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UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

Certificate Course in Field Archaeology

Year 1

SITE VISIT: ORD HILL

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Obliquely to the left of the entrance to the Visitor Centre, is a stony track. This finds its way past a fenced entry-point and threads upwards towards the summit of a low-lying hill. The hillside itself is covered with heather, though some small areas of rough grass are also visible. A contemporary structure of some kind can be seen at the top - a small electrical relay-station, perhaps, or a radio mast. The sky is wholly overcast and the consequent absence of contrastive light-and-shade renders the terrain virtually undifferentiated, save for limited variation in the surface colour of its vegetation. With strongly directional illumination - early morning or late evening sunlight - subtler features in the landscape might have been revealed.

On ascent, and with the help of a sketch-map provided by the Ferrycroft Countryside Centre, it is possible to make out the remains of stone dwellings. These are, however, only rough outlines in uncut stone and could easily be missed in longer grass or at a greater distance from the track. At the summit, there are two large accumulations of stone some twenty or thirty feet apart. Without the assistance of the guide leaflet, these evidently unstructured piles would not convey an immediately obvious function. Nonetheless, their position on top of a hill does indicate deliberate communal activity rather than transportation and deposit by natural forces. At one side of the first mound there is an arrangement of larger slabs in what seems to be an entry-way and this does, more clearly, suggest human intervention.

Continuing past the summit, and beginning to descend on the opposite slope, it is possible to observe signs of change in the vegetation and - once more with the help of the site-map - to make out traces of past agriculture, namely, indistinct furrows and larger areas of grassland. Further down, and returning towards the Visitor Centre, there is a pronounced heather-clad hump, some sizeable stones being visible within its mass. This is a quite unremarkable feature to the uneducated eye. Expert archaeological analysis, however, has identified it as the remains of a 'burnt mound'.

To the casual visitor or uninformed hill-walker there appears to be little in this area to attract or sustain attention - particularly at any distance from the main site.

A two-phase account: objectives

There are two phases in this overall account. The first, above, is a solely impressionistic report based entirely on recollection of a first visit to the Ord Hill, six months earlier in May 1998. The second, immediately following a further visit, offers more deliberative and focused observations which pick up on inaccuracies and forgotten features.

There are two main reasons for adopting this approach. First, and by directly comparing the two visits, total memory-dependency can reveal a principle of 'saliency' in action. In other words, when perception is 'un-primed', for example by lack of prior knowledge or an explicit brief, only the salient or gross features of an encounter tend to be retained for later recall. The resulting - and primitive - 'mental map' has ambiguous implications, having the capacity both to enable and obstruct further study. It may, on one hand, provide an initial and useful, holistic perspective. Conversely, it might prove to be a conceptual barrier to fresh or reflective insight.

Second, and closely related, there is likely to be a selection-shift in visual perception. The conceptual frames of inspection through which terrain is viewed will be at least prospectively different for the winter-sports developer, sheep farmer, landscape painter, or archaeologist. Intention and cognition are interlinked and have a marked effect on the primary processes of

looking and seeing, and on the subsequent acquisition of understanding. Thus, the observations of casual laity are primarily different from those of even the most inexperienced archaeology student.

Though the first visit can be described as little more than a sightseeing trip, a small amount of prior knowledge did underpin actual observation in the field - not least the fact that the site had already been identified, explored and conserved by professional archaeologists. Should this not have been the case, perception would have been differently sensitized (primed), perhaps even blind to the available archaeological evidence.

The various terms of reference alluded to above - saliency, selection, perception, intention and cognition - are relevant to many domains of academic study and inquiry and are assumed to have some pertinence also to field archaeology

Purpose of the first visit, May 1998

[‘Written up’ five months later on 20 October 1998]

Having taken residence in Sutherland only a few months previously, in August 1997, this earlier visit was, in part, a process of getting to know what was still a relatively new part of the country. The purpose or intention, then, was informal and unfocused. The decision to have a look at the Ord Hill site was a mixture of response to local recommendation and an authentic - if inexperienced - curiosity about archaeological settlements in the North of Scotland. The ‘result’ of this visit was, as the account above plainly shows, an incomplete mental picture and only a slight hold on given, interpreted information.

