



## Book Reviews

### **BROCHS AND THE EMPIRE: THE IMPACT OF ROME ON IRON AGE SCOTLAND AS SEEN IN THE LECKIE BROCH EXCAVATIONS BY EUAN W MACKIE**

*Archaeopress Archaeology. 2016. 168pp, 107 illustrations, 4 tables, pb, ISBN 9781784914400, £30.00*

The brochs of southern Scotland are an intriguing group of structures that have been the subject of considerable academic interest in the last century. They present an interesting archaeological problem as their architectural characteristics, massive circular stone walls that provide the foundations for a stone tower, clearly relate them to the brochs of the Atlantic fringe and yet they are separated from this region by areas where broch towers are unknown. They are in a landscape where the architectural norm was for people to build timber roundhouses and where the monumental architectural element was generally the boundary around settlements that often contained several houses. This geographical separation has resulted in the southern brochs becoming intellectually detached from the debates about Atlantic brochs and to their treatment as an historical anomaly.

The lowland brochs are concentrated in the valley of the River Forth, but examples are found to the south, in the southern uplands, and to the north-east, along the coast of the Firth of Tay. The most complete distribution appears to be around the bog known as Flanders Moss, which was a significant boundary for north–south travel. The strategic importance of the region would have been appreciated by the Romans and structured Agricola's attempts to control the north in the latter part of the first century AD, and the location of the Antonine Wall in the middle of the second century AD. The presence of Roman material in the lowland brochs has therefore encouraged explanations of their presence that link them closely to the various Roman invasions of Scotland.

The excavations at the broch of Leckie, reported on in this volume, are probably the most important contribution to our understanding of the relationship with Rome to be published so far, though the recent discoveries at Castle Craig, Auchterader in Perthshire should prove to be just as interesting. Leckie has produced a large assemblage of Roman material culture that includes: samian ware; glass beads and bangle fragments; glass vessel fragments; iron tools and weapons; bronze objects including brooches, pins and rings, fragments from a mirror and various

fragments of sheet that indicate the presence of vessels, and possibly a sword scabbard; plus a variety of lead pieces, which included objects such as a lamp. Mixed in with these alien objects are items that could be classed as indigenous; a range of stone tools including querns, weights, spindle whorls, discs and counters, copper alloy rings and pins, and glass beads of local types. This is a truly exceptional assemblage and detailed examination of the glass vessels by Ingemark has revealed a variety of types, which are only sparsely distributed within Roman Britain. The copper alloy mirror and the chain brooch with decorated enamel disc terminals are extremely rare finds that emphasize the significance of the inhabitants of the broch.

The distinctive nature of the finds assemblage is used to support the argument that this indicates the Roman tactic of prestige gift-giving to compliant local elites, rather than the looting of abandoned Roman forts, and this seems convincing. However, there are various other issues which arise from the presence of this material, which are more problematic. The bulk of the objects are associated with a destruction layer within the broch that is interpreted as the result of a violent assault and systematic demolition of the broch by the Roman army at the beginning of the Antonine occupation of central Scotland. The dating relies on the presence of a small quantity of Hadrianic and Antonine pottery in the destruction layer.

It is argued that the large quantity of complete prestigious objects found in the broch is present because they had been 'dropped on the floor in an emergency and had not been recovered' (p.81). However, it seems odd that the inhabitants were allowed to leave the broch (no bodies were found), but were unable to remove their most valuable possessions particularly as these would have demonstrated an allegiance to Rome. An alternative scenario might be that the broch was systematically dismantled and the Roman regalia destroyed by the locals, possibly because the Romans had gone back on their word to leave the region and never return. However, the decision could be unconnected with the Romans and simply reflect the inauspicious death of the householder, which meant that the house and possessions needed to be destroyed to mark their passing. The historical record for this period is poor but it seems clear that that larger tribal identities were being fashioned as a means of resisting and exploiting the Roman presence in England and this might well have led to the deliberate erasure of local elites with alternative points of view. The presence of a similar destruction layer in the broch at Castle Craig (James 2011, 144) may indicate a correlation between large amounts of prestige Roman goods and deliberate destruction.

