(Re)discovering the Gaulcross Hoard.

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During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many antiquities were both discovered and destroyed through processes of agricultural improvement and expansion, and their discoveries often inadequately reported. As a result, although these treasures are often the highlights of public displays, we know relatively little about them compared to the levels of information recovered from modern excavations. Here we highlight the potential of reinvestigating antiquarian finds for research purposes and using modern investigative techniques to provide information otherwise lacking for so many old finds. The article outlines a project that revisited the findspot of a Pictish silver hoard at Gaulcross, Aberdeenshire (Figure 1).Only three items survived from the original 1838 discovery, but fieldwork carried out in Spring 2013 uncovered 100 new finds of silver including late Roman coins and military equipment, personal ornaments including brooch and bracelet fragments, ingots and Hacksilber parcels (pieces of cut, bent and broken silver often found in hoards – see Hunter and Painter 2013 for a fuller definition). The new fieldwork has revealed that the Gaulcross hoard was much larger than previously known and is now the northernmost (pre-Viking Age) Hacksilber hoard in Europe and one of only two comparable hoards known in Scotland. The discussion focuses on our initial thoughts on the composition of the hoard, its date and the insights that the hoard can give us for the character of society in northern Britain in the late Roman and post-Roman centuries.

The original discovery of the hoard

The Gaulcross hoard was discovered in 1838 at Ley Farm, Aberdeenshire (northeast Scotland), in a field that contained two stone circles. In 1837 James Lawtie gained the tenancy of the farm at Gaulcross and began improving the land soon after. The stone circles

were ruthlessly removed with some of the stones blown up with dynamite. Only one monolith of the northern circle was still standing at the time of the first account of the hoard by John Stuart (Stuart 1867: 74-75). He suggested that the silver hoard was found on the southern side of the northern circle amongst the boulders of the ring-cairn that the standing stones were set into. Stuart confirmed that other "pins and brooches" were found, but only illustrates three objects. The three surviving objects from the original discovery are a hand-pin (so-called because of its resemblance to a clenched fist), a spiral bracelet and a length of silver chain (Figure 2). These were given by the landowner, Sir Robert Abercromby, to Banff museum, Aberdeenshire, and are now on loan and displayed in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (Stevenson and Emery 1964). Reverend William Cramond also reported that the hoard was found south of the remaining monolith which was on the west side of the north circle. Like Stuart, Cramond suggested the hoard included other pins, buckles and brooches (Cramond 1887: 92).

Revisiting the Gaulcross Hoard

Gaulcross is now an intensively farmed arable field in rural Aberdeenshire and nothing is now evident of the stone circles. In Spring 2013 two projects in Scotland came together to investigate the findspot of the hoard. The Northern Picts project (established 2012) at the University of Aberdeen, is a field-based project targeting key Pictish sites in northern Scotland, and National Museums Scotland Glenmorangie Research Project (established 2008) has been promoting material culture approaches to the study of Early Medieval Scotland. The initial aim of this joint venture was to investigate whether new contextual information could be provided for the important antiquarian find at Gaulcross. Fieldwork began with a geophysical survey. Metal-detecting was also planned with the aim of addressing the level of antiquarian recovery of the hoard and to identify any additional small fragments of the hoard that may have been missed by the original finders. On the second day of the project, Alistair McPherson, a local metal-detectorist working with the project, found three late Roman silver siliquae, pieces of folded Hacksilber, a silver strap-end and part of a silver bracelet.

With these early successes the project stepped up a gear – the field was due to be ploughed and planted within a week. Geophysical survey was extended over 31,500 m^2, but revealed little, so we quickly focused on metal-detecting (Figure 3). Finds were plotted using a dGPS, providing accurate three-dimensional recording of the finds. Over the next three days metal-detecting allowed us to plot the finds scatter and a large trench was opened over the most

concentrated area (Figure 4). The opening of the trench followed a two-stage process with approximately half of the ploughsoil removed at first to allow detecting to be carried out at different levels. The depth of ploughsoil was around 0.3 m with detection from the metal detectors around 0.2 m max. The trench was subsequently cleaned, planned and the position of features recorded. Careful excavation demonstrated that all of the finds were located in the modern ploughsoil (Figure 1: Area A). A smaller trench was also opened at the recorded position of the last standing stone of Gaulcross North stone circle (Area B).

