

Small cairns in Argyll: some recent work

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INTRODUCTION

The peninsula of Morvern, in the NW corner of Argyll and now in the Lochaber district of the Highland Region, is roughly triangular in shape and is joined to the mainland of Scotland by the narrow neck of Glen Tarbert. A great through valley, caused by a series of Tertiary faults and subsequent erosion, contains a chain of lochs from Loch Aline to Loch Teacuis, which once formed a narrow sound separating the western tip from the rest of the peninsula. From Loch Arienas, the River Aline, a broad spate-river, joined from the NE by the waters of the Black Glen and the White Glen, runs southwards for 3 km until it reaches Loch Aline, a sheltered sea-loch on the N side of the Sound of Mull. Overlooking the confluence of river and loch is the medieval tower-house of Kinlochaline Castle and a little distance to the E is the 19th-century mansion-house of Ardtornish, set within its wooded policies. The floor of the Aline Valley, from its narrow, thickly wooded entrance to the stepped-plateau remnants of the marine erosion-surfaces at the point where the Black Glen water enters the open valley, is comparatively good agricultural land. The sides of the valley are steep, the W side particularly being covered by forest – as it has been since the later 19th century, at least in its southern part (Gaskell 1968, 110).

In broad outline, the patterns of settlement in Morvern in prehistoric times were coastal and riverside, but, as in the early 19th century (Gaskell 1968, xvi, Map 5), there seems to be a concentration of bronze-age sites in the Aline valley itself. Although no habitation sites of this period can be identified (nor indeed are there any iron-age sites), it seemed to be worth while to bring various bronze-age cairns together in one report and to suggest the existence in the later second millennium BC of three small, and possibly contemporary, communities at Acharn at the SE end of Loch Arienas, at Claggan halfway along the River Aline and at Kinlochaline overlooking the head of Loch Aline.

The excavations of cairns at Claggan and Kinlochaline were carried out in the course of field-work on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and permission to publish these results has been granted by the Commissioners; Mr

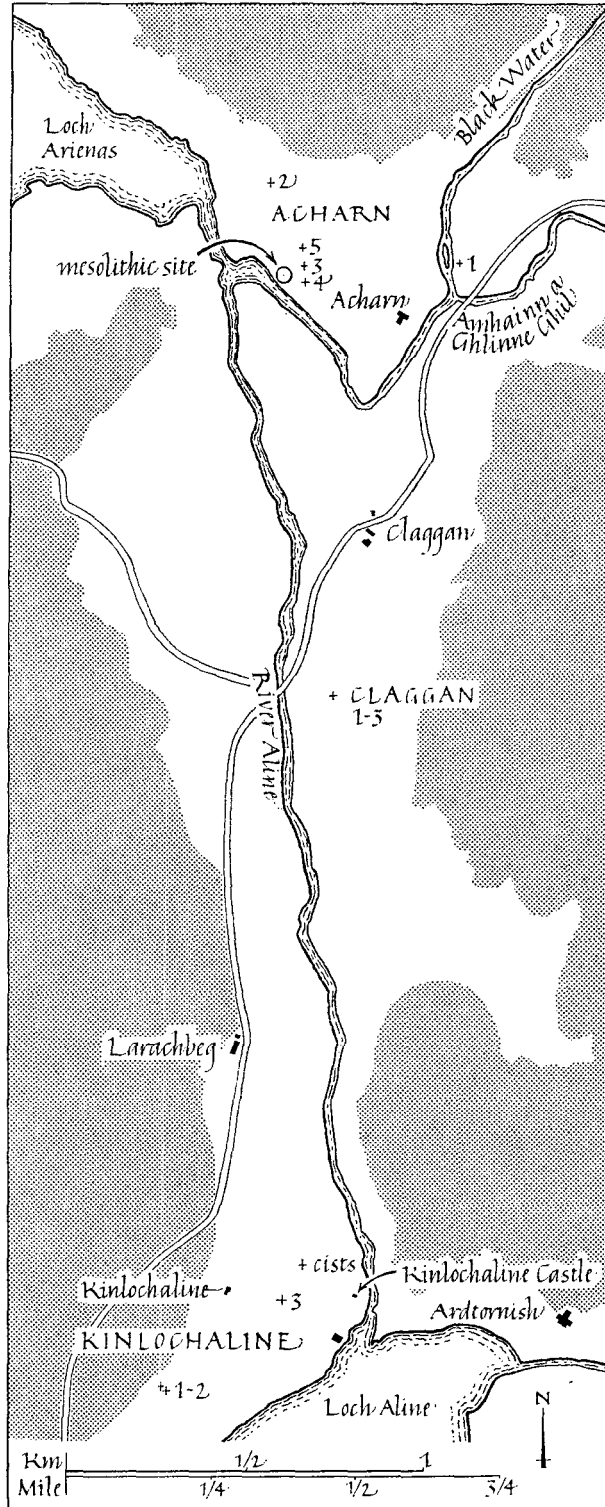


FIG 1 Aline Valley, Morvern, Argyll

Thorner discovered the cairns at Acharn, undertaking the excavation of the outlying cremation pit of Cairn 1 and the cists in Cairn 2, and has been responsible for that section of the report.

EXCAVATIONS

Acharn

The series of cairns at Acharn was discovered in 1973 and 1974, and the excavation of an outlying cremation burial of Cairn 1 and of the two cists of Cairn 2 was undertaken in 1974. None of the cairns had previously been recorded, although the placename might well have given an indication of their existence.

Cairn 1 (fig 1; NGR NM 702504) is situated on what was formerly the highest part of the promontory overlooking the confluence of the Black Water and the Amhainn a' Ghlinne Ghil, but its immediate surroundings have been considerably altered by sand extraction. The cairn (fig 2) has been severely robbed of its stone and now survives merely as a low mound some

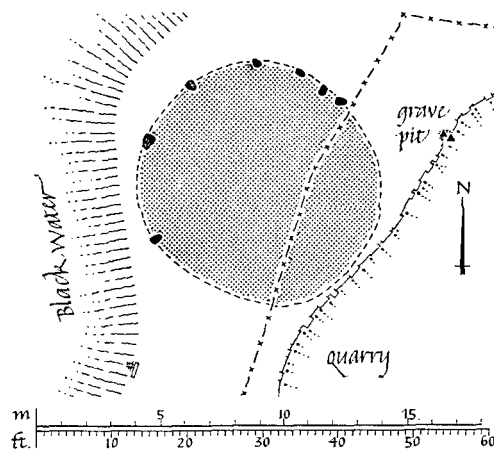


FIG 2 Acharn, Morvern, Argyll: cairn 1 and outlying cremation pit

9.9 m by 9.4 m in diameter, with some possible kerb-stones on the N half, and standing to a height of 0.25 m. Some 3 m to the E of the cairn, a pit was discovered in the section of the sand-quarry. The pit, measuring 0.53 m in diameter and 0.5 m in depth, held a cremation, mixed with earth and charcoal, which was associated with what may be a calcined bone toggle or pin-head, a smoothed stone and a number of unworked burnt flint flakes. A radiocarbon date of 1314 bc \pm 55 (SR R - 594) was obtained from an analysis of the charcoal.

Bone toggle or pin-head (fig 6, a) This tiny fragment of cremated bone, 14 mm long by 7 mm in diameter, may be interpreted either as a tripartite (or multi-partite) toggle or as the decorated head of a small pin. The piece is divided into three segments by two distinct grooves running round the bone, the end segment being of less than half the width of the middle one, and the segment on the other side being too fragmentary to interpret. The object is not perforated horizontally and it cannot therefore be described as a segmented bead, but it is not merely a notched bone representing an early stage in the bead-making process; in general proportions, however, it is similar to the small perforated beads found in a cinerary urn from Milngavie, Dunbartonshire, along with one leaf-shaped and four barbed-and-tanged arrowheads (Callander

1908, 218-20). But, as Powell has pointed out in his discussion of the segmented bone fragment from Corrandrum, Co Galway (1972, 103-4), it is unlikely that surface decoration would be attempted until after the perforation of delicate pieces, and it is safe to assume that such objects should be regarded as unperforated; if the Acharn fragment is envisaged as a pin-head, it is worth remembering that it is of very slight diameter and is approximately half the size of that from Corrandrum. Cremation burials of second-millennium date have produced a surprising series of small bone objects, toggles, beads, pins and pin-heads, some of them apparently burnt on the funeral pyre (for example Coolnahane, Co Cork; O'Kelly and Shee 1974, 76); it is impossible to hazard what they mean in terms of dress (for such objects would surely be more often found with inhumations if they originally belonged to clothing or shrouds) or in terms of burial ritual (for why are they burnt, if they are toggles securing duffle-bags of cloth or leather in which the cremated bones have been collected prior to deposition). Other examples of such associations are listed by Kavanagh (1973, 518-21).

Stone rubber (fig 6, b) A stone, probably dolerite, with its surfaces smoothed and faceted by rubbing, broken but not apparently burnt, the two rounded edges and the flat surfaces smoothed; the stone measures 51 mm by 30 mm and up to 16 mm in thickness.

A second outlying cremation was discovered on the opposite side of the narrow promontory on which the cairn stands and at a distance of 4.5 m SW of the cairn. It was found at a depth of only 0.2 m from the present turf level in the open section of the river bank and was apparently associated with a long flat slab (0.64 m by 0.13 m and 0.1 m in thickness). The cremation may have been deposited in a shallow cist of which only the one course of one side survives, but the remains are too fragmentary to interpret. Also present beside the slab and the cremated bone was a mineral formation, two examples of which were examined by general X-ray fluorescence scan by Dr A Livingstone and Mr W J Baird, Department of Geology, Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh. Both samples consisted of a majority of iron (one with heavy traces of barium and manganese, and the other with minor traces of barium, manganese, strontium and rubidium); this deposit of what seems to be bog iron is unrelated to the cremation burial.

