

EXCAVATIONS AT KINTRAW, ARGYLL

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INTRODUCTION

THE sites to be described in this report lie on a flat platform 100 ft. above sea level overlooking Loch Craginish (N.G.R. NM 830050). The most prominent feature of the group is a large standing stone, 13 ft. high, leaning to the SW. Some 13 ft. NE. of the stone is a large cairn, site A, 48 ft. in diameter and 8 ft. high; 20 ft. SW. of the stone is a second, smaller cairn, site B, 11 ft. in diameter and 1 ft. 6 in. high; 10 ft. W. of this cairn is a further low cairn, and 145 ft. NE. of the large cairn is a fourth small and denuded round cairn.

Two sites, the large cairn, site A and the small cairn to the SW., site B, were excavated. Site A presented the appearance of a stone-built mound partially covered by turf and bracken, on the perimeter of which a number of kerb stones were visible, giving a diameter of 48 ft. Projecting at right angles to the line of the kerb on the S. were two stone slabs set 3 ft. 8 in. apart, only the upper 8 to 10 in. of which were visible above the turf. The cairn bore traces of superficial disturbance at several points but most notably on the N. adjacent to a modern sheepfold, much of the stone of which must have been provided by robbing the cairn. Outside the area of the kerb the stones of the cairn extended for some 8 to 10 ft., generally as a grass-covered slope. Site B was a low, grass-covered mound, slightly dished in the centre, on the perimeter of which a number of kerb stones projected.

No record survives of any previous excavation of the two sites. The large cairn, standing stone and the two small cairns to the W. are illustrated in a MS Common-place Book (now in the library of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Devizes) kept by William Stukeley between 1718 and 1721, but with additional material up to the 1740s (Pl. IV). The drawing consists of an elevated view of site A showing the kerb and projecting slabs, the standing stone with a note of its height, and the two smaller cairns to the W. shown in plan. The row of stones running SW. from one of these cairns is no longer visible. The drawing is captioned 'on a hill above the upper end of Loch Kreigness in Argileshire'. Stukeley never visited Scotland and the drawing must be a copy, perhaps from Edward Lhuyd; if so the original appears to have been destroyed with the bulk of Lhuyd's MSS books.¹ The site is briefly described and a plan reproduced in the *Illustrated Guide to Excursions* prepared by Professor Atkinson for the Prehistoric Society summer meeting in September 1954.

EXCAVATION

Both sites were totally excavated during two seasons' work in July and August 1959 and July 1960. On site B the normal quadrant method was employed. On site A a variant of this technique was necessary as the material of the cairn would not

¹ Piggott, *William Stukeley*, 1950, p. 97, n. 1.

