

Excavation of the cairn at Cairny, Lanarkshire

by G S Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

The hill of Cairny lies in an area of rather bleak, rolling moorland, roughly half-way between Blackridge, West Lothian, and Caldercruix, Lanarkshire; it is now in the Monklands district of Strathclyde Region. Very near the summit of the hill (260 m OD), about 475 m NW of Forrest farmhouse, a round grass-grown mound about 8 m in diameter and 0.6 m in height until quite recently marked the position of a burial cairn (NGR NS 851665). A roughly circular depression about 1.5 m across and 0.2 m deep near the centre of the mound appeared to indicate an area of modern disturbance, possibly associated with the decaying stumps of three wooden posts, which projected through the turf within the hollow. Subsequent examination, however, suggested that the posts belonged to some unidentified structure of recent date and the depression was the result of intrusion by treasure-seekers at an earlier period.

When first visited by officers of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, in the course of preparatory work for the *Inventory* of the prehistoric and Roman monuments of the county, the site was found to be in imminent danger of destruction, for the stripping of overburden associated with the operations of the adjacent quarry had advanced to within a few metres of the summit of the hill. As it was clearly impossible to preserve the cairn, and as, in any case, it appeared to be seriously mutilated, permission was sought for total excavation of the monument. This request was immediately granted, and the work itself was carried out on behalf of the Royal Commission in August 1969 (RCAMS 1978, no. 26).

EXCAVATION (fig 1)

When stripped of modern topsoil and an original capping of laid turf, the cairn was found to be more or less oval on plan, measuring approximately 6.4 m by 5.5 m. However, although

the absence of a regular kerb made it impossible to be certain, it seemed probable that this shape had been produced by erosion of the perimeter through ploughing, especially on the S, and that the original cairn had approximated to a circle about 6.7 m in diameter. The bulk of the cairn had consisted of boulders of varying size mixed with blackish earth, built apparently with care and preserved to a height of 0.53 m. Occupying what would have been a central position was an

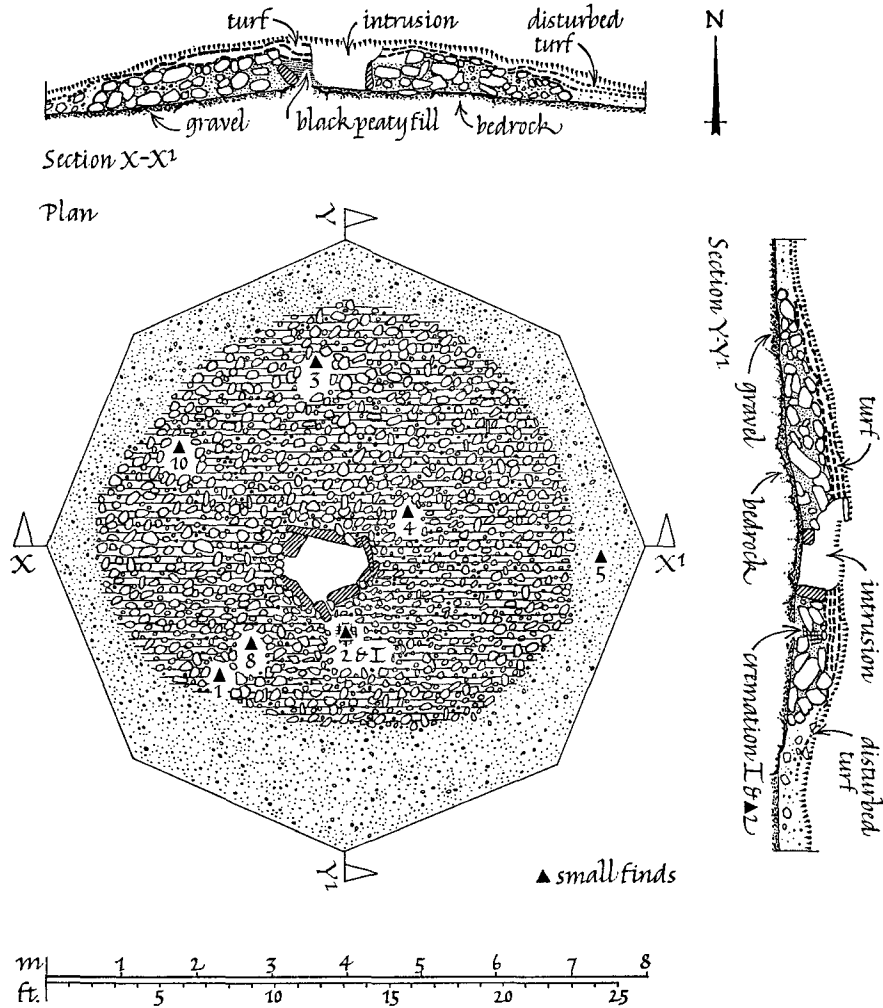


FIG 1 Cairny: plan

irregularly-shaped cist, measuring 1.17 m from E to W by 0.84 m transversely and 0.35 m in greatest depth; it was constructed of boulders and small slabs, resting, for the most part, directly on bedrock. The cist had been filled with a mixture of loose black earth and stones, which also contained a few minute fragments of cremated bone (Appendix no. IV), and then the whole cairn had been capped by layers of turf, surviving at the time of the excavation to a maximum thickness of 0.23 m. The use of this material and the absence of a capstone are most unusual features, and their significance is discussed below.