Cairn 2 (fig 1; NGR NM 697507) is situated 570 m NW of the first cairn on a small terrace above the alluvial flood-plain and the E end of Loch Arienas. The cairn (fig 3) has been very considerably disturbed and now measures about 10.5 m in diameter and stands to a height of up to 0.5 m. Two cists, neither of them central, are visible within the cairn material, one on the S side and the other in the NE quadrant. The first cist (1) is trapeze shaped on plan and measures 1.4 m by 0.8 m internally and 0.8 m in depth. The capstone, which had been dragged off, measures 2 m by 1.8 m and 0.1 m in thickness. Clearance of the disturbed filling of this cist in order to

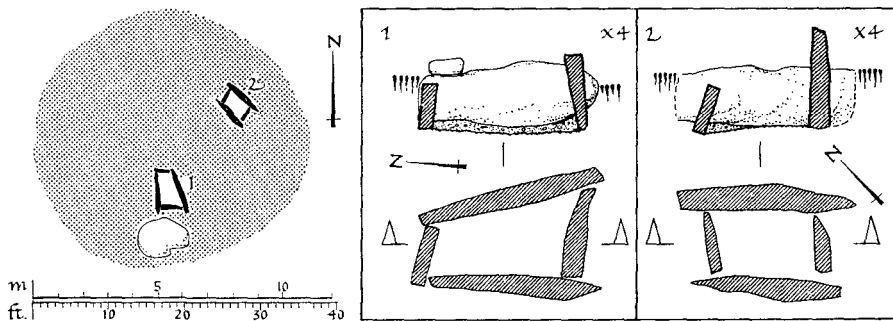


FIG 3 Acharn, Morvern, Argyll: cairn 2

facilitate measurement produced a small amount of cremated bone (Appendix 1), unworked flakes of flint and quartz and a number of small pieces of charcoal. The second cist (2), composed of four slabs and measuring 0.9 m by 0.7 m internally and about 0.6 m in depth, is aligned roughly NW and SE; the SE end-slab is 1.04 m high and would thus have stood above the level of a single flat capstone, which would have rested on the other three slabs and merely butted against this end-slab. It might also be suggested that the cist had been covered by two capstones forming a gabled roof, a method recorded at Corran Ferry in 1889 (Campbell 1890, 437). When the cist was cleared, an unworked flint flake and some tiny fragments of charcoal were noted. In both cases the cists appear to have been set within the cairn material and not completely dug into the natural subsoil; fragments of white quartz were recorded around the surfaces of both cists.

Cairn 3 (fig 1; NGR NM 697505), situated 200 m SSE of no. 2, is a well-preserved platform-cairn measuring 13.5 m in diameter and 0.6 m in height; at least forty-four kerb-stones still survive *in situ* round the perimeter.

Cairns 4 and 5 (fig 1; NGR NM 698505 and NM 697505) are situated 30 m S and 4.6 m N of cairn no. 3 respectively; the former is a small overgrown mound 7 m in diameter and 0.4 m in height, with no kerb-stones. The other mound, which may be the remains of a cairn, is 6.5 m in diameter and 0.2 m in height.

Claggan

Three kerb-cairns are situated in a level field 425 m S of the former Claggan school and about 1 km NNE of Larachbeg (fig 1; NGR NM 697493). The cairns are indicated on the second edition of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map of the area (1900, liv SE) as 'Old Grave Yard'. In 1973 the site was visited by officers of the Commission in the course of field-work preparatory to the publication of the third volume of the *Inventory of Argyll* and it was at once clear that the oval mound, measuring about 11.4 m by 9.5 m and standing to a height of 0.75 m, with two arcs of close-set upright stones, was a prehistoric burial cairn. The mound, however, had been considerably disturbed by the addition of field-gathered stones, and from surface inspection it was impossible to classify this potentially interesting monument. Accordingly the excavation of the site was undertaken over two seasons in 1973 and 1974. The two close-set arcs of stones were found to be parts of the kerbs of two cairns (Cairns 1 and 2) and to the NW of Cairn 1 was discovered a small and partially destroyed cairn (no. 3). Cairns 1 and 3 were excavated in 1973 and Cairn 2 was examined in detail in 1974. Apart from a number of unworked spalls of flint, the only finds were a small flint flake from Cairn 1, a tiny flint blade fragment from Cairn 2 and an unstratified bronze chisel which may also be of prehistoric date (fig 6, c-g); a number of wooden fragments are clearly more recent.

Cairn 1 measured 5 m in diameter and had been surrounded by a series of about twenty contiguous kerb-stones (fig 4); the best-preserved arc of stones, in the SW quadrant, protruded above the turf covering of the mound, while in the N half of the perimeter the kerb-stones had slipped outwards and in the SE quadrant had been completely removed. Observation of the stratigraphy indicated the sequence of events involved in building the cairn (fig 4). The setting-up of the kerb-stones seems to have been the first stage; these for the most part were broad flat slabs set upright in a distinct stone slot or stone hole. Stones 1-4 have individual holes, though their upper levels tend to merge; stones 5-12, on the other hand, are set in a shallow groove or slot rather than in individual holes, although the groove is rounded or deepened to meet the needs of each stone. Stone holes 14-16 are distinct hollows or scoops with several packing stones still in position, though the stones they once supported have been removed. Stone 17 survives as a stump (0.65 m in height, 0.54 m in breadth and 0.16 m in thickness), preserved no doubt by its deep

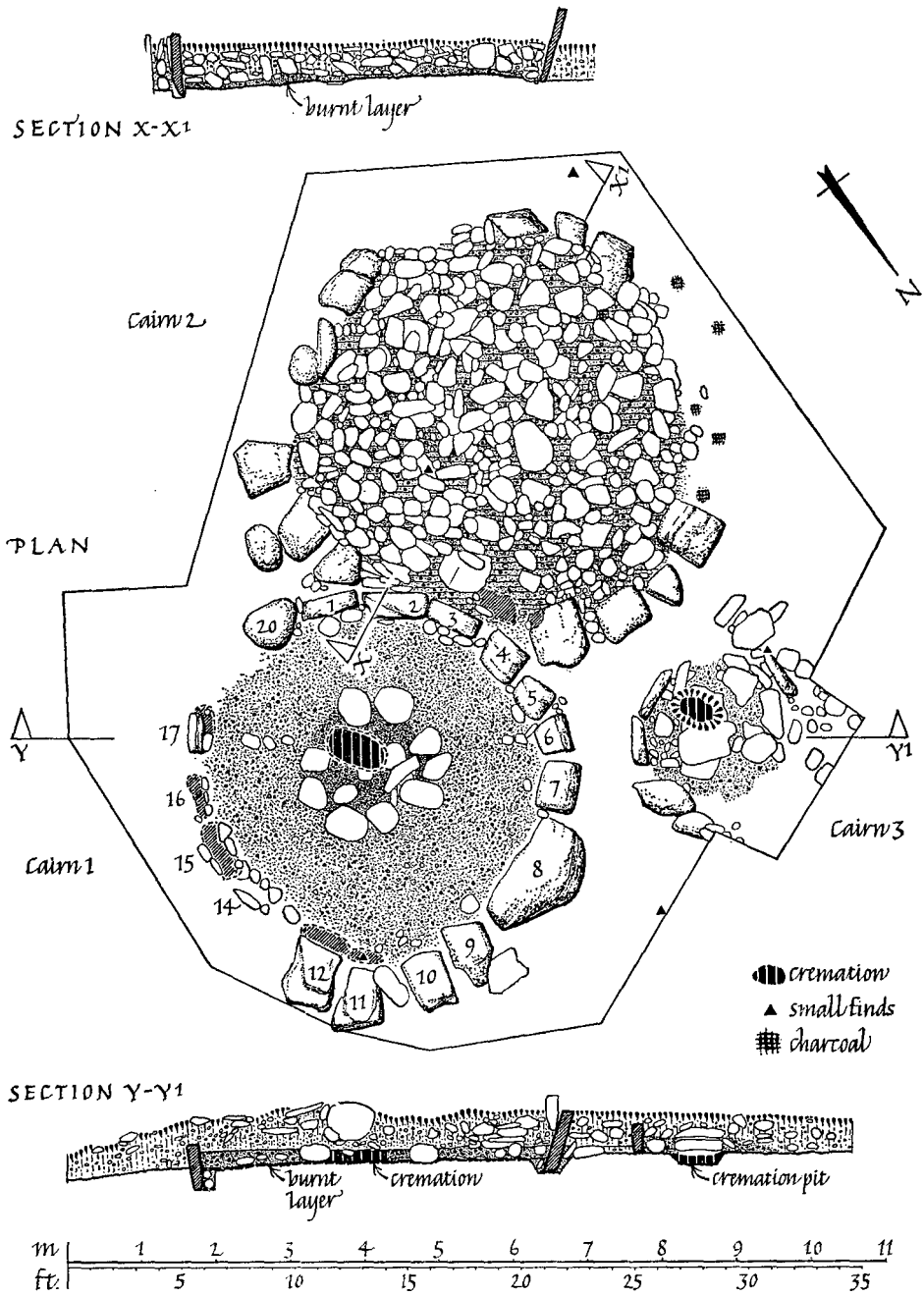


FIG 4 Claggan, Morvern, Argyll: cairns 1-3

stone hole. Stone 20 is an irregular granite erratic boulder (0.5 m in height by 0.7 m by 0.6 m), and is the only stone not sunk into the natural gravel. No trace was found of the postulated stones 13, 18 and 19, but numbers were apportioned to their spaces; as they occur on the most ruined part of the site, it is likely that they have been removed for dyke-building. Stone 1 is the tallest stone on the site (1.81 m in height and sunk 0.48 m into its stone hole) and stone 8 is the most massive (1.22 m in height by 1.6 m in breadth and up to 0.23 m thick). The upright stones were supported by boulders set into the stone holes which were then carefully back-filled with natural gravel. Hand samples of the kerb-stones of Cairn 1 were submitted to Mr G H Collins, Institute of Geological Sciences, Edinburgh, and they have been identified as mica-schist, quartz-feldspar granulite and micaceous granulite. Some contain granitic veinlets. The samples are similar to a series collected from nearby rock exposures, and it is likely that the material is of local origin, though it is impossible to say whether the kerb-stones were quarried or were loose blocks of glacial origin.

