



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC211
Designations:	Scheduled Monument (SM90248)
Taken into State care:	1890 (Guardianship)
Last Reviewed:	2021 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RISPAIN CAMP



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Cover image: Oblique aerial view of Rispain Camp, looking north-west.
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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

RISPAIN CAMP

Contents

1. SUMMARY	3
1.1 Introduction	3
1.2 Statement of Significance	3
2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES	5
2.1 Background	5
2.1.1 Context: Iron Age settlement in southern Scotland	5
2.1.2 Descriptive overview	8
2.1.3 Features revealed by excavation but not visible on site today	9
2.1.4 Early antiquarian interest and activity	10
2.1.5 Maintenance and conservation activity	12
2.2 Evidential values	14
2.3 Historical values	16
2.4 Architectural and artistic values	17
Artists' representations	18
2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values	19
2.6 Natural heritage values	19
2.7 Contemporary/use values	19
3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING	20
4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES	22
5. KEYWORDS	23
BIBLIOGRAPHY	23
Further resources	26
APPENDICES	26
Appendix 1: Timeline	26
Appendix 2: Guardianship background	27

Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

I. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Rispain Camp¹ is a Late Iron Age defended farmstead, located 1.5km west of Whithorn, in Dumfries and Galloway. It survives as a rectangular earthwork; visible as a deep ditch flanked by an inner and outer bank, with a single entrance causeway on the north-east side. Excavation has demonstrated the survival of archaeological features within the gently sloping interior. The site sits on a low hill with wide views over the surrounding farmland.

The site (then thought to be a Roman camp) was taken into State care under a Guardianship Agreement in 1890. It was protected as a Scheduled Monument in 1921, with amendments in 2004 (SM90248).²

The site is unstaffed and is reached from the A746 along a side road to Rispain Farm, where limited visitor parking is available.³ It is accessible to view all year round, with information provided on site via an interpretation panel.

1.2 Statement of Significance

Rispain⁴ Camp is of national importance⁴ as a well-preserved example of a small, Late Iron Age, enclosed settlement. Sites of this scale, probably single-family farms, must once have constituted a common feature of the Iron Age landscape. But few lowland examples have survived as upstanding earthworks, largely due to the extensive remodelling of Scotland's arable farmland which took place during the later 18th and throughout the 19th centuries.

Rispain's rectangular plan is relatively unusual in south-west Scotland, where Iron Age settlements tend to be oval or circular on plan; it is more typical of the eastern Borders and Northumberland.⁵

¹ 'Rispain Camp' is the legal name for the site (as defined in the Scheme of Delegation), which was originally assigned when the monument was thought to be the remains of a Roman Camp. Although this interpretation is no longer considered to be accurate, the site retains 'Camp' within its official title, which denotes the features within PIC211 now considered to be an Iron Age defended farmstead.

² Scheduled Monument details for Rispain Camp are accessible at: [Rispain Camp \(SM90248\) \(portal.historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

³ Please check access information before visiting: [Visit a Place - Rispain Camp \(historicenvironment.scot\)](#)

⁴ Alternative spellings have been variously recorded as Rispen, Rispin or Rispan, or the alternative name of Glasserton.

⁵ Jobey 1960

Initially thought to be a Roman camp (because of its rectangular plan), and later reclassified as a medieval moated settlement (for the same reason), Rispaïn's construction and occupation have now been dated to the last century BC and/or the first two centuries AD, by evidence from excavations which took place from 1978 to 1981.⁶ As a result, Rispaïn is often cited as a warning against the perils inherent in dating prehistoric sites by surface appearances alone.

The excavations produced evidence for occupation of the interior of the site, including at least three substantial, circular, timber-built roundhouses, and also for a timber-built gatehouse closing off the single causeway through its ditch and ramparts. Investigations also demonstrated the impressive original depth of the silt-filled ditch and the existence of an additional lesser outer ditch, running outside the defences on the south and west sides. As the excavations were limited in extent, it is highly likely that more extensive remains survive in situ, despite ploughing and unrecorded earlier excavations.

Key aspects of Rispaïn Camp's significance include the following:

- The evidence for Late Iron Age enclosed settlement on a relatively small scale (as compared with the more familiar hillforts of the earlier Iron Age).
- The extent to which it typifies, or is exceptional to, the generality of late prehistoric settlement in lowland Scotland (and specifically south-west Scotland), and how it has been referenced in developing theories of Iron Age architecture, society and economy.
- Its history of antiquarian and archaeological interest, (mis)classification and investigation, including its association with General Pitt-Rivers through his friendship with leading Scottish antiquarian Sir Herbert Maxwell of Monreith, who lived nearby.
- The small but significant finds assemblage (including at least one lost artefact of considerable interest). While it appears that the site may have been occupied during the brief Roman presence in far south-west Scotland, none of the artefacts so far recovered indicate contact or trade with the Roman world.
- The possibility of surviving undisturbed deposits capable of providing further information about the site's construction and occupation.
- The site's relationship to other archaeological and landscape features – notably to nearby Whithorn, where the important and much-excavated settlement of Early Christian and later date had been occupied from an earlier date than Rispaïn.

⁶ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983

- Its conservation, use and presentation as an Ancient Monument: Rispain was taken into Guardianship in 1890, so was among the earliest sites in Scotland to come into State care, and one of the first to do so which had not been specifically named in the 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act.

The above paragraphs outline the key significance of Rispain Camp. The following pages give a fuller background and analysis of the site.

