

AN ORKNEY-CROMARTY CHAMBERED CAIRN IN UPPER STRATHNAIRN, INVERNESS-SHIRE

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THE occurrence of passage graves and ring cairns of the Clava type on the low ground on either side of the River Nairn and in the neighbourhood of Loch Dun Seilcheig is well known. Indeed the Clava cemetery itself lies in the Nairn Valley. In addition, however, this region is noteworthy because it contains a few examples

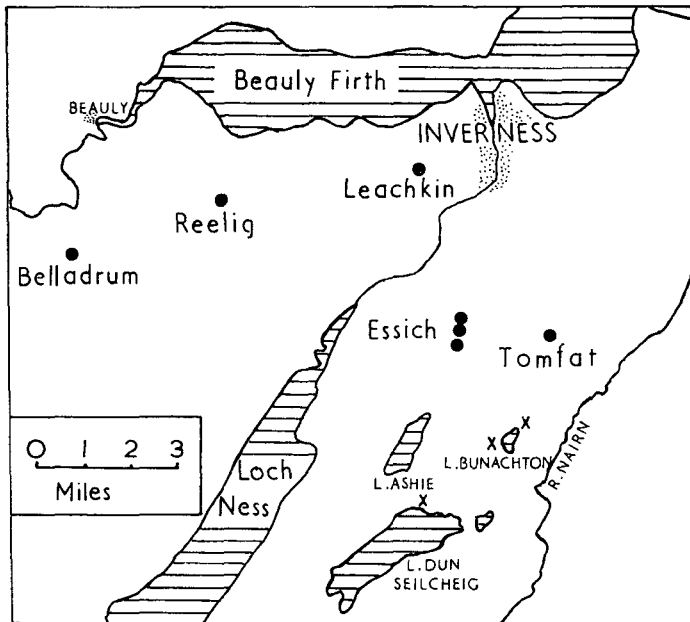


FIG. 1. Location map showing the position of the Tomfat chamber in relation to the other Orkney-Cromarty cairns south of the Beauly Firth. All are marked with black circles. In addition the areas in which large, round, possibly chambered cairns of uncertain type have been noted are marked with crosses

of chambered cairns of the Orkney-Cromarty type, representing the most southerly location of these cairns so far known. Miss Henshall has listed 6 of the cairns S. of the Beauly Firth.¹

During a survey of unrecorded sites in Upper Strathnairn during the summer of 1963 some 8-10 large, roughly circular cairns were noted, all undisturbed to the extent that no indication of a chamber was visible, though each was large enough to contain one. None of these cairns was surrounded by a ring of free-standing uprights, but some possessed indications of peristalith settings. No cup-markings were noted. The absence of an enclosing stone circle does not necessarily preclude the

¹ Henshall, A. S., *The Chambered Tombs of Scotland*, vol. 1 (E.U.P. 1963), 366-84.

possibility that some or all of these cairns are of Clava type. West Town ring cairn, lying close to the group under discussion, has no enclosing circle though it is almost certainly of Clava type. Avielochan, Belladrum and Stoneyfield similarly may have lacked an original free-standing ring, either because they were unfinished or possibly because there was degeneration in the design.¹ It seems unlikely that the large uprights have been removed and not the smaller peristalith stones, which are, in modern times, more generally useful. In this region cairns have been dismantled principally to provide stones for dykes and croft building rather than to free agricultural land, adequate supplies of which are available even now at the expense of the labour of land reclamation. The newly recorded group of cairns could, then, include some of Clava type. Some or all could be simple unchambered cairns of Bronze Age date similar, for example, to the one on Callachy Hill, near Rosemarkie.² The possibility that the group includes further chambered cairns of the Orkney-Cromarty type however, is underlined by the discovery of a rectangular megalithic chamber similar to those typifying the more southerly variants of this category found in Ross-shire. (Fig. 1.)

This new site is situated near the summit, and slightly on the Strathnairn side, of the watershed between the Beaully Firth and the River Nairn. It is at a height of 830 ft. above O.D. about 200 yds. east of the Inverness-Inverarnie road in a recently replanted area indicated on the six-inch O.S. sheet No. XX as the Tomfat Plantation. The National Grid reference is NH 678374.

