

Description of Proposed Works

Authors-Oskar Sveinbjarnarson and Gordon Noble, Department of Archaeology, University of Aberdeen

INTRODUCTION

Project Background

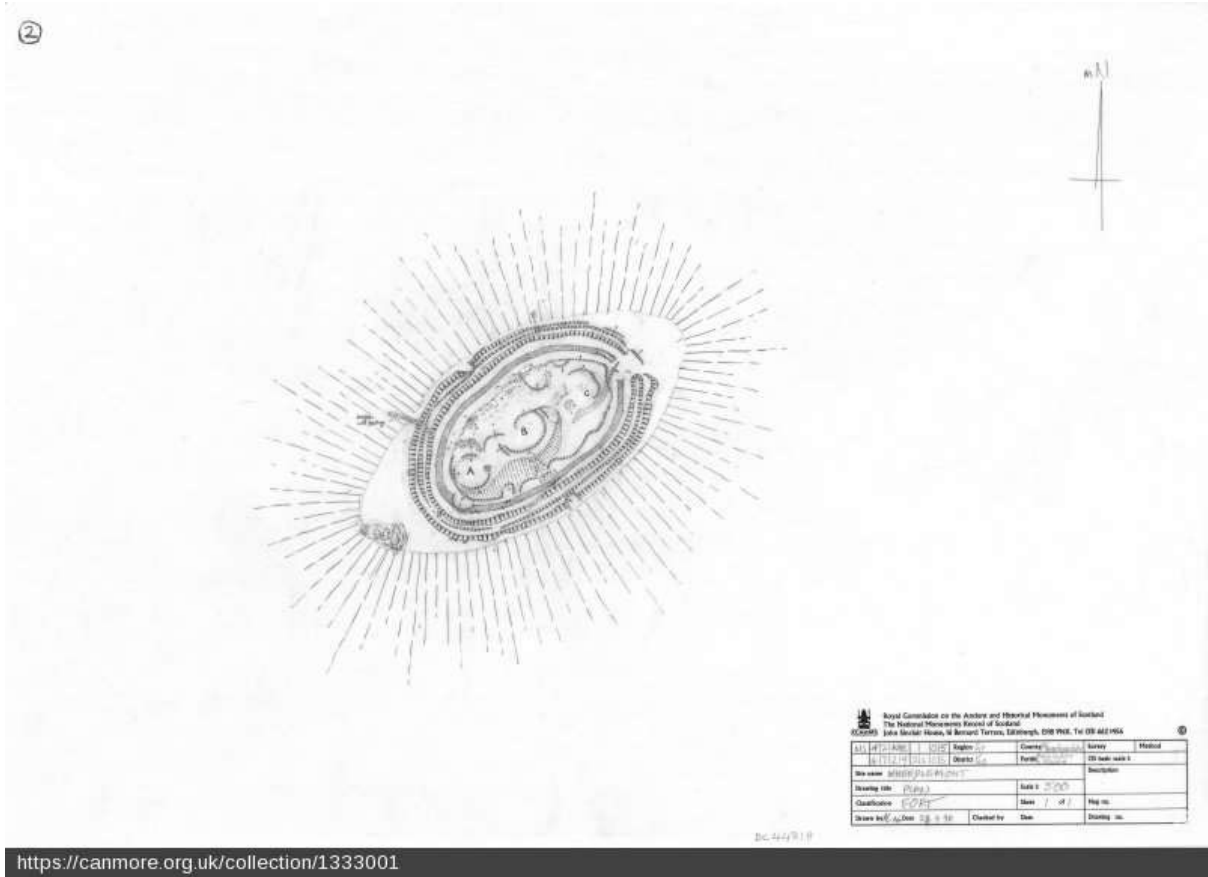
Northern Picts is a project at the University of Aberdeen that aims to uncover the archaeological traces of Pictish society in northern Scotland through fieldwork and survey. To date the project has worked on major central places such as Rhynie (Noble et al. 2013) and Dunnicaer, a silver hoard at Gaulcross (Noble et al. 2016) and a range of other sites from Aberdeenshire to Inverness-shire. One major lacuna in the evidence brought together by the project to date is the nature of settlement patterns and hierarchy in Pictland, one of the major remaining 'problems' of Pictish archaeology (Carver 2011). In Aberdeenshire, for example, apart from major fortified sites such as Rhynie, Cullykhan and Dunnicaer, the settlement evidence consists of isolated and highly truncated features (Ralston 2004). Hence our understanding of the wider settlement patterns of Northeast Scotland in the early medieval period is poor. Excavations by Murray Cook as part of the Strathdon Hillforts project uncovered a handful of other sites such as more modest enclosed sites at Maiden Castle, Bennachie and Cairnmore near Rhynie (Cook 2011). This has led to the suggestion that one important class of Pictish settlement site may be small ringfort-type enclosures of the type occasionally dated to the early medieval period elsewhere in Scotland (Noble et al. 2013: 1150). However, the number of sites investigated remains frustratingly small and insufficient to draw wider conclusions. For example, the small ringfort type enclosures have been shown to also date to the Iron Age and no clear morphological patterns can yet be established.

