant with *Anno Domini* dating. Even more serious, the date would originally have been recorded in Roman numerals, with considerable possibility of miscopying, for instance of *v* (five) for *x* (10), or of the loss of digits in the series *i-iiii* (1-4). None of the manuscripts which we possess today is an original of the sixth-ninth centuries, so we must always allow for the dates being garbled or corrupt.

Indeed, when we find in the *Annals* that the same fort was burned twice within a brief space of years – for instance, Dunollie in AD 686 and 698 – we may well wonder whether one event is merely a duplication of the other, the product of corrupt transmission. Such problems may cast doubts on the overall validity of annalistic dates: but this would be too severely sceptical a view. We may reasonably believe that events of the kind reported in the *Annals* did indeed occur at the places mentioned in the later seventh and earlier eighth centuries AD. Despite their limitations, the *Annals* none the less provide us with a more precise form of dating than that afforded either by typology or by radiometric methods. (For a wider treatment of the problems of historical dating in this period: Jones, C W 1947; 1968; Harrison 1976.)

A further problem remains, however, about the relevance and applicability of historical dates to archaeological sites. For instance: we can say, with a high degree of probability, that Dundurn was besieged in AD 683; but it is only through a chain of inference that we can relate the siege to any particular structure discovered by archaeology. We have a second historical reference to Dundurn, namely that Girg, son of Dungal, died there in 889. But these two dates do not necessarily encompass the entire structural or occupational history of the site: indeed, when the excavation results are fully published, it will be seen that both the structural complexity and the radiocarbon dates imply a markedly longer time-bracket. (See meanwhile Alcock and Driscoll 1985.) Similarly when Bede, making it clear that he is writing in AD 731, calls Dumbarton a strongly defended political centre, we have no indication as to how much earlier it had been founded, nor which structures were standing in AD 731.

In contrast to historical dates, those derived from radiocarbon assays may be accurate, but they are certainly not precise. This is because they are probability statements, in the form of a central figure – which is not to be regarded as a date – followed by an *error term* (standard deviation) which must be added to and subtracted from the central figure in order to express a date-range at a particular level of probability. For reasons which do not concern us here, it is common practice in the case of conventional (as opposed to high precision) dates to quote a bracket of two standard deviations either side of the central figure, in order to achieve a 95% level of probability. Thus a laboratory date of 600 ± 50 might be quoted as the bracket of 500–700 [ie: $600 - (50 \times 2)$, $600 + (50 \times 2)$]. Even so, it seems likely that this bracket of 200 years does not make full allowance for all possible sources of error.

There is a further problem, of considerable significance in a period when historically-derived dates are available. This is that radiocarbon years do not fully correspond with the solar or calendar years to which we are accustomed in our everyday experience of chronology. It is consequently necessary to calibrate radiocarbon ‘dates’ to ‘real-time’ dates. This is done by obtaining radiocarbon dates from tree-rings, which may be assumed to have formed at the rate of one every solar (or calendar) year, and comparing the two. It is customary among archaeologists to distinguish uncalibrated, ‘raw’, radiocarbon dates by lower case bc and ad, reserving BC and AD for calibrated radiocarbon dates, or other calendrical dates.

Over recent years, a number of different calibrations have been published, each a refinement of its precursors. No doubt over the length of time which it will take to publish the present series of reports, further refinements will appear. It must be recognized, however, that the difference between

the chronological brackets for a single radiocarbon measurement which may be derived from any two calibrations is considerably less than the differences between either of them and a historically derived date. This is especially so in the case of conventional (rather than high precision) dates. It follows that it is a matter of indifference which of the available curves is used here: what is important is that a single calibration should be used consistently throughout the whole series of excavation reports. For convenience, the chosen calibration is that of Klein *et al* (1982). In all cases, the 'raw' uncalibrated date is quoted first.

Finally, we should notice one method of science-based dating which is both accurate and precise: tree-ring dating or dendrochronology. Given a large timber, for instance from a palisade, and provided that the bark is present, then it is theoretically possible to date the felling of that timber not just to a year, but to a growing season. We have already noticed the relevance of this to the calibration of radiocarbon dates: in the sequel, its significance in dating a major defensive phase at Dundurn will be demonstrated.

1, Excavations near St Abb's Head, Berwickshire, 1980

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SUMMARY

The names Urbs Coludi, Coludesburh and Colodaesburg, applied to a seventh-century Anglian monastery, invited attention in order to locate and examine the implied pre-monastic fortification. The headland known as St Abb's Nunnery was shown to bear a late medieval secular hall and enclosing wall, identifiable as Rampart Hall. The preferred site for the monastery is, therefore, Kirk Hill, a hillock of about 3 ha, naturally defended by steep landward slopes and vertical sea cliffs. Here a massive turf bank may be identified as the monastic vallum. This had been preceded by two timber palisades, one of them dated by radiocarbon to the seventh–eighth centuries AD. The major significance of the excavation lies in the identification of both a large secular fort and an important monastery, their interiors undisturbed except by cultivation.