Unfortunately at least half of the filling of the cist had been removed when an intrusive shaft was driven into the centre of the cairn, presumably by treasure-seekers. A fragment of a jet armlet (cat. no. 7), found just beneath modern turf-level immediately within the N perimeter of the cairn, was possibly removed from the cist at that time. The discovery, in approximately the same place, of a sherd of late medieval green-glazed pottery (cat. no. 6) may indicate when that disturbance took place. No objects of prehistoric date were recovered from the cist itself, but about 0.3 m to the S of it a pocket of calcined human bone, incorporated in the cairn material, was found to contain a single crumb of coarse buff pottery (cat. no. 2). The human remains were extremely comminuted, but were identified as belonging to a young adult, possibly male (Appendix no. D).

Furthermore, when soil samples taken from the floor of the cist were submitted to the laboratory of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland for phosphate analysis, they were found to contain uniformly high phosphorus levels, although selected from widely separated points in the floor; this may be taken as support for the view that the phosphorus derives from an even spread of cremated and partly cremated human bones in the filling of the cist, rather than the decay of an inhumed body, which would have tended to give only locally high readings (Dr McKerrell *in litt*; McCawley and McKerrell 1972, 303–4).

No further finds were made until the wholesale removal of the body of the cairn had taken place. It was then seen that, before the cairn was built, the old land-surface had apparently been stripped of turf; the bare subsoil thus revealed was covered by a thin spread of charcoal flecks, amongst which were found some cremated bone (Appendix no. II), a flint scraper and a flake of chert (cat. nos 8 and 10) and several sherds of coarse pottery (cat. nos 1, 4 and 5). It is possible that no. 1 is an abraded sherd of beaker ware.

DISCUSSION

The small cairn on the summit of Cairny consisted of a central above-ground cist, surrounded by a stone mound and capped by layers of turf. Although in the strict sense a composite cairn, it is clearly different from many of those funerary structures to which the term is normally applied (Ashbee 1960, 41–50). In the majority of composite cairns the inner element takes the form of a small central mound, which is later covered by a much thicker outer casing. Indeed, there appear to be few cairns where the proportions are reversed, as in the example under discussion, and fewer still where the outer casing is of turf. The nearest parallel in Scotland is an undated cairn at Machrihanish in Kintyre (RCAMS 1971, 44–5, no. 42), which was opened in the early 19th century and found to consist of an inner cairn of stones and an outer casing of sand, earth and turf. The inner cairn, like that at Cairny, incorporated an above-ground cist. Geographically closer to Cairny, a barrow at Broughton Knowe, Peeblesshire (MacLaren 1967, 99–103), was found to be composed of two structural elements: a loosely packed core of sandy soil and an outer capping of dark earth, stones and boulder clay. The burial rite was also similar, in that a cremation was accompanied by a spread of abraded pottery fragments on the old ground-surface. The construction of composite cairns and barrows seems to be a long, although not necessarily unbroken, tradition stretching from the early bronze age to the first millennium AD, the later stages being represented by the composite barrow surmounting the counterscarp bank of the Roman fortress at Inchtuthil, Perthshire (Abercromby *et al* 1902, 201–2).

Beaker cremations are relatively uncommon, although not perhaps as rare as suggested by Clarke (1970, 453), and at least four others have been recorded in Lanarkshire. Two were found in a multiple burial cairn at Limefield (DES 1967, 59), one under a cairn at Crawford (Ritchie

1970, 144-5) and another from a flat cemetery at Ferniegair (Welfare 1975, 5, 11). In fact cremations associated with beakers and food vessels seem to be more common in the south-west than elsewhere in Scotland.

