Early lead smelting in southern Scotland

John Pickin

ABSTRACT: A brief summary is presented of the evidence for medieval and earlier lead smelting in southern Scotland. Antiquarian, place-name and field evidence indicates widespread smelting with concentrations close to the Leadhills-Wanlockhead orefield and in the Manor Valley, Peeblesshire. Four smelting sites have produced 10th-11th century AD radiocarbon dates.

Introduction

For the present purpose southern Scotland comprises the region between the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth south to the English border. Most of the lead deposits in the area occur in the Southern Uplands, a spine of high ground running diagonally across the region from the Galloway Hills in the south-west to the Lammermuir Hills in the north-east. The principal veins are in the small but highly-productive Leadhills/Wanlockhead orefield in the Lowther Hills but significant deposits also occur in Dumfries and Galloway, especially around Newton Stewart and at Carsphairn. In addition, a number of small, dispersed veins occur throughout the region which, although neither historically important nor economically significant, could have been exploited in the past. The distribution of lead veins has been discussed by Wilson and Flett (1921) and is shown in Figure 1.

The documentary evidence for medieval lead mining has been summarised by Harvey (1997). Scottish lead was certainly being mined in the mid-12th century when it is mentioned as one of the duties payable to William the Lion. In 1239 there is a reference to mining at Leadhills-Wanlockhead followed in 1264 by a record of the movement of lead from the same area to Rutherglen. There are no accounts of lead mining during the late 13th or the 14th century, the time of the Anglo Scottish wars, but lead production from Leadhills-Wanlockhead is recorded again after 1466. There is also increasing evidence for lead mining during the prehistoric period. The discovery of a necklace of smelted lead from an Early Bronze Age burial at West Water Reservoir, West Linton (Scottish Borders) suggests that southern Scottish lead deposits—perhaps the nearby silver-lead deposit at Siller Holes, West Linton—were being worked by 2000 BC (Hunter and Davis 1994). Lead objects also occur at a number of Iron Age and Roman sites and lead isotope analysis suggests the Scottish Southern Uplands as a possible ore source for some of these items (Hunter 2007).

The only direct documentary evidence for medieval lead smelting is a record of 1326 relating to the purchase of charcoal ‘with a view to smelting’ at a mine or trial near Loch Fyne in Argyll; this is outside our study area but it demonstrates a knowledge of lead-smelting technology in 14th century Scotland (Harvey 1997, 125). Later medieval records, however, show lead ore being exported from...