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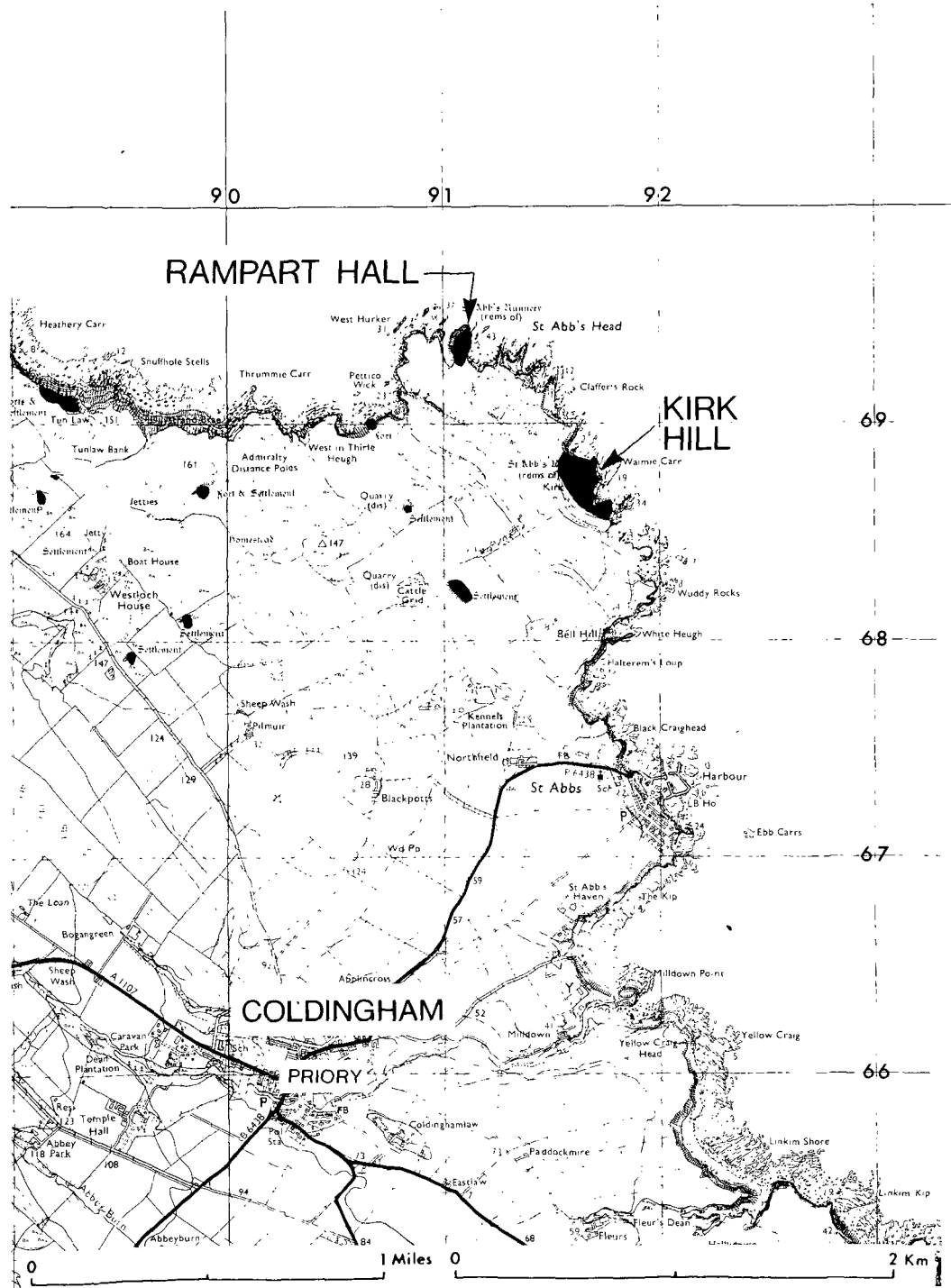
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INTRODUCTION: HISTORY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Several late seventh- and early eighth-century Northumbrian sources name a slightly earlier monastery, in terms which imply that it had been preceded by a secular fortification: *burh* in Old English, *urbs* in Latin. Those names were the inspiration of excavations near St Abb's Head, Berwickshire, in 1980, which form the subject of the present report. The *Anonymous Life* of St Cuthbert (VA II.iii) and the *Life* of St Wilfred (VW chap 39) refer to a monastery which is called, respectively *Colodesbyrig* and *Colodaesburg*; thus, despite both being written in Latin, they provide the vernacular name for the site. Bede gives the name itself in Latin, in effect translating *burh* as *urbs*. Twice he refers to the monastery 'in the place which is called *Urbs Coludi*' (VP chap 10; HE IV.19); once to the monastery 'which they call *Coludi Urbs*' (HE IV.25). Whether in the vernacular or the Latin, the meaning is the same: Colud's Fort. There has been speculation that Colud was a British personal name, and that the place may originally have been called *Caer Golud* or the like (Nicolaisen 1976, 72–3). There can, however, be no certainty about this.

The placing of a monastery within a pre-existing fortification – in Ireland a *rath*, in England sometimes a decayed Roman fort – is a well-attested phenomenon. A monastery needed an enclosing bank or *vallum*; and presumably a fort as such would have been a royal, or at least lordly, possession, and therefore available for a royal donation to the church. Given the frequency with which abbots and abbesses were royal kin, this kept the fort, with its appurtenant land and tenantry, in the family. Bede gives us a detailed picture of the structures at *Urbs Coludi*: the lofty buildings, both communal and private, the cells and sleeping places, and the little houses for prayer and reading. Cramp has rightly



ILLUS 2 Location map for Coldingham, Kirk Hill and Rampart Hall. Other forts and settlements of the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Age are also indicated (Based on the OS 1:25,000 map, Crown Copyright)

drawn attention to this as a picture of a Northumbrian monastery (1976, 206). The place was burned down, through the carelessness of its inhabitants, and as divine retribution for their sins, and thereafter was largely deserted. Bede does not give us the date of the fire, but it is considered to have been after AD 679.

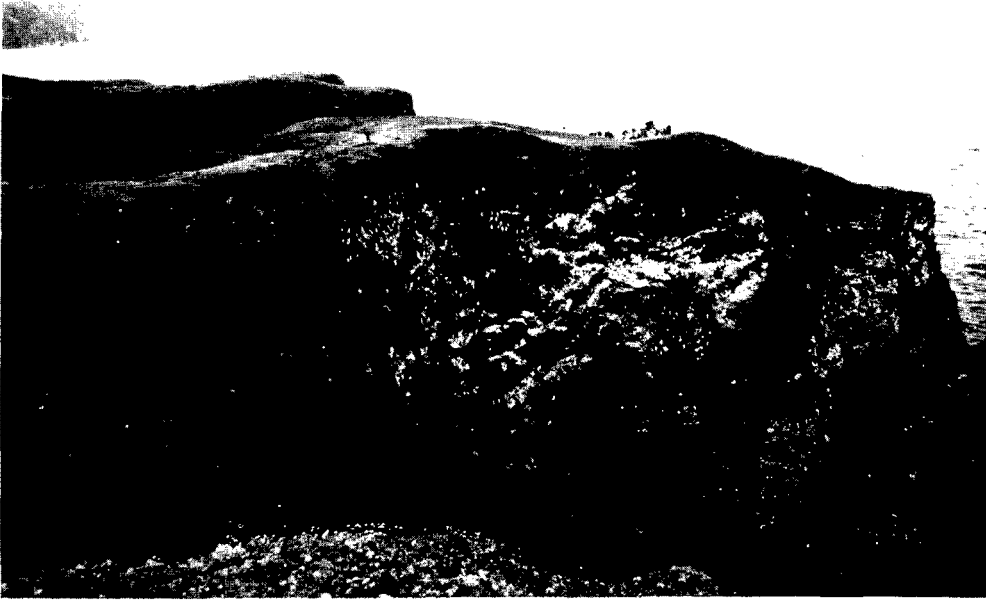
In seeking the location of the monastery, a clue is provided by references to Aebbe, sister of King Oswy, as abbess there. Bede, for instance, writes of *monasterium Aebbae abbatissae* (HE IV. 19). This would indicate St Abb's Head or its vicinity; and appropriately we find there the traditional sites of St Abb's Nunnery (treated below as Rampart Hall) and St Abb's Kirk (dealt with below as Kirk Hill) (illus 2).