The two decorated fragments of pottery from the ground surface beneath the cairn (cat. nos 1 and 3) are so abraded that it would be wrong to suggest that the attribution of sherd no. 1 to a beaker tradition was other than tentative. But if this sherd is indeed beaker ware it may represent part of a zone of decoration bounded by horizontal impressions and infilled with diagonal lines or chevrons, and beakers from Cairnpapple (West Lothian) and Cambusbarron (Stirlingshire) are complete examples of the type of vessel from which this single sherd may have come (Clarke 1970, nos 1791 and 1782, figs 570 and 686). The jet armlet belongs to a type of long duration and is of little help in suggesting a date for the cairn; armlets with similar transverse

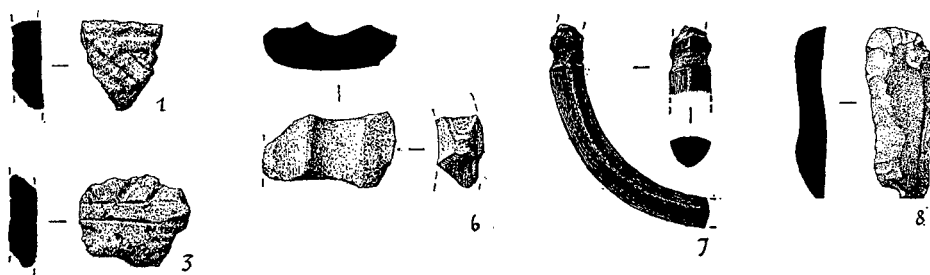


FIG 2 Cairny: small finds (scale 1 : 2)

grooves have been found on Traprain Law, East Lothian (Cree and Curle 1922, 248, fig 26, 9; NMAS 1922.344 and also 1967.287 – a surface find), and a comparable armlet was discovered during the excavation of the crannog in Lochend Loch, near Coatbridge (Montieth 1940, 33).

It is therefore clear that the equivocal nature of some of the small finds makes it difficult to say precisely when the cairn was built. On balance, however, the artefacts found beneath or within cairn material are such as to make it more likely than not that a context in the early part or the middle of the second millennium BC would be appropriate.

SMALL FINDS (fig 2; the find-spots are shown on fig 1)

Pottery

1 Small, very worn sherd of orange-buff ware, with a black core and black inner surface, 8 mm in thickness, decorated with lines of converging impressions, possibly beaker; beneath cairn material on SW perimeter.

2 Tiny fragment of pottery (20 mm by 15 mm and approximately 11 mm in thickness), orange-buff outer surface, grey-black interior. It is possible that this is a crumb of the same vessel as no. 1; from cremation deposit I to S of cist.

3 Sherd of brownish-buff with buff inner surface, heavily gritted (up to 4 mm in size), decorated with incised parallel lines; in cairn material N of cist.

4 Body sherd, well-fired ware with some mica, but not so heavily gritted as no. 2; 9 mm in thickness; beneath cairn material immediately NE of cist.

5 Worn body sherd of buff ware, 12 mm in thickness; on old ground-surface outside cairn on E.

6 Two sherds of late medieval ware, including a fragment of a strap-handle and a grey body-herd.

Jet

7 About a quarter of a jet or lignite armlet with an overall diameter of 90 mm; triangular section measuring 12 mm internally and 9 mm in thickness; transverse groove (4 mm in width and about 1 mm in

depth) cut at 7 mm from one end of the fragment and the remains of a second groove along the break. The transverse groove is more deeply cut on the outer surface and is more roughly cut, and shallower, on the inside; topsoil.

Flint

8 Scraper made on the end of a long flake of grey flint of triangular section, with steep working on the rounded end and trimming along the sides; areas of cortex remain on the upper surface; 45 mm long, 18 mm broad; beneath cairn material SW of cist.

9 Flake of greyish flint roughly trimmed to a scraper end and now damaged; 39 mm long, 19 mm broad; unstratified.

10 Small broken fragment of dark green-grey chert, carefully trimmed along one edge; 17 mm by 8 mm. In charcoal patch on old land-surface; beneath cairn on NW periphery.

11 Three flakes of unworked flint or chert, one light grey, possibly burnt, and two of dark grey colour; unstratified.

APPENDIX

The cremated remains from Cairny Cairn, Lanarkshire

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I *Cremated bone from cairn material S of cist.* The fragments, light brown in colour, were human, and consisted of the remains of skull and postcranial bones. Examination of the remains revealed weights of 96.5 gm of skull fragments; 80.0 gm of long bone fragments; and 110.0 gm of miscellaneous fragments. No recognisable duplicate portions of bones were found, and this suggested that the remains were of one individual. A few of the long bone fragments were recognisable portions of specific bones, but the skull fragments revealed the most information. Among the skull fragments were a complete right mastoid process and a portion of a left mastoid process, possibly both from the same individual. The robustness of the complete mastoid process suggested that it was more likely to have been representative of a male than of a female. Other fragments of cranium displayed vestiges of sutures, all of which appeared to be patent (unfused), therefore indicating either a young adult or a person in their teens at time of death.

II *Cremated bone from ground surface beneath cairn.* 38.5 gm of cremated bone, possibly all human. The colour of the fragments was similar to those from I, and measured from minute fragments to 26.0 mm. Both skull and postcranial bones were represented.

III *Cremated bone from cairn material NE of cist.* A small fragment of postcranial bone; the composition of the bone suggested that it came from the extremity of a small bone, possibly the distal extremity of a metatarsal.

IV *Cremated bone from original filling of cist.* A very small fragment of postcranial bone.

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