The annual Archaeological Research in Progress (ARP) conference is Scotland’s premier research conference. It is jointly organised by the venerable Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (www.socantscot.org/) and Archaeology Scotland (http://www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk/), each taking the lead in alternate years. The 2015 conference was organised by the Society of Antiquaries and held at the headquarters of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in the heart of the New Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The conference format is standard and comprises 10 lectures ranging from early prehistory to post-medieval archaeology and related themes. The price has risen in recent years: the 2015 conference was £40, with a £5 discount for both Fellows of the Society and Members of Archaeology Scotland. I had thought that this was expensive, although it included an excellent buffet lunch as well as tea, coffee and cakes.

Formerly, I regularly attended the conference and on several occasions I spoke at it. More recently, however, I have regretfully found myself increasingly less interested in the conference’s content, which has far too often descended into “what I dug on my summer holidays”, and I have missed the conference more often than not. This year’s content, however, was excellent and the overall conference and all the attendant book stalls and publicity were highly professional – although the grading of sponsors into “Iron”, “Bronze” and “Stone” according to the size of their donations is somewhat crude.

The conference itself was recorded by Doug Rocks-MacQueen, and I am assured that the presentations will be available on the websites of both the organisers. I would like to praise Doug for this and also recommend his postings, as he has built up a considerable body of conference recordings in recent years (see Note at end of this review).

Before I proceed further I should note that I am a Fellow of the Society, a Trustee of Archaeology Scotland, my brother Martin spoke at the conference and AOC Archaeology gave me a spare ticket.

For those who were unable to attend, there follows a taster of these excellent presentations.
Living in the Mountains: research on Mesolithic and Neolithic activity in the Cairngorms
Caroline Wickham-Jones (University of Aberdeen)

In general, Scottish research into the Mesolithic has to date revealed a coastal focus with very little evidence from Scotland’s interior. In part this is to do with the contemporary focus of human populations and settlement. The Dee Tributaries Project was launched following the discovery of lithics on the National Trust for Scotland’s property in the Cairngorms following a path upgrade. The project, involving geophysics, test-pitting and geomorphology, revealed a series of in situ deposits and features, often under alluvial deposits ranging from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age. The results indicate that human activity extended into the Cairngorms and presumably represent a mixture of transit routes across the landscape between hunting and processing camps, as well as providing access to mineral deposits. There was also clear evidence for a focus by prehistoric locations on key liminal locations.

Daily Activities and Resource Use in Neolithic Orkney: Microarchaeology at the Ness of Brodgar
Lisa-Marie Shillito (University of Edinburgh)

The Ness of Brodgar excavations at the core of the Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site have revealed a complex series of interconnected sites including a 3-m deep accumulation of waste, so large as to have completely changed the land form. Soil micromorphology (soil thin sections taken via kubiena tins) and soil chemistry were combined to analyse domestic fuel use. Over 60 individual samples in the 2013–2014 season were undertaken and the results are still being processed. The interim results reveal that turf rather than wood was being burnt, although pollen records indicate that woodland was present. The middens may also have been used as latrines.

Burials in the Bronze Age: Excavations at Broich Road, Crieff
Melanie Johnson (CFA Archaeology)

This project was a two-phased mitigation excavation in 2012 and 2014 in an area rich in early Prehistoric ritual remains. Two separate prehistoric cemeteries were uncovered, featuring a variety of burial rites including urned cremation, unurned cremation, cist and the remains of at least twenty people including women, men and children dating to c. 1900/1500 BC. A variety of artefacts was recovered from the site including copper alloy razors, barbed and tanged arrowheads, stone tools and so on.

The second cemetery comprised a series of circular stone filled pits within which were both a series of cists and pits containing pyre material as well as a massive pit 2 m deep and very well packed containing two discrete piles of burnt bone at the centre of the circle. These are thought to be two bags of burnt bone representing three people.

