

# Arthur's O'on again: newly-discovered drawings by John Adair, and their context

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the significance of a recently-identified sheet of drawings by John Adair, 'Geographer' (1647–1718), of Arthur's O'on, the celebrated Roman building which formerly stood north of the Antonine Wall near the site occupied by the Carron Ironworks, 3 km north of Falkirk. These drawings of c 1700, which were once in the collection of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676–1755), the noted antiquary, antedate any other known drawings or engraving of this remarkable structure, and add to our knowledge of Adair's career.*

## INTRODUCTION

On 16 July 1748 Sir John Clerk of Penicuik wrote to William Stukeley:

'I acquainted you some time ago of the barbarous demolition of the Antient Roman Temple called Arthurs Oven, and that a drawing was preparing to preserve its memory. This was to be taken from what you was so good as to publish some years ago, and from a drawing made by one of our best Geographers Mr John Adair deceased many years since.' (Lukis 1880, 439; cf Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng Misc c 113, ff 112v–13.)

This letter introduces us to two of the leading personalities in the long saga of the antiquarian study of one of the most enigmatic buildings of Roman Britain (Steer 1958). Stukeley published the first substantial work on Arthur's O'on in 1720 (Stukeley 1720); Sir John Clerk led a campaign to prevent its demolition in 1743, and Clerk family interest in the monument lasted into the next generation (Brown 1987, 14). Stukeley's illustrations of 1720, like those of Alexander Gordon (published in his *Itinerarium Septentrionale* of 1726) are well known. Adair's drawings, to which Clerk alluded, have been lost to scholarship until their recent rediscovery and identification, and it is these drawings which it is the purpose of the present paper to discuss. Arthur's O'on was a structure in which most of the leading figures engaged in antiquarian research in North Britain in the first half of the 18th century were interested – Sir Robert Sibbald, Clerk, Stukeley, and Gordon are the most notable, but the list could be expanded to include Edward Lhuys, Roger Gale, John Horsley, William Maitland and, later, William Roy. It is the addition of John Adair to this list which must cause us to take note of him not only as 'one of our best Geographers', but also as a man concerned with the recording of antiquities.

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## PROVENANCE

The sheet of Adair's drawings (illus 1) was acquired by Professor Stuart Piggott from a bookseller in the north of England, and was subsequently presented by him, through one of the present authors, to the National Library of Scotland, where the drawings were entered in the accessions register of the Department of Manuscripts (Acc 9439). The significance of the drawings was immediately apparent, and the connection with Sir John Clerk (1676–1755), revealed by identification of the anonymous hand in which the sheet was inscribed, raised questions of provenance. Investigation showed that this sheet of drawings was in fact a stray from the Clerk of Penicuik Muniments (now deposited in the Scottish Record Office, HM General Register House, Edinburgh), having been removed from a sketch-book of drawings by Adair which had been given by his widow to Sir John Clerk some time after Adair's death in 1718 (SRO, GD18/5077). By agreement among all parties, the sheet of drawings has now been re-united with the series of studies by Adair which are loosely stitched together to form a small album of sketches of natural and artificial curiosities.

The Adair album in the Clerk Muniments bears the manuscript title in Sir John Clerk's hand: 'Several very curious drawings/ by John Adair Geographer/ which were given to me by his wife/ after his death.' Clerk added a further note:

'Mr Adair was a very skilfull Geographer, he designed well & was no mean phylosopher. All his carts whither in print or manuscript were by an order of the Lords of the Treasury lodged in the Exchequer of Scotland in November 1723, for which his wife received a pension during her life of 40 lib. str. yearly.'

Adair's widow, Jean Oliphant, had spent long periods in London lobbying for this pension, and when a decision in her favour was reached in 1723 had brought her husband's papers back to Edinburgh in order to deliver the draughts and plans up to the Barons of Exchequer (National Library of Scotland, Adv MS 29.1.2 (vi), f 254, Mrs Adair to James Anderson, WS, 3 July 1723). As a Baron of the Scottish Court of Exchequer, Clerk had supported Mrs Adair's claim, and indeed he had known and respected Adair for many years (SRO, GD18/5851/1, Clerk to ?William Wishart, 19 Sept 1741). It is probable that Mrs Adair gave the drawings in question to Clerk as a personal token of appreciation for his support, or as a keepsake in memory of her husband.

## DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

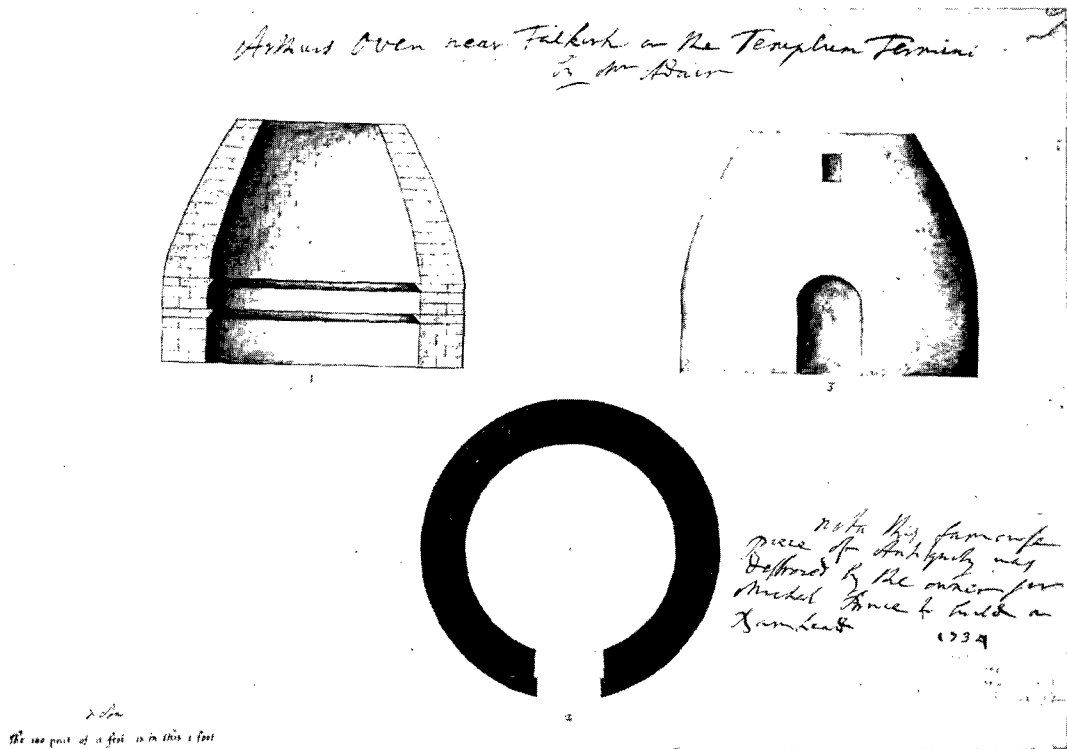
The Arthur's O'on sheet of drawings measures 290 mm by 205 mm. It comprises (1) a section, (2) the plan and (3) the elevation of the building at a scale of 1:100. At the bottom right-hand corner is a pencil inscription, probably by Adair himself, which is the form of disjointed and inconclusive notes on the stones of the window aperture and the door jambs. But the sheet also bears all-important annotations in the hand of Sir John Clerk. As the drawings are unsigned, the evidence in the upper inscription is vital: 'Arthur's Oven near Falkirk or the Templum Termini/ by Mr Adair'. Clerk's second annotation reads as follows:

'Nota. this famouse/ piece of Antiquity was/ destroyed by the owner Sir/ Michel [sic] Bruce to build a/ Damhead. 1734 [sic].'

These annotations are in Clerk's late hand. A *terminus post quem* for at least the second inscription is the date of the destruction of the O'on, an event which occurred in 1743 (Brown 1974). It may be that these are the drawings which Clerk had in mind when he corresponded with