In order to address the nature, chronology and social dynamics of the smaller enclosed sites of Aberdeenshire, Northern Picts aims to carry out small-scale survey and excavation of a series of stone-walled duns or palisaded sites in Aberdeenshire. Carrying out this work will provide a basic chronology for a much wider monument type that has seen little in the way of previous work. This includes four scheduled monuments that have seen no previous archaeological work:

Wheedlemont SM11681

Wheedlemont (Figures 1 and 2) is a small oval enclosure classified as a fort. It measures about 55metres by 27metres in max dimensions and is located few miles southwest of the village Rhynie, Aberdeenshire. The fort survives mainly as ramparts with ditch in between. There is 3m break in the enclosure which may indicate the entrance to the fort. The ditch is about 3 metre wide and up to 1 metre deep with low earthwork inner and outer banks. The RCHAMS survey of the site records possible house platforms within, but a recent LIDAR survey does not show any conclusive interior features. The site was scheduled in 2007.

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<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1333001>

Figure 1: Plane table survey of Wheedlemont fort. ©RCAHMS.

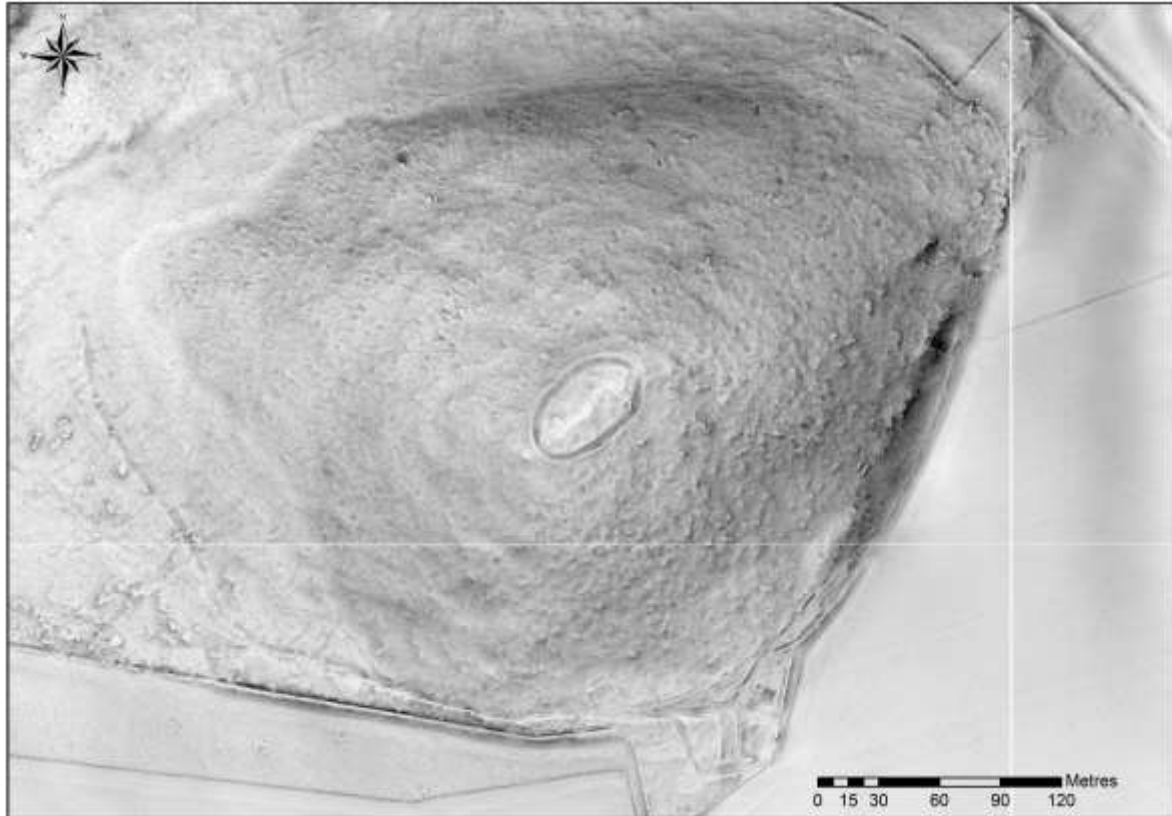


Figure 2: LIDAR image of Wheedlemont fort © Forestry Commission Scotland/Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service/University of Aberdeen.

Hill of Keir SM12334

An oval enclosure on the summit of the Hill of Keir consists of a stone wall measuring around 30 m in diameter, the wall surviving up to 6m in thickness and 0.4m in height. There is a probable entrance (4.5m wide) on the east. No internal features are visible. No previous work has been carried out here. The site was scheduled in 2009.

Barmkyn of North Keig SM11514