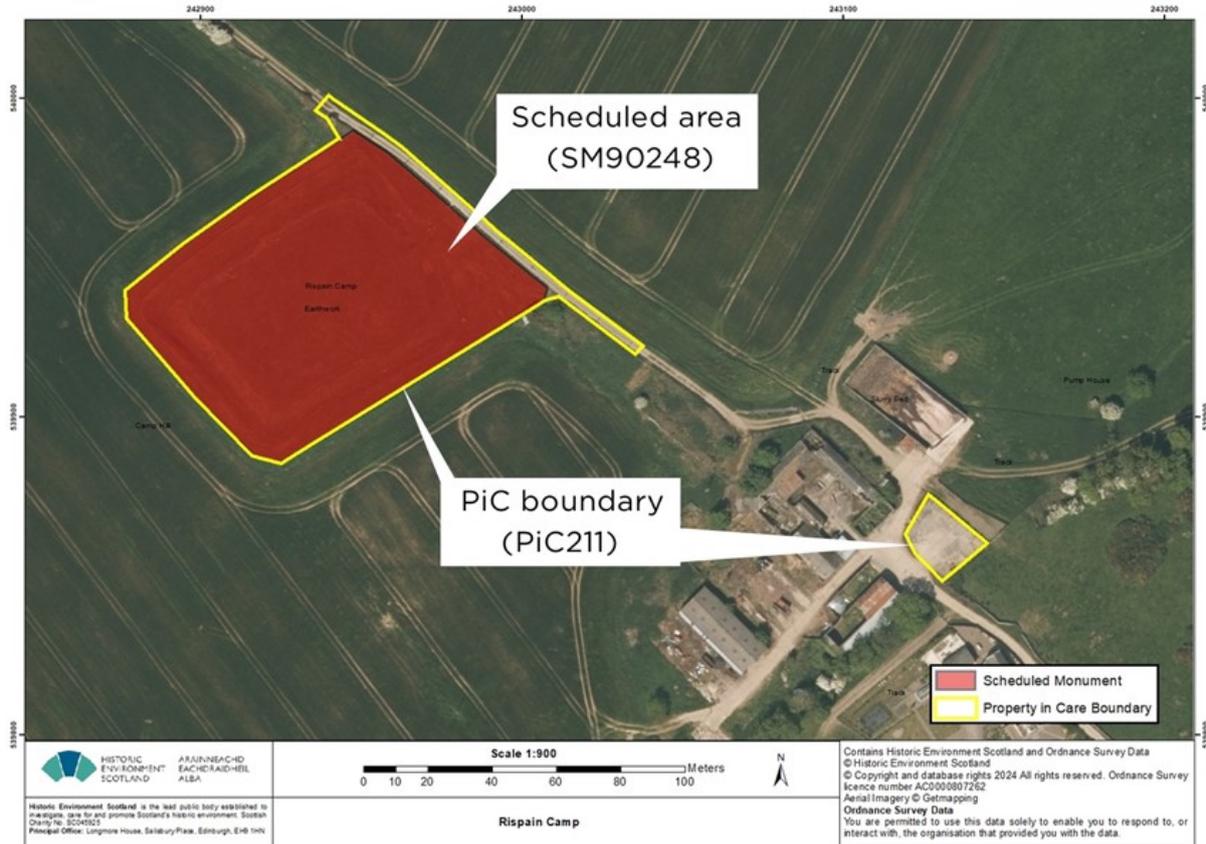


Figure 1: Scheduled Area and Property in Care (PIC) boundary of Rispain Camp, with visitor carparking area to its south-east. For illustrative purposes only.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

2.1.1 Context: Iron Age settlement in southern Scotland

Early Iron Age settlement in southern Scotland was characterised by enclosures, ranging in scale and extent from major hillforts and palisaded settlements to much smaller-scale sites. The boundaries enclosing settlements of this period (at least, those which have been examined by excavation) appear to have been intended to act as defences against human attackers, being built on a scale which would be excessive if the exclusion of marauding animals was their primary objective. Ditches with

stone or earthen ramparts are the norm, and there is frequent evidence for stout wooden palisades and elaborate gateways. Control of access was clearly of great significance.

By the second century BC, the earliest date at which Rispaan may have been constructed, patterns of settlement had changed.⁷ There is good evidence that forts and other large enclosures had ceased to be maintained, and in some cases, they had clearly been abandoned (for example, houses were built over the former defences of the fort at **Edin's Hall**,⁸ and over the former palisaded enclosure at Dryburn Bridge⁹). The majority of houses were now set in open settlements, though probably surrounded by less substantial boundaries such as stake fences or hedges.

Although few sites of this period have been explored in south-west Scotland, if the pattern there followed that in the south-east, described above, then Rispaan would have been unusual in continuing to be enclosed by stout defences. It has been suggested that, as society became more settled, enclosure changed from being a necessary defensive precaution for all, to being an indicator of higher social status. The quality of some of the artefacts recovered from Rispaan may support the theory that the occupants were of high status.

Society at the time seems to have been organised within a 'chiefdom' model, with power and status more widely distributed than in the earlier Iron Age, when hillforts suggest regional hierarchies on a larger geographical scale. Increasingly, social rank may have depended as much on intangible matters (such as descent or special skills) as on conventional wealth (such as holdings of cattle or extent of ploughland). There is evidence from across Scotland and further afield that portable wealth, in the form of jewellery and other fine metalwork, was becoming increasingly important as a means of displaying status.

The environmental evidence points to mixed farming, with cattle prominent, but sheep, goats and pigs also raised. Crops included wheat and barley. Wild foodstuffs were also important, including venison, birds and fish. Some 'wild' resources may have been managed, including woodland: fencing and maintaining a substantial enclosure and large wooden houses would have required large quantities of timber, ideally of regular form.

The landscape of late first millennium lowland Scotland, including that around Rispaan, had long since ceased to be truly wild,¹⁰ and most settlements would have stood at the centre of extensive areas of cleared

⁷ Armit 1997, 86 etc

⁸ Dunwell 1999. Throughout the text, site names in **bold** are managed by Historic Environment Scotland and are publicly accessible. Access information can be found at: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/

⁹ Triscott 1982

¹⁰ Armit 1997, 76

and cultivated land, with livestock grazing on poorer soils and pockets of woodland between. Marshy valley bottoms would have provided hay for overwintering stock.

Palaeoenvironmental research at Rispain Mire,¹¹ around 300m to the south of the site, revealed that by the Iron Age the landscape had been virtually cleared of native woodland; hazel and birch were both still present, but in lower levels than previously seen. An increase in alder was detected but still at low levels. The researchers highlighted that the dramatic increase in diversity of herbaceous ‘weedy’ taxa was indicative of widespread agricultural land, with the landscape dominated by open pasture and arable cultivation.¹²

Rispain’s site would have represented a prime location, with access to a range of domesticated and wild terrestrial resources, and the added bonus of being only four kilometres from the sea. The presence of copper ore in the immediate vicinity may have been important: although there is no clear evidence that it was worked at this date, its location near to the surface makes this likely.