No trace of the cairn itself is to be seen, old tree stumps indicating planting up to, and even within, the chamber. However, the situation on a small knoll strongly suggests that the cairn must have been round and probably of the order of 40-50 ft. in diameter. A large pointed-topped stone standing 5 ft. high on the very summit of the knoll attracted attention to the spot, and on closer examination this proved to be the headstone of a rectangular chamber, the upper edges of some side slabs being visible at ground level to the east of the stone.

The excavation of the chamber

Within the chamber at the NW. corner a hole had been recently dug and this, in addition to the presence of tree roots, left no doubt that the interior had undergone considerable interference. It was decided that the chamber should be cleared out in order to obtain an accurate plan, and a careful search was made for artifacts.

Removal of the turf revealed the upper edge of a transverse slab abutting against a flat slab on edge which formed part of the north side of the chamber. After complete removal of the turf and some roofing slabs which lay at the surface trowelling was begun at the point where the transverse slab met the side slab. The chamber proved to be very shallow and the transverse slab was only 8 in. high. No corresponding transverse slab was found on the south side of the chamber and no more side slabs were found other than those already noted before the excavation was started, though there were indications of horizontal built walling at two places. The floor was of sand and contained a few tiny pieces of charcoal. (Pl. V, 1.)

¹ Henshall, *op. cit.*, 27.

² Woodham, *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXVIII (1954-6), 74.

The inner compartment between the headstone and the transverse slab was 6 ft. long and 4½ ft. wide and the two side slabs adjacent to the headstone were 2 ft. high. The headstone was 7 ft. high and leaned inwards slightly, being supported by the ends of the side slabs. In the centre of the inner compartment a flat stone 1 ft. long and 10 in. broad was found lying directly on the floor surface covering a patch of

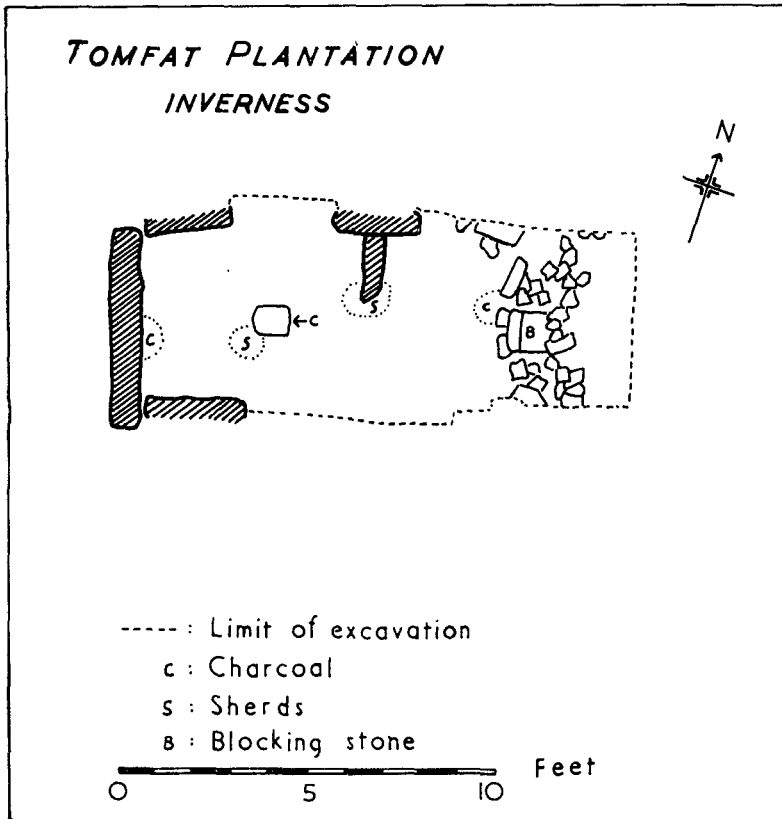


FIG. 2. Plan of chamber

black earth (Pl. V, 2). This patch did not extend beyond the stone. Another black patch about 1 ft. in diameter was noted at the foot of the headstone and mid-way along it.

