

## IV.

## FOUR HENGE MONUMENTS IN EASTER ROSS.

BY ANTHONY A. WOODHAM, B.Sc., PH.D., F.S.A.Scot.

The sites to be described in this communication were visited in the course of a survey of the archæological features of the Black Isle, and the individual character of the group, as indicated by their similarity to each other and their general resemblance to the body of sacred sites known to-day as henges, seemed to merit separate treatment.

The group is situated E. and W. of the main road joining Beauly and Dingwall, two of the sites being actually adjacent to the road, and the others 3 miles to the E. and 6 miles to the W., respectively.

*CONONBRIDGE* (Nat. Grid Ref. 28/543551).

Situated in the SE. corner of a field on the farm of Riverford, at the southern end of the village of Cononbridge, and immediately adjacent to the Beauly-Dingwall road, the site is approximately 50 ft. above O.D. and within 400 yds. of the River Conon. A flat, central, almost circular area having a diameter of 48 ft. is surrounded by a ditch 9 ft. across with an entrance 5 ft. wide at the SE. (bearing 140°). A continuous bank 12 ft. wide surrounds the ditch, and in places its crest is 3 ft. above the present ditch bottom. The diameter of the bank between opposite points on the crest is 80-85 ft. The circle itself has been planted with trees and is in a fairly good state of preservation (Pl. IV, 1).

A plan and section of this site were published in 1883 by Mr Angus Beaton,<sup>1</sup> but these are inaccurate in certain important respects. In the first place, the entrance causeway spanning the ditch is omitted, and further, an outer bank and ditch as well as two tangential banks are shown. As will be seen from the new plan (fig. 1), the outer and tangential banks are most probably the result of cultivation of the adjoining land. Beaton's outer ditch is not continuous as he shows it, but peters out in the NW. sector, and neither bank nor ditch continue on the SE. It seems highly unlikely that the omission of the entrance in the plan means that it is of more recent date, in view of its authentic appearance and more especially in view of the fact that similar omissions occur in the case of the Muir of Ord site (see below). Beaton also maintains that the Cononbridge site is identical with Dun Mhor, near Beauly. This is not the case, for the latter is typical of the small

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, xvii (1882-3), 414.

fortlets which are so characteristic of the region and which will receive fuller treatment in a future publication. It will suffice to say here that Dun Mhor, in distinction from Cononbridge, occupies an elevated and defensible position, and consists of a central area surrounded by two irregular banks and ditches, the banks being innermost.

*CONTIN* (Nat. Grid Ref. 28/443569).

At the E. end of Loch Achilty, in the valley of the Black Water and abutting on the road which traverses the N. shore of the Loch, is an earthwork of similar form to the one already described. It is at a height of approximately 100 ft. above O.D. A roughly circular area 32 ft. in diameter is surrounded by a ditch 20 ft. wide, broken by an entrance causeway in the ESE., which is at present about 4 ft. wide (bearing 120°). The whole is enclosed by a continuous bank, and the overall diameter of the site between opposite points on the crest varies from 66 to 76 ft., the longer axis being that which passes through the entrance. No berm is visible between bank and ditch, and the top of the former averages 4 ft. above the ditch bottom (fig. 2).

An engraved plan of this circle was published early in the 19th century, unfortunately with no textual description whatever. The illustration is idealised, and shows an entrance gap through the bank corresponding to the causeway over the ditch.<sup>1</sup> No gap is detectable on the ground (Pl. III, 1, 2).

Of the four henges described in this paper, this is the only one that receives mention in either the *Old* or *New Statistical Accounts*. In the latter it is stated that “. . . an attempt was made to examine its contents, but it ended in disappointment as nothing else was found than a few empty earthen jars.”<sup>2</sup> The site is described in the same entry as “. . . a circle formed of stone,” and this is of interest, because the location is marked on the 1-inch and 6-inch O.S. maps as “Stone Circle.” The reason is not obvious as the bank is largely composed of earth, although small stones are also present. If there were at any time large stones of the nature of megaliths associated with the site they must have disappeared before 1822, when the engraving, already referred to, was made.

*CULBOKIE* (Nat. Grid Ref. 28/594577).

