

S. S. Frere und J. J. Wilkes, *Strageath. Excavations within the Roman Fort 1973–86*. *Britannia Monograph Series No. 9*. Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, London 1989. 276 Seiten, 136 Abbildungen, 40 Tafeln, 7 Tabellen.

Strageath was one of the garrison forts established in Strathmore along the south-eastern fringes of the Scottish Highland massif as a consequence of the Agricolan conquests in the 80s AD. Abandoned not many years later, it was re-occupied in the 140s AD as an outpost fort north of the eastern section of the Antonine Wall. After a short abandonment in the mid-150s AD it was brought back into commission until ca. AD 164, when it was finally abandoned. There are thus three principal periods: Flavian, Antonine I, Antonine II.

The excavations here were conducted over a number of years as the summer training excavation of the Scottish Field School in Archaeology. The principal aims of the project may be summarised as (i) the elucidation of the sequence of forts on the site and the plans of each period (only the interior of the fort was excavated; the defences were sampled, the extensive area of annexes left untouched), (ii) the use of the plans thus recovered to establish the type of garrison at each period, and (iii) the recovery of dating evidence for the various periods which would allow Strageath to be tied into the wider context of the Roman military interventions in Scotland. In this review I would like to examine each of these three objectives in turn, using the particular example of Strageath to illustrate some more general points.

The actual excavation was very much within the long-standing tradition of excavation of north British Roman military sites, of which the late Sir Ian Richmond was the prime exponent (cf. my review of *Inchtuthil* in *Bonner Jahrb.* 188, 1988, 650–653). This employed a series of small trenches to establish the positions of structural elements; these elements were then extrapolated to produce complete building plans and thus the overall site plan. This technique rested on the assumption that individual examples of a particular building-type (e.g. the barracks) were standardised. This is how the excavations at Strageath started out, but it soon proved inadequate as the authors admit (e.g. pp. 53; 57) and larger trenches were cleared by machine. Even these, though, were really just a quicker means of establishing the location of buildings with the complete building plan then being extrapolated. Readers are referred to the trench plan on p. 134 to see how much of the fort interior was actually excavated. The drawbacks of this system are clear in this report. On the one hand so little of individual buildings was excavated that the reconstructed plans of some go well

beyond what the evidence allows; on the other hand it is clear that the buildings are not sufficiently standardised to allow confidence in reconstruction. As an example of the first one may cite Fig. 35; I simply do not see how the excavated evidence justifies the reconstructions offered. For the latter, the general period plans (Figs. 66–68) serve as good examples, the barracks in particular. As at Inchtuthil it is clear that open-area excavation is now required to get accurate and actual plans. This may also help sort out the manifold problems in the *latera praetoriorum*. Also as in the Inchtuthil report some very idiosyncratic publication scales are used, e.g. 1:192, 1:298, 1:765 (why could the first two not be 1:200 and 1:300, the last 1:750?).

Turning to the second objective, the elucidation of the successive garrisons, one must first note that this is based principally on the plans of the forts as reconstructed according to the system noted above, with all its drawbacks. In line with established practice for identifying the type of unit in garrison when there is no epigraphic or other evidence surviving, the amount of accommodation is compared with the idealised unit-structures for the six types of auxiliary unit derived from Hyginus and other written sources. The different types of barrack-block and differences in their officers' quarters are used to suggest the differing types of troops being accommodated. Underlying this approach to determining the type of unit in garrison, are two assumptions which are never made explicit. One is that all examples of a particular unit-type (for instance, an *ala milliaria*) are of an identical composition. The second is that an individual fort contains one complete unit, neither more nor less. On the basis of these two assumptions much ink has been spilt trying to reconcile excavated fort-plans with the ideal-types. This has usually been accompanied by an embarrassingly high failure rate, or else a plethora of exceptions to the rule. This is especially the case with the *cohors quingenaria equitata*. Even such 'classic' plans as that of Künzing do not work (in that case there is a supernumerary barrack-block). This consistent lack of success should raise the possibility that the methods and aims are unrealistic and unattainable. Given the historical circumstances of the raising of the auxiliary units from tribal and ethnic groups, one might well have thought that diversity was to be expected within a nominal uniformity, the more so perhaps with the hybrid *cohortes equitatae*. Nor is the assumption of one fort per one unit one that ought to be sustained. By implication in their discussion the authors do not and cannot. At Künzing a *numerus* had to be invoked to explain the extra barrack. It is to be hoped that in future not only will we have much more completely excavated fort-plans (one thinks of another Scottish site, Elginhaugh), but also a willingness to let the excavated evidence speak for itself rather than be made to conform to some predetermined scheme.