The excavation was continued to the east, and 5 ft. from the transverse slab a large stone fallen inwards because of the pressure of stones on the outside was found (Pl. V, 3). This obviously constituted a blocking of the chamber entrance, and there were indications from the tumbled walling on the south side that the chamber narrowed at this point to form a passage. No trace of slabs lining the passage was found and it seems this part of the structure has become quite obliterated by interference. A flat stone just within the fallen blocking slab covered blackened earth.

Artifacts

Small sherds of Beaker ware showing no signs of decoration were found on the floor or an inch or so below its surface on either side of the transverse slab and also at a point between the headstone and the central flat slab. White quartz was unusually sparse, only four or five pieces being noted in the course of the excavation. No bone was found or charcoal, other than the tiny pieces already mentioned.

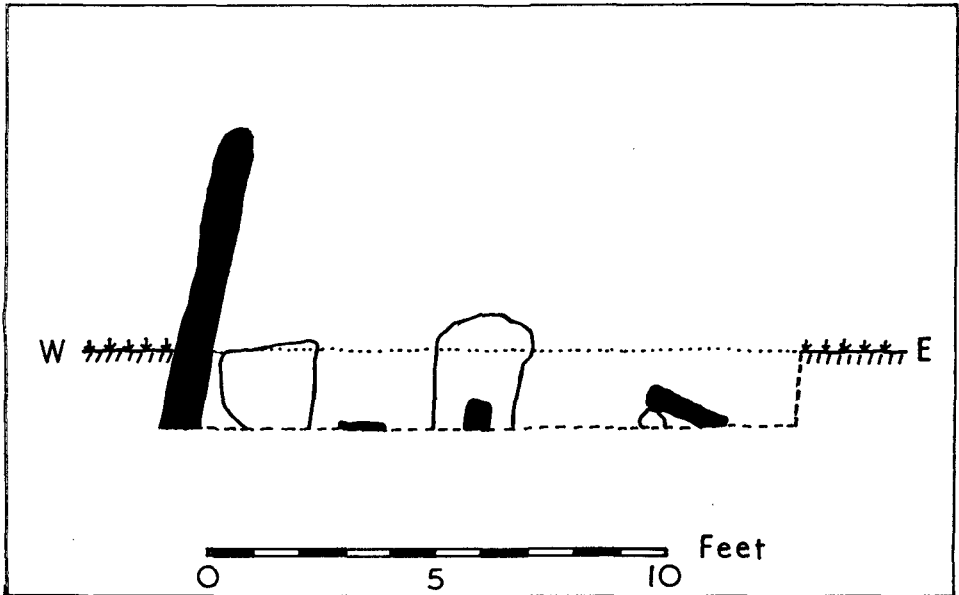


FIG. 3. Section along north side of chamber with the blocking stone and flat central stone projected

Discussion

The site is 2 miles SE. of the Essich Moor group of Orkney-Cromarty cairns, each of which contains a small rectangular chamber.¹ The resemblance to the chamber at Carn Glas, Kilcoy is striking.² The chamber plan and its size correspond closely, and the headstone with its pointed top projecting high above the other functional slabs of the chamber is another point of similarity. Beaker sherds were found at Kilcoy also and there, too, they were small and few in number.

Divisional transverse slabs are commonly lower than the side slabs in the rectangular chambers of Orkney-Cromarty type³ but the single one in this chamber is so extraordinarily low that one must assume that it constituted only a symbolic barrier. Further, if there was another slab opposite to it, as is usual, the entrance between them must have been very narrow.

The absence of any finds other than the Beaker sherds does not allow us to draw

¹ Henshall, *op. cit.*, 376.

² Woodham, *P.S.A.S.*, xc (1956-7), 102.

³ Henshall, *op. cit.*, 62.

any firm conclusions regarding the date of construction but the general similarities to the southern variants of the Orkney-Cromarty passage graves demands the inclusion of this site in that category. It is in fact the most southerly to be discovered so far.