This site is located at a height of 350 ft. above O.D., in the NE. corner of a field adjacent to a disused road which runs from the steading of Crochar down to Urquhart Manse on the shore of the Cromarty Firth. The ground has a gradual slope towards the Firth, 1 mile distant to the NW. A ditch

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Scot.*, II (1822), 327.

<sup>2</sup> *New Stat. Acc.*, XIV (1837), 237-8.

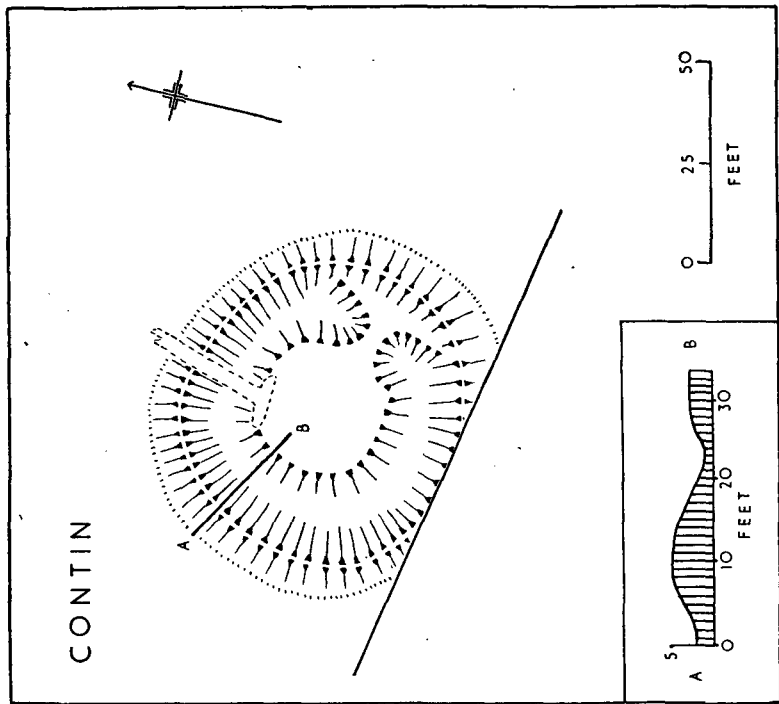


Fig. 2. Plan and Section.

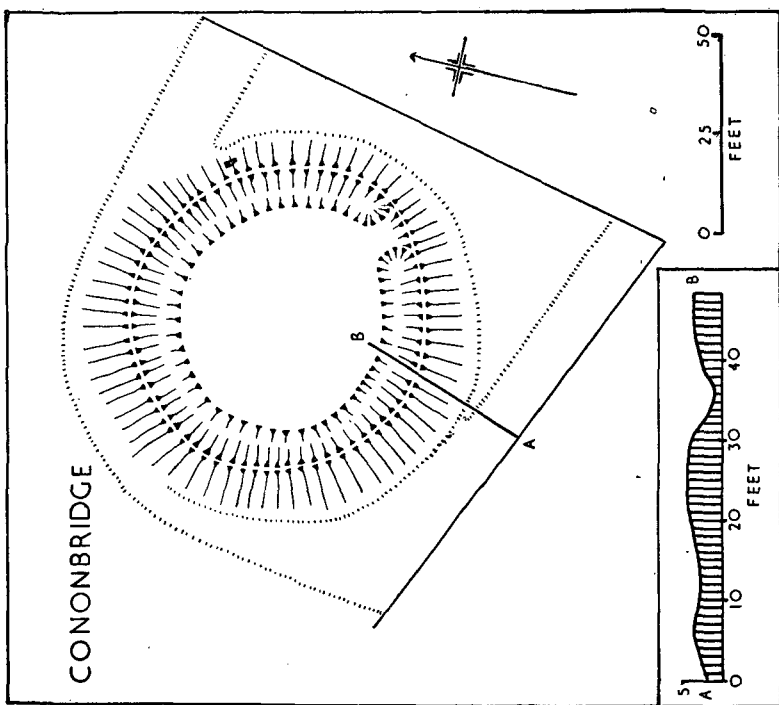


Fig. 1. Plan and Section.

