III.

A ROUND CAIRN NEAR ACHNAMARA, LOCH SWEEN, ARGYLL.

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Just east of the easternmost bay at the head of Loch Sween the land rises in a series of ridges to Cnoc an Altan. The lowest of these ridges rises rather steeply just east of the easternmost of the two burns that flow out near Seafield cottage. At the south-western extremity of this ridge Mr James Robb of H.M.O.W., Edinburgh, came upon two denuded cairns, in one of which a cist was exposed. Suspecting interference with the cist, Mr J. S. Richardson, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland, suggested that I should excavate the cairn. The Forestry Commissioners very kindly gave me permission to do so, and accordingly a week from 15th to 20th June was spent at the site with two men, Messrs Colin Campbell and Dewar, from Lochgilphead. I have to thank Mr Robb and Mr Richardson, as well as the Forestry Commissioners, for the opportunity of examining and describing this unrecorded monument.

The two cairns stand close together, the spread of stones from the western cairn extending to within a couple of feet of the eastern cairn that stands higher up the ridge. Both had been greatly denuded—doubtless to provide stones for the dyke bounding Seafield meadow at the foot of the ridge—so that they were practically invisible in the high bracken by the time we arrived. Neither cists nor kerb could be detected superficially in the western cairn, and our operations were accordingly confined to its less ruined neighbour. The latter proved to be built on the crest of the ridge of rock that falls away under the cairn at the rate of 1 in 12 towards the west, and more steeply still to the south and north, but the rock was covered with a deep layer of marshy soil.

On the high ground to the north-east the cairn was bounded by a distinct kerb traceable for a distance of 20 feet (fig. 1). The kerb was formed of large angular blocks of local rock laid on edge upon the marshy subsoil: $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $1\frac{1}{4}$ feet represents the average size of the

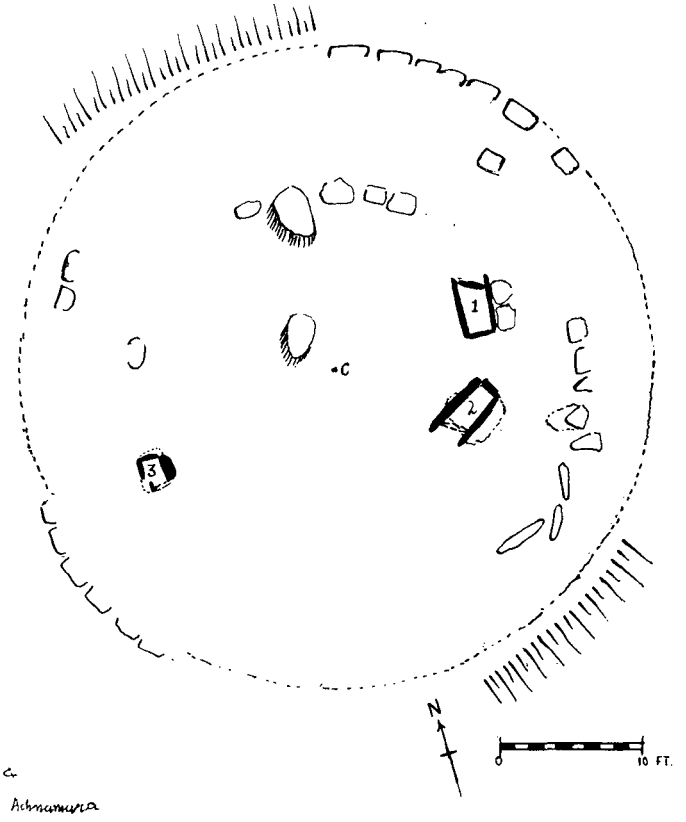

Fig. 1. Plan of Cairn near Achnamara, Argyll.

kerb-stones. As deduced from this segment the diameter of the cairn should have been 45 feet, and the "centre of the cairn" was fixed on the basis of this calculation. On the slopes to the south and north-west the kerb was ill-defined, but on the west, where the ground was more than 3 feet lower than on the east, stones supposed to belong to the kerb were found about 24 feet from the centre. It is, however, difficult to distinguish kerb-stones from spread, since the former are not set deep on the subsoil, but rather laid upon it, and stones of comparable sizes are liable to occur throughout the cairn.