A small number of features were identified during the excavation phase from 21st-25th March 2013, but none can be linked directly with the silver finds. Boulders found in Area B may have been part of the ring cairn of the stone circle and a number of lithics were also found. A few prehistoric features were also identified, one dating to the early Neolithic and another to the middle Bronze Age (1670-1500 cal BC), the latter conceivably relating to the construction or use of the stone circle, but few other traces of the stone circle were found – the agricultural improvement of Lawtie and his labourers had been comprehensive.

Excavation only occurred once each area had been thoroughly swept by the detectors and subsequent detecting of the spoil heaps and additional visits have shown that almost all artefacts were detected using this method. Over the next 18 months Alistair McPherson repeatedly detected the fields to ensure all the silver was recovered. Subsequent detecting produced 14 additional finds, again all within the topsoil, widely scattered and at the margins of the main artefact scatter excavated in Spring 2013. Indeed, further detecting and a further trench opened in September 2014 (Area C) produced no new finds or features of significance.

Antiquarian reports suggest the hoard was only a slight depth below the surface "found between two stones" (Stuart 1867: 75) and the recent finds were all within the modern ploughsoil. It seems likely that dispersal of the fragments of Hacksilber began during the extensive improvements to the field in 1838 that led to the initial discovery and subsequent ploughing dispersed the silver further. The lack of remaining evidence for the stone circle and the dynamiting of the stones of the circles are testament to the vigour of improvement and the intensive ploughing carried out since that time. Many small fragments of Hacksilber and other objects had been missed or dispersed before the hoard was discovered by the original finders. Careful mapping of the finds by dGPS in three dimensions will allow subsequent studies of the dispersal and survival of the hoard material in the ploughsoil.

Character and composition of hoard

The new fieldwork at Gaulcross has entirely changed our knowledge of the scale and character of this hoard. 100 new silver items were recovered, mostly small fragments of sheet silver, hacked fragments of objects and occasionally more diagnostic and intact objects (Figure 5). We have confirmed that the three surviving items were part of a larger Hacksilber hoard similar to the only other comparable hoard known in Scotland – the Norrie's Law hoard in Fife (Figure 6). Large silver hand-pins found in both had always linked the two hoards (Youngs 2013), but within the new finds from Gaulcross there are more recognisable late Roman objects than in the Norrie's Law hoard, such as hacked dish fragments, spoon handles, and a strap end/belt fitting. There are also clipped siliquae, a British phenomenon that involves removing the edges of fourth century Roman silver coins in order to stretch out increasingly diminishing supplies of silver during the fifth century AD when coinage was no longer being imported into Britain (Guest 2013). Not all objects from Gaulcross have been hacked. Intact ornaments include a lunate/crescent shaped pendant (Figure 7) with two double-loops at either end perhaps for suspension from a small-gauge double link chain and two hemispheres that may have originally formed one ornament, perhaps a hollow spherical bead or pinhead (Figure 8).

A number of the finds are unique or very rare – for example only one confirmed silver ingot was previously known from Pictland, from excavations at the hillfort of Clatchard Craig (Close-Brooks 1986). The Gaulcross hoard includes two distinct types of ingots, D-sectioned, and rectangular sectioned comparable to those found in other Hacksilber hoards such as that from Coleraine, Northern Ireland (Marzinzik 2013). The contents of both the Gaulcross and Norrie's Law hoards call into question our modern categorisation of Roman and 'native'/'Pictish'. Fragments of two penannular brooches in the Gaulcross hoard are object types with a wide currency in late Roman and early medieval Britain and Ireland, but these objects span that historical transition. One is a flattened terminal of a penannular brooch with a twisted hoop of a type only otherwise found in the Norrie's Law hoard (top left in Figure 6). The other is a substantial portion of a small Type F zoomorphic penannular brooch (Figure 9). Both are rare in both form and material: before the recent Gaulcross discovery the Norrie's Law twisted penannular hoops were unique; and although the zoomorphic penannular brooch is much more widely distributed in bronze across Britain and Ireland, it is very unusual in silver.

