

1. Craigmarloch Vitrified Fort and the Prehistory of Strathgryfe

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The title of this article refers to one of the best known archaeological sites in the Strathgryfe area, and perhaps one of the most enigmatic. However the opportunity was also taken to provide an overview of the prehistoric remains right through from the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers to the appearance of the Roman military. References have been kept to a minimum and ideas for further reading are provided at the end.

Strathgryfe presents an ideal case study for archaeology both in Renfrewshire and in the west of Scotland in general. If we follow the River Gryfe down the strath from its headwaters on the moors to the west, it passes through the pastoral fields around Kilmacolm and Bridge of Weir, passed its confluence with the Lochar Water, to the low-lying area of the Paisley basin where it joins with the Black Cart before merging with the White Cart at Inchinnan. The changing nature of the topography and farmland can easily be seen on the satellite imagery available on the intranet via websites like Google Earth. Indeed the talk used many of these images to illustrate how useful such photographs can be (although publishing them might be a bit more problematic!). As the topography changes so the archaeology changes; from the upstanding remains of the hills and moors to the west, through the heavily improved pasture fields of the middle stretch to the plough-flattened sites in the arable fields to the east. The latter sites have been recorded largely through aerial photography but in some cases by archaeological trial trenching. While the watershed of the Gryfe loosely defines the boundaries of this study, the sites along the southern bank of the Clyde will also be included here.

Radiocarbon dates from the Linwood Moss area on either side of the River Gryfe indicate that peat had started to accumulate here by around 8-9000 years ago. These boggy areas would have been ideal hunting grounds for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers from around 7000 BC onwards. A small collection of Mesolithic flint blades has been recovered from ploughed fields just to the north of Bishopton and similar artefacts were found during the excavation of the South Mound cairn at Houston.

Evidence for the first farming communities of the Neolithic from around 4000-2500 BC is more numerous. A wide range of artefacts such as flint tools and arrowheads and polished or ground stone axes have been found across Strathgryfe. Many of these discoveries were made by or reported by Frank Newall in his numerous publications or in the annual publication "Discovery and Excavation in Scotland" (DES)¹. Indeed Newall is largely responsible for the record of Neolithic material from the area. It was during his excavations at Whitemoss Roman fort, to the west of Bishopton, that a small cluster of pits were found to contain Neolithic material including sherds of plain round pots. A radiocarbon date obtained from charcoal within one of the pits gave a date range of 3943-3520 cal BC (GU-1044). These pits, and a similar set found below the South Mound, were probably used to deposit rubbish either from domestic activity or from ritual feasting, perhaps some of the pot sherds were imbued with special significance, seen as 'ritually charged', and were deliberately placed with care into the pits to remove them from circulation and prevent perceived contamination. Perhaps these scatters of pits represent the remains of funerary rites and feasts.

¹ see D Alexander (ed). 1996.

Unfortunately, there are no known chambered cairns or long mounds in the area within which the Neolithic communities may have placed their dead although perhaps any large cairns have been removed by agricultural improvements or alternatively the deceased may have been treated and remembered in a different way. It is not until the Bronze Age that we have the first evidence for human skeletal remains in Strathgryfe. Once again it is the South Mound at Houston that provides the evidence, where stone cists were first exposed in the eighteenth century and from which several skulls and long bones were reported. It was the two sets of excavation work in 1974 and 1976 that confirmed their date. The low burial mound, which forms the centre of a woodland plantation, revealed a large rubble built cist covered by a huge stone slab. Cremated human bone lay in a pile in the centre along with a flint blade and a complete and elaborately decorated Food Vessel belonging to the Middle Bronze Age. Other graves were located to the south of the cairn during the subsequent excavation work in 1976, prior to the re-alignment of the Houston to Bridge of Weir road. From one of the shallow pits a bronze awl, the earliest metal artefact from Strathgryfe, was found along with fragments of burnt and un-burnt human bone, sherds of Bronze Age pottery and cannel coal fusiform beads from a beautiful spacer-plate necklace.

