III.

THE NETHER LARGIE CHAMBERED CAIRN, KILMARTIN, ARGYLL.
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The chambered cairns of Scotland have long been the object of great archæological interest, but it is only in recent years that they have come to occupy a more definite position in general prehistory, owing to the new importance they have acquired by comparative study. The megalithic burials of Europe have yielded types too closely related to admit of their resemblance being accidental, and modern research, with its preference for single rather than multiple origins, is now seeking to correlate successive stages over different areas.   It would be premature to indicate whither this new line of study is destined to lead, but one conclusion, at least, can be stated with certainty.   Comparative work of any kind necessitates detailed knowledge, and minute particulars regarding structure which would be considered superfluous in a general survey assume significance when viewed in relation to similar instances elsewhere. The present report on a chambered cairn at Kilmartin in Argyllshire seeks this importance of detailed work as its justification.

The site of the cairn under consideration is near the head of a valley which runs north-westwards from Lochgilphead to the southern end of Loch Awe.   The floor of this valley is a low-lying plain whose peculiar flat monotony suggests that it was probably at one time a sea loch owing its origin to glacial action, of which there are unmistakable traces in the surrounding country.   In the vicinity of the cairn the valley is 2000 feet across and approximately 60 feet above sea-level.   To the east the view from the cairn is bounded by a range of hills which rise abruptly for 700 feet, while to the west the view is more open, since the high ground, though wooded, is broken and undulating.   Southwards, the valley widens before bending east to the head of Loch Gilp, and this affords an extensive vista of about six miles across the intervening plain to the distant hill ranges south of the Crinan Canal.   To the north of the cairn the valley narrows considerably, and the ground becomes more rugged with massive outcroppings of rock.   The view to this quarter is terminated by the church and village of Kilmartin, which are situated on a projecting spur from the eastern foothills about one mile distant.

The cairn itself stands in a hayfield almost due south of Nether Largie farmhouse, from the porch of which its highest point is 76 yards

distant. The exact position of the cairn is, latitude N. 56° 7′ 29″, longitude W. 5° 29′ 39″; while the height of its highest point above mean sea-level is 67·7 feet, obtained by levelling from the Ordnance Survey benchmark on the bridge across the Largie Burn leading to the farmhouse. Almost exactly south of the cairn there is a group of five standing stones, the middle stone of which is 242 yards from the centre of the cairn. There is also a single standing stone, S. 14° W. (true), and at a distance of 152 yards. The cairn is the southernmost of four which lie in a line approximately 800 yards long, whose direction is from N. 18° 47′ E. to S. 18° 47′ W. (true).

In 1864 Canon Greenwell excavated the main chamber and the two secondary cists of the cairn. In a paper which he subsequently communicated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (*Proceedings*, vol. vi. pp. 336-41) he made the following comment:—

"This cairn has originally been a very large one, having a diameter of 134 feet, but the greatest part has been removed many years ago when the stones had been taken for making walls and drains."

Even to-day the tracks of the carts which removed the precious building material can be seen, and the only remains of the original covering mound of loose stones are several heaps lying in the immediate vicinity of the main chamber, and particularly to the north-east. But these can have no significance, since their formation is recent. The real problem with regard to the exterior is the exact determination of the periphery. To the south-east, south-west, and north-west, the margin of the cairn merges imperceptibly into the surrounding field, except for a false demarcation line afforded by the edge of the cut grass. To the north-east there is evidence of a well-made platform 4 inches to 6 inches high. This only extends a short distance to the north-west of the datum line AB (fig. 1), and on the north-east it cannot be traced with certainty further than the point C. The platform may be acting as a base to the superimposed cairn, and such a hypothesis is not without support from other cases of a similar kind, notably a cairn on the Ord, parish of Lairg, Sutherland.[1] More probably it is the outer edge of loose stones overgrown with grass, though it is uncertain whether this outer edge represents the original. Greenwell estimated the diameter as 134 feet, but omitted to note the direction in which this was measured. The present diameter along the datum line AB is 140 feet, assuming the south-western margin to be the edge where the rank growth meets the hayfield. But the circumference of the cairn as shown in the ground plan (fig. 1) is purely conjectural, and is wholly based upon what, to-day,

[1] *Second Report of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland*, "The County of Sutherland," p. 153, No. 443.

