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Mither Tap Fort, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire: Results of an Archaeological Watching Brief

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PROJECT SUMMARY SHEET (BNA05)

Client	Forestry Commission Scotland, Aberdeenshire Forest District
National Grid Reference	NJ 6825 2240
Project Manager	Simon Stronach
Text	Dan Atkinson
Illustrations	Mike Middleton
Fieldwork	Dan Atkinson
Schedule	
Fieldwork	November 2006
Report	November 2006

Summary

The Forestry Commission Scotland commissioned Headland Archaeology Ltd to undertake an archaeological Watching Brief during the construction of a new path at Mither Tap Fort, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. The monitoring of the works revealed a stone block, possibly a step, near the inner entrance to the Fort, likely to represent part of an earlier modern path; the remains of two stone blocks and a cobble spread near the inner entrance adjacent to the outer rampart, possibly a structure and associated surface; and a concentration of loose heat affected stone near the base of the slope to the summit also adjacent to the outer rampart. The concentration of stones did not appear to form any identifiable structure. No other archaeologically significant features or finds were uncovered during the works.

MITHER TAP FORT, BENNACHIE, ABERDEENSHIRE (BNA05)
RESULTS OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

This document presents the results of an Archaeological Watching Brief in connection with improvement works to the footpath to the summit of the Mither Tap Hillfort, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. As Mither Tap Hillfort is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the client, Forestry Commission Scotland, applied for consent before the proposed works could be carried out. The Scheduled Ancient Monument Plan was subsequently submitted to Historic Scotland that detailed an archaeological watching brief to be carried out during the proposed the works (Scheduled Ancient Monument Plan, Mither Tap Fort, Forestry Commission Scotland, March 2005). This was accepted along with a Method Statement (Stronach 2005) for the archaeological monitoring of the works agreed with Historic Scotland and the Principal Archaeologist of Aberdeenshire Council. The Principal Archaeologist of Aberdeenshire Council prepared an initial brief for the work (21/1/05). The work was carried out between the 13th and 15th November 2006 in fine weather.

2 SITE LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION (Figure 1)

The Mither Tap is the easternmost granite tor of the Bennachie ridge in Aberdeenshire (NGR NJ 6825 2240). It stands at a height of 518 m OD and is only accessible by foot. The fort commands fine views over the surrounding farmland.

The fort consists of an outer drystone wall located toward the edge of a narrow terrace. Traces of a wallhead parapet remain on either side of the entrance passage, which enters the fort from a triangular annexe. An inner wall is represented largely by tumble beneath a very denuded wall line linking two parts of the upper tor. Scree above this line may have derived from a third wall, which sat above a level shelf on which structures have been suggested.

3 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Archaeological intervention on the site has been minimal, the most recent of which comprised the preparation of a detailed plan by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland from 1996 until the present (*RCAHMS* NJ62SE 1). The only previous archaeological investigations were conducted by Christian Maclagan in 1876 and 1878. The investigations comprised the excavation of a number of areas within the fort immediately within the outer rampart, the results of which confirmed the presence of the remains of several round houses positioned along the full length of the rampart. On a subsequent visit after these investigations Maclagan noted that much of the stone from the roundhouses had been robbed away. The only clear traces of these structures noted during the current works were located to the south of the main entrance. The fort is formally undated but the use of rock outcrops to form a hierarchy of space and the parapet walk suggest an early historic date. Maclagan also suggests, based on documentary evidence, that Sir Andrew Leslie of Balquhain occupied the fort for a time in the medieval period (Maclagan 1881: 35). The recent past has seen the fort maintain its status as a popular attraction for walkers.

4 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Archaeological Watching Brief were:

- To archaeologically monitor all ground-breaking works both within the fort and immediately outside the fort's entrance.

- To excavate and record fully any archaeological remains exposed by the works and detail the findings in a report following completion of the works.

5 METHOD

Construction of the path

The current path surface, formed from compacted stone, was hand-excavated and removed by the main contractor under the supervision of an archaeologist. The excavated material was stored adjacent to the location of the new path on geotextile sheeting in such a way as to prevent it being mixed with the loose rubble that forms the fort's denuded ramparts. The stone lifted from the path tray was re-instated within the fabric of the new path.

Watching Brief

All ground-breaking or disturbing works within the identified area (see Figure 1) were monitored by a suitably qualified archaeologist.

