

Some possible dating evidence for a souterrain near Alyth, Perthshire

Alan Small* & J D Bateson†

ABSTRACT

A small group of Roman coins discovered at the turn of the century during the clearing out of a souterrain near Auchter Alyth are identified, described and suggested as possible dating evidence for the Drumderrach souterrain.

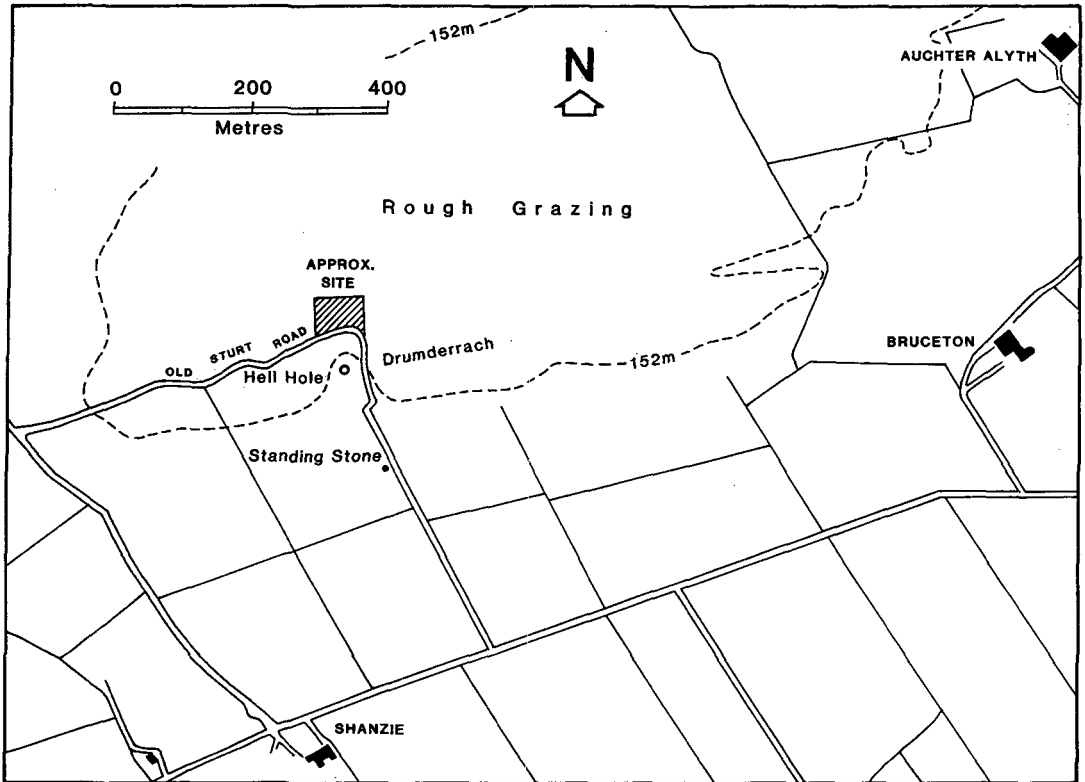
In the discussion following an Extra-Mural lecture, Robert J Brien of Pitcairngreen, near Perth, stated that his grandfather, Robert Jamieson, then master of works at Airlie, had recovered Roman coins during the clearing out of a souterrain 'on the Auchter Alyth side of the Isla from Airlie'. No more precise location is available. Similarly, the date of the find can be no more accurately placed than probably after 1880 and certainly before 1913. Mr Brien could not be specific as to which coins in his grandfather's collection were from the souterrain. Two problems therefore arose: was it possible to identify the souterrain, and could the coins in the collection which belonged to it be identified? If so, some useful but circumstantial evidence lost as a result of indiscriminate digging could be recovered.

Although the Airlie area is rich in souterrains, only two of the recorded examples meet the description 'on the Auchter Alyth side of the Isla' – Balloch (NO 258498) and Drumderrach (NO 279508). The site at Balloch was discovered in the late 18th century and was described in the *Old Statistical Account* (Symers 1792, 406) from which later references derive. By the mid-19th century, when the Ordnance Survey visited the site, nothing was visible and the map location is based on the evidence of the farmer at Shanzie, who had seen the site open 65 years earlier and indicated the spot as nearly as he could recollect. Although the *OSA* does state that the extremities of the site were not fully explored, it would seem unlikely that Jamieson would have attempted to undertake such a task on a souterrain so imprecisely located. Furthermore, Balloch is some 3 km from Auchter Alyth, and is unlikely to be described by a local person as on the Auchter Alyth side of the Isla.

The Drumderrach site (illus 1), being much closer to Auchter Alyth, must be the prime contender, but the evidence for a souterrain is confused. There was no published record of this site until Meikle (1925, 102) noted that 'In the wood to North (from Hell Hole) beyond the old Sturt Road are underground dwellings which have fallen in to a large extent since 1880'. This is likely to be reliable information as Meikle, who was minister of the parish of Alyth from 1897 to 1932,

*Department of Geography, University of Dundee, Dundee DD1 4HN

† Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ



ILLUS 1 Drumderrach: location map (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)

had a wealth of detailed local knowledge, publishing two books on historical aspects of the parish as well as several papers. Callander (1925) also notes the site, locating it by estimated distances from the site of a short stone cist, though it is likely that Meikle was his personal source. Wainwright (1963, 183) confuses the issue by relying on Callander rather than Meikle. He identifies an elongated depression just to the north of Hell Hole as a likely souterrain, equating it with Meikle's underground dwellings even though, according to the latter's information, these lay in the wood to the north of the Sturt Road at least 75 m from Hell Hole. In winter the area around Hell Hole is extremely marshy and extensive dumping of field clearance stones over a long period of time has left somewhat irregular terrain which may have misled Wainwright into postulating a souterrain. In winter such a site would have been impossible to drain.

