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Forteviot. A Pictish and Scottish Royal Centre (review)

John Malcolm

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Nick B. Aitchison. *Forteviot. A Pictish and Scottish Royal Centre*. Tempus: Stroud, 2006. 288 pp. £19.99 paperback. ISBN 075243599X

In comparison with the majority of the early medieval residences of the Pictish and early Scottish kings, the former royal site at Forteviot in Perthshire is unprepossessing on first acquaintance. Apart from a pretty Arts-and-Crafts village and a fine collection of early medieval carved stone in the porch of the Georgian church, there is little evidence that this site in the heart of Strathearn once hosted the palace of the rulers of Pictland. Moreover, the royal residence was a centre of power during the crucial years of the early and mid-ninth century, when the Gaelic kings were establishing their pre-eminence in eastern Scotland. Nick Aitchison's extraordinarily rich study is a timely reminder of the splendour of early medieval Forteviot. The story of royal Forteviot has to be extracted from three key sources. Aerial photography by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments for Scotland has revealed the cropmarks of a prehistoric ritual complex and of a Pictish cemetery to the south of the modern village. A magnificent carved lintel known as the Forteviot Arch was recovered from the adjacent stream, the Water of May, in the 1820s. Dated to the early years of the ninth century, it now resides in the National Museum of Scotland. The other source is the landscape of Forteviot itself, and this bears the greatest potential for those interested in the archaeology of early historic kingship in these islands. Aitchison demonstrates a clear grasp of these key areas of enquiry.

Forteviot marked a considerable break with other centres of Pictish and Scottish royal power. Elevated 'nuclear' forts such as Dunollie, Dunadd and Dundurn were the venues for royal households in the crucial period when Pictland began its absorption into the Gaelic realms. Yet, the site at Forteviot is on a level river terrace overlooked by the Ochils on the south and by the Gask Ridge on the north. It has been suggested that the use of such a low-lying site facilitated the creation of a palace-type complex in the Carolingian tradition, an innovation of which the royal house and its attendant Church can hardly have been unaware. This appears likely to be related to a reduced emphasis on militarism in the period when Forteviot was first used. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the site with the extensive cropmark complexes can hardly have been accidental, as the cropmarks certainly represent earthworks that would have been significantly monumental in the early medieval period. Stephen Driscoll has suggested that this juxtaposition represented a deliberate attempt by the royal house to insinuate itself into a visible manifestation of 'ancestral' power. The palace almost certainly stood at the west end of the modern village at Haly Hill, and there are several reliable eighteenth-century accounts of

building traces at that location. Aitchison expertly reviews the occasionally conflicting evidence for the structures at Haly Hill. It is therefore a shame that the Water of May has undermined (and probably destroyed) the core of the palace site at Haly Hill. Excavations in 1981 by the late Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock found no trace of early medieval settlement, and recent geophysical investigations by the University of Glasgow's Strathearn and Environs Royal Forteviot (SERF) project have revealed only modern structures in the vicinity of the hill. Nevertheless, the site at Haly Hill was small, and could not have constituted the entirety of a royal estate in itself. This is borne out by recent work by SERF, which suggests that other elements of the palace remain within the boundaries of the village and the churchyard.

While Aitchison's explorations of the topography of Forteviot are exemplary, it is his study of the Forteviot Arch that represents the core of his work. The arch is a semi-circular monolithic lintel, with a series of carvings which chiefly depict three human figures bearing staves, two quadrupeds, and a badly defaced cross. The arch is practically unique in Britain and Ireland, and its depictions of humans and animal figures are atypical of contemporary Pictish work, while clearly drawing on some of its traditions. Aitchison has determined that the figures represent a king and two clerics, with a lamb (the *agnus dei*) and a bull. He proceeds to draw out meaning from the imagery and makes the connections between Pictish royal patronage and the church at Forteviot. The depiction of a king and a cleric bearing staves is mirrored in the ninth-century Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, and that fine sculpture is believed to commemorate the royal foundation of the cathedral there. Aitchison encourages us to see the Forteviot Arch in a similar light. The arguments over the original function of the piece are rehearsed here, and Aitchison echoes Leslie Alcock's claim that it acted as a chancel arch. The assertion is supported by the existence of a number of similarly sized arches in Anglo-Saxon churches of the period. However, it must be noted that these English arches were built from individual voussoirs rather than from a single block of carved masonry. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that the royal church at Forteviot celebrated the royal connection in a very visible and ostentatious manner, and that the arch was central to this demonstration. The religious imagery may also explain the survival of this unique sculpture into the twenty-first century. Aitchison revisits the nineteenth-century find of the arch in the Water of May, and suggests that it had eroded down from Haly Hill. This writer finds this explanation unconvincing, given that the modern church to the south of the hill may have been built on the site of a medieval predecessor. It is considerably more likely that the arch was moved to the stream during the iconoclasms of the Reformation, either

to conceal or to obliterate the religious associations pertaining to the arch. On a minor point, the treatment of the arch is very detailed, but it is overly long and written in a style that will discourage all but experts in the field.