A cautionary note is in order here, however. General understanding of the period is based almost entirely upon sites many kilometres from Rispain. Until very recently, most research into the Iron Age of southern Scotland has been concentrated in the eastern coastal plain,¹³ and there had been no large-scale excavations in the south-west to compare against those such as Broxmouth,¹⁴ St Germain’s¹⁵ and Dryburn Bridge.¹⁶ The nearest area to Rispain which has been even moderately well-explored is eastern Dumfriesshire, where excavations at Boonies,¹⁷ Castle O’er¹⁸ and Overrig¹⁹ have suggested a relatively impoverished material culture compared with sites further east. However, recent excavations at Black Loch of Myrton, only eight kilometres away from Rispain, are providing a rich assemblage of structural, artefactual and environmental evidence from waterlogged deposits associated with an enclosed settlement on the edge of a small loch.²⁰ Once fully analysed, this will offer a much more complete picture of the material culture and economy of the local area in the centuries just before Rispain came into being.

¹¹ Ramsay *et al* 2007, 35

¹² Ramsay *et al* 2007, 53

¹³ Banks 2002

¹⁴ Armit and McKenzie 2013

¹⁵ Alexander and Watkins 1998

¹⁶ Triscott 1982

¹⁷ Jobey 1975

¹⁸ Mercer 2018

¹⁹ Mercer 2018

²⁰ Cavers and Crone, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019



Figure 2: Aerial view of site from north-east © Crown Copyright: HES.

2.1.2 Descriptive overview

Rispain Camp is situated at the eastern end of a low hill, at 76m above mean sea-level. The outlook to the south and east is open, across the shallow valley of a small stream (the Ket) towards the coast, with the sea just visible. To the north and west, the skyline is formed by slightly higher ground, but this is some distance away, so there is no nearby 'dead ground'.

The visible remains take the form of a near-rectangular enclosure, aligned north-east/south-west and bounded by a 2.5m deep ditch with a V-shaped profile, flanked by both an inner and a (slighter) outer bank. The area enclosed by these features is 64m north-east/south-west by 48m north-west/south-east. Across the ditch and outer bank, the enclosure's overall measurements are 88m north-east/south-west by 71m. The interior has a gentle slope towards the single entrance causeway, located at the centre of the north-east side. Along this side, the ditch and banks are not so well-preserved, having been damaged by a farm track (since relocated further away). In this area, the profile of the ditch, and the banks, were restored in the early 1980s to match the remainder of the perimeter, following partial excavation.



Figure 3: Roundhouse under excavation © Crown copyright.

2.1.3 Features revealed by excavation but not visible on site today

Excavations were conducted between 1978 and 1981, encompassing about 15 percent of the site's interior, plus sections through and beyond the defences. These revealed a number of features which are not currently visible on the ground.



Figure 4: Section excavated through main ditch. © Crown copyright.

A shallow outer ditch, first noted during a rudimentary excavation in 1901,²¹ was confirmed, running outside the defences on the south and west sides. The partially silted-up main ditch was shown to be of variable depth; up to 4.2m below the original ground surface and averaging 3.4m deep. The excavators suggested that the two banks flanking it might have stood as much as 2m above the former ground surface: this would have represented a formidable barrier. At the inner end of the entrance causeway through the ditch were found post-holes which were interpreted as evidence for a timber-built gateway. Within the interior, the main finding was the remains of a timber-built round-house in the form of a continuous stone-packed ditch, interpreted as the setting for a plank-built wall, plus a ring of post-holes which would have carried the weight of a tall, conical, roof. This building had two separate entrances. A small part of the circuit of a second building, apparently of similar size and character, was also found. Unfortunately, the sub-soil surface within the interior had been heavily ploughed and also affected by more recent drainage works, making it impossible to tell if the two buildings were contemporary or sequential in date. A series of radiocarbon dates,²² taken together, suggested that the main ditch and the complete house foundation were created during the last century BC or the first two centuries AD. Relatively few artefacts were found, with those which offered any suggestion of date consistent with first two centuries AD.²³

2.1.4 Early antiquarian interest and activity

Rispain was recognised as an ancient site from at least the late 18th century, and initially classified as a Roman Camp.²⁴ It is marked thus on the First Edition Ordnance Survey map of the area (surveyed in 1849). Rispain was described by Christison in 1898 as a 'redoubt', a type of small rectangular fortification which he believed to be Roman.²⁵ Although later proven to be erroneous, this firm belief that Rispain was Roman was probably instrumental in its survival through the upheavals of agricultural change which reconfigured the local landscape during the 19th century. Had it been known to be 'merely' a native site, it might not have fared so well.

Rispain was not immune from disturbance, however, and two artefacts of note were recovered during the 19th century. A 'round plate of copper about the size of a soup plate, weighing 11 or 12 pounds [5.0 or 5.4 kg]' was

²¹ Barbour 1902

²² C14 Radiocarbon dating index for site accessible at:
<https://canmore.org.uk/c14index/63122>

²³ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983

²⁴ Rev Isaac Davidson, writing in the Statistical Account of Scotland 1795, claimed that Whithorn was the capital of the Novantae, the tribe record as possessing this area in Ptolemy's Geography. OSA 276-7 and 288.

²⁵ Christison 1898, 62 and 271

found about 80 centimetres down during drainage works.²⁶ (The drainers also reported coming upon an arrangement of large flat stones containing ‘a quantity of decayed matter, which emitted an indescribable stench’.)²⁷ A bronze axe was ‘turned up by the plough’²⁸ just outside the camp towards the end of the century. Obtained by a local antiquarian, Dr Douglas, it was exhibited in the Palace of History at the Glasgow Exhibition of 1911 and is now in the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow.²⁹

Sir Herbert Maxwell of Monreith, a neighbouring landowner, was a keen antiquarian. He was instrumental in several local monuments being included in the Schedule to the 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act, though Rispain was not one of these. However, he developed a lively friendship with General Pitt-Rivers, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments, who was appointed under that Act, and in 1890 Rispain Camp was passed into State care via Order in Council (see Appendix 2 for further detail).