Within this well-built ring of slabs, a layer of burning indicated by burnt soil and smears of charcoal covered the site, clearly overlying the packing stones of the stone holes and thus later than the erection of the stones. This seems to have been the result of a fire of greater proportions than one would expect from mere clearance of the site, as definite chunks of charcoal were found within the layer, and in any case such clearance would probably have taken place before the setting up of the kerb; it is likely that it represents a cremation pyre. An inner ring of boulders about 4 m in external diameter, with an open central area some 1.25 m by 1 m, had been set in position over the burnt layer, and the space between the stones of the kerb and those of the inner ring filled with a deposit of ginger-brown gravel measuring 150 mm to 200 mm in thickness. Within the inner setting there was a deposit of similar thickness consisting of charcoal and burnt earth with a patch of cremated bones in the central area, though there were also bones scattered to the SE of centre. The cremation is discussed in Appendix 1. A radiocarbon date of 975 bc \pm 50 (SRR - 284) was obtained from the charcoal accompanying the cremation. The gravel ring and the central burial were then covered by a capping of stones and earth some 0.55 m in thickness giving the final cairn a height of about 0.7 m. The top level of this undisturbed filling is shown in pl 1a.

Flint The only small find from this cairn was a flake of yellowish-white flint (fig 6, c) measuring 28 mm in length, 16 mm in width. It was found in the brown gravel filling the shallow groove in which stone 11 had originally stood. A small fragment of yellowy flint (23 mm by 7 mm) was recovered from the old-land-surface to the NW of this cairn (fig 6, d).

Cairn 2 The kerb-stones of the second cairn had been subjected to greater disturbance than those of Cairn 1 and it is not possible to suggest the original number of stones (fig 4); three groups of kerb-stones survive, on the NE, SE and W arcs, and there is no doubt that the diameter of the cairn was about 5.25 m. The western group contains the tallest stones of this cairn, measuring up to 1.65 m in height. Only one individual stone hole was found, and in the NW quadrant the kerb-stones appear merely to have been laid against supporting stones of the lowest level of cairn material; in the NE quadrant several of the more massive stones were set within a shallow trench or slot, merging with the only stone hole close to the side of Cairn 1, which measured 0.8 m by 0.3 m and up to 0.2 m in depth.

The cairn material consisted of medium-sized rounded boulders and brown earth; there was no visible pattern in the disposition of the stones. The lowest level of cairn material had a considerable admixture of brown, rather gravelly earth, covering a thin old-land-surface (up to 0.12 m in thickness), which had been subjected to burning and was a mottled greyish colour. Cairn 2 seems to have been constructed at a rather later stage than Cairn 1 for it is built against the

carefully graded kerb of the latter; it would certainly have been very difficult to dig the deep stone-holes of Cairn 1 had Cairn 2 been the earlier, whereas the stones of Cairn 2 are with one exception set on the existing land surface. No cremated bones nor other burial remains were discovered and no identifiable sign of comminuted bone could be detected in samples examined in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland Research Laboratory. Radiocarbon dates of $462 \text{ bc} \pm 55$ and $586 \text{ bc} \pm 80$ (SRR – 593 and 599) were obtained from the old-land-surface, but the implications of these dates, in the absence of any burial deposit, are not clear, though they confirm that the construction of Cairn 2 was later than Cairn 1.

Flint A tiny flint (fig 6, e) was found on the old-land-surface; it is the broken end of a small parallel-sided implement of yellowy flint measuring 15 mm in length and 7 mm in width.

Cairn 3 In the angle between Cairns 1 and 2 and 0.75 m from them there were the ruined remains of a much smaller kerb-cairn of which only three of the uprights remained *in situ* and three had slipped out of position (fig 4). The cairn had originally measured about 2 m in diameter but its N half has been almost completely destroyed. Within the kerb the cairn material comprised about two layers of boulders and flat slabs, and the extent of the cairn is indicated more by the flat slabs than by the surviving kerb-stones. To the S of the centre and mostly covered by three of the larger slabs of the cairn material, there was a grave pit dug into the natural gravel; measuring 0.66 m by 0.48 m and up to 0.18 m in depth, it contained a deposit of cremated bones and charcoal. The cremation is described in Appendix 1. A radiocarbon date of $1058 \text{ bc} \pm 40$ (SRR – 285) was obtained from the charcoal accompanying the cremation. There were no small-finds with the burial deposit but some small quantities of white quartz chips had been inserted in two places near the kerb-stones; the position of these chips was not as significant as those recorded at the comparable cairn at Strontoiller in Lorn (Ritchie 1971, 4, fig 1).

Flint A small flint flake with cortex was found just outside the W side of this cairn (fig 6, f); it measures 27 mm by 22 mm.

Bronze chisel A small bronze chisel or punch (fig 6, g) was found in the topsoil to the SW of Cairn 2; it measures 61 mm in length and is of circular section at one end and of rectangular section at the other; the maximum width is 6 mm. The working end is missing. Its unstratified position means that it is no help in dating the cairn complex; it may, however, be compared to examples from the Glentrool hoard (Kirkcudbright; Coles 1963, 117, fig 16) and from Traprain Law (East Lothian; Burley 1956, 149).

Kinlochaline

Two kerb-cairns are situated in an arable field 335 m SSW of Kinlochaline and 2 km SSW of the cairns at Claggan (fig 1; NGR NM 692474); they are close to the edge of the field just below a wooded slope to the S, but the site has an open aspect to the NE. The sites are shown on the second edition of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (1900, liv SE) as 'Stone Circle', and three individual spots are shown; whether this indicates the site of three of the most visible kerb-stones or suggests the presence of three cairns is not clear. There is certainly no sign of a third cairn in the immediate vicinity at the present time. The larger of the two cairns, Kinlochaline Cairn 1 (fig 5), has been severely robbed and only the SW arc of kerb-stones survives almost intact suggesting an original diameter of about 6 m; the kerb-stones stand up to 0.6 m in height, but little cairn material now remains within the postulated line of the kerb. About a metre and a half to the W of this cairn the tops of a small kerb-cairn, Kinlochaline Cairn 2, are visible just protruding above the turf. This cairn was partially excavated in June 1974 in the hope that further dating evidence for this group of monuments might be found. The central area of the cairn had been severely disturbed and, although two small rim sherds (fig 6, h) and a number of tiny fragments of cremated bone

were recovered, the excavation was abandoned after the main outline of the kerb had been established.

The cairn, which measured 3.1 m in diameter, comprised nineteen kerb-stones and an inner filling of stones and earth. The kerb-stones are slabs mostly of rectangular section and they have been carefully set to maintain an even height of about 0.7 m. The kerb-stones have been selected and positioned with some skill and, before the disturbance of the SE portion of the kerb and the gradual engulfing of the site as a result of hill-wash and possibly ploughing, the cairn must have

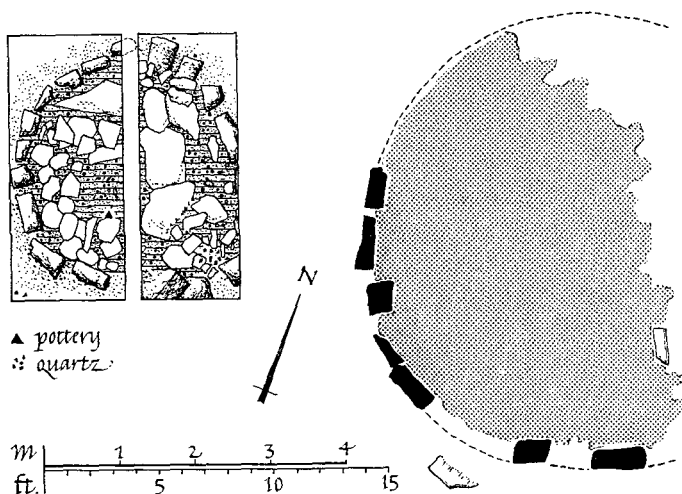


FIG 5 Kinlochaline, Morvern, Argyll: cairn 1 (unexcavated) and cairn 2 (showing limits of excavation)

been an attractive, low drum-like structure. The cairn material was made up for the most part of medium-sized stones and some earth, but there are some very large blocks, one of these in the SE quadrant measuring 0.9 m by 0.85 m and about 0.2 m in thickness; this stone had apparently been displaced during the disturbance of the centre of the cairn. There was a blanket of white quartz chips between this stone and the kerb to the SE; quantities of chips were also present underneath this slab and a few were also found round the outer perimeter of some of the kerb-stones. The basal layer within the cairn was a greyish more clayey loam in which there were minute fragments of cremated bone; the bone appeared to have been scattered on this layer and there were no discernible concentrations. The central area of the cairn had been previously excavated by means of a shaft, approximately a metre in diameter, which had been driven through the cairn material and about 0.1 m into the natural gravel. The small rim sherds (fig 6, h) and a number of fragments of cremated bones were recovered from the sides of this pit at a depth of about 0.6 m below turf-level.

