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Tap O' Noth Hillfort - Rhynie,
Aberdeenshire



An Aberdeenshire Icon

From the summit, it is possible to see all the way to the Moray Firth to the north and to the North Sea in the east. Clearly a strategically significant location in prehistory, this iconic hillfort remains substantially unexcavated. A trench - dug across the wall of the summit fort in 1891 - established its width, but there have been no recent excavations, other than some small scale excavations carried out in 1983. A survey in 1997 found traces of a previously unrecorded enclosure and the site was laser scanned in 2015.

Tap o' Noth has not been scientifically dated. Three glass beads, fragments of Roman pottery and a bronze terret have been found near to the lower enclosure. However, the most convincing dates are provided by comparison with Dunnideer hillfort, another Strathdon oblong fortification, which was recently dated to 400–200 BC. However, this does not mean the site was not reused later, or that the location was not the site of an earlier feature. It is quite possible that this prominent location was used over a long period of time. The hillfort rises over fertile agricultural land, and the landscape around the fort is rich with later prehistoric and early medieval remains. In addition to Tap, there are several smaller fortified sites, such as Wheelemont. A number of Pictish symbol stones have been found in the area. The Craw Stane, which has a commanding view of Tap o' Noth from its position beside the Pictish high status settlement at Rhynie, is one of the most well known. The relationship between Rhynie and Tap o Noth is as yet undefined, but is being investigated as part of 'The Rhynie Environs Archaeological Project'.



A Place of Strength?

Tap o' Noth consists of two main components; the massive rectangular fort at the summit is visible as a mound of rubble at about 15m thick. The interior has been quarried, but the rubble still stands to 3 metres in places. The rubble tails off for 30 metres on one side, and there is a large amount of vitrification, indicating that the walls have been subjected to high temperatures. The ramparts were originally formed from stone interlaced with a timber frame. When the timber was set alight, it created an intense heat which caused the stone to fuse. There are a large number of vitrified forts in Scotland, and although we don't know why they were fired, various suggestions have been put forward. Was this a construction technique. The fusing of the stones did not uniformly and in all cases make the walls stronger. Did it take place during a conflict, perhaps the deliberate smiting of a prominent symbol? Whatever the reason for burning the fort, it must have been an awe-inspiring sight.

There is no entrance currently visible into the vitrified fort, and this is something which it has in common with other rectangular forts, such as Craig Phadraig in Inverness. The present access over the tumbled walls dates to the 19th century. The thickness of the walls and isolated summit position suggest that this was an exclusive and strong place which may not have been open to everyone. This doesn't necessarily mean that it was defensive, and a ceremonial function is also possible. Two banks and a ditch run across the south east end of the interior, and may be part of an earlier enclosure. There is a cistern at the south end which is over 2 metres deep, and traces of two hut circles on the northern side.

A single large rampart encircles the outer fort, although stone has been robbed from this too, and it is barely visible in some places. Ten gaps have been identified in the circuit, although not all of them are original entrances. This outer enclosure contains substantial trackways and 234 platforms, some of which may be quarries and others houses.

Tap o' Noth is a stunning monument and perhaps the best preserved example of an Iron Age hillfort in Scotland, but how long was it occupied for? How did it connect with the landscape around it? Despite its iconic status, much remains a mystery.

Kirsty Owen - Senior Archaeology Manager



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/17169/tap-o-noth>
<https://online.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/smrpub/master/detail.aspx?refno=NJ42NE0001>
<http://reaparch.blogspot.co.uk/>



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