TINTAGEL - SOME PROBLEMS

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Any discussion of the development of monasticism in the British Isles in the post-Roman centuries must include a consideration of the finds and structures excavated by Dr C.A.R. Radford at Tintagel on the north Cornish coast in the 1930's (Radford, 1935a; 1935b; 1942; 1956; 1962; 1968). Recent surveys of the period (Alcock, 1971; Thomas, 1971a) have adopted Dr Radford's interpretation of the site as a large monastic establishment of the later fifth and sixth centuries, in direct contact with the Mediterranean world. Although much more is now known about the character of monastic and secular sites in western Britain than was the case in 1935, the Scottish Archaeological Forum of 1973 emphasized how many problems still await detailed study. The aim of this brief contribution is not, therefore, to draw historical conclusions from Tintagel, but to outline some of the problems of interpretation posed by the evidence when considered in the light of more recent work, and to suggest ways in which these problems might be further studied in the absence of a full report of the excavations. This discussion is based on the published material and on discussion at the Forum, and is a preliminary to a more detailed review of the evidence now in preparation.

The excavated evidence from Tintagel comprises several classes of material. The large quantities of imported wares, mainly of Thomas's classes A and B (Thomas, 1959), provide the primary evidence that the headland was occupied in 5th - 7th centuries, and still represent the largest single collection of this material in the British Isles. The absence of later ceramic material, other than an uncertain quantity of grass-marked ware, whose date is still open to debate, and in particular the lack of E ware, has suggested that this occupation was relatively short (Alcock, 1971, 249). The second major component is the structural evidence of at least eight groups of rectilinear unmortared stone buildings on the headland, some on the summit plateau, the remainder on artificially enhanced natural terraces on the east side. The promontory was cut off from the mainland by a bank and ditch later incorporated into the defences of the twelfth-century castle. The bank, of which no published section is available, had imported sherds both incorporated within it and trodden into its surface (Radford, 1962, 8). Three east-west aligned rock-cut features, interpreted as graves, were located although no burials remained in them, and a possible fourth was

identified beneath one of the walls of the site A complex (Radford, 1935a, 413). A square stone structure, interpreted as a tomb-shrine or leacht, had not been excavated at the time of the 1935 report. Incised slates, two lightly incised pieces interpreted as 'trial pieces', and two joining pieces forming part of a cross-inscribed headstone, have also been published (Radford, 1935a, 416, pl.lix, lx). Four fragments of Mediterranean glass and one of more local origin were also found (Harden, 1956, 70).

In the consideration of this range of material a number of questions can immediately be posed. Firstly, can the imported pottery, and its implications of date and possibly of specialised function, be firmly linked to the excavated structures? Secondly, what was the function of these structures, especially of the groups of buildings? Thirdly, what does the import of such relatively large quantities of pottery to the site imply in historical terms, and finally how far, in the light of more recent work, does Tintagel fit into any current model of early monasticism in the British Isles?

The extreme difficulty of interpreting the stratigraphy in and around the buildings (Radford, 1935a, 406-9) makes it clear that, at any rate for the structures excavated before 1935, little reliance can be placed on the association of pottery with the structural remains, most of the pottery being 'found lying outside the buildings in unsealed layers' (Radford, 1935a, 415). The post-1935 excavations may have produced better results but are as yet undocumented. Doubt must, however, remain as Dr Radford has more recently stated (1962, 8) that 'in every case the pottery found in and under the floor levels and among the fallen debris was of the same types'. This evidence is insufficient to ascribe the arrival of the pottery on the site to the same period as the construction and use of the buildings, made as they are from local material and their erection involving preparation and disturbance of the ground. Pottery already on the site could easily be both covered by floor levels and become incorporated in walls, to appear in debris on their collapse. A further point to be made is that the grey pitchers of type C (Radford, 1956, 60-1), initially regarded as of broadly the same date as the rest of the imported wares, have since come to be considered to be of later date (Thomas, 1959, 94).

Excavation in an area devoid of stone buildings (of which several unexplored sites can be identified on the ground) could resolve these problems either by demonstrating that the densest concentration of pottery is around the stone buildings, or that the distributions are not complementary. The second alternative may suggest an occupation structurally distinct from

that of the stone buildings. The position of the other objects, a coin of Alfred and the inscribed slates, which are impossible to date closely, is unhelpful in attempting to date the structures.