Further guidance might be sought from the name *Colodaesburg* itself, but in fact there is no modern place with this name, nor with one simply derived from it. There is, however, the village and parish of Coldingham, which was also the location of a later medieval priory (illus 2). Nicolaisen has shown that Coldingham derives ultimately from *Colodaesburg*, either as 'village of the settlers near *Colud*' or 'village of the people of *Coludesburh*' (Nicolaisen 1976, 20–1, 72–3). The fact that there was a priory at Coldingham from the 12th century has led to the suggestion that this had also been the location of the Anglian monastery, and therefore of the *burh* or *urbs* which was the object of our research. The *Lives* of St Cuthbert make it clear, however, that this cannot have been the case.

The *Anonymous Life* (VA III.iii) tells us of the saint's nocturnal walks by the seashore (*maritima loca*); of his immersion in the sea, and of the sea creatures, possibly otters, which dried his feet. Bede's topography is even more explicit: Cuthbert 'went down to the sea, above the shore of which the monastery was placed' (VP 10). This immediately takes us away from Coldingham and its medieval priory, to the sea-cliffs of St Abb's Head. These cliffs, of Old Red Sandstone lava, rising to a height of 70 m (230 ft), are rightly considered to form the finest coastal scenery in southern Scotland. They also provide, today, a major nesting place for kittiwakes, fulmars, guillemots, razorbills, shags and other sea-birds. Neither the birds nor the cliff-scenery are wholly irrelevant to the monastery: the birds would obviously have furnished eggs, meat and feathers; while it is reasonable to believe that Northumbrian monks and nuns, with a large Irish element in their make-up, would have been fully sensible of the scenery.

Other resources, except for the sea-harvest, may have been more limited. The modern soil survey reveals that on St Abb's Head itself, and to the west for a distance of up to 1 km from the cliff, are brown forest soils with a vegetation of acid bent-fescue grassland, while the land capability survey marks this coastal belt as suitable only for use as improved grassland (Bown & Shipley 1982). (To the south and southwest, however, there are large tracts regarded as capable of producing barley, oats and grass.) This may not be a true and relevant picture, however. Even today, cereals are grown more widely in the hinterland of St Abb's Head than the Capability for Agriculture map would suggest. More relevant to our period is the recognition of numerous forts, cliff-castles and enclosed settlements of the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages, in the coastal belt (map: illus 2). These demonstrate that there were the resources to support a sizeable population in the centuries before the founding of *Colodaesburg*.

On the cliffs themselves, two candidates have been suggested for the actual location of *Urbs Coludi*. For rather more than a century, the preferred site has been a promontory a little west of the St Abb's Head lighthouse, defended by a rockcut ditch and a mortared stone wall (NGR NT 911694; illus 3). Towards the tip of the promontory are traces of a rectangular building described, on the OS maps, as 'St Abb's Nunnery (rems. of)'. On a visit by LA and EAA in Spring 1978, we decided that the attribution was unlikely because, firstly, there is too little level ground within the defences to hold the buildings of the double monastery described by Bede; secondly, the sea access required by the two *Lives* of Cuthbert is quite impossible; and thirdly, the building itself appeared to be secular – in fact a



ILLUS 3 Rampart Hall, viewed from the east showing the rock-cut ditch and walling across the neck of the promontory

medieval hall. (Appropriately enough the site was known in the late 18th century as Rampart Hall.) We were therefore inclined to dismiss this identification, though we had no doubt that both the defences and the building deserved to be examined by excavation.

Fortunately, an alternative had been suggested to us as long ago as 1970 by Dr C A Raleigh Radford, and subsequently re-affirmed by Aidan Macdonald. (Indeed, A H A Hogg (1945) had already suggested it as a more probable site than the westerly promontory.) This was the hillock known as Kirk Hill, some half a kilometre south-east of the lighthouse (NGR NT 916687). Here vertical sea cliffs and steep inland slopes define a fairly level area of about 3 ha, rising to a slight rocky summit at 79 m (260 ft) above sea level (illus 4). An earthen bank, resting on the sea cliffs, encloses low ruins, which appear to be those of a medieval church, traditionally known as St Abb's Kirk. A little to the west of this enclosure, small lumps of mortar visible in mole hills imply the former presence of a masonry building. There are also clear traces that the interior had been cultivated. According to local informants, the name of the hill was The Burgh rather than Kirk Hill.

The features which favour the identification of Kirk Hill as the location of the Anglian monastery are, firstly, that the area of level ground appears amply sufficient for the buildings of a double monastery; and secondly, that access to the sea, so essential to the two *Lives* of St Cuthbert, is easily gained in a bouldery cove at the back of Horsecastle Bay, and less than five minutes' descent from the hilltop.

As for defences: on our reconnaissance in Spring 1978 we were greatly impressed by the natural strength of the hill. The sea cliffs are quite unscalable, while the landward slopes rise at an angle of about 40°. Such a location would have required no great works to defend it, but in fact the trace of a rampart was clearly visible, picked out especially by a profusion of sea pinks. We estimated that the bank had originally be about 3.0 m wide, and that it still stood in places 1.0 m high above an internal



ILLUS 4 Kirk Hill, seen from the north-east. The pronounced break in slope on the landward side marks the line of the rampart

quarry ditch. (A more thorough examination would have revealed that, around the entire landward perimeter, protruding lines of stones, tussocky vegetation, bare patches of eroding rampart core, and intensive rabbit-burrowing, all bore witness to an altogether more massive rampart.) This defence work invited examination by means of a cross trench, which might be extended to the rear to pick up evidence of interior buildings.

The excavations inspired by these surface indications may now be described.