The technical specification for the works involved the lifting of the current uneven path surface and relaying that may have resulted in underlying archaeological features being exposed. The path was seen to run through several areas of the fort (including the potential original entrance passage) that may have contained preserved structural features (Scheduled Ancient Monument Plan, Mither Tap Fort, Forestry Commission Scotland, March 2005). Special attention was to be paid to the possibility of exposing any inscriptions or carvings on freshly exposed bedrock surfaces, while the possibility of artefacts being exposed was also noted.

All recording was undertaken according to the Headland Archaeology Ltd standard method. All contexts, small finds and environmental samples were given unique numbers. Colour transparencies and print photographs were taken. An overall site plan was recorded at 1:1250 relative to the National Grid with 1:20 plans of individual features where relevant. Sections were drawn at an appropriate scale and significant archaeological deposits sampled. All recording was undertaken on *pro forma* record cards.

6 RESULTS (Figure 1 & 2)

For ease of description the path has been split into sections (Figure 1). These include:

1. ***Section 1*** - The path located along the approaches to the entrance of the fort
2. ***Section 2*** - The path through the entrance passage of the fort
3. **Section 3** - The path from the entrance along the inside of the outer rampart to the base of the slope to the summit
4. ***Section 4*** - The path from the base of the slope towards the summit

The following presents the results of the archaeological monitoring of path improvement works at Mither Tap Fort.

Section 1
This section of path was approximately 38m in length and ran up to the present entrance to the fort. On removal of the topsoil and loose stones (Context 01) within the path tray natural bedrock was

exposed along the path's length. No carvings or inscriptions were noted on the exposed bedrock and no significant finds were recovered (Plate 1).

Section 2

This section represents the segment of path running through the entrance of the outer ramparts and was approximately 22m long. The removal of the existing surface resulted in little disturbance to the subsurface deposits beneath the modern path. These deposits consisted of further stone rubble, possibly the remains of earlier path surfaces and tumble (Plate 2). Modern finds and litter were recovered from the deposits beneath the present surface within the path tray. The only feature of any interest was the presence of a rectangular stone block (Context 02) (approximately 1.0m x 0.30m x 0.25m) that was located across the entrance adjacent to an upstanding stone slab, incorporated into the north elevation of the modern retaining wall (Plate 3). This block was uncovered immediately beneath the current path surface and may therefore be of recent date. The absence of finds, however, makes the date of this feature uncertain. No further significant features or finds were uncovered.

Section 3

This section of path was approximately 22m long and ran from the inner entrance to the fort, turning to the north along the stone rubble and tumble adjacent to the interior of the outer rampart. After the removal of the turf, topsoil and stone rubble, this section of path revealed further deposits of stone tumble (Plate 4). Close to the entrance at the southern end of this section were noted two stone blocks (Context 03) running across the path tray on a NW-SE alignment. Immediately below this and to the south with a visible width approximately 1.0m was a roughly compacted spread of cobbles (Context 04). This spread was confined to the west by a large stone on the slope of the tor and to the east by stone rubble. No further evidence for the cobble spread was noted either to the south or to the north of Context 03 (Plate 5). A small sondage was excavated to determine the nature of the deposits below the cobble spread. This revealed a dark, gravelly silt deposit (Context 05) below [04] that lay directly on top of the natural bedrock. The function of these features is uncertain, although initial interpretations suggest some form of structure and surface. The remains may represent the vestiges of one of the round houses located in this area by Maclagan in 1876. Alternatively the features may represent the remains of earlier path deposits. The absence of finds however occludes any definite date at his time, although two fragments of oak/*quercus* charcoal were retrieved from a sample taken from Context [05] that could potentially provide an AMS date. Approximately 14m to the north of these features was noted a loose concentration of what appear to be heat affected stones (Context 06). The stones, however, were not vitrified and did not appear to be part of a structure, merely representing loose rubble and tumble at the base of the slope to the summit. No further significant archaeological features or finds were uncovered.

Section 4

The final section of path ran for approximately 30m from the base of the slope of the tor to the summit. This section was particularly steep and eroded, comprising on the whole of stone rubble scree (Plate 6). Little evidence of the inner rampart wall was identified towards the top of the scree, and no remains of any structures or finds were uncovered in the path tray.

