

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE KING'S SEAT HILLFORT, DUNKELD



  
**KING'S  
SEAT**  
—  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
PROJECT



Explorer Guide 5

The Pictish people (named *Picti*, or ‘painted people’, by the Romans) were tribal communities whose lands extended across northern and eastern Scotland from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The northern Picts controlled territories beyond the Grampians. The southern Picts had power over what is now Angus, Fife, and Perth and Kinross.

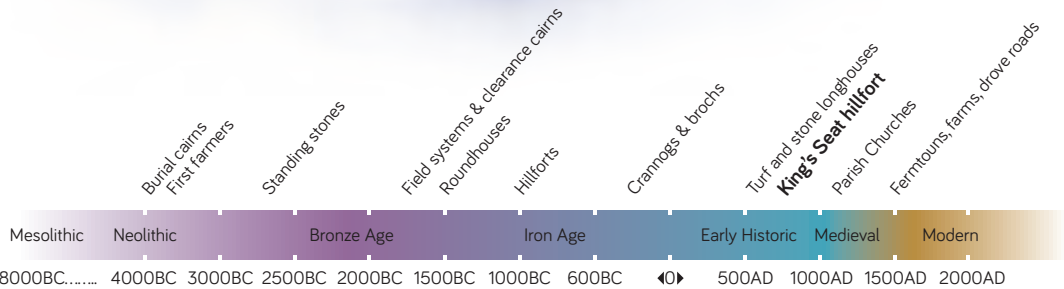
Pictish period homes were long and narrow with rounded ends. These ‘Pitcarmick’ houses, built mostly of turf, were similar to Viking longhouses. The Picts buried their dead in stone coffins known as long cists, and sometimes marked the grave with earth or stone mounds known as barrows.

We can trace the influence of the Picts in the distribution of their symbol stones: large standing stones adorned with carved designs featuring symbols, people and animals that may have marked boundaries between tribal territories. The Picts were skilled craftspeople. Their metalwork ranges from delicate and ornate brooches to huge and heavy neck-chains – portable symbols of wealth and power.

The King’s Seat hillfort was an important stronghold, a power centre of the southern Picts.



Artists' reconstruction of a 'Pitcarmick' building at Lair, Glenshee © Chris Mitchell





High on a Hilltop

The fort occupies a steep rocky hill which is topped by a massive boulder left by retreating ice sheets around 12,000 years ago.

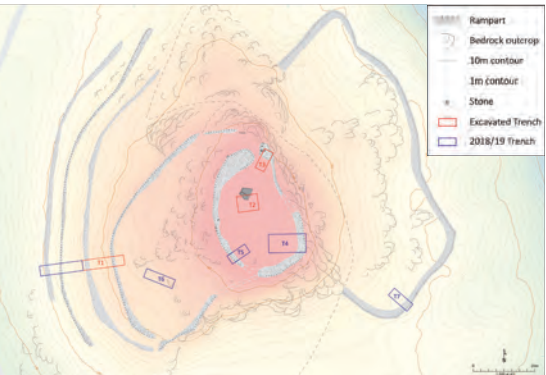
Hillforts were first built in the Late Bronze Age, and were prevalent in the Iron Age. The fort builders of the early medieval period were particularly keen on sites that were difficult to access. The steep, rugged terrain of the King’s Seat is similar to that of other contemporary power centres like Dundurn at the eastern end of Loch Earn, and the stronghold of the *Scottii* at Dunadd in Argyll.

Substantial ramparts built of earth, timber and stone enclosed the hilltop, creating three separate tiers of enclosure: a low walled upper citadel on the summit; a middle terrace on the western slope; and a lower terrace on the eastern edge of the hill. Enclosures on the lower slopes demarcated areas for craft activities and probably domestic spaces too.

The lowest rampart on the western slope was not necessarily original to the hillfort. It might be Victorian landscaping: a trackway or perhaps remodelling of an older feature.



The hillfort was a busy, thriving hub, home to a community that exerted control over the wider landscape © Chris Mitchell



Plan showing the fort's ramparts, and trench locations.