Under the body of the cairn there are traces on the north of an inner setting formed of large boulders or slabs on edge (fig. 2). On the north such stones approached to within $11\frac{1}{2}$ feet of the centre, while on the south-east they were found only 17 to 18 feet from it. The blocks of the inner setting in general ranged in size between 30 inches by 18 inches by 12 inches and 21 inches by 21 inches by 18 inches, while slabs on the south-east measured 36 inches by 27 inches by 7 inches. All these

Fig. 2. Cist 2 (in foreground) as discovered: the nearer pole stands in Cist 1.

stones were tilted towards the centre through the weight of stones outside them as none were embedded in the subsoil. But included among them, due north of the "centre," was a huge natural boulder 3 feet square and 20 inches high. Between the setting and the kerb, stones comparable in size to those of the kerb were in the majority, while within the setting such big blocks were less common. All the stones of the cairn seem to be blocks split off the rock ridge on which the cairn stands by weathering or by human action. But even in the best-preserved parts the cairn has been so robbed that only 3 feet of its height survives.

Three cists, all lying eccentrically, were uncovered. The side-stones in all are formed of comparatively thin slabs of a shaley rock which does not outcrop on the ridge and the surface of which peels off readily.

In all cases these slabs had been sadly disintegrated by bracken roots and moisture, so that the original surface had almost entirely vanished —and with it, of course, any grooves or other carvings. Cist 1, lying north and south about 10 feet east of the "centre," was exposed when we arrived (fig. 3). The capstone, $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet long by 3 feet wide, had been partly broken. The cist had been robbed of its original contents and filled instead with bracken roots and very sticky soil. The four slabs

Fig. 3. Cists 1 and 2 looking south.

composing it measure respectively 4 feet 8 inches long by 2 feet 4 inches high, 1 foot 2 inches wide by 11 inches high, 4 feet long by 1 foot 11 inches high and 1 foot 8 inches long (the top being broken off). On the top of the low east headstone was a second that rested upon and projected beyond the two side slabs, so that the total depth of the cist was about 2 feet. The west headstone, set obliquely between the lateral slabs, reduces the cist's length to $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet. The floor of the cist was the subsoil underlying the cairn. The slabs merely rested upon this subsoil and were kept in place by the stones of the cairn round them.

Cist 2 lies 9 feet south-east of the centre with its main axis 67° east of north (magnetic). One capstone, 4 feet 4 inches wide by 3 feet

long, was found still in position covered by stones. A second capstone, 4 feet long by 3 feet 6 inches wide, had, however, been removed and left lying on the cairn's surface. Presumably at the same time the south-western headstone had been pulled up. Through the aperture

Fig. 4. Cist 3 sealed down.

thus created plunderers had robbed the cist of any relics it may have contained, and bracken roots and loose earth had entered the cavity. The three surviving slabs measure respectively 5 feet by 1 foot 8 inches by 6 inches, 1 foot 6 inches by 1 foot 3 inches, and 4 feet 3 inches by 2 feet 3 inches by 4½ inches. The cist had been hollowed out to a depth of over a foot in the subsoil in which the lateral slabs were firmly embedded. A groove in the subsoil suggests that in this cist too the missing headstone had been set obliquely between the side slabs, reducing the cist's length to little over 3 feet.

Fourteen feet west of the centre a third cist, lying north and south,

was found intact. Its capstone, 2 feet 3 inches long by 2 feet wide, was sealed down with flat slabs laid horizontally above it (fig. 4). The cist beneath was only 2 feet long by 1 foot 4 inches wide by 1 foot 4 inches deep and was not excavated in the subsoil. The eastern side is formed of a thick slab, 2 feet long by $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches high by 8 inches thick, the western side of two thin slabs. The southern headstone had collapsed and was lying prostrate on the floor of the cist. Bracken roots had penetrated beneath the capstone and even under the prostrate headstone. No bones survived, and the bracken roots had destroyed any hope of tracing the "ghost" of the corpse on the cist's floor. However, a flat oval pebble, centrally perforated to serve as a pendant (fig. 5), was found in the middle of the floor on the smooth earth immediately under the fallen headstone.

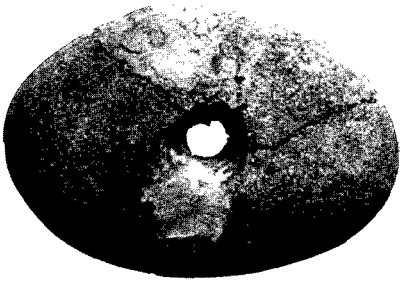

Fig. 5. Perforated Pebble from Cist 3. (½.)

This, the only relic recovered, does not in itself suffice to date the monument. Since not a trace of bone was found in any of the cists, it may be assumed that all three burials had been by inhumation. Fragments of cremated bones would certainly have survived, whereas unburnt bones would be entirely consumed in the acid soil. But none of the cists was large enough to accommodate an extended body. Hence contracted burial may be inferred. This rite points rather vaguely to the earlier part of the Bronze Age as the date of the monument.