

Evidence stacks up that rocky outcrop was home to earliest Pictish fort

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Excavations underway on top of Dunnicaer

An inhospitable sea stack on the Aberdeenshire coast has been confirmed as the site of the earliest Pictish Fort and predates the iconic Dunnottar Castle, carbon dating has revealed.

The sea stack to the south of Stonehaven, known as Dunnicaer, was excavated by archaeologists from the University of Aberdeen in April.

With the help of experienced mountaineers they scaled the rocky outcrop, which measures at most 20 by 12 metres and is surrounded by sheer drops on all side.

Despite its small size, the team led by Dr Gordon Noble, believed it would yield important archaeological finds. Their initial surveys found evidence of ramparts, floors and a hearth and now samples found in the excavation trenches have been carbon dated.

This suggests the site dates from the 3rd or 4th century – making it the oldest Pictish fort ever discovered.

Dr Noble, a Senior Lecturer in archaeology at the University of Aberdeen, described the sea stack as an 'exceptional archaeological find' and said consistency across the samples dated meant that they could be 'confident it was one of the earliest fortified sites occupied by Picts'.

He said: "This is the most extreme archaeology I've ever done. The site can only be accessed using ropes at low tide and having never climbed before, it was quite hair-raising. But the challenge of getting to the top was soon forgotten as we began to make significant discoveries.

"We knew that the site had potential as in 1832 a group of youths from Stonehaven scaled the sea stack, prompted by a local man who had recurring dreams gold was hidden there. Unfortunately for the youths they didn't find the gold, but they did find a number of decorated Pictish symbol stones and as they were throwing them into the sea, noticed some were also carved. Several years later, when knowledge of Pictish stones began to circulate, a number were recovered from the sea."

"We've always thought these symbol stones either strange or very early as the carvings are 'rough and ready' compared to other known Pictish symbol stones and this is what prompted us to excavate Dunnicaer."

Since the 19th century few people are known to have accessed the sea stack and Dr Noble and his team, from the University's Northern Picts group which included Oskar Sveinbjarnarson, Michael Stratigos, Claire Christie, Vanessa Rees and Robert Lenfert, needed the specialist help of Duncan Paterson of North East Mountaineering to scale it.

Once there they dug five trenches which yielded a number of exciting finds, including evidence of fortified enclosure walls and terraces and the remains of a stone hearth.

"Dunnicaer appears to have been home to a significant fort, even at this early date," Dr Noble added. "We can see there were ramparts, particularly on the south side, constructed of timber and stone. This is consistent with the style of later Pictish forts.

"The stone is not from the local area so it must have been quite a feat to get it, and the heavy oak timbers, up to such an inaccessible site.

"It is likely that the sea stack was greater in size than it is today as the fort appears to extend over a large area. Dunnicaer was likely to have been a high status site for a structure of this scale and complexity to have been present as early as the 3rd century."

But the results of the carbon dating also suggest that use of Dunnicaer was relatively short-lived and it is assumed the Pictish communities who inhabited it moved on to the larger site of Dunnottar Castle to the south.

Dr Noble said: "We sent a number of samples from different trenches for analysis. All the results point to the 3rd or 4th century. Not only does

this tell us that this is one of the earliest early medieval fortified sites known in northeast Scotland, it also indicates that even at that time, the sea stack was probably eroding.

"It is likely that it became too small and the communities who built it moved along the coast to what is now Dunnottar Castle."

Aberdeenshire Council archaeologist Bruce Mann said "The dates for this site are truly amazing, and hugely important for Scottish archaeology. Towards the end of the 3rd century AD evidence of how and where people were living largely disappears, leading to all sorts of speculation over what happened during the next 200 years. This discovery now starts to not only fill in that missing story, but also helps us to understand the early origins of the Picts in the north east."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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