

Rock art from a Bronze Age burial at Balblair, near Inverness

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ABSTRACT

This report presents the findings of archaeological excavations undertaken on the heavily denuded remains of a Bronze Age burial cairn at Balblair, near Inverness, during 2004. Little information was recovered about the cairn, other than a ground plan, and the single central cist had been opened and emptied in the past, leaving only a few sherds of Food Vessel-style pottery with which to date the monument. The cist itself proved to be of much greater interest with all three of the surviving side slabs bearing rock art. In two cases this comprises small cup marks and a perforation but the third slab bears a large cup mark and perforation, and complex carved design without obvious parallel in Scottish prehistoric rock art. An analysis of the cist slabs concludes that, although the main slab is exceptional in its design, the site as a whole conforms to our current understanding of 'single grave art' and the use/re-use of rock art in the early Bronze Age.

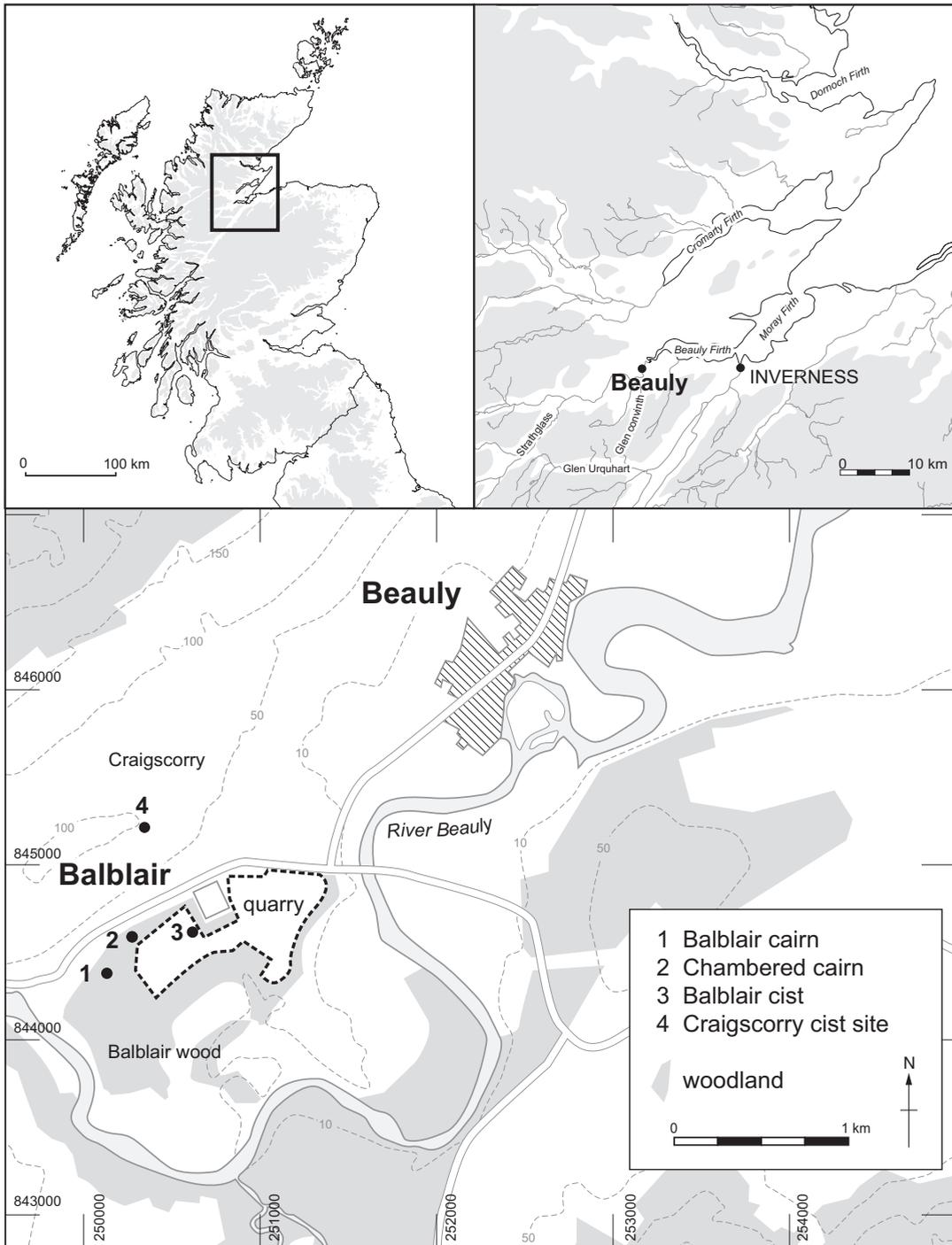
INTRODUCTION

Headland Archaeology undertook the excavation of the heavily denuded remains of a Bronze Age burial cairn at Balblair, near Inverness, during 2004. Balblair is located at the mouth of Strathglass, 2km to the south-west of Beauly (illus 1). The need for archaeological investigations was prompted by a proposal for the expansion of Balblair Quarry, a sand and gravel quarry operated by Aggregate Industries (UK) Ltd. A study undertaken in 1999 by the Centre for Field Archaeology (Neighbour 2000) confirmed the presence of archaeological sites within the application area for the quarry extension. As a result, when planning permission was granted, a programme of archaeological investigations was required by Highland Council to mitigate the loss of sites through quarrying. A staged programme of works involving survey and intrusive evaluation confirmed the tentative identification of a prehistoric burial cairn and led

