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ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC008

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Taken into State care: 1953 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ARDESTIE EARTH HOUSE



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ARDESTIE EARTH HOUSE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Ardestie comprises an Iron-Age souterrain and an associated settlement that lies within a fenced enclosure in arable farmland approximately 2km north of Monifeith. Accidentally discovered during ploughing in 1949, F T Wainwright directed the initial excavations, investigating the souterrain (earth house) and revealing the robbed remains of an adjacent settlement.

On plan, the souterrain is a banana-shaped structure comprising a long, stone walled semi-subterranean passage built in a curved trench cut through boulder clay. Access to the main chamber is by a short, narrow passage from the surface leading down to the twin jambs of the souterrain's entrance while a second doorway inside the souterrain provided direct access to and from one of the settlement's buildings.

The settlement comprises four conjoined stone walled structures built on the surface within the curve of the souterrain, and probably form part of a larger settlement extending beyond the area in care.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

February 1949: souterrain discovered during stone clearance. Excavation initiated by F T Wainwright of the Department of History, St Andrews University (Feb 1949-June 1950).

July 1952: Wainwright invited to complete the excavations at Ardestie on behalf of the Ministry of Works as the owners were willing to transfer the monument to Guardianship.

May 1953: Ardestie is taken into care.

October 1998: Ardestie Scheduled.

Archaeological Overview

Souterrains are a feature of Iron-Age settlements in many parts of Scotland, although marked clusters occur in Fife, Perthshire and Angus (Wainwright's 'Southern Pictland'), Aberdeenshire, the Moray Firth estuary, the Western Isles, Caithness and Sutherland, and the Northern Isles. The majority of sites are known through aerial photography, although evidence from excavated sites suggests that the more northerly examples are amongst the earliest souterrains, with most dating to the late centuries BC, while those in Fife, Angus and Perthshire are from the early centuries AD.

As souterrains vary considerably in size and form throughout Scotland, it is unlikely they had a single and identical purpose. Ardestie is typical of the Fife, Perthshire and Angus group of monuments as it lies on or near good quality arable land today, and it is likely these souterrains were used to store agricultural produce, such as grain, as well as meat and dairy goods. Recent theories suggest that these souterrains were linked to the Roman

military occupation of central and eastern Scotland in the early centuries AD, perhaps being used to meet the increased demand for agricultural produce. The withdrawal of Roman forces in the late second century AD appears to coincide with a period when many souterrains were dismantled and decommissioned and none appears to have remained in use beyond the early 3rd century AD.

Although excavated in the 1950s, Ardestie probably retains considerable archaeological potential. It is highly likely that there is further evidence of the associated settlement within the PIC area and beyond, although it would be difficult to extend the scheduled area without undertaking additional investigation, possibly using geophysics or excavation.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

As mentioned above, Ardestie is a typical example of a souterrain in this region and has the characteristic crescentic shape. Its drystone walls are composed of small boulders and split flagstones resting on foundations of massive boulders. The narrow entrance passage has two squared pillars that probably supported a lintel, marking the point of entrance from the surface, while an additional entrance was provided from one of the adjacent structures (hut 4).

The floor of the souterrain was roughly paved with flagstones, and a drain was later inserted into the underlying bedrock to combat the souterrain's poor drainage. Wainwright noted that while the site was dry during the summer, it was prone to flooding during the winter months, clearly attested in his photographs of the excavation. No direct evidence for the roof at Ardestie was found, although it may have had a timber roof, as has been suggested at the Newmill souterrain, or perhaps one built of flat slabs, as seen at Barns of Airlie.

The floor of the souterrain is not on one level, as it slopes downwards and then begins to rise upwards again towards its end. While this may have aided drainage, it is more likely that the builders began by digging their trench through boulder clay but found that toward the end of the trench this became thinner and eventually gave way to the solid bedrock.

Wainwright excavated four surface structures arranged in a linear fashion in the curve of the souterrain. Each of the huts was conjoined, and each could be entered from its neighbour by way of a well-made slab-built door. The largest huts, numbers 1 and 2, were separate structures in that they possessed their own floors and walls, while huts 3 and 4 were one larger structure subdivided by a partition wall. Hut 3 contained a fire-bowl and draught vent, while hut 4 was effectively a corridor between the adjacent building and the souterrain. A large cup-and-ring marked stone was found built into the wall of one of the structures.

Social Overview

Not formally assessed, although the monument features in several popular archaeological guides, both in print and on-line.

Spiritual Overview

The modern spiritual significance of the site is unknown.

In antiquity, however, the monument may have possessed some spiritual characteristics as many souterrains are found with cup-marked stones built into their walls, possibly an association with ancestors and fertility (Hingley, 1992).

Aesthetic Overview

The souterrain is situated near the busy A92, and visitors must walk along the roadside for approximately 100m to reach the monument. Provision of parking is poor but is due to be revised during the conversion of the A92 to dual carriageway.

The basic features of souterrain construction can be appreciated first-hand at Ardestie, namely the massive boulder foundations, with the upper corbelled courses of smaller boulders and flat slabs.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

Wainwright's excavations focussed on a small portion of the PIC area, which is likely to be of high archaeological potential. Further survey of the PIC area and the surrounding area may reveal further features of the settlement.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

Ardestie offers visitors an opportunity to inspect a souterrain at first hand and retains a number of features such as the additional drain, the original entrance passage, and the additional doorway into the adjacent settlement structure.

Associated Properties

PICs: **Carlungie** (larger and more complex but shares many of the same architectural features); **Tealing** (similar features); Barns of Airlie (near complete example of the Fife, Perthshire and Angus group); Pitcur (offers the visitor the opportunity to experience a partially-roofed souterrain). All four sites feature cupmarked/cup-and-ring marked stones built into the structure of the chamber.

Keywords F T Wainwright; souterrain; Iron Age; Roman; 'Southern Pictland'; corbelling; drain