The Rhind Lectures 1988–89: a synopsis

An Heroic Age: war and society in northern Britain, AD 450–850

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1 NATIONS ORGANIZED FOR WAR

Northern Britain is defined broadly as mainland Britain north of the Tyne. In the later sixth century, and more especially from the mid-seventh, an information window is opened increasingly widely by the availability of written sources; and these have been exploited by campaigns of excavation in both secular and religious fields.

In contemporary eyes, the area was inhabited by four peoples, defined not, as in archaeological terms, by their cultural traits and attributes, but by their respective languages: indigenous Britons and Picts, and intrusive Angles and Irish or Scots. All four were further divided into kindreds or small kingdoms; all four fought both internal and external wars: a recipe for balkanization, but also the inspiration of the battle poetry of the Britons.

That 'heroic' poetry defines an 'Heroic Age'. The themes of the poems are often historically absurd, like the expedition of the men of Gododdin across a hundred miles of Anglian-settled territory. The ethos of the poetry emphasizes the personal link between king and war-band, and the personal quest for glory.

Contemporary annals, and narrative sources such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History,* while not devoid of the heroic ethos, present an alternative view of warfare and society. In the Irish Annals, killings, battles, sieges and devastations are annual events in both Ireland and Scotland. Cryptic though the accounts are, sieges, burnings and destructions of fortified places, such as Dunadd, Dundurn and Dunollie, suggest a more serious business than do the battle poems.

This is reinforced by Bede; for while retaining some heroic themes, and in particular calling heroic warfare into the service of religion, he none the less makes it clear that some battles had major political repercussions among the warring peoples. Among these would be the battle in AD 603 between Æthelfrith and Aedan which limited the southern expansion of the Scots; Heavenfield, AD 634, which ended the counter-attack of the Britons against the Angles; and Nectansmere, AD 685, which broke Northumbrian supremacy, not merely over the Picts, but everywhere north of the Forth.

To this can be added, from the Annals, evidence for naval battles, involving small galleys – that is, vessels with both sails and oars – with an Irish Sea ancestry back to the beginning of the Christian era. Another significant siege and destruction was that of Dumbarton at the hands of Vikings from Dublin in AD 870. This destroyed a citadel described by Bede as 'a strongly defended political centre of the Britons'.

Warfare of such political significance could not be sustained on the basis of the personal nexus and quest for glory of the heroic poetry. It depended on the right of a king (or a member of the king's

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family) to lead an annual military expedition or hosting; the right to military and other services, as well as to taxes and tribute; the power to enforce those rights; and the systematic assessment of land for taxes and services.

All these resources for warfare can be witnessed in the literary sources; including the information that Bede knew the land-assessment of Iona 'according to the English reckoning'; and that a Pictish king might have tax-enforcers in his war-band when on campaign.

The fullest working out of the assessment system is seen in the Dal Riata document, *Senchus Fer nAlban*, which implies that Dal Riata could muster an army of 2000 or a fleet of 140 ships each of 14 oars. It may further be inferred that this was about one-fifth of the total population; that is to say, that every able-bodied man would be mustered.

This is obviously incompatible with the heroic model of warfare and society; but it justifies the claim that the nations of northern Britain were organized for war.

2   THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WARFARE: FORTIFICATIONS

In northern and western Britain, some 75 'enclosed places' of potentates, often in the form of hill-top fortifications, can be dated c 450–850 AD. The building or reuse of 'hillforts' is widely known at this time throughout barbarian Europe, among both Germans and Slavs, but is unknown in Anglo-Saxon England. Some of the forts feature in the military actions mentioned in Lecture 1.

Three main categories of fortification may be distinguished in northern Britain:

A   Palisades

Earliest at Portknockie; most developed at Yeavering; and known to enclose timber halls at Doon Hill and Cruggleton. Other examples are Yeavering Bell and Dundurn 1.

B   Hillforts of conventional pre-Roman Iron Age appearance

1   Multivallate, especially but not exclusively on lofty or conspicuous hills. Classic is Cadbury in south-west England; in north Britain, Clatchard Craig, Craig Phadraig, East Lomond and Tynron Doon are good examples.

2   Univallate, on promontories or near the sea, especially with a timber-framed defence: eg Dumbarton, Mote of Mark, Portknockie. Burghead combines multivallate defences with a promontory position and timber-framed ramparts; Dundurn 2 is an inland fort with a timber-framed citadel.