Pottery (fig 6, h) Miss A S Henshall has kindly commented on the pottery from this cairn. 'The sherds comprise two small pieces of a rim and three other very small fragments. The rim is rounded in section, and the thickness of the walls and the top of the rim are irregular. The ware is rather friable including some quite large angular grits, and is covered by a slip of chalky texture. The colour is dark brown, becoming buff on the outside. The fabric suggests pottery of the food vessel/cinerary urn tradition, but the form of the rim is at variance with this suggestion, and the small simple vessels associated with cinerary urns are generally of better quality. Neither the

fabric nor the profile of the Kinlochaline sherds corresponds with the simple undecorated sherds recovered from Scottish cairns or stone circles, such as Monzie and Croft Moraig in Perthshire, or Garrol Wood, Kincardineshire, or Loanhead of Daviot, Aberdeenshire.'

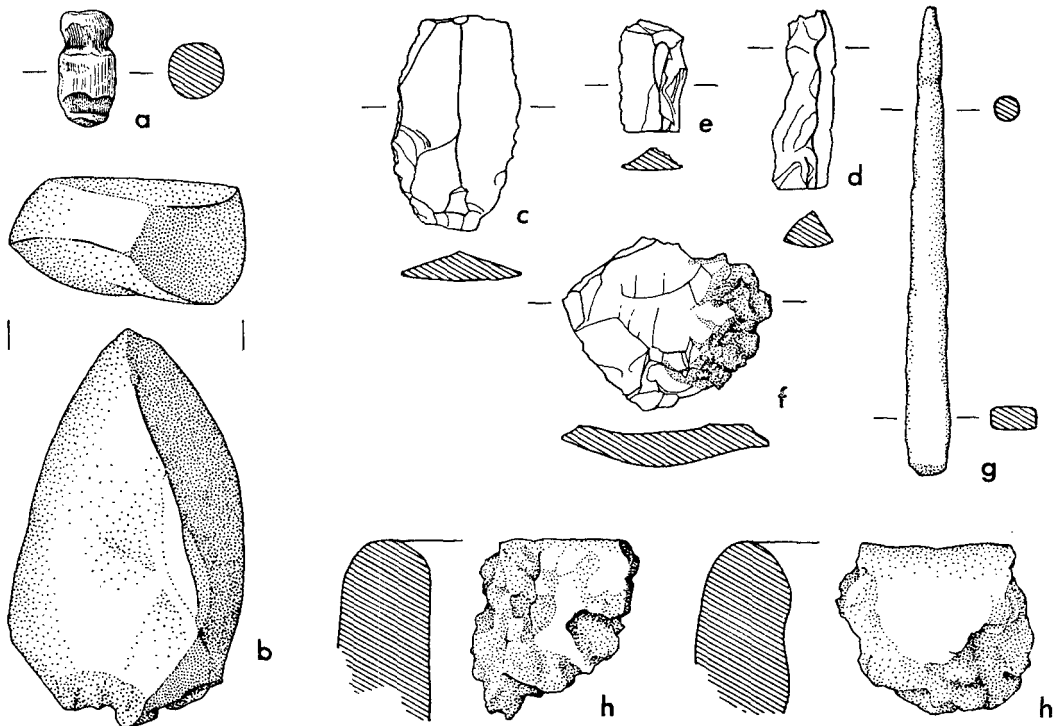


FIG 6 Finds from the cairns in the Aline Valley: a and b, Acharn; c-g, Claggan; h, Kinlochaline (1:1)

Cairn 3 There are the slight remains of what may have been a third cairn situated about 400 m NE of the other two and about 40 m from the edge of an arable field (fig 1; NGR NM 659476); local tradition states that there was formerly a stone cairn in this position which was always avoided during ploughing, but it now survives only as a slight swelling in the field, measuring 5 m in diameter and 0.3 m in height.

Cists Some distance to the N, four cists were discovered during the working of a sand-pit (fig 1; NGR c NM 696477) but the precise location is not known and, apart from the fact that the bones were re-interred, there are no further details (*The Oban Times*, 30 April 1904).

DISCUSSION

The excavations at Claggan and Kinlochaline have added little to our knowledge of the class of cairns known as kerb-cairns which was first identified following the excavation of the site at Strontoiller in Argyll (Ritchie 1971; see also pp 30-3). The distribution of such cairns was indicated for Lorn in the Commission's *Inventory* (RCAMS 1975, 10) and further sites have been identified in the course of fieldwork in the adjacent areas of Northern Argyll, Mull and at least one example in Mid Argyll at Ballymeanoch. The distribution of comparable cairns elsewhere in Scotland, indicated by Ritchie and MacLaren (1972, 8-13), may now be filled out by

further examples. Apart from the radiocarbon dates from Claggan and the confirmation of the impression of ring-cairn affinities in the construction of Cairn 1, Claggan, there has been very little archaeological advance. Perhaps more extensive planning of such cairns and excavation of further examples may provide more information about their date and affinities; but it might also be argued that the paucity of finds from excavated cairns, which now number about a dozen individual cairns in Scotland, means that excavation may not in fact produce many more answers.

Some suggestions may be put forward about the bronze-age occupation in the Aline Valley, though in the absence of dating material, except from Claggan and from the outlying pit at Acharn Cairn 1, they are based on subjective interpretation. In all the monuments examined by excavation, cremation rather than inhumation appears to have been the burial rite – in cists at Acharn, Cairn 2, in a circular setting or in a central grave pit at Claggan, Cairns 1 and 3, and as a scatter within a kerb-cairn at Kinlochaline, Cairn 2. The radiocarbon dates from the kerb-cairns at Claggan suggest that this class of monument was being built in this area between about 1300 and 500 bc in terms of corrected dates – a very long chronological range. It is difficult to know what to make of the radiocarbon dates from Cairn 2 at Claggan; in contrast to the samples from Cairns 1 and 3, which were of wood charcoal associated with the central cremation deposits, the sample from Cairn 2 was of charcoal collected from patches on the ground surface beneath the cairn. Although providing only a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the cairn rather than for a date of deposition, the determinations are much more recent than expected on archaeological grounds or on viewing the Claggan trio of cairns as a whole, but there is no reason to doubt the relationship of the sample to the cairn or to suppose more recent contamination. What the dates must indicate is that the tradition of building this type of cairn continued for a long period of time, at least in Morvern. But it does suggest, disconcertingly perhaps, that the building of such a cairn need not be far removed from that of a vitrified dun at Rahoy, 9.6 km to the NW (NGR NM 633564; MacKie 1971). Although there are no radiocarbon dates from Rahoy itself, determinations from comparable sites indicate that such an overlap of radiocarbon dates is quite possible – though whether this means anything archaeologically is another matter.

Cairns 1 and 2 at Acharn are probably earlier, though this is based partly on the tenuous supposition that cist-burial in Argyll is an earlier phenomenon than the kerb-cairn class, and partly on the bone fragment and date from the outlying burial at Cairn 1. If these cairns at Acharn are earlier than the other sites it may account for the greater concentration there. It may be permissible to envisage three distinct communities in the valley by about 1200 bc; of course, other sites may have been destroyed and there are certainly no settlement remains, but survival of stone cairns is likely to be high even if the lost habitation sites may be on those sites occupied in more recent times. The botanical evidence from Claggan (Appendix 2) suggests that the landscape was already much affected by man at the time of their building, almost completely deforested (with only a few alders and some hazel shrub) and consisting perhaps mainly of grass-heath with some areas of pure *Calluna* moorland. The presence of species such as *Succisa* in the flora suggests that pastoralism was important and there is no evidence for cereal cultivation. Such conditions appear to be very similar to those recorded for the old-land-surface beneath the bank at the Black Crofts, North Connel, Argyll, some 27 km to the SW; at another site on the Moss of Achnacree the beginning of the growth of the peat moss has been dated to 980 bc ± 80 (N – 1468; Ritchie *et al* 1974, 69). This date is almost identical to that from Claggan, Cairn 1, 975 bc ± 50 (SRR – 284), and one may assume that rather wetter conditions than earlier in the second millennium were prevailing at this time. A date early in the formation of the peat covering of the stone circle at Cultoon (Islay) is some two centuries later, 765 bc ± 40 (SRR – 500; MacKie 1975), but the onset of peat growth is likely to be the result both of general and local conditions.