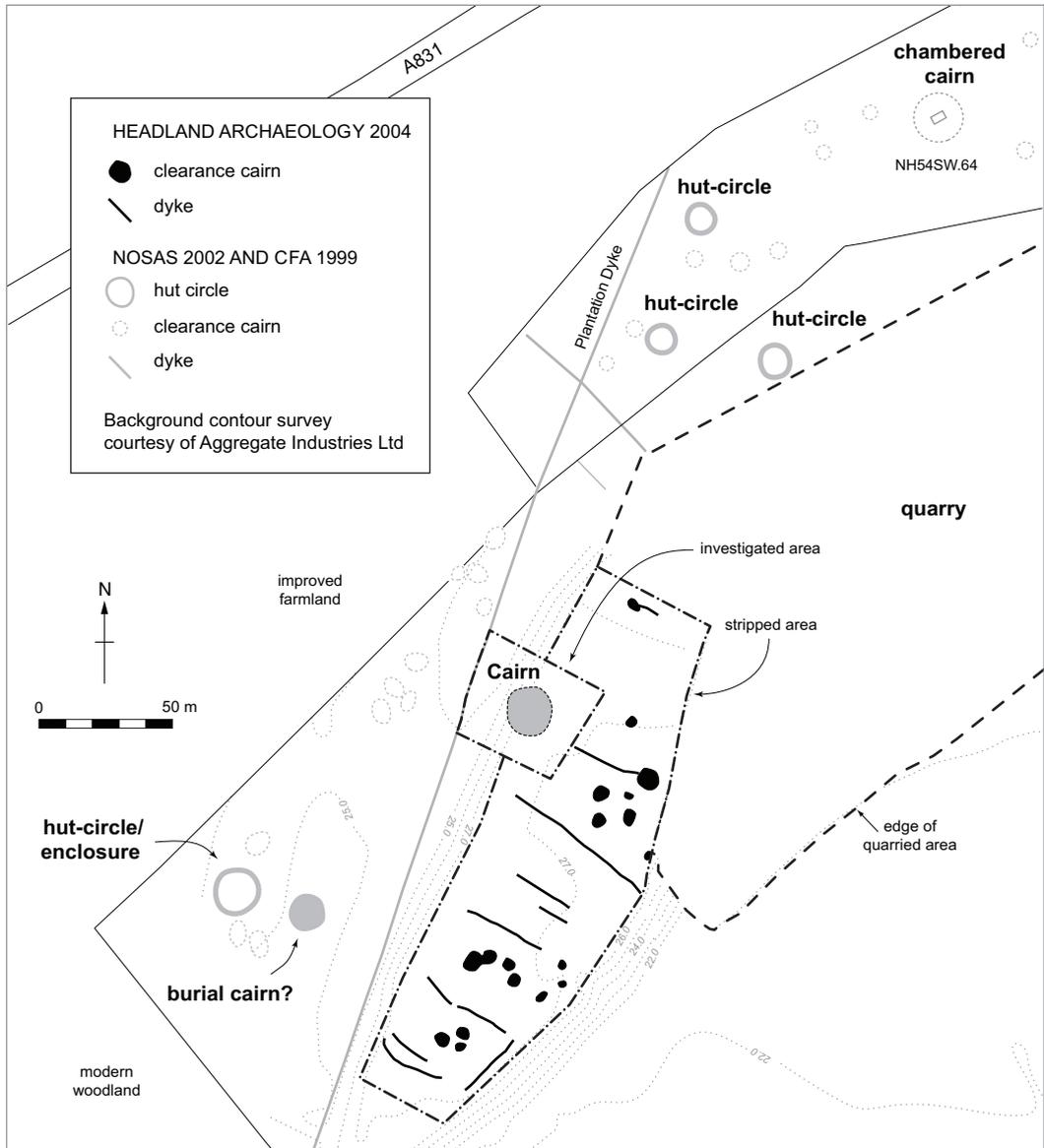
to the full excavation of it and the surrounding area.

The floor of Strathglass in this area is filled with a deep accumulation of fluvio-glacial sand and gravel which is being exploited in Balblair Quarry. The area investigated is at the western end of the quarry, within Balblair Wood, a pine plantation originating in the 1750s (May 1757). The excavated cairn forms one component of a preserved fragment of archaeological landscape that has been protected from agricultural improvement by the plantation. The extent of the recorded remains (shown in illus 2) represents the combination of data from two previous archaeological surveys. The south-west end was recorded by the Centre for Field Archaeology (Neighbour 2000) and the north-east end by the North of Scotland Archaeological Society (Marshall 2002). Recorded sites include a heavily robbed chambered cairn (Coghill & Hanley 1993), several hut circles, numerous small cairns

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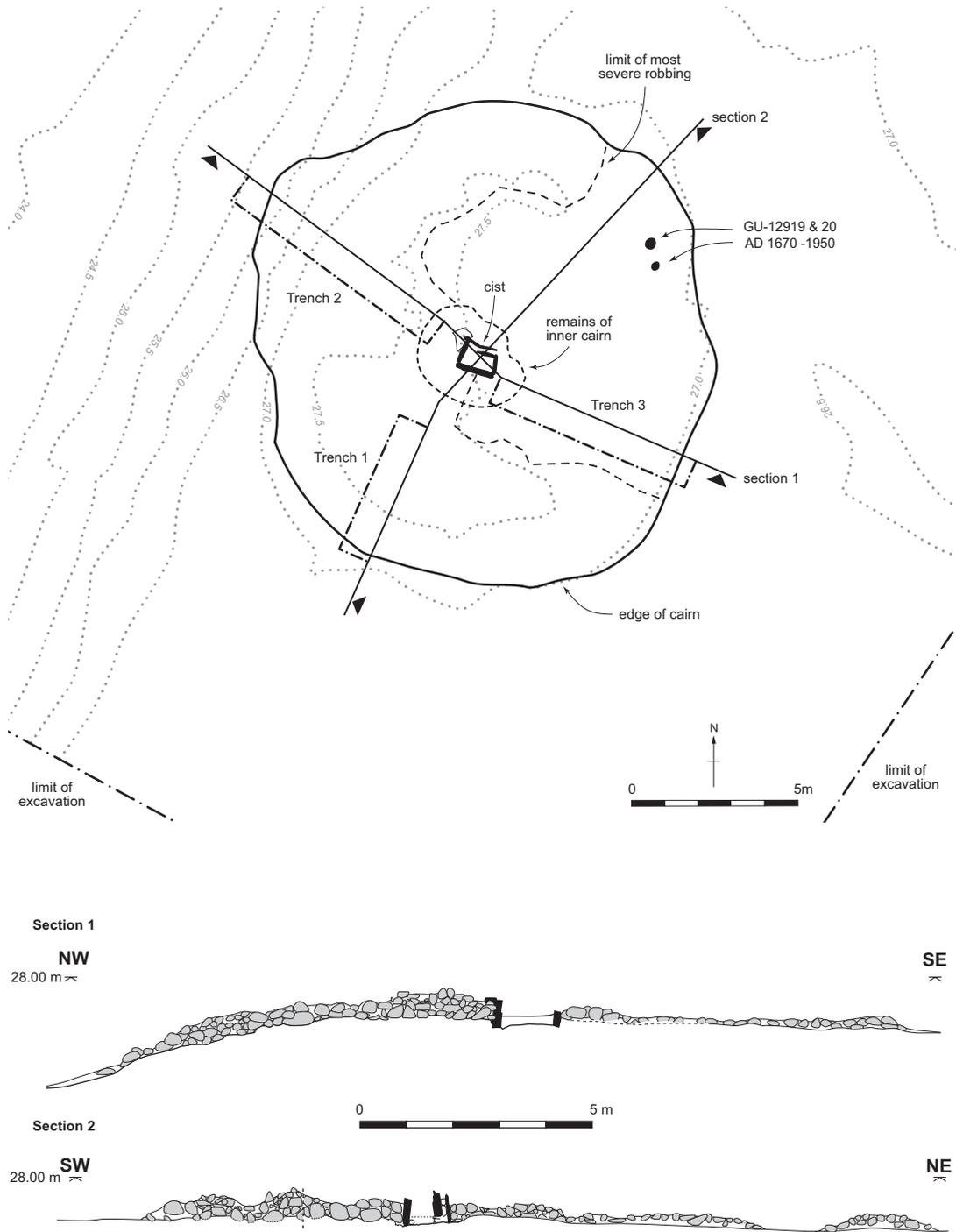
ILLUS 1 Location plan



ILLUS 2 Location of the Balblair cairn and other monuments in and adjacent to Balblair Quarry

and a section of the 18th-century plantation enclosure bank. Most of these sites were either located outside the quarry extension or able to be preserved in situ by limiting the extent of quarrying. As a result, only one site (a possible

funerary cairn) was directly affected by the quarrying. This site was located on the top of a low ridge of gravel, separate from the other recorded sites, which were on lower ground to the north and west. This distinctive location,



ILLUS 3 Plan and sections through the cairn

coupled with the larger size of the site, led to its tentative identification as a funerary cairn.