In summary, perhaps 50% of undated forts superficially of pre-Roman Iron Age character in northern Britain may be post 400 AD in some phase of occupation, if not actual construction.

C   Forts of types predominantly dated to the first millennium AD

1   Simple ring-forts: eg duns in the west; possible ploughed-out earthen ring-forts in the east; but the stone ring-forts of Tayside are later. Of excavated duns in mainland Argyll, 85% were certainly occupied in the first millennium AD; moreover 70% were certainly occupied, and many were built or modified, after AD 500. Examples are Ardifuir, Dun Fhinn, Dunadd 1, Dunollie 1, Eilean Righ 1, Kildonan, Kildalloig, Leccamore, Ugadale. In Ayrshire, Castlehill Dalry has glass and metalwork of this period.

2   Ring-forts with outworks, ranging from forecourts and partial or complete enclosing walls to enclosures looping out from a small citadel. In Argyll 29% of all duns belong in this category, though dated examples are confined to Dunollie 2 and, in Galloway, Castle Haven, Borgue.

This group might include the 'citadel forts' defined by R W Feachem in 1955; that is forts, such

as Dumyat, Moncreiffe and King's Seat Dunkeld, where a strong ring-fort appeared to have been inserted into pre-existing ramparts which would still have provided some degree of defence.

3 Ring-forts with articulated, hierarchically-arranged enclosures: the overall plan conceived as a single work, tailored to the crags and terraces of a deliberately chosen hill. This is the classic 'nuclear fort' as defined by R B K Stevenson at Dalmahoy, and securely dated at Dunadd and Dundurn, and possibly Ruberslaw.

Categories C2 and C3 require further discussion. In 1961, Feachem repudiated the class of 'citadel fort'. In 1974–75, excavations at Castle Rock Dumbarton showed that the supposed ramparts of a nuclear fort were of the 13th century AD or later. More significantly, excavations at Dunadd and Dundurn have led Lane and Campbell, and Alcock and Driscoll, respectively to a radical reconsideration of the sequence at these two classic nuclear forts, by demonstrating that the nuclear fort was the end product of the structural sequence, not the primary intention of the builders.

It may be concluded that the hill was primary, the defences secondary; and the apparent close fit between them was something which evolved. The stepped profiles of chosen hills, with a summit boss and terraces at various levels, were appropriate to a hierarchical organization of space. This might or might not be emphasized by the erection of defences and internal barriers, as at Dunadd and Dundurn. At Dumbarton there is no surface evidence for such defences, but the morphology of the hill is eminently suited to a hierarchical organization.

Finally, it may briefly be noticed that hierarchically planned forts can be found rarely in Ireland, as at Doonmore, Antrim; and more commonly, with both elaborate and simpler plans, in barbarian Europe. An especially relevant example is that of Tushemlya on the Upper Dneipr which, like Dunadd, includes a sacred focus.

3   OF TOWNS AND VILLAS, KINGS AND THANES

The forts and enclosed places described in Lecture 2 had an important role in military actions, as is demonstrated both by written evidence and by burned structural timbers, for instance at Dumbarton, Dundurn and Portknockie. The present lecture examines the non-military functions of forts, using not the terminology of present-day theory, but the vocabulary of politics and society derived from contemporary written sources.

Paramount was the role of kings, who might build forts; and who certainly used them as residences for themselves, their household, court, officials and war-band. Thus Bamburgh was *civitas regia*; Dunbar was *urbs regis*; Dumbarton was *civitas/urbs*, and kings who ruled there are specifically named.

Written sources imply a graded series of royal sites: *civitas, urbs/castellum, villa/vicus*; and the known status of Bamburgh, Dumbarton and Dunbar suggests archaeological correlations in terms of size. (It should be noticed, however, that current excavations at Dunbar may make it necessary to modify present perceptions.) So, in Pictland, Burghead would be the equivalent of a *civitas*, and so may Dundurn; though the only designated royal *munitio*, that of Brude which Columba visited, is unidentified. The two principal royal centres known in Dal Riata, Dunadd and Dunollie, are only equivalent in size to an *urbs* in richer kingdoms.