Through its connection to the Maxwell of Monreith family, Rispain Camp is understood to have a ‘property’ empire connection.³⁰ Sir Herbert E. Maxwell Bart (1845–1937) was a major landowner in late Victorian Scotland. His commitment to and pursuit of antiquarianism led to the preservation of historic sites across the region. The family had major imperial connections, and through Herbert E. Maxwell’s maternal line, the Shaw-Stewart family, connections to Caribbean slavery. It is not clear how much of that family’s fortunes made it into the Maxwell family, but there was undoubtedly some transfer of wealth, which may have played a role in the preservation of sites.³¹

In 1901 Sir Herbert provided £50 to cover the cost of an excavation, and permission was given by the Board of Works and by the landowner, Mr R Johnston Stewart of Glasserton (who was Sir Herbert’s nephew). The work

²⁶ This now vanished artefact bears comparison with the much larger copper ingots found at **Edin’s Hall** broch, Berwickshire, which were possibly made of locally mined copper and from their context are assumed to be of Iron Age date. There were certainly copper mines in the area of Whithorn in medieval and later times, so the Rispain ‘plate’ may have been a local product too. Such finds were apparently not unusual in the late 18th century: ‘Upon the lands of Tonderghie, pieces of fine copper have been often found. Lately, a piece of a circular form was found, weighing 3 stone and 5 lb avoirdupois [21.3 kg]; and six pieces in an earthen vessel were discovered in the garden of one of his tenants.’ Davidson 1795, 285.

²⁷ McIlwraith 1877

²⁸ Barbour 1902, 625

²⁹ Schmidt and Burgess 1981, 107 (no. 685) (provenanced to Glasserton). Noted as B.1914.276 within the Hunterian catalogue [GLAHM:B.1914.276 \(gla.ac.uk\)](https://gla.ac.uk/collections/hunterian/B.1914.276)

³⁰ ‘Property’ connection describes land or buildings owned by either an established propertied family which participated in the Empire, or a recently enriched family which, through involvement in colonial activities, acquired the means to secure property. For a full definition of typology and to download the full report visit HES website: [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c. 1600-1997 \(historicenvironment.scot\)](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/research-and-consultation/surveying-and-analysing-connections-between-properties-in-care-and-the-british-empire-c-1600-1997).

³¹ Mullen *et al* 2024, 60-61.

was undertaken by James Barbour, who had previously dug at other sites including Birrenswark and Raeburnfoot. Barbour dug two transverse trenches across the site, and, unfortunately for his archaeological successors ‘turned over’ much of the interior. He found little of note except for the previously unknown outer ditch, but his brief report very significantly did not mention the site’s previous Roman attribution, referring to it as a ‘camp or earthwork’. He did, however, recover two incomplete human skulls; the more complete of the two had apparently been pierced at the back, and was found in the ditch, halfway between the central gateway and the east corner. The leading antiquarian anatomist of the day, Dr T H Bryce, noted that it possessed ‘no characters which would distinguish it from a modern skull from the same district.’³²

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS), in describing the site in its 1912 Inventory, adopted a neutral position regarding its possible Roman nature, stating that its features were ‘not inconsistent with that attribution’.³³ Following a rapid re-survey of the area in the 1950s, the RCAHMS view changed, to the view that Rispain was most likely medieval. This became the new orthodoxy, with the site now regarded as a homestead moat,³⁴ even though RCAHMS itself was more circumspect, stating that it was ‘a medieval earthwork of some kind, possibly a castle site rather than a homestead moat in view of the defensive nature of the ditch.’

2.1.5 Maintenance and conservation activity

When the site came into State care, the north-east side had largely been flattened, with a stretch of the ditch almost completely infilled and both banks reduced, though the entrance causeway was still visible. A hedge ran at an angle over the outer bank with a farm track just beyond it.³⁵

In 1912 metal post and wire fences were erected on the inner and outer banks, to protect the visible ditch,³⁶ but as was common practice at this time the interior of the site continued in agricultural use. This state of affairs may have been encouraged by the 1901 excavations which had ‘turned over a considerable portion of the interior’ but had noted nothing of interest.³⁷ There are anecdotal accounts of the interior having been ploughed for vegetable cultivation and used for cattle pasture up until the mid-1970s. A farm track ran across the north edge of the site, causing some

³² Barbour 1902, 621-626. The human skull fragments are within the collections of the National Museums Scotland (NMS) and are currently (2021) displayed within the Scotland Galleries. The NMS catalogue notes that they are ‘showing signs of possible ritualised mutilation’: [Cranium \(X.ET 74\) \(nms.ac.uk/search-our-collections\)](https://nms.ac.uk/search-our-collections) and [Cranium \(X.ET 75\) \(nms.ac.uk/search-our-collections\)](https://nms.ac.uk/search-our-collections)

³³ RCAHMS 1912, xxxi

³⁴ Feachem 1956, 64; Piggott and Simpson 1970, 105

³⁵ Plan and description in Barbour 1902, 622

³⁶ MW1-778

³⁷ Barbour 1902, 623

damage to the outer bank, and it is possible that the ditch was partly infilled in this sector.

In the mid-1970s this position was reviewed. The decision was taken to replace the farm track with one a little further away, and to take the interior out of cultivation. Excavations were commissioned (see below); initially to explore the damaged north-east side of the enclosure but then expanded to examine other parts of the site.³⁸ After this, the ditch and banks on the north-east side were restored to a profile resembling the rest of the perimeter. The old iron post and wire fence was removed and replaced with a new fence set beyond the outer bank. The area within the new fence was set down to grass: originally this was mown only occasionally,³⁹ but more recent years have seen regular mowing and the creation of a short green sward. The first of a series of information panels was erected soon afterwards.

In recent years the only changes have been the erection of updated information panels. The site has been recorded by laser scanning, providing an objective digital record which will underpin future conservation work. There are currently no significant threats to the integrity of the site, apart from the ever-present risk of rabbit or mole incursions.