Prior to the excavations, the cairn survived as a sub-circular low and uneven spread of stones, the best preserved area being a curving bank of stones on the south-west perimeter up to 1m high. The cairn was subject to detailed survey in April 2004 following tree felling and accumulated ground vegetation but this did little to define the site. Trial trenching in July 2004 confirmed the presence of a central cist and full excavation of the cairn, and the area surrounding it, followed in November to December.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

THE CIST

The cairn (illus 3) contained a single stone cist at its centre. It was built on three sides from sandstone slabs with a more substantial headstone of schist at the west end. Each slab had been edge-set into narrow slots of varying depth cut into the underlying gravel subsoil and packed with smaller stones. Variation in the depth of the slots served to bring the top edge of each of the side slabs to approximately the same height. The side slabs were packed around with boulders on the outside to support the cist, thereby creating a small cairn. This became the nucleus of the much larger cairn subsequently raised over the cist. The inner cairn survived best around the south and west sides of the cist from where a single, small, flint thumbnail scraper was recovered. It would seem that the cairn was enlarged within a very short space of time, if not immediately, as there was no physical evidence for a hiatus (weathering, soil formation) between these events. The inner cairn is therefore interpreted as a constructional feature only.

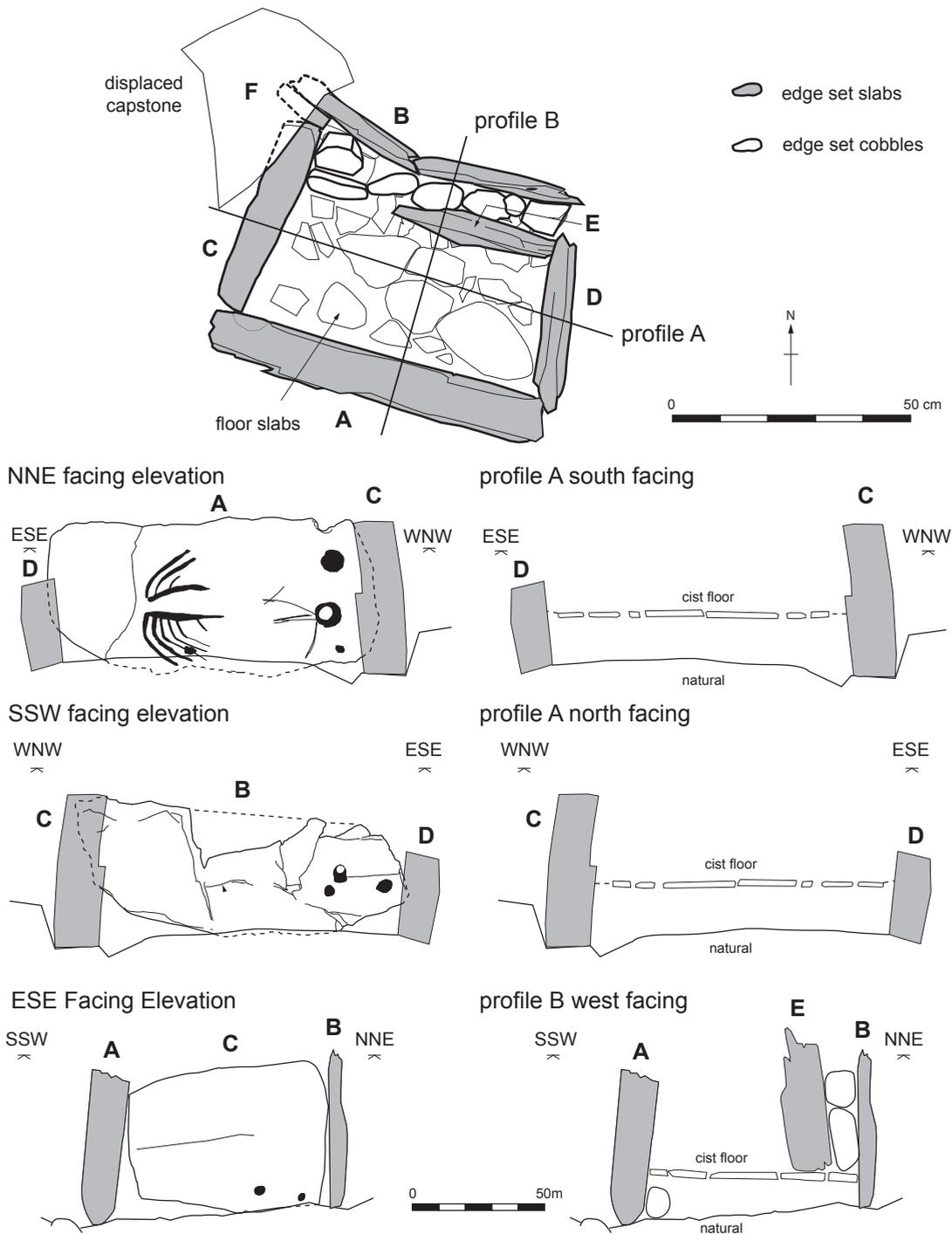
The interior of the cist (illus 4) was partially infilled with sand and gravel, probably derived from the bedding slots for the side slabs, above which was laid a floor comprised of small

sandstone slabs. A single fragment of burnt bone was recovered from this fill and has been identified as ungulate: deer or cattle (Henderson pers comm).

At some point the original north side (Slab B) was damaged and a repair was undertaken. A row of flat, edge-set cobbles retained by a shorter sandstone slab (Slab E), which did not extend for the full length of the cist, was inserted directly over the slab floor. While this modification resulted in an obvious reduction in the size of the burial compartment, it still represents an average size for cists within contemporary Scottish burials (Hanley & Sheridan 1994). The evidence suggests that the cist was damaged and subsequently repaired during the construction process and the repair does not represent a later re-opening of the burial.

The original covering of the cist was largely missing but a substantial schist slab at the west end is probably a displaced capstone (Slab F). At the east end of the cist a dense group of sandstone fragments may be the shattered remnants of another capstone or may derive from the damaged east-end slab (Slab D). The fragmentary remains of this slab were revealed just above the internal floor level of the cist; damage to this stone and its partial removal most likely occurred during stone robbing.

All three of the side slabs that had survived substantially intact (Slabs A, B and C) were found to bear carved decoration. The extent of the decoration was not immediately apparent during the excavation of the cist because much of it occurred on portions of slabs below the level of the cist floor (see illus 4). Approximately half of the complex design on Slab A was visible above the floor, as well as the perforation on Slab B. These three slabs were retained and moved to Inverness Museum for further examination; they are described in detail later in the report. No decoration was seen on the fragmentary remains of the east-end Slab D, nor on the inserted Slab E and putative capstone, Slab F. These slabs were not retained.