In terms of distribution and numbers there is a marked contrast between the chambered cairns and the later bronze-age monuments in this area of Argyll. Two chambered tombs on the Moss of Achnacree (ARG 36 and 37) may be contrasted with the extensive series of later cairns on the Moss; a single chambered tomb in Morvern (Rahoy; ARG 40) may be compared to the groups of rather later bronze-age monuments, some of which have been described in this paper. If the distribution of chambered tombs on the Firth of Lorn, Mull and Northern Argyll is at all indicative, the extent of settlement in the third millennium BC was clearly very sparse, with only eight examples in this large and comparatively inhospitable area. There is a marked preference for sheltered bays such as Port Donain (MUL 1) or Camas nan Gael (ARG 2) where the tomb is set a little back from the shore. In the second millennium the area of settlement extends to the head of Loch Linnhe (Campbell 1890; RCAMS 1975, 46, no. 19) and to further parts of Mull (Loch Buie and the head of Loch Scridain for example), but also to rather higher altitudes, as the kerb-cairns at Killundine (NGR NM 586496) and Ardnacross (NGR NM 542491) testify. It is possible that several of these areas became less desirable, however, with the onset of the climatic deterioration; there is no reason to suppose that the upland areas were altogether deserted, for, although the peat surface would not have a high carrying capacity for stock, the possibility of transhumance means that such areas might be used at certain periods of the year.

APPENDIX 1

Cremated Remains from Acharn and Claggan, Morvern, Argyll

by *Dorothy A Lunt*, Department of Oral Biology, University of Glasgow Dental School
and *Stephen G Rees-Jones*, Department of Conservation, City Museum and Art Gallery,
Birmingham

Acharn, Cairn 1, Cremation Pit

The weight of the cremated remains was 406 gm, and the bone was in a very fragmentary condition, the largest pieces being a skull fragment (36 mm by 24 mm) and a tibia fragment (54 mm in length). Positive identification is thus very difficult, but the cremation is definitely that of an adult and probably that of an adult male judging from the thickness of the skull and long bones. There is no evidence of duplication and the remains are thus those of a single individual. The dentition is represented by extremely fragmentary portions of roots of permanent teeth. Part of one crown is present but it is so severely calcined as to be unrecognisable; neither can the roots be recognised. The only comment that can be made is that the root apices appear to be well closed, and the individual is therefore most probably adult.

Acharn, Cairn 2, Cist 1

The remains of this deposit are very fragmentary, weighing only 43 gm, the largest being a piece of skull (22 mm by 11 mm) and a fragment of a femur (33 mm in length). There was no evidence of duplication. Only one tiny fragment of a tooth root could be found; it appears to have been very small and could well have formed part of a deciduous tooth. The individual would thus have been less than 8 at death, since this is the apical part of the root and there is no evidence of resorption. But sometimes permanent teeth have very slender apices and so the possibility that this may have been from a permanent tooth cannot be ruled out. The individual could still, of course, have been a child and the very light nature and the thinness of the cranial fragments tend to confirm this suggestion.

Claggan, Cairn 1

The weight of the cremated remains recovered was about 540 gm, the largest fragments being a piece of the parietal of the skull (43 mm by 25 mm) and an ulna shaft (65 mm in length); there was no duplication of fragments. The remains appear to be those of a young adult, possibly female, but the fragmentary nature of the cremated bone made it impossible to determine the age or sex.

The teeth are in an extremely fragmentary state and the crowns, which are the most useful parts for the purposes of dental identification and age assessment, have been almost entirely lost. There are five

fragments of roots, two of which can be recognised with a reasonable degree of certainty as belonging to an upper left second permanent molar and an upper right third permanent molar. The rest cannot be identified. The root of the upper third molar has been completely formed before death. Johanson (1971) has shown in a study of modern Swedes that this stage of development is reached as early as 16 years in a few individuals, more usually occurs at about 18 or 19, and has been attained by 20 in all individuals. While the individual from cairn 1 could have been as young as 16 or 17, it is more likely that the minimum age would be in the range 18–20. How much older the individual may have been at death cannot be ascertained. Part of the pulp chamber of the third molar is present, and is large, which suggests that the individual probably was not very old.

Claggan, Cairn 3

The cremated remains in the grave pit in the centre of this cairn weighed only 223 gm, the largest pieces being fragments of a tibia shaft and the parietal (35 mm by 35 mm). There is a well-pronounced occipital protuberance. There are no duplicated fragments and the remains appear to be those of a young adult (between 20 and 30 years old) and probably male, as the muscle attachments to the bones are well marked. The tooth fragments from this cairn are even smaller than those of Claggan, Cairn 1. Three of them have formed part of premolar or molar crowns, but it is not possible to identify the exact teeth. The only evidence of age which can be obtained from them is that the pulp chambers in all three fragments are large and it is therefore unlikely that the individual was middle aged or elderly. The remaining fragments cannot be identified.

APPENDIX 2

Pollen analysis of soil samples from Claggan, Morvern, Argyll

by *Leslie Rymer*, Botany School, University of New South Wales

Sample 1 was taken from the old-land-surface just outside Cairn 1, at the E end of stone 8; sample 2 was taken from the old-land-surface beneath the cairn. The results of the pollen analysis are given in Table I. Preservation of pollen was quite good. The pollen spectra suggest an almost treeless landscape, perhaps with alders growing along the rivers. *Corylus/Myrica* pollen occurs in large amounts, and, although *Myrica* pollen is definitely present, hazel scrub may have been growing on some of the steeper slopes. The high proportion of *Calluna* in the pollen spectrum suggests that podzolisation was well developed, with *Calluna* heath growing on the hills. The high proportion of grass and plantain pollen, together with the presence of *Succisa*, may be taken to indicate that the area was not under cultivation, but was under pasture (Dimbleby and Evans 1972). It is clear that man had considerably altered the environment of the area before the cairn was built, and an interesting contrast is provided by the brown forest soil which must have developed under deciduous woodland that was found beneath the long barrow at Dalladies, Kincardineshire (Romans, Durno and Robertson 1973). It would seem possible that the deterioration in soil indicated by the Claggan results was caused by anthropogenic disturbance. There is no statistical difference between the pollen spectra of sample 1 and sample 2.

APPENDIX 3

Flints from Acharn, Morvern, Argyll

by *D M Rich Gray*, Falkirk Museum

The lithic assemblage was collected by Iain Thornber and was derived from two localities at Acharn within 30 m of one another (fig 1, mesolithic sites, NGR NM 697504) where, after their confluence at Acharn Bridge, the combined waters of the Black Glen and the White Glen flow into the River Aline and Loch Arianas. As the collection was made in an extensively ploughed field, no chronological conclusions can be derived from it, but the presence of microliths and microburins would appear to point to a mesolithic complex. However, taking into account the fairly rich evidence for later prehistoric activities in this area, a post-mesolithic element might well be expected.

The assemblage from site A consists of 42 worked pieces, 47 blades, 457 flakes and 86 cores and

TABLE I
POLLEN ANALYSIS FROM CLAGGAN

	Sample 1 (% total pollen)	Sample 2 (% total pollen)
<i>Alnus glutinosa</i>	9	9
<i>Betula</i>	3	1
<i>Pinus</i>	0.07	—
<i>Quercus</i>	0.85	0.63
Total tree pollen	13	10.63
<i>Corylus/Myrica</i>	24	23
<i>Calluna</i>	29	36
Gramineae	21	24
Cyperaceae	0.41	0.32
<i>Polypodium vulgare</i>	3	2
Polypodiaceae undiff.	3	0.5
<i>Plantago lanceolata</i>	3	1.42
<i>P. maritima</i>	0.07	—
<i>P. major/P. media</i>	0.21	—
<i>Ranunculus</i>	0.35	0.32
Rosaceae undiff.	0.14	0.16
<i>Succisa</i>	1.55	1.10
Caryophyllaceae undiff.	0.35	0.16
<i>Silene maritima</i> type	0.14	—
<i>Filipendula</i>	0.14	—
Rubiaceae	0.07	—
<i>Matricaria</i> type	0.14	—
<i>Potentilla</i> type	0.14	0.16
Cruciferae	0.07	—
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	—	0.16
<i>Sphagnum</i>	0.49	0.32
Indeterminable (as % total pollen + indeterminable)	7	6
Pollen sum	1520	675

bashed lumps: a total of 632 pieces. Flint constitutes 96.68% of the raw materials, and other stones represented are quartz, mudstone, quartzite, chert, bloodstone and granite. Cortex is present on 26.58% of the assemblage and 11.08% is fire-cracked. The longest blade is 55 mm, the longest flake 49 mm and the longest core 40 mm. Varying degrees of patination can be seen although there is a tendency towards a white patina.

The quality of the flint working is reasonable in Scottish conditions with its scarcity of good flint, but the bulk of the assemblage, the waste, is of no significance due to the lack of stratigraphy and comparable finds. Most of the cores are irregular and only two are good pyramidal cores; there is also a small irregular bloodstone core (fig 7, no. 14).

Of the 42 worked pieces six are microliths (fig 7, nos 1-6), two are microburins (fig 7, no. 7), ten are scrapers (fig 7, nos 8-9) and one is a possible borer (fig 7, no. 10), the tip of which, with its triangular cross-section, appears to be polished from wear. One flint (fig 7, no. 13) has flat trimming on both faces, but it is probably not a leaf-shaped arrowhead. The remaining flints have miscellaneous retouch, some of which may result from recent agricultural activities.

From site B, 227 pieces were collected, consisting of 10 worked pieces, 18 blades (fig 8, nos 2-3), 190 flakes and 9 cores and bashed lumps. Flint constitutes 97.35% of the raw materials; other stones found are quartzite, quartz, mudstone and pitchstone. 25.66% of the assemblage has cortex and 12.32% is cracked from firing. The longest blade (fig 8, no. 3) is 54 mm, the longest flake 38 mm and the longest core 36 mm. Patina and workmanship is similar to that of the assemblage from site A. The 10 worked pieces consist of one microlith (fig 8, no. 1), four scrapers (fig 8, nos 4-5) and five pieces with miscellaneous retouch.