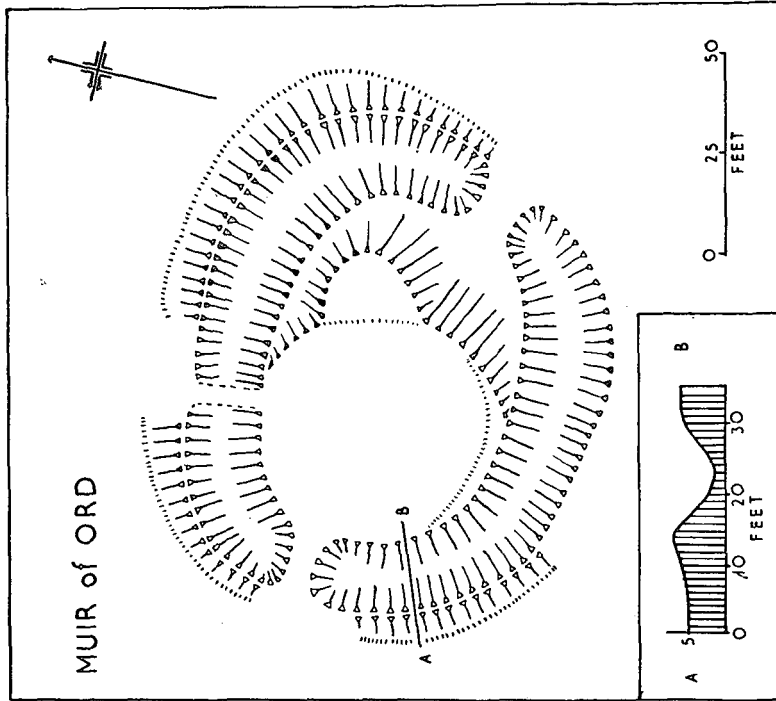


Fig. 4. Plan and Section.

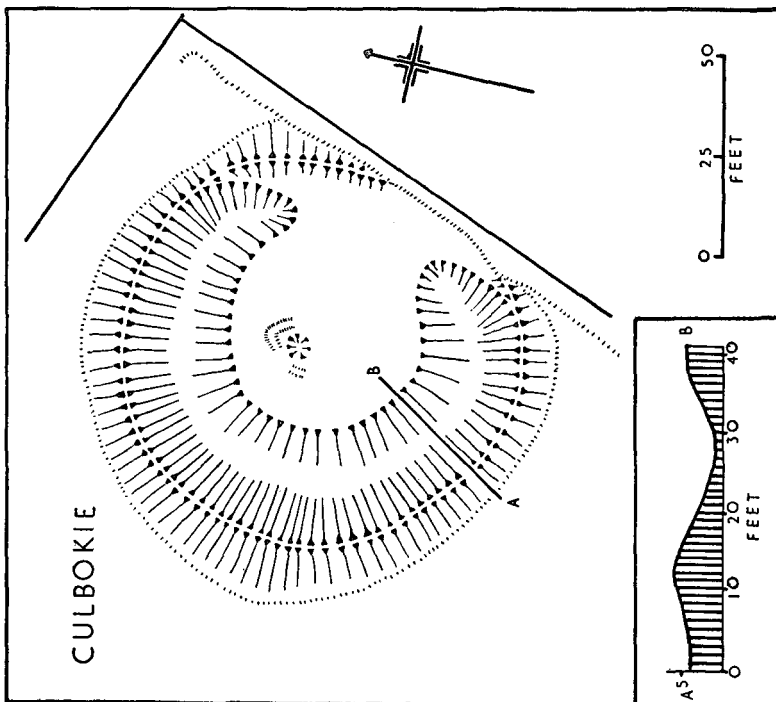


Fig. 3. Plan and Section.

26 ft. wide encloses a roughly circular area averaging 48 ft. in diameter. The present width of the entrance between the cusps of the ditch is 33 ft., and it is situated in the E. sector, the bearing through the centre of the causeway being  $105^\circ$ . In front of the entrance a field wall has broken into the bank, but enough remains to suggest strongly that the bank was originally unbroken across the entrance. The diameter of the site between opposite points on the crest of the bank varies from 90 to 96 ft. No berm is visible, and the height of the bank above the present ditch bottom is 5 ft. in places (Pl. III, 3 and fig. 3).

A stony mound, now not more than 6 ins. high, may have delimited a small irregularly shaped central area, but except at one corner the remains are so indistinct as to be unintelligible without excavation. A well-marked depression exists in the very centre of the area, and this might be explained, along with the irregular stony heaps, as the legacy of an unscientific and anonymous treasure-seeker.