ILLUS 4 Detail plan of cist, elevations and profiles

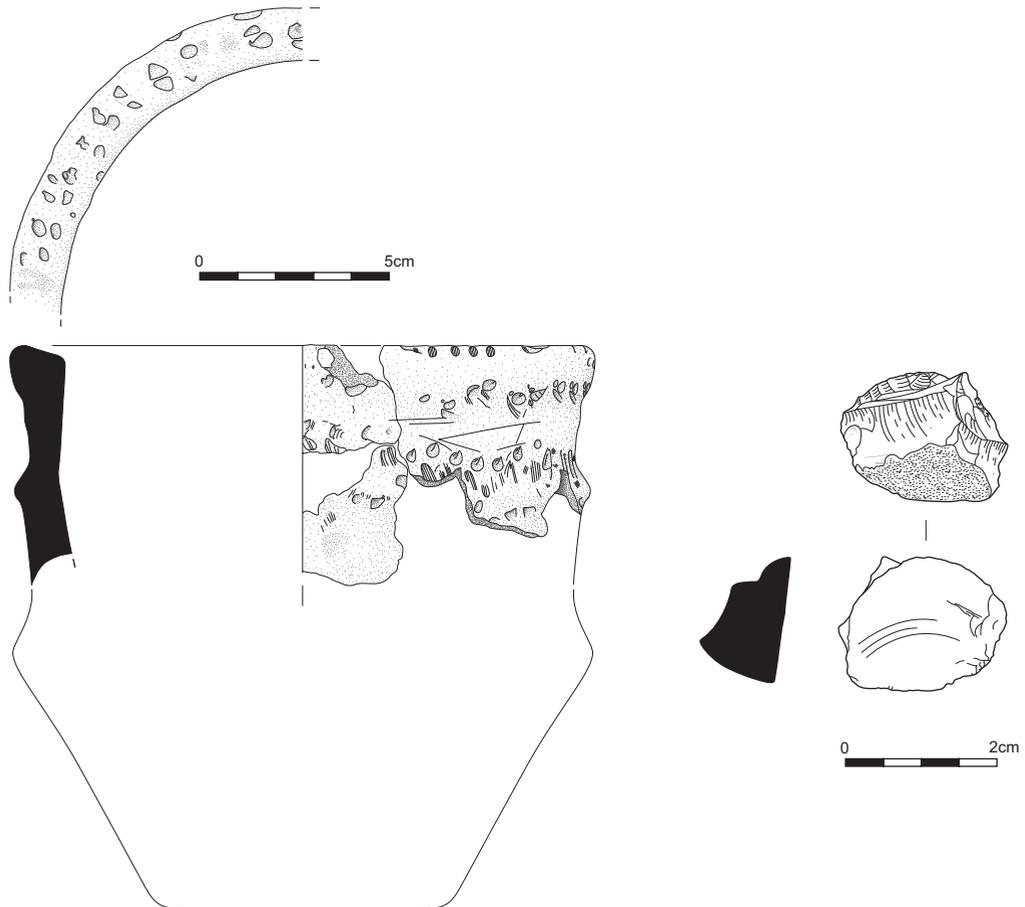
THE BURIAL

When excavated, the inside of the cist was filled with yellow sand. This fill contained a few conjoining rim sherds of Food Vessel type pottery (Sheridan pers comm) (illus 5). The disturbed condition of the cist means that the nature of any burial (or burials) remains unclear. The complete absence of cremated human bone in the backfill of the cist suggests that it originally contained an inhumation but penetrating ground waters and the natural acidity in the gravels precluded the survival of any skeletal remains. The disturbed distribution of the pottery fragments tells us nothing about

the arrangement of the body in the grave although it can confidently be assumed to have been a crouched burial.

THE CAIRN

The cairn was constructed around and over the cist. Most of it lay on the level top of the gravel ridge but some extended over the edge and here a step had been cut to form a level foundation for the mass of stones. It is unclear whether this was a deliberate act, linking the cairn to the slope to maximize the impression of height, or simply the result of a miscalculation of the position of



ILLUS 5 Food Vessel pottery and flint scraper

the cist at the centre of the cairn. There was no other evidence of site preparation for the cairn, which appears to have been built directly on the pre-existing ground surface. No evidence was recovered for man-made features beneath the cairn but the basal layer of stone was pressed deeply into the underlying ground surface so, as a result, there was no well-preserved buried soil. This compression demonstrates that the cairn was built as a substantial monument and was then almost totally destroyed by quarrying for stone in the relatively recent past (see below).

The cairn survived as a roughly circular platform of stones, 14m in diameter, with a higher bank forming an arc around the perimeter on the south-west side. There was no evidence for any structural organization of the cairn, which therefore appears to have been a simple accumulated mass of rounded boulders and cobbles collected from the surrounding gravel deposits. There was no evidence for a kerb, even in the better preserved south-west arc.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE SETTING OF THE CAIRN

The excavated burial cairn was sited on the western edge of a flat-topped gravel ridge that rose 3m above the surrounding land. The cairn formed part of a fragment of archaeological landscape that has been preserved within Balblair Wood. Archaeological features have been recorded in a narrow strip of woodland, 400m long and up to 150m wide, bounded by the quarry to the east and improved farmland to the west (illus 2). Archaeological survey took place in the 1990s, before the quarry reached the limit of these features, so it appears that they did not originally extend further to the south-east than indicated. A small cist containing two Beakers was recovered during quarrying operations in 1990, roughly 500m to the east of the present site (Hanley & Sheridan 1994) (illus 1), but this appears to have been an isolated burial.

The burial cairn was originally recorded during archaeological survey as an isolated feature on the top of its gravel ridge (Neighbour 2000) but subsequent monitoring of soil stripping on the flat top revealed no fewer than 18 small cairns and 10 sections of stone bank on the ridge. None of these was visible under the deep vegetation and organic soil layers of the plantation. All features were sectioned to record structural information and locate dating evidence, then cleared off by machine to examine any underlying ground surfaces. All cairns and banks were simple piles of stones, presumably the product of land clearance. No dating evidence was recovered from any of the features and no other archaeological features were noted beneath them. The common alignment of the banks suggests that they are all contemporary but their age relative to the clearance cairns is not known. Similarly, no stratigraphic relationship was recorded between the stone banks and the burial cairn, although one bank appeared to be aligned on the cairn. Given that this bank was not identified beneath the burial cairn, it is considered more likely that the banks are all later than the burial cairn.

The banks and cairns on the ridge top are clearly part of a more extensive area of land clearance; numerous cairns are on the lower ground to the west and north, and at least two sections of bank to the north lie parallel to those on the ridge. Cairns recorded in these unexcavated areas are generally larger than those on the ridge but this is assumed to reflect the difficulty in spotting small cairns without the stripping of overlying vegetation. The sites recorded by survey alone should therefore be seen as a fraction of those present. The lower ground also contains the remains of three prehistoric roundhouses and another structure that is either a small enclosure or large roundhouse. Finally, at the north-east end of the landscape fragment there is a heavily robbed chambered cairn. Again, there are no stratigraphic relationships between features to provide a relative chronology, with one clear exception. A section of the bank that

TABLE 1
Calibrated dates (OxCal v3)

<i>Lab code</i>	<i>Sample material</i>	<i>Lab age</i> <i>BP</i>	$\delta^{13}C$	<i>1-sigma</i>	<i>2-sigma Lab</i>
SUERC-5819 (GU-12919)	Charcoal (<i>Betula</i> sp)	135 ± 35	-27.50%	AD 1670–1950	AD 1670–1960
SUERC-5820 (GU-12920)	Charcoal (<i>Betula</i> sp)	130 ± 35	-26.20%	AD 1670–1950	AD 1670–1960

enclosed the original 1750s Balblair Wood plantation runs straight through this area, clearly cutting through one of the parallel banks.