Stukeley in 1748 on the 'barbarous demolition' of the building, as being those which might form the basis of a commemorative print. The publication of some sort of memorial drawing, to serve as a reminder not only of the structure itself but also of the 'gothicism' of its demolisher, was a project Clerk had entertained for the previous five years: he had discussed the idea with Stukeley, and with Roger and Samuel Gale, and the notion had enjoyed some currency in the central antiquarian circle in England (Lukis 1885, 430). The way Clerk has annotated these drawings may be indicative of his intention that they should be engraved to serve this commemorative purpose. Perhaps he envisaged the Adair record of Arthur's O'on taking its place in the *Vetusta Monumenta* series then being published by the Society of Antiquaries of London. The fact that the drawings are annotated at all by Clerk suggests indeed that he had separated them from the rest of the sheets forming the Adair album in order to give them to a third party. It is possible that in 1748, or at some date in the next few years, Clerk removed the Arthur's O'on drawings – the sheet has been folded as if for enclosure in a letter – and sent them to Stukeley, for whom the O'on had then assumed renewed importance in his far-fetched studies of the career and coinage of the Emperor Carausius (cf Brown 1974, 286–7, and Stukeley's heavily annotated copy of his 1720 pamphlet which is in the Ashmolean Library, Oxford; see also Piggott 1985, 139–41). The last-known letter between Clerk and Stukeley dates from July 1753. Three engravings of Arthur's O'on are included in Stukeley's *The Medallic History of Marcus Aurelius Valerius Carausius Emperor in Britain*, Book I (London, 1757). In these plates (illus 2–3) some influence of Adair's drawings may be detectable. Certainly the correspondence between Stukeley's drawings of the 1750s and the newly-discovered Adair sheet is much greater than is any resemblance between Stukeley's 1750s' work and his own engravings accompanying his essay of 1720 (illus 4) which were based not on personal inspection of the monument but on the field-sketches of the architect Andrews Jelfe. In the *Carausius* plates Stukeley quite clearly shows the internal wall of the O'on beginning to taper inwards from a point immediately above the upper string-course. This characteristic had not previously been shown on either Stukeley's or Gordon's engraved plates of the building, despite the fact that Gordon had specifically stated that it was this 'upper Cornice from whence springs the whole Arch of the Building' (Gordon 1726, 26).

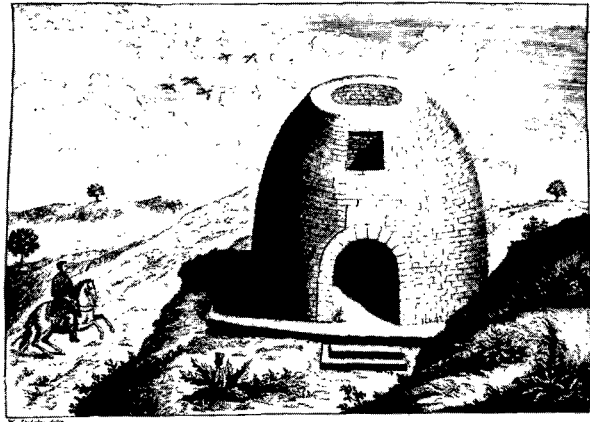
Stukeley had been the real protagonist in the study of Arthur's O'on; but he had always worked at second hand. From his friend Jelfe he had obtained 'an exact Mensuration of the old Temple'. Jelfe visited the site, at Stukeley's request, 'and accurately examin'd every Part of the Building in an Architectonic Way, of which his Skill in that Science rendered him highly capable'. From Jelfe's field-sketches – 'the Draught in his Pocket-book taken upon the Spot' – Stukeley had worked up his own drawings for publication. Yet he remained conscious that he could present only 'a Sketch and imperfect Attempt', and that 'those of better Judgment, and who have the Advantage of Autopsy' might improve upon his pioneering efforts (Stukeley 1720, 1–2, 12). He argued that no previous writer had examined the building with sufficient accuracy; and if he presented its '*Ichnography* or Ground-plot' and its '*Architectonic Section*' in a somewhat rude manner, this was perhaps appropriate to the then rough-and-ready character and weather-beaten appearance of the structure. Gordon had made his plates as a result of personal inspection and survey, but no influence of Adair's previous work is detectable and it does not seem that he knew these particular drawings. We learn from a Memorial (before 1730) which Gordon drew up when he was seeking the post of 'Hydrographer for the Kingdom of Scotland, vacant since the death of Mr Adair' (SRO, GD18/5023/6) that he had had access to Adair's manuscript maps then housed in the Exchequer Chambers in Edinburgh, and that he had listed them. Clerk was Gordon's confidant and patron. But in all probability the Arthur's O'on sheet was already in Clerk's possession by that time, and not with the bulk of Adair's charts



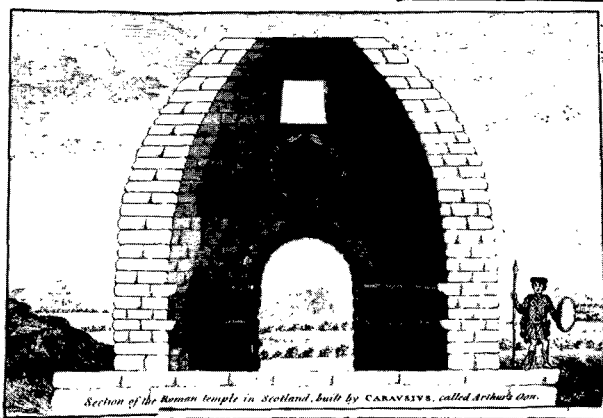
ILLUS 1 Sheet of drawings of Arthur's O'on by John Adair

and plans, and so it may have escaped Gordon's notice. The shape of Arthur's O'on as we see it illustrated in *Itinerarium Septentrionale* is very different from Adair's record.