None the less they are between five and seven times greater in areas than the largest dun as defined by RCAMS, and they bring into question the status of these small ring-forts. On both historical and archaeological grounds it is not helpful to treat Dal Riata as a simple Irish colony, with the duns as the equivalent of Irish raths or cashels. Indeed, the variety in size and elaboration of Argyll ring-forts forbids any simple interpretation of their social context. The more elaborate ones –

some of those in Category C 2 – may be the strongholds of the leaders of the septs into which the three kindreds of Dal Riata were divided, or of the *comites* of Selbach (Annals of Ulster AD 719).

Such nobles and officials, *ministri regis*, may be found at forts, as well as accompanying the king on hostings and circuits. Thus Dunbar was the seat of a *praefectus*, or thane, resident in a royal centre and responsible for the administration of a large territory, forerunner of a medieval shire.

The circuit took the king, household and war-band on periodic visits to the whole range of royal centres, to receive the food renders which were the main resource of kingship. These taxes in kind included both arable and pastoral products. In addition, there was tribute from subject peoples, military and building services, and the products of the royal demesne. These provided the surplus which purchased the necessary luxuries of kingship: wine from the Mediterranean and Gaul; glass vessels (and not merely scrap-glass or cullet) from Gaul; fine metalwork from local craftsmen: all necessary as gifts to officials and war-band.

The lowest, and most common rank, of royal centre was the *villa regis*, essentially the focus of an agricultural estate. One of its main requirements would have been large barns for storing the arable components of food renders. Some of the large buildings at the *villa regis* of Yeavering should be reinterpreted in this sense rather than as noble halls.

Yeavering also reminds us of low-lying royal centres, such as Sprouston and Milfield in Northumbria; Forteviot among the Picts and subsequently the Scots; and Scone among the Scots. Apart from air photographs, however, little is known about such sites. At the other end of the social scale, even less is known about peasant villages, the agricultural base which furnished food renders, and supported the whole military and heroic superstructure. The driving force in the economy was, indeed, the royal demand for the resources to sustain the kingly pursuit of warfare.

4   IMAGES OF MEN AND BEASTS

Valuable insights into warfare and society in northern Britain are provided by pictorial, representational images, on essentially secular themes, which were engraved or sculpted, normally on stone. These are not merely decorative, but purport to be scenes from contemporary life in northern Britain. Here, the thesis is maintained that this is exactly what they were, against the contrary thesis that they are derived, more or less closely, from sources in the Mediterranean, Gaul, or elsewhere outside our area.

The 'Franks Casket', carved in whalebone in Northumbria about AD 700, illustrates some of the problems. Some of the themes, such as the sack of Jerusalem by the Emperor Titus, or the Adoration of the *Magi*, are obviously exotic. Others derive from Germanic traditions: in particular, that in which an archer, labelled *Ægili* in runes, defends a stockaded *burh*, within which his wife sits in a house heavily ornamented with Germanic or Anglian animal ornament. This may indeed be a simplified picture of a noble Northumbrian house.

Among the Pictish Class I engravings, closely observed realism is demonstrated by the bovines: bulls at Burghead, but castrates at Inverness and East Lomond, as the secondary sexual characteristics – body weight, length of limb, and shape of horns – make clear. Given the feeble depictions of the calf of St Luke on manuscripts, there is a strong case for transmission from the carved stones to the manuscripts. Artistic movement from north-east to south-west along the Great Glen is witnessed by the relationship between the Tioram hanging bowl and the escutcheon mould from Craig Phadraig: a reciprocal of Columba's missions across the spine of Britain.

Noteworthy too is the effect of power achieved with great economy of line, not just with the bovines, but with the Birsay eagle. That these animal engravings had a long development behind

them is suggested by recent discoveries in Ayrshire and Galloway. Likewise the symbol stone dated to the fifth–sixth century at Pool, Sanday, shows that the accomplished designs of the seventh century had evolved from primitive beginnings.

Among secular subjects carved on the Class II Pictish cross slabs, the commonest are horsemen. Some of these are casual riders, some may be riding to battle, but about half are definitely hunting. Whereas in Classical depictions, and indeed more widely, horses most frequently gallop or prance, no prancing horses appear among the Picts, and only one galloper. Pictish horses normally trot, whether pursuing deer with hounds, or as at Elgin, hawking.

The social importance of hunting is obvious, as a noble sport, involving the cost of the breeding, training and upkeep of horses, dogs and falcons, as well as hunt servants. Equally important for warfare was the training in both physical and mental fitness in the pursuit of a potentially dangerous prey.