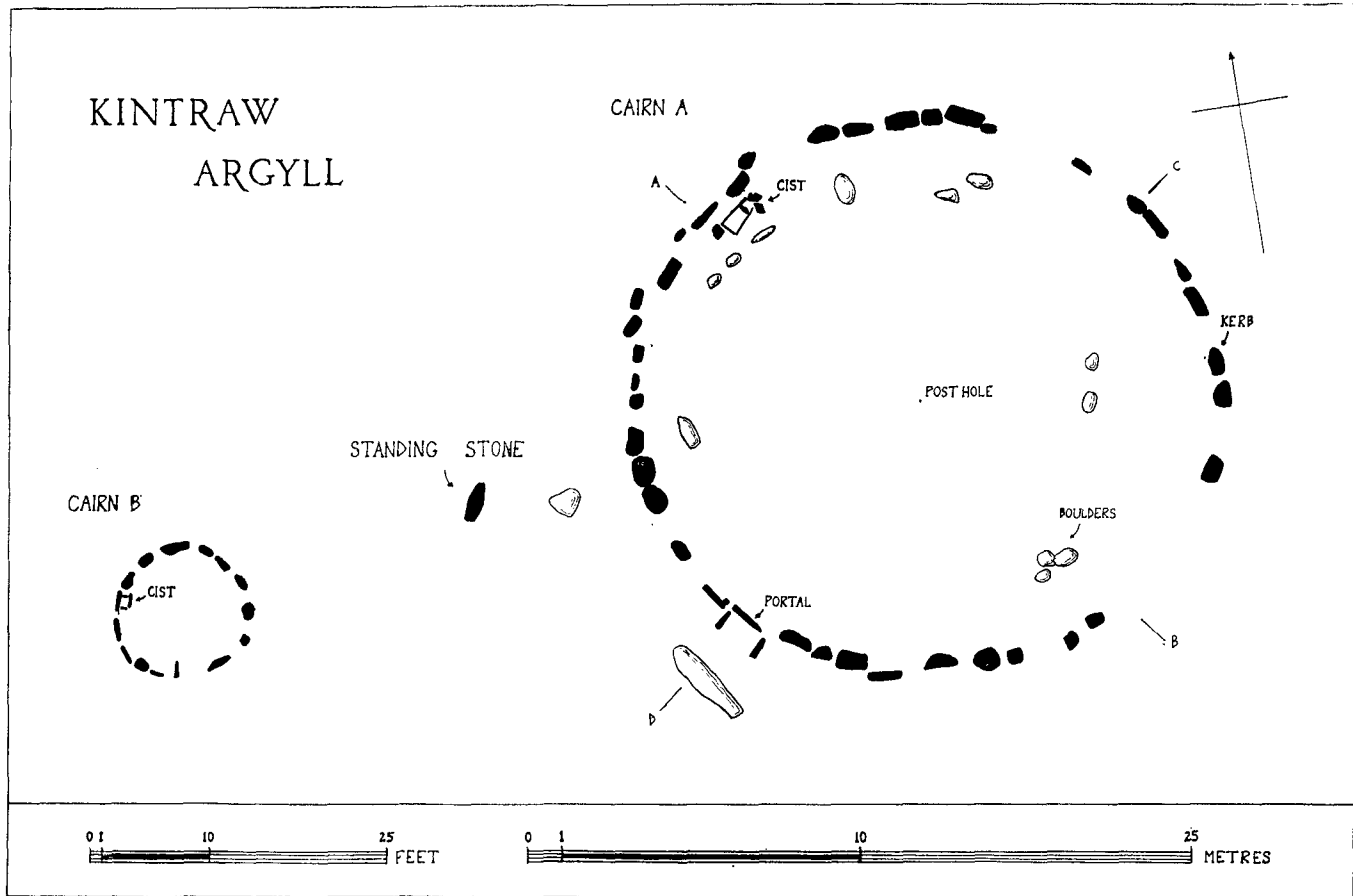


FIG. 1. Site plan

remain as a vertical section to a height of more than 2 ft. 6 in. The method employed, therefore, was to remove two opposed quadrants to a depth of 2 ft., drawing the sections exposed, after which the remaining two quadrants were excavated to the same depth; this process was repeated until the whole of the mound was cleared. In addition a cutting was laid out outside the kerb on the south side to examine the area around the two projecting slabs. After excavation the sites were restored to their former appearance.

Large cairn, site A (figs. 1 and 2)

The mound was composed entirely of stones, both angular and smoothed and waterworn, each averaging about 6 in. in diameter with occasional much larger boulders up to 3 ft. in length. The latter were particularly frequent towards the base of the mound and on the old land surface (the latter have been included on the general plan, fig. 1) although in no way constituting a setting. These stones were of coarse grit, fine grained quartzite and epidiorite.¹ The material would have been readily obtainable as scree material on the slopes of the hill NE. of the cairn or from the bed of the burn at its foot. Towards the perimeter of the cairn the stones tended to be considerably smaller including a high percentage of quartz and a few fragments of rock crystal. The position of these smaller fragments suggested that they represented slip from the surface of the mound, which, when first constructed, was probably provided with an envelope of quartz presenting a brilliant white surface. The quartz could again have been obtained locally, as a vein was located in an outcrop half a mile NE. of the site. At the centre of the cairn and traceable to a height of 3 ft. 4 in. from the old land surface was a post-hole 5 in. in diameter. The base of the post must have rested directly on the old land surface and been held in place by packing stones as the subsoil beneath the cairn was undisturbed. As the post-hole was set centrally to the kerb it may have held an upright used in the laying out of this feature.

