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Traprain Law fort and settlement - Prestonkirk, East Lothian





Traprain Law fort and settlement, East Lothian

Summarising the story of an excavation or a site can be one of the most difficult things for an archaeologist. To who should it be addressed? What is the vital information? Where should the emphasis be laid? Each of us writes for our audience, and we all try to balance between information and hyperbole. Many archaeological sites read as a palimpsest (1) but the representation of that story in writing and illustration, or archaeological records like Canmore, presents a significant challenge.

This challenge is brought into focus at Traprain Law, a volcanic hill set among rich East Lothian farmland. While deceptively simple at first glance, the archaeology of Traprain is made especially complex by both its sheer size and the richness of the archaeological finds (about 5% of the site has been excavated over the years). Numerous objects from the Late Bronze Age period through to the late Roman period in particular have been recovered, representing burial, settlement, agriculture and trade over 1,500 years. One of the most exciting came in 1919 when workmen uncovered a pit containing 34kg of Roman silver, but remarkable discoveries have continued: a small hoard of Late Bronze Age axe-heads came to light in 2004. Activity continued in later years and there is a growing argument for medieval occupation and burial on the summit, a reminder of the link to St Kentigern - recorded in the 12th century - and the existence of a 16th century beacon. Two hundred years later plantations of trees were established on the summit, and in the late 19th and 20th centuries the NE of Traprain was the site of the one of the county's largest quarries.

(1) a manuscript written over a partly erased older manuscript in such a way that the old words can be read beneath the new



Classification and survey

For archaeologists of the 1950s and 1960s, Traprain was considered as a prehistoric fort since it is enclosed by a large defensive ramparts. Creating their records in 1962, the Ordnance Survey recognised the fort and some 26 categories of find, from spindle whorl to arrowhead. Separate cards recorded each element, listing the relevant references, and a thorough critical summary was provided. The term fort, while satisfactory in some contexts, here disguises the complexity of the site and its long history of settlement. The difficulties of organising information are compounded when one considers the archive material – some 700 items survive including plate photographs, manuscripts, and drawings, many of which offer subtle clues or critical enhancements in understanding. The finds, most of which are housed in our National Museum, present another rich seam for study, and recent re-analysis has offered new perspectives.

While the organisation and structure of archaeological information clearly presents a challenge, the survey of the Traprain has also caused significant difficulties. Despite the fact that the Law was at the centre of the county Ordnance Survey in 1851, even the largest ramparts of the fort escaped record until 1906 (though a detailed survey of nearby Chesters fort was prepared in 1851). Early excavators provided only a schematic plan, and the RCAHMS Inventory of 1924 relied on the 6-inch map. The task of preparing a large-scale plan fell to RCAHMS in 1955, led by their archaeologist Richard W Feachem. Due to the size of the hill and the steepness of the slopes, Traprain presented a particular challenge requiring some 120 survey stations. The inked plan, still regularly reproduced, was crucial in demonstrating the existence of at least four different forts, not the one or two previously supposed. One mistake took 25 years to correct – because of differences in the orientation to magnetic or grid north, some trenches were drawn at the wrong angle!

