

Cemeteries of platform cairns and long cists around Sinclair's Bay, Caithness

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ABSTRACT

The cemetery at Ackergill in Caithness has become the type site for Pictish platform cairns. A re-appraisal based on Society of Antiquaries of Scotland manuscripts, together with published sources, shows that, rather than comprising only the eight cairns and two long cists excavated by Edwards in the 1920s, the cemetery was more extensive. Close to Edwards' site, Barry had already excavated two other circular cairns, three rectangular cairns and a long cist, and possibly another circular cairn was found between the two campaigns of excavation. Two of the cairns were re-used for subsequent burials, and two cairns were unique in having corbelled chambers built at ground level. Other burial sites along the shore of Sinclair's Bay are also examined.

INTRODUCTION

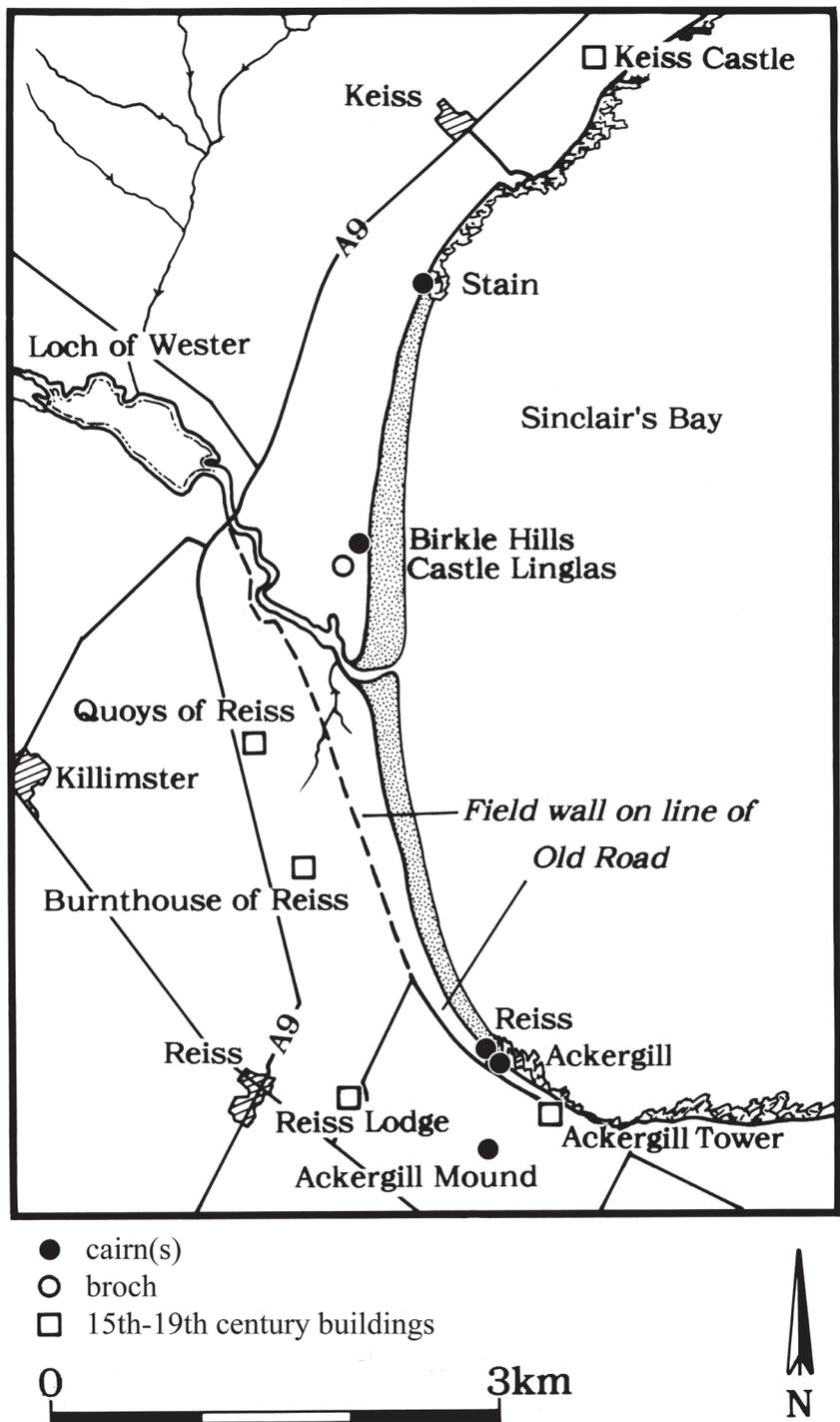
For more than a century after it was founded in 1780, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland was the primary repository in Scotland for information about sites and artefacts, some but not all of which were published in the *Transactions (Archaeologia Scotica)* or in the *Proceedings*. Some of the letters, notes, drawings and books which the Society had accumulated were, for various reasons, transferred to other institutions between 1934 and 1968, and in 1975 most of the letters and drawings concerned with field archaeology were transferred to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).¹ Amongst the latter manuscripts were the Sir Francis Tress Barry Collection (RCAHMS 1998) and others relating to the archaeology of Caithness and Sutherland, among which are documents which help to illuminate the published

accounts by A J H Edwards of cairns and long cists at Ackergill on Sinclair's Bay in Caithness (1926; 1927). These included square and circular platform cairns of the type that is thought to have been used in Pictish times, for which Ackergill remains the type site, and the new information presented here helps both to clarify Ackergill itself and to enhance the status of the Sinclair's Bay area as a focus for burial activities at this period. Many of the distinctive features of these sites have been found elsewhere in Scotland, and platform cairns may be seen as a northern version of the earthwork barrows of the Late Iron Age encountered from the Moray Firth south to Galloway (Alexander 2005: 31).