7 DISCUSSION

A single stone block was noted across the inner entrance to the fort, although it is suggested that this is likely to represent an element of an earlier modern path surface. The alignment of the stone block with an upstanding slab built into the north elevation of the modern entrance retaining wall may support this suggestion. The discovery of stone blocks and cobbled surface within the path tray in Section 2 of the path may represent the remains of a structure and surface. Although the function of and date of the features are uncertain an AMS date for the charcoal fragments found in the deposit

beneath the cobbled surface would provide a *terminus post quem* date for these features. The discovery of a concentration of heat-affected stones towards the western end of Section 2 of the path is difficult to interpret. No structural evidence was evident in connection with this concentration of stones and may therefore represent material associated with the migration of stone material from the slope of the summit through erosion. The watching brief did not identify any further remains of archaeological significance.

8 REFERENCES

Maclagan C 1881 *Chips from Old Stones: Bennachie Ancient Fortress* Edinburgh

Stronach S 2005 *Method Statement for an archaeological watching brief at Mither Tap Fort, Bennachie, Aberdeenshire* Headland unpublished client document.

1.1 Context Register

Context No.	Description
01	Turf, topsoil and stone rubble noted across the site
02	Large granite squared, rectangular block: L: 1.0m W: 0.30m D: 0.25m.
03	Roughly squared stone blocks aligned ne-sw. average size = L: 0.40m W: 0.40m D: 0.30m. Possible structure
04	Cobbled spread. Contained between stone block and rubble and extends to the south for approximately 1.0m.
05	Dark grey gravelly silt deposit with fragments of charcoal
06	Concentration of heat affected stone

1.2 Drawing Register

Drawing Number	Description
1	Plan of stone structure [03] and cobbled spread [04]
2	South facing section of sondage showing [04] & [05]

1.3 Photograph Register

Shot No.	Print	Slide	Direction Facing	Description
1	1/1	1/1	W	Context 01 – stone block located across the inner entrance – Section 2
2	1/2	1/2	W	Context 01 – stone block located across the inner entrance – Section 2
3	1/3	1/3	W	General shot of context 03 – 05 – Section 3
4	1/4	1/4	E	Detail of context 03 & 04 – Section 3
5	1/5	1/5	W	General shot of context 03 – 05 – Section 3
6	1/6	1/6	W	General shot of context 03 – 05 – Section 3
7	1/7	1/7	W	General shot of context 03 – 05 – Section 3
8	1/8	1/8	W	General shot of context 03 – 05 – Section 3

1.4 Sample Register

Sample Number	Context Number	Description
1	05	Dark gravely silt deposit beneath cobbles [04]

BNA-05: Bennachie, Aberdeenshire

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Environmental sample report

A single 10-litre sample [001] was taken from a gravel rich layer [005] underneath a spread of cobbles [004] to investigate the nature of the deposits below the cobble spread. The sample was processed in laboratory conditions using a standard floatation method (cf. Kenward *et al*, 1980).

The sample was found to contain only charcoal fragments, of which two *quercus* (oak) fragments ($1cm^3$) were of sufficient size for AMS dating. The small size of the rest of the charcoal fragments suggests this sample represents redeposited material, which has been washed or blown into this deposit.

References

Kenward, H. K., Hall, A. R. and Jones, A. K. G. (1980). A tested set of techniques for the extraction of plant and animal macrofossils from waterlogged archaeological deposits. *Science and Archaeology* **22**, 3-15.