Only one clear depiction of warfare itself occurs on a Class II stone, that in Aberlemno churchyard. This appears to relate a story in three registers, perhaps modelled on something like the story-telling of the Franks Casket. It may be interpreted as three scenes from the military relations of Northumbrians and Picts. In the first, a Northumbrian king, possibly Ecgfrith, having discarded sword and shield, gallops away from a Pictish horseman; in the second, he advances against Pictish infantry who display a clever combination of swords and pikes; and in the third he lies dead, prey to raven or eagle.

An ancient warrior who escaped the raven or eagle, a rare survivor of heroic society, is seen at Bullion, Invergowrie. Bald-headed, but with flowing beard, targe and sword slung carelessly, he rides a depressed nag while drinking from a magnificent horn with a bird's head terminal. The suggestion of humour, or even caricature, implies that this is a portrait from life.

Class III is marked by the absence of Pictish symbols; but it is also regarded as characterized by the collapse of Pictish realism. This is attributed to the Scottish take-over of southern Pictland, with the consequent elimination of the Pictish aristocracy as patrons, the suppression of the spiritual significance of the symbols, and the reorganization of both secular and ecclesiastical structures on Gaelic lines.

Whatever the aesthetic poverty of most Class III sculpture, however, two stones run counter to the rules: Sueno's Stone (Lecture 5), and the Dupplin Cross. This free-standing cross stands proudly above the north bank of the river Earn, overlooking the former Pictish royal centre at Forteviot. Strongly Northumbrian in both form and ornament, it lacks any Pictish elements. But the ranks of soldiery are not so much stiff and lifeless as sternly disciplined and purposeful. They appear to convey the message: we, the Scots, are the masters now. The Dupplin Cross is indeed the ultimate visual statement about nations organized for war.

5 THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

The Church Militant readily accommodated itself to the ethos of heroic society. The mosaic of Christ the warrior in Roman military dress in the archiepiscopal chapel at Ravenna is paralleled by the literary image, in Old English runes on the Ruthwell Cross, of Christ the young hero gathering his noble war-band from afar.

The cross face of the Aberlemno slab quite plainly celebrates the triumph of the cross, and more arcanely, in a symbolism where Christ himself is never depicted, his triumph over death and hell. In the same spirit, even the secular battle scene can be interpreted as the triumph of good over evil; and

if the defeat of Ecgfrith may be read into it, then it depicts the punishment of an evil king for his sins, as Bede plainly relates.

But the triumph of Christianity and the progress of conversion were far from simple; apostasy, heresy, organizational problems, personality clashes are all vividly recorded by Bede and others. So too was the confusion in the minds of men who had been 'robbed of their old ways of worship', and did not know how the new worship was to be conducted.

This confusion is perhaps reflected in burial practices in the north and also among the western Britons; partly in the mixture of long-cist cemeteries with both round and square barrows and simple dug graves; partly, perhaps, in the association with far older cremation burials, as though seeking a link with older certainties.

Adherence to the old religion is seen most vividly on Sueno's Stone. Standing some 20 feet (6·1 m) high, its cross is the most awe-inspiring in northern Britain. The other face, however, celebrates the ancient Celtic cult of the severed head, with military parades, decapitated corpses, and – in a dominant position – a head in a stone cist or niche, with parallels a millennium or more earlier in Celtic Gaul.

Christianity introduced into barbarian regions a low-grade literacy for commemorative and other semi-official purposes, especially on funerary monuments. Since these regularly have, in addition to Christian statements, the formula A son of B, they may mark, in a permanent manner, the founding of a noble family and its claim to landholding, with the blessing of the Church. The Yarrow stone, for instance, establishes a royal family in the valley of the Yarrow Water; and the Catstane with its associated long-cist cemetery may affirm special rights to collect burial dues from the cemetery itself.

The Pictish Class I symbols were presumably legible to the Pictish learned classes, and made permanent statements on stone just like the Roman script and Latin language inscriptions of their southern neighbours. They may likewise have set out claims to found a family, or to hold land.

The close relations between the Church and secular society, to the benefit of both, are most clearly seen at the level of kingship. Such relations are vividly reported by Adomnan, Bede, Eddius and other contemporary writers, and need no elaboration here.

Actual church buildings, or substantial fragments incorporated in later fabric, are well known in Northumbria. They have been intensively studied architecturally, and more recently by excavation as well, so that we now have a good appreciation of the layout of monastic buildings at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, and of their Romanized architectural sophistication. North of the Forth, however, the existence of early churches must be inferred from place-names; or from the discovery of carved stones incorporated in the fabric of later churches, or dug up in churchyards; or from clusters of crosses and cross-slabs which must mark major ecclesiastical centres.