Evidence for Bronze Age house sites is plentiful in the uplands and moors in the form of hut circles such as those at Gotter Burn and Lurg Moor. Although none of these sites have yet been excavated, on comparison with the sites at Martin Glen, North Ayrshire and Picketlaw, East Renfrewshire, we know that some of these settlements are likely to date to the second half of the second millennium BC.

Radiocarbon dates for renewed peat growth at Linwood Moss and other low-lying boggy areas has been dated to around 1500 BC. From around 1000 BC onwards, climatic deterioration led to increased blanket peat growth in the uplands as well. It is possible that there was, therefore, increased pressure on good farmland and it is around this time that there is a noticeable increase both in bronze weapons and the enclosure of settlements by defensive timber palisades and stone walls. Although undated by radiocarbon samples, the site at Knapps, to the south of Kilmacolm golf course, with its central timber house and heavy palisade set within a substantial foundation slot, may represent a site of this period.

The earliest phase of enclosure at Craigmarloch Wood, above Port Glasgow, appears to have been defended by not one but two lines of timber palisade both of which were destroyed by fire and a radiocarbon date suggests it belongs some time in the first half of the first millennium BC – between the Late Bronze Age and the start of the Iron Age. Strathgryfe has a number of small Iron Age hillfort sites on the high ground around the watershed including Castle Hill, Gibblaston and High Castlehill, just to the east of Craigmarloch. Unfortunately the site close to Gibblaston farm was planted with conifers in the 1960s and is now completely obscured. A little clearer is the defended ridge site at Marshall Moor but the only excavated site is at Craigmarloch, where Helen Nisbet of Paisley Museum opened a series of small trenches in the 1960s (Figure 1).

Excavation showed that the double palisades at Craigmarloch had been replaced by a stone-built timber-laced wall. At the western entrance the wall had both internal and external vertical stone wall faces and the core must have contained a mix of loose rubble within a framework of wooden beams. That there must have been such a timber element to the wall is evident as a fire had burnt it down and the inner stone core had been subjected to such an intense heat that large lumps had melted or 'vitrified' and fused together. Whether this destruction was accidental or the result of a deliberate attack or slighting of the defences is impossible to say but the

radiocarbon dates indicate that it may have occurred in the 200 years between the 1st centuries BC and AD. It should be noted, however, that the excavator thought the timber-laced fort should be dated closer to that of the palisades. Whether deliberate or not, it must have presented a particularly spectacular sight – a hill top fire – visible from the upper reaches of Strathgryfe but also from the Clyde and indeed further north.