RAMPART HALL (illus 5)

On the westerly promontory, two structures demanded excavation: the so-called 'St Abb's Nunnery' and the defences across the neck of the headland. The latter had attracted the attention of O G S Crawford (1934) who had accepted the identification of the site not merely with the Anglian monastery of *Colodaesburg*, but with the hypothetical, if not actually mythical, *Caer Golud* as well. He therefore saw the mortared walling as a defence work of sub-Roman date. That mortared masonry was still being built in a northern British context in the post-Roman centuries may have appeared unremarkable in 1934: by 1971, a wide survey of the fortifications of the fifth-seventh centuries rendered it quite unacceptable (Alcock 1971; 1973). Its excavation was therefore a primary aim of our research.

Today, the most obvious feature is a rock-cut ditch which spans the headland from a ravine on the west to a precipitous cove on the east. Overlooking the western ravine is a jagged block of mortared masonry, about 3.0 m wide, and founded on solid rock. The rear face is well preserved, and there are traces of a front face, both at a slight angle to the shortest line across the promontory. This



ILLUS 5 Rampart Hall: overall plan by Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland. *Crown Copyright*

line is itself represented by a short length of front face. It was here that a trench 7·0 m by 2·5 m was laid out. This uncovered a raft of rubble, comprising two courses carefully laid in a clay binding. The raft, of the same width as the western block of masonry, had been cut down into a very tough clay. It was carefully faced, front and rear, with large stones. Conforming with its leading edge was the front face of the line of mortared masonry already mentioned. There was, however, no penetration of mortar down into the raft.

Two explanations are possible. (A) We are dealing with a unitary, but unfinished work, intended as a masonry wall, 10 ft (3·0 m) wide across the promontory: this was to be founded on the solid rock at the exposed corner above the western ravine (and perhaps above the eastern precipice as well); but elsewhere was to be based on a clay-bound raft. Only part of the raft and the masonry wall itself was ever completed. (B) We have a work of three periods: (1) a clay-bound wall, an early (perhaps prehistoric) defence of the promontory; (2) an unfinished mortared wall 3·0 m wide, represented by the western block of masonry; (3) a feeble mortared wall across the middle of the neck of promontory. Since there is no clear difference between either the mortar or the masonry of elements (2) and (3), it is likely that (3) is really a reduced continuation of (2). Moreover, the widths of elements (1) and (2) are the same, while (3) used the leading edge of (1) as its own face line. These correspondences between the three elements are so strong as to argue powerfully in favour of alternative A.

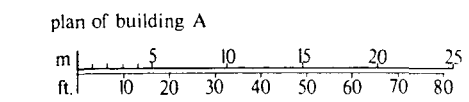
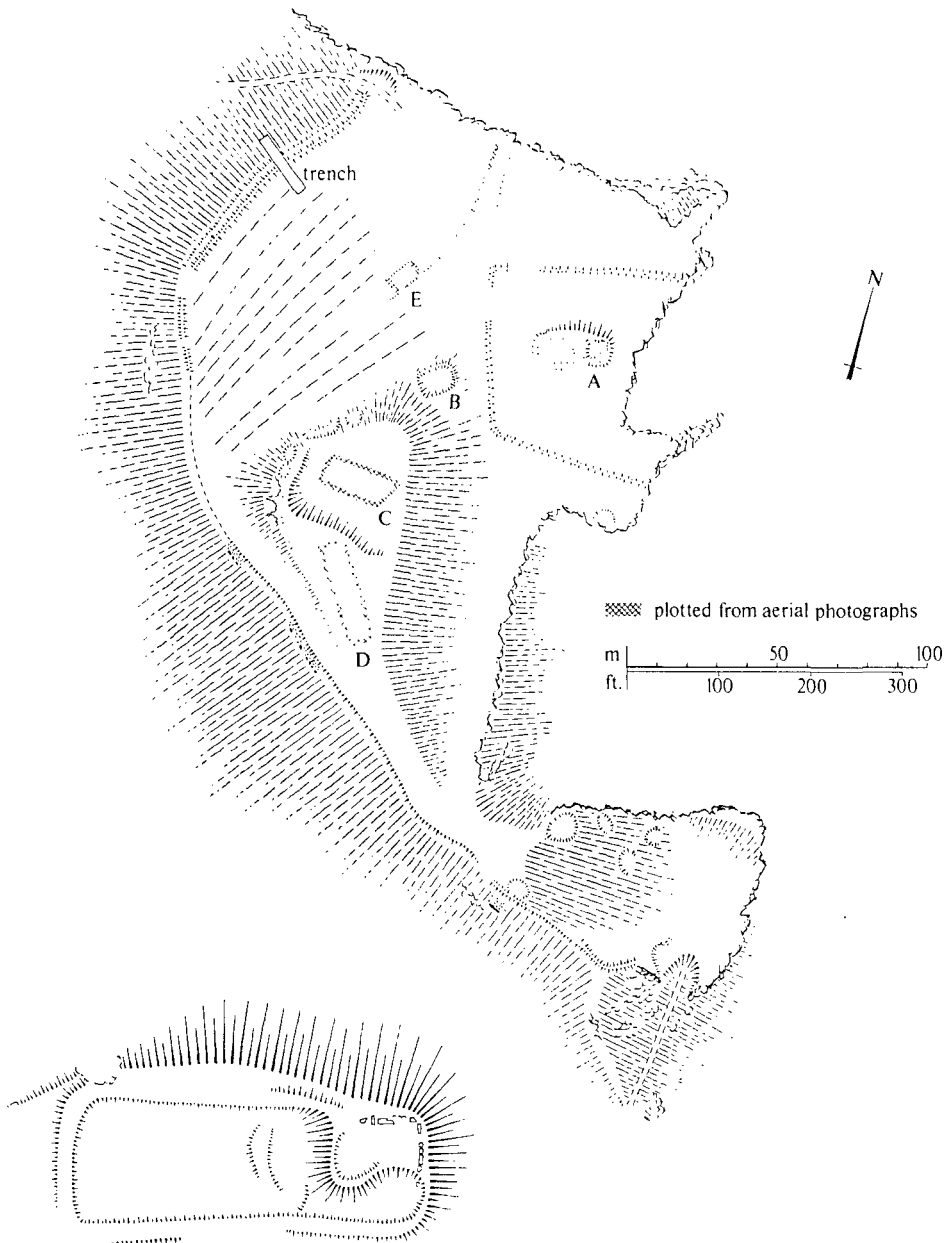
Turning now to the examination of the so-called 'St Abb's Nunnery', the most obvious feature of the plan was a recess in the upper gable wall, which appeared more likely to be a fireplace than a tomb recess. To test this, half of it was uncovered, together with the adjoining gable wall. It had already been observed that the recess was the only lime-mortared feature in an otherwise dry or clay-bound wall (OS Record Card NT 96 NW 6). On excavation, collapsed masonry was found to lie immediately on a totally clean layer of natural clay. From this it is inferred that the building originally had a flagged floor; and that, on its abandonment, the flags were lifted. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the recess yielded no evidence for use as a fireplace or for any other function.