The only site, other than the excavated cairn, that can be readily dated is the denuded chambered cairn which can be confidently assigned a Neolithic date. The roundhouses lie in a broad later prehistoric time bracket but cannot be closely dated without excavation. The cairns and banks are un-dateable as site types; in the present context, a later prehistoric date would not be inappropriate for them but they could also be considerably more recent in origin. Taking this poorly defined chronology as a whole, the archaeological landscape appears to contain two early prehistoric funerary monuments with later prehistoric settlement and cultivation. The apparent change in land use (from funerary to settlement/agriculture) should be treated with caution. The archaeological record for most of northern Scotland comprises early prehistoric funerary monuments scattered amongst later settlement remains, reflecting the invisibility of earlier settlement sites but the good survival of contemporary large stone funerary monuments.

DESTRUCTION OF THE CAIRN

The excavations clearly showed that most of the cairn had been dismantled and the stone taken away from the immediate surroundings of the site. The cairn was reduced to ground level except in the south-west quadrant where a low bank survived at the perimeter of the cairn. It

was presumably at this time that the cist was discovered, opened and its contents disturbed or removed.

There is no direct evidence for the date of demolition but various lines of evidence point to a period in the later 18th to early 19th centuries AD. Two small concentrations of charcoal were recorded close to and within the north-east perimeter of the demolished cairn, lying over the surviving cairn material (illus 3). Both features were sampled and charcoal was submitted for identification and radiocarbon dating. Both samples were identified as birch wood (*Betula*) with resulting dates for each calibrated to between AD 1670–1960 cal. The two charcoal-rich deposits are interpreted as the remains of small fires lit over the remains of the demolished cairn. Further evidence for recent activity is provided by the presence of pottery sherds of early 19th-century date (Franklin pers comm), distributed throughout the surface of the robbed cairn.

A specific historical context for removal of stone from the cairn is provided by the creation of a tree plantation at Balblair in the 1750s. The newly created plantation is accurately represented on a map by May, dated 1757, and the stone-faced dyke that was built to enclose it can still be traced on the ground (illus 2). It runs immediately to the north of the cairn, which must therefore be a prime candidate for a source for stone used in the dyke. Quarrying for the plantation dyke may not have completely exhausted the supply of stone but, once identified, the cairn could have been repeatedly exploited as demand for building in stone increased in the years about

1800. The absence of any antiquarian accounts or an entry in the Ordnance Survey *Name Book*, recording the discovery of the cist, suggests that removal of stone had ended well before the later 19th century when such events are much more likely to have been documented.

The fate of the excavated burial cairn may be compared with the nearby chambered cairn (illus 2) which was also systematically robbed of its stone cairn, exposing the megalithic passage and chamber; it too lies next to the plantation bank. The survival of the passage and chamber allowed this site to be readily interpreted when it was recorded during archaeological survey (unlike the amorphous remains of the excavated cairn). However, the remains of the chambered cairn escaped detection by archaeologists until the early 1990s (Coghill & Hanley 1993). This reflects the difficulties in locating even large stone structures in dense woodland and the example of the Balblair chambered cairn is by no means unique. A substantial megalithic chamber from a denuded chambered cairn was identified in woodland at Kyleoag, Creich, in Sutherland as recently as 1999 (NMRS site NH69SE 42).

THE DECORATED STONES

SLAB A

Slab A (illus 6) is a substantial piece of sandstone that had broken into two pieces in the cist; there is also considerable weakening of the large fragment along bedding planes. All faces are uneven and weathered and glacial striae are present on the external (undecorated) face of the slab. This suggests that it may have been quarried from a surface exposure of the local Old Red Sandstone or was a local glacial erratic.

This slab bears the most complex decoration of the three Balblair slabs. All decoration is on the side that faced into the cist (with the exception of a single perforation worked from both faces) and occurs in two principal groupings on the slab.

At the western end of the slab (as located in the cist) there is a line of two or three circular

designs: a perforation, a cup mark of similar diameter and the partial remains of a probable second cup on the edge of the slab. Four light but confident incisions radiate out from (or into) the perforation and there are smaller cup marks and lighter pecking around it.

In the middle of the slab, off centre, there is a striking, deeply scored, linear decoration. The design comprises two mirrored elements with their axis along the length of the slab but the design is not fully symmetrical. The upper (and smaller) half of the design appears to have been partially lost where part of the surface of the slab had spalled, but careful examination revealed that the ends of the incised lines in this area shallowed to complete terminals and were not broken through.

Pecking appears as the predominant working technique used on Slab A although on the larger designs, the perforation and the grooved pattern, scoring and smoothing of the stone has also taken place. Surviving evidence of attrition around the edges of the perforation and large cup mark suggest that they were initially pecked. Scoring created the line decoration radiating from the perforation. This has been identified in some Irish megalithic tombs (Johnston 1993) as a preliminary sketch before more complex designs are executed, although there is no evidence that this was intended on the Balblair slab.

There is little evidence for the order in which this slab was decorated, or for superimposition of different decorative schemes through time. Only one definite area of superimposed decoration has been observed, where slight pecking over the third 'rib' occurs on the lower side of the curvilinear motif. The radial lines around the perforation were probably cut after the perforation was created. The only other evidence for sequence comes from the partially preserved cup mark on the top edge of the slab. It appears that this cup mark was either damaged when part of the edge broke away or deliberately removed when the slab was cut down.

The position of decoration relative to the cist floor means it is almost certain that Slab A was

re-used as a side slab for the cist and therefore was first decorated and used elsewhere. Possible origins for this slab are discussed further below but two points may be noted here. The absence of decoration on one end of the slab, coupled with the long-axis of the curvilinear decoration, strongly suggests that this slab was designed to be viewed set upright in the ground with the large cup mark and perforation at the top. The presence of a perforation worked from both sides, could indicate that the slab was also freestanding.

If we accept this possible history, there remains the issue of the vestiges of the second large cup mark that survives on the edge of the slab. If this is taken as evidence for the cutting down of the slab at some point in its history, when did this occur and what shape was the slab before reduction? An economical interpretation would conclude that little stone would need to be replaced in order to complete the cup mark so the original shape of the slab would be little different from the surviving remains. It is possible that the edge was dressed down when it was placed in the cist to form a perfectly level top edge for the cover slabs. Alternatively, such a minor loss may be the result of natural or accidental breaking of the slab during or after decoration.

SLAB B

Slab B formed the northern side of the cist and therefore is similar in size to Slab A, although narrower and significantly thinner. Probably as a result of this, it is highly fragmented and, from the evidence of early repairs, started to fail during construction of the cist. It was excavated in numerous fragments and the drawing of this slab is based on photographs before excavation was attempted. Slab B is sandstone and, as far as could be observed, all surfaces appeared weathered.

The slab bears two small but distinct pecked cup marks and a single perforation of similar dimension, all located at the east end of the slab. In common with Slab A, the cup marks and

perforation on Slab B are pecked and the internal surface of the perforation polished.

