

DUNS AND FORTS - A NOTE ON SOME IRON AGE MONUMENTS OF THE ATLANTIC PROVINCE

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The categorising or defining of ancient monuments is not an easy task. In the case of duns and forts, however, the problem is made more complex by the fact that although both terms have figured in archaeological literature for a considerable period of time each has been used by different scholars to signify different things. This is particularly true of duns which, as a class, have seldom been studied outside their immediate context and have thus less often required precise definition. In recent years, however, this lack of precision has been thrown into sharp relief by comparison with the penetrating inquiries into the nature and origins of a contemporary and probably related monument, the broch.¹ As a preliminary, therefore, it would be expedient to consider briefly the development of the term dun as used by antiquaries over the past 175 years. The following remarks represent a summary of that development which is documented more fully at the end of this paper.

From as early as 1792, when Colin McKenzie wrote a short paper for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on 'The Ancient Remains of the Island of Lewis', until the mid-1950s the word dun was used to signify any later-prehistoric fortified structure in N. and W. Scotland (usually, but not always, with the exception of the broch). The sharp distinction between the predominantly 'ramparted' hill forts of the southern parts of the country and the 'castles' of the Atlantic Province was drawn at an early stage by Sir James Simpson (1860)², and it was not long before Christian MacLagan (1875) foresaw all too clearly the difficulties of distinguishing between the various elements of that complex. The first significant attempt to classify duns (meaning thereby all Iron Age fortifications of the western seaboard) was made by Captain F.W.L. Thomas (1890) who suggested that there were two main categories - firstly Brochs, and secondly all the remaining fortified sites; the latter category he further sub-divided on the basis of the natural positions which the structures occupied: (1) Rock Stacks, (2) 'Mural promontories', (3) Fortified promontories, and (4) Fortified islets. This is of particular interest as it foreshadowed the classification proposed by Erskine Beveridge (1903) and the authors of the Royal Commission report on the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles (1928). In both of these publications the word dun was still used to embrace all defensive construc-

tions; Beveridge's most notable innovations were the introduction of the term semi-broch and the ominous use of the word dun in a cultural sense; the Royal Commission's report, which included in the dun category not only brochs but also forts which measured internally as much as 330 by 120 ft., made available for study a large number of measured drawings of duns and forts, and drew attention to the long period over which the construction and occupation of duns must have extended. The dating problem had, in fact, already been raised by Christison (1898) who was the first to suggest that many of the small forts of the west had been built by Dalriadic Scots.

Such broad definitions were largely accepted for the next quarter of a century, during which time the major contributions to the study of the subject were Childe's theories on the 'Castle Complex' (1935) and Dr Fairhurst's excavation of the dun at Kildonan in Kintyre. Childe gave a strong impulse to the development of the idea that 'castles' stemmed from one cultural movement; Fairhurst (1939) gave a similar impulse to the idea that galleried duns were a late manifestation of 'castle-building' - possibly Dark Age in date.

In 1955 R.W. Feachem published the results of a modern examination of small dry-stone walled forts in mainland Scotland and offered a classification (including ring-forts, long duns and simple duns) to cover a series of apparently late fortifications found in S. Pictland. This in time led to the excavation of the dun at Castlehill Wood, Stirlingshire, in the report on which (1957) Feachem attempted to make a definition which was much more specific than any previously made. The gist of it was that the dun was a 'comparatively small', thick-walled enclosure, smaller than a hill fort and stronger than a homestead - possibly erected in the first or second century A.D. This definition is valid in Stirlingshire and SE. Scotland generally but is less than satisfactory when applied to sites in the Atlantic Province, where small thick-walled structures abound. It was regrettable, therefore, that in the next few years there was a tendency to regard this narrow definition (implying a small, sub-circular structure of Roman Iron Age date) as the only acceptable definition of a dun. Indeed at one point it was claimed (1964) that duns represented no more than an outworn tradition of broch-building, and the theory was revived that they belonged to the Dark Age and had been built as a defence against the Dalriadic Scots.