Thirty-nine kerb-stones survived *in situ*. The stones were not contiguous and there were gaps 7 ft. wide on the NE. and 14 ft. wide on the SE. where stones had been removed. The stones varied considerably in height and width from 2 ft. to 4 ft. and from 1 ft. to 3 ft. 6 in. respectively. The taller and broader stones showed a concentration on the S. and W. sectors. Two forms of kerb-stone occurred; one slab-like and angular, the other rounded and waterworn. As in the cairn the stone was coarse grit and fine grained quartzite. The stones were not set in holes, but rested on the old land surface into which they had sunk slightly under their own weight. The additional cairn material which lay outside this kerb did not therefore represent slip from the mound, but was designed to give support to the kerb structure.

In the NW. quadrant and only a few inches within the kerb was a small stone cist, orientated NE.-SW., trapezoid in plan and covered by a capstone of similar form, its slabs set into the old land surface (Pl. III, 1). It measured internally 3 ft. in length and was 10 in. broad at the SW. end, widening to 1 ft. 8 in. at the north-east.

¹ These and other determinations of rock samples were made by Dr W. A. S. Sarjeant and Dr D. Morton University of Nottingham.

KINTRAW CAIRN A

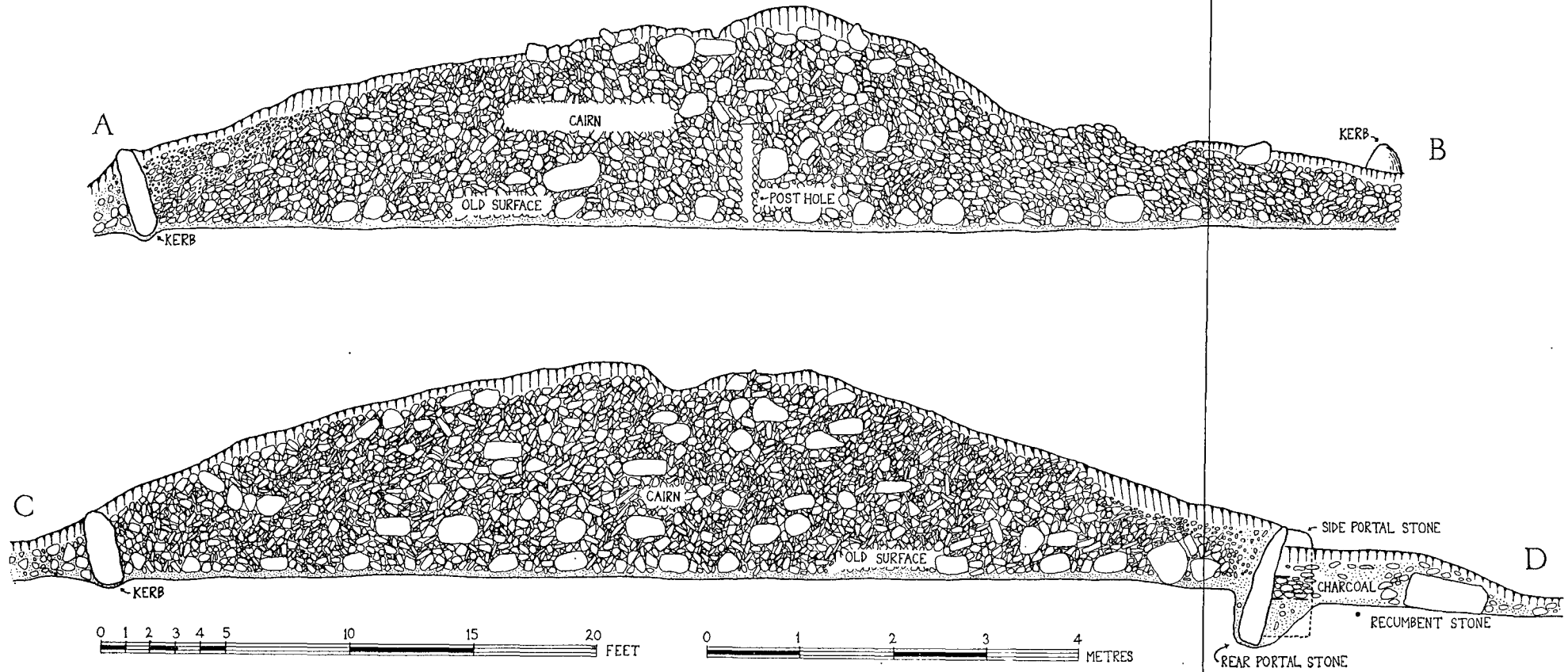


FIG. 2. Cairn A: sections

The cist was divided internally into two unequal compartments by a transverse slab. The larger compartment was filled with black, greasy earth containing a few small and weathered fragments of cremated bone and carbonised wood¹; the smaller compartment was empty. The lumps of quartz, which were widely scattered around the perimeter of the cairn, showed a marked concentration in the immediate vicinity of the cist. This was the only grave found beneath the mound and in spite of its markedly eccentric position and small size must be regarded as the primary burial over which the mound was erected.

The two slabs projecting from the kerb and the slab of the kerb which formed the back of this setting were the only stones which had been set into stone holes. Each stone was 4 ft. 6 in. tall and was set in a ramped hole. The area between the side slabs had been carefully blocked with small stones between which were layers of charcoal. The whole setting thus formed a false portal to the mound (Pl. III, 2). South of this feature and lying parallel with the kerb was a recumbent monolith 7 ft. 6 in. long, covered by collapsed cairn material. It is uncertain if the stone was ever upright as no stone hole was found in the excavated area around it.