The temptation to write historical narratives is problematic and there are other issues that need to be rethought as a result of the evidence from Leckie. The chronology and nature of the first broch is slightly problematic as Mackie has changed his interpretation of the earliest activity on

the site. He had originally argued in an interim report that the initial occupation had been a timber roundhouse and that this was replaced by the stone built broch. However, in the final stages of the post-excavation analysis he noted that the layer of sand, into which the primary post holes were recorded, abutted the broch wall on the west side and therefore has to post-date the construction of the broch. The early timber features are now re-interpreted to indicate the primary occupation of a broch with a relatively clean ground floor. Unfortunately, this reconsideration of the stratigraphy occurred after the specialist reports had been written and these reports, which are added as appendices, now misleadingly reference the pre-broch occupation. This will cause considerable confusion to any specialist who dips into the volume to extract details from the specialist reports and it is difficult to understand why the author could not simply have amended these reports to accommodate the new information.

The different phasing used in the main report and the specialist reports is particularly annoying as the specialist reports contain valuable information that is directly relevant to the chronology of the site. The radiocarbon chronology of the site is now very well understood as 20 new dates were obtained and have undergone Bayesian analysis to provide an accurate chronology for the history of the site. The construction of the broch (not the pre-broch roundhouse as it is referred to in the specialist report), can now be placed in the period 55 cal BC to cal AD 40 (at 68% probability), which suggests that the broch was built well before the period when the Romans had influence in this region. It therefore highlights the issue of why these brochs appear in southern Scotland and what their presence contributes to the larger debate on broch use. Neither issue is really addressed in this report.

The southern brochs are clearly associated with elite material culture and it is generally acknowledged that they were houses whose occupants were individuals with authority over the locality, but who could not be regarded as leaders of the tribes that are recorded in the later Roman sources. This theory would be supported by the distribution of brochs around Flanders Moss as these are relatively evenly spaced to control the limited agricultural landscapes present. This interpretation would be similar to that used by some to explain the role of brochs in Atlantic Scotland and suggests that these structures were used in the same way in both areas. However, it conflicts with another widely held view that brochs are in many areas the only structures present and that they were occupied by all the members of a non-hierarchical community. Supporters of this view argue that brochs have widely different roles in different regions within Atlantic Scotland and that the use of the southern brochs is irrelevant. The author of this review favours the former explanation.

The emergence of the southern brochs therefore represents the increasing importance placed on the architecture of the domestic sphere to define status and clarify social relationships in relatively localized agricultural societies of central Scotland. There were a number of ways of doing this in the lowlands of Scotland, and these mostly involved building substantial timber roundhouses, such as crannogs, which were particularly popular in areas to the north and west and would have been perfectly appropriate in this area given the presence of Flanders Moss. However, the inhabitants chose to adopt the alien stone roundhouses of Atlantic regions, which must indicate some level of long distance contact between these regions, but also the symbolic significance of stone. Perhaps the use of stone was an attempt to establish permanence and longevity in the social fabric of these communities and to demonstrate a control over nature. If this was the case then it seems to have failed as the appearance of the Romans manifestly disrupted social relationships and the gift exchange networks encouraged by the new material culture probably undermined the existing local power relationships. Brochs, such as Leckie, may have evidence for a limited amount of occupation in the third or fourth centuries AD, but they do not have the prolonged life histories that are so common in Atlantic Scotland where the impact of Rome was less direct.

A number of problems have been highlighted in the discussion above and it would be remiss of me not to warn people that this is an idiosyncratic report. Euan Mackie has a long and distinguished career in Scottish archaeology, but he is a figure of controversy and many scholars have found his interpretations difficult to accept. This is not, I think, one of his more controversial books, though his interpretation of the nature of the contact between Roman and natives is more detailed than most archaeologists would be comfortable with. The principal problems arise because of the circumstances of the excavations and the post-excavation and publication process. The excavation was undertaken over nine years in the 1970s by volunteers largely working at weekends, or in short summer seasons. Consequently, the recording, though adequate, is not as good as could be hoped for. The post-excavation analysis has taken decades and in recent years has been hampered by the retirement of the author, and the reorganisation of the Hunterian Museum that has occurred since his departure. Consequently, some of the finds are currently mislaid or inaccessible, and are therefore not illustrated. The plans are not adequately reproduced or properly labelled with context numbers that enable cross-referencing with the text; the principal plan of the broch interior appears to be a field drawing with potentially useful but illegible annotations. None of the post hole sections show the fill sequences, which are an important part of the interpretation of the site. These problems are emphasized by the design of the book, which has all the illustrations grouped at the end of each chapter, surely it would not have been too expensive to integrate text and illustrations, as has been the norm for most

academic publications for decades. It is best to look at this report as a work of rescue, which has salvaged an important amount of information on a very interesting site and for that the author should be thanked.

### **Reference**

James, H. 2011. Castle Craig. *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* 12, 144–5

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