This bank was placed to make the most of a natural drop in the bedrock, which enhanced its appearance from below

Precious Metals

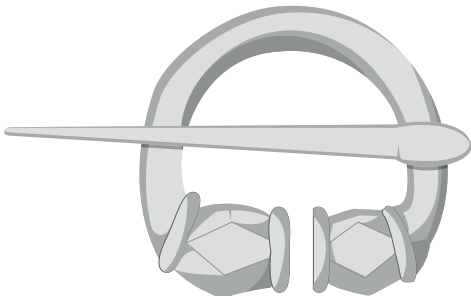
The Picts were skilled smiths. Finds from elsewhere in Scotland show that they produced everything from delicate brooches to massive neck-chains and razor-sharp weapons.

The King's Seat was an important centre for specialist crafts and industries, particularly metalworking. The discovery of crucibles for melting metal ores, and moulds for shaping the final products, leave us in no doubt that the people of the hillfort were making items from precious metals, probably bronze or brass and silver. Ingot moulds suggest that this was a significant production site. Were smiths melting down precious metals and storing it in uniform shapes, turning it into objects later on?

The western enclosure at the King's Seat seems to have been a crafts area with numerous workshops for metalworking, leatherworking and perhaps textile production. Precious metalworking was also taking place in the upper enclosure, around a large hearth within a sizeable building.



This fired clay mould (above) was used to make brooches, perhaps something like this (right)



Royal Connections

The people of the hillfort had access to high status objects and imported goods. Sherds of wheel-thrown pottery known as E ware hint at links with France in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century. Stone and coloured glass gaming pieces give tantalising glimpses of how the elite spent their leisure time. A fragment of a rare glass vessel suggests connections with Anglo-Saxon communities from further south, perhaps as far afield as Germany. The King's Seat was a special place, as the name suggests, perhaps with close royal connections.



A fragment of an imported glass beaker. Was it dropped by someone who had drunk a little too much during a sumptuous feast?

Pottery like this was rare in Pictish Scotland, and it is only found on high status sites. It was brought here from France: the jars were filled with exotic foods – nuts, fruits and spices – and the bowls and jugs may have been used in feasting rituals.

Power at Play

The King's Seat was the centre of power to an important, well-connected community, perhaps the leaders of the southern Picts. The site was probably multi-functional: an inauguration site for kings, and a focal point for feasting and highly skilled craft activities.

The fort's community enjoyed a dominant position over the landscape. They could keep a watchful eye over the rich farmland to the south-east, and the fort on Dunsinane Hill in the Sidlaws. Just as the people of Dundurn controlled travel along Strathearn, the community at the King's Seat controlled travel northwards along Strath Tay and into the highlands.

Most Pictish hillforts made use of locations that had already been occupied in prehistory. Unusually, the excavations at the King's Seat yielded no evidence of prehistoric activity.

Digging Deeper

The first mention of the King's Seat appears to be in the New Statistical Accounts 1834-1845. Very little was known about the site when Dave MacDougall of Dunkeld and Birnam Historical Society invited Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust to help the group explore its history. The fort had never been excavated so it wasn't clear how old it was, and for decades, the summit had been overgrown by rhododendrons.



Over 2017-2019, the King's Seat Hillfort Archaeology Project saw volunteers contribute 844 days of their time over three seasons of excavations. Together, they explored the hillfort, celebrated its Pictish history and unearthed its story so that it can be shared here.

A volunteer excavates a sizeable hearth which was in use in the 6th-7th century AD

You can walk to the hillfort on the summit, but please note that the route is not marked, the path is narrow, steep and uneven, and there are cliffs at the summit. Stout footwear is essential.

“Take account of natural hazards, use common sense and take care”

Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly

- take responsibility for your own actions
- respect the interests of other people
- care for the environment.