Small finds (fig. 3)

The only small finds from the cairn were a number of marine shells and animal teeth, six jet beads and a small bronze buckle. None of the finds are necessarily contemporary with the construction of the cairn as the nature of the mound enabled small objects dropped on its surface to percolate between the stones and come to rest on the old land surface beneath it.

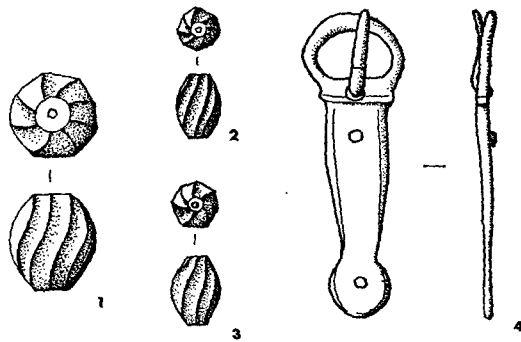


FIG. 3. Small finds: Nos. 1-3 scale $\frac{1}{2}$, No. 4 scale $\frac{1}{4}$

From the old land surface came four examples of the edible mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) and three of the edible cockle (*Cardium edule*). The teeth, from the same context consisted of three molars of sheep or goat and two of ox. The jet beads, in the cairn material and on the old land surface, were all fusiform, longitudinally perforated, and worked in a series of spiral flutings. Each had been carefully polished

¹ The bone fragments were examined by Dr D. R. Brothwell, British Museum (Natural History), but were too small for identification.

but microscopic examination revealed traces of the knife cuts produced in their manufacture. Five of the beads are 0.5 in. in length, the sixth is 1 in. long. The bronze buckle, 1.6 in. long, is in good condition with small spots of corrosion only on the pin which is still movable and consists of a rectangular-sectioned bronze strip bent round to encircle the perforation. Two rivets, one on the foot represented only by a stump, the second centrally placed with the pin bent flat against the underside of the buckle, secured it to some organic or metal object of thin section.

Small cairn, site B (fig. 1)

This small cairn, 11 ft. in diameter and 1 ft. 6 in. high, was revetted with unusually large kerb-stones. Little cairn material lay outside these slabs, which were set in the old land surface and were in this case functional. The stones themselves were angular, of the same geological composition as those of the large cairn, and did not exceed 1 ft. 6 in. in height. Within this kerb the stones forming the cairn were disproportionately large. On the western edge of the cairn was a small stone cist, 8 in. square internally, built against the inner face of the kerb, one stone of which served as a side slab. Although apparently undisturbed it contained only a few fragments of carbonised wood. There were no small finds from this cairn.

