The Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot project (SERF)

Stephen Driscoll, Kenneth Brophy & Gordon Noble

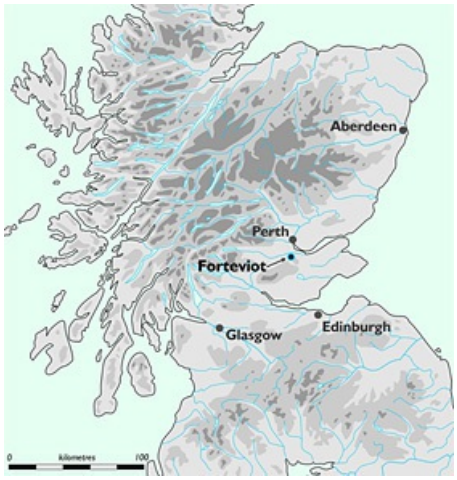


Figure 1. *The location of Forteviot in Central Scotland.*

Introduction

Forteviot in Central Scotland (Figure 1) preserves one of the most extensive prehistoric ceremonial landscapes in Britain and one of the most important early royal centres of Scotland. According to the Chronicles of the Kings of Alba, King Kenneth Mac Alpin is said to have died at the palace of Forteviot in AD 858. The ninth century AD in Scotland was a period of major political change with the unification of the eastern kingships of Pictland and the western kingships of the Scots into the new kingdom of Alba by AD 900. As one of the major early royal centres in this time period, Forteviot is a crucial location in assessing the complex processes that gave birth to one of the nations of Early Medieval Europe. The Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot project (SERF) aims to investigate the prehistoric complex at Forteviot and establish the nature of the royal establishment at Forteviot. Early royal sites in Ireland are well known for re-using the sites of prehistoric ceremonial centres, legitimising their power through reference to the past and the ancestors and there are hints of similar practices in Scotland (cf. Alcock & Alcock 1992; Driscoll 1998; Newman 2007). The SERF project aims to explore what it is about Forteviot and the wider Strathearn region that created this regional centre in such different social and political situations, and whether there were connections between the prehistoric complex and the much later establishment of the royal centre at Forteviot.

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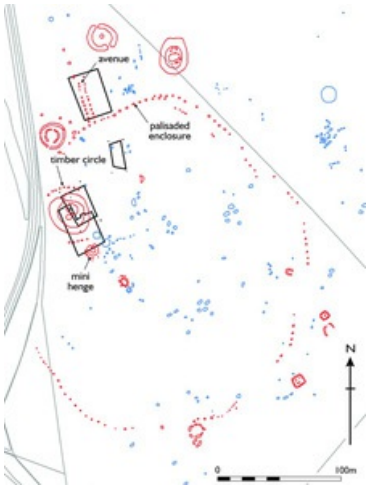


Figure 2. *Transcription of the prehistoric cropmarks at Forteviot.*
(Transcription © RCAHMS)

The archaeology of Forteviot

A range of cropmarks have been identified at Forteviot (Figure 2). The largest is a palisaded enclosure some 270m across. This remarkable monument is one of a series of Later Neolithic timber monuments that have been recorded as cropmarks across Northern and Central Europe (Gibson 2002; Varndell & Topping 2002). In close proximity to the palisaded enclosure is a range of other prehistoric monuments including henge monuments and timber circles (St Joseph 1976). Overlapping and intermingled with these early prehistoric monuments are the cropmarks of square barrows and a flat-grave cemetery which belong to the era when Forteviot was the palace of King Kenneth Mac Alpin (Figures 3 and 4). Preliminary dating of two of the square barrows excavated as part of the SERF project points to an eighth- to ninth-century date for at least part of this complex, and a large square enclosure has produced a significant amount of Roman pottery from features within (Figure 4).