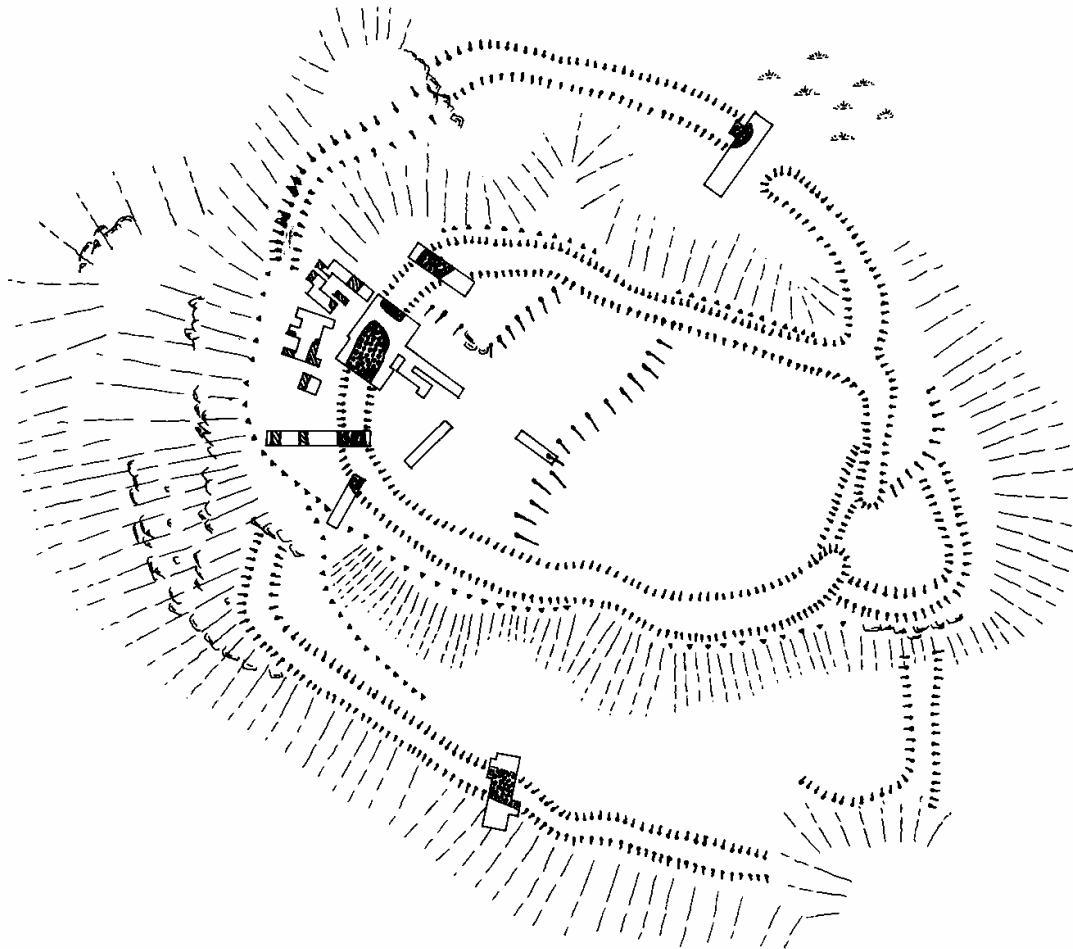


Figure 1: Craigmarloch Fort

The upstanding remains of the hill top enclosures in the west of the study area are nicely complimented in the east where the arable ground is more conducive to the formation of cropmarks visible from the air. A small cluster of single-ditched enclosures have been recorded to the north-east of Bishopton at Ritchieston, Drumcross and Longhaugh Lodge. Perhaps more interesting is the triple-ditched enclosure on the summit of Corslie Hill, north of Houston, where the Barochan Cross used to stand before it was transferred to Paisley Abbey. Here there appear to be two possible phases of enclosure with the wider, inner and outer ditches being of similar date and the narrower, middle, ditch belonging to a separate construction phase. As yet, none of these cropmark enclosures have been excavated but a recently discovered site at Mar Hall Hotel, in the grounds of Erskine Hospital, indicates the sort of features that might be expected.

The Mar Hall site, however, was not located by aerial photography, as the field was not under crop, but was only found during trial trenching in 2007 for the new golf course by AOC Archaeology. A wide ditch enclosed an area 60-65m in diameter.

There was a fence or palisade on the outside edge of the ditch and two more widely spaced palisades in the interior. At the south-west there was a break in the ditch and the palisades all joined, forming a fenced avenue over 20m long leading to the door of a large timber roundhouse c. 16m in diameter. Full publication of this excavation is ongoing but its discovery clearly shows that there are still major sites to be discovered in Strathgryfe. It will be intriguing to see if the dates for the occupation of Mar Hall overlap with those from the crannog site which is located only 300m to the north-east, right on the banks of the Clyde.

Water-logged timbers from Erskine Bridge crannog have been radiocarbon dated to 400-160 BC and 100 BC – 150 AD. Another two crannogs, at Langbank East and West, are also located on the southern shore of the Clyde although the best known example is at Dumbuck on the northern shore. All three of these latter sites can clearly be seen on satellite images available on Google Earth. Whether these crannogs were timber round houses or other structures for taking advantage of the estuarine resources remains open to question but all were ideally placed for transporting goods both along and across the river. As such these sites must have been known and used by the people of Strathgryfe.