Figure 5: Reconstruction illustration, showing possible configuration of settlement within an inhabited Iron Age landscape. Produced by artist JG O'Donoghue for HES on-site interpretation panel. © Historic Environment Scotland.

³⁸ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983, 26

³⁹ Photograph in Ritchie 1988, 65

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Rispain is high for what its physical fabric, location and setting can tell us about settlement during the Later Iron Age; and for its potential to yield further information through ongoing research and investigation. However, its unusual form, for which there are few comparator sites (none excavated or in State care), means that it is hard to know how far evidence from Rispain can be extrapolated to contribute to a picture of the wider state of society in the area at this period.

The 1978-81 excavations allowed the original profile of the ditches and banks to be estimated with a fair degree of accuracy, although arguably not sufficiently to justify the subsequent reinstatement of the banks along the damaged north-east side. The ditch profile here was distinct, but the banks were not clearly evident in the excavation trenches. That said, the state of erosion of this area means that any surviving evidence of the lower levels of the banks had probably been removed, and the reconstructed appearance seems plausible enough.

These excavations confirmed that, despite several episodes of drainage, many years of cultivation and earlier antiquarian digging, significant archaeological evidence survives within the interior. However, this takes the form of deeper pockets of deposits lying in features cut into the subsoil, such as post-holes, wall trenches, drains and pits. Unfortunately, surface features such as former floors appear to have been largely destroyed, so that it is now difficult to demonstrate the links between, and the sequence of, individual cut features. The evidence recovered tends to point towards a single, relatively short-lived period of occupation.

The timber-built house (represented by a wall-trench and a ring of post-holes revealed through excavation) appeared to be respected by the small portion of a second, apparently similar, house nearby, with a ditch running between them – this points to both buildings having been upstanding at the same time. There were no obvious signs of re-building or repair along the wall-lines, nor of re-cutting in the main boundary ditch. Although the excavated area was only about 15 percent of the interior, it should be emphasised that nothing is known about the rest of the interior, so that the attractively drawn artist's impression⁴⁰ goes beyond the known facts. The enclosed space could have held anything up to eight houses of similar size, but there is currently no proof that it did. This is significant in considering the nature of the settlement: it remains uncertain whether it was a single farmstead or a small defended hamlet.

Despite earlier interventions, the site retains considerable archaeological potential:

⁴⁰ Ritchie 1988, 66

- The majority of the fill of the boundary ditches, and the surfaces under the banks, remain largely undisturbed. Hence, they may hold deposits with the potential to provide additional evidence relating to contemporary land-use and economic activity and towards more precise dating of the enclosure, including with the application of future techniques yet to be developed.
- The area immediately inside the entrance way produced evidence for a 'metalled' (or cobbled) surface, behind what is interpreted as a gateway. This cobbled surface may seal earlier deposits, which could contribute similarly.
- On the evidence of the excavated portion, the rest of the interior is likely to contain further features cut into the subsoil, and may contain more extensive former surface deposits. All of which might help to establish the unanswered question of the duration of occupation of the site as well as the overall layout and utilisation of space, and whether this changed over time.

The finds from excavations were few in number, with a complete lack of prehistoric pottery (a feature not uncommon in Later Iron Age southern Scotland). Two small pieces of worked flint look more like gunflints from more recent times (perhaps the waterlogged ditches were frequented by wildfowl, so that the site offered duck-hunting opportunities). Two small fragments of glass from the site have been mislaid. However, there were a small number of outstanding metalwork finds. Setting aside two older finds, (the now lost copper plate found in 1851 and the Bronze Age axe found outside the site) the more recent excavations produced:

- A small bronze object with coloured enamel inlay, without precise parallel but possibly part of a bracelet and datable in its style to the first two centuries AD.⁴¹
- A socketed iron adze or hoe, its form consistent with a similar date.
- A broken pair of iron tongs, notable for their unusually large size, at 75.5 centimetres long. Their length strongly suggests that they were intended for use at very high temperatures and were therefore likely used for metalworking – most probably ironworking. To date, no evidence has been recovered to suggest that this took place on the site itself, and indeed there is currently little evidence of ironworking elsewhere in Iron Age Dumfries and Galloway. It is likely that they represented high status items, which were consciously deposited, rather than being something which would have been casually discarded or lost.⁴² Taken as a group, the Rispaan metal finds strongly suggests that the site was held by a family with high social status, perhaps engaged in local metal mining, working and

⁴¹ Discussed by Dr Joanna Close-Brooks in Haggarty and Haggarty 1983, 47-48

⁴² Dr G. Cruickshanks, pers. comm.

exchange. Further investigation might produce more evidence in this regard.

A limited volume of further artefactual remains included bread wheat and barley, bone fragments from cattle, sheep and pig, supporting the hypothesis of a mixed farming economy, but the total quantity available for analysis means this must be only an indicative suggestion.

2.3 Historical values

The primary historical importance of Rispain lies in its potential to contribute to evidence-based narratives describing how society in Late Iron Age southern Scotland may have operated and changed. It also offers evidence to support considerations of how that society exploited local resources. However, the absence of securely dated sites of the same period currently limits that potential.

Rispain also has the potential to contribute to understanding local circumstances preceding the emergence of nearby Whithorn as an early Christian and medieval power centre. It may be that copper mining in the area of Whithorn, beginning in prehistoric times, had led to its emergence as a regional focus of wealth and power, thus influencing the choice of St Ninian when locating his religious establishment.

The significance of the name, Rispain, has attracted some discussion: one suggestion is that it is derived from Brythonic (ancient British) *rhwospen* ('chief of the cultivated country')⁴³ but an alternative of Norse derivation *hryssa pund* ('mares enclosure or pound') has also been suggested.⁴⁴ The first derivation would be consistent with the high social status suggested for the site.

⁴³ M'Kerlie 1906, 480

⁴⁴ Maxwell 1930, 237 [This was one of Sir Herbert Maxwell's final publications.]