If the buildings can for these reasons be considered separately from the pottery, they pose problems of date and function. Parts of Site A are covered by the twelfth century chapel, and on stratigraphical grounds they are likely to post-date the Mediterranean pottery. It is suggested that a comparison of the Tintagel buildings, in terms of dimensions, construction and internal features, with south-western vernacular sites of between the 5th and the 12th centuries AD, for example Mawgan Porth (Bruce-Mitford, 1956), would produce useful results. Whether these buildings represent an intrusive type (Thomas, 1971a, 25-6), or are merely an adaptation of local styles is obviously an important question in any assessment of the history of the site as a whole. Whatever their date, the complexity of the buildings and the recognition of an associated degeneration of building styles suggest that they had a considerable life-span, this in itself to some extent contradicting the ceramic evidence.

Discussion of the possible functions of these structures must take into account the apparently agricultural functions of some of them (Radford, 1962, 12-13), and Dr Radford's varying interpretations of the buildings of the site A complex demonstrate that much reconsideration is possible. In addition to the problems posed by the stone structures there remains the possibility that there are as yet unrecognised slight timber structures on the site. Selective excavation might also confirm this hypothesis.

Whether or not the imported pottery is associated with the stone buildings it remains important as the largest single collection of a group of material that, while being constantly added to by material from controlled excavations, still poses many problems of interpretation and dating. Until the material from Tintagel has been studied and compared in detail with that from other sites in Western Britain, many problems both of the site and the period will remain. The total number of different vessels and the precise area of origin of the material are important pieces of data, particularly in view of Thomas's thesis that there is a direct connection between the import of the pottery and the spread of monasticism in Britain, Tintagel being in his view the 'crucial primary context' for this material in the British Isles (1971a, 25).

The quantity of this material leaves little doubt that Tintagel was of

importance in the 5th - 7th centuries AD, but it remains to be conclusively demonstrated that in this period the site was of a monastic character. Data from the British Isles as a whole is still unsatisfactory, but it should be possible to formulate criteria by which secular and monastic sites might be distinguished. Interpretation of the bank and ditch at Tintagel as the vallum monasterii (Radford, 1962, 8) emphasizes the fact that there is little to distinguish such a structure, frequently mentioned in documentary sources as associated with early monastic sites (Thomas, 1971a, 27-9), from a secular defensive work or other feature delimiting or defining a settlement. The choice of the same location for the cutting of the castle ditch at Tintagel does perhaps serve to emphasize that whatever its actual function, the earlier structure would also have been defensive potential, as indeed does the whole site.

There is little in the interior of the site, other than the possible leacht, that can be compared with features on other excavated sites. The importance of cemeteries and associated structures elsewhere (Thomas, 1971a, 48-90), is not reflected in the excavated areas, though it is possible that a large cemetery remains to be discovered on the headland.

Detailed study of the location and economic base of sites of this period remains a largely untapped source of information, although some recent work has shown the potential of this type of approach (e.g. Ellison and Harriss, 1972). Study of the physical resources, land use, and place-name evidence in the locality of sites may provide additional data relevant to these problems.

Dr Radford's 'monastic model' of Tintagel, which itself replaced (in academic circles at least) a strongly entrenched view of the site as 'Arthurian', has been supported by Thomas's identification of the site as the Rosnat or Rostat mentioned in Irish sources (1971b), but is only one of several as yet largely unconsidered alternatives. Even on the base of the published material alone it is possible to suggest a quite drastic reappraisal which is not in conflict with the evidence as it is at present available. A reconsideration of the site as a defended stronghold, of which the structure interpreted as the vallum monasterii forms the landward defence, is perhaps the most obvious of these alternatives. The structures at present on display on the headland may be related in part or whole to such a stronghold, but there is a strong possibility that they are of wholly later date, in which case the structures associated with the 5th to 7th century material still await discovery. The occupation at this

time might have taken the form of a trading post or market, or of a settlement with a differing social status from that implied by the term 'stronghold'. There is considerable scope for further work on the evidence, although the discussion of the site would be much facilitated by the full publication and drawing together of all the material.

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