Fortunately, more recent publications have emphasised the wider context of duns, and Feachem himself published (1963) a more generous interpretation of the problem. His later classification owed much to the work of Thomas, Christison, Beveridge, Childe and the Royal Commission 1928 report; it specified a 'homestead' group of duns comprising galleried duns, plain duns,

stack duns and small insular duns; there was also a group of larger duns, which included several on the border line with hill forts, as well as those whose vitrified walls indicated that they were in origin timber-laced duns. Later writers, while not concerned intimately with the dun problem, have, nevertheless, tended to follow this broader view.

In short the term dun seems to have turned a full circle. Originally it was applied to all fortifications and even topographical features; for a short period it was restricted to structures belonging to the Roman Iron Age or Dark Age; finally it appears likely to be used in a comprehensive sense to denote a large class of small stone-walled forts of differing plan, size and date.

The practical application of this definition presents one main problem: if the criterion is one of size, how small must a stone-walled defensive enclosure be before it falls to be classified as a dun? The distinction between small fort and large dun is, to a certain extent, an arbitrary one, and being based on internal area does not imply a difference of date or culture. In practice a dividing-line drawn at about 4000 sq. ft. seems the most convenient. On this basis the total number of duns in Scotland is at least 375, of which almost three-quarters are to be found in the area represented by the modern counties of Argyll, Bute, Renfrewshire and Ayrshire.

Recent fieldwork in Kintyre, where duns are most densely concentrated, has revealed that, in addition to 65 duns there are about a dozen slightly larger stone-walled defensive enclosures, which by reason of their size or position, are rather to be classified as small forts; the same ratio of duns to small forts may be expected to occur in other areas.

There are, of course, other fortifications on the western seaboard, some quite extensive, like the six-acre minor oppidum at Dun Ormidale two miles SW. of Oban³ or the extensive fortified site on Creag a' Chapuill, Mid Argyll⁴, but these represent only a very small minority of fortified sites and differ from duns in character and plan as well as size.

The duns themselves are to be found in a wide variety of natural positions - on the seashore, on coastal headlands or bluffs, on isolated rock stacks, and occasionally on level ground; the sites are usually conspicuous rather than strongly defensive. Not surprisingly, therefore, quite a few have sought added protection by the construction of outworks, some of which take the form of short lengths of walling designed to impede access through natural clefts and gullies, while others in addition define an annexe or bailey, which may have served as a stock enclosure. In the absence of excavation it is

often impossible to determine whether such outworks are primary or not.

A sub-circular or sub-oval plan was generally adopted but there are many exceptions - for example Dun Bechaire, Kintyre, is sub-rectangular and Wester Craigend, Stirlingshire, is D-shaped - while duns situated on rock stacks are often markedly irregular on plan. Although architectural details are rarely visible there are a few sites where the dun-builders can be seen to have possessed exceptional skill in design and construction, the most obvious manifestations of which are the checked or rebated entrance-passage, often with bar-holes, as well as mural galleries, stairs and cells. The enclosing wall, in which some of these features were inserted, was not nearly as thick, relatively speaking, as that of the normal broch; (the average percentage of wall bases in overall diameter for duns in Kintyre is only 32 per cent, which, by coincidence, is the minimum figure given for brochs).⁵ Nevertheless the stability of the enclosing wall was still a problem, and to ensure that its core-material did not collapse two techniques were used - a pronounced batter on the external wall-face, or an internal revetment - as for example at Kildonan.⁶ This latter feature appears not only in duns and small forts elsewhere in the Atlantic Province but also in stone-walled hill forts in Selkirkshire,⁷ Northumberland,⁸ Somerset,⁹ as well as in Germany and France.¹⁰

On occasion the wall may have been timber-laced, as at Rahoy in Morven¹¹, where the combustion of the timbers caused the vitrification of the wall-core; there must be several timber-laced duns where no combustion took place and the only trace of timber-lacing would be the holes for beam-sockets showing in the outer face.