Figure 6: The main ditch and banks as viewed today; when freshly cut, there would have been an impressive distance between the base of the ditch, and the top of the banks either side. © Crown Copyright HES.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

When complete, the monument would have been an imposing form, particularly when viewed from the exterior. Haggarty and Haggarty's excavations across the main ditch revealed an average depth of 3.4m, suggesting that when this material was originally extracted, the resulting banks would have been considerably higher than present. There would have hence been a sizeable distance from the top of the banks to the base of the freshly-cut ditch; likely around 5.8m in depth, and therefore presenting a formidable barrier.⁴⁵ This was breached by a single entrance, or causeway, in the centre of the north-east side of the monument. On excavation, this gap was found to contain three postholes, which may have supported some form of gate structure to fully enclose the circuit and further control access. Leading from this feature to the interior were the remains of a 'metalled' surface of compacted stones, not dissimilar to the arrangement at the site of Boonies in Dumfriesshire.⁴⁶ Clearly this would have been an impressive approach for those afforded access to the interior of the enclosure. The apparently stout defences, and the resources required to facilitate their creation, may in fact have been a conscious

⁴⁵ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983, 40

⁴⁶ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983, 41 and Jobey 1975.

demonstration of the high social status of the occupants within, rather than a strictly defensive endeavour (see 2.1.1 above).

The architectural details of Later Iron Age enclosures and roundhouses have been studied through excavations at a number of sites in eastern Scotland, but there have been relatively few excavations in the south and west.

Although there is a wide range of size and constructional detail amongst these, the house excavated at Rispain is a fairly typical example. A stout ring of free-standing, floor-set posts, the tops of which may have been connected by a ring-beam, served to take the main weight of the roof. The roof probably over-sailed the outer wall of the house, which was not required to carry much vertical load. The outer wall was constructed at least partly of planks, reinforced by upright posts.⁴⁷ Wattle, perhaps covered with daub, seems also to have featured in the construction, perhaps for sub-divisions within the house. Its floor area, of about 140 square metres, is comparable with the size of a modest contemporary three-bedroomed house.

The most noteworthy feature of the Rispain house is that it had two entrances, both apparently original. That on the south-east side (facing the entrance into the enclosure) was slightly wider and provided with stouter posts, while that on the west side was narrower and a less solidly constructed. Houses of this date with two entrances are unusual, however other known examples include Craggleton in Dumfries and Galloway, and St Germain's in East Lothian.⁴⁸

Artists' representations

No early depictions of Rispain are known, with the first published plan appearing in Barbour's 1902 article.⁴⁹

The only published artist's impression appears to be that by Dave Pollock, drawn in the 1980s for use on a new interpretative board.⁵⁰ This stylised line drawing shows four houses of circular plan, which goes rather further than the excavated evidence.

No instances have come to note of the use of Rispain as the inspiration for creative literary or artistic works.

⁴⁷ A local comparator to this vertically-set plank walling, was found during the Black Loch of Myrton excavations, see: [AOC. Scotland's Loch Village: Black Loch of Myrton \(aocarchaeology.com\)](http://aocarchaeology.com).

⁴⁸ Alexander and Watkins 1998

⁴⁹ Barbour 1902, 622

⁵⁰ This appears in Ritchie 1988

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Rispain is a pleasant site, easily accessed and forming a small island of well-cared-for grass in an arable landscape. It offers open views to the east and south, including that of the small, historic town of Whithorn, clearly visible, and distant glimpses of the sea.

The site is distinctive from the air, and oblique aerial views of various dates have been published and are held in the National Record of the Historic Environment.⁵¹

2.6 Natural heritage values

The local habitat is semi-improved acid/neutral grassland of some value to wildlife. The site itself and the land immediately around Rispain are not currently (2021) designated for the protection of species or habitats.

Visitors to the site pass between fields, mainly of sown grass, though other arable crops are also grown. According to the season, a variety of farmland birds are usually audible or visible, for example skylarks *Alauda arvensis*. Being near the coast, seagulls are often overhead, especially when ploughing is taking place.

Geologically, the superficial deposits of the site are Devensian Till, overlying Greywacke beds of the Kirkmaiden Formation.⁵² In the areas excavated in 1978-81, the undisturbed subsoil was found to be clay, with stones mostly local in origin, plus some glacial erratics of granite.⁵³

2.7 Contemporary/use values

To date, there has not been a formal assessment of the value of Rispain Camp to contemporary communities, either of geography or interest. However, the site is well regarded by the local community, and its presence is championed by the Whithorn Trust. The significance of the site for tourism, and to the local community, has recently been highlighted as part of the Whithorn Trust's development of the Whithorn Way pilgrimage route.⁵⁴ The segment of route from Whithorn to the Isle of Whithorn passes directly through Rispain, and the site features in drone footage in the *Walk the Whithorn Way* film and free walkers' app.⁵⁵ A suite of printed leaflets

⁵¹ Accessible at: [Canmore ID 63122 - Rispain Camp \(canmore.org.uk\)](https://canmore.org.uk/id/63122)

⁵² [BGS Geoindex \(onshore\)](https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/onsshore/), [BGS Map Viewers \(bgs.ac.uk\)](https://www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/)

⁵³ Haggarty and Haggarty 1983, 22

⁵⁴ A modern-day pilgrimage of 147 miles from Glasgow Cathedral, now being marketed and waymarked.

⁵⁵ [Walk 13: Whithorn to Isle of Whithorn 8 miles \(whithorn.com\)](https://www.whithorn.com/walk-13-whithorn-to-isle-of-whithorn-8-miles)

with OS maps accompanies the route, and highlight this and other monuments along the way.

Coupled with this, the site has attracted increased numbers of local walkers and visitors after the creation of a new footpath⁵⁶ leading to the site from **Whithorn Priory**, and onwards towards Glasserton; it is ultimately hoped to extend the path to **St Ninian's Cave** and link with the Isle of Whithorn.⁵⁷

In 2017, the Whithorn Trust opened a new, full-scale reconstruction Iron Age roundhouse on their site at the Nursery Field, Whithorn, based on one of the Middle Iron Age buildings excavated at Black Loch of Myrton in 2013-2018. The Whithorn roundhouse was created as a skills training project and also served to refocus attention towards the earlier (pre)history of the area, prior to the arrival of Christianity.

Perhaps because of its name, Rispaun is still sometimes described as a Roman Camp. It is visited by those from further afield who are interested in heritage. Although there are no official figures, it is thought that there were approximately 1220 visitors to the site in the year 2018-2019.