What is striking about Adair's elevation is the smooth appearance which he gives to the exterior of the rotunda. It appears as (quite literally) polished ashlar of the most accomplished workmanship, or else as a surface rendered in plaster. The quality of the masonry was indeed something that was to be praised by all writers on the O'on. Sibbald, for example, described the 'squared Stones without Lime' which had resisted both 'Storms and Time', and had given 'the Fabrick Strength and Firmness'. The round structure seemed to such a writer as Sibbald a perfect form: 'the Elegancy and Magnificence of this Work, appeareth in the agreeable Pulchritude of it, that the Stones were polished, and so artificially placed, that by being set in other [sic], they upheld the Structure, each of them keeping the other fast and firm; so that they have now lasted above Fifteen Hundred Years' (Sibbald 1707, 45). Gordon, too, was to comment on the firmness of the masonry, in which he found it impossible in parts to discern any jointing. 'This Observation I owe to the ingenious Architect Mr Adams who made me take Notice of this particular Circumstance, when I was upon the Spot' (Gordon 1726, 25). (This interest in antiquities is a further example of the multifarious activities of William Adam which has not before been noted, and it is perhaps worthy of passing mention in his tercentenary year. Adam had probably inspected the O'on by way of diversion during his investigation of the practicalities of constructing a Forth-Clyde canal.) Given Adair's extreme accuracy, and the great attention to detail which is evident in other examples of his work, some heed – if not complete credence – must be given to his depiction of the external appearance of the O'on. Of



View of the Roman Temple called Arthur's Oon, Scotland, built by CARAUSIUS.



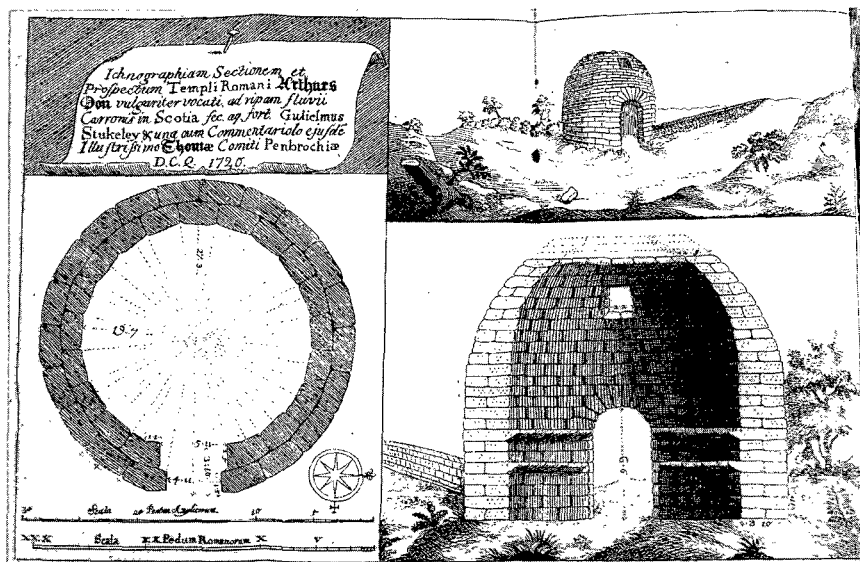
Section of the Roman temple in Scotland, built by CARAUSIUS, called Arthur's Oon.

ILLUS 2 & 3 Engravings of Arthur's O'on from Stukeley's *Carausius* of 1757

all the graphic records of the structure, those which contrast most markedly with each other are Adair's drawings and the engraved plate published at the end of Sibbald's *Historical Inquiries* of 1707. This little-known representation of the O'on was later to reappear in an even more crude form as a woodcut in the second edition of Gibson's *Camden* of 1722 (Gibson 1722, II, cols 1223–4). It could be argued that this view of the structure is actually a section, for it shows the string-courses which were an internal feature: it is almost as if the building had been, as it were, turned inside out.