There is very little certain evidence regarding the internal features of duns. At Kildonan¹² the interior was apparently occupied in the primary period by a number of rudely built huts, but recent excavation at two other sites in Kintyre¹³ has suggested that timber structures may have been built against the inner wall-face, as in brochs or pre-broch drystone forts generally. Similar ranges are implied by the scarcements at Druim an Duin and Ardifuair in Mid Argyll¹⁴, and may perhaps be inferred from the position of hearths in the duns at Borenich, Perthshire¹⁵, and Castlehill Wood, Stirlingshire.¹⁶

There is still no simple answer to the question: 'when were duns constructed and occupied?'. If we can accept that the term dun embraces small timber-laced structures, as Feachem first proposed, then the upper limit may be very early indeed. Admittedly the series of radiocarbon dates recently

published by MacKie¹⁷ indicates that timber-lacing was being used in forts in Scotland for about a millennium from the 7th century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., but the presence of a La Tène Ic fibula in the vitrified dun at Rahoy suggests that some, at least, of the timber-laced duns were constructed in the earlier part of that period. It should moreover be remembered that on the basis of size and appearance approximately half the vitrified forts on the W. coast of Scotland fall into the dun category, and there is one site, Dun Skeig in Kintyre¹⁸, where a vitrified dun has been robbed to provide material for the core of a solid-walled dun.

The excavation of a few duns without timber-lacing has shown that they were being built and occupied in the first and second centuries A.D., or possibly a little earlier, and it is probable that most examples are of a similar date. Nevertheless several sites were re-occupied, and possibly a few originally constructed, in the Early Christian period. Although there is no reason why these later duns should differ markedly in structure from earlier ones, it is just possible that the presence of such elaborate outer defences as exist at Dun Mhuirich in Knapdale¹⁹ may indicate lateness of construction. Nor is this quite the end of the story for there are several instances of duns actually being used in medieval times²⁰, and even when the structures themselves had fallen into decay, the sites which they occupied continued to attract settlers as late as the 17th and 18th centuries.²¹ Indeed the rectangular buildings which were then erected on the ruins of duns may still have been occupied, in some cases, when Colin McKenzie wrote to the Society of Antiquaries in 1792.

Notes

1. A full summary of broch studies was given by E.W. MacKie [P.P.S., xxxi (1965), 93 ff.].
2. Dates in brackets refer to entries in the chronologically arranged survey contained in the Appendix to this paper.
3. P.S.A.S., xxiii (1888-89), 388 f.
4. Ibid., xcv (1961-62), 43.
5. P.P.S., xxxi (1965), 105 ff.
6. P.S.A.S., lxxviii (1938-39), 193 ff.
7. R.C.A.M.S., Inventory of Selkirkshire, No.122.
8. Arch. Ael. 4, xliii (1965), 41.
9. C.W. Dymond, Worlebury (2nd ed. 1902), 21 ff. and 124.
10. J. Déchelette, Manuel d'Archéologie, iii, 191.

11. P.S.A.S., lxxii (1937-38), 23 ff.
12. Ibid., lxxiii (1938-39), 202 ff.
13. Discovery and Excavation, Scotland, 1964, 18 f.; ibid., 1966, 11 f.
14. P.S.A.S., xxxix (1904-05), 259 ff. and 285 ff.
15. Ibid., xlix (1914-15), 30.
16. Ibid., xc (1956-57), 32.
17. Antiquity, xliii (1969), 15 ff.
18. R.W. Feachem, Prehistoric Scotland, 108.
19. P.S.A.S., xcv (1961-62), 50 f.
20. E.g. Dun Lagaidh, Ross and Cromarty [E.W. MacKie, Excavations on Loch Broom (2nd report 1968), 7]; Dun Fhinn, Kintyre (Disc. and Excav. Scotland 1966, 11 f.); Kildonan, Kintyre [P.S.A.S., lxxiii (1938-39), 185 ff.].
21. E.g. Ugadale, Kintyre [P.S.A.S., lxxxviii (1954-56), 15 ff.].

APPENDIX

Development of the term 'Dun'

1792 C. McKenzie

Arch.Scotica, i (1792), 282ff.

Paper on ancient remains in Lewis. Talks of the round forts or Duns' of the island; i.e. dun signifies any round fortified structure.