A large proportion of the Hacksilber comes from bracelets. They are a variety of shapes, widths and diameters, chopped up, folded and sometimes bundled into packages, and provide

a further parallel to the many similar fragments found in the Norrie's Law hoard. Two of the Gaulcross bracelet packages had late Roman siliquae pinched between the terminal and a fold (Figure 10), but the cultural origins of these bracelets (Roman or indigenous) will be a key question for future research. Further analytical study of the objects in both hoards will undoubtedly reveal much about the transition from late Antiquity to early medieval in this part of northern Europe.

Discussion

The Gaulcross hoard can now be studied alongside two other pre-Viking Age Hacksilber hoards from Scotland –Traprain Law, East Lothian, containing only late Roman items and Norrie's Law, Fife, a mix of late Roman and non-Roman objects. Traprain Law is the largest hoard of late Roman Hacksilber known, buried at some point in the fifth century AD inside a hillfort (Curle 1923). It weighs c.22 kg and is dominated by fragments of dishes, flagons, and platters, their composition typical of high purity late Roman silver. This hoard has been the focus of a recent international research project at National Museums Scotland (Hunter and Painter 2013). Analytical science (including PIXE and XRF analysis) has demonstrated that the composition of late Roman silver in the Traprain Law hoard and the silver in the Norrie's Law hoard can be differentiated based on trace elements as much as quality of silver (Tate and Troelen 2009) and the composition of the Gaulcross silver will be a key area of future research.

The closest comparison for the contents of the Gaulcross hoard is the Norrie's Law hoard (Figures 5 and 6), discovered around 1819 by a labourer digging for sand at the base of a large prehistoric cairn in Fife. Like Gaulcross, only a fraction of the Norrie's Law hoard survives – 750g whereas over 12kg of silver is estimated to have been found originally (Graham-Campbell 1991). The majority of the silver was immediately dispersed, sold and melted down. The hoard now consists of around 170 pieces and includes two hand-pins, a plaque decorated with Pictish symbols, two pennanular brooches with twisted hoops, a complete spiral finger-ring and fragments of others, chain fragments, decorated fittings, many fragments of bracelets, and Hacksilber, including an inscribed late Roman spoon bowl (Blackwell and Goldberg in press; Stevenson 1955). As at Gaulcross, Roman coins were also found, and although they are now lost, three late fourth century Roman siliquae have recently been identified from an early drawing of the hoard (Blackwell and Goldberg in press; Bland, Moorhead and Walton 2013: 132). The most remarkable object from the Norrie's Law find is

the plaque decorated with Pictish symbols more usually found on standing stone monuments across northern and eastern Scotland. The symbols are as yet undeciphered, but they are likely to mark personal identities and may have been a form of communication serving a similar purpose to contemporary inscribed stones using ogam and Latin in Ireland and Wales (Samson 1992; Forsyth 1997).

Dating the hoard(s)

The dating of both the Gaulcross objects and the Norrie's Law hoard has been much debated. The Gaulcross hoard has generally been seen as earlier than Norrie's Law, perhaps dating to the sixth to seventh century AD (Graham-Campbell 1991: 241; Stevenson and Emery 1964, Youngs 1989: 26). The dating of the Norrie's Law hoard has seen more discussion, ranging from the late fourth or fifth century (Laing 1990: 41) to the eighth century AD (Stevenson 1955, 110). There are a greater quantity of late Roman items in the new finds from Gaulcross but it is also uncertain how many Roman objects were lost from Norrie's Law due to its dispersal. The similarities between the two hoards means that discussion of their date has often been intertwined.