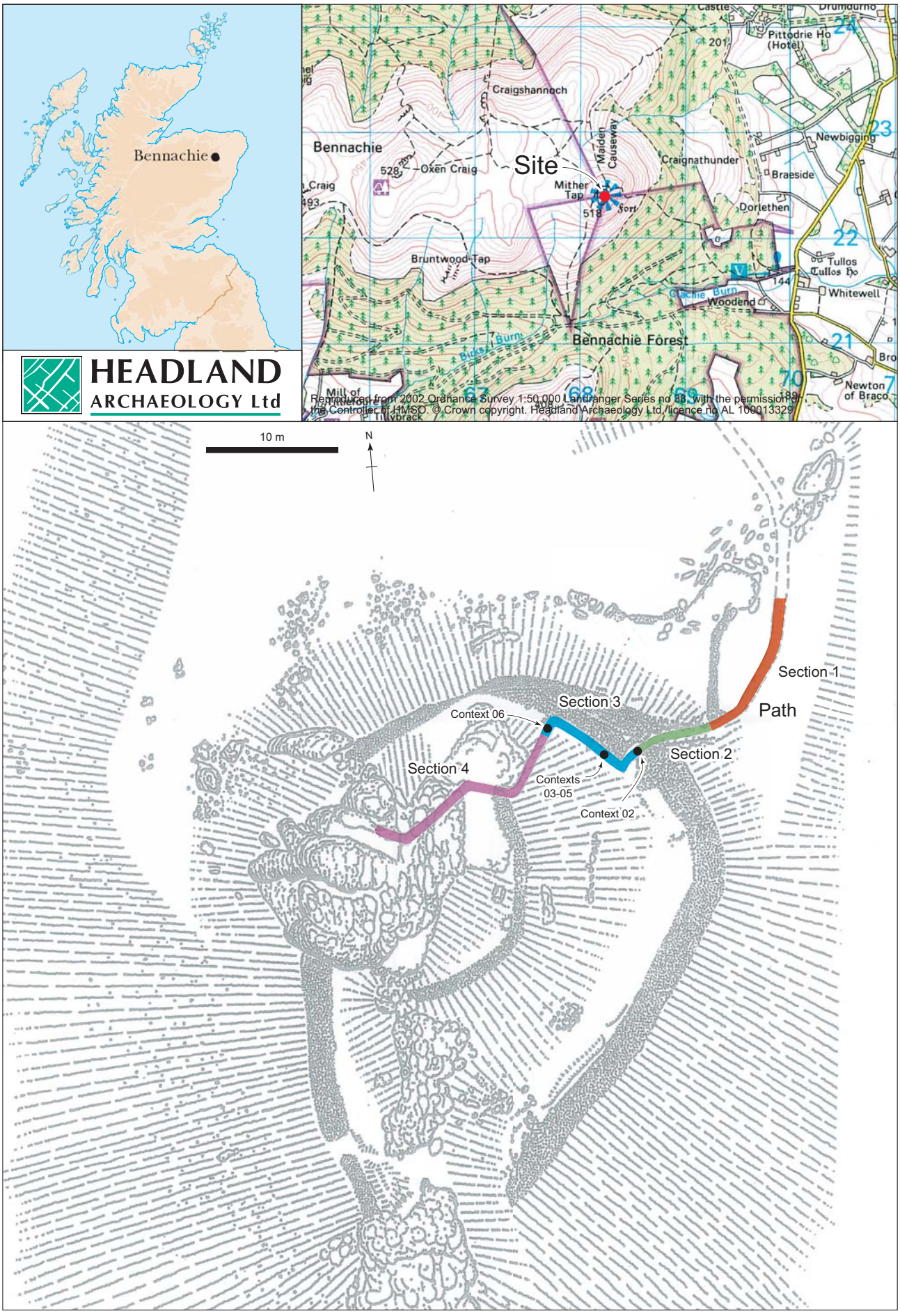

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Figure 1 - BNA05: Mither Tap Fort, Bennachie - Site location map and plan of features.

Plate 1: Section 1 of path. Looking NE.

Plate 2: Section 2 of path. Looking W.

Plate 3: Stone block 02. Looking SW.

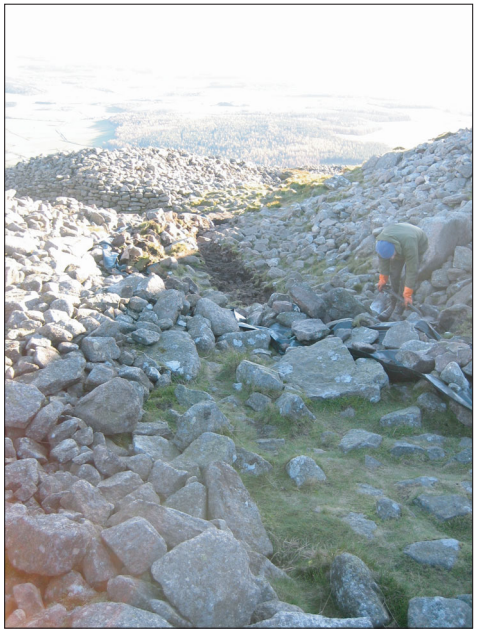

Plate 4: Section 3 of path. Looking E.

Plate 5: Stone blocks 03 and cobble spread 04.

Plate 6: Section 4 of path. Looking SW.