This fort, on the summit of Hill of Airlie consists of a very denuded inner rampart around 25-31 m in diameter surrounded by a much more substantial stone wall around 8 m in diameter which encloses the central area of c.45 m diameter. An outer entrance around 4 m wide survives on the southeast side of the outer wall. No work has been carried out at the site. It was scheduled in 2006.

Hill of Christ's Kirk SM11394

The enclosures on Hill of Christ's Kirk are of a slightly different character to the sites above. The site consists of three circuits of a palisaded enclosure with the interior enclosure

measuring around 21 m in diameter and the outer around 55 m. The inner enclosure is offset from the outer two suggesting it may be later in date. The inner enclosure encloses a similar area to the interiors of the small forts above.

NATURE OF THE PROPOSED WORK

Survey

The location, setting and vegetation cover for the majority of these sites means that geophysical survey would be difficult. However, Wheedlemont is in a more open, lowland, location and here resistivity survey can be undertaken to establish whether interior features can be identified through survey.

Excavation

At all four sites small-scale excavation is proposed to provide a basic chronology and characterisation of this form of enclosure in Aberdeenshire. The exact position of trenches would be agreed with HES, but illustrations are provided of the approximate locations.

Wheedlemont SM11681

Three trenches are proposed (Figure 3) – one at the entranceway (c.3 x 5 m), one in the interior (5 x 5 m) and one across the ramparts and ditch (6 x 2 m). These trenches would provide a basic chronology for the enclosure system through obtaining samples for dating, would verify the entranceway and would test the interior for structural evidence. The position of these trenches would be partly determined by the results of the resistivity survey. The trenches across the ramparts will address research questions 1, 3, 7 and 8 (See below for research questions). The trench in the interior will address research questions 2, 4 and 5. Desk based assessment and survey will address research questions 6 and 7.