Figure 3. *Aerial photograph of the Early Medieval cemetery at Forteviot*
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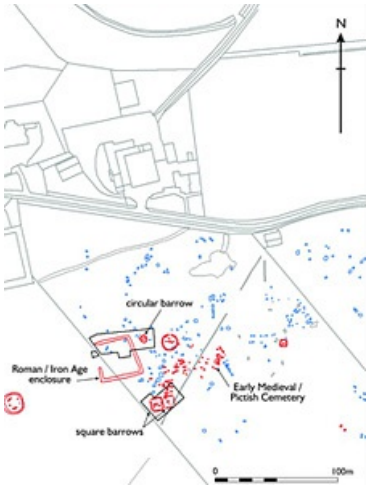


Figure 4. *Transcription of the Early Medieval cemetery at Forteviot (Transcription © RCAHMS)*

There is also a rich assemblage of Early Medieval sculpture that has come from Forteviot. This includes two spectacular ninth-century carved Christian crosses, the Dupplin Cross and the Invermay Cross and a remarkable carved stone arch, the Forteviot Arch, made from a single piece of sandstone. The arch is most likely a fragment of stone-built church of eighth- to ninth-century date, the only known structural component of a Pictish church or royal centre (Aitchison 2006: 9). The imagery on the arch has also been interpreted in a royal context, demonstrating parallels with the Irish ninth-century Cross of the Scriptures, believed to commemorate the royal foundation of the church at Clonmacnoise (Aitchison 2006). The royal associations of Forteviot are further borne out by an inscription on the Dupplin Cross which names Constantine son of Fergus — king of the Picts from 789-820 (Forsyth 1995).

Study area and project objectives

The study area of the SERF project encompasses the parish of Forteviot and the two neighbouring parishes of Dunning and Forgandenny.

The main project objectives are to:

- characterise the prehistoric cropmark complex at Forteviot;
- identify and characterise the Early Medieval palace at Forteviot;
- explore the associated Pictish cemetery and Roman Iron Age features at Forteviot and their relationship to the palace and prehistoric monuments;
- fully record the sculptural remains from Forteviot and explore their meaning and landscape context;
- consider the impact that the prehistoric monuments had on the Picts, identifying evidence for the deliberate reuse of the prehistoric complex in the Early Medieval period;
- map the wider regional archaeological resource in the study area to assess the social and political context of Forteviot;
- track the major social, political, religious and economic changes in the study area;
- test and monitor past and present agricultural impacts and land-use patterns on the archaeology of the study area.

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Figure 5. *Lifting the capstone of an important Early Bronze Age cist burial.*

Initial results and prospects

The project has been designed as a long-term project to fully contextualize both the prehistoric and Early Medieval elements of Forteviot, so providing a fine-grained regional sequence for Scotland. To date excavations have been undertaken at the entrance avenue of the palisaded enclosure, one of the associated henge monuments and within the Early Medieval cemetery. One spectacular discovery so far is a well-preserved Early Bronze Age dagger burial with a stone slab cover (Figures 5 and 6). We have also carried out some test-pitting in the village to try and identify elements of the palace complex and to track the evolution of the village. To assess the wider settlement patterns we are working with the RCAHMS to map cropmark evidence and will follow this up with targeted survey and excavation. One strand of this work on the Forteviot environs is an ambitious programme of dating the hillforts in the study area. This is part of an attempt to track the evolution of high status sites in the study area.



Figure 6. *Recording the Bronze Age dagger burial cist.*

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Figure 7. *Students in action at the SERF field school.*

All of these excavations have added important detail to our knowledge of these elements of the site and the post-excavation and the Historic Scotland funded dating programme have begun to provide the chronological framework for the site. Reports on the excavations are available on the project website. As well as being an important research project, SERF also aims to be an important research-driven teaching project that will train many undergraduate and postgraduate students in basic and advanced excavation and research skills (Figure 7). The project is a major investment in the prehistoric and historic archaeology of Scotland that will hopefully have long-term benefits to the discipline of archaeology in Scotland and beyond. We are working hard to develop a funding framework and teaching experience that will deliver the detailed research results and disciplinary legacy we aim for.

Project website

http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/serf/

SERF runs an accredited field school, if you are interested in participating please contact Stephen Driscoll or Kenneth Brophy

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