Second visit, 21 October 1998

[Written notes 22 October 1998]

Weather conditions were very varied during the two hours spent on site, ranging from mist and drizzle at the outset to brilliant sunshine midway through the visit. This resulted in the terrain being variably flat-lit or tonally high-relief depending on the relative angles of slope-gradient to sunlight. The burnt mound, in particular, was sharply defined against the widespread heather covering: and, taking this feature first, it was instructive to note that no stones were visible within its mass. It seems unlikely, on reflection, that any were exposed at the time of the first visit either. Guide-book knowledge gained then, therefore, is likely to have mentally supplemented actual observation and provided a fuller imaginary picture than could be subsequently justified.

The more attentive inspection of the site as a whole revealed some surprising gaps in memory. For example, Loch Shin - NNW of the summit and plainly visible [Fig.1] - did not feature in the earlier description. Moreover, the two main burial cairns were not differentiated in respect of their overall character. Ord North, in fact, is a strikingly large cairn of lichen-mottled boulders, massively heaped in what appears to be nakedly pristine condition. Ord South, by contrast, is almost completely clothed in short grass, turf and moss. The Ord South mound, moreover, is marked by some eleven standing monoliths, evidently untreated to cutting or carving [Fig.2]. Ord North, too, has identifiable features which were not reported earlier. First, the entrance to the chambered tomb is primitively trabeated, its large lintel stone plainly identifying it as a way in to the back-filled interior [Fig.3]. Second, two distinct ‘depressions’ were noted a few metres above this entrance, these being assumed to indicate partial collapse of an internal passage-way.

Direct questions arise from a more considered reflection on the scale of these burial cairns: who were the dead and how many were deposited there over millennia of use? Available small-scale publications indicate the presence of very few human bones at the time of the 1967 excavation; and, though acid soil is reported (potentially) to have dissolved most remains, it seems that there could have been only relatively small numbers in any single period. Might the later cairn have been an early form of ossuary, skeletal remains having been subsequently removed for less prestigious disposal elsewhere? Could excavation of the earlier, south cairn site, conversely, reveal a permanent burial place for Neolithic luminaries? The existence of several individual burial mounds from the Bronze Age may account for some of the higher-status populace but there is no apparent trace of the masses who, over some fifty centuries, must have perished and been interred in the Ord Hill area. Glancing back to the incompletely excavated burnt mound, and to acknowledged uncertainty of purpose surrounding some structures of its type, it is possible to conjecture that a primitively effective form of cremation might have been deployed in the Neolithic or Bronze Age.

Other features were also noted more carefully during the second visit, but, for the purposes of this brief account, it is sufficient only to offer one further annotated photograph by way of reinstating 'lost memories'. This shows purposeful delineation of terrain surrounding the cairns and suggests the kind of control over the immediate environment necessary for the development of early agriculture [Fig.4].

Tentative conclusions

The informal, memory-dependent and impressionistic relay of information which characterizes the first report may have some bearing on the problems attaching to earlier forms of archaeological exploration and publication; and, perhaps, in an indicative way on the gaps which complex interpretative procedures in contemporary archaeology increasingly attempt to address, especially from postprocessual and cognitive perspectives. The second visit confirms the inadequacy of an 'un-briefed' and non-focused survey, but it also demonstrates a capacity for the disinterment and retrieval of memory, itself a form of mental archaeology.

Finally, the photograph of the radio mast with its inset view of the village of Lairg [Fig.5] illustrates a particular, late 20th Century, utilitarian construction; evidence of what the imagination can conceive of as 'prospective archaeology' - the remote future interpretation of a functioning present.