appears to form the periphery, which, considering the lapse of time and the notorious spoliation which has been perpetrated, must necessarily
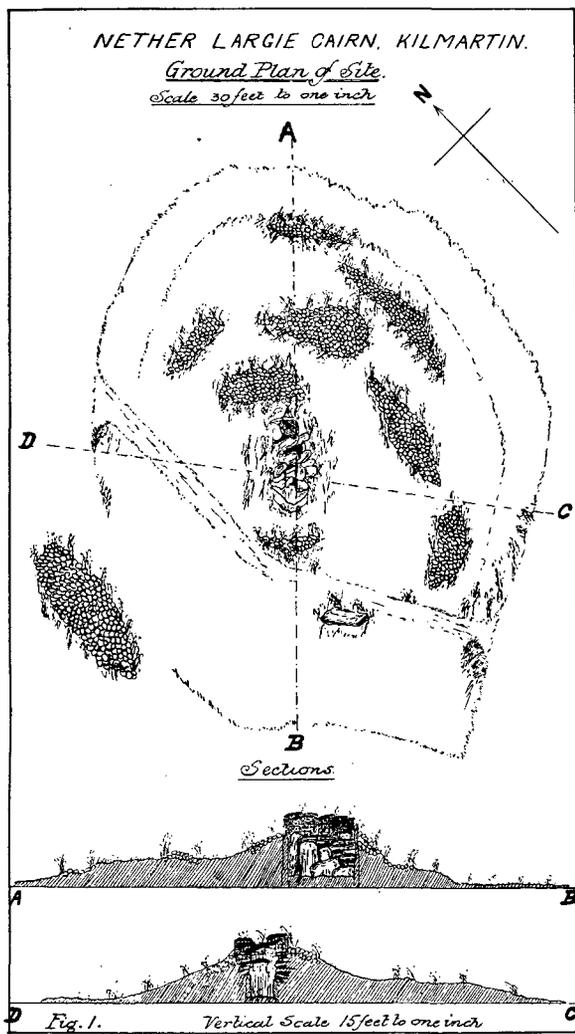

Fig. 1. Nether Largie Chambered Cairn: plan.

be uncertain. About 70 feet south-west of the centre of the cairn is a mound of loose stones partially overgrown with grass. It is oval in shape, approximately 40 feet in length, and at its highest point is raised about 1 foot above ground-level.

The north-eastern end of the main chamber lies 65 feet from the point where the north-eastern periphery crosses the datum line. The chamber, which is oblong on plan, measures 20 feet in length, and lies with its main axis N. 44° E. to S. 44° W. (true). The highest point of the roof inside is 10 feet, while the floor is approximately 1 foot, above ground-level in the surrounding hayfield. The breadth of the chamber varies from 3¼ to 4½ feet, and the height varies from 5½ to 9 feet.

The walls of the chamber are formed of large slabs of schist supplemented by well-made horizontal building, which in its upper reaches has been inclined inwards on the principle of corbelling, which gives support to the overhead roof. Only two of the megaliths which once formed the western wall now remain approximately in their original position (fig. 2). These are the stones T and Q. The former lies at the extreme northern end of the western wall, and measures 5 feet 10 inches in height by 3 feet 9 inches in breadth by 7 inches in thickness. Once upright, it is now fully 3 feet out of the vertical, having, no doubt, been forced inwards towards the centre line of the chamber by the superincumbent mass of earth and stones. Q lies at the extreme southern end of the west wall, and measures 3 feet 8 inches in height by 6 feet 4 inches in breadth by 10 inches in thickness. Between these two stones the wall has collapsed for a distance of 9 feet, in the midst of which the slabs S and R are partially visible (fig. 4). It is fairly clear that their position on the floor of the chamber is not original, but they may have some bearing upon Canon Greenwell's statement that the west wall was formed of four slabs besides walling. The upper reaches of this west wall consist of well-laid horizontal building which has not suffered to any appreciable extent by the ruin below. Immediately south of T this horizontal building gives support to the first cover-stone M at the northern end of the chamber, while above the nine-foot collapse it is still sufficiently strong to carry the weight of the largest roofing slab L (fig. 2). Above Q it has in part been destroyed, in order, no doubt, to afford a practicable entry to excavators.

The eastern wall of the chamber, formed of five megaliths supplemented by horizontal building, is practically intact up to a height of 6 feet (fig. 3). Commencing at the north-eastern end, we have stone F, which measures 5 feet 4 inches in height by 3 feet 2 inches in breadth by 7 inches in thickness. F is now 15 inches out of the vertical, possibly on account of the same reason which forced T from its original position. South of F lie the three slabs—G, measuring 3 feet 10 inches in height by 4 feet 1 inch in breadth and 1 foot 8 inches in thickness; H, measuring 3 feet 8 inches in height by 2 feet 4 inches in breadth by

7 inches in thickness; and I, measuring 2 feet 8 inches in height by 5 feet 4 inches in breadth and 1 foot 3 inches in thickness.   All three

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Figs. 2 to 4. Nether Largie Chambered Cairn: elevations and plan of chamber.