#### *MUIR OF ORD* (Nat. Grid Ref. 28/527497).

This site lies on the Muir of Ord golf-course just to the W. of the railway line and at a height of approximately 150 ft. above O.D. It has been utilised as a green, and mutilated to some extent as a result. An approximately oval area measuring 84 ft. by 64 ft. is surrounded by a ditch averaging 18 ft. wide. This is broken by three entrance causeways, of which the two in the NW. and SE. (bearings  $295^\circ$  and  $125^\circ$  from the centre respectively) appear to be original, the third, northern entrance having probably been constructed for the convenience of golfers. The ground slopes towards the SE., at first gradually but increasing inside the henge itself, so that the NW. entrance is actually not visible from that at the SE. Surrounding the ditch on the N. and E. are the remains of a much denuded bank. The present green is circular, and occupies the upper, northern part of the interior. A slight bank inside the ditch, round the W. side of the green, is obviously modern, being a common device in green construction (fig. 4).

Fortunately we do have an idea of the state of the site before the modern alterations, as Beaton, in the paper already mentioned in connection with the Cononbridge henge, gave a plan and section of it.<sup>1</sup> As in the former case his measurements are reasonably accurate, but again he omits the entrances. This is a pity, as it would have clinched the authenticity of the third entrance. A central raised portion is shown on the plan, and this has been partially obliterated in the modern reconstructions, although the E. end of it remains, projecting from the edge of the green. It is not now possible to say whether the raised portion was of natural or artificial origin.

From the available evidence it seems more than likely that this is the site

<sup>1</sup> Beaton, *loc. cit.*

referred to by Dr Garden of Aberdeen in his letter to John Aubrey transcribed in the latter's *Monumenta Britannica*.<sup>1</sup> In this he refers to a sacred grove thus: "I . . . have gotten information of two groves yet standing which are reputed sacred. One of them (which stands near to a place called Taradale in the parish of Killernen and shire of Nairne) is enclosed with a trench or dry ditch having two entries to it where the ditch is filled up or rather the ground has never been broken: all that live near it hold it as sacred, and will not cut so much as a rod out of it: my informer adds that, hard by, there is a cornfield where he conjectures there has been one of the Monuments, because in it there are several big stones such as those Monuments use to consist of, fallen down and out of order." The full extract is quoted by R. J. C. Atkinson in his very excellent monograph on "The Henge Monuments of Great Britain."<sup>2</sup>

The description fits the Muir of Ord site exactly. No mention is made of a surrounding bank, but this might easily escape the notice of a casual observer to-day, and probably was not much more evident in Aubrey's day. The site was wooded as recently as 1883 when Beaton visited it. Tarradale House lies 2 miles from Muir of Ord, but the latter was called "Tarudle" in the early 18th century, according to a map of that time in the Inverness Museum. Finally, two standing-stones are still to be seen situated about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile from the henge, and visible from it.

#### THE NATURE OF THE SITES.

Of the four earthworks described above, three are marked on the O.S. maps as "forts," but that this is not a true indication of their original function is obvious when we consider the following evidence. The positions chosen are in every case on low ground and possessed of no tactical value for defence. Contin and Cononbridge are situated on absolutely flat terrain in river valleys, Culbokie is on a very gentle slope, and Muir of Ord, although on a slope, is overlooked by higher ground on one side, and is in close proximity to several locations which would be preferable from the point of view of fortification. Beaton recognised this, suggesting that Muir of Ord and Cononbridge were not forts by virtue of their situation, and proposing that the latter was probably ". . . a place of prehistoric sepulture."<sup>3</sup> A tradition of sanctity has certainly been attached to the sites and has, in fact, occasioned their survival in a practically intact condition to the present day. The probable use of the Contin henge as a burial-place in prehistoric times is suggested by the reference to the finding of earthen jars in its interior. The non-defensive nature of the monuments is clear when a comparison is made

<sup>1</sup> *Monumenta Britannica* (Bodleian MS., Gen. Top. c. 24, fo. 128r).

<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, R. J. C., Piggott, C. M., and Sandars, N. K., *Excavations at Dorchester, Oxon.* (1951), 107.

