
4 Discussion

Despite the circumstances and the limited area available for investigation – essentially a watching brief on an access road which evolved into a rapid salvage excavation – the results have established activity, especially metalworking, in the 8th–11th centuries AD to the south of the area later developed in the medieval period as the Cathedral and Bishop’s Palace complex.

However, what is not clear as yet is whether the settlement and/or semi-industrial activity unearthed at The Meadows Business Park is Norse or Pictish/Gaelic. Place-name evidence is especially useful here and there has been much work done in the field of linguistics (Watson 1926; Nicolaisen 1976; Fraser 1986; Crawford 1995b; Bangor-Jones 1995, for example). The place-names of both Picts and Norse intermingle in what must have been a zone of contact between the two peoples, with a later Gaelic element being introduced as Pictish power declined in the ninth century (Fraser 1986, 23). Pictish place-names indicating settlement are relatively infrequent around the Dornoch Firth, Norse names more common and distributed fairly evenly,

and Gaelic names represent by far the largest proportion of the settlement place-names in the area (Fraser 1986, 23–29).

The distribution of Viking graves also fits well with the place-name evidence, with a concentration around Dornoch (McNeill and MacQueen 1996, 64–5, 71; Batey 1993, 148–172). There is also a strong relationship between grave finds and the location of the best arable land – in north-east Caithness and the Dornoch area of Sutherland (Crawford 1987, 118). Some of the finds recovered from the cultivation soil at Dornoch (the finger bell, pinshaft and bone counter) and the one diagnostic find from the excavation (the bone pin beater) point to a Norse presence. The copper alloy bell, for example, has parallels from sites such as Freswick Links and Icelandic sites; the bone pin beater has both Anglo-Saxon and Norse parallels. The large numbers of cockle and mussel shells also have Norse parallels. Although it is not clear at Dornoch whether they were being used as food or bait, similar assemblages have been found at late Norse farms such as those at Jarlshof, Sandwick and Freswick and interpreted as



Illus 8 The access road under excavation looking west. The building is in the foreground and is cut by the ditch running diagonally across the trench

being indicative of intensive fishing (Ritchie 1993, 122–124).

However, the early dates attributed to the activity at Dornoch would lend some support to the age-old tradition of a cell of Early Christian monks at Dornoch, and it is possible that the features uncovered at the Meadows Business Park represent a semi-industrial zone lying at the outer edge of a precinct around an early church complex. Phases 1–3 (8th–11th centuries AD) all suggest that iron-making and -working were core activities, with evidence for all stages of the process present, a common feature of early monastic estates.

Remarkably few secular dwellings dating to the period from the 8th–11th centuries AD have been excavated on mainland Scotland, and most of the parallels for the enclosures, structures and activities carried out at the Meadows Business Park come from ecclesiastical sites. The nearest such site is at Portmahomack, just over the Dornoch Firth (Carver 2004). Excavations there in Sector 1, Intervention 25 (Sector 1 lies to the south of the early church), revealed somewhat similar structures and features (Tarbat Discovery Programme Bulletin No. 4 1998). These were interpreted as an oval enclosure, open at one end and c 15m along its long axis. This in turn overlay an earlier ditch, forming a curvilinear enclosure. Immediately to the south-west of these features was a group of intercutting gullies and post-holes which appear to define a sequence of structures. Unfortunately, no finds were recovered from these features, which lay just outside the enclosure around the 8th-century monastery. Initially thought to be prehistoric in date, ongoing post-excavation analysis, however, now suggests that these features are more likely to be 8th–11th century in date and could be Norse (Tarbat Discovery Programme Bulletin No. 5 1999). Iron-making and -working were also features of Portmahomack during this period (*ibid*).

Further afield, parallels can also be drawn with the early monastic site on Inchmarnock, off the island of Bute, Argyll (Lowe, forthcoming). Here, within an enclosure, was a series of post-built huts, at least one of them associated with metalworking activity, a later phase of which was dated to cal AD 810–1020.

Ironworking in the 8th–10th centuries AD was

not, however, confined entirely to monastic sites. An intriguing site at Upper Gothens, Perthshire, radiocarbon-dated to this period, consisted of a roughly circular enclosure visible as a cropmark. The interior had been badly damaged, but smithing slag and iron were recovered, as well as evidence for internal divisions within the enclosure. The excavator interpreted this site as a high-status early historic settlement, possibly an estate centre of a hitherto unrecognised type (Barclay 2001). No buildings were identified within the enclosure, however, due to the modern damage to the site and limited excavation.

The form of the Dornoch Phase 2 building, either a small sub-rectangular structure with rounded corners, or the rounded end of a longer rectangular structure, does have some parallels other than on monastic sites. As a rectangular structure with rounded ends, it could represent an example of the ‘Pitcarmick-type’ building recognised further south in Perthshire (Barrett & Downes 1997). As a smaller sub-rectangular structure, it can be paralleled by a series of timber structures excavated at Easter Kinnear, and dated to the 6th–8th centuries AD (Driscoll 1997). Here, there was evidence of up to five rebuilds on the same site, and all of these were found to have ditches around the circumference, but there was no trace of a central post to support the roof. It is presumed by the excavators that the roof was supported by the wall posts, and the gaps between the posts filled in with wattle and daub panels, bedded in the trenches.

The structural remains, the evidence for iron-making and -working and the, albeit limited, artefactual assemblage recovered from The Meadows Business Park suggest that Dornoch was subject to influences from both Norse and Pictish contexts. Lying on the boundary as it does between the Norse and Pictish lands and in the context of the emerging Scottish nation, the Dornoch Firth area can be seen to occupy an important point of contact where all these influences met. Perhaps we need look no further than this strategic position for the reason behind the later establishment of the see at Dornoch, but it is possible that further discoveries relating to the extent and importance of pre-burghal settlement at Dornoch remain to be made.