DISCUSSION

The paucity of finds and lack of structural detail from the two sites make comparisons difficult. The Kintraw cairns should probably be regarded as northern outliers of the great concentration of prehistoric sites in the Kilmartin valley.¹ Settlement in the valley by chambered tomb builders appears to be late, judging by the morphological features of the tombs themselves. The tombs at Baroile,² Dunamuck³ and Lochan Add⁴ all have chambers which in plan resemble the normal structure of Clyde-Carlingford tombs, but their small dimensions would have made it virtually impossible to gain access to the chambers after their construction in order to deposit further burials. In the largest of these tombs at Nether Largie⁵ it was still possible for Beaker groups to gain access to the chamber, and it is likely that the tombs with diminutive chambers mentioned above were built after the settlement of the valley by Single Grave peoples. Certainly the rite of collective interment appears to continue into this phase, as some of the massive cists beneath the great round cairns contained multiple inhumations or cremations,⁶ while the dry stone walling construction of the largest of these cists at Dunchraigaig⁷ closely resembles the building technique at Nether Largie. This mixture of traditions is seen, too, in site A at Kintraw where a round cairn covering a cist burial is provided with a non-functional entrance portal. In the Kilmartin Valley itself an upright slab in the embanked stone circle in Temple Wood,⁸ set at right angles to its circumference, may be the remains of a similar portal. Similar entrances have been noted in two

¹ PSAS, vi, 336-51; vii, 322; viii, 378; x, 103; xxxviii, 133.

² PSAS, LXIV, 139.

³ Unpublished. Nat. Grid Ref. NR 846922.

⁴ Unpublished. Nat. Grid Ref. NR 855983.

⁵ PSAS, vi, 336-41; LXIV, 233-43.

⁶ PSAS, vi, 339; viii, 378.

⁷ PSAS, xxxix, 235-9.

⁸ PSAS, LXIV, 130.

unexcavated Irish sites. In a circle at Knocknahoma Davis records a short 'passage' of stone leading to a portal which gave access to the circle. A closer parallel to Kintraw is the site at Sleabh Gore, Co. Derry, where a ruined cairn with a double circle of kerb(?) -stones had the latter cut by a false entrance formed by two slabs set at right angles to the circumference.¹ Lastly one may note the similarity between the Kintraw portal and the sill-and-jamb entrance on the megalithic kerb at Lyles Hill for which Evans sought parallels in chambered tomb architecture.²

No greater chronological precision is provided by the beads from Kintraw. In general form they are similar to the beads of space plate necklaces, three of which have been found in the area,³ but the spiral fluting appears to be unique. An incised spiral design occurs on a bead found with a cremation in a bucket-shaped urn from Glenluce,⁴ but the bead is only one third of an inch in length and laterally perforated. Vertical ribbing is also a feature of small ovate beads from Wessex Culture contexts.⁵ In view, therefore, of the absence of close parallels the beads cannot be used in the dating of the site, and the structure itself enables no greater precision than the suggestion of a date in the first half of the second millennium B.C. for its erection. The small bronze buckle is a medieval form and indicates some activity in the area of the site some three millennia later.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to thank the owner of the land, Mr Hugh Mackie of Kintraw Farm, for ready permission to excavate the sites on his property and to the Ministry of Public Building and Works for allowing the examination of a scheduled monument. The work was undertaken by undergraduates of the Department of Archaeology, Edinburgh University, to whom I offer my grateful thanks for their efforts on a physically exhausting task over two seasons. Generous financial assistance was given by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and the Department of Archaeology, Edinburgh University. For specialist advice and reports I should like to thank Dr W. A. S. Sarjeant and Dr D. Morton for identifying and commenting on geological samples, Dr Brothwell for examining the cremated bone fragments from site A and Dr G. Webster and Mr J. S. Wachter for their comments on the bronze buckle.

¹ *UJA*, II, 7.

² Evans, *Lyles Hill*, 1953, 64. It may be significant that Lyles Hill pottery is known from the Kilmartin valley. In studying the contexts of Lyles Hill pottery in Scotland, Atkinson (in Piggott, *Prehistoric Peoples of Scotland*, 1962) suggested a relationship between the recumbent stone circles of Aberdeenshire and the monument at Lyles Hill. The Kintraw portal might be seen as another manifestation of this same tradition. (See also *PPS*, XXXI, 43 ff.)

³ *PSAS*, LXIV, 136; VI, 339; LXIII, 152.

⁴ *PSAS*, LXXXVI, 47, fig. 2.