There were no datable finds. The mortared wall of the recess seemed to mark an improvement to the original structure. The mortar itself was not inconsistent with that in the wall across the promontory, so it is probable that both the wall and the building are contemporary. For both, a secular rather than an ecclesiastical function seems likely. Rampart Hall is thus seen to be, at best, an unlikely candidate for the Anglian monastery at *Colodaesburg*.

KIRK HILL (illus 6)

In order to examine the structure and chronology of the Kirk Hill rampart, and to pick up possible evidence for internal buildings, a trench 19·0 m long was laid out across the north-western sector of the bank. The cutting was originally laid out to a width of 3·0 m; but because the size of the rampart had been underestimated, our resources proved to be insufficient to excavate the whole trench down to bedrock at that width. For much of its length, only a 2·0 m width was excavated, while the deepest parts were only 1·0 m wide. Only special features, such as the front revetment and palisade slot, were explored to the full intended width. Inevitably, therefore, both observation and interpretation are more tenuous than is normal when data are derived from a single cross-rampart cutting.

A further problem in understanding the stratification was presented by the very intensive rabbit burrowing [annotated (B) on illus 7], which had destroyed much of the stratigraphy on the south-west face of the trench.

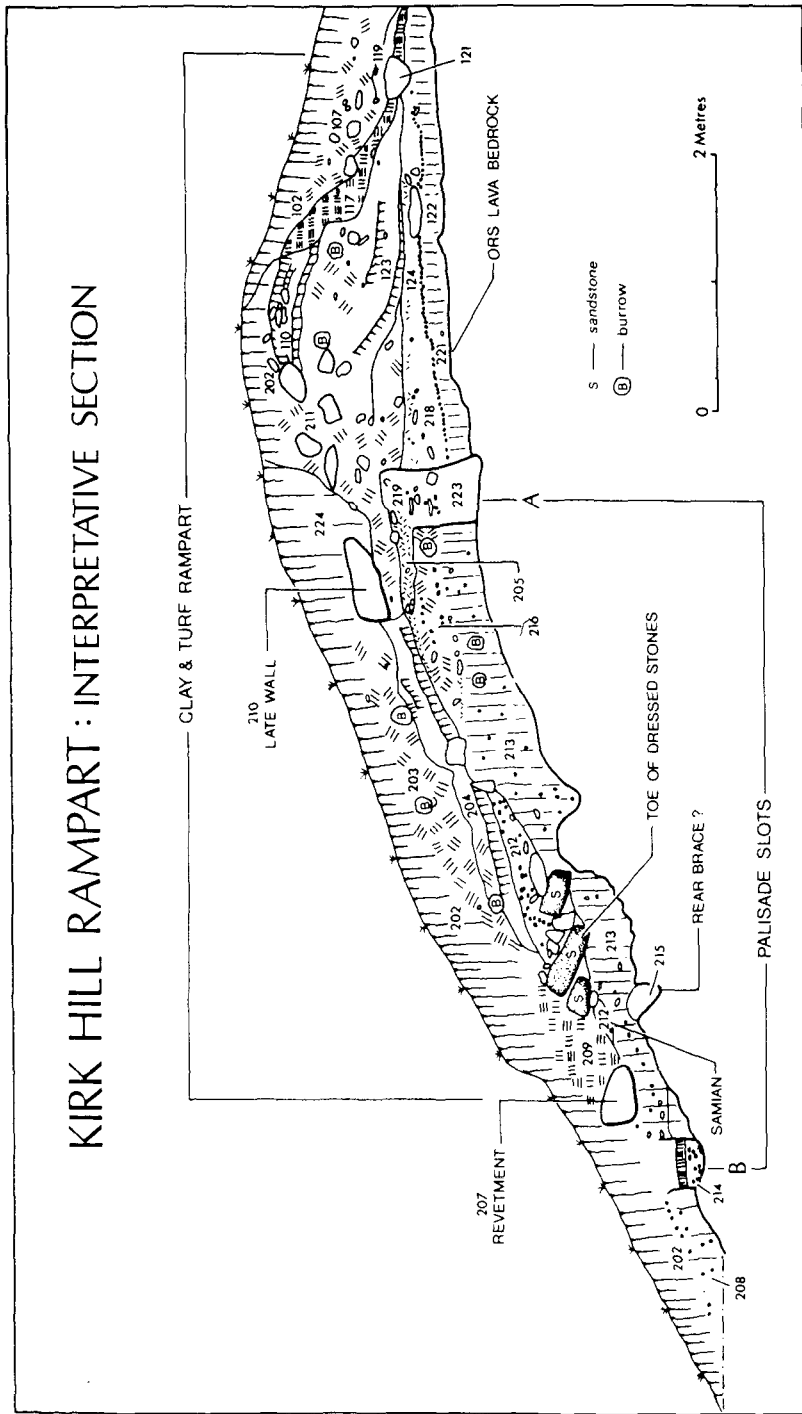


plan of building A

KIRK HILL, ST. ABB'S HEAD

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ILLUS 6 Kirk Hill: overall plan by RCAMS Crown Copyright



