

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC062

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90108)

Taken into State care: 1928 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUNADD FORT



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

DUNADD FORT

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises an early medieval hillfort that is sited on a craggy hill by the River Add. It stands proud within a natural boggy basin, towards the southern end of the Kilmartin Glen, in Argyll. The multi-period fort occupies a series of natural terraces, defined by collapsed stone ramparts and entered through an impressive natural defile.

Prehistoric rock art (cup-markings) and artefacts found on the site hint at earlier prehistoric activity on the hill, and some later medieval use is also known of.

On a terrace beneath the summit of the hill is an important and unusual group of carvings that have been made into the bedrock: a basin, two footprints, an incised boar, an ogham inscription, and what may be a rock-cut throne.

The site was a component of the Kilmartin Glen Project to improve interpretation and access of cultural and natural sites in this area in the late 1990s.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Dunadd is one of the few places to be referred to in surviving early historic annals. The fact that it is mentioned, and the content of the brief references, imply that it was an important place. AD 683 Annals of Ulster record siege of *Dun At*, ditto seizure in 736 by the king of the Picts. Its hillfort is therefore interpreted (on historical and other grounds) as a chief seat or the principal royal centre of the Dál Riata ('capital' is not quite the right word to use). Its occupants were therefore *Scoti*, a Gaelic-speaking people whose Scottish heartland was Argyll, from roughly AD 400-800. (*Scot(t)i* literally means Scots, but this is not a useful translation at this period – best referred to as Gaels.) The origin legend of the Dál Riata has been subject to recent scrutiny; clearly there were close links between Gaels in Argyll and Ireland, but each was culturally distinctive.

The Dál Riata formed a series of kindreds (larger tribal groupings) or Cenéla. Significantly, Dunadd seems to have been sited close to the boundary of the Cenél Loairn and Cenél nGabráin (the two leading kindreds).

Dunadd was visited, in peace and war, by kings from all over northern Britain, if not also Ireland. On the basis of present archaeological evidence, it is the leading contender to be 'the chief place of the region' where St Columba met a Gaulish merchant (Dunollie, by Oban, is the alternative).

Documented use of the site for a series of important events by royal officials in 1506 may reflect a lingering memory of its earlier significance.

19th-century antiquarians 'rediscovered' the site as a 'capital' and royal inauguration site.

1904-5 and 1929 Antiquarian excavations did little more than indicate that the site produced a lot of finds.

1932 Site comes into guardianship.

1979 Boar stone, etc is covered for its protection by a fibre-glass replica.

1980-81 Small-scale excavations by Alan Lane of Cardiff University to establish the date for the sequence of ramparts and confirm whether or not site had any remaining archaeological potential (see below).

Archaeological Overview

Prehistoric cup-markings and miscellaneous artefacts link the use of the site in the Bronze Age to the wider use of Kilmartin Glen by prehistoric peoples.

From just three small trenches, Lane and Campbell have demonstrated that although there was a small fort on the summit of Dunadd in the Middle Iron Age, most of the visible remains relate to an early medieval period. A small dun, constructed in the 4th or 5th century AD, was expanded sometime in the 6th or 7th century by the addition of a series of enclosing walls. The summit construction was enlarged and a further lower enclosure added in the 8th or 9th century. Little is known of later activity.

There is no evidence to suggest the hill was of particular significance in Iron-Age times.

The fort is hierarchical in its layout and use of space, a characteristic of early medieval high status settlements in Scotland.

As an early medieval royal and symbolic site, Dunadd hillfort may have been deliberately sited amongst one of the densest and most important concentrations of prehistoric monuments in the British Isles.

An outstanding range of high status activities took place here: fine metalworking and other craft activities; martial arts (to judge from the unusually large number of weapons); and trade with the continent.

The evidence is for one of the most significant metalworking workshops in Europe. The site as a whole has produced the largest and most exceptionally diverse range of continental imported pottery from any site in the Celtic west. This, in combination with a series of radiocarbon dates, has refined the dating horizon for the metalworking to a generation or so sometime in the mid-late 7th century. The quantity of moulds is matched only by the royal crannog site of Lagore in Ireland.

The site retains outstanding archaeological potential, to judge from what has been learnt from the small areas recently excavated.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Excavations in 1980-81 at Dunadd have had a profound significance and consequence for our understanding of the art and inter-relationships of the peoples of the British Isles in the 6th-8th centuries.

Finds from the site (now in NMS) provide *direct*, unique and dated evidence for how the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic design repertoire were fused to create the Hiberno-Saxon (Insular) style. The finery of some of the Anglo-Saxon objects, notably a gold and garnet mount, hint at the presence of Bernician royalty on the site, as opposed to simply gift giving or exchange. There is the first evidence for the production of magnificent Hunterston-type brooches in Scotland, and La Tène-style art is seen to be produced 500 or so years later than anticipated (this with interesting implications for the understanding of the art of the Pictish symbol stones). Pre-Viking contact with Scandinavia is also mooted. Given the role that Iona played in the development of manuscripts and sculpture, here is further evidence for the pivotal role of this part of Scotland in the development of early medieval decorative arts. The ramifications for the dating and provenance of contemporary art in all media are profound.

