
10 Discussion and interpretation of Lambsdale Leans by Janet Hooper

10.1 Introduction

The partially excavated mound of Lambsdale Leans lies in Reay parish, situated on low-lying ground towards the head of Loch Shurrery and close to where its main tributary, the Torran Water, enters the loch. Loch Shurrery lies at the northern edge of this now rather sparsely occupied part of the interior of Caithness. In spite of this, on the slopes of Beinn Freiceadain and Ben Dorrery, just to the east, is one of the largest surviving clusters of archaeological sites in Caithness, a concentration which continues northwards along the Forss Water to the sea. Within this group are sites of both ritual and secular significance and of varying dates, including chambered tombs, standing stones, hut circles and the enigmatic fort of Buaile Oscar on the top of Beinn Freiceadain itself. While this provides no immediate clue as to the place of Lambsdale Leans in the history of the locality, it suggests that this area has always been of some importance.

The main characteristics of the Lambsdale Leans site – the presence of what appear to be two extended inhumations and the remnants of possible structures associated with several layers of burnt material (Illus 14 and 15) – provide the initial starting points in the search for a context for the site. A number of sherds of medieval pottery, coming from the upper layers, provide the only clue to dating these rather diverse strands of evidence (Section 8).

10.2 Lambsdale Leans as a burial site

The change from cremation to extended inhumation burial seems to have occurred during the later prehistoric period, although a variety of burial practices did persist well into the first millennium A.D. (Ashmore 1981, 350ff; Close Brooks 1984, 89). Long cist burial, generally without grave goods, appears to have been the norm in the Early Medieval period throughout much of Scotland (Close Brooks 1984, 94), though again this does disguise a variety of form and association. In many cases, such cists – while still incorporating slab-like stones – were often very roughly constructed. This was true at Reay, on the coast north of Lambsdale Leans, where one of the (?10th-century) burials lay on a paved surface and was surrounded by large stones which, although they covered the burial, could not be described as a cist (Edwards 1927, 203). This recalls Lambsdale Leans; here, again, the excavator believed that, although the burials were not in cists, that there was

some form of arrangement of flat stone slabs around one of the bodies (Section 7.2).

Lambsdale Leans is a natural mound, of elongated shape and composed largely of sand, into which are set the burial and structural remains. Many of the known long cist burials in the north of Scotland also occur in natural mounds. These, as at Reay, and at Keiss (Laing 1870, 38–41) and in the Birkle Hills, near Murkle (Tress Barry 1895), are often sand dunes. In other cases, for example Loch Watenan and Dairy Park, Dunrobin, an artificially constructed cairn covered the cist (Gourlay 1984; Ashmore 1981, 350; Close Brooks 1984, 99–102). Not all mounds utilised in this way were of natural origin; a significant number of long cists have been recovered from broch mounds, such as Crosskirk and Green Tullochs, both in Reay parish (Fairhurst 1984, 101–3; Anderson 1873, 185).

Although many of the accounts of the finds of burials in Caithness and Sutherland are old and confused, a surprising number include references to possibly associated structures. Even if these are not contemporary with the burials, it is perhaps significant that such relationships do occur. At Lambsdale Leans, areas of stone paving and walling form two, small structures, one sub-circular in shape and the other, less complete example, seemingly rectangular in plan. At Lower Dounreay, the structural remains are described as huts (Cruden 1956; see Appendix, Section 11). Although their shape is not recorded, these had clay floors and hearths and may have been contemporary with, or later than, the group of burials with which they were found. In the top of the most northerly mound of the Birkle Hills and overlying the cist burials, a rectangular, slab-built structure contained a re-used Pictish symbol stone (Laing 1870, 49; Tress Barry 1895, 273). At Crosskirk, the seated burial is associated with the main period of occupation of the broch, while the two other cists appear to post-date this main phase of use (Fairhurst 1984, 101–3). These, along with more well-known complexes at Buckquoy and Saevar Howe in Orkney (Ritchie 1977; Hedges 1983), suggests that the transformation of settlement sites into burial places, and apparently vice versa, was a feature of the later first millennium A.D. in Caithness as elsewhere.

[*Ed.*: However, it is only an assumption that the burials are stratigraphically earlier than the structures. It is noticeable that the orientation of the Lambsdale Leans burials – north-east to south-west – is the same as that of the later, aberrant burials in the sequence at John O’Groats (Driscoll 1993, 35) which are radiocarbon-dated to 1520–1656 cal AD (at 1-*sigma*). It is also only an assumption

that the mound, into which the burials were incorporated or inserted, is a natural one and not a burnt mound].

10.3 The structures at Lambsdale Leans

The structural remains themselves, whilst neither was fully excavated, accord well with the general tenor of the available evidence from the north of Scotland. Both structures at Lambsdale Leans had floors comprising roughly laid paving, edged with upright slabs, and with an outer kerb of stones. The form and construction of these structures, particularly this use of uprights, finds parallels amongst the known cellular and rectilinear buildings at Buckquoy and Pool, Sanday on Orkney and the Udal and Cnip in Lewis (Ritchie 1977; Hunter 1990; Crawford n.d., 12; Armit 1996, 164–6). Further, the structures at Lambsdale Leans appear to be of comparable dimensions to the buildings at these sites – the circular structure is around 3.5 m in diameter, while the rectangular structure is of similar width (although not complete enough to determine length). Their scale certainly ensures that these structures are more in keeping with the later first millennium AD buildings in Orkney and Lewis than the hut circles, broch settlements, and wags of the Iron Age in Caithness.

[*Ed.*: It is worth mentioning here the Late Norse site at Huna in Canisbay parish, described as ‘a low irregular [sand] mound . . . made up of a series of structural phases. Sherds of grass tempered pottery were found in association with walls protruding at the upper level’ (Batey 1984, 24 & 58; plate 6A & B)].

10.4 Final comments

While much of this evidence is tantalisingly imprecise, on the arguments presented above Lambsdale Leans correlates well with other known sites in the far north of Scotland. Although the known distribution of burials in this area is primarily coastal, the cairn at Watenan provides a parallel as it is also situated by an inland loch. Lambsdale Leans, therefore, appears to find a place within the context of Early Medieval activity in Caithness. The pottery however suggests that occupation on the site, or perhaps more likely nearby, may have continued into the medieval period.

It must be stressed that the evidence is so fragmentary, due to the conditions under which the excavations had to be carried out and the fact that the work was abandoned, that it is difficult to be certain about any aspect of the Lambsdale Leans site.

[*Ed.*: An alternative interpretation, prompted by the stratified 12th–13th century pottery (Section 8, nos 1–4) in the mound and another structural parallel (the medieval building at Eilean Olabhat: Armit 1996, fig 11.1), might offer an even later date-range than Early Medieval. In this respect, it would be useful to obtain radiocarbon dates for the Lambsdale Leans burials, whose orientation is of some interest, for at present it could be argued that they had been cut from a higher level than was recognised at the time (cf Illus 15: section E–F). The relationship between Cutting A (burials) and Cuttings B–F (structures) seems to have become a casualty of the premature end to the 1955 excavations; the site of course still remains, though it is a Scheduled Ancient Monument].

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