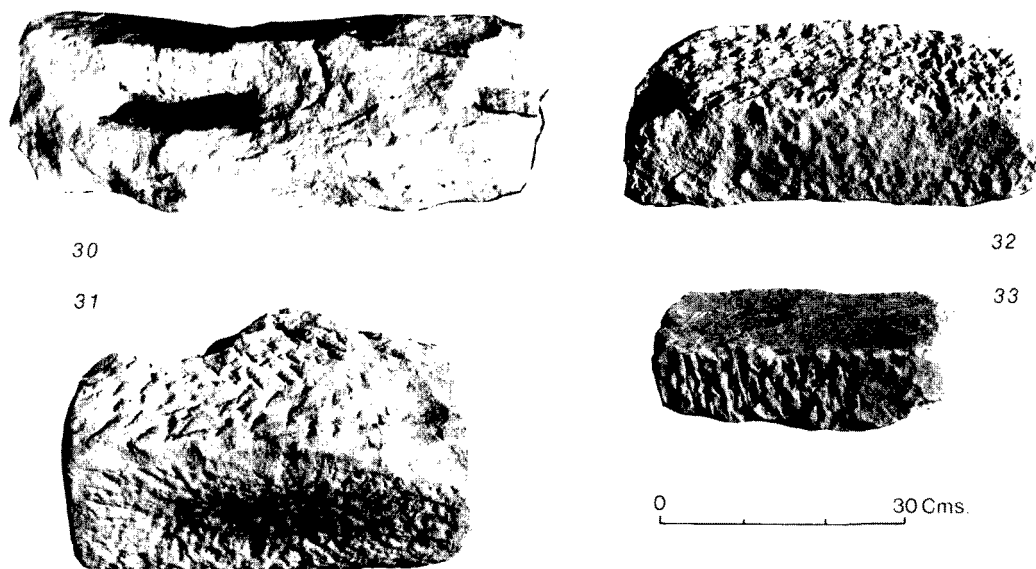
ILLUS 7 Interpretation of rampart section on Kirk Hill

Within these limitations, the observed stratification and structures may now be described (illus 7). Immediately below the turf, and slightly forward of the apparent rampart crest, were remains of a rough wall built of large, more or less paralleloiped boulders (210). This is cut into the top of a pre-existing rampart, and it is reasonable to think that it is a very late structure, most probably a field wall related to the traces of agriculture in the interior (Period 3). It is no doubt the good drainage created by this wall which is responsible for the profusion of sea-pinks that was mentioned earlier.

The rampart itself was composed of clay and stacked turves, with occasional boulders (110, 123, 203, 204, 211). The rear line was marked by a rough stone kerb, and above this was a cheek of very tough clay (117), to stabilize the rear face. About half of the total width of the bank was forward of the break of angle between the level interior and the landward slope of the hill. This must have created a danger that the forward mass of the bank might slide downhill. To counter this, therefore, the front of the turf and clay was bedded on a toe of massive pitched stones: in fact, rough-dressed blocks of sandstone (206) (illus 8). It may be that the front face of the bank, like the rear, had been stabilized with a tough clay (209), but this is so weathered that its original composition is uncertain (Period 2A).

Subsequently, the front was revetted with a drystone wall of large blocks (207) (illus 9). These were local boulders and split blocks, not dressed sandstone, and it is therefore likely that this revetment was not a primary feature, but belonged rather to a secondary phase 2B. The overall width of the rampart was some 8.0 m; and the vertical height from the foot of the drystone revetment to the crest is still more than 3.0 m, despite a thousand and more years of weathering.

Beneath the turf and clay bank, down to the solid bedrock, were layers of rather stony soil (124, 216, 218) overlying a dark organically-rich soil with a good crumb structure (122, 213, 221). The latter was probably a cultivated soil, washing forward over the break in the slope. It may mark a period of cultivation datable to the Roman Iron Age, on the basis of casual finds of Roman pottery and glass (Hogg 1945; OS Record Card), as well as of a Samian sherd and glass beads from the excavation. The cultivation may have been associated with one of the nearby enclosed homesteads. The more stony



ILLUS 8 Kirk Hill: selected dressed sandstone blocks (KH 206)



ILLUS 9 Kirk Hill: remains of the front revetment (KH 207) to the clay and turf rampart, Period 2B. Toe of pitched sandstone blocks (KH 206) in the background

soil possibly marks a reversion to grassland before the erection of a timber palisade, or may represent a low bank on the line of palisade A.

However that may be, palisade A itself is inferred firstly from a vertical-sided trench (219), 440 mm wide by 800 mm deep, dug through layers 213, 216, 218 and 221; and secondly from charcoal of oak, birch, hazel and willow which lay partly across the trench and partly forward of it (205). The birch and hazel charcoal comes from stems or small branches, but the oak and willow are from larger timbers. It is a reasonable inference that the main uprights of the palisade were oaken beams, interwoven with birch and hazel. Given its siting at the very head of the slope, palisade A could have made a sturdy defensive line. It had evidently been destroyed by fire.

Some 5.0 m down the slope was a trench (214) for another palisade, B. In the section this appears to have been shallower than the upper trench, but this reflects the extreme weathering of the soil (202) through which it was partly cut. It further differs from the upper one in that the posts had been packed with stones rather than with gravelly soil; and that they had not been burned. It is reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the two palisades were of different date, though there is no positive evidence as to which was the earlier. Behind the lower palisade, an angled slot in the bedrock (215) may have held a rear brace. The palisades mark two phases of Period 1 on Kirk Hill.

The relationships of the two palisades and the clay and turf rampart to the fort and the monastery are discussed below, after the evidence for their dates has been examined.

Meanwhile, it should be added that rock-cut trenches and postholes also indicated the occurrence of wooden buildings behind the defences. One at least of these appears to have been a rectangular building, aligned parallel to the rampart. But within the limits of the excavation, it was not possible to establish either the plan or the date of these buildings.

DATING

In attempting to put dates on the two palisades and the turf and clay bank, we derive no help from artefact typology. A few objects are clearly of Roman or early post-Roman date, notably a segmented silver-in-glass bead; but since they were unstratified, they tell us only that there had been some Roman presence on the hill or in its vicinity. The only closely stratified find, a Samian sherd of the mid-second century AD, was found beneath the pitched blocks (206), which formed the toe of the rampart. Since charcoal from the burned palisade gives radiocarbon dates which are centuries later, the Samian is irrelevant to the chronology.

The dressed sandstone blocks (206), though highly stratified, cannot be closely dated. The tooling is really no more than rough quarry-dressing, and could be either Roman or Anglian in date (*illus* 8). Since no mortar was noticed on these blocks, it is at least unlikely that they came from a demolished building, whether a Roman lighthouse or watch tower on St Abb's Head or some monastic building.