1860 Sir J.Y. Simpson

Address to the Soc. of Antiquaries of Scotland quoted in frontispiece to

C. MacLagan (1875)

J.Y.S. categorises Scottish Ancient Monuments. '1. Our ancient hillforts of stone and earth. 2. Our old cyclopic burghs and duns.'

1867 J. Horsburgh

P.S.A.S., vii (1866-8), 271ff.

Notes on 'Cromlechs, Duns, Hut-circles, Chambered Cairns and other Remains' in Sutherland. Duns - any round drystone walled structure.

1870 C. MacLagan

P.S.A.S., ix (1870-1), 29ff.

Account of 'Round Castles of the Forth Valley': uses Dun as specifically a round drystone walled structure.

1875 C. MacLagan

Hillforts, Stone Circles and other Structural Remains of Ancient Scotland, 22.

Discussing Brochs and Duns, C.M. writes: 'But perhaps the better way were to give them no name, as a name ----- too often hides from us the nature of the thing named. Practically it will be found very difficult to classify these various round edifices under set names, for it seems as if one class very gradually becomes modified, until it quite fades, as it were, into another.'

1881 W. Stevenson

P.S.A.S., xv (1880-1), 127ff.

Describing antiquities of Colonsay and Oronsay, W.S. uses dun as geographical term to describe the position, and fort as the archaeological term to describe the structure.

1889 D. Christison

P.S.A.S., xxiii (1888-9), 368ff.

'The Duns and Forts of Lorn, Nether Lochaber, etc.' Dun used as geographical term in the main. All structures are called forts when archaeological definition is required. Dun Macuisneachan is referred to as 'this interesting dun'. D.C.'s classification on p.426. He classifies first by materials used, i.e. forts of earth, earth and stone, rubble, dry masonry - and divides forts of dry masonry into 3 basic types: (a) of regular plan; (b) contoured; (c) partially defended by artificial means.

1890 F.W.L. Thomas
Arch.Scotica, v (1890), 365.

'On the Duns of Outer Hebrides'. Dun is used archaeologically but comprehensively to embrace all fortified structures - brochs, promontory forts, etc. F.T.'s classification appears on p.405. Sites are classified firstly by natural strengths utilised - (1) Stack Rocks, (2) 'Mural Promontories', (3) Fortified Promontories, (4) and (5) Fortified Islets - and secondly 'Brochs or Pictish Towers'.

1891 D. Christison
P.S.A.S., xxv (1890-1), 117ff.

Excavation of 'Suidhe Chennaith', Lorn, Argyll. D.C. calls this a fort throughout, mentioning dun only in connection with Thomas's paper on the Hebridean duns (1890). He classifies Scottish drystone forts as - (a) Brochs, (b) Structures which may have been brochs but are now too dilapidated, (c) Stone forts of larger size, and of varying form. In (b) D.C. seems to distinguish between brochs and 'simple solid towers'.

1898 D. Christison
Early Fortifications in Scotland, 301 ff.

D.C. treats dun as linguistic problem. At 235 ff. D.C. categorises fortifications in Argyll as brochs and forts: forts are sub-divided into categories depending on axial measurements: p.382-3 suggestion forts were built by Dalriadic Scots.

1903 Erskine Beveridge
Coll and Tiree, passim.

Dun is used as an archaeological term to embrace all defensive constructions. E.B. categorises his duns into (a) Semi-Brochs (described as being low brochs with basal galleries - ?galleried duns); (b) Rock-forts or Hill-forts; (c) Loch or Marsh Duns; (d) Island Duns or Islet Forts. E.B. talks of 'fragments of pottery of the Dun type' (p.64).

1904 W.M. Mackenzie

P.S.A.S., xxxviii (1903-4), 193ff.

On antiquities of Lewis. 'The word "Dun" ... is applicable to any form of fortified position.'

1912 W.J. Watson

P.S.A.S., xlvii (1912-13), 30ff.

'The Circular Forts of N. Perthshire'. Calls structures forts or towers, and associates them with early inhabitants of S. Pictland.