A date in the seventh to eighth century range for the deposition of the Norrie's Law hoard has been generally accepted, based primarily on art-historical analysis of the symbols on the silver plaque (Figure 6) (Graham-Campbell 1991: 255; Henderson 1989: 211; Henderson and Henderson 2004: 88), and on one of the hand-pins. Graham-Campbell, for example, compared the juxtaposition of the Z-rod on the back of the hand-pin and a small cross detail on the front of the hand-pin with Class II Pictish cross-slabs dating to the seventh century or later. However, recent research has shown this hand-pin is a nineteenth-century copy of the other large Norrie's Law hand-pin, with the addition of a Z-rod on the back (Goldberg and Blackwell 2013). This object cannot therefore be used to date the hoard. One of the two plaques has also been shown to be a nineteenth-century copy.

The symbols on the remaining plaque from Norrie's Law consist of a double-disc and Z-rod and a 'beast-head' shown in profile. Both Stevenson (1955: 110, 1964: 208), Graham-Campbell (1991: 255) and Henderson (1989: 211; Henderson and Henderson 2004: 88) compared the latter symbol to a dog motif in the Lindisfarne Gospels. A closer comparison for the plaque is on a Pictish symbol stone from Rhynie (No. 5), Aberdeenshire, which depicts the same two symbols of a beast-head, double-disc and Z-rod, but with the addition of a mirror and comb symbol (Figure 11). Indeed, the art-historical comparison to the

Lindisfarne Gospels is misleading. The beast on the Norrie's Law plaque and on Rhynie No. 5 is not a dog – both clearly have flippers and are more readily identifiable as some form of sea- or water-creature.

As with so many Pictish symbol stones, the context of Rhynie No. 5 is uncertain, having been found in the foundations of the later parish church. However, recent excavations up-slope from the church have found an extensive high-status settlement, in association with the findspots of three other stones and a contemporary cemetery that extends towards the modern village and the findspots of two further stones. Over 20 radiocarbon dates for the Pictish phases of the settlement and cemetery all point to a fifth to sixth century AD date for this major complex (Noble et al. 2013). A clay mould for the production of a hand-pin has been recovered from Rhynie, providing further material links to the two silver hoards.

The Pictish symbol stone Rhynie 5 is the best parallel for the symbols on the Norrie's Law plaque and the recent excavations of the associated complex suggest a fifth-sixth century AD date. The number of Roman finds in the Gaulcross hoard (and increasingly recognised in Norrie's Law) also suggests an earlier date for both hoards must be considered. An earlier date would place the hoards within a wider north European context of hoards from Denmark of fifth-sixth century date that also contain a mixture of Roman and non-Roman objects (Painter 2013: 226; Blackwell and Goldberg forthcoming).Although the evidence for redating is tentative, further analysis will hope to narrow the date of deposition of the two hoards further.

Europe's northernmost pre-Viking Age Hacksilber hoard

As well as re-examining the composition and dating of the hoards from Gaulcross and Norrie's Law, over the next three years, the Glenmorangie research project at the National Museums of Scotland will address the biography of these hoards. Certainly some of the objects had long histories – fragments of vessels from Roman silver dining sets and objects with late Roman military associations. Alongside these objects were fragments of objects, such as penannular brooches, made locally and found across Britain and Ireland. Silver was not mined in Scotland in this period. All silver used in the post-Roman period in Scotland had its origins in the Hacksilber from the late Roman world, as exemplified by the Traprain Law hoard. The differing compositions of individual objects in the three Scottish Hacksilber hoards will show how, through time, late Roman silver was recycled and re-cast into high-status objects that underpinned the development of elite society in the post-Roman period.

During the process of recycling, the Roman silver was remade into new objects, but its origin may not have been entirely forgotten. Some of these later objects may have also directly referenced the late Antique world, with items such as hand-pins showing the adaptation of late Roman military styles both in terms of design and in decorative techniques (Gavin 2013: 430; See also Youngs 2013, 415). As Gavin notes, the use of Roman models may have been to invoke military prowess and ostentation amongst elites in early medieval Britain and Ireland (Gavin 2013: 433).

