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Review Article

Elginhaugh: the Most Complete Fort Plan in the Roman Empire

By NICK HODGSON

Elginhaugh: a Flavian Fort and its Annexe. By W.S. Hanson with K. Speller, P.A. Yeoman and J. Terry. Britannia Monograph 23. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London, 2007. 2 vols: pp. xxxvii + 686, illus. Price: £58.00. ISBN 978 0 907764 34 2.

A Roman Frontier Fort in Scotland: Elginhaugh. By W.S. Hanson. Tempus, Stroud, 2007. Pp. 159, illus. Price: £17.99. ISBN 978 0 7524 4113 9.

The fort at Elginhaugh (discovered from the air in 1979 near Dalkeith, 10 km south-east of central Edinburgh) takes us into a new archaeological era, for its interior was completely open-area excavated by Hanson, in advance of development, in 1986–87. Richmond's 1939 plan of the Scottish auxiliary fort at Fendoch, which it has been all too easy over the years to forget had been extrapolated from keyhole trenches, has appeared in countless publications, but is now superseded by something much more comprehensively and concretely known. Elginhaugh becomes the best-understood timber auxiliary fort in Britain, and the only truly complete example of its period from anywhere in the Roman Empire. The appearance of the excavation report therefore marks a decisive evolutionary stage in the development of Roman military archaeology. The report complements those on the unfinished legionary fortress at Inchtuthil (1985) and the fort at Strageath (1989) (both explored by trenches rather than area excavation). All three sites were occupied only briefly in the Flavian period and abandoned at much the same time. Although there is some difference in their foundation dates, the near contemporaneity of these short-lived sites means that in combination they are particularly valuable for the study and dating of later first-century finds, particularly pottery. A vast amount of information is reported in the bulky two-volume *Elginhaugh* monograph: as well as work on the fort and annexe, the prehistoric remains discovered are fully treated. There is a report on the investigation of the baths (which lay 60 m south), a notably early example at an auxiliary fort. Space in this review only allows comment on some of the most important discoveries and interpretations offered.

DATE AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Elginhaugh has an immense chronological significance: a coin hoard deliberately incorporated within a construction trench of the *principia* gives a *terminus post quem* of A.D. 78 and it is convincingly argued that the hoard must have been deposited, and the fort founded, very shortly after this date. A foundation date in Agricola's governorship (which ran from A.D. 77 or 78 to 83/4 or 84/5) is therefore demonstrated. Until recently this would have called for little comment, but there have been claims that the conquest of Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde may have been achieved by his predecessor Petillius Cerialis (*c.* A.D. 71–74). This arresting proposition has been made on the basis that early Flavian coins and finds occur at northern Scottish forts, and that the timbers of certain watch-towers along the Flavian 'Gask Ridge' — frontier or fortified road — were replaced, suggesting a longer life than that usually ascribed to them. The proposition also relies on dismissal of the *Agricola* as a historical source of any reliability, and the belief that other neglected literary references indicate Roman penetration of northern Scotland by the early 70s.

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The first of these grounds is ably dismissed by H. who points out that the small numbers of early finds are meaningless within a general context in which a number of survivals would naturally be expected. At Elginhaugh, for example, early Flavian coins occur in similar quantities as on those sites further north where foundation in the early 70s has been deduced. Elginhaugh also provides examples of wholesale replacement of major gate-posts within the brief (seven-year?) life of the fort, demonstrating that such modifications do not necessarily denote a long life. Extensive modification of the barracks and other internal buildings during the short life of the fort is also interestingly documented here. Whatever value one places on the various pieces of literary evidence, the date of Elginhaugh decisively undermines claims that the building of forts north of the Forth had largely been undertaken by Agricola's predecessors in the early to mid-70s. The solid foundation dates that we do have — Carlisle in A.D. 72/3 (dendrochronology) and Elginhaugh in A.D. 79/80 — bear out Tacitus' statements that Petillius Cerialis undertook the conquest of the Brigantes and that the *Tavum* (almost certainly the Tay) was first reached by Agricola in A.D. 79/80, and that new peoples were encountered along the way.

H. describes a phase of use of the site following its formal abandonment by the Roman army, which numismatic and samian evidence makes clear was in or shortly after A.D. 86. This involved the maintenance of the rampart and reconstitution of some of the gates. But the internal structures were demolished and metalled over. The former annexe to the west of the fort was now reduced by the insertion of a new western rampart, ditch and gate, and an arrangement of ditches funnelled traffic from the west gate of the former fort to the newly provided western annexe gate. H. hypothesises that the complex was to hold and select livestock being collected as a form of taxation on a population that was still subject to Rome but no longer under direct military occupation. The evidence for a phase of activity post-dating the fort but not of typically native character seems strong, and the author's hypothesis is attractive. This would presumably fall in the period *c.* A.D. 86–105 when the northernmost permanent fort was at Newstead, only 45 km south. This is an intriguing insight into Roman relations with peoples on the fringe of Empire, and it is worth noting that this evidence could only have been recovered by extensive area excavation and would not have been recognised in selective trenching or any kind of remote survey.