1914 W.J. Watson

P.S.A.S., xlix (1914-15), 17ff.

'Circular Forts in Lorn and N. Perthshire'. Nomenclature and date as above. Emphasises contrast with hillforts of the Borders.

1927 A.O. Curle

Antiquity, i (1927), 290ff.

Dealing mainly with brochs, but 'galleried duns' or semi-brochs proposed as possible precursor of brochs.

1928 R.C.A.M.S.

Inventory of the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles, xxxiii ff.

Dun taken to mean all defensive constructions except brochs, categorised as follows: (1) Galleried Duns, 'a variety of fort or dry-stone building which resembles the broch in having long, narrow galleries within the thickness of the wall and a long, narrow entrance with door-checks and bar-holes. It differs from the broch in being irregular in plan, not circular and also in having in all probability been lower when intact.' (2) Brochs. (3) Promontory Forts: formed by erection of defences across the landward end of a promontory. (4) Seashore Forts: 'built on lofty headlands and on the edge of cliffs ... The wall is carried round the whole perimeter, while sometimes the line of approach ... is strengthened by outer defences.' (5) Forts in Lochs. (6) Late Duns: a sub-class of (4) and (5), often irregular in plan and containing rectangular building foundations. Dun Gerashader (No. 577) and Dun Mor, Torran (No. 653), both referred to as duns and forts, measure internally 168 x 100 ft. and 330 x 120 ft. respectively. Date-range of duns recognised as extensive, i.e. Early Iron Age to Medieval.

1935 V.G. Childe

Prehistory of Scotland, 197ff.

V.G.C. included duns in his 'castle' complex, an all-embracing class which includes brochs as well as stone forts outside the Atlantic Province, e.g.

e.g. Bennachie, Aberdeenshire. He suggested an origin in the S.W. for castle-builders. Dun is used archaeologically only in the term 'galleried dun'; elsewhere phrases like 'duns or small stone forts' appear (p.237). First real development of idea that 'Castles' (i.e. duns and brochs) all derive from the same cultural movement.

1939 H. Fairhurst

P.S.A.S., lxxiii (1938-9), 185ff.

Excavation of the Galleried Dun at Kildonan. The structure is referred to as a Fort throughout; dùn (accented thus) is used sparingly, or in the phrase 'galleried dun'. Conclusion stresses long life of duns from pre-Scottic to Medieval times.

1946 S. & C.M. Piggott

P.S.A.S., lxxx (1945-6), 83ff.

Fieldwork in Colonsay and Islay: see especially conclusions (p.92 f.). Duns used in wide sense of 'fortified structures': this includes Dun Cholla measuring 200 x 80 ft. Plea for excavation on a generous scale.

1947 L. Scott

P.P.S., xiii (1947), 1ff.

On origin and development of brochs; mentions duns only as 'galleried duns' or as equivalent of general term 'fort'.

1948 L. Scott

P.P.S., xiv (1948), 46ff.

'Gallo-British Colonies - Aisled Round-House Culture'. Amplifying theme of above; duns used in general sense only.

1951 A. Graham

P.S.A.S., lxxxv (1950-1), 64ff.

'Archaeological Gleanings from Dark-Age Records'. See esp. section on fortifications; at p.70-1 note dimensions of dun belonging to a single regulus being given as 140 ft. diameter.

1955 R.W. Feachem

The Problem of the Picts (Wainwright Ed.), 66ff.

Chapter on Fortifications: Classifies ring-forts: (Turin Hill, Strath Tummel, Glen Lyon) 40-80 ft. diam. inside well-built dry-stone walls. Examples also on western seaboard; long duns, e.g. Peniel Heugh, Rox.; 'finally small oval or D-shaped structures of the class often referred to simply as 'duns' ...'.

1957 R.W. Feachem

P.S.A.S., xc (1956-7), 24ff.