It is assumed, for the same reasons as were advanced for Slab A, that Slab B is a re-used piece, decorated elsewhere. Again, it is possible this slab was originally set upright with the cup marks and perforation at the upper end of the slab. The top edge of the slab (as placed in the cist) was already broken when revealed during the excavation but, judging by the overall shape of the slab, it seems likely this edge was dressed flat to provide a suitable level surface for the cist cover slabs.

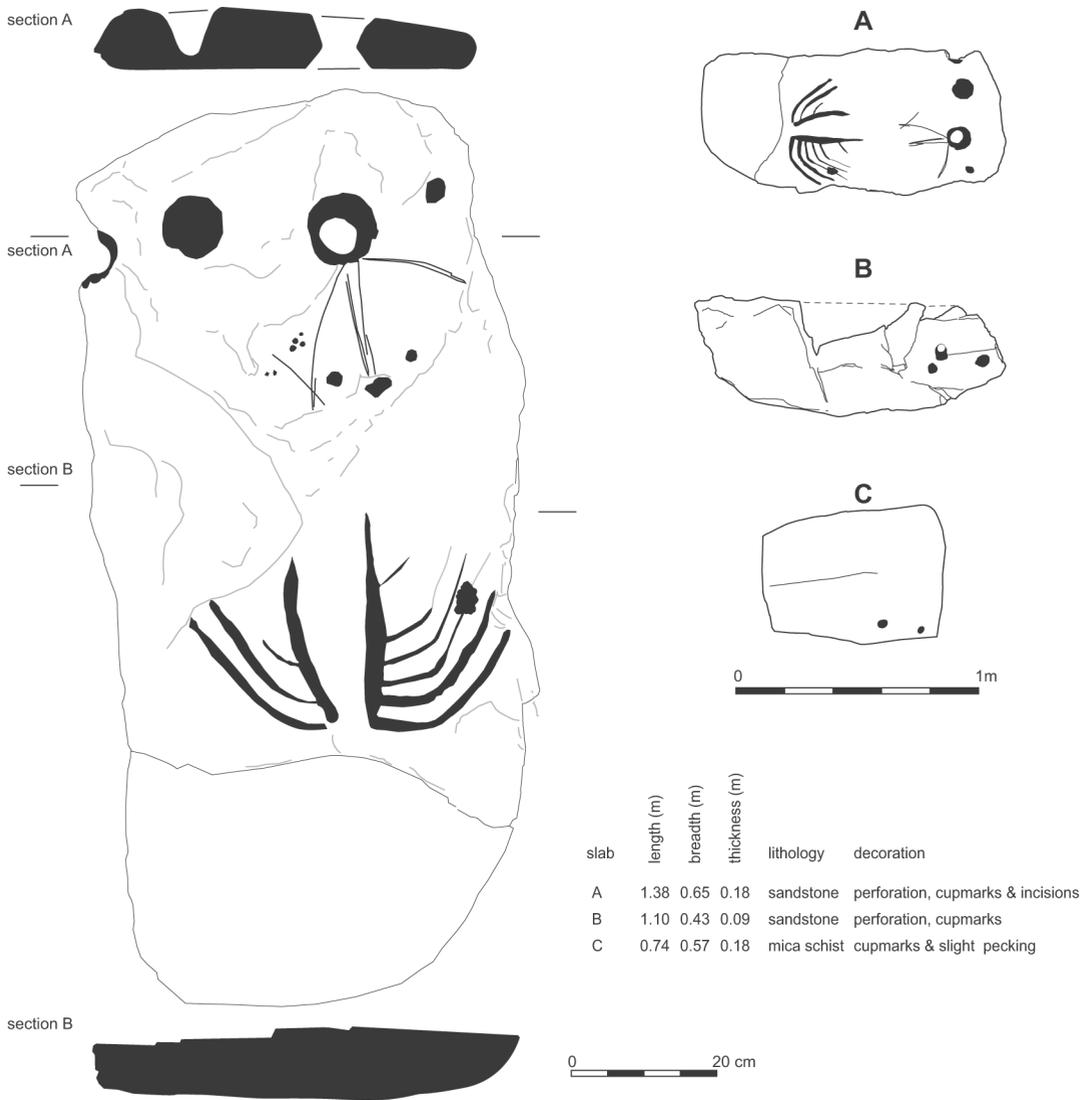
SLAB C

The squat west-end Slab C is comprised of mica-schist with evidence of slight pecking and one shallow but well-defined cup mark located centrally and close to its base.

The cup marks on Slab C are smaller and less distinct, not least because they have been applied to a harder surface, and these motifs too have been pecked.

PARALLELS FOR THE DECORATION ON SLAB A

The cup marks from Balblair Slabs B and C fall within the 'single-grave art' family identified by Simpson and Thawley (1972) while the more complex curvilinear designs seen on Slab A resemble superficially Neolithic passage-grave art (Shee Twohig 1981). Megalithic art has only been identified in six Scottish sites, all in Orkney including the chambered cairns of Eday Manse and Pierowall (Davidson & Henshall 1989). Slab A does not fall neatly into this category, as the decoration lacks the complexity and quality of workmanship displayed in the Orkney examples. However, the style is certainly closer to megalithic art than to single-grave art, highlighting the possibility that Balblair Slab A originated from an earlier



ILLUS 6 The decorated slabs

megalithic monument. The decoration can be said to follow a tradition that was prolific over Atlantic Europe from the Neolithic to the Later Bronze Age.

The authors have identified no close parallels elsewhere in Britain or Ireland, nor in Scandinavia. Some similarities may be identified in the megalithic tombs of Magheranaul, Co

Donegal, and Loughcrew, Co Meath, in Ireland which display ‘lobed’ and ‘fringed’ motifs (Johnston 1993) (illus 7). There are similarities with the motifs found on the angled passage graves of the Morbihan in Brittany (Cunliffe 2001; Giot 1997; Patton 1993) (illus 7). The closest parallels identified for the design motif on Slab A come from south-west Spain and



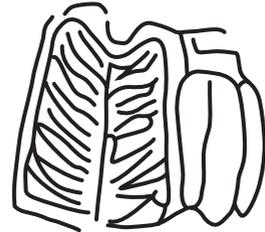
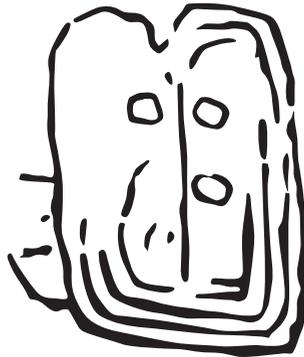
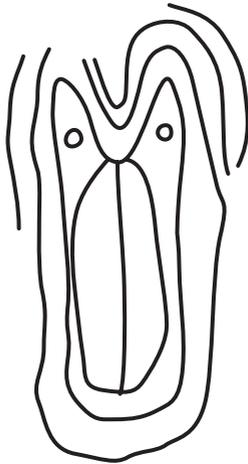
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"Lobbed" motif from Magheranaul I, Co. Donegal (After Johnston, 1993)



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From Magheranaul I, Co. Donegal, showing 'fringed' motif (After Johnston, 1993)