Wiggle-Match Dating Scottish Crannogs
Piotr Jacobsson, Derek Hamilton and Gordon Cook (SUERC)

The well-known mid-first century BC plateau in the radiocarbon calibration curve can create a very wide error range in contemporary radiocarbon dates. Research indicates
that these errors can be minimised with multiple dates and dendrochronology at sites like Cults Loch, Black Loch of Milton and the Firth of Clyde crannogs. Scotland’s wetland sites, given their level of preservation, represent a resource of world significance in terms of what they can tell us regarding settlement patterns. The approach focuses on multiple dates from well-preserved features from both dendrochronology and radiocarbon dating, rather than the standard approach of dating a site from an individual sample, as the latter approach increases the risk of misdating based on reused older wood. While expensive, this method can reduce the error range down to 100 or even 50 years.

New Evidence for Iron Age Burial Practice in the Western Isles
Martin Cook (AOC Archaeology)
In Scotland, where human remains are discovered by chance outside the panning system Historic Scotland takes responsibility for their recovery and analysis under the remit of the Human Remains Call-Off Contract, which is currently held by AOC Archaeology. This lecture examined recent discoveries of human burials in the Scottish Western Isles, most of which have been uncovered through coastal erosion.

In general there is a perception of a paucity of Iron Age burials in Scotland. This is in part connected with the absence of a distinctive burial rite or diagnostic grave goods and most contemporary Iron Age burials in Scotland are confirmed through systematic radiocarbon dating. Recent discoveries in the Western Isles have identified a variety of inhumation forms including informal cists, crouched inhumations and remains including children, men and women dating across the final quarter of the first millennium BC and the first half of the first millennium AD.

Middle Iron Age Native Glass Toggle Production of the Western Seaboard
Claire Ellis (Argyll Archaeology) and Martina Bertini (British Museum)
A routine mitigation exercise ahead of a new house plot at Kilninian, Isle of Mull revealed a previously unknown unenclosed Iron Age settlement dating to the first century BC/AD. A pit within the settlement contained a glass toggle, which in turn produced a first-century BC/AD radiocarbon date. Glass toggles are small dumbbell-shaped glass ornaments (1–2 cm) that have a core distribution around the northwestern sea board – the Irish Sea, Isle of Mann, Argyll and the small isles – and this particular example was unfinished and appeared to have been manufactured on site. A review of the existing corpus of glass toggles indicates that they were made by melting fragments of Mediterranean glass together. The Kilninian example was of a considerably poorer quality and appeared to have been made from small quantities of residue from previous toggle manufacture. The authors suggested that this example may therefore have been an apprentice piece.

Burnswark: Siege or No Siege?
John Reid (Trimontium Trust) and Andrew Nicholson (Dumfriesshire and Galloway Council)
Burnswark hillfort is enclosed by a series of Roman siege works and excavation has revealed the presence of Roman sling shot and ballista. However, it has never been clear if the Roman material represents a real siege and subsequent attack on a contemporary
native settlement or merely practice. It has often been argued that the relatively small
defensive works (from a European perspective) would not have presented any difficulty
to the Roman army; so why would they have bothered? This argument is countered by
the possibility of the Romans making a very public demonstration of overwhelming
force in order to utterly destroy an opponent; perhaps an early example of shock and
awe?

One of the main arguments for a real attack is the presence of lead rather than
clay sling shot, the lead examples being considerably more expensive to produce. The
project has involved new survey and metal detection, where the metal detectors were
calibrated to detect different types of metal, which were subsequently mapped but
without requiring excavation. The next stage of the project proposes to examine the
location of some of the find spots.

(Re)discovering the Gaulcross Hoard and Other Early Medieval Silver
Alice Blackwell, Glenmorangie Project, National Museums Scotland
Martin Goldberg (National Museums Scotland) and Gordon Noble (University of Aberdeen)
Chemical analysis of Early Medieval silver in Scotland indicates that it appears to be
predominantly derived from older Roman silver. Across Europe there is a series of Late
Roman silver hoards where silver objects have been cut up into smaller units. These
hoards are known as hacksilber; the purpose of these hoards is unclear but they may
indicate material raided from Roman settlements or perhaps payments going from the
Empire to outwith the Empire.