Until the 1950s the only evidence for Roman activity in this area was the discovery in 1886 in a field at Barochan, just below Corslie Hill, of a bronze paterra or a soldier's mess tin (Figure 2). The handle of this Roman paterra is stamped with the letters '...OLIBY..' thought to relate to its maker Publius Cippius Polibius, who had a workshop in the Bay of Naples in the 2nd century AD. This wonderful artefact is now in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. We now know however, though aerial photography, that there were three Roman military sites in Strathgryfe: the forts at Barochan Hill and Whitemoss (Figure 3) were revealed as cropmarks while the fortlet at Lurg Moor is still upstanding, and indeed can once again be seen on Google Earth with a length of Roman road leading away from the southern entrance.

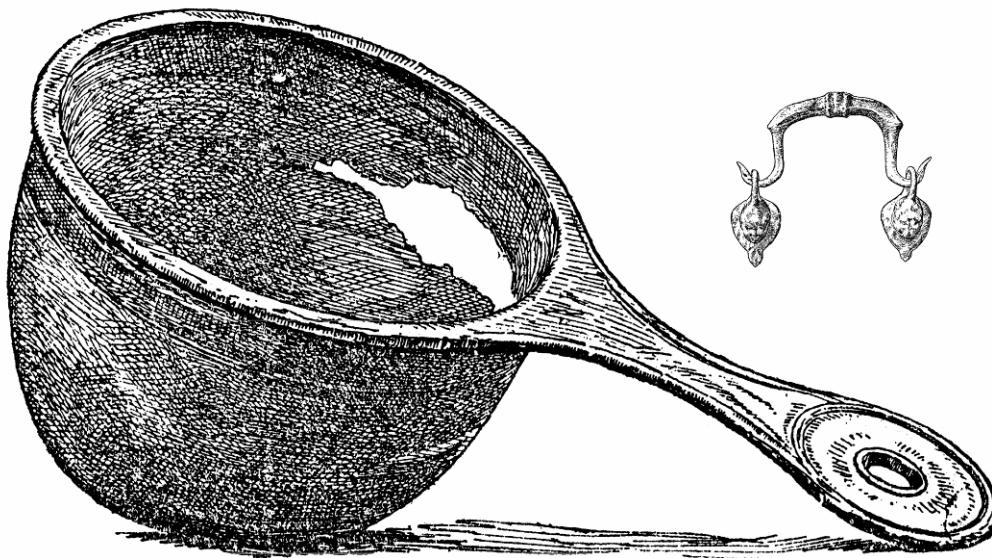


Figure 2: Barochan Patera

While Lurg Moor remains unexcavated, both the forts were trenched by Frank Newall and Lawrence Keppie. Barochan Hill was found to date to the Flavian period and was probably occupied around 80-83 AD. The larger fort at Whitemoss, Bishopton, was found to be Antonine in date with three phases of occupation: 142-155 AD, 158-165

AD and early in the 3rd century (Figure 3). Excavation focussed on the defences and the south-east quarter of the site where the principia (or headquarters building) was located along with a granary, stables and barracks block. Each of the first two phases seem to have ended with major fires and destruction but whether this represents evidence for the warlike nature of the Strathgryfe inhabitants or the deliberate abandonment and dismantling of the site by the Roman army remains unclear. It was under the stables block that Newall found the pits containing the Neolithic pots that were discussed earlier.

Many of the numerous Roman artefacts from Whitemoss are held within the collections of the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow University and photographs of the 2nd century samian bowls, mortaria and other pottery can all be seen on the museum website, along with building materials such bricks, roof tiles and window glass.

In conclusion the wider area of Strathgryfe has a wealth of prehistoric archaeology and indeed a good proportion of it has been explored. Much of this work was done by local amateurs keen to find out more about their own area – indeed Frank Newall lived for many years in Kilmacolm. More recently this work has been expanded by commercial archaeology units working in advance of major developments. While some of the results remained unpublished for many years or published in slightly obscure journals, this paper has attempted to highlight the richness of the resource. Strathgryfe in prehistoric times was obviously a densely settled and farmed area defined not only by the watershed of the river itself but also by the line of the Clyde to the north. It was important enough to have been controlled by the Roman army as well. Indeed it is likely to have been considered as a recognisable unit or body of land, distinct from the surrounding countryside, and it is not surprising that it is first mentioned as such in the medieval in the 12th century AD.