stones are in the same plane, which is inclined inwards, but G and H lie behind I.   The fifth megalith on this eastern wall is the stone N situated at the extreme south-western end and measuring 2 feet in height by 4 feet 3 inches in breadth and 9 inches in thickness.   It is nearly vertical, and corresponds to stone Q on the west.   The horizontal

building on the east wall is in excellent preservation, and for convenience may be divided into two distinct areas. The first is that supported by G and H. Here the slabs employed are comparatively small, since their purpose is to form a corbelled continuation to the stones G, H, and I in order to support the overhead coverstones M and L. The second main area of horizontal building on the east wall is at its extreme south-western end above N. In character this area differs considerably from the first, since the slabs used are long and very thin, their main purpose being to form part of the wall and not to fill up interstices or to support the roof. The following are the measurements of some of the principal slabs of the second area :—

Stones.	Length.	Thickness.
M	5 feet 3 inches	$6\frac{1}{2}$ inches
M$_1$	3 ,, 1 ,,	$5\frac{1}{2}$,,
Y	4 ,, 0 ,,	3 ,,
X	2 ,, 10 ,,	6 ,,

This systematic building is carried up to a height of about 5 feet above the level of the floor. Thereafter it merges into a structure of smaller stones, which, as in the first area, is continued to the overhanging cover-stones A and B, though with only a slight corbel.

The entrance to the main chamber had been at the north-eastern end (fig. 7). Here two upright megaliths C and D, set with their faces in a plane at right angles to the axis of the chamber, have served as jambs for the portal. C, on the west, measures 4 feet 10 inches in height by 2 feet 6 inches in breadth by 1 foot in thickness, while D, in a corresponding position on the east, measures 3 feet 11 inches in height by 2 feet 3 inches in breadth by 7 inches in thickness. In considering the question of a lintel the evidence is not so clear, since there are three stones, each of which would equally well have served the purpose. B, which measures 3 feet 6 inches in length by 1 foot 5 inches in breadth by 5 inches in thickness, is now firmly wedged between the two jambs 3 feet below the highest point of C. E, lying 2 feet south of B on the floor of the chamber, measures 4 feet 6 inches in length by 8 inches in thickness. The fact that E is badly cracked favours the supposition that it has fallen from some previous position. A, which measures 3 feet in length by 11 inches in breadth by 4 inches in thickness, lies north of B, more or less outside the chamber. Besides this accumulation of slabs at the north-east end, there is a great quantity of rubble consist-

ing of earth and water-worn stones which would have to be cleared away before the exact type of entrance could be ascertained.

The south-western end of the chamber, as shown in fig. 7, is formed by one immense slab O, which is nearly vertical and measures 7 feet 7 inches in height by 2 feet 8½ inches in breadth by 6 inches in thickness. A peculiar feature of the structure here is a beam of stone P, which measures 3 feet 9 inches in length by 10 inches in breadth by 6 inches in thickness. It lies horizontally against O about 2 feet from the floor of the chamber, and is retained in this position by being wedged between Q and N. At this point a quotation from Canon Greenwell's paper may serve to elucidate the purpose, not only of P, but possibly of S, R, and even E.

"It [the chamber] is divided into four compartments by three flat slabs placed across the chamber, each being 2 feet 7 inches high, and there was at the extreme south end an oblong stone resting upon two upright stones, one at each end, which crossed the chamber 2 feet 7 inches from the bottom. At a distance of 11 feet 6 inches from the north end and 6 feet above the bottom a long slab 3 feet broad crossed the chamber. I regard all these cross slabs as a provision meant to prevent the collapsing of the sides when the large mass of stones which formed the cairn pressed against them. The position in which they are placed relative to the side stones, and the apparent absence of any other purpose in the supported slab at the south end and in that which crosses the chamber 6 feet above the ground, seem to warrant this conclusion. At the same time these transverse stones practically divide the chamber into four compartments."

In describing an oblong beam of stone at the extreme south end, raised 2 feet 7 inches above the floor-level, Canon Greenwell undoubtedly refers to P. To-day, the supports which retained it in position have disappeared, and the consequent downward slip has fixed P between Q and N. As for the three transverse slabs which served to divide the chamber into compartments, there remain no traces unless S or R, and possibly even E, may have at one time been so placed. But the broad slab referred to as being 11 feet 6 inches from the northern end and 6 feet above floor-level still remains in position and may be identified with the stone V (fig. 5, 8-feet section). To-day, the serious collapse on the western wall has wholly detached V from support on the opposite side, and has left it hanging in a precarious position. It is unfortunate that the sectional aspect of the main chamber has not been more carefully preserved, since it would have proved extremely valuable for comparative work.

The floor of the chamber is covered with earth and vegetation

besides a great quantity of water-worn stones averaging 8 inches in diameter. The level is irregular, and though deepest at the south-western end, the actual floor is at no point visible.

Figs. 5 and 6. Nether Largie Chambered Cairn: sections of chamber and plan of roof.