Excavation of Castlehill Wood Dun. 'The word dun has long been applied to structures consisting essentially of a comparatively small enclosure surrounded by a proportionately thick wall. The name is used to distinguish works that are smaller than hill-forts but stronger than farmsteads or homesteads' ... 'In addition to the duns shown in the area (Stirlingshire), a great many others exist in Argyll (etc.) ... Among the very few that have been excavated, evidence has come to light which shows that some of them were occupied during the Early Christian period, but until a great many more have been examined it will not be possible to say whether such occupation was primary or whether it represented the use during that period of defensive walls originally built in 1st or 2nd centuries A.D.'

1960 A. MacLaren

P.S.A.S., xciti (1959-60), 192ff.

Stanhope Dun. 'A rapid inspection of the site revealed that the remains were not those of a fort, but a monument of the class known as the dun. The chief characteristics of this class of structure are a massive well-built dry-stone wall, relatively thick in proportion to the small circular or oval area which it encloses, and a single narrow entrance passage ... often provided with door-checks. The distribution of duns in Scotland is essentially western; they are found in Galloway, Ayrshire and Stirlingshire and are widely scattered along the coastal regions of Argyllshire.'

1963 R.C.A.M.S.

Inventory of Stirlingshire, 27

Definition of Dun in introduction follows that appearing in Castlehill Wood and Stanhope reports: 'It is smaller than most hill-forts but seems to be built for defence in a way that the conventional farmstead and homestead is not. Such works vary greatly in size and shape and, no doubt, in date of construction ...'

1963 Ordnance Survey

Field Archaeology, 73 and 76f.

Definition of dun: 'Amongst archaeologists it is usually given a more limited meaning and is employed to describe a class of dry-stone defensive structure common in Western and Northern Scotland. In their typical form duns are circular, oval or occasionally D-shaped, seldom exceeding 60 ft. in internal diameter; ... The chief point to bear in mind is that a broch was a tower while a dun was not.'

1963 R.W. Feachem

Prehistoric Scotland, 175ff.

Classification of duns: galleried duns (including promontory sites); plain duns, stack duns (all the preceding in homestead category); larger duns - on border-line with hillforts, some examples having traces vitrification; small insular duns - found especially in Hebrides. Examples cited (all sub-species) include Turin Hill (90 ft. internal diameter), Drumelrick (100 x 85 ft.), Dounree (120 x 100 ft.), Dun Scalpsie (90 x 80 ft.), Am Baghan Galldair (70 ft. diam.), Lochangower (100 ft. diam.), Auchencairn (110 x 80 ft.), Braes of Foss (85 x 75 ft.), Struanmore (175 x 140 ft.), Dun Liath (150 x 80 ft.), Chang (110 x 70 ft.), Chippermore (90 x 80 ft.). Also included are 'vitrified duns' at Dun Skeig, Rahoy, and Dun MacUisneachan, Kemp Law, Onich, etc.

1964 A. Young

P.S.A.S., xciv (1961-3), 171ff.

'Brochs and Duns': Offers a chronological sequence 'In the [Dun] categories the broch tradition is outworn and shows a great diversity of form'. The examples of duns cited are (apart from those in the galleried wall class) all more or less small duns (i.e. 50 ft. in internal diameter or smaller). Revives theory of duns as defences against invading Dalriadic Scots.

1965 E.W. MacKie

P.P.S., xxxi (1965), 93ff.

'Origin and Development of Broch and Wheelhouse Cultures'. Duns not specifically defined but shown as evolving along with brochs from small stone fort complex in the first century B.C.

1966 J.R.C. Hamilton

The Iron Age in Northern Britain, 111ff.

Duns taken as wider class of dry-stone wall forts: Clickhimin pre-broch fort equated with Druim an Duin, Borgue Castlehaven and Ardifuar - architecturally at least.

1969 E.W. MacKie

Antiquity, xliii (1969), 15ff.

'Radiocarbon Dates and the Scottish Iron Age'. Emphasises early date possible for duns of timber-laced variety.

1969 M.E.C. Stewart

Trans. Proc. Perthshire Soc. Nat. Sc., 12 (1969)

'The Ring Forts of Central Perthshire'. Comments on unsuitability of term fort for structures occupying such weak positions.