Beyond adding a new findspot to the map of probable Scottish mesolithic sites, these Acharn localities do not yield any new information on a period poorly understood in Scotland. One of the main

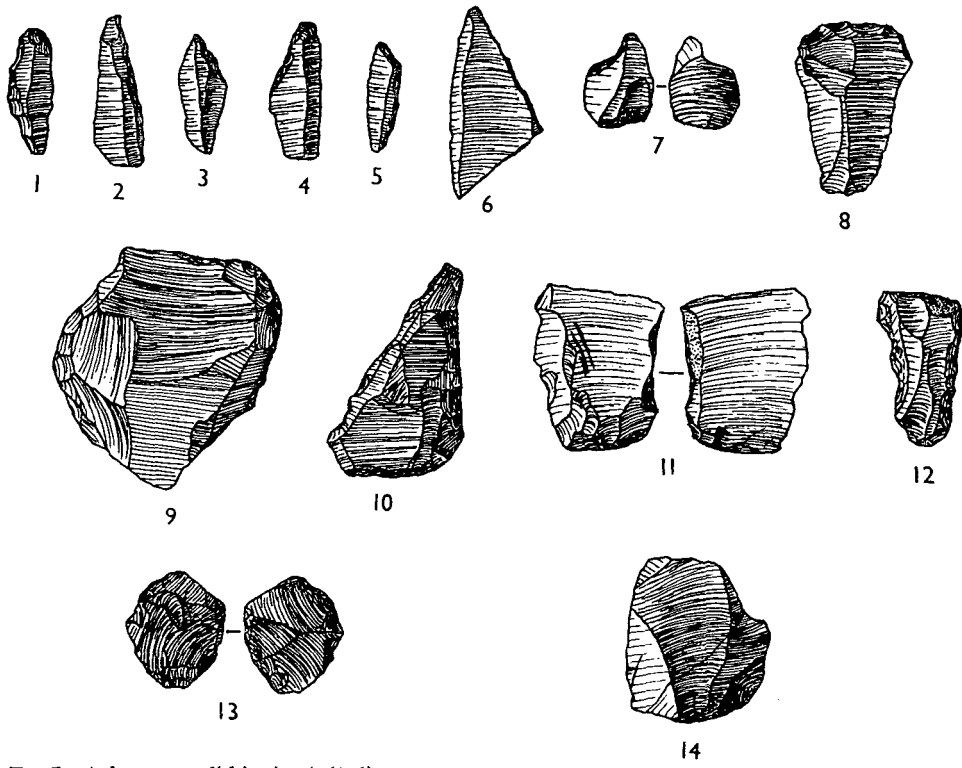


FIG 7 Acharn mesolithic site A (1:1)

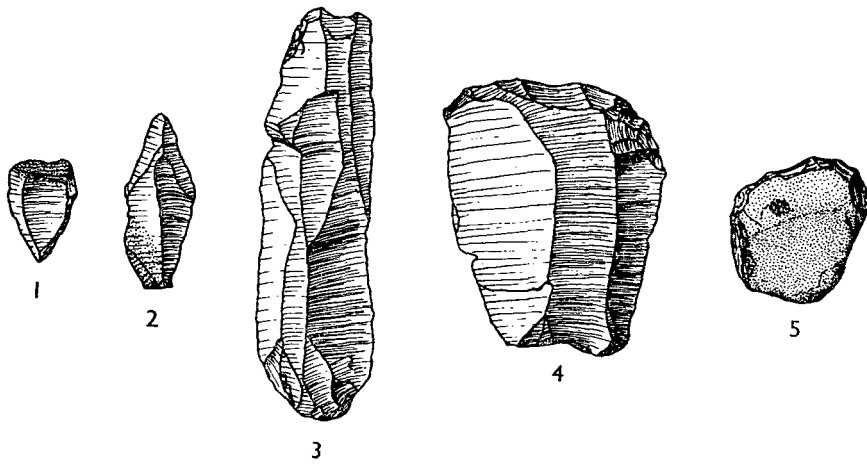


FIG 8 Acharn mesolithic site B (1:1)

problems is the scarcity of well-excavated, stratified sites, because most of the material currently available has been derived from surface collections in ploughed fields and sand dunes. *It can only be hoped that careful field-working may reveal sites suitable for future excavation.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writers are indebted to Mrs Faith Raven and the Ardtornish Estate Company for permission to undertake the excavations described in this paper and for generously presenting the finds from Claggan and Kinlochaline to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland; the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland is indebted to Mr R A M Coyne, Ardtornish, for assistance during the excavations; to Mrs M Kay, Miss B Matheson, Mr A Rutherford and to the volunteers who took part in the work. Fig 1, the sketch map of the Aline valley, was prepared by Mr I G Parker; the site survey and preparation of the plans were undertaken by Mr J N Stevenson (figs 2-5). Miss E H Jackson, National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, prepared fig 6 and Mrs D M Rich Gray kindly wrote Appendix 3 and drew the accompanying figures (figs 7 and 8). Mr W J Baird, Dr A S Clarke, Dr J Close-Brooks, Mr A Gibb, Mr G Collins, Dr D D Harkness, Miss A S Henshall, Mr J B Kenworthy, Dr A Livingstone, Dr D A Lunt, Mr J C McCawley, Mr A MacLaren, Dr H G Macpherson, Mr S G Rees-Jones, Dr L Rymer, Mr I G Scott, Mr J B Stevenson all gave expert assistance in various specialised fields.

ii Kerb-cairns

by Frances Lynch and J N Graham Ritchie

The field identification of any class of monument depends on firm definition of diagnostic features visible externally and should not be based on details which can be revealed only by excavation. The classification of a cairn as a 'kerb-cairn' depends on the sense of proportion of the stones of the kerb to the area enclosed and to the height of the cairn material. The kerb-stones themselves, sometimes graded in size, are the dominant feature of the monument, which has the appearance of a petrified 'charlotte russe'. In shape kerb-cairns may be either round or oval, but round ones are predominant. The size is an important factor because it is the small diameter which gives the kerb-stones their unusual prominence. However, this is not an accidental result, but is clearly deliberate as is shown by the existence of many small cairns without an unduly conspicuous kerb (Heathcote 1930). The size range lies between 2 m and 6 m but both extremes are rare; monuments between 3 m and 5 m in diameter are more common and more typical, with a height of 0.4 m to 0.75 m, the height being defined by the kerb-stones since the cairn material does not rise above them even at well-preserved sites.

The number and proportions of the kerb-stones vary, not only because of differences in the size of the area enclosed but also because of the use of locally available stone for the kerb. In the Lorn area of Argyll, for instance, glistening granite erratics were used and such stones form a rounded, gently contoured perimeter to the cairn (Strontoiller; Ritchie 1971). Whereas in Northern Argyll and Mull basalts and mica-schist were quarried from adjacent exposures and the resultant kerbs have the appearance of close-set linear blocks, as at Kinlochaline, Cairn 2.

Excavated examples have shown several recurrent features: a burnt old-land-surface, a basal

layer of disproportionately large stones, white quartz pebbles or chips and normally the burial of cremated remains. Although some sherds of undiagnostic pottery have been found, none of these monuments has yet produced a standard urn burial, nor have any of the cremations been accompanied by any datable grave goods. However, the presence of burning and charcoal does mean that good samples are normally available for radiocarbon dating.

Despite geological variations, therefore, it is possible to isolate this type of cairn from surface remains alone and to envisage distinct geographical groups not only in Argyll but also in Perthshire and Aberdeenshire. Outside Scotland the type may also be recognised in North Wales and it is likely that further examples will be found in N England and in the south-west where parallels for other specialised types of bronze-age monuments also occur. Some sites in Ireland could be mentioned in this context though bronze-age structures as a whole have not been much studied there.

In the west of Scotland, such cairns were first recognised as an identifiable group in the course of fieldwork by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in the Lorn area of Argyll, and four examples with diameters between 4 m and 6 m were recorded (RCAMS 1975, 10, 45, no. 10; 49, no. 34; 54, no. 61; 57, no. 78). Many more examples will be illustrated in the third volume of the *Inventory* with local concentrations on either side of the Sound of Mull; apart from the cairns in the Aline Valley the only 'classic' kerb-cairn to be excavated is Strontoiller (Ritchie 1971) where many of the features that can only be found in the course of excavation (burnt old-land-surface and quartz for example) were present. The cairns in Lorn were found individually, but several of those in the adjacent areas of Argyll have been discovered in small groups. The Perthshire and some of the Aberdeenshire monuments, including the allied site of Cullerlie, were discussed by Ritchie and MacLaren (1972) and by Burl (1976, 188–9, 195–9).

Apart from Cullerlie, the only excavated site in NE Scotland is that on the summit of Knockollochie Hill (NGR NJ 702252) which was examined in 1961 (*DES 1961*, 3); here an oval cairn, 4.9 m by 3.7 m and standing to a height of 0.6 m, comprised a kerb of massive boulders, with a large upright stone standing on bedrock just to the S of the centre and an artificial hollow in the bedrock at the centre of the mound. The cavity was empty but fragments of burnt bone, flint flakes and white quartz chips were found in the S half of the interior, while the basal layer of the N half was seen to be blackened. The burial ritual, quartz and burnt surface are recurrent traits in the reports of the excavation of kerb-cairns on both sides of Scotland. Several of the surviving examples from Aberdeenshire occupy commanding positions such as Knockollochie and Knockhill, Logie Coldstone (NGR NJ 451037; Ogston 1931, 104). This contrasts with the situation in Argyll where few are in individually prominent positions and some are even in secluded or hidden spots – Achacha for example (RCAMS 1974, 45, no. 10).