The roofing of the chamber has been achieved by overlapping slabs of considerable size (fig. 6). It has suffered somewhat in the course of ages, but at the south-western end is still tolerably well preserved. There are six principal slabs which may be said to roof the chamber,

the others being merely secondary and serving no specific purpose. The six slabs referred to are M, L, G, F, B, and A. Their measurements are given in the subjoined table.

Stones.	Length.			Breadth.			Thickness.	
M		5 feet 10½ inches			2 feet 11 inches			9 inches
L	(1) 7	,,	7 ,,		4	,,	9 ,,	(2) 2	,,
G	4	,,	4 ,,	(2) 1	,,	10 ,,		5	,,
F	4	,,	9 ,,		2	,,	4 ,,	5½	,,
B	7	,,	4 ,,	(3) 4	,,	4 ,,	10½	,,
A	5	,,	3 ,,		3	,,	2 ,,	3	,,

(1) From inside.   (2) At eastern end.   (3) At east side.

It is noteworthy that the greatest weight of the four largest roofing slabs, viz. M, L, B, and A, should be borne by the west wall, though the fact that M and L are lower at their western end than at their eastern end by 2 feet indicates the damage affecting the stability of the west wall from the collapse, to which reference has already been made.

In his paper Canon Greenwell makes mention of two secondary cists lying in the immediate vicinity of the main chamber. One of these, situated on the northern side of the cairn, is no longer visible; the other, however, lies exposed near the southern margin. Its cover-stone is 32 feet from the south-west end of the main chamber in a direction S. 16° W. (true). It is of rectangular form and its axis lies from N. 11½° W. to S. 11½° E. (true). The walls of this cist are formed of four single slabs. The south wall averages 2 feet in height by 3 feet 8 inches in breadth by 6 inches in thickness. The west wall measures 2 feet 7 inches in height by 2 feet 8 inches in breadth, while its thickness is not ascertainable. The northern wall averages 2 feet 9 inches in height by 4 feet in breadth by 4½ inches in thickness. The east wall measures 2 feet 6 inches in height by 2 feet 4 inches in breadth, while the thickness, though variable, is 10 inches at most. The manner in which these four walls still retain their verticality is notable, as is also the construction with regard to the minimum of space permitted at the corners. The cover-stone measures 6 feet 9 inches in length by 3 feet 7 inches in breadth across the middle by 10 inches in thickness. It is still approximately in its original position, but has been pushed

northwards so as to afford an entry from the south. The breadth and length of the floor along a centre line is 3 feet 4 inches and 3 feet 9 inches respectively. At present the floor is covered with water-worn pebbles and animal bones, and this modern debris extends downwards for nearly a foot before older soil is encountered.

In conclusion a word should be said regarding the material used in the constructive work of the cairn. The large slabs of schist employed would be easily obtainable from the neighbouring hill-sides at no great distance. To-day, indeed, there are within a quarter of a mile three
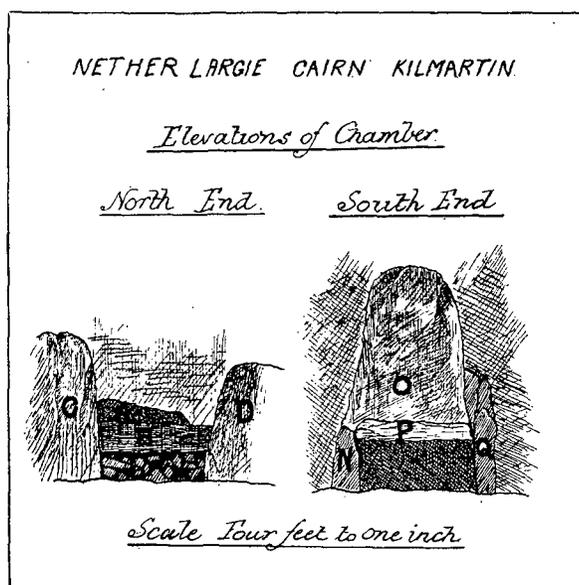

Fig. 7. Nether Largie Chambered Cairn : elevations of ends of chamber.

points on the eastern slopes of the valley at which stone of a similar character is being quarried. The slabs of the main chamber vary considerably in their state of preservation, some showing marked indications of weathering, while others, notably D, are in very fair condition. The smaller slabs utilized in the horizontal building show evidence of water action. They may well have been gathered from the surface of the stony ground at the head of the valley.

The Nether Largie cairn is undoubtedly one of the most interesting examples of Neolithic sepulture in Scotland, and even to-day its ruined condition bespeaks a grandeur whose vestiges are still impressive.

Without embarking on the controversial subject of comparative study it may be stated with certainty that the true significance of the cairn which has formed the matter of this report lies in its bearing upon cognate structures elsewhere. For that reason, if for no other, it merits not only careful preservation before further ruin takes place but also accurate and detailed description.

I have to thank Mr R. Dickinson for drawing the illustrations which accompany this paper.