Why is Forteviot now largely forgotten as a residence of the Pictish and Scottish kings, when nearby Scone is seen as the *fons et origo* of the medieval Scottish crown? Aitchison reasonably argues that the decline of Forteviot is related to the itinerant nature of early Scottish kingship, where regular royal progressions around the realm knitted the nascent kingdom together. Such wandering kings required residences located to facilitate easy travel around the kingdom. This necessitated the creation of new royal residences in the southeast and west of the kingdom of Alba. However, in eastern Scotland, there were already centres of power at Scone, Forteviot, Perth, and 'Rathinveramon' by the early twelfth century, and this excessive concentration of residences in such a relatively small area had to be addressed. For Aitchison, the demise of Forteviot (and the concomitant rise of Scone) as a key residence before the early thirteenth century must be seen in this context. Nevertheless, a further reason for the demise of Forteviot must be the foundation of an Augustinian house at Scone between 1114 and 1122. This house was a regular recipient of royal and noble patronage after its foundation, and must account for the increasing favour shown to Scone in the later twelfth century. The failure to found a religious house at Forteviot in this period can only be explained by a deliberate decision to concentrate patronage at its rival royal centre. Moreover, David I's granting of burgh status to the town of Perth acted as an alternative focus of economic and political power in the lower Tay valley, further marginalising Forteviot.

Nevertheless, two apparent footnotes to fourteenth-century history suggest that Forteviot was not completely eclipsed as a royal centre. In 1306 Edward II stayed at Forteviot after his victory at Methven, indicating, as Aitchison suggests, that some buildings were still standing. Edward Balliol made camp at Miller's Acre, located at the eastern end of the modern village, on the night before his victory over the Scots at Dupplin Moor on 11 August 1332. While the presence of a nearby ford over the Earn may have influenced the location of these temporary encampments, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the presence of buildings at Forteviot was a key factor, rather than some folk memory of a former royal residence. In the opinion of this writer, Forteviot may have been surplus to the residential needs of the Scottish kings, but the undoubtedly profitable estate was certainly retained in royal hands into the middle years of the fourteenth century. It appears likely that it was subsequently granted out in the reigns of Robert II or David II, when the needs of the royal exchequers were at their greatest.

This book represents an enormous amount of multi-disciplinary research, diligently obtained and expertly synthesised. It is an important work not merely because of its treatment of an important and often disregarded royal site, but also because of the close contextual study of a neglected piece of Pictish sculpture. Minor stylistic and editorial points aside, its relevance to the study of Pictish and Scottish royal sites cannot be overestimated, and it represents a valuable contribution to the study of early kingship in these islands.

John Malcolm, Dept. of Archaeology, University of Glasgow

Stephen Boardman, *The Campbells 1250–1513*. John Donald: Edinburgh 2006. xxvi + 374 pp. £14.99 paperback.
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No family is more closely associated with the history of highland Scotland than that of the Campbells. More even than the MacDonalds, whose eclipse is almost always laid at their door, the kin of Clan Campbell have been portrayed both in the popular imagination and scholarly literature as the quintessential representatives of a Gaelic way of life that was at once distinct from, and more genuinely Scottish than, that of the lowland region of the kingdom, but, more important, as men who betrayed that simple, honest way of life in order to secure fame, wealth and power at the court of the Scottish king. In this beautifully written, carefully researched and thoroughly engaging study, Stephen Boardman sets out to demolish the twin images of the Campbells as agents of a ‘sinister and inexorable assault upon the very fabric of Gaelic society’ (p. 4) and the instruments of MacDonald destruction.

His is no easy task. Campbell-MacDonald historiography stretches far back into the early modern past. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moreover, it travelled thousands of miles in the collective memory of Scottish emigrants, then took firm root across the face of the Anglophone world (and further beyond). Boardman unapologetically assumes the onerous task of rehabilitating the Campbells by means of what he calls a straightforward ‘political narrative’. His approach, he none the less cautions, ‘is not defence of [the family’s] political opportunism, ruthlessness and aggression’, for these qualities were ‘the essential prerequisites for the successful exercise and extension of aristocratic power’ in the late medieval and early modern milieux of Scotland. From his warts-and-all perspective, the men of the Campbell family appear, on more than one occasion, ruthless, vindictive, opportunistic and ambitious, but so do the noblemen with whom they competed for advantage; so, too, do the kings whom they served. Chief among their opponents in the arena of Scottish politics were members of the MacDonald family, lords of the