Images of the site have very occasionally been used in specialist archaeological guides and reference works, but it does not usually feature in general guidebooks.

On-site interpretation is currently provided by a single interpretation board, and it is way-marked from the main road by a metal direction post.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

Please note, the research for this document was undertaken during 2020-2021 with limited access to archives and resources, as a result of Covid-19. While every attempt was made for accuracy throughout the statement, errors or omissions may remain. Please direct comments or suggestions to CRTenquiries@hes.scot

The lack of excavated sites means that local evidence to support an understanding of the Iron Age in south-west Scotland is virtually non-existent.⁵⁸ Interpretations have instead been extrapolated from other areas,

⁵⁶ Created by the Whithorn Trust, in conjunction with Dumfries and Galloway Council and with additional funds from NLHF and Dumfries and Galloway LEADER Programme 2014-2020.

⁵⁷ In 2021, a further footbridge is being installed in the shelterbelt, enabling walkers to cross the Ket Burn, avoiding Rispaun Farm Road. This completes a network of local paths which have been supported by the local Council, Paths for All, and Royal Burgh of Whithorn and District Community Council. The footpath from Whithorn is maintained by the Whithorn Trust volunteers and has been notably used during the Covid-19 pandemic by local families walking to Rispaun for exercise.

⁵⁸ Banks 2002

usually the south-eastern coastal plain and eastern Borders, even though the regional variability of Later Iron Age settlement patterns has long been recognised.⁵⁹ There are relatively few large hillforts, and only a few coastal forts (one of which, **Barsalloch** promontory fort, is in State care but is unexcavated). So Rispain is left in splendid isolation, as the only site of this period in the area about which any detailed information currently exists. This situation is slowly changing: recent years have seen major excavations at Black Loch of Myrton, on an enclosed settlement of slightly earlier date, but the results are not yet published (2021).

At present, though, it would not be unreasonable to take the view that *any* new information about the Later Iron Age in the area would be of great value. However, it is possible to sketch out a short list of unanswered questions about Rispain, together with how these might be addressed:

- How does Rispain fit into the local Late Iron Age settlement pattern? Tackling this question would require a major programme of regional survey and multiple excavations. A limited start might be made by examining **Barsalloch Fort** or another coastal fort to establish if such sites are contemporary with Rispain.
- Is Rispain's proximity to Whithorn coincidental? Now that the excavation report from the 1980s excavations at Whithorn is available, it might be informative to look at the evidence from Whithorn for later prehistoric occupation to compare with that at Rispain.
- What was Rispain's internal layout when completed: was it a single dwelling with several ancillary buildings, or a small cluster of dwellings? This has implications for its social status, with a single-house plan being more likely to indicate higher social status. Further investigation might have a chance of resolving this: recent advances in dating techniques can now offer a precision which was totally unfeasible at the time of the 1978-1981 dig.
- Was the site occupied before the enclosure was built, and if so, what was the nature of that occupation? The excavators indicated one or two areas where there seemed to be earlier deposits but accessing these would require excavation with no guarantee of success.
- Can additional information be extracted from the artefacts found during the 1978-1981 excavations, for example by comparing trace elements in the bronze with local copper deposits? Could more be discovered about patterns of trade and exchange?
- Can we be sure that the site as seen today represents a genuine survival rather than having been refreshed at some unrecorded date? It appears to have survived very much better than almost every other

⁵⁹ Hingley 1998, 44

late prehistoric earthwork in the area: in particular, there are no obvious signs of it ever having been wooded.

- We know that the lower deposits in at least one part of the ditch are of Late Iron Age date, but is this the case around the whole circuit? Palaeoenvironmental analysis of a small ditch section might offer an insight into the site's vegetation history, and confirm or reject the proposition that it remained in good condition partly because the ditches were naturally waterlogged from the start?
- The notion of structured deposition at the site warrants further consideration, particularly with regards to the large pair of iron tongs, and the incomplete human skull, which was found to have been pierced. The latter was recovered from the main ditch, at the point halfway between the gateway and the eastern corner. Examples of 'special deposits' have been recovered from many other Iron Age pits and ditches and enclosures, perhaps marking the symbolic significance of these structures as marginal spaces.⁶⁰

Added to the specific questions above, there are major gaps relating to the period to which Rispain Camp belongs. Key Research questions relating to the Iron Age as a whole are contained within the ScARF National Framework Iron Age report.⁶¹

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Associated properties managed by HES

- Barsalloch Fort (fort, Dumfries and Galloway) – probably Iron Age, but exact date compared with Rispain is not known
- Whithorn Priory (medieval church site with excavated evidence for some prehistoric occupation and a major early Christian presence) – and associated Visitor Centre(s)
- Edin's Hall (hillfort, broch and settlement, Scottish Borders) – like Rispain, has produced artefacts made of copper, which may have been locally extracted
- Dundonald Castle (medieval castle on site of earlier fort, East Ayrshire)
- Dumbarton Castle (medieval castle on site of earlier fort, West Dunbartonshire)

⁶⁰ For further discussion on the structured deposition of objects in Iron Age contexts, particularly those including iron artefacts, see Hingley 2006

⁶¹ Accessible at: [ScARF. Iron Age \(scarf.scot\)](https://scarf.scot.nhs.uk/)

5. KEYWORDS

Iron Age; enclosure; Novantae; roundhouse; farm; copper; Rispain Camp; Dumfries and Galloway.

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Note: Footnotes throughout the text offer page numbers where appropriate. If no page number is given, this indicates that reference is being made to the general thrust of the publication cited rather than a specific point of detail.