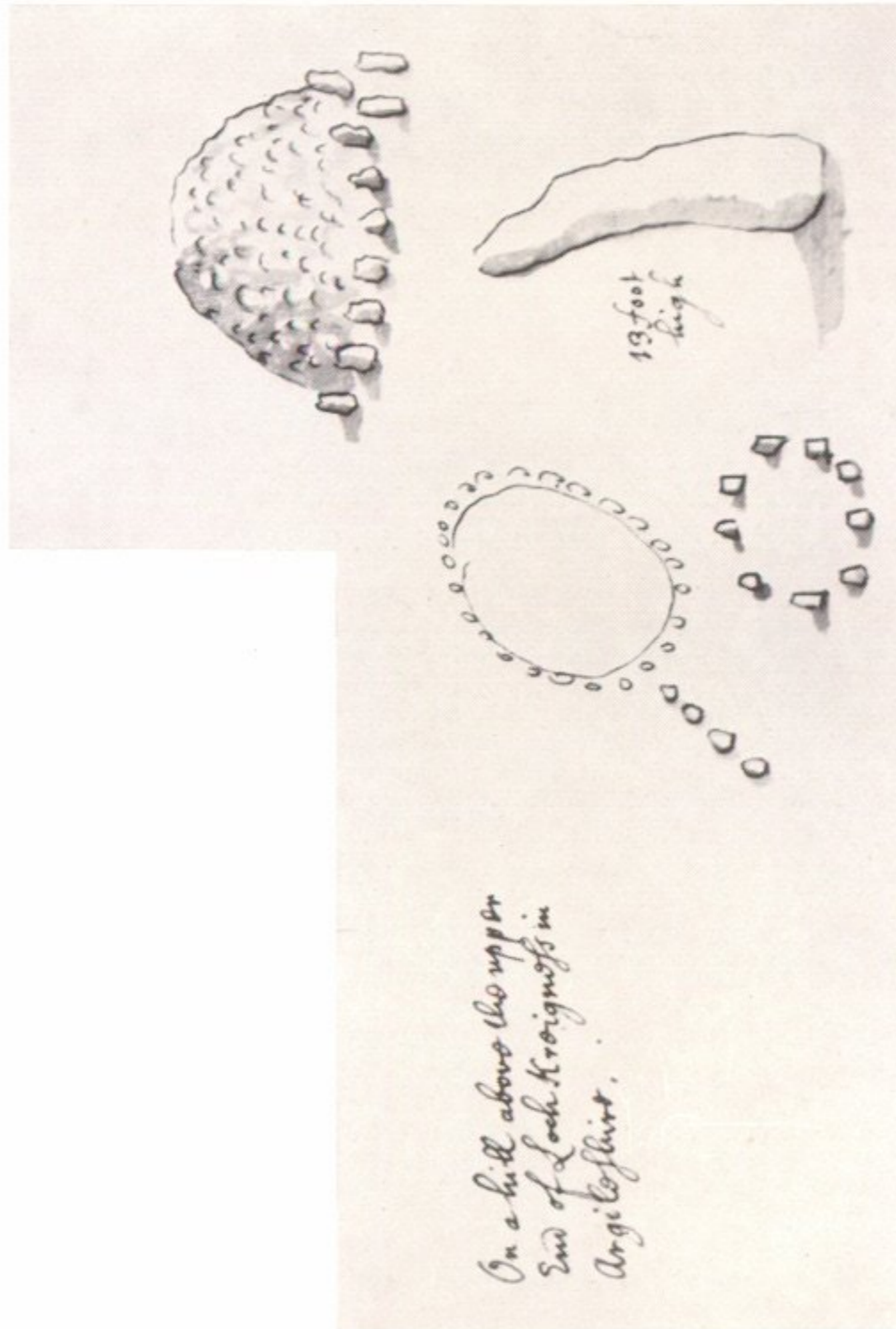
⁵ Annable and Simpson, *Guide Catalogue to the Neo. & Bronze Age Coll. Devizes Mus.*, 1964, 98, Nos. 147, 154; 101, No. 197.



1. Compartmented cist, Cairn A



2. The false entrance showing blocking and recumbent stone in front, Cairn A



Detail of page from Stukeley's Commonplace Book showing the Kintraw sites