In the area to the north of the Sturt Road the wood has long gone, leaving rough grazing with the occasional tree, along with patches of whin and scrub vegetation. Parts of the surface are hummocky, but it is impossible now to identify the site of the 'underground dwellings'. We are grateful to Gordon Maxwell for confirming that no other likely possibilities for a souterrain in the area have shown up on air photographs to date, and therefore conclude that Meikle's site rather than Wainwright's is likely to be the site from which the coins were recovered, not only in view of the approximate date of discovery and relationship to the extant description, but also because it is a well-drained location with commanding views of the countryside.

It was much more difficult to identify which coins in the large collection, ranging from ancient Greek to modern, had come from the souterrain. All the Roman coins were identified and assigned to Probable and Possible lists. Other coins of the same period were identified and similarly assessed. Four Greek Imperial coins, issued in Cydonia (Crete), Hieropolis (Cyrrestica, Syria), Antioch and Ephesus and Alexandria for local use, were discounted as they were unlikely to have reached Scotland in antiquity. Finds of Greek Imperial coins are common enough in Britain and are usually assigned as modern losses, but then a small number may well be genuine contemporaneous losses, by a soldier, merchant or native, of a souvenir acquired abroad and subsequently lost or discarded as being of no value. The four pieces here are probably best regarded as modern souvenirs. The only other contemporaneous item was a base metal forgery of an Ancient British group H gold *stater*. It is possible that this forgery found its way north from southern England as it is a very unusual coin to find in a very minor collection of early coins from the north-east of Scotland. It is therefore added to the Possible list (no.11).

LIST OF COINS

Full details of each coin follow, including the condition (SW = slightly worn, W = worn, VW = very worn, C = corroded), weight in grammes and the die axis in degrees.

PROBABLE

- 1 Vespasian *denarius* AD 78,79 Rome reverse Annona, *RIC* 131(a) [W; 2.67 g; 180]
- 2 Hadrian *denarius* AD 118 Rome reverse Pax, *RIC* 44 [W; 2.53 g; 210]

POSSIBLE

- 3 Augustus *quadrans* 5 BC, *RIC* 209a [W; 3.12 g; 310]
- 4 Domitian *as* AD 90–1 Rome reverse Fortuna, *RIC* 394 [C–W; 10.76 g; 150]
- 5 Maximinus *sestertius* AD 236–8 Rome reverse Victory, *RIC* 90 [VW; 18.31 g; 0]
- 6 Gordian III *as* AD 241–3 Rome reverse Sol, *RIC* 297(b) [VW; 7.66 g; 0]
- 7 Marius *antoninianus* AD 268 unidentified mint reverse Victory, *RIC* 17 [SW; 3.01 g; 0]
- 8 Aurelian *antoninianus* AD 270–5 Milan reverse Emperor and Concordia, *RIC* 119 [VW; 3.01 gm; 180]
- 9 As last Cyzicus reverse Emperor and Mars, *RIC* 366 [SW; 3.38 g; 0]
- 10 Constantine I deified *ae* 15 mm AD 347–8 uncertain mint *RIC* cf44 (of Heraclea) [VW; 1.37 g; 180]
- 11 Celtic contemporary base metal forgery of an Ancient British group H gold *stater*, Mack 1974, 50 [W]

Of the 11 coins listed, two stand out in being silver, as opposed to base metal, and in having a similar patination. They are also the type of coin which could easily have reached a native Scottish site in the middle of the second century AD. These are the *denarii* of Vespasian and Hadrian (nos 1 & 2). If found together they would constitute a small hoard, or indeed they may be part of a larger hoard as there is no record of whether the finders shared the coins among themselves. Assuming, as seems most likely, that these were the coins found in the souterrain this would suggest that they were hidden there together rather than having been lost separately on a habitation site. The remaining Roman Imperial coins (nos 3–10) run from the reign of Augustus to

the mid-fourth century. They cannot be completely dismissed as possible finds from a souterrain, but it would be surprising if all of them came from northern Perthshire. From the possible list, there is no way of determining at present whether one or more of them did.

Although the evidence outlined above is of a somewhat circumstantial nature, it is reasonable to suggest that the underground dwellings, probably a souterrain, described by Meikle can be assigned a *terminus ante quem* of the second century AD, a conclusion which fits well with other examples from southern and eastern Scotland. Although Roman material is recorded from souterrains, not only in Angus but also at several sites south of the Forth (Hingley, 1992, 29–30), the date range of souterrains covers a considerable time span. Recent evidence from Cyderhall in Sutherland, for example, indicated dates between 400 and 200 BC or even earlier (Pollock, 1992, 159).

REFERENCES

- Callander, J C 1925 'Long Cairns and other Prehistoric Monuments in Aberdeen and Banffshire and a Short Cist at Bruceton, Alyth, Perthshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 59 (1924–5), 21–8.
- Hingley, R 1992 'Society in Scotland from 700 BC to AD 200', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 122 (1992), 7–53.
- Mack, R P 1974 *The Coinage of Ancient Britain*. London.
- Mattingly, M, Sydenham, E A *et al* 1923–94, *Roman Imperial Coinage I–X*. London.
- Meikle, J 1925 *Places and Place-Names Round Alyth*. Paisley.
- Pollock, R W 1992 'The Excavation of a Souterrain and Roundhouse at Cyderhall, Sutherland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 122 (1992), 149–60.
- Symers, C 1792 Parish of Alyth, in *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, 6, 397–406.
- Wainwright, F T 1963 *The Souterrains of Southern Pictland*. London.