The most famous hacksilber hoard in Scotland is the Traprain Law Hoard discovered
during excavation of the substantial East Lothian hillfort. A second possibility is the
Norries Law Hoard from Fife, which was notable for containing material with Pictish
symbols on it. It is now clear that at least two of these objects are fakes; however,
further analysis also identified some Late Roman silver that had been folded up into a
package.

A third possibility is the Gaulcross Hoard in Aberdeenshire, which was discovered in
1838 during agricultural improvements though subsequently most of it was destroyed.
Metal detection at the location of the find spot revealed a considerable volume of
disturbed material including Late Roman metal work folded around Late Roman coins.

SAMPHIRE: Crowd-sourcing Scottish Underwater Archaeology
John McCarthy (Wessex Archaeology)
SAMPHIRE (Scottish Atlantic Maritime Past: Heritage, Investigation, Research & Educa-
tion) is a project funded by the Crown Estate with the explicit purpose of enabling
professional underwater archaeologists to engage with local maritime communities on
the west coast of Scotland, with the aim of supporting the identification, investigation,
conservation and appreciation of Scotland’s marine heritage. By working collaboratively
the project hopes to reinforce a shared sense of stewardship of those underwater
archaeological sites. This will enhance the record and support future management of
the underwater cultural heritage in Scotland.
The Trigger for the Demise of an Eighteenth Century Drovers’ Inn
Warren Bailie (GUARD Archaeology)

This paper detailed a community research excavation into an eighteenth-century Drovers’ Inn on the drove road between the Isle of Bute and the cattle market at Crieff. The site is recorded as a ruin on the first edition Ordnance Survey and identified in the accompanying name-book as a former inn.

Excavation revealed a 20-m long building with multiple phases and an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century artefact assemblage, and the Drove Road revealed a burnt hazel framework (an attempt to create a stable surface) dated by radiocarbon dating to the fourteenth century. The Inn and the at least 500-year-old drove road it serviced were bypassed by the construction of a more formal road by Thomas Telford between 1804 and 1811, and without the road trade the Inn was abandoned.

In conclusion, the conference was a feast for both amateur and professional, and demonstrated a wealth of new research and the development of more systematic and rigorous scientific techniques. I can’t wait for next year!

Note

Further details of the conference can be found at www.socantscot.org/event/archaeological-research-in-progress-2015/. The conference was recorded by Doug Rocks-MacQueen, and can be accessed at his “Recording Archaeology” YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC08QKQ01qs6OPQs911kMOPg.

The following websites provide more information on some of the research detailed above:

Lisa-Marie Shillito: see the Ness of Brodgar Excavations website: www.orkneyjar.com/archaeology/nessofbrodgar/

Piotr Jacobsson, Derek Hamilton and Gordon Cook: see the AOC Archaeology Group website, in a section titled “Wetland Archaeology: The Cults Loch Landscape Project”: www.aocarchaeology.com/key-projects/community-and-outreach-key-projects/wetlands

Alice Blackwell, Martin Goldberg and Gordon Noble: see Tim Clarkson’s Senchus website, in a post titled “A Pictish hoard from Aberdeenshire”: https://senchus.wordpress.com/2015/01/08/a-pictish-hoard-from-aberdeenshire/

John McCarthy: SAMPHIRE, www.wessexarch.co.uk/samphire

Warren Bailie: The Demise of Tigh Caol, an Eighteenth Century Drovers’ Inn, co-authored by Donald Adamson and Warren Bailie, has been published by Archaeology Reports Online as ARO 17: http://www.archaeologyreportsonline.com/PDF/ARO17_Tigh_Caol.pdf

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