PLAN AND GARRISON

The plan of the 1.56 ha fort is essentially single-period, and so can be relied on and lends itself to confident analysis. The most important development from earlier interim reports is the recognition of cavalry barracks. Distinctive subsoil stains caused by the urine of horses tethered in the front rooms of certain of the *contubernia* identify the buildings as combined 'stable-barracks' (where each block houses the men and mounts of a 30-strong *turma* under the same roof). This type has recently been recognised at many other sites and is now generally accepted as the standard means of accommodating cavalry in forts of the Principate.

The fort consists of eleven apparent barrack-building plots (Building 8 is convincingly shown not to be a barrack, but probably a store). Of the eleven barrack-plots, only five produced positive evidence for the horse-urine stains in several of their *contubernia* (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Barrack 6 yielded a single example. In addition Barracks 6 and 9 had similar features in their officers' quarters. H. explains that because of changing soil-conditions across the site, absence of evidence cannot be taken for evidence of absence, and argues that these stains may have been present in the *contubernia* of all the barracks.

So what kind of unit formed the garrison? All discussion rests on the interpretation of Buildings 3 and 4 in the *retentura*, which seem different in the numbers of *contubernia* from all the others and which appear to be physically joined by a disproportionately large officer's quarters. H. is inclined to regard this as a single barrack whose thirteen *contubernia* and extensive officer's house reflect a *turma* of higher status or greater size than all the others. This would give a total of ten barracks, all of which H. thinks are likely to be for cavalry, so he concludes on balance that the fort was occupied by ten *turmae* detached from an *ala quingenaria*, one of which was 'slightly' enlarged. As an alternative, mindful of the lack of positive cavalry evidence from Barracks 7, 10, 11 and 12, H. offers a garrison of four centuries of infantry and six cavalry *turmae* (one of which would have to be larger or different from the others). The basic conclusion is that, however the evidence is viewed, the fort cannot have been occupied by a complete auxiliary unit of known type.

Another interpretation of the unusual double barrack 3–4 is possible, however. If one looks at the thirteen *contubernia* they possess exactly the number of rooms found in the other barracks (ten, plus three

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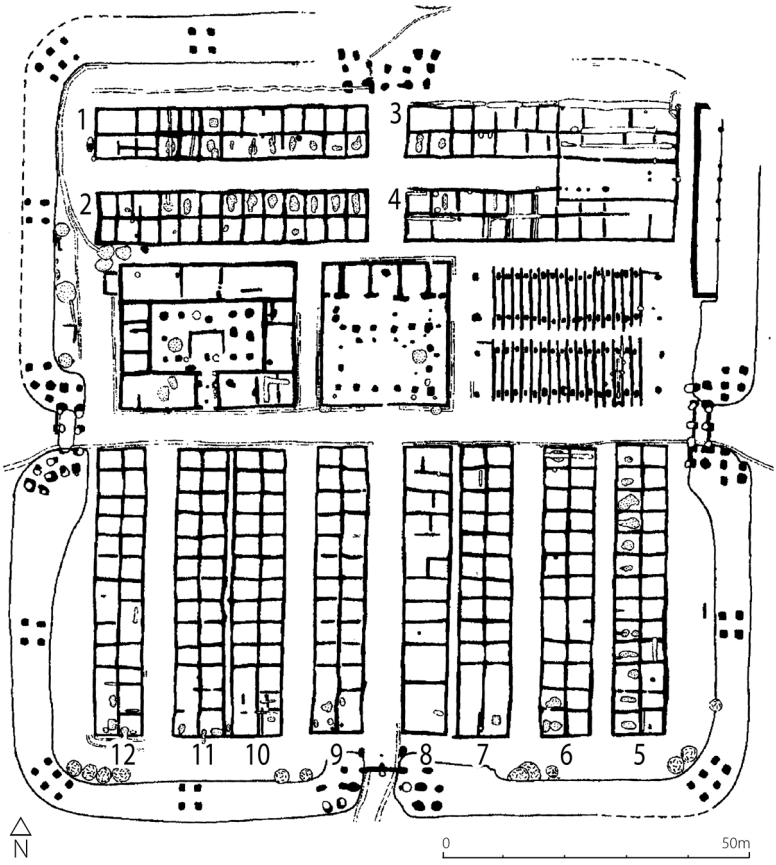


FIG. 1. Plan of Elginhaugh fort.

making up the officer's end), and the two halves combined give exactly the length of the barracks in the *praetentura*. The three easternmost '*contubernia*' of the northern building display the same irregularity of partitioning as the officers' quarters in the other barracks. Is this not a barrack like all the others, split into two halves, in the manner of barracks in fortlets and in the well-known plan of Valkenburg? Rather than being a huge officer's suite with no parallel in Roman military planning, the eastern part of 3–4 looks like a large (19.5 by 22 m) building with two ranges of rooms opening off a central space. This arrangement resembles certain kinds of store buildings. Its entrance will have faced the stone building (identified as a *fabrica*) in the back of the adjacent rampart. The insertion of this special building into the fort plan explains the necessity to split the barrack into two, for that was the only way the latter could now be fitted into the available space. Parallels can be found for this sort of insertion of a special structure: for example, the 'gyrus' at the Lunt and the courtyard building in the south-east corner of second-century *Segontium*. That this building is of one build with the barrack is no objection, since both structures were planned like this from the outset and erected in the same operation.