As for the ultimate origins of the Roman items in these hoards, interpretations of the distribution of silver into non-Roman hands has ranged from looting, trade, and bribes to natives, to military pay for native groups in contact with the Romans. Hunter (2007a, b), for example, has argued for the deliberate use of bribes and subsidies by the Romans in Scotland to both build up and destabilise native society. Recent scholarship, however, has focused on Hacksilber as evidence of indigenous individuals or groups serving in the late Roman military (e.g. Guggisberg 2013: 213). The 'parcels' of silver from Gaulcross, including coins clasped between bracelet fragments, certainly suggests that standardised weights of silver could have been used as a means of payment. However, whether this was from direct payment for military service in the late Roman army, or as bribes to leaders of native warbands in the late fourth or early fifth century AD, or due to exchange between indigenous elites themselves remains a moot point (Painter 2013: 230). Through time, this silver made its way into Hacksilber hoards.

The Northern Picts

Looking at the more regional context in Pictland, this new discovery adds to the growing evidence for the importance of northern Pictland in the post-Roman period. Studies by Alex Woolf (2006, 2007) have relocated Fortriu, the Pictish kingdom most frequently cited in later annals, to the Moray Firth region of northern Scotland rather than central Scotland as previously thought. The iconic Pictish Class I symbol stones, are more common in northern Pictland, and the distribution of massive silver chains show a distinctive scatter in this region, but are absent from southern Pictland (Henderson 1958; Youngs 2013: Illus 26.1). A whole series of Pictish fortifications have also been identified along the Moray coastline, including the largest Pictish fort known at Burghead in Moray. The identification of a high status settlement at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, and a series of ringforts recently dated to the fifth and sixth centuries AD has also renewed interest in Northern Pictland, an area that at times has

been thought to be peripheral to the major social and political developments in northern Britain (Noble et al. 2013).

Nonetheless, in the immediate area around the Gaulcross hoard there are few identified contemporary Pictish sites – and the region has a notable absence of symbol stones. Two forts are located nearby, but radiocarbon dating evidence obtained as part of the Northern Picts project suggest these are Iron Age in date. The nearest confirmed Pictish fort is 7 km along the coast at Green Castle, Portnockie which has been partly excavated and dated to the seventh-ninth centuries cal AD (Ralston 1987). However, one curious object has been found less than 5km from the hoard site – an object known as the Portsoy whetstone (Figure 12). The object is a small cylindrical stone of phyllite carved with human heads on either end, one apparently displayed on the end of a sword, with carvings of a fish, three crescents, an arch and tongs set between the two heads. The object is unique, but the symbols resemble those found on Pictish symbol stones. The Portsoy object has been compared to the whetstone or sceptre from the Sutton Hoo burial mound and interpreted by Enright and others as a symbol of sacral kingship (Enright 1982: 130). The Portsoy whetstone, although much simpler and less refined than the Sutton Hoo example, shows similar opposed human heads and perhaps one of the most revealing elements of the carving is the set of tongs – an obvious reference to metalworking. At Rhynie and other Pictish sites, metalworking evidence is interpreted as an indicator of high status, used to create and support elite identities in the post-Roman period.

Some of the objects in the Gaulcross hoard themselves were almost certainly connected to elites. Items like silver hand-pins and silver bracelets found in Gaulcross and Norrie's Law are uncommon finds – these were clearly high status objects that would have belonged to some of the most powerful members of post-Roman society (Youngs 2013: 421). Some hoards in Denmark and Germany have been interpreted as the family treasures of emerging elites in post-Roman northern Europe (e.g. Collins 2013: 38; Painter 2013: 228; Rau 2013: 345). Like Gaulcross, the hoards of Hacksilber from Denmark include Roman and non-Roman objects, but in contrast many of the new finds from Denmark are found in close association with high-status central places with evidence for imported goods and working of precious metals (Dyhrfjeld-Johnsen 2013: 321). At Gaulcross and Norrie's Law there is as yet no evidence of high status settlements at the site or in the near vicinity.