The Adair drawings bear no indication of orientation, and therefore make no comment as to the location of the entrance. This is a matter of dispute in the literature. The door was said by Stukeley, in 1720, to be on the east, and by Gordon, in 1726, to be on the west, a fact which Stukeley later accepted, adapting his earlier work accordingly in an intriguing way (Brown 1974, 286). Yet other records, however, place the door on the east (Steer 1976).

As to the matter of siting, the Adair drawings contribute nothing to the debate on whether the O'on stood, as Gordon put it, on 'a fair Level', or else on 'the Declivity of a considerable rising Ground, supported by a Basement of Stones, projecting out from below the lowest



ILLUS 4 Engraving of Arthur's O' from Stukeley's essay of 1720

Course of the Building' (Gordon 1726, 25). Nor do the Adair drawings answer the question as to whether there was any form of stepped podium.

#### SUGGESTED DATE FOR THE DRAWINGS

The date of the drawings may be largely inferred from evidence of Adair's antiquarian and other activities as they are recorded in the Clerk album. As has been pointed out, this actually consists of loose sheets stitched together; but the separate leaves represent a discrete body of natural-historical and antiquarian work carried out over a definite period. The only sheet actually inscribed and dated by Adair himself is a drawing of a 'Whale in the Forth near Rosaith [*sic*] the 4th September 1694'. The Penicuik album includes a sheet of finely-drawn sketches of Roman distance slabs from Antonine Wall sites. One of these is shown *in situ*, and this example is one of several which were removed to the library of Glasgow College between 1694 and 1700 (Keppie 1979, 7–8; Macdonald 1897). Clerk annotated the sheet to indicate the changed locations of the inscriptions. In Edinburgh University Library there is a set of drawings which belonged to Professor David Gregory of some of these same distance slabs. These are described as being from sketches made by John Adair c 1696–98 which had been supplied by him to Dr John Urry of Christ Church, Oxford (EUL, Dk.1.2, p 74). During the period when he seems to have drawn these slabs either *in situ* or after their transfer to Glasgow, Adair was gathering material for a proposed publication on the Antonine Wall. William Nicolson, in his *Scottish Historical Library* (1702), noted that Adair's 'Historical and Mathematical Account of [the Scots'] famous Roman Wall' was 'in a good forwardness' and that with it Adair would presently 'oblige the publick' (Nicolson 1702, 22). A pamphlet produced by Adair, probably in 1703, also promised forthcoming plans of the Antonine Wall together with 'a large Description of it with the Camps, Castles, Forts, &c, and an account of the Inscriptions, Coins, Instruments of War and other remains of Antiquity that have been found thereabout' (Adair 1836, 384).

The Penicuik album also contains sketches of other Roman artefacts, the find of one of which can be dated to about 1702. This is a small oblong cornelian sealstone inscribed VTERE/FELIX which was said by the Revd Robert Wodrow in a letter of 9 March 1702 addressed to James Sutherland to have been 'cast up late by a plough' about five miles west of Glasgow (Wodrow 1937, 190). Along with this seal, described as coming from the parish of Kilbride, the Clerk album contains a sketch of a 'ring of whitish aggat'. For this no findspot is recorded. But both the sealstone and the ring appear, some years later, engraved by Robert Milne as numbers six and eleven on Plate 1 appended to Sibbald's *Conjectures Concerning the Roman Ports, Colonies, and Forts, in the Firths* (Edinburgh, 1711). Thus if we note all stated or ascertainable dates for Adair's recording of this archaeological material, and bear in mind the purpose for which it was drawn as being his survey of the Antonine Wall in its wider setting, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Arthur's O'on drawings date from about 1700. At any rate, they now join that corpus of graphic and literary evidence available to the modern scholar who would wish, in the words of William Stukeley to Sir John Clerk, 'to preserve some remembrance of this curious fabric' (SRO, GD18/5027/8, 7 June 1753).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Bt, for kind permission to quote from his family papers deposited in the Scottish Record Office, and also for permitting a photograph of the Adair drawings to be used to illustrate this paper.

#### NOTE

Both authors have in hand work which will set the subjects discussed above in wider context. I G B is engaged in a full biographical and cultural treatment of Clerk, and is also preparing a study of Stukeley's antiquarian circle. P G V is gathering material for a monograph on Adair's life and work.

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