Further Reading

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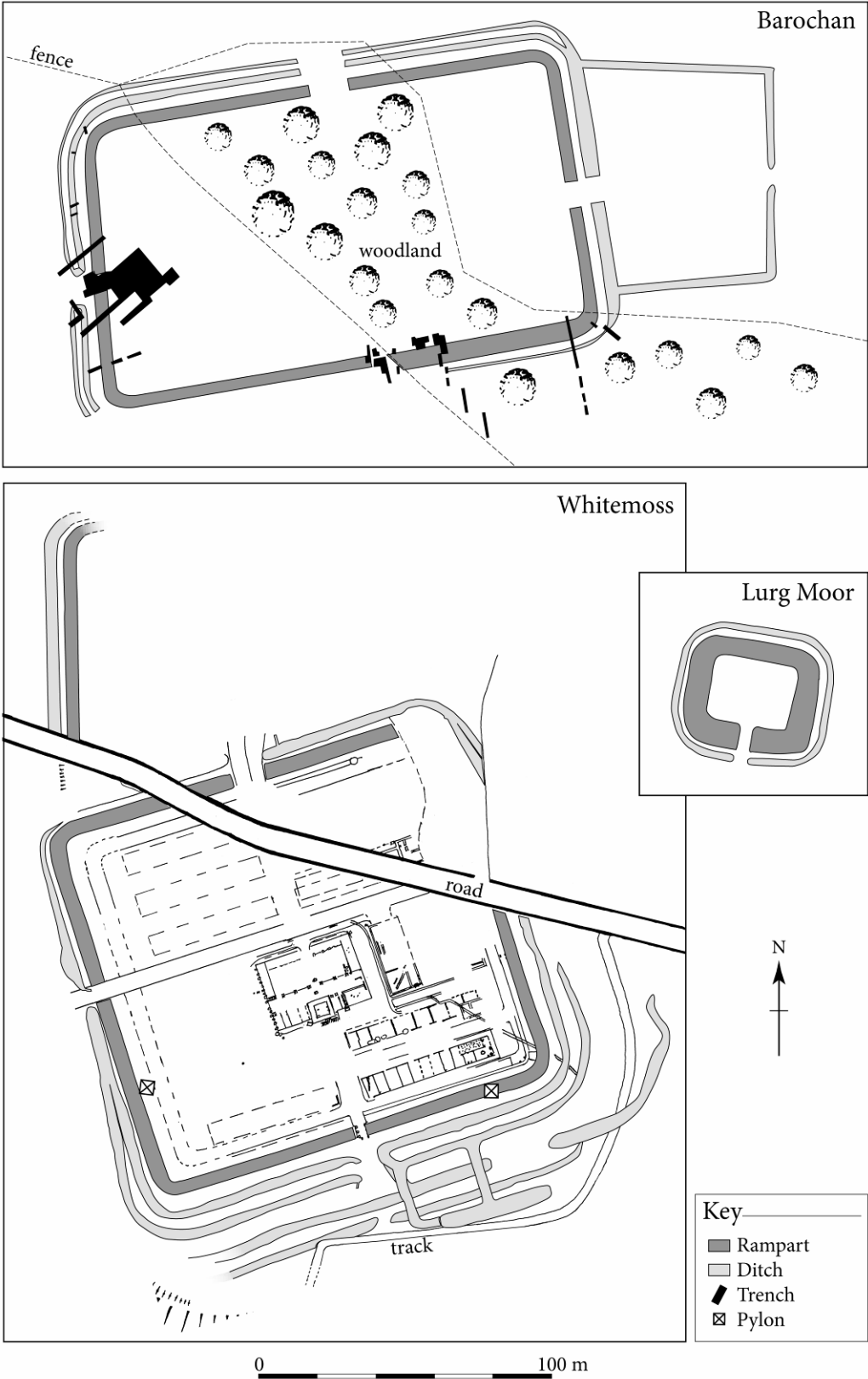


Figure 3: Roman Forts