Fig.1 *Loch Shin to the north north-west of the Ord Hill. The indistinct remains of domestic dwellings can be seen in the foreground.*



Fig.2 *The massive mound of boulders forming the burial cairn of Ord North as seen from the summit of Ord South, with some of the latter's eleven standing stones embedded in its grass-covered surfaces.*



Fig.3 *The massive stone beam or lintel creating part of the trabeated entrance to the burial chamber of Ord North.*



Fig.4 *Part of the raised and roughly circular enclosures to the south-west of Ord South. These provide evidence of Bronze Age fields and/or controlled grazing land.*

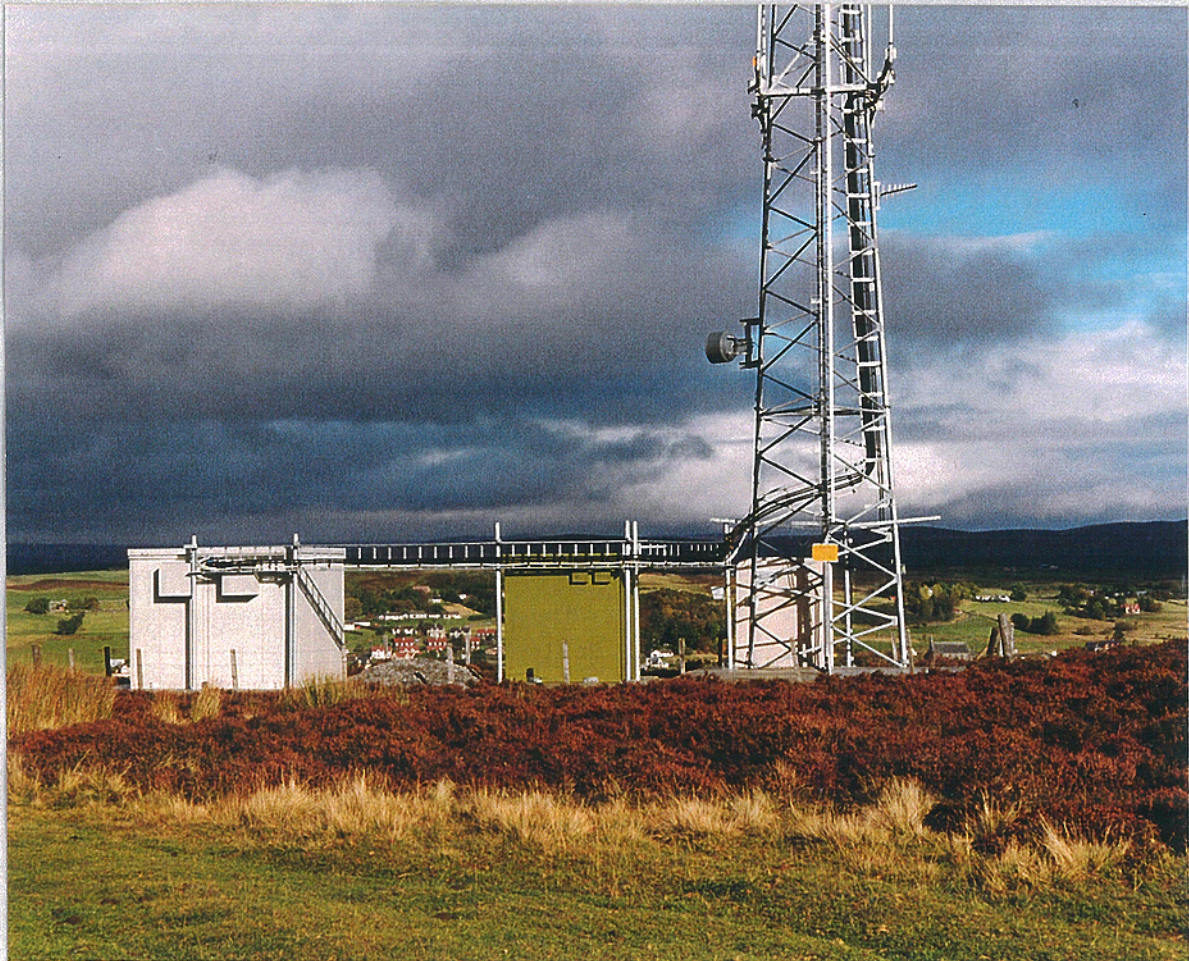


Fig.5 *The radio mast: coeval evidence of 20th Century human ingenuity and the future material of remote interpretation of that functioning present.*