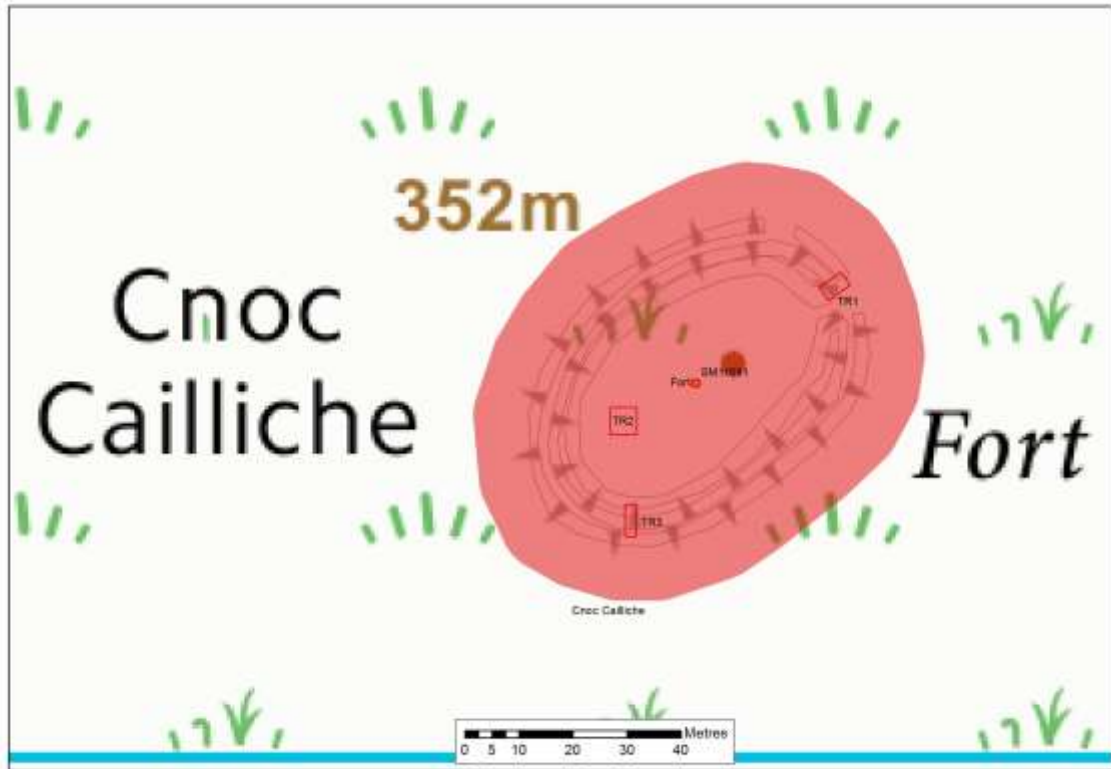


Figure 3 Possible location of trenches at Wheedlemont

Hill of Keir SM12334

A single section across the stone wall and a 2 x 2 m trench would be opened in the interior to test for the presence/absence of interior buildings/deposits (Figure 4). The trench across the rampart will address research questions 1, 3, 7 and 8. The trench in the interior will address research questions 2, 4 and 5. Desk based assessment and survey will address research questions 6 and 7.

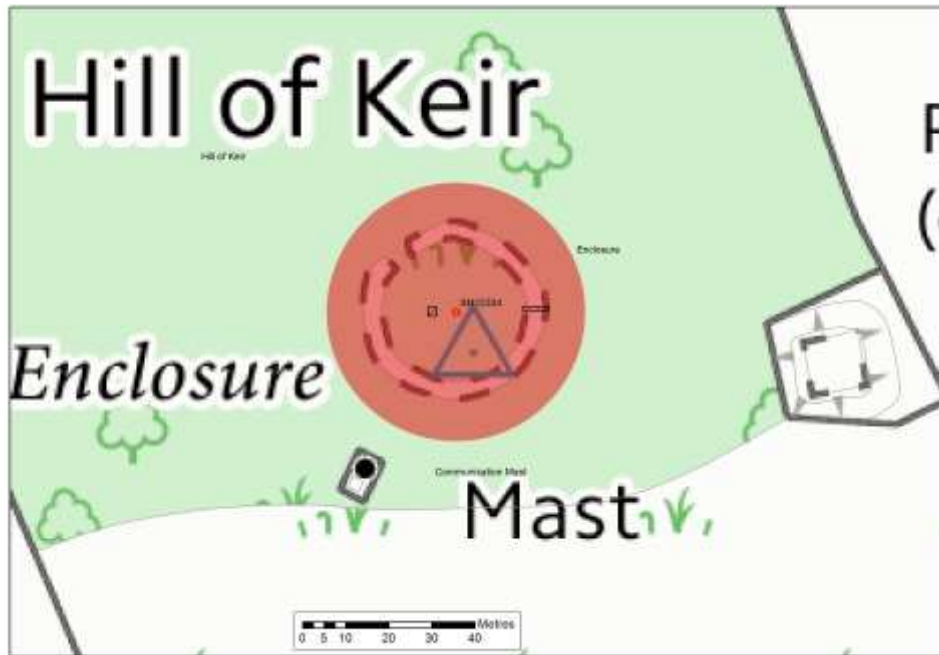


Figure 4 Approximate location of trenches at Hill of Keir

Barmkyn of North Keig SM11514

Sections would be dug across the exterior stone wall and the putative inner wall line and a 2 x 2 m trench would test for the presence/absence of interior buildings/deposits (Figure 5). The trench across the rampart will address research questions 1, 3, 7 and 8. The trench in the interior will address research questions 2, 4 and 5. Desk based assessment and survey will address research questions 6 and 7.