Art historians have had different views on whether or not the boar was carved by the Picts.

The ogham inscription can only be partly transliterated and is not understood. It has been dated to the 9th/10th century, ie towards the end of the currency of ogham in Scotland (6th-10th century AD).

Social Overview

Dunadd is recognised as an important component in the network of sites associated with the Kilmartin Glen Project, which aimed at enhanced sustainable tourism in this area. Ditto Kilmartin House Museum.

Earlier descriptions of Dunadd as an early Scottish 'capital' linger in the public imagination: it was certainly one of the most important early medieval settlements in Scotland, belonging to a formative time in the development of the Scottish nation.

Spiritual Overview

In 1876, when Dunadd was first interpreted as the capital of Dál Riata, its footprint carvings were also interpreted as evidence for it being an inauguration site of early (Scottish) kings. Such footprints are found in Britain from the Iron Age onwards, and their use is recorded in later medieval Irish and Scottish inauguration ceremonies. An inaugural function for Dunadd is certainly plausible given the grouping of carvings here.

In common with other early medieval forts in Scotland, there is no evidence for any ecclesiastical structure within the site, although there are likely contemporary sites in the near vicinity. However, there is evidence from artefacts for Christianity and literacy.

The visual qualities of the area, the concentration of prehistoric remains, and boggy surrounding land situated between two tribal groups, may have imbued this landscape with a liminal, symbolic significance.

Aesthetic Overview

The isolated rocky hill of Dunadd rises steeply out of the surrounding flag, boggy countryside, which is fringed by hills and sea. This area is of great natural beauty, and the surrounding Moine Mhór, or Great Moss, is an SSSI.

The impression of isolation is misleading: Dunadd's location is highly strategic for maritime and inland communications.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Dunadd is well surveyed as a field monument (although 3D recording of carvings may be desirable). Limited modern excavations, published in 2000, have highlighted the outstanding archaeological potential of the site. Further excavation will be able to tell us more about how the site developed over time and its internal spaces were used (excavation has been largely limited to defences, but any internal structures could have left little trace), as well as provide more detailed information about the lifestyle of the inhabitants, their technological and artistic skills, and the extensive nature of their contacts. The potential for further revelations about Insular art must also be high.

Little is known of the earlier prehistoric and later medieval use of the site. Excavation is the main way of finding out more, although occasionally new historical sources are being discovered by chance.

The finer details of early medieval politics, and where Dunadd fitted into this, are not well understood, but that is because the documentary sources are so paltry.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- ≡ One of the most important early medieval power centres in Scotland – chief seat, or principal royal centre of the Gaelic Dál Riata, one of the main peoples of early medieval Scotland.
- ≡ Well-preserved and well-dated example of a hierarchical fort, a type of settlement characteristic of early medieval Scotland.
- ≡ Dunadd's association with one of the most important and most dense collections of prehistoric remains in the British Isles is unlikely to be a coincidence.
- ≡ Excavation has provided evidence for a wide range of high status activities, including one of the most significant early medieval metalworking workshops in Europe.
- ≡ Very little of the site has been properly excavated and what remains is of outstandingly high archaeological potential.

- ≡ Artefacts from excavations in the early 1980s have had a profound impact on our understanding of 6th-8th-century Insular art and the inter-relationship of the peoples of the British Isles.
- ≡ Dunadd has modern social significance as a former 'capital' of the 'Scots' at a formative time in the development of the nation. This includes its role as an early medieval royal inauguration site, one of the few plausible examples in Scotland.
- ≡ Dunadd is sited in a place of outstanding natural beauty and where the liminal qualities of the landscape may have add further significance to the symbolism of the site.

Associated Properties

Related forts include: Dunollie (Oban), Dundurn (Perth and Kinross) and, arguably, **Urquhart. Brough of Birsay** related in sense of being early medieval power centre also important for its metalworking.

Other contemporary and related sites include: **Iona, Kilmartin Church, Keills Chapel, Kilmory Knap** and other HES sites with early medieval sculpture in this area. Needs to be seen in context of all the sites in **Kilmartin Glen** [HES sites not listed individually here] particularly prehistoric and early medieval ones, including the many examples that are in Forestry Commission or otherwise accessible land.

Dupplin links in sense of being a monument to early Gaelic king in Pictland, ie period in which Gaels from west starting to take over Pictland in east, so the period when Dunadd was becoming less important.

The Dunadd finds have links with art in other media, including early medieval sculpture in Historic Scotland's care.

Stone of Destiny has associations to royal inauguration theme, Scone as later site of royal inauguration.

Kilmartin House Museum contains relevant and excellent local exhibition. Artefacts from Dunadd in National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Keywords Early medieval, prehistoric, later medieval, hierarchical fort, prehistoric rock art, inauguration site, ogham, early medieval carvings, early medieval royalty, St Columba, early medieval metalworking, early medieval trade, early Christianity, Kilmartin Glen, Argyll.