<sup>3</sup> Beaton, *loc. cit.*

with such indisputable fortlets as Dun Mhor at Beaully, and Findon, Drummondreoch and Culbokie forts in the Black Isle. The most characteristic feature of the four earthworks, however, is the relative positioning of the bank and ditch in each case. While in a fort constructed for defence it is obvious that the bank should be inside the ditch, in each of these four sites the bank is outside.

Thus the general plan and siting of each is identical with that of classic henge monuments such as Arminghall, Cairnpapple and Stonehenge I. The Muir of Ord site is similar in size and plan to the Class II henge at Broomend of Crichtie, Aberdeenshire.<sup>1</sup> This latter is the nearest previously recorded henge monument to the group under consideration.

Atkinson has noted the frequent proximity of the henges to water,<sup>2</sup> and while all four of the Ross-shire examples are reasonably close, Contin and Cononbridge are particularly so. The majority of Class II henges have their entrances on a NW.-SE. axis and the Muir of Ord site is aligned thus. While Class I henges tend to be circular, Class II are more often oval, and again this generalisation applies to the new group.

So then we seem to have ample justification for claiming that this group of earthworks in Easter Ross are henge monuments, Contin, Cononbridge and Culbokie falling into Class I, the single-entrance type, and Muir of Ord into Class II. Two points do, however, remain to be considered with regard to the three single-entrance examples. The entrance causeway at Culbokie is unusually wide when compared with previously recognised henge monuments, but in view of the wide variation amongst the latter in other particulars, for example size, internal structure, and the number of ditches present, this is perhaps not so important. A more striking feature common to all three is the unbroken line of the bank across the front of the entrance causeway. The question immediately arises whether the possession of this feature precludes the sites in question from being classed as henges at all. As far as I am aware, no other similar earthworks have been recorded in the literature, and while it has been stated by Atkinson<sup>3</sup> that unbroken earthen circles surrounding stone circles (*e.g.* the Litton Cheney circle) and unbroken earthen circles with no visible central features (*e.g.* the Priddy circles) cannot be classed as henge monuments, an unbroken earthen circle surrounding a ditch with distinct entrance causeway surely must be included at least tentatively with the henges, especially when the additional evidence, already referred to, is considered in conjunction. It has been suggested that the function of the bank was at least partially to serve as a "grand stand" for the laity, who were separated from the central sanctum by the internal ditch. This latter can, however, have been little more than a symbolic partition, and the extension of the bank across the front of the entrance causeway would serve the double purpose of providing more room for

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LIV (1920), 154 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, *loc. cit.*, 84.

<sup>3</sup> Atkinson, *ibid.*, 82.