Figure 5 Approximate location of trenches at Barmkyn of North Keig
Hill of Christ's Kirk SM11394

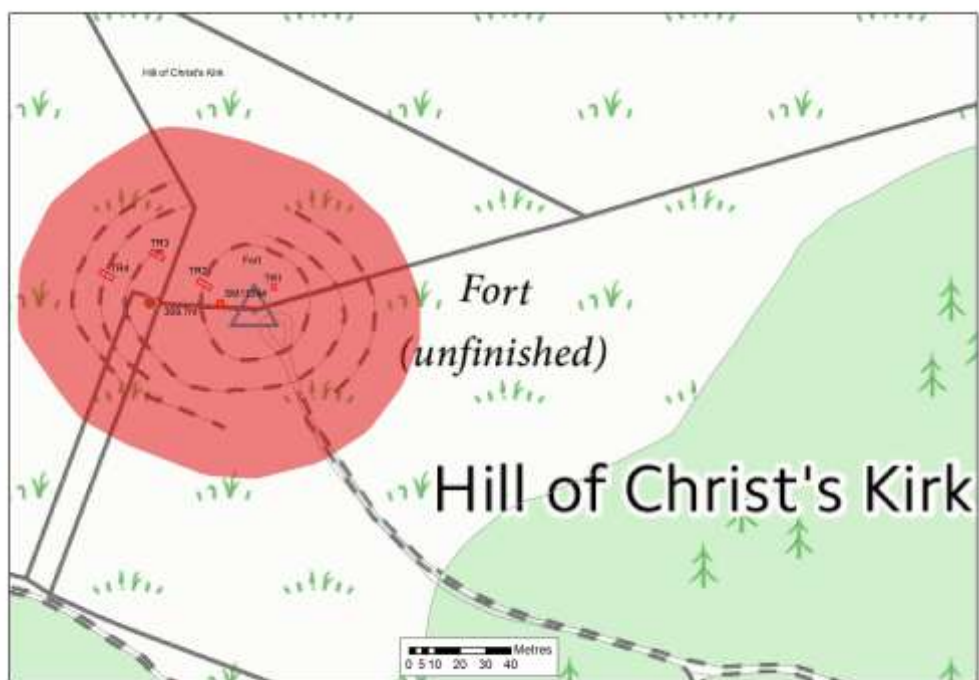


Figure 6 Hill of Christ's Kirk with approximate location of trenches

A single 1.5 m wide section would be dug across each of the three palisade lines to obtain dating and characterisation of the different circuits of palisade (Figure 6). A 5 x 5 m trench would test for the presence/absence of interior buildings/deposits. The trenches across the palisade line will address research questions 1, 3, 7 and 8. The trench in the interior will address research questions 2, 4 and 5. Desk based assessment and survey will address research questions 6 and 7.

Research Questions

The proposed work aims to address a series of research questions:

1. What are the date of these small enclosed sites in Aberdeenshire and how does the chronology fit with wider regional and national patterns?
2. How might they fit within the settlement hierarchy of the Iron Age or early medieval periods?
3. What was the character of their outer 'defences'?
4. Did the defences enclose roundhouses or other settlement forms within?
5. Can we tell anything about the occupants or status of these sites from the material and architectural evidence?
6. What was the landscape setting of these enclosed sites? Were their contemporary sites in the wider landscape (assessed through desk based assessments for each site)?
7. Are these morphologically similar sites a coherent set of contemporary sites that can help elucidate enclosure typologies and dating at a wider national level?
8. Do they help fill the major settlement lacunas of first millennium AD Scotland or do they flesh out our picture of later prehistoric enclosure forms?

JUSTIFICATION FOR PROPOSED WORK

In accordance with with Scotland's Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement (HESPS) Section 3.18/Annex 1 (June 2016), SMC is being sought to explore the cultural significance of a series of small enclosed sites in Aberdeenshire. This intervention will allow the cultural significance of the sites to be considered and the results will offer new interpretation opportunities for visitors and the local community. This enhanced understanding of the sites' cultural significance will be of wide public and academic interest.

In accordance with HESPS Section 3.16, the work proposed represents a minimal level of intervention. The current programme of work will aim to record the site and will involve limited evaluative testing of deposits through targeted excavation. The archaeological evaluation of these series of enclosures is also designed to follow the key research areas identified within the Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF) Iron Age and Medieval Panel.

