

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Aberdeen		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 15 (Archaeology)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Shedding new light on our Pictish past		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012-2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Gordon Noble	Professor	07/2008-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2013-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Despite their iconic status, the archaeology of the Picts has remained elusive. This has limited understanding of the culture and importance of the Picts in Scotland and more widely. Research led by Professor Gordon Noble within the School of Archaeology has facilitated several major discoveries, one of which has been hailed as Scotland's 'most exciting archaeological discovery of 2020' and has succeeded in putting the Picts on an international stage, both through wider public engagement and by increasing collective knowledge to open a portal to their world. The Northern Picts project, named 'Project of the Year' by <i>Current Archaeology</i> magazine, encompasses Noble and his team's research to date and has ensured the delivery of national heritage objectives, inspired new creative practice, engaged communities with their heritage and stimulated cultural tourism.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Fundamental to the creation of the medieval kingdom of Scotland was the establishment of the Pictish kingdoms of eastern and northern Scotland, contemporary with Anglo-Saxons further south. Pictish society left behind major legacies, including some of the most spectacular archaeological sites and artistic achievements of early medieval European society. Despite this, only limited and contentious documentary sources survive for the Pictish period— almost all of which are from non-indigenous sources. This issue has been exacerbated by the fact that the archaeology has been traditionally difficult to identify with only a handful of settlements known. This has meant that our collective understanding of the Picts have largely been derived from very limited evidence, with all models for the development of Pictish society being restricted to comparisons with much better studied regions.</p> <p>Since 2012, Noble has led the University of Aberdeen 'Northern Picts project' [P1]. The project has addressed the aforementioned limitations through an unheralded scale and scope of archaeological excavation, made possible by grants of GBP2,000,000 from a variety of bodies [P1-4] and representing an unprecedented investment in early medieval archaeology in Scotland. The research has succeeded in shedding critical new light on the Picts with a series of paradigm-shifting excavations that have led to the discovery of a huge new body of information on Pictish society. As a testament to the ground-breaking nature of the research, the project was nominated (November 2020) and awarded 'Research Project of the Year' by <i>Current Archaeology</i> magazine, a highly prestigious accolade and one of only two major award schemes in the profession [S1].</p> <p>The Northern Picts – location of the overkingdom of the Picts – had seen very little in the way of an archaeological or historical focus before excavations as part of the Aberdeen project. The project has revealed unheralded detail in three specific areas:</p> <p><b>The scale, extent and character of Pictish elite settlement and society</b></p> <p>The discovery of an undocumented early elite centre of the Picts at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire was the first of its kind ever identified [4,6]. The centre comprises a settlement and ceremonial</p>		

enclosure and burial complex in the lowlands, the largest (and also previously unknown) early medieval settlement and fort known from the whole of Britain (the 16 hectare site at Tap o' Noth), and a third contemporary settlement at Cairnmore. Finds from Rhynie include exceptionally rare evidence for Mediterranean and Continental imports that crucially reveal for the first time that the Picts were important participants in developing international networks – networks that included contacts with the Byzantine Empire and Merovingian France and the Kingdoms of western Britain and Ireland. The work at Rhynie indicates the precocious development of an early medieval royal centre that pre-dates any identified in Britain previously. In addition, excavations and survey work at sites such as Dunnicaer, Burghead and Kinneddar have revolutionised our understanding of the scale, chronological range and complexity of Pictish power centres, settlement sites and ecclesiastical complexes. At Dunnicaer, excavations have helped push back the chronology of Pictish symbols (see below) and dated an elite settlement to the shadowy Late Roman Iron Age period, when almost no fortified sites of this period are known [1,2]. Excavations at Dunnicaer and Burghead have more than doubled the number of early medieval buildings we know of from lowland Scotland and survey and excavation at Kinneddar have revealed a hitherto unknown early Christian vallum that is of the scale of Iona, the most important church in early medieval northern Britain [1–3].