KNOW THE CODE BEFORE YOU GO  
outdooraccess-scotland.scot



Visit at your own risk

- Please be alert to:
- uneven ground
  - unmarked path
  - sheer drops on top of hill

Metal Detecting

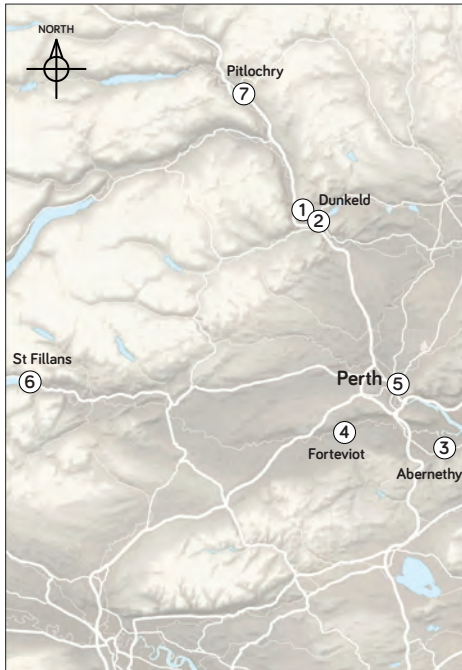
The King's Seat is a Scheduled Monument, protected by law. Metal detecting here is illegal.

Report any suspicious behaviour to Police Scotland on 101.



# The Picts in Perthshire

The Picts can be traced across Perthshire through their carved stones and power centres. Why not visit a few of these sites and objects to get a taste of Pictish Perthshire?



## Key



Outdoors, freely accessible



Check opening hours  
before visiting



Admission fee

This leaflet was produced during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which some attractions were closed. Please check open hours online before visiting.



Abernethy Symbol Stone  
Image © Kim Traynor (cc-by-sa/2.0)



St Madoes Stone  
© Perth Museum & Art Gallery,  
Perth & Kinross Council, Scotland

## 1. The King's Seat Hillfort

This steep, rocky outcrop was the location of a key Pictish power centre.

[www.pkht.org.uk](http://www.pkht.org.uk)

## 2. Dunkeld

Two Pictish stones are housed in Dunkeld Cathedral: a 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century symbol stone that depicts a figure on horseback; and a 10<sup>th</sup> century cross slab fragment.

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)

## 3. Abernethy Stone:

Museum:

Abernethy was the centre of the Pictish church until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. A 7<sup>th</sup> century Pictish symbol stone sits against the base of the unusual round bell tower, built in around 1100 AD. The Museum of Abernethy also houses a small collection of Pictish symbol stones.

[www.museumofabernethy.co.uk](http://www.museumofabernethy.co.uk)

## 4. Forteviot Replica:

Church:

Forteviot was a Pictish royal centre in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Fragments of Pictish crosses are on display in Forteviot Church during opening hours, and a Pictish-style symbol stone was erected in the centre of the village in 2018.

[www.aberdalgieandforteviot.co.uk](http://www.aberdalgieandforteviot.co.uk)

## 5. St Madoes Stone

This 9<sup>th</sup> century cross slab is adorned with grappling beasts, people on horseback and classic Pictish symbols, as well as an ornate cross. See it for yourself at Perth Museum & Art Gallery.

[www.culturepk.org.uk](http://www.culturepk.org.uk)

## 6. Dundurn Hillfort

Perched high on a rocky knoll, Dundurn was a Pictish power centre similar to the King's Seat. Visible from the A85 between Comrie and St Fillans, it was the site of a siege in 683 AD and was excavated in the 1970s.

## 7. Dunfallandy Stone

This exceptional example of Pictish art features several human figures as well as animals and mythical creatures.

[www.historicenvironment.scot](http://www.historicenvironment.scot)



Dundurn Hillfort  
Image © Dr Richard Murray (cc-by-sa/2.0)



© Bart Masiukiewicz

The King's Seat fort sits on a prominent hilltop above the River Tay at Dunkeld, in a commanding position overlooking Strath Tay. Until recently, we knew very little about the site. The fort had never been excavated, so it wasn't even clear how old it was.

Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust worked in partnership with Dunkeld and Birnam Historical Society to develop a community project to explore the story of the fort. In the autumn each year from 2017 to 2019, volunteers worked alongside a team of professional archaeologists from AOC Archaeology Group to survey and excavate the site. The results of that work are summarised in this leaflet.

[www.pkht.org.uk](http://www.pkht.org.uk)



DUNKELD  
& BIRNAM  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