Further resources

NGR: NX4294139939

Canmore ID: 63122 <https://canmore.org.uk/site/63122/rispain-camp>

C14 Radiocarbon Index: <https://canmore.org.uk/c14index/63122>

Alexander Curle's digitised diary recording site visit to Rispain:
<https://scotlandspplaces.gov.uk/digital-volumes/rcahms-archives/curle-diaries/curle-diary-08/29>

Worked stone in Hunterian collections:
[GLAHM:B.1951.1767 \(www.gla.ac.uk/collections/\)](http://www.gla.ac.uk/collections/)

Bronze Axe in Hunterian collections:
[GLAHM:B.1914.276 \(www.gla.ac.uk/collections/\)](http://www.gla.ac.uk/collections/)

The human remains are now within the collections of NMS, as are a number of stone and flint implements and part of an iron axe:
<https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: TIMELINE

Date	Event
Later Iron Age (c.100 BC to c.200 AD)	Main ditch dug and flanking banks built, with wooden gateway barring access.
(shortly after this)	Circular house(s) built.
c.100 AD to c. 200 AD	Enamelled bronze ?bracelet manufactured and is brought to the site.
By 200 AD	Roundhouse possibly burnt down.
(shortly after this)	Site ceases to be occupied.
Medieval period onwards	Interior cultivated.
Late 18th century	Site comes to antiquarian attention, is believed to be Roman.
19th century, inc. 1851	Stone-lined field drains installed on more than one occasion. During 1851 work, a 'plate' of copper is found, along with what may have been a burial cist.

1880s	Neighbouring landowner and leading antiquary, Sir Herbert Maxwell, draws the attention of Pitt-Rivers to the site.
1890 onwards	Site is passed into State care. A farm track (of uncertain date) runs partly over north-east boundary of site. It is thought that cultivation continued within the interior of the enclosure.
1901	Poorly recorded excavations by Barbour (published 1902).
1911	Visited by RCAHMS, (recorded in Alexander Curle's diary entry of 6th July 1911). ⁶²
1912	Iron fences erected on inner and outer banks. RCAHMS survey drawings published.
1953	RCAHMS revisit – site reclassified as medieval.
1978-81	Excavations by Haggarty and Haggarty.
Early 1980s	Farm track re-routed, fences removed, and new fence line established. Partially infilled stretch of ditch on north-east side cleared out and banks 'reinstated' to match remainder of perimeter.
1980s onwards	Fence repair and new signage – latter regularly updated. Grass mown increasingly regularly.
2020s	Laser scanning undertaken, with view to regular repeat surveys.

APPENDIX 2: GUARDIANSHIP BACKGROUND

Rispain Camp was brought into Guardianship by 'Order in Council' on 8th February 1890.⁶³ This was a mechanism by which sites could be taken into State care through legislation set before and approved by the monarch in front of the Privy Council. It applied specifically to ancient monuments which had not been listed on the original Schedule to the 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act but were 'of a like character' to the monuments listed.⁶⁴

Rispain Camp was exceptional in being brought into State care at this early date, at a point when it was believed to be a Roman site. It was therefore

⁶² Curle's digitised diary is accessible at:

[ScotlandsPlaces. Curle Diary 08. 29 \(scotlandsplaces.gov.uk\)](https://scotlandsplaces.gov.uk/entry/08-29)

⁶³ Chippendale 1983, 55

⁶⁴ Thurley 2013, 41

arguably not 'of a like character' to the almost entirely prehistoric Schedule list. In fact, it was only after the 1900 Ancient Monuments Protection Act that privately owned monuments from historic periods (that is sites which were *not* prehistoric) were systematically taken into care. When Richborough Castle in Kent entered care more than 20 years later in 1911-1912, it was the first guardianship site to have a primary phase which was Roman.⁶⁵

Rispain was one of a suite of monuments in Dumfries and Galloway which, having been offered to the State by their owners Sir Herbert Maxwell and Mr R. Johnstone Stewart, were considered for Guardianship via Order in Council on 3 May 1888. The list included **St Ninian's Cave**, (a natural cave with early Christian carvings), **St Ninian's Chapel** (a roofless medieval chapel associated with St Ninian), **Druchttag Motte** (a medieval earthwork once topped by a timber stronghold) and the **Wren's Egg** (a glacial boulder with two adjacent standing stones). These were all sites which lay outside the intended scope of the 1882 Act, but were ultimately accepted into care, setting a new precedent for State protection.⁶⁶

Rispain Camp and Wren's Egg were in fact originally rejected in 1888, and put forward for Order in Council a second, successful, time in 1890 at the insistence of Pitt-Rivers. His notes state that Rispain Camp 'cannot be said to be a monument of first importance but is much thought of in the neighbourhood and entailing little or no expense...[it] is the first camp of any kind that has been offered to be put under the [1882] Act'.⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that the importance of the site to the local community (or what might now be termed social value) was of consideration in this instance, but perhaps more enlightening that the site presented an opportunity to expand the National Collection of monuments in care, without incurring expense to the Office of Works. A similar positive was noted by Pitt-Rivers in relation to the Wren's Egg, about which he wrote: 'It cannot certainly be said to be an important monument in its present state but Sir Herbert Maxwell wishes to place it under the Act and it will entail little or no expense'.⁶⁸

This perhaps also reveals the pressure applied by the influential and active Maxwell, who was one of the few landowners to give Pitt-Rivers 'energetic and active assistance'⁶⁹ in his implementation of the 1882 Act. As Conservative MP for Wigtownshire, Maxwell had been involved in debates over the first Act for the protection of ancient monuments, and he subsequently played a pivotal role in securing the successful Guardianship

⁶⁵ Fry 2014b, 26. In Scotland, the reputed Roman carving of Eagle Rock entered care in 1913, with Kinneil House (including its Roman remains) in 1937. The majority of Antonine Wall sites currently in State care didn't enter Guardianship until after the 1950s.

⁶⁶ Fry 2014a, 29

⁶⁷ MW1-1290

⁶⁸ Chippendale 1983, 54, in ref to Pitt-Rivers AM3, AM34

⁶⁹ Chippendale 1983, 24

of at least seven sites in Dumfries and Galloway.⁷⁰ He was particularly devoted to demonstrating a Roman presence in Galloway, and a number of Roman sites were excavated during his presidency of the Society of Antiquaries.⁷¹ He drew on his experience of excavation to substantiate his own writing, with his novel, *A Duke in Britain*, focussed on St Ninian's mission to Galloway, featuring a Roman cohort based at Rispain Camp.⁷²

⁷⁰ See Fogel 2019, 29

⁷¹ Murray 2008, 126

⁷² Murray 2008, 126