In North Wales eight certain examples of this class of monument have been recognised (Table I). The descriptions of others, such as the destroyed monument, Cerrig y Cledd III, Merioneth (Bowen and Gresham 1967, 92, no. 169), are suggestive, but since the main criterion is the massiveness of the kerb-stones in proportion to the size of the cairn it is impossible to be certain of the classification without visiting the site.

One such cairn has been reported from South Wales where many small cairns without prominent kerbs are to be found, however some in the Gower may prove to have the necessary massive kerb (e.g. RCAMW *Glamorgan* forthcoming, no. 214). The only comment that one can make about the distribution at this stage is that it would seem to be widespread and that there is a notable association with other specialised types of Bronze Age monuments. The cemeteries at Penmaenmawr and Brenig contain specifically ritual sites as well as standard burial monuments

(Griffiths 1960; Lynch *et al* 1974; 1975) while the two on Eglwyseg Mountain stand close to an enigmatic circle or ring cairn (Ellis Davies 1929, 266) and that on Rhos y Beddau is clearly associated with the Circle and Alignment (Grimes 1963, 121). The destroyed cemetery at Cerrig y Cledd had contained at least one ring-cairn.

The only excavated example in Wales is Brenig 6 which had, unfortunately, been rather badly damaged (Lynch *et al* 1974, 48-50; 1975, 26-9). The monument superseded a round house on the same site and the evidence for patches of burning on the old-land-surface was probably

TABLE I
KERB CAIRNS IN WALES

<i>Site</i>	<i>NGR</i>	<i>Diameter</i>	<i>Height</i>	<i>Publication</i>
<i>Caernarvonshire</i>				
Cors y Carneddau	SH 717747	3.0 m-3.6 m	0.6 m	RCAMW 1956, 89, no. 271, i
Bryn Bugeilydd vi	SH 718740	4.0 m-5.0 m	0.4 m	RCAMW 1956, 126, no. 429, vi
<i>Denbighshire</i>				
Brenig 6	SH 995563	4.5 m	0.4 m	Lynch <i>et al</i> 1974, 48-50
Eglwyseg Mountain Ia	SJ 227451	3.6 m	0.4 m	Unpublished
Eglwyseg Mountain Ib	SJ 227450	4.0 m	0.4 m	Unpublished
<i>Merioneth</i>				
Cerrig y Cledd III	SH 643197	c 6.0 m	—	Bowen and Gresham 1967, 92, no. 169. Destroyed
<i>Montgomeryshire</i>				
Rhos y Beddau	SJ 059303	4.7 m	0.4 m	RCAMW 1911, 124-5, no. 631; Grimes 1963, 121
Trannon ii	SN 920975	3.6 m	0.3 m	Unpublished
<i>Pembrokeshire</i>				
Carn Edward	SN 053367	4.6 m	0.35 m	RCAMW 1925, 273, no. 818

The writers are grateful to Mr Peter Crew for some of the entries in this list.

to be associated with that rather than with the cairn. However, the discovery of an unaccompanied cremation dispersed amongst the stones of the cairn filling and the presence of a notable quantity of quartz are in line with the results from Scottish sites. A radiocarbon date of $1120 \text{ bc} \pm 90$ (HAR-536) came from a hearth beside the cairn, so this relatively late date, which agrees well with those from Scotland, is not to be directly associated with the building of the cairn, although it may turn out to be a pointer to the date range in Wales. The massive boulders forming the kerb at Brenig 6 were set horizontally and surface indications suggest that this may be the case at other Welsh sites; they certainly do not seem to have the neat vertical setting of the Scottish examples, though none is undamaged and only short lengths of kerb are intact. Both the kerb-cairns on Eglwyseg Mountain have a single taller stone in the kerb which may be an echo of the Scottish association with standing stones.

Some allied sites may be mentioned from Ireland; at Beaghmore (Co Tyrone) sites 9 and 12 are small cairns (2 m and 2.7 m in diameter) kerbed by large stones with the centre filled up with stones and earth. At the centre of no. 9 there was a pit with two small flints, and at the centre of no. 12 there appeared to be a ruined cist, with the disturbed remains of a cremation and charcoal near by (Pilcher 1969, 74-5, figs 2 and 3). The site at Carnagat, Co Tyrone (Davies 1938) is comparable in scale to a kerb-cairn (3.7 m in diameter) but the design is rather more complex,

since it contains an inner ring of uprights, most of which are now sloping outwards, and a low central stone. However, the middle of the cairn had been disturbed and the original arrangement is not entirely clear, though fragments of charcoal and cremated bone were found there. An interesting feature of the cairn is that it was 'composed of rounded pebbles, often of quartz or other stones of noticeable colour, white, green or red', and these do not seem to have been of local origin.

The site at Carnagat could equally well be interpreted as a small Cairn Circle (Lynch 1972), and in fact several Welsh examples of these more striking monuments are built on this same small scale. This fact, together with the ring-cairn aspect of the plan of Claggan, Cairn 1 and of Knappers, Dunbartonshire (Davidson 1935, 363-4), suggests that the kerb-cairn has close links with the complex of quasi-ritual monuments known loosely as ring-cairns and circles. Another link is to be found in the occasional 'false portal' – a pair of stones set radially to the kerb – which can be found on the kerb-cairns at Lochbuie (NGR NM 615252) and at Clachadow (Ritchie and MacLaren 1972) and on the kerb-circles at Cefn Caer Euni and Moel Ty Uchaf, Merioneth (Lynch forthcoming; Bowen and Gresham 1967, 80-2), and at Culcharron and Kintraw, Argyll (Peltenburg 1972; Simpson 1967). In addition, there is the very frequent association between kerb-cairns and other bronze-age monuments, such as stone circles, alignments and standing stones, which have been assumed to have some ritual and even astronomical significance. This coincidence of siting can be found in all the areas where kerb-cairns are known to exist. In Scotland the groups at Kintraw, Ballymeanoch in Mid Argyll, Strontoiller, Lorn, Ardnacross, Mull, and Fowlis Wester in Perthshire, all contain kerb-cairns while the only two well-preserved circles in Argyll, Lochbuie and Strontoiller, are close to kerb-cairns. At Strontoiller the association between the kerb-cairn and the standing stone is very close indeed. In North Wales all the known examples are found close to ritual sites of one kind or another, and at Beaghmore, Co Tyrone, the small cairns are set within a large complex of circles and alignments. In SW England what may be a kerb-cairn lies close to the stone circle on Mardon Down, Devon (Fletcher, Grinsell and Quinnell 1974).

This link with ritual monuments which are traditionally assigned to the early bronze age (though admittedly there is little evidence for their span of use) is somewhat at variance with the radiocarbon dates which are now available for kerb-cairns in Scotland, quite definitely associated with the construction of the monuments but lying consistently within the later half of the period. However, as yet these dates have come from only one group and they may not prove to be entirely representative of the class as a whole, especially since the North Grave at Cairnpapple, West Lothian (Piggott 1948, 88-92), with its beaker inhumation burial, might possibly be included in this class, as could the cairn which formerly incorporated the Catstane, Midlothian (Rutherford and Ritchie 1974). Perhaps their similarity to the true kerb-cairns as defined in this paper is more apparent than real, but they serve to highlight those questions of origin and cultural context which have still to be answered, together with the elusive problems of their relationship to the other specialised types of bronze-age monuments so often found near by. The single example within the cairn group at Balnuaran of Clava has perhaps allowed the affinities to the Clava ring-cairns to be overstressed, initially by Ritchie (*in* Ritchie and MacLaren 1972) and more explicitly by Burl (1972, 39-40; 1976, 198-9). The distribution of kerb-cairns, if indeed they are a unified class, suggests that there is little direct influence from any other class of monument; in all probability there is no linear relationship to the Cairnpapple example nor to the Clava monuments, sites which are on the periphery of known concentrations of kerb-cairns. The radiocarbon dates from Claggan do nothing to strengthen any immediate connection with cairns or circles of the Clava group.

iii Excavation of a cairn at Portavadie, Cowal, Argyll

by Dorothy N Marshall

INTRODUCTION

The impending construction of the Portavadie Oil Platform Site at Port a' Mhadaidh, on the E side of the S end of Loch Fyne, stimulated intensive fieldwork in the area, and the structure here described was recognised as a possible cairn by Mr Archie McIntyre, Lindsaig farm, in March 1974. Situated on Stillaig farm at the edge of a wide shallow valley sloping towards the sea (fig 9, 1; NGR NR 933691), the cairn lay in the path of a road-widening scheme designed to