Dating must therefore be based entirely on the radiocarbon age estimates for the charcoal spread (205) from the burned palisade A. The raw dates on the Libby half life are:

GU-1387	<i>Quercus</i> (oak)	1395±60 bp
GU-1388	} Mixed charcoal, including <i>Betula</i> (birch), <i>Corylus</i> (hazel), <i>Salix</i> (willow)	1285±60 bp
GU-1389		1265±60 bp

These may be calibrated to calendar dates AD using the calibrations of Klein *et al* (1982):

	Klein <i>et al</i>
GU-1387	570–760 AD
GU-1388	610–880 AD
GU-1389	615–885 AD

In considering these dates, it might be suggested that since the oak charcoal came from larger timbers than the hazel and birch – no doubt the main structural uprights of the palisade – it would be somewhat older than the stems and branches used for the wicker infilling. This could account for the difference of more than a century between GU-1387 and the two other dates. But given the wide time-bracket of the calibration, such a treatment is probably too refined. All that the calibrated dates allow us to say is that palisade A was built in the second half of the first millennium AD, and most probably in the third quarter. Even to have established this is a considerable achievement. On the wider evidence for the construction of palisades in north-east England and south-east Scotland, a pre-Roman date, even one as early as the seventh century BC, might have been expected. As it is, palisade A is placed firmly in the Anglian period of Northumbria.

On stratigraphic grounds, the turf and clay rampart is later than the building and destruction of palisade A, but we have no evidence to say how much later. We are forced back on probability. Accepting that the dressed sandstone blocks (206) did not come from a demolished building, and that they arrived in their present position in the post-Roman period (that is, after the burning of the palisade), then the most likely occasion for quarry-dressed blocks to be available on site would be during the building of the monastery. We might suggest that stones surplus to the builders' requirements were used to stabilize the front of the monastic *vallum*, which was being built concurrently.

In any case, the turf and clay rampart is most reasonably interpreted as the *vallum*, and therefore as a primary feature of the whole monastic establishment. Unfortunately we have no evidence for the date of its foundation. We are not expressly told that Aebbe herself had founded the monastery which came to be known after her: for instance, as *monasterium Aebbae abbatisssae* (HE

IV.19). If we were to attribute its founding to Aebbe, then a likely time would be after her brother Oswy succeeded to the kingdom of Bernicia in AD 643. But on this there can be no certainty.

INTERPRETATION

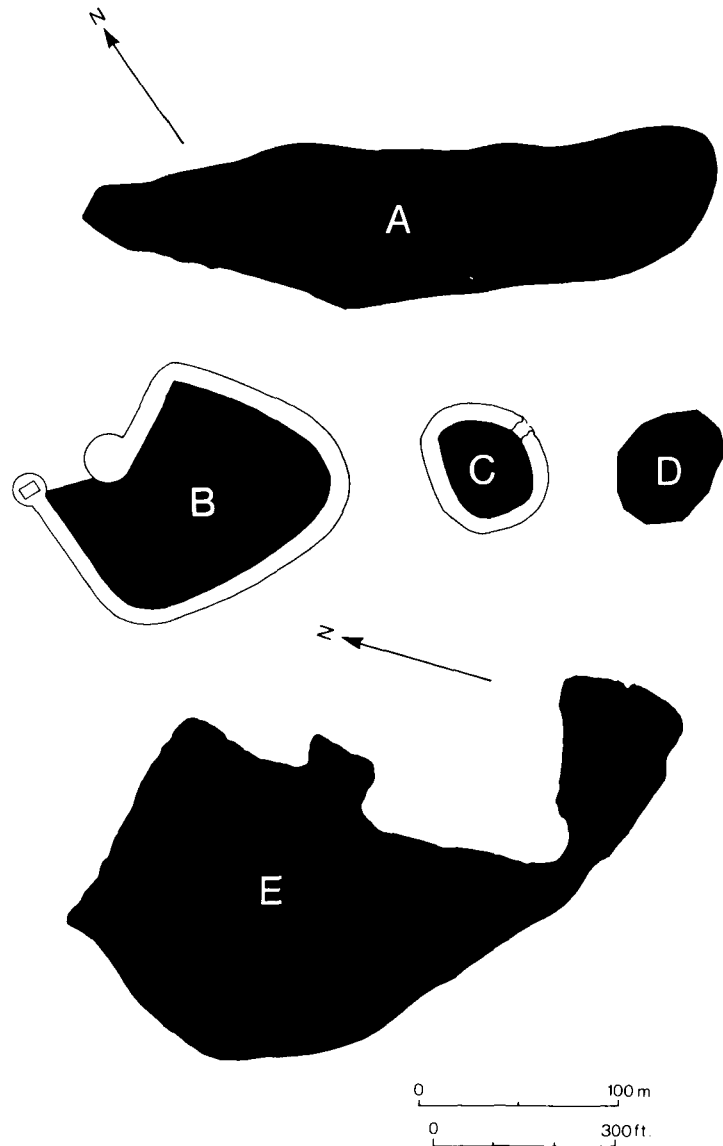
The positive identification of the fort and monastery of *Colodaesburg/Urbs Coludi* must turn on our interpretation of the successive structures on Kirk Hill. The earlier period had two successive phases of timber palisade, or less probably, a single-phase double palisade. In the general context of palisaded sites in north-east England and south-east Scotland, such palisades might have been expected to fall into the Pre-Roman Iron Age, or even the later Bronze Age. The radiocarbon dates, however, rule this out, placing palisade A firmly in the second half of the first millennium AD. It is thus broadly contemporary with the single palisade at Doon Hill (NGR NT 6875) (Hope-Taylor 1983); with the considerably more massive double palisade of the fort or Great Enclosure at Yeavinger (NGR NT 9331) (Hope-Taylor 1977); and perhaps, with the double palisade of the second phase at Harehope (NGR NT 2044), which is linked to Yeavinger by the peculiarities of its entrance arrangement (illus 10).

Period 1 at Kirk Hill, then, saw a location which was already strongly defended by nature, which was then further reinforced by a timber stockade. Would an Anglian have called such a place a *burh*? (It is not necessary to show that Bede would have called it *urbs*; for him, the Latin word is simply translating the vernacular.) Place-name scholars tell us that Old English *burh* means a fortified or defended place. These may include prehistoric hillforts or Roman forts, thereby demonstrating that a *burh* may be recognized as such even if it had long been derelict. The scale of fortification that is implied ranges down from a hillfort, with massive multiple ramparts, to a fortified house or manor (Cameron 1961, 112–15; Gelling 1978, 143–6). Particularly interesting is the case of Lathbury in Buckinghamshire, for early spellings show this was a *burh* constructed of laths (Ekwall 1947, sn; Cameron 1961, 114). This sounds a good description of a palisaded fort.

