

A Bronze Age Cairn at Moleigh, Lorn, Argyll

by J. N. G. Ritchie

During the course of the preparation by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland of the Lorn volume of the *Inventory of Argyll*, the central cist of one of the cairns to the S. of Loch Nell and $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles SSE. of Oban was re-examined (N.G.R. NM 880263).¹ The cairn, which is one of a group forming a linear cemetery, lies 600 yds. E. of the farmhouse of Moleigh and is sometimes described as one of the cairns at Cleigh, Loch Nell. It measures about 70 ft. in diameter and stands to a height of as much as 4 ft. 6 in. Although stone robbing has reduced it considerably, a number of large kerb stones remain (fig. 2). The central cist, measuring internally 4 ft. 6 in. by 3 ft. 3 in. and about 4 ft. in depth, was built on ground level with the cairn piled round it; the capstone has not survived.

The cist was first mentioned by Angus Smith in 1871 who noted that the burial it contained was 'probably of ashes only'.² On a subsequent visit to the site he excavated the cist to a depth of 'about 2 feet in all' and, along with earth mixed with fragments of bone, he discovered, in one corner of the cist, the bronze riveted dagger now in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.³ The cist itself is truly massive, the E. side-slab measuring 5 ft. by 4 ft. and about 1 ft. 6 in. in thickness (it is not, however, the living rock as Smith suggested).

In June 1967 the cist was completely re-excavated in order to facilitate the planning of the site; the section recorded is shown in fig. 2. The topmost layer of the filling (1) consisted of disturbed soil and pebbles. Below this was a compact layer of small pebbles and gravel (2) covering a clay layer (3), 0.75 in. thick, which fanned out from the corners of the cist. At the bottom there was a compact earthy deposit (4) in which there were considerable quantities of cremated bone, charcoal and stones. A hole had been dug through the pebble layer and had

¹ Mr Neil Jackson, Manager of Thomas Corson and Co. Ltd., the owners of the farm, kindly gave permission for this work.

² *PSAS*, ix (1870-2), 105.

³ *ibid.*, x (1872-4), 84, 458; *ibid.*, xii (1876-8), 454; Museum Inv. No. DI1 under Cleigh, Loch Nell; J. G. Scott, *South West Scotland* (1966), 34, 79, fig. 15a.

penetrated beyond the clay band, but it had disturbed only the upper part of the cremation deposit beneath. The end-slabs were set in sockets dug into the gravel. The side-slabs on the other hand were not, and between the bottom of the slabs and the natural there were considerable traces of wood charcoal. Only three tiny calcined flakes of flint accompanied the lower cremation deposit which was sealed by the clay and then the pebble and gravel layers. Although the cist had been used for two burials, the upper associated with the bronze dagger and the lower with the minute flint flakes, there was no evidence to indicate the lapse of time between them.

The dagger from the upper burial has recently been fully described by Miss Henshall and it belongs to a group which is dated by decoration and shape to about the middle of the Wessex

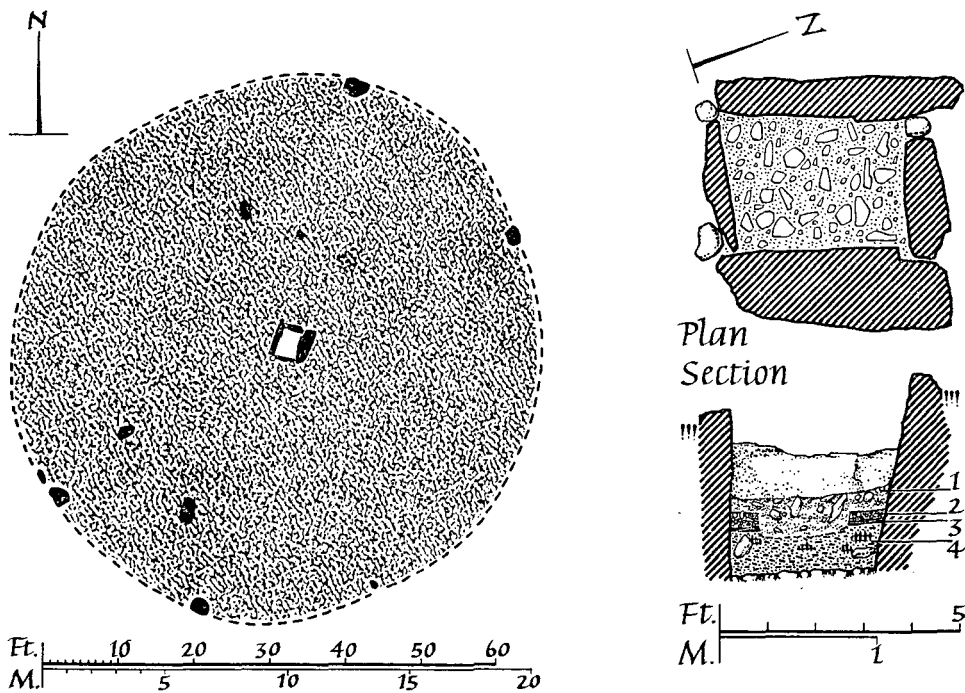


FIG. 2. Plan and section, Moleigh cairn

culture or the mid-fifteenth century B.C.¹ The great majority of such daggers are associated with inhumed burials, but at Moleigh the rite appears to have been cremation; and although massive cists are not uncommonly found with dagger burials, Moleigh is unusual as it is the second deposit in a cist already built. Since daggers are most commonly associated with male burials it is reasonable to assume that the upper burial was that of a man, whereas an analysis of the bones from the lower burial has indicated that they are probably those of a woman.² It is worth noting that a comparable burial was discovered in a cairn on top of the hill at West Mains of Auchterhouse, Angus³; two distinct cremation deposits were found on the floor of the central cist and differences in the degree of incineration of the bones might suggest that they belonged to separate burials. A bronze dagger was discovered with one of the cremations, and lines of small dots running down

¹ A. S. Henshall, *Studies in Ancient Europe* (1968). Coles and Simpson, ed., 175, 181 ff., fig. 42, Pl. Ic

² Mr C. B. Denston of the Duckworth Laboratory of Physical Anthropology, Cambridge, has kindly

examined the cremated material and his detailed report has been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

³ *PSAS*, xxxii (1897-8), 205 ff.

each side of its ribs are paralleled round the omega hilt-plate from Moleigh.¹ Miss Henshall has also suggested that the similar cist at Masterton, Fife, may have contained a double burial.² But although the dagger dates to about the mid-fifteenth century B.C., there is no real evidence for the date of the construction of the cist and cairn nor for that of the primary burial deposit at Moleigh.