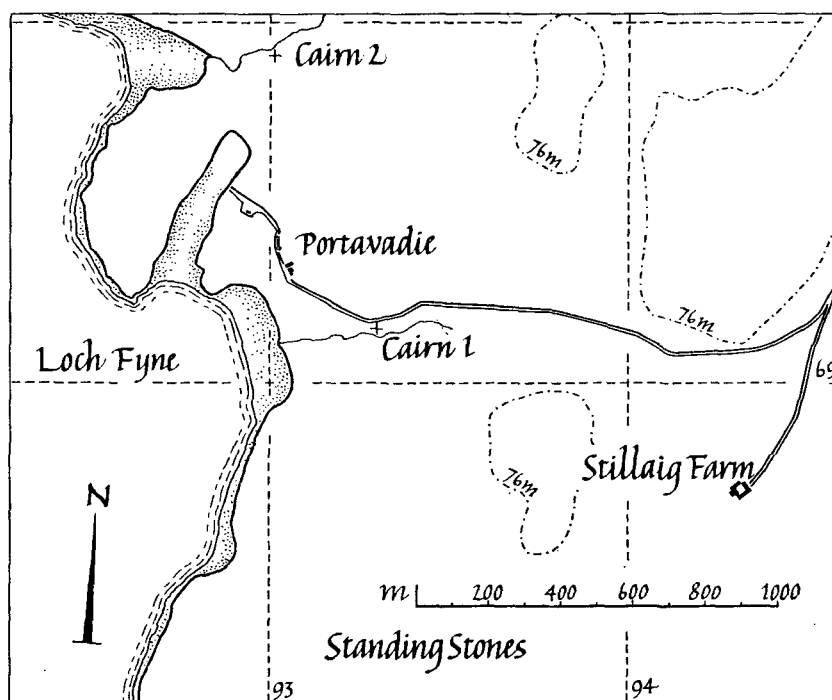


FIG 9 Portavadie, Cowal, Argyll

improve access to the Platform Site, and an excavation was hastily mounted by members of the Cowal Archaeological Society and of the Buteshire Natural History Society on behalf of the Department of the Environment. Lack of time and resources prevented total excavation, but a considerable proportion of the cairn had been examined by the time the whole site was finally obliterated. Record photographs, however, were taken frequently and these have been deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland, Edinburgh. A second cairn (fig 9, 2), measuring about 9 m in diameter and 1 m in height, discovered by Miss E Rennie some 800 m NNW of the first, at the head of Lùb na Faochaige, has since been scheduled as an ancient monument and has remained undisturbed by the construction work.

EXCAVATION

The cairn consisted of two structural elements, a low central mound of earth and stones and an outer band of earth and clay within a kerb of long slabs set on edge (fig 10); the cairn stood some 0·6 m in height, with the diameter of the central cairn being some 5 m and the outer band increasing the overall diameter of the site to about 6 m. The central cairn had been retained by a well-built kerb of slabs or small boulders; on the E half of the cairn the kerb survived to a height

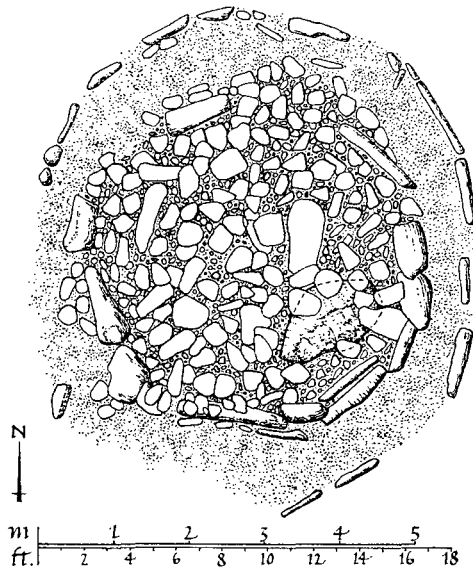


FIG 10 Portavadie, Cairn 1, Cowal, Argyll

of about 0·5 m in four courses, but it was not well preserved on the W side. In summary, excavation revealed the presence of six main layers but, although the general character of the layers of cairn material can be distinguished, no distinct horizons could be detected between them: a layer of grey clayey soil flecked with charcoal, with an average thickness of 0·15 m, on the surface of the natural yellow clay; the bottom layer of stones of the cairn, some of which were massive slabs; smaller stones, some of those near the kerb overlapping one another and sloping inwards against the kerb; a layer of larger slabs of schist set at all angles (although those near the kerb were also pitched inwards) and a few deposits of charcoal and soil; finally layers of water-rolled stones and earth, with some patches of ashy soil; just under the turf there was a spread of ashy material – presumably the result of recent disturbance. Only the E half of the cairn was excavated to a level beneath the layer of large schist slabs and the plan (fig 10) shows the stones at this stage of the excavation.

The layer of clayey soil would seem to be in part an old-land-surface, possibly flecked with charcoal from the clearance of the site, but it may also result from the preparation of a foundation for the construction of the cairn and it seems likely that the outer line of kerb-stones, far from being a later addition round the cairn, may be the outer edge of this prepared platform. In the absence of total excavation it is impossible to be certain, but there is no doubt that the tops of the outer kerb-stones are on the level of the lowest course of the kerb-stones of the central cairn (pl 1c). The stones of the basal layer of cairn material included a number of unusually massive

stones – with a block of schist at the centre of the cairn (0.5 m by 0.45 m and 0.45 m in thickness) which was surrounded by three large lumps of quartz. A massive stone in the SE quadrant, indicated on fig 10, measured 1.5 m by 0.85 m and at least 0.3 m in thickness; it had a peculiarly irregular and rugged character in marked contrast to the other stones of the cairn. Flat slabs of this layer of cairn material in the NE quadrant lay pitched against the stones of the kerb.

It is unlikely that such large stones would have been moved into position after the construction of the kerb, and the pitching of the stones against the lowest levels of kerb-stones clearly indicates that the kerb was heightened as the cairn was built; this feature was not present in the topmost levels of cairn material. Unfortunately, with the time and manpower available, it was not possible to move the central block.

The kerb of the cairn was best preserved on the E side where it stood four courses in height (pl 1b), but larger upright blocks were also employed as single kerb-stones (pl 1c). The use of dry-stone walling round the perimeter of a cairn is one of the most unusual features of the construction of the site. Within the cairn, apart from the central block and the particularly large schist slab marked on fig 10, the only other feature of note was a conical stone with a striking quartz inclusion set with its point uppermost, packed in position by three other upright stones, but the significance of that setting is not known. A flint core, made from a split pebble and retaining most of the original cortex, was the only find recovered from the cairn. A few small flakes have been struck off one side using the split face as the platform. Cores of this type are very common among large surface collections of mesolithic material in Scotland, such as those from Ballantrae, Ayrshire, but in the present state of knowledge it is not possible to say whether half-pebble cores are also present in neolithic and bronze-age flint industries.

The outer kerb, which it has been suggested may be an early phase in the construction of the site, consists of long upright slabs holding in position a stone-free band of earth and clay about 0.6 m to 0.8 m across. This band of clay was also found outside the outer kerb-stones in a trench cut on the S side of the cairn. The slabs of the kerb were up to 0.5 m in depth and their tops were found to be approximately at the same level as the basal courses of the inner kerb-stones. But in the absence of complete sections it is impossible to be certain about the sequence of building.

The upper levels of the cairn had been subjected to secondary and perhaps recent disturbance – patches of ash, charcoal and what may have been a hearth were recorded; there is, however, no evidence for the date of this activity.

DISCUSSION

While it is clearly unsatisfactory that it was not possible to complete the excavation, enough information was recovered to ensure that the plan of the inner and outer kerb-stones, the inner cairn and the outer earthy band are accurately represented on fig 10. This demonstrates that the cairn, though allied to the kerb-cairn class of monument, is, because of the outer kerb-stones, in a class by itself. The use of flat courses of slabs as the kerb of the cairn material also seems to be unusual in Argyll. In Yorkshire, an inner cairn within a surrounding apron of smaller stones has been recorded at Mount Pleasant, near Normanby (Sockett 1971); here the central low cairn (9.14 m in diameter) was set within a kerb, in some cases of three or four courses of stones, and in others apparently of upright blocks, and was associated with a beaker and a tiny piece of worked flint. The basal layer at Portavadie, grey clayey soil flecked with charcoal, may be comparable with that found within Cairn 2 at Claggan, Morvern, Argyll. The absence of any burial deposit at Portavadie may also be paralleled at Claggan, Cairn 2 and in the surviving portion of the cairn at Culcharron, Lorn, Argyll (Peltenburg 1972). On the other hand, the concurrent construction

of kerb and cairn at Portavadie is in contrast to the initial building of the kerb and the subsequent infilling found at Culcharron and at Claggan, Cairn 1 (Peltenburg 1972, 68). Culcharron also comprises the twin features of central cairn, in this case surrounded by upright granite erratics, and a surrounding apron of external cairn material. Peltenburg has drawn attention to the different character of the central cairn and the surrounding apron (1972, 68).

Two features of the Portavadie cairn link it in general terms to the class of kerb-cairns discussed in the previous paper – the use of chunks of quartz, in a manner that seemed to be significant, and the disproportionately large blocks of stone of the bottom layer of the cairn. Although it would have been preferable to strip the whole of the area of the cairn in advance of destruction, the large blocks of stone at the bottom of other cairns in Argyll, such as Culcharron, were not in fact found to be covering any features or burial deposits, but were merely a firm foundation layer (Peltenburg 1972, 67). If the interpretation of Portavadie as a small cairn set on a prepared and kerbed platform is correct, a possible parallel is found at Barcaldine, Lorn, Argyll (RCAMS 1975, 48–9, no. 32). The third cairn of this group consists of a cairn some 9·8 m in diameter, within a kerb of substantial upright boulders, built on a platform about 22 m in overall diameter; the platform is edged by a bank some 3 m across. Perhaps this is a more complex version of the sort of construction that has been recorded at Portavadie. The important feature of this salvage excavation is the demonstration yet again of the variety of internal structure shown by recent excavations of small stone cairns in the west of Scotland, which are presumably of bronze-age date, and this report is presented as a contribution to this study.

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a Claggan: Cairn 1 before removal of stones



b Portavadie: inner cairn from W



c Portavadie: dry-stone walling of inner kerb and outer kerb-stones on E side