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Examples of designs from angled passage graves of the Morbihan, France (After Cunliffe, 2001)



Crato



Castelo Branco

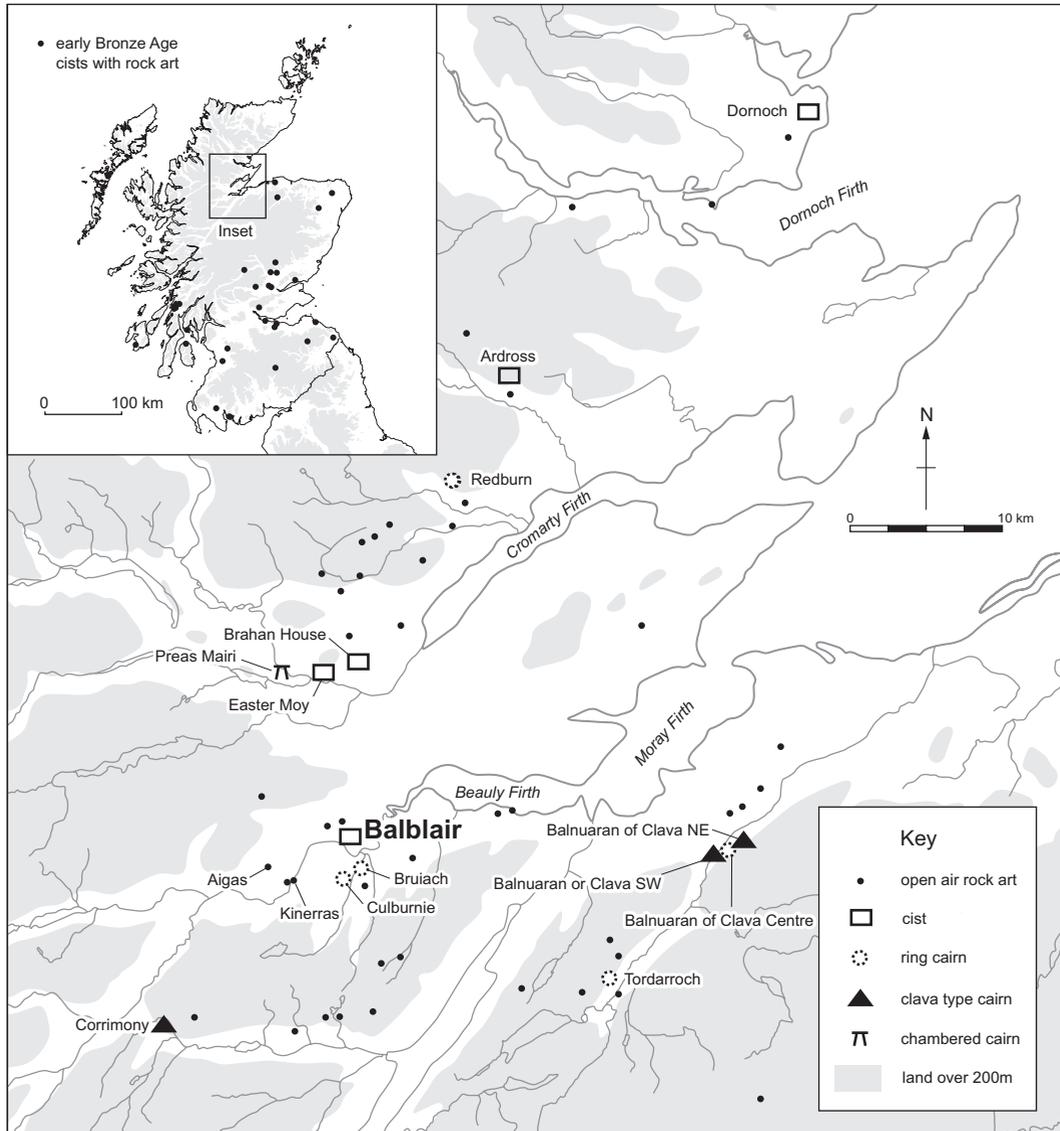


Portalegre

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Examples of Bimorphic simple plaques from Portugal (After Lillios 2004)

ILLUS 7 Comparative motifs from other locations



ILLUS 8 Rock art and funerary monuments around the Beaully Firth

Portugal, not as monumental art in a megalithic context, but as small portable slate plaques (typical length 0.2m) contained within burials of Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age date (Lillios 2004), examples of which are illustrated in illus 7. A sub-set of these plaques (Lillios’ ‘biomorphic simple’ group) is interpreted as

representations of bird goddesses or, more specifically, owl goddesses. Characteristic design features include the presence of deeply set eyes, two long appendages with three or four ‘fingers’ (interpreted as wing feathers), and an unengraved/undecorated ‘chest’ (Lillios 2004, 147). In drawing parallels with Balblair Slab A,

the perforation and deep cup mark represent eyes and the curvilinear lines are furled wings. The Iberian parallels are intriguing, not least because they suggest an element not previously seen in megalithic rock art in Britain, where designs are essentially abstract to the modern eye: a non-representational form or pattern created to resemble a living organism, in this case an owl. It also requires us to view the totality of the decoration on Slab A as a biomorphic image, rather than a number of discrete elements that may have been carved at different times. This presents particular difficulties for interpretation of the damaged cup mark on the edge of the slab, which, if this slab is assumed to contain a single coherent decorative design, provides a 'third eye'! In this case it may be suggested that the biomorphic design is the result of the reworking and enhancement of an existing decorated slab but this explanation tends to question the whole notion of a biomorphic design.

The visual parallels between the Balblair art and that on the Iberian plaques are striking and their context too appears to have similarities if we accept that Balblair Slab A could have originated from an earlier, megalithic context. The presence of decorated bone plaque from an early Bronze Age context at Jarlshof, Shetland (Turner 1998) also hints at there being a local tradition for portable decorated artefacts similar to those from Iberia. However, it is easy to overstate the links between what is a well-defined and common class of portable artefact in Iberia and a single large stone slab from northern Scotland. The Iberian plaques accompanied an individual burial and are interpreted as a record of a dead person's position within a genealogy, buried with the corpse to preserve this information for future generations (Lillios 2004, 149); the Balblair stone cannot have functioned in this manner. If there is a cultural connection that explains the visual similarities it is likely to lie with the widespread status of the owl in European mythologies as a guide between the worlds of the living and the dead, rather than any hitherto

unrecognized direct cultural link between Iberia and Scotland. It should also be stressed that, in the absence of any other representations of owls from this period in Scotland, the identification of Balblair Slab A as a coherent representational design remains highly speculative.

ROCK ART AROUND THE DORNOCH, CROMARTY AND MORAY FIRTHS

The discovery of three decorated slabs within a Bronze Age cist at Balblair provides an opportunity to review the distribution of rock art previously recorded within the local area, in both funerary and open-air environments (illus 8) and how Balblair fits in with the local and wider picture.

Funerary monuments with recorded rock art fall into four distinct categories: Cists, Clava-type Cairns, Ring Cairns and Chambered Cairns.