If accepted, this has implications for the interpretation of the whole plan. Only a single barrack (5) in the *praetentura* has the cavalry soakaways in multiple *contubernia*. Is this in fact the fourth of the four cavalry barracks originally intended for the *retentura*, but displaced by the special building (3–4) into the *praetentura*? If the other six barracks in the *praetentura*, with only patchy evidence for the soakaways, were for infantry, the fort plan could be read straightforwardly as being for the six centuries and four *turmae* of a *cohors quingenaria equitata*.

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FORT AND ANNEXE — SOLDIER AND CIVILIAN

An annexe west of the fort was also investigated, though sadly time and resources did not allow work on the comprehensive scale applied to the fort interior. There was a more complex pattern of structural change than inside the fort, with a rapid succession of metal-working and food-processing activities next to the oft-resurfaced road running west from the *porta principalis dextra*, strip-buildings fronting the road being clearly attested in one phase. Preceding these there was clear evidence for grain-drying. Although only revealed fragmentarily, this roadside activity extended at least 150 m west of the fort gate, but the western extent of the annexe is unknown. On the basis of what was found at Elginhaugh, H. reacts against the view (originally advanced by C.S. Sommer) that communities of civilian traders and craftsmen moved and operated symbiotically with units and might have been accommodated in annexes. H. argues pugnaciously that all fort annexes should be regarded as military-run ancillary compounds and that civilian presence should be discounted unless positively attested. Implicit is the view that annexe and civilian *vicus* are entirely separate and distinct things. To this reviewer, our knowledge of extramural Elginhaugh seems too ambiguous and fragmentary to form the basis of such a clear-cut conclusion. H. considers the annexe buildings to have a military character, but would strip-buildings used by civilians (and metal-working and food-processing are commonplace in second- and third-century military *vici*) look any different? The Elginhaugh enclosure was slightly defended/demarcated, and apparently of irregular, elongated shape, with the road and roadside activity forming its spine. This was not a geometrically-planned annexe of the kind neatly attached to the whole or part of the side of a fort or camp (as at Glenclochar or Dalswinton). Indeed, it resembles the apparent '*vicus*' at Caerhun, cited by H. as an instance where *vicus* and annexe appear at the same site as distinct entities. There may have been other, geometrical annexes at Elginhaugh of which we know nothing: a further annexe is postulated on the east side (135). In short, can we really be sure that there was no civilian component within the diversity of enclosure types subsumed under the term 'annexe'? The ambiguity of the Elginhaugh strip-buildings recalls that of the Vindolanda tablets concerning the supply and processing of grain for a military unit, for there also it is utterly uncertain whether the names in the documents are those of soldiers or civilians.

There certainly *were* civilians at Elginhaugh, as H. accepts. One of the outstanding discoveries reported here is the evidence for large-scale production of mortaria by civilian potters from southern Britain. This points to a supply and distribution role for Elginhaugh (a possible explanation for the 'special' building that may be recognised in the *retentura*?). For this reason, I would be doubtful about using an Elginhaugh mortarium found at Carlisle to deduce the presence of part of the *ala Sebosiana* at the Scottish site. The kilns themselves have not been located. The next evolutionary step in understanding these problems will come when the totality of excavation applied to the fort interior at Elginhaugh one day encompasses the whole of a fort, its annexes and environs.

Admirably the story of Elginhaugh has been made accessible to a more general audience in the form of *A Roman Frontier Fort in Scotland: Elginhaugh*. Much of this is taken verbatim from the discussion sections of the main report, but specialists will still want to acquire the smaller book for its excellent colour photographs. One criticism is the lack of an overall plan to locate the various interventions in the fort annexe, without which it is difficult to visualise the spatial context of the extramural discoveries. The critical information is given in fig. 1.2 of the main report, unfortunately omitted from the shorter book.

As indicated at the outset, the main Elginhaugh volume is a landmark in Roman military archaeology. It is pleasing to be able to say that the quality of the reporting rises to the occasion. There is not space here to go down the many avenues of interest in the specialist finds and environmental reports. The reader should, however, be aware that some of these were submitted a considerable time before publication, so do not always refer to recent developments and literature. The structural report and concluding synthesis are wide-ranging, balanced and full of judgements that display good sense. In particular, the discussion by H. of the methods and materials of timber building, both of the fort gates and towers and internal structures, is masterly, as one would expect from a pioneer writer on Roman military timber supply and construction. The book will be a constant source of reference for those studying timber military sites, and takes its place in the pantheon of classic archaeological reports.

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