Accepting, then the probability that Kirk Hill 1 was indeed the fort which gave *Colodaesburg* its name, it is interesting to compare it with the other Bernician *burh* of similar date: *Bebbanburh*, modern Bamburgh (NGR NU 1834). This was the royal stronghold, and political and religious centre, which Bede called both *regia civitas* and *urbs regia*. Here there is no problem of identification. Bamburgh is a crag-bound site, naturally strong, but not so strong as Kirk Hill. The usable area, so far as it can be assessed, is rather less than that of Kirk Hill: less than 5 acres, or about 2 ha, as opposed to about 3 ha, over 7 acres for Kirk Hill. The character of the early defences of Bamburgh is unknown, except for the statement in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (ASC s.a. 547), that it was first defended with a hedge or fence. The source and reliability of this entry are uncertain: but altogether more reliable is Bede's account of the attempt by Peñda of Mercia to destroy the place by fire (HE III.16). This would certainly suggest that timber played a significant part in the early defences of Bamburgh (illus 10).

If *Bebbanburh* was both smaller and weaker in terms of its natural situation than *Colodaesburg*, it none the less had advantages which made it more fitting to be the major royal centre of Bernicia. Firstly it was more accessible by sea, and secondly its immediate hinterland was less rugged than that of St Abb's Head.

Finally, we should consider briefly the significance of the palisades of *Colodaesburg* for our understanding of the relations between the native Britons and the invading Angles. Palisade A, as the radiocarbon age estimates show, is almost certainly of seventh-century date. In that area, at such a date, it must surely be an Anglian construction. The idea of palisade defences however, as has already been emphasized, has a long history in the area, perhaps back to the seventh century BC. As a defence for a large settlement, the palisade may represent a native British tradition adopted by the Angles. At



ILLUS 10 Block plans, to a common scale, of A Bamburgh, B Yeavinger Great Enclosure, C Harehope II, D Doon Hill, E Kirk Hill

Yeavinger, the massively palisaded Great Enclosure of the Anglian *villa regalis* had a British precursor. At Doon Hill, a noble hall of Anglian type enclosed by a palisade likewise had a British precursor. Finally the Anglian royal *urbs* and *civitas* of Bamburgh, and the no less Anglian royal *urbs* of Dunbar were both founded on British sites. The name Dunbar itself, first recorded as *Dynbaer*, is a British (Primitive Cumbric) form meaning summit-fort. Bamburgh is likewise given a British name, *Din Guayrdi*, perhaps a misspelling of *Din Guoaroy*, in the *Historia Brittonum* (HB Chapter 61; Jackson 1963). In other words, the palisades of *Colodaesburgh*, as seen at Kirk Hill 1, conform to a

well-established pattern of relationships between Angles and Britons in the establishment of fortified centres of power.

In the light of this wider discussion of British/Anglian relationships, we must now look again at the first element in the name *Colodaesburgh*. We may dismiss Crawford's view (1934) that the name translates the British place-name, *Caer Goludd*, which he had found in the Book of Taliesin. Jackson has shown (1959, 15–16) that this belongs in a list of *Caer* names which represent the Celtic Otherworld: it is therefore irrelevant to the world of historical and archaeological fact. None the less, it seems likely that Colod, Colud, Golud, or some similar form is a British, rather than an Anglian personal name. Even this would not rule out an Anglian context. Here we may notice the British name of the Whitby monk, Caedmon (HE IV.24); or the apparently British names incorporated in the genealogy of the dynasty of Cerdic of Wessex. We may consider that the son of a marriage between an Anglian royal or noble male and a British noblewoman might have had the British name Colud, and might have built the eponymous palisaded fort under Anglian rule.

The possibility remains, however, that the Anglian name *Colodaesburg* is indeed translating a British (Primitive Cumbric) name such as **Din Colud* or **Caer Colud*. This may have been the name of a fort earlier than that which is implied by the radiocarbon dates for Palisade A. Pursuing these conjectures further, we may suggest that this earlier, British, fort was the one represented by Palisade B. But on present evidence, there can be no certainty of this.

Turning now to Kirk Hill Period 2: excavation revealed a turf and clay bank, with a sub-phase represented by the front revetment (2B). The stone wall on the crest probably marks an altogether later work of Period 3. The dating of Kirk Hill 2 is inferential rather than proven. The radiocarbon dates provide no more than a probability estimate for its earliest possible date: there is a 19:20 chance that it was built after AD 615 on Klein's calibration. It could even be the defence of the *burh*, adopted as the *vallum* of St Aebbe's monastery. The only argument against it being a pre-monastic work is provided by the toe of quarry-dressed stone (206). It has already been suggested that the most likely time for such stone to be available on site would be during the building of the monastery itself. On these grounds, we may see the Kirk Hill 2 rampart as being indeed the monastic *vallum*.

We may then picture this wild and exposed hilltop being enclosed by a bank about 8 m wide, and over 3 m high, which backed onto the vertical sea cliffs. There were entrances at the northern and southern tips, that on the north approached by a terraced trackway. Between the bank and the cliff was a fairly level area of about 3 ha, containing both wooden and masonry buildings, communal and private, as Bede described them.

It is not easy to find information about other monastic *valla*, which is securely based on excavation rather than on surface indications. (The case of Rampart Hall shows how unreliable the latter may be.) Glastonbury has been described as having 'the most convincing *vallum* enclosure of any Anglo-Saxon monastery' (Cramp 1976, 245). It was a ditch and bank structure, the ditch 15 ft (c 4.5 m) wide by 7 ft 6 in (c 2.3 m) deep, the bank 20 ft (c 6.0 m) wide at the base, and originally standing 8 ft (c 2.4 m) high. More relevant than this, because of its strong connection with Northumbria, was the *vallum* at Iona. At its greatest extent, this appears to have enclosed over 8 ha. Like that at Glastonbury, it consisted of a substantial ditch, fronting a bank up to 4.5 m wide (RCAMS 1982, 36–9). These examples are clearly insufficient for generalization, but their dimensions are not at all out of keeping with those of the turf and clay bank of Kirk Hill 2.

Without further, and far more extensive excavations, it remains a matter of inference, rather than proof, that the palisades of Kirk Hill 1 are those of the original fort of *Colodaesburg*, and that the turf and clay rampart is the *vallum* of St Aebbe's monastery. Such wider excavation would be extremely worthwhile. Apart from some later cultivation, and the so-called St Abb's Kirk, there appears to have been no post-monastic interference, or structural overlay, within the enclosure.

Rock-cut features in the excavated area demonstrate the former existence of wooden structures, while spreads of mortar, occurring in molehills, imply masonry buildings as well. On Kirk Hill, the internal features of a major Northumbrian *burh*, no less than those of a celebrated double monastery, await the attention of adequately-funded research.

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