### Recovering the northernmost pre-Viking Age silver hoard in Europe

The team recovered what is now the largest 'Pictish' hoard known and the northernmost pre-Viking Age hacksilver hoard in the world [5]. One hundred new silver items were recovered: including objects never identified before, providing insights into the access of native groups to late Roman silver and the trade and exchange of recycled Roman silver in the post-Roman period. The finds included fragments of sheet silver, hacked dish fragments, pendants, spoon handles, strap-end/belt fittings, silver ingots and fragments of late Roman clipped siliquae. Only one other Pictish silver hoard of this size and scale is known and this was found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Developing a new robust chronology for the iconic Pictish symbols

The meaning of Pictish symbols has been debated for over a century. Through our excavations at key Pictish sites such as Dunnicaer (a promontory fort where five Pictish stones were found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Rhynie, and through direct dating of artefacts in museum archives, the project team has both shown that the origins of this system are earlier than previously countenanced – with the new chronology placing the symbols in the same milieu as runes and ogham, other important European early forms of writing [3].

All of the major discoveries of the project have involved community members, students and academics working together to co-produce entirely new views of our Pictish past. Due to the success of the Northern Picts project, the research has underpinned a series of subsequent projects, most notably 'Comparative Kingship: the early medieval Kingdoms of Northern Britain and Ireland', the first ever Leverhulme Research Fellowship awarded to the University of Aberdeen and one of only three awards in the humanities [P4].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

#### References:

- [1] **Noble, G.**, Evans, N., Hamilton, D., MacIver, C., Masson-MacLean, E., O'Driscoll, J. *et al.* 2020. Dunnicaer, Aberdeenshire, Scotland: a Roman Iron Age promontory fort beyond the frontier. *Archaeological Journal* 177(2), 256–338, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00665983.2020.1724050>
- [2] **Noble, G.** & Evans, N. 2019. *The King in the North: the Pictish Realms of Fortriu and Ce.* Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd (book). (Birlinn is a leading publisher on history and archaeology of Scotland).
- [3] **Noble, G.**, Goldberg, M. and Hamilton, D. 2018. The Development of the Pictish Symbol System: Inscribing Identity at the Edges of Empire. *Antiquity* 92(365), 1329–1348, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.68>
- [4] **Noble, G.**, Gondek, M., Cambell, E., Evans, N., Hamilton D. and Taylor, S. 2019. A Powerful Place Of Pictland: Interdisciplinary Perspectives On A Power Centre of the 4th to 6th

Centuries AD. *Medieval Archaeology* 63(1), 56–94,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2019.1588529>

- [5] **Noble, G.**, Goldberg, M., McPherson, A. & Sveinbjarnarson, OG. (2016). '(Re)discovering the Gaulcross Hoard'. *Antiquity* 90(351), pp. 726-741, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2016.71>
- [6] **Noble, G.**, Gondek, M., Campbell, E. & Cook, M. 2013. 'Between prehistory and history: the archaeological detection of social change among the Picts'. *Antiquity* 87(338), 1136–1150, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00049917>

#### Grants:

- [P1] Noble, G. University of Aberdeen Development Trust. Northern Picts: The Archaeology of Fortriu and Ce; 07/2012-12/2023, (GBP351,200)
- [P2] Noble, G. Historic Environment Scotland. Rhynie Environs Project; 04/2018-03/22, (GBP158,920).
- [P3] Noble, G. Historic Environment Scotland. The Citadel Project; 04/2020-03/2023, (GBP257,431).
- [P4] Noble, G. The Leverhulme Trust. Comparative Kingship: The Early Medieval Kingdoms of Northern Britain and Ireland; 08/2017-08/2022, (GBP971,149).

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Research carried out in the Northern Picts project has succeeded in capturing the imagination of both national and international audiences and has empowered communities to use and engage with heritage in new and creative ways. The research has also supported the delivery of national heritage objectives, stimulated cultural tourism across Scotland, inspired creative practice in local communities and enhanced and engaged public interest in and understanding of this 'lost' people.