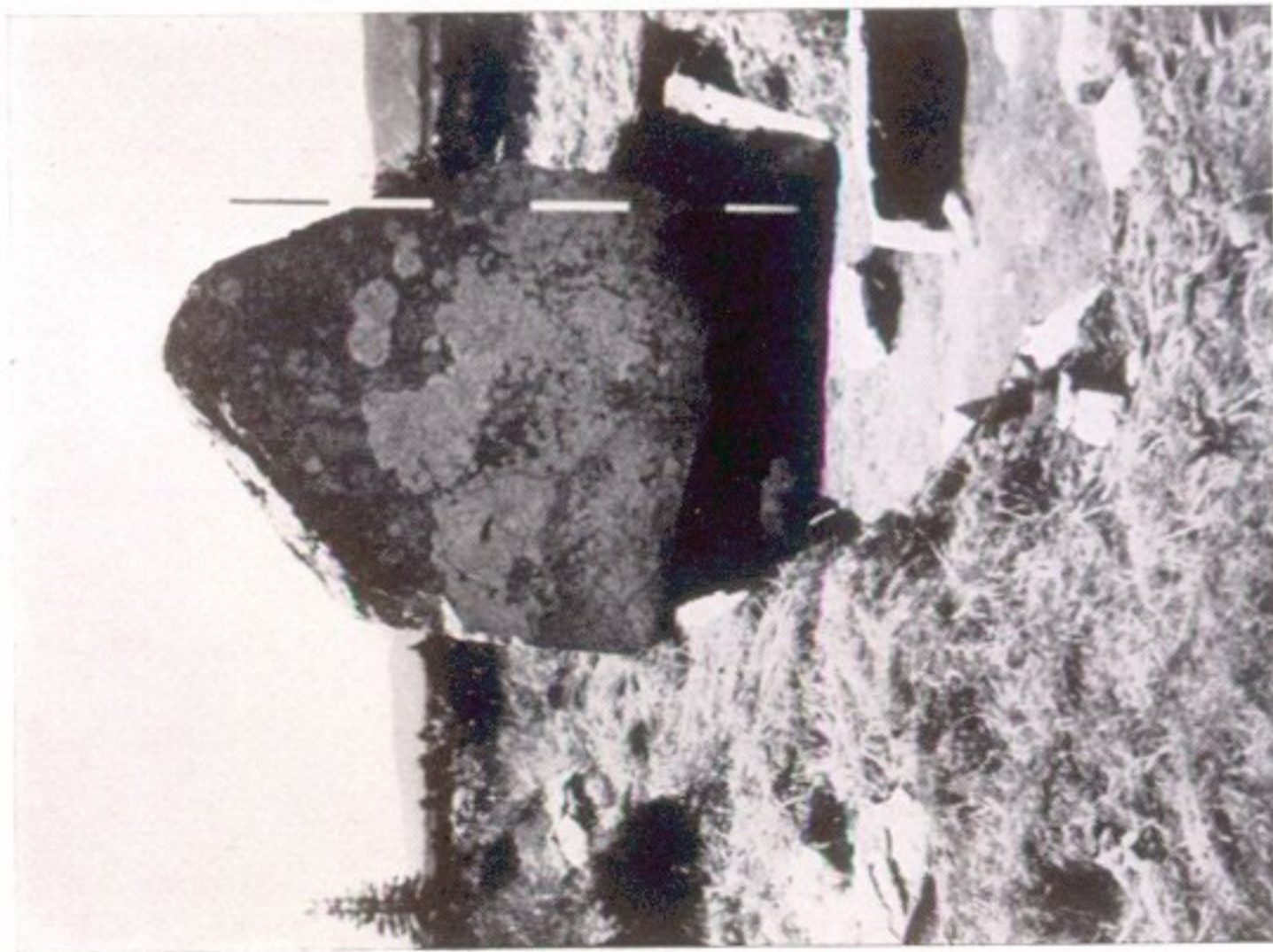
Permission to excavate was readily granted by Mr Hugh McCallum, Factor, on behalf of the Altyre Estates Company and we wish to record our gratitude to Sir Wm. Gordon Cumming, Bt., who donated the pottery to the National Museum of Antiquities.



2. View across inner compartment from the south showing the flat stone lifted exposing patch of blackened earth



3. View towards east end of outer compartment during excavation showing the blocking stone raised to original upright position with the two boulders against which it was leaning



1. View of chamber after excavation showing shallow transverse slab and the flat stone in position in the centre of the inner compartment of the chamber