1. Contin: general view looking E.

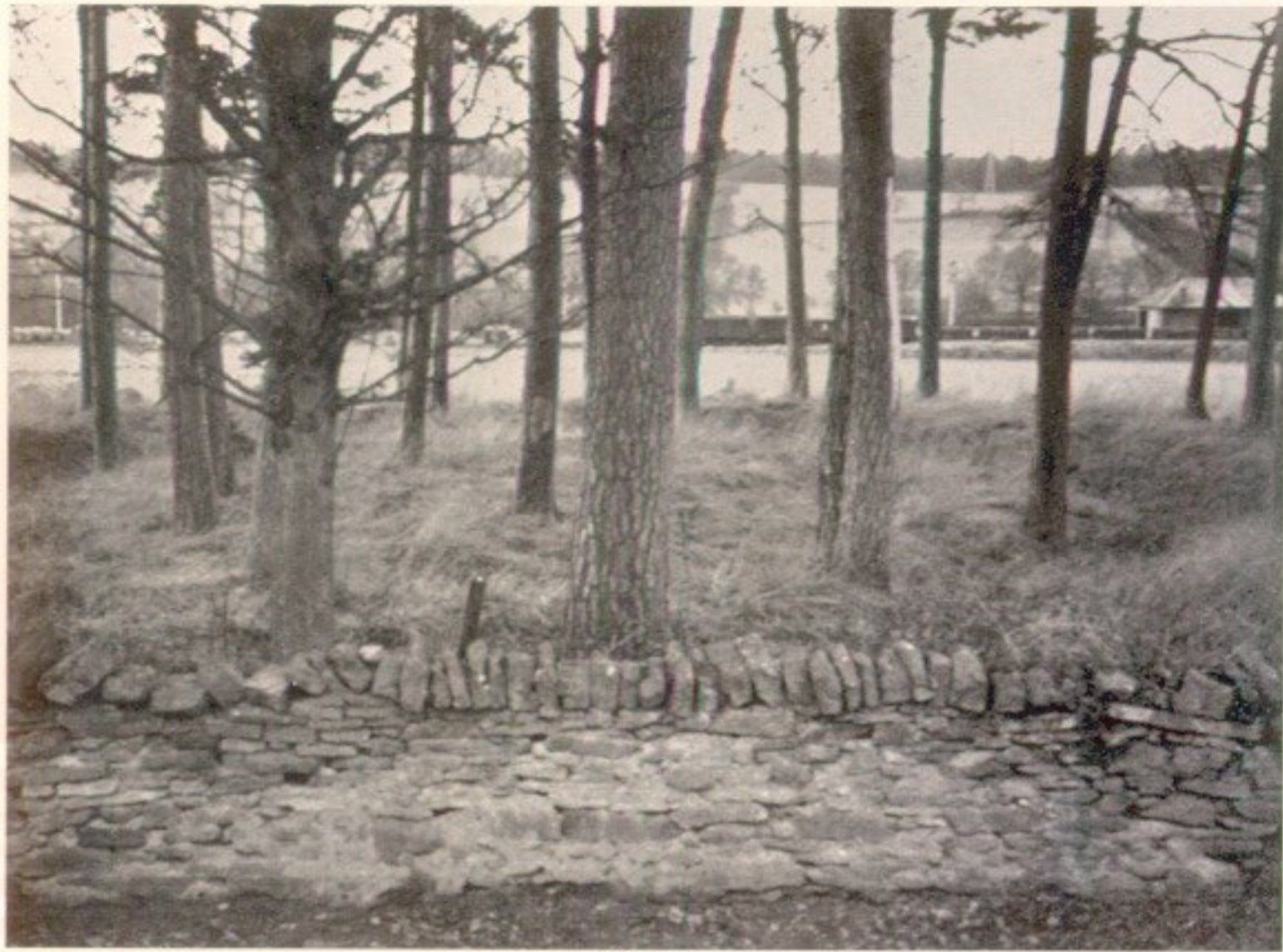


2. Contin: view of entrance from S. showing unbroken line of bank.



3. Culbokie: general view looking SW.





1. Cononbridge: general view looking W.



2. Muir of Ord: view from NW. showing the slight external bank in foreground and entrance causeway over ditch.

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spectators and effectively excluding external disturbance. While an entrance causeway across the ditch was a physical necessity, the bank was probably never high or steep enough to warrant an entrance gap. Even to-day the crossing of the ditches in some places requires considerable physical effort, while the negotiation of the entrance causeway, forming as it generally does a gently sloping ramp from the top of the bank to the interior, presents no difficulty. The outer slopes of the banks, however, are in every case very gentle, and even when freshly dug it was probably a comparatively simple feat to reach the summit of the bank from any point on the outside. It is possible that the banks were originally lower at the entrances than elsewhere, but the slight dip seen to-day suggests rather the effect of use.

In a recent review<sup>1</sup> of the chapter by Atkinson on "The Henge Monuments of Great Britain" already mentioned, J. G. D. Clark suggests that sites such as those at Dorchester, having no central features in the form of stone or timber uprights, should be considered as progenitors of the henge monuments rather than be included themselves in the henge category. Surely, however, until definite evidence is obtained from excavation, proving that enclosures containing posts or stones were constructed for a different purpose than those consisting of bank and ditch alone, we may assume that both types fulfilled a similar function, and classify them all under the convenient name of henge monuments. In the case of the Ross-shire sites, excavation alone will reveal the remains of internal structure if it is present, and until then it is contended that the three single-entrance sites as well as the double-entrance example should be included under the general designation of henge monuments.

The available evidence favours the attribution of the Class I monuments to Secondary Neolithic and Class II henges to the Western Neolithic peoples. The three single-entrance henges described are the most northerly so far reported, and excavation might be expected to add something of importance to our scanty knowledge of the Secondary Neolithic peoples on the northern mainland of Scotland.

<sup>1</sup> *Ant. J.*, xxxiv (1954), 91.