#### Enhancing interest in - and creating public understanding of Pictish culture with audiences around the world

The information gathered during the team's excavations across multiple sites have provided unexpected and unparalleled evidence and insight about Pictish cultures and communities, representing what Archaeology Manager at Historic Environment Scotland (HES), has described as 'representing discoveries of international significance' [S1i]. Thanks to the focus of Noble's team on dissemination and engagement, knowledge of the research has captured the fascination of audiences around the world and has been hailed as 'Scotland's most exciting archaeological discovery of 2020' and was nominated (Nov, 2020) [S1ii] and awarded (March 2021) 'Research Project of the Year' by Current Archaeology magazine [S1iii]. The project was featured in the 2015 and 2016 BBC series 'Digging for Britain', reaching approximately 1,000,000 viewers per episode. Based on this success, Noble was approached by BBC Radio 4 who designed an episode of the hugely popular 'In Our Time' series based in part on the new findings of the project. This episode was listened to by over 2,000,000 people on the day and downloaded by the same number [S2]. *National Geographic* have also showcased the project results in a short film that has now been viewed by over 1,000,000 people worldwide. Noble's most recent book, which captures the outcomes from the project, '*The King in the North: The Pictish Realms of Fortriu and Ce*', has sold 3,600 copies to date and reached #1 in Amazon's 'History of Scotland' category in February and May 2019 [S3ii], a very unusual sales figure and profile for an academic book [S3i].

The award-winning project has been featured in talks around the world, and featured in over 100 newspaper articles, including *The Times*, *The Scotsman*, *The Daily Mail*, *New Scientist*, *The Conversation*, and *Der Spiegel*, a testament to the level of national and international interest surrounding the project [S4]. To encourage debate and discussion, the project team actively manages social media accounts on both Facebook and Twitter, with a combined following of more than 11,000 people from countries including Australia, United States, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Canada, Iceland, Germany, Qatar and New Zealand, as well as from across the UK [S5i]. Feedback obtained from these followers shows a high level of engagement with the project. Of the 300 people who completed an online survey developed by the author, 281 (95%) stated that

the project had influenced their interest or understanding in the Picts, with respondents saying that it had 'opened up a new world', 'breathed life into the Picts', that they had a 'much more-fact-based understanding', 'an even greater interest and desire to discover more' and a 'much more nuanced view and a greater understanding of the physical fabric of their lives' [S5ii].

### **Engaging communities in their local history and heritage**

A key part of the team's approach has been to work closely with local communities and to include them as part of the digs. Feedback from the survey [S5ii] attested to how the research has 'stimulated conversations in our community' and many commented on the welcome and information they had received when visiting the sites. People from the areas local to the dig sites also revealed how the project has increased their own sense of place, saying that they felt 'more rooted' and that it had given them 'a very strong connection to the land'. The team also made sure to include local participants as part of the excavation teams. Since 2013, over 200 people from the community have taken part, enabling them to learn new skills. One volunteer told the team that they: *'learnt so much from the Northern Picts project. Volunteering on excavations has given me experience excavating which is valuable for future work in the professional world... [and] inspired me to pursue a career in archaeology.'* (anonymous survey participant) [S5ii]. Feedback from the survey confirmed that visits and community events have all been supported by the project helping inspire a new generation with knowledge about the Pictish past, *'The project has been invaluable to school children and informative to visitors to the area'* and another mentioned *'Rhyndie, talks digs, school projects in Dufftown school'* [S5ii].

### **Supporting the delivery of national heritage objectives**

The Northern Picts project received funding from HES because of its strong potential to deliver the aims of Scotland's Archaeology Strategy. Testimony from the Head of Archaeology and World Heritage at HES, demonstrates the specific contributions that the project has made to these national objectives. Not only has she described the project as having *'a transformative effect on the understanding of the Picts and their role in Scottish and wider European society'*, she also points to the contribution the project has made in enhancing understanding, encouraging collaboration and attracting wide audiences. The team's programme of community engagement is recognised as delivering the 'Encouraging Greater Engagement' aim of Scotland's Archaeology Strategy, with HES noting its partnerships and broad media engagement. The work has also contributed to the HES Corporate Plan, through engagement with rural communities, by looking after and protecting the historic environment and through inspiring creativity and new opportunities for learning [S6].

### **Stimulating cultural tourism**

Outcomes from the project [P4] have been used to create new resources and materials that have stimulated cultural tourism across Scotland. The discovery of the Gaulcross silver hoard inspired and underpinned a new exhibition, 'Scotland's Early Silver', curated by National Museums Scotland and displayed in Edinburgh in 2019 before touring to a series of regional museums, after receiving GBP100,000 of Scottish Government funding. Over 68,000 people visited the exhibit. As the second largest Pictish silver hoard ever recovered, it constitutes a significant museum display and it will form an important part of the redisplay of the National Museum once the find has been formally allocated by Treasure Trove. The display was open to the public at both the National Museum Scotland; at Duff House, Banff, near to the original find-spot of the hoard; Stornoway and Kircudbright [S7].