In contrast to the Danish hoards, a striking feature of Gaulcross and Norrie's Law is the sense of isolation of the findspot. Like Gaulcross, there are no known Pictish settlements, forts or

symbol stones in close vicinity to the Norrie's Law hoard (although a Class II Christian cross-slab was discovered on the same estate). Both of the hoards are in similar topographic positions on elevated ground with views towards the coast. If the hoards were connected to wealthy post Roman communities then that wealth was accumulated and buried, but never reclaimed. Some hoards in the Roman Iron Age, such as the two silver *denarii* hoards at Birnie, Moray, buried in between a series of roundhouses, have been interpreted as gifts to the gods (Hunter 2009: 13), and the collection of second to fourth century AD Roman material found at Covesea cave on the Moray coast is also best interpreted in this light (Armit et al. 2011). Gaulcross is also on a hill less than 1.5km to the west of Deskford where a first to third century AD boar-headed carnyx (war trumpet) was votively deposited in a pit dug into a bog (Hunter 2001: 100). The Gaulcross hoard can perhaps be seen as part of a long-standing tradition of votive deposition in this area.

The Gaulcross and Norrie's Law hoards were both deposited at what were already ancient monuments in the Pictish period. An association with the prehistoric past as a way of bolstering the power and legitimacy of contemporary lineages is a well-known phenomenon in the early medieval period in Britain and Ireland (Bradley 1987; Driscoll 1998; See also Clarke 2007; Gleeson 2012). The appropriation of ancient places through an act of ritualised deposition could be one way in which an emerging elite connected the present with a deep ancestral past through places associated with otherworldly powers (Driscoll 1998, 143, 155). The act of deposition might also imply a rejection of the more recent past through the sacrifice of the silver objects – we need to consider the processes of accumulation, curation and deposition of the hoards as potentially embodying differing motivations, appropriate in vastly different social circumstances. Of course these hoards could have also had much more prosaic origins. We cannot rule out the possibilities that these hoards were the accumulated wealth of a powerful dynasty that hid their valuable stash of raw materials for safe-keeping and never returned. Nonetheless, whether a gift to the gods, the raw materials of a smith or unrecovered wealth, it seems likely that the landscape location was not fortuitous or without significance (Needham 2001). For what better location to place one's valuables than under the protection of the ancestors or the gods?

Conclusions

The new work at Gaulcross has uncovered a remarkable range of important new objects, some never seen before in Scotland. Further analysis will allow them to be fully integrated

into our narratives for understanding society in the late Roman and post-Roman centuries in northern Britain and its wider European context. The composition of the Gaulcross hoard and the close comparanda from Norrie's Law embody both the material resources of the late Roman Empire, and fragments of objects associated with early medieval elite identities. They span what is traditionally seen as a historical transition from late antiquity to the new forms of society emerging in the post-Roman period.

Our work also has crucial culture resource management implications. For example, the majority of nineteenth century hoard findspots in Scotland are not scheduled – i.e. they have no legal protection. The work at Gaulcross suggests that the location of important antiquarian discoveries and the information that may remain at the findspots of objects needs legal protection as much as monuments do. Hobbyist metal-detecting has led to many important discoveries in recent years, but this untrained and random process of finds recovery often forces archaeologists to be reactive rather than proactive. In this difficult period for heritage management, with budgets and funding constantly been reduced, it is often a struggle to find the resources to recover the vital contextual information to understand these new discoveries. Therefore, important methodological lessons can also be drawn from our work at Gaulcross. By bringing a targeted, research-driven approach we can greatly enrich our knowledge of artefacts that have long formed part of important national and regional collections. These treasures of public display often lack detailed contextual evidence to help more fully interpret their significance, but in many cases vital contextual information may still be there awaiting (re)discovery.

