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Brownhart Law Fortlet and Eildon Hill North Fort - The Scottish Borders



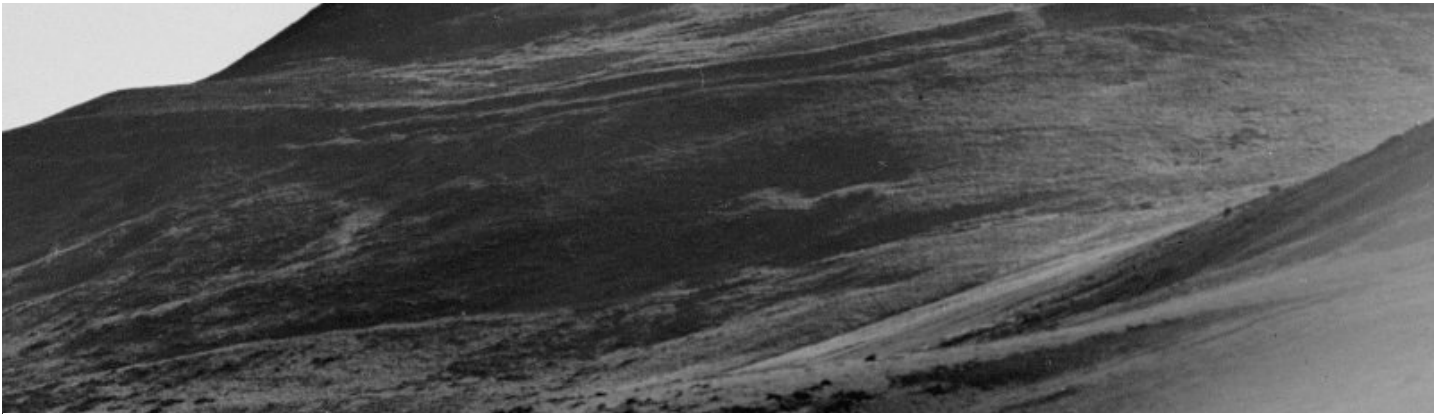


Eildon North Hill, Melrose

The largest hillfort in Scotland, and the most widely visible landmark in the Borders – Eildon North Hill, located just south of Melrose, has always been a beacon in its own right. The Roman army stationed here made this literal. Their garrison at ‘Trimontium’ (after the three Eildon hills), Newstead, placed a lookout and signal station on Eildon North Hill. This connected with a fire chain stretching from Northumberland northwards to the Forth, and included lookouts on prominent hills such as on Brownhart Law in the Cheviots, that could warn the occupying army of an impending attack. This was a frontier in its own right and the Iron Age and Roman archaeology of the area speaks volumes about the everyday complex relationships that emerged during the imperial occupation of southern Scotland.

To this day, the enormous, nearly 1 mile long, enclosing defences on Eildon North Hill slide along its flanks like a coiled serpent. On a frosty day, drivers on the A68 or Melrose Bypass might also see the pockmarks from hundreds of roundhouse platforms. Impressive as this site is now, the Romans were surely stunned by its magnitude. It is perhaps no coincidence that the first Agricola period camps were established at the foot of the hill in the 80s AD, and that these marked the beginnings of the fort that took its name from the three peaks of the Eildons: Trimontium. Except, by the time the Roman military machine trundled through the Borders, Eildon North Hill seems to have been abandoned. While it is recorded that James Curle made a few exploratory excavations of hut circles in the 1890s, the only published excavations are those of Steer and Feachem (1954) and the Central Excavation Unit Scotland in 1986. Both the 1952-53 and 1986 excavations confirmed that the main occupation of the hill took place before the construction of a Roman signal station on the hill's summit. This consisted of a wooden tower surrounded by a circular bank and ditch. Radiocarbon samples taken in 1986 indicated the hillfort had a long life between the later Bronze Age and the middle of the Iron Age. These, along with Roman pottery, were of second century AD date, contemporary with the main occupation of the fort at Newstead. Whoever the Romans were watching out for, it was not any residents of Eildon North Hill. And yet, we are left with evidence suggesting the very limited excavations on the hill have only scratched the surface of the story. There is, for instance, some late third or fourth century Roman pottery from the hill which must have come to the site after the Roman fort below was abandoned. Is there, somewhere on the hill, evidence for later occupation similar to that at Traprain Law in East Lothian? Only time will tell. Nonetheless the name of the Eildons may derive from the Anglian AEled Dun meaning ‘fire hill’ recalling the signal station (Steer and Feachem 1954).





Brownhart Law, Kale Water

The Roman signal station on Eildon North Hill was one in a chain that formed an effective frontier running north to south and separating the Southern Uplands from the fertile plains of the Merse and the lower Tweed Valley. The signal stations were supplemented along the course of Dere Street by watch-towers. In form, these were similar Eildon North Hill with a wooden tower set within a sub-circular bank and ditch. A well-preserved example can be visited on Brownhart Law on the English Border about a mile north-east of the Roman fort at Chew Green and just south of the hillfort on Woden Law. Brownhart Law watched Dere Street at a key point where the road passed from the open views of the Merse into the hilly and treacherous expanse of the Cheviot Hills. Brownhart Law may have communicated directly with a possible Roman station on Rubers Law which could signal to Eildon North Hill. This chain linked the soldiers of Chew Green with those at Newstead. However, as anyone visiting Brownhart Law, Rubers Law or Eildon North Hill might appreciate, it would have been in any attackers' interest to make their move on a not infrequent windy or cloudy day. From Brownhart Law, looking down on a wealth of abandoned and perhaps contemporary Iron Age strongholds in the Cheviot foothills, we get a visceral sense of the Roman army's preparedness and exposure in a foreign landscape. This sense of constant watchfulness and tension must have taken its toll on the men, potentially feeling exposed in a foreign land.

While we generally accept that the Romans and Iron Age Britons of south-east Scotland lived a somewhat peaceful co-existence through treaty or even bribe, the archaeology of the Roman military remains and dis-used Iron Age forts speaks volumes about an inherent tension in relations. While it was abandoned for some time before the Romans arrived, the ruins of Eildon North Hill must have remained in the hearts and minds of the local people as a special, even sacred, place. For the Romans to camp underneath and place a station on the hill's summit, the locals must have been ambivalent at best about the implications. And for the Romans, with their chain of sites spanning the line of Dere Street, their watchfulness implies not just preparedness for any eventuality, but even fear that they were exposed and certainly not in completely friendly territory. None of this story could be told without the visibility of the sites on the ground which led to their eventual excavation. The archaeological sites on Eildon North Hill and Brownhart Law are incredible survivals. We are fortunate in the Scottish Borders to have so many examples of well-preserved sites from all periods. We would recommend anyone interested in Scottish archaeology to make the journey.

Sources

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Dr Chris Bowles, Archaeology Officer, Scottish Borders Council and Keith Elliott, Assistant HER Officer, Scottish Borders Council



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