For enclosed places the ScARF Iron Age and Medieval panels recommend keyhole excavation to collect dating evidence which is severely lacking for this type of site. They state that 'the lack of dating evidence for enclosed sites is an issue across the board, as it is a severe constraint in understanding them. 'Key-hole' work offers the prospect of obtaining at least an outline

chronology in an area relatively quickly' (e.g. ScARF Iron Age panel - <http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/69-research-recommendations>). They also recommend evaluation and geophysical surveys of the interior of enclosed places to gain an understanding of the activities undertaken within these sites. It is the latter research objective that this project most closely tallies with.

The ScARF Medieval panel also recommend the investigation of possible centres of consumption and power to assist in the understanding of their economic and social activities. They state that this work will help to develop a framework for the understanding of the trajectory of power at a regional, and in time, a national level for Medieval Scotland (ScARF Medieval panel www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/28-future).

The archaeological investigations of these Aberdeenshire enclosures will also help to build key partnerships with the local community and other northern heritage resources to promote the archaeology of the area to local and international audiences, as well as the importance and value of the resources themselves. This has the potential to have cultural, social and economic benefits for the local community, in particular it may increase visitors to the area.

Public interest in the archaeological investigations of these enclosed sites will be promoted through public talks in the area and participation of local community members in the work.

The project will also provide unique training opportunities for university students and researchers and will work with local communities to explore ways of promoting more general involvement, training and education in the archaeology of the north of Scotland.

FURTHER DETAILS OF PROPOSED WORK

Objective and Methodologies

The objectives are to:-

- Expose and characterise features within the four enclosures outlined above;
- Gain an understanding of the level of natural erosion and truncation which has occurred on the site and evaluate possible future recommendations;
- Obtain artefactual, ecofactual and radiocarbon dating evidence;
- Offer public outreach opportunities for local volunteers.

Methods of Excavation

All trenches and test pits will be excavated by hand. The topsoil will be stripped back to the first archaeological horizon. All archaeological features will be carefully cleaned and recorded (hand planned at 1:20 and photographed). All turf, spoil and stone will be stored on plastic sheeting at a close location to each trench and will be fully reinstated following the excavation.

All excavated contexts will be 100% dry sieved (weather permitting) and environmental samples (for soil flotation and micromorphology) taken. Environmental sampling will follow English Heritage guidance (Campbell, G, Moffett, L and Straker, V 2011). All samples will be processed and reported on by environmental specialists from the University of Aberdeen.

Volunteers and archaeology students from the University of Aberdeen will be working on site under close supervision. The site directors Gordon Noble and Oskar G Sveinbjarnarson will supervise all excavation work. Gordon has directed sites across Scotland and Oskar is a professional archaeologist with experience of directing excavations in Scotland and beyond. Post-excavation analysis will benefit from the facilities and expertise available in-house at the University of Aberdeen.

Reinstatement Plans

All excavated material will be reinstated by hand. All trenches and test pits will be returfed using the original turf removed from each area. *Team and implementation of research design*

The project team involves a site director Gordon Noble and project manager Oskar Sveinbjarnarson who have both over ten years of experience of running large-scale field projects. Experienced supervisors will be on site at all times to monitor the progress of the excavations. We will maintain a ratio of 1:3 experienced to non-experienced diggers. Volunteers and archaeology students from the University of Aberdeen will work on site under close supervision. Post-excavation analysis will benefit from the facilities and expertise available in-house at the University of Aberdeen. The research design has been formulated with over ten years of experience of working on sites such as these and the research design will be achievable within the duration of the works.

Resources to carry out works

The project is funded through University of Aberdeen funding streams organized through the Northern Picts project. Fieldwork costs will be minimal as all sites are within commuting distance of the department. All costs including radiocarbon dating will be covered by the university.

Post-excavation

Environmental processing and initial artefact processing will be conducted at the University of Aberdeen. Relevant specialists will be commissioned to undertake analysis where appropriate. The project funding for the Northern Picts project will cover all post-excavation costs.

Outputs and Stakeholder Engagement Outcomes

The results of this project will provide:

- Academic research outputs in the form of journal articles

- Popular outputs in the form of newspaper and magazine articles (local newspapers and archaeology press such as Archaeology Scotland magazine)
- This research will feed into the Northern Picts project which will lead to a project monograph
- Project results will be updated on the project website and facebook page (with over 2000 members)
- An interim report will be completed and sent to relevant bodies (Historic Environment Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service, DES) and the archive will remain at the University of Aberdeen until completion of the study when it will be housed with a relevant body
- The ADS will be consulted for guidance on digital archiving and the hosting of the digital archive

References

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