CISTS

Four cists that contain decorated slabs were identified in the study area. At Easter Moy, a cup marked slab formed the north side of the cist. Nearby Brahan House, although damaged still retains cup-and-ring marked capstone. At Ardross an end slab was decorated with concentric rectangles and at Dornoch the capstone bears a cup mark with a groove. Other than the presence of rock art, these individual burials and the Balblair cairn all share an elevated location.

CLAVA-TYPE CAIRNS

Three Clava-type cairns contain stones with cup marks. The two passage graves in the Clava cemetery, Balnuaran of Clava North-East and South-West and the passage grave at Corrimony. The most complex of these is Balnuaran of Clava North-East where the outer kerb is decorated with numerous cup marks, one ringed and many linked by channels.

RING-CAIRNS

There are five ring-cairns containing or situated immediately adjacent to cup mark decorated stones within the study area. These are Bruiach, Balnuaran of Clava centre, Culbirnie, Redburn and at Tordarroch.

CHAMBERED CAIRNS

There is only one known chambered cairn with rock-art in the study area at Preas Mairi where three cup marks survive in an otherwise ruined chamber.

The majority of open-air rock art panels are located along the major glens leading into the Moray, Beaully, Cromarty and Dornoch Firths, with a further concentration located around the confluence of Glen Urquhart and Glen Convinth. They hold positions on valley slopes, command wide views, and generally become heavily concentrated around the mouths or confluences of valleys. The sites are located on gneiss boulders or sandstone outcrops.

While open-air sites commonly occupy the higher slopes of the valleys, and cists and ring-cairns are located on the lower slopes or along the valley floors, Early Bronze Age burials with decorated stones are located near high concentrations of open-air art, suggesting a local source for most panels. There are several panels situated close to Balblair including Aigas and Kinerras. It is possible that the Balblair cist contained slabs from the immediate vicinity, even if re-used from an earlier monument. This trend can be identified across Scotland, where the majority of the cists with cup marked stones coincide with areas of prolific open-air rock art, for example, around the Kilmartin Valley and Strath Tay.

INTERPRETATIONS OF ROCK ART IN BRONZE AGE CISTS

How does the discovery at Balblair fit in with current theories regarding the use of rock art

within Early Bronze Age funerary cairns, and does the unique nature of the decoration on Slab A affect our understanding? Over the past 20 years much effort has gone into investigating the relationship between Early Bronze Age single grave art, open-air art and the landscape (eg Bradley 1992, 1993, 1997; Jones 2001; Brück 2004). These studies have produced several basic assertions about single grave art:

- the designs in graves are relatively complex when compared to surrounding open-air art;
- there is a high incidence of re-used art in graves from various sources;
- particular rules govern the position of rock art within cists and their cairns;
- reworking can be identified on many of decorated stones in graves.

COMPLEXITY

It has been observed by most authors that the level of complexity of rock art within Early Bronze Age cists is much higher than that found on surrounding open-air sites. Cup marks account for the bulk of decoration at open-air sites but tend to be lacking on cist slabs, while cup-and-ring and curvilinear motifs are comparatively common (Bradley 1992; 1997). This observation applies to the Balblair cist slabs, as Slab A bears a design more complex than any of the local open-air art. From roughly 50 open-air sites identified in the local region, only six contain designs more complex than simple cup marks. These six generally normally consisted of two or more cup marks joined by a groove, and no cup-and-ring markings have been found.

RE-USE

The re-use of decorated slabs in Early Bronze Age cist burials is common, either taken from open-air sites or earlier monuments (Jones 2004;

Bradley 1992; 1997). Several cists in Scotland incorporate re-used standing stones, for example, Cist 1 from Loanleven (Russell-White et al 1992; Bradley 1997) and the capstone from Nether Largie North. The Clava Cairns are another local example where cup marked stones have been re-used in an Early Bronze Age context, even if the physical nature of the monument is very different (Bradley, 2000; Henshall 2001). This phenomenon has been documented throughout Atlantic Europe, for example, in northern France, where menhirs were deliberately broken and fragments re-used (Bradley 2002).

It has already been suggested (above) that the Balblair slabs are re-used and, in at least two cases, were originally set upright. The source of the slabs remains unknown but the links to Megalithic art provided by the design on Slab A points to the existence of an earlier structure in the vicinity. The obvious candidate, in terms of proximity, is the chambered cairn, which is only 200m to the north-east of the cist where the slabs were found.

POSITION

The position of decorated slabs within cists follows some deliberate patterns. Commonly the more complex face is turned in towards the corpse (Bradley 1997). The Balblair slabs follow this tradition, with all the decorated faces turned inward. It has also been documented that the art can influence the position of the corpse, cremation or related grave goods, for example, a cup marked stone was inserted into the earlier tomb of Cairnholy 1, Dumfries and Galloway, and a cremation placed in front of it (Bradley 1992). The high level of disturbance at Balblair makes any observation of this phenomenon impossible. More relevant is the observation in other cists that much of the decoration was deliberately obscured by other stones (for example, the cist at Loanleven) or buried within the main matrix of the cairn (Bradley 1997). A similar observation can be made about Balblair, where the original floor level of the

cist obscured the majority of the curvilinear design on Slab A, cup marks on Slab B and all decoration on Slab C.

REWORKING

Often decorated slabs exhibit evidence of reworking, where later carvings have been superimposed over earlier. A fine example of this is the capstone from Nether Largie North (Jones 2001; Bradley 1993). There is little evidence for any major reworking or phasing of the Balblair slabs within the context of the cist although it has been suggested that the smaller cup marks may be a later addition (Andrew Jones pers comm).

CURRENT THEORIES

It is assumed that the change in context of rock art from open-air sites in the Neolithic, to their re-use in Early Bronze Age cairns reflects a change in the meaning of the motifs (Bradley 1992; 1997). Jones (Jones 2001) argues that since art in the landscape was open to reworking, the meaning of the motifs was constantly changing, creating a palimpsest of memories. The insertion of decoration into a cist halts this process, fixing a permanent meaning onto the motifs. Bradley (Bradley 1992; 1997) has argued that the change in context from the open-air, associated with the landscape, transhumance and the living to the dead is a reversal in meaning, and may be an indicator of wider cultural upheavals (and cross-cultural assimilation with the spread of ideas and practices). Where once open-air art marked routes or territories, cists with rock art may follow a similar pattern in the Early Bronze Age. Bradley suggests that the re-use of open-air art is an appropriation of the past and legitimizes claims to the landscape (Bradley 1997) and the removal and placing of an existing decorated stone with earlier cultural affinities at Balblair is just such an

appropriation. Brück (2004) also supports a change in socio-political circumstances; that there is evidence for increasing regionalization in the Early Bronze Age, and this is reflected through burial practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Archaeological excavations at Balblair have recorded a highly damaged Bronze Age burial cairn. The monument and its evidence for burial practice during the Early Bronze Age fits comfortably within the regional funerary tradition and other examples of 'single-grave art', despite the unusual nature of the principal decorated cist slab. In this context, it is an interesting but unremarkable site. The exceptional nature of the decoration on Slab A is of much greater interest but, like all unique objects, it defies simple interpretation. The apparent parallel for the design in broadly contemporary Iberian objects does little to advance our understanding of the Balblair stone but raises interesting lines of enquiry in Scottish rock-art and contemporary belief systems that should be explored further.

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