In fact and to their credit, the authors do recognise the difficulties of shoe-horning particular unit types into the successive forts at Strageath. It really only works for the Antonine I fort. The Flavian layout is a good example of where evidence defeats ideal. There are fourteen barrack-blocks, more than needed for any known unit-type. Of these, one (I) apparently has a vast officer's quarters; three others (II, VII, XV) have larger-than-average officers' quarters. All four have fewer *contubernia* than the others. On the basis of this the authors suggest that there was a mixed garrison, namely, a *cohors equitata* less one of its centuries and two of its *turmae*, another *cohors equitata* represented by four *turmae* and three centuries, and a legionary century – a real dog's breakfast. By admitting mixed garrisons and partial units they undermine the whole tradition of using fort-plans to identify the unit in garrison. Even so, they are stuck over the explanation of the apparent extra barrack-block in the right *latus praetorii*. Their suggestion of a store-building smacks of desperation: why build a store-building in the form of a barrack? One final point on identifying units. The authors use the finds of horse equipment to argue for the presence of cavalry. It should be remembered that even in infantry cohorts there were mounts for the officers, also baggage-animals, not to mention the horses of visitors, messengers etc. Elements of their harness could perfectly well enter the archaeological record.

When one considers the third topic, dating, there must again be reservations over its handling. This relates in particular to the dating of the Flavian fort. As with much else in this project the problems arise out of the traditional priorities of Roman military archaeology in Scotland. The existence of the "Agricola" of Tacitus has determined the agenda: the archaeology is there to confirm or flesh out the historical narrative. In summary the historical record for the Agricola intervention in Scotland as used here (pp. 12–13) is: AD 80 first foray north of the Tay; AD 81 building of forts to secure the Forth-Clyde line; AD 83–84 the advance through Strathmore to the victory at Mons Graupius; AD 86 or early 87 abandonment of the area north of the Forth-Clyde line. Thus the whole Flavian occupation of Strageath must be encompassed within six to seven years maximum. Two hypotheses are advanced: one that the fort was established as a consequence of

the first foray of AD 80, the other that it dates from the advance of AD 83–84. The earlier date is somewhat favoured on the grounds of (p. 13) "the presence of pre- and early Flavian coins in some number, and of a samian vessel stamped by Carillus". This of course brings us to the crux of this problem: what is the dating evidence, and is it capable of distinguishing between events two or three years apart? The evidence consists of coins and samian. A coin date is, of course, the date of the minting of that coin. It therefore only gives a *terminus post quem* when encountered in an archaeological deposit. Coins are not common from Flavian military sites in Scotland. This seems partly to have been because there were not many in circulation, partly because they were relatively valuable and large enough to be relatively easily retrieved if lost. The size of these coins means that they were durable, and we now know that Flavian coins could circulate well into the second century. Thus the presence of pre- and early Flavian coins at Strageath can do nothing to refine the date of that site within the Flavian period. (For a more recent, important reconsideration of the Flavian coinage pattern in Scotland see A. S. HOBLEY, *Britannia* 20, 1989). A samian date, on the other hand is not a date of manufacture, however much it may be thought to be. It is the date at which that type of samian most commonly occurs in the archaeological record. If a piece of samian is dated as "Flavian" what is really being said is "this type of samian most commonly occurs on sites dated historically or numismatically to the Flavian period". It occurs on such sites broken and/or discarded. A samian date is therefore the date of the end of the object's life; a coin date is the date of the beginning of the object's life. This of course means that an individual piece of samian could have been broken and discarded before or after the period to which it is conventionally dated. One stamp of Carillus proves nothing. To answer the question posed earlier; no, the dating evidence is not capable of distinguishing between events two or three years apart.

It will by now be clear that this reviewer has grave reservations over the methodology of the excavation, interpretation and dating of the fort at Strageath. In my opinion the shortcomings compromise the report overall to the extent that in its present form its conclusions simply cannot be relied upon. The shortcomings all arise, essentially, from the presence of a preexisting, historically determined agenda. The archaeological evidence is made to conform to that agenda. But it can only be made to do so by violating the ways in which archaeological data are gathered and interpreted. It is a great pity that two respected and leading practitioners should have allowed themselves to respond to an agenda set in the nineteen fifties, especially when one of them was in large part responsible for the abandonment of such agendas in the excavation and interpretation of civil sites in Roman Britain.

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