Particularly interesting in the case of St Andrews where, in addition to the well known slab shrine of the ninth or early 10th century, there is a distinctive local school of cross-slabs. The distribution of these is markedly concentrated to the north-east of the town. This makes it possible to determine the original existence of a double monastic enclosure, closely comparable in layout to examples in Ireland.

Finally, in the present context, mention must be made of the Monymusk reliquary. This belongs to a group of house-shaped caskets, highly ornamented in the Insular style: that is, combining Anglian, Irish, Pictish and Scottish motifs. Nine of these are currently known, with their date centred on the ninth century. The particular significance of the Monymusk reliquary is that it held the relics of St Columba; and that it was very probably carried before the Scottish army at Bannockburn. It thus represents the pagan-derived concept of the role of religion in supporting the military activities of a nation.

6 'BUT WHAT GOOD CAME OF IT AT LAST?'

What were the long-term results of the decisive battles mentioned in Lecture 1, and others of the period 450–850 AD? What developments took place in economy and society, in politics and governance, whether as the result of warfare and of the need to organize for war, or from other causes?

In the primary farming economy of northern Britain, there is evidence that in the early medieval period, the earlier squarish fields were replaced by long narrow fields, especially in the form of cultivation terraces. These, which may reflect changes in the form of the plough, are now known as far north as the southern slopes of the Cairngorms. They demonstrate a widespread advance of arable farming.

These centuries also saw the proliferation of horizontal water-mills in Ireland, still to be discovered in northern Britain. This evidence undermines the myth that the economy of upland Britain and of Ireland was dominated by the raising of cattle.

Site finds, especially from fortified places in north-western Britain and Ireland, bear witness to the import of wine from the Mediterranean and Gaul, and glass and pottery vessels from western Europe, from the late-fifth to the eighth century. Adomnan mentions a *caput regionis* visited by sailors from Gaul. This may have been Dunollie; but the quantity or variety of imports at Dunadd, Mote of Mark and Whithorn reveal that these were important centres too. Indeed, the dense settlement over an area of 3 ha, no less than the finds, show that Whithorn was an *emporium* in European terms.

Northumbrian coins of the later eighth and ninth centuries from Whithorn, Carlisle and Hexham show that these were on the periphery of a money economy centred on York. In these examples, early urbanization had an ecclesiastical focus (as was also the case at St Andrews). But similar coins from Dunbar mark a wholly secular centre, with its roots in the seventh century *urbs regis*.

It is significant, however, that north of York kings did not mint coins, neither did they found burghs: two activities characteristic of medieval kings. Instead, they built forts; and the appearance of forts, sometimes of developed hierarchical plans, in the archaeological record from the late sixth century on is paralleled by the emergence in the historical record of credible kings, such as Æthelfrith among the Angles, Roderc among the Britons, Brude among the Picts, and Aedan among the Scots.

The evidence of artefacts and C14 dates shows that forts – with the exceptions of Bamburgh and Dunbar – were being abandoned by the ninth, or at least 10th centuries. Dunadd and Dunollie were, however, occupied late enough to inhibit Scandinavian settlement in mainland Argyll. Thereafter there was a definite break until the 13th century, when some fort-sites were overlaid with castles. In the meantime, kings may have used unfortified low-lying centres such as Scone.

The threat of balkanization mentioned in Lecture 1 was not initially relieved by warring, fort-building kings. In the long term it was reduced by the emergence of two strong nations, with efficient war-machines and ideologies of genocide.

Thus the Northumbrian Angles eliminated the kingdoms of the Britons (with the exception of Strathclyde), 'having first', in Bede's approving words, 'either exterminated or subjugated the inhabitants'. Culturally, this led to the permanent anglicization of much of lowland Scotland. Likewise, the Scottish takeover of southern Pictland was said to have been accomplished *destructis Pictis*: the destruction, in effect, of what had been the major military nation of the north, with its distinctive stone-carving. The consequent achievement was, of course, the political consolidation of the mainland north of the Forth–Clyde isthmus.

These centuries, then, laid the foundations of the modern political, linguistic and cultural

landscape of northern Britain. Present-day affiliations and tensions were being created then. We must conclude that the past is not a foreign country; it is indeed the land which we inherit.

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