Acknowledgements

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Images

Figure 1 Location map of the findspot (inset) and the projected position of the two stone circles at Gaulcross North and the location of the recent silver finds at the site (produced by Oskar Sveinbjarnarson).
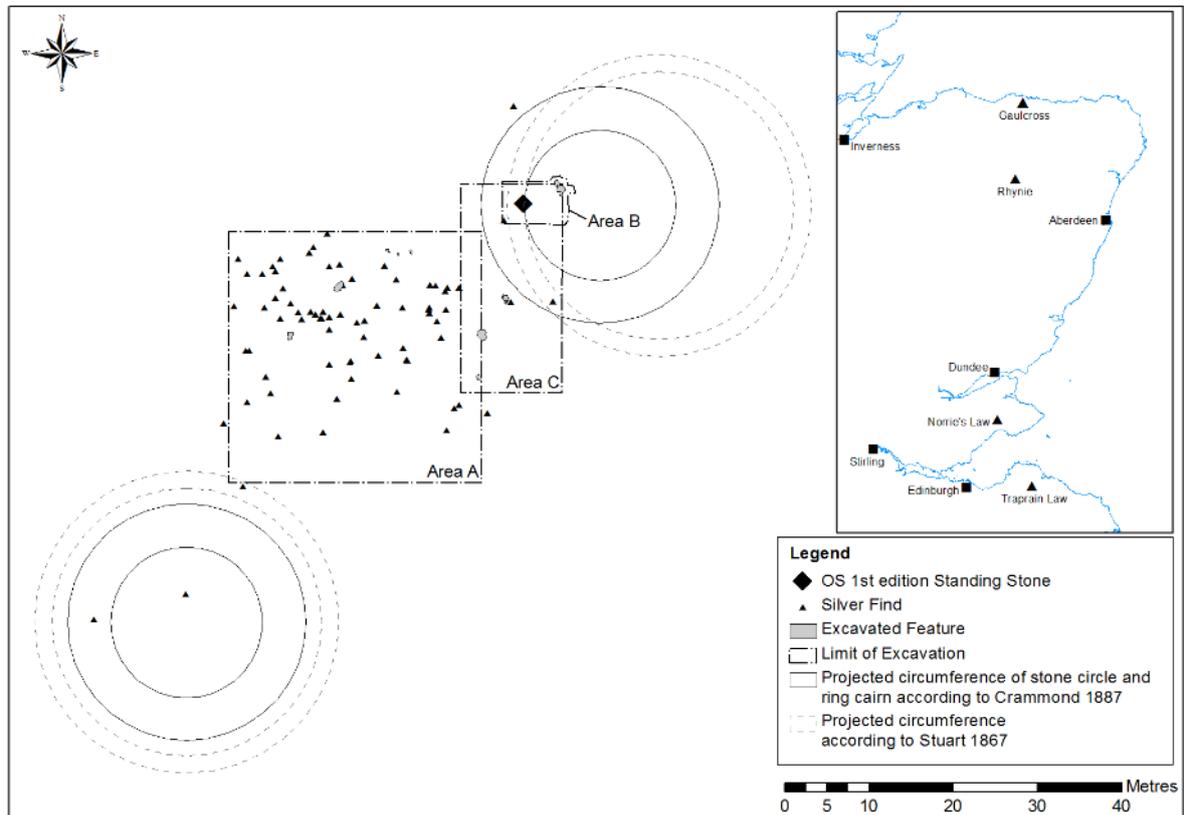
Figure 2 The surviving objects from the nineteenth-century Gaulcross hoard find © National Museums Scotland.

Figure 3 Metal-detecting at Gaulcross

Figure 4 The excavation underway. The topsoil was stripped back by machine in spits to allow detecting at different levels of the topsoil. The subsoil was also detected, cleaned and features recorded and excavated.

Figure 5 The Gaulcross silver hoard including a silver ingot, Hacksilber and folded bracelets.

Figure 6 The Norrie's Law hoard, Fife, central Scotland.

Figure 7 The lunate/crescent shaped pendant with two double-loops.

Figure 8 The silver hemispheres.

Figure 9 A small zoomorphic penannular brooch.

Figure 10 One of the bracelet fragments with a Late Roman siliquae pinched inside.

Figure 11 Rhynie No.5 symbol stone showing the 'beast' head, similar to that shown on the silver plaque from Norrie's Law © Michael Sharpe.

Figure 12 The Portsoy whetstone © British Museum.