Through the project [P4], Noble has also worked with smaller regional museums such as the Tarbat Discovery Centre (TDC), running exhibitions at the Centre as part of a formal partnership with the University (2012-2020). TDC is the most important museum in northern Scotland for displaying and disseminating knowledge of the Picts. Their exhibitions include material recovered from Dunnicear – an important Pictish site on an eroding coastal promontory that will undoubtedly soon be lost to the sea – and have been seen by over 18,000 visitors. The first exhibition in 2014 coincided with the largest visitor numbers to the centre in over eight years and visitor numbers have steadily risen ever since, which has 'increased the profile of the museum amongst the general public and academia' and 'generated much needed funds through ticket sales' [S8]. As part of the partnership, the project team also produced a booklet series for TDC and other small

museums in northern Scotland, showcasing their Pictish research. Over 1,000 booklets sold with all profits going directly to the museums. All author proceeds and also direct sale profits (totalling over GBP7000 for TDC in 2019) from the popular book 'The King In the North' also go to supporting the ongoing vitality of TDC [S8]. The project has also showcased its research on the University campus. A three-month exhibition at the University of Aberdeen King's Museum in 2015 was seen by over 2,000 people. The project has inspired many to visit sites of Pictish heritage and local museums (53% of participants visited Rhynie, 42% visited National Museum Scotland and 59% visited Burghead and Dunottar). One visitor, stated '*After learning about Burghead through NPP [Northern Picts project], I took a pilgrimage along the coast*' and '*The NPP opened my view of Dunottar by the work at Dunnicaer it was fascinating*' [S5].

### Inspiring creative practice

In 2013, the award-winning project inspired the creation of an arts collective Rhynie Woman who have run a series of community focused events. The group was inspired by the findings of the excavations and aim to engage a wide audience with the research findings through creative ways of engaging a broad public audience, which has resulted in hundreds of people visiting the tiny village of Rhynie each summer since 2013. In 2014, Rhynie Woman secured GBP20,000 of Heritage Lottery Funding to work alongside the archaeologists during community archaeology excavations in the village and to run a series of public engagement activities of their own including a pop-up museum and cafe and exhibitions. In 2017 the group received another GBP20,000 to launch walking trails in the village to connect the archaeological sites to village amenities [S9]. Other events have included a light festival (2015) on Tap o' Noth, the site now confirmed as the largest early medieval site known in Britain and ceilidhs including music composed to respond to the dig findings (2016). Rhynie Woman has also been supported by grants from Creative Scotland and has worked with arts organisations Deveron Arts and the Scottish Sculpture Workshop who have themselves received funding to undertake arts and cultural projects, building on the results of the Northern Picts project. Rhynie Woman are currently working with Rhynie Charitable Trust to find new ways to display the Rhynie stones in accessible ways in the village, including a return of Rhynie Man to the village for the first time since his removal to Aberdeen Council Headquarters in the 1980s [S9].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [S1 (group)] (i) Media article quoting Archaeology Manager at HES (Heritage Daily, 05/2020); (ii) Nomination for 'Research Project of the Year' by Current Archaeology magazine (Nov, 2020); (iii) confirmation of award (March, 2021)
- [S2] Letter from BBC corroborating that Northern Picts research led to the development of the 'Picts In Our Time' broadcast and listening figures.
- [S3 (group)] (i) Letter from Hugh Andrew, Birlinn, describing the unusual success of the book and the reasons for commissioning the book; (ii) corroboration of 'History of Scotland' #1 category on Amazon
- [S4 (group)] A selection of newspaper, popular science articles, corroborating media interest in the project (BBC News, New Scientist, Der Spiegel)
- [S5 (group)] (i) Social media statistics for Facebook and Twitter accounts showing follower growth and active membership; (ii) Northern Picts survey data (July 2020)
- [S6] Testimonial letter from Head of Archaeology and World Heritage at HES, corroborating the project's contribution to HES strategy
- [S7] Letter from NMS highlighting success of the silver exhibitions, visitor feedback and the importance of the hoard find
- [S8] Testimony from TDC: partnership, importance of research, importance of finds, impact to Centre in terms of visitor numbers, income
- [S9] Testimonial letter from Rhynie Woman collective corroborating influence of Northern Picts research on their activities and leverage of funding support