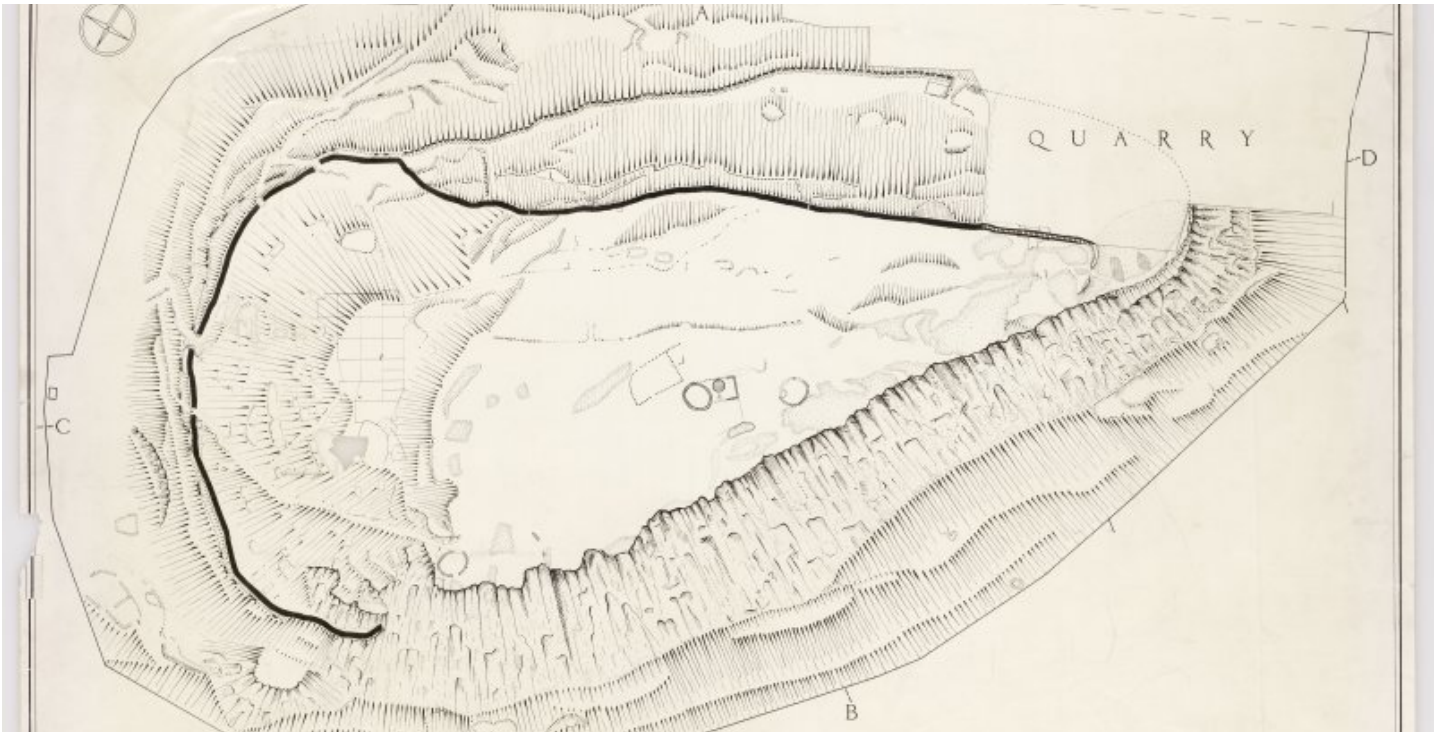
During this summer HES Survey and Recording are preparing a new survey of Traprain and will face many of the same challenges. The survey will be split into three parts – collection of data, archaeological interpretation, followed by depiction and dissemination. We are now spoiled by the ability to call on centimetre accurate GPS equipment which will, but for the most awkward area among steep cliffs, provide an accurate spatial fix. To this we can add a 3D model developed from hi-resolution aerial photographs and, using visualisation software, this will allow the enhancement of specific slopes in order to help us 'read' elements the landscape. Interpretation has come on in other ways since 1955 and the experience of RCAHMS in the Borders, Perthshire, Aberdeenshire and Dumfriesshire in particular has helped the surveyors see more clearly than two generations ago, and to pick up nuance and subtlety which in 1955 may have simply been generalised out. Depiction though is a fast developing art. Where careful use of ink pen and hachure was the mode then, depiction now relies on skills with software and the application of field interpretation in 3D represents a significant (but potentially rewarding) challenge. Clarifying the natural hill from the archaeological features, exposing the character of stratigraphic relationships, and piecing together a coherent narrative are still the order of the day.

While Traprain retains a particular significance in Scotland, the wider archaeological picture has dramatically changed since the first excavations in 1914. Where the 1924 Inventory recorded some 264 sites in East Lothian dated earlier than 1707, the current record in Canmore number some 3404 archaeological sites. The discovery of cropmark sites in the fields surrounding the Law has completely changed our notion of Traprain as an isolated capital, while programmes of excavation such as the Traprain Law Environs Project and the archaeology of the A1 road have transformed the regional picture. That said, the Law still presents an extraordinary picture of prehistoric and historic activity and is a special place whose resonance will continue through the ages. Why not take a walk up it the next time you are out there and see how many ramparts you can find!

References

Curl 1914; RCAHMS 1924; Feachem 1958; Rees and Hunter 2000; Armit, Dunwell, Hunter and Nelis 2005

George Geddes



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/56374>

<https://canmore.org.uk/site/56384>

<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM755>





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