ACKERGILL

Edwards excavated at Ackergill in 1925 and 1926, and although he noted the proximity

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ILLUS 1 Location map of platform-cairn and long-cist cemeteries around Sinclair's Bay, Caithness, based on the 1st-edition one-inch to one-mile map (Sheet 116, 1878) with additions from Thomson 1832

of two Pictish symbol stones, he was careful not to suggest that the graves and the carved stones were directly associated (Edwards 1926: 179). From the introduction to his first report, which describes the lack of context for Viking artefacts in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, it would appear that he tackled Ackergill in the hope of discovering Viking graves, and he sought parallels for the cairns not only among the few excavated Viking graves in Scotland but also in Scandinavia. His hopes of a Viking grave were rewarded in the course of his second season in Caithness, not at Ackergill but at Reay on the north coast, when a telegram from the Director of the Museum instructed him to proceed there without delay to record the new discovery, which proved to be the burial of a male warrior (Edwards 1927). At this time, Edwards had been Assistant Keeper of the Museum since 1912, and the Society used the funds in the Gunning Fellowship to allow him to work in the 1920s on a variety of sites in Galloway, Lewis and Caithness (Stevenson 1981: 187), including Ackergill.

The site is close to the shore of Sinclair's Bay, to the north of Wick, on the east coast of Caithness (NGR ND 3487 5496). The cairns lay on a long natural ridge of sand on the Links of Ackergill and, when a road was built from Ackergill Tower along the ridge to the nearby golf course, 'quantities of human bones' had been found by the workmen.² This was already a 50-year old local memory, for the road appears on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps, survey work for which was carried out in the early 1870s (illus 1), and the tradition may have been brought to Edwards' notice by Mrs Louise Duff-Dunbar of Ackergill Tower, who was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and keenly interested in local archaeology.

The first season of excavation produced four rectangular cairns (Table 1, nos 10–13),

one circular cairn (no 4) and one isolated cist (no 18), while the second season added three more rectangular cairns (nos 14–16) and another long cist (no 19) (details in Table 1, including metric dimensions). They were all in a line along the sandy ridge, except for nos 15 and 16, which lay off the east end of the ridge on a smaller sandy mound at a distance of almost 49m from the main cemetery. Edwards was not, however, the first to examine the area, and he records that Simon Bremner of Freswick told him that 'a circular construction of 15 feet in diameter had been discovered somewhere in the immediate vicinity a number of years ago', which had 'a well-defined built kerb of no great height, the surface within the kerb being covered with white pebbles' (no 3). He also had information from John Nicolson that a similar circular kerbed cairn, 16½ft (5.03m) in diameter, had been found in 1902 (1926: 169–70) (no 2). It was in the course of searching for the latter that Edwards found circular cairn 4, whose kerb enclosed an area 18ft (5.49m) in diameter. Thus it would seem that there were certainly two and possibly three circular kerbed cairns known to Edwards.

John Nicolson had worked with Sir Francis Tress Barry, both as factor for his estate at Keiss in Caithness and as foreman for his excavations (RCAHMS 1998: 7), and it seems odd that Nicolson apparently failed to mention the two square kerbed cairns that Barry had discovered in the same locality in 1902, since they were clearly comparable to Edwards' rectangular cairns. On 7 August 1902, Barry wrote to his friend and archaeological advisor, Joseph Anderson, Keeper at the Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh, 'I have never had more want of Antiquarian advice than now, as I have just made an important discovery of Burial Places' (RCAHMS MS 28/470/6). He goes on to describe two conjoined square enclosures (Table 1, nos 7–8), one of which contained two graves (the other was not

TABLE 1

Platform cairns and long cists around Sinclair's Bay

<i>No</i>	<i>Circular cairns</i>	<i>Source and date</i>	<i>Measures and type of kerb</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Ref/ images</i>
1	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Barry 1902	15ft (4.6m) horizontal kerb	Cist 4 'Reiss'	MS/28/470/6 DC48572 CA628 CA629
2	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Nicolson 1902	16½ft (5m)		Edwards 1926: 169–70
3	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Bremner before 1925	15ft (4.6m)		Edwards 1926: 169
4	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	18ft (5.5m) horizontal kerb	Grave 6	Edwards 1926: 170–2
5	Ackergill Mound ND35SW 13	Barry 1902	basal course of horizontal kerb only	Mound	MS/28/470/5 MS/28/470/6 DC48574 D5206 Barry no 166
6	Keiss, Stain ND36SW 5	Laing 1860s	18ft (5.5m) horizontal kerb	No 8 'Chief's Cist & Cairn'	Laing 1866: 14–15
<i>Rectangular cairns</i>					
7	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Barry 1902	12ft × 10ft (3.7m × 3m)	Cist 2	MS/28/470/6
8	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Barry 1902	almost 12ft × 10ft (3.7m × 3m)	Cist 3	MS/28/470/6 DC48573 D5207
9	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Barry	13ft (4m) wide horizontal kerb	near Cist 4 'Reiss'	DC48572
10	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	12½ft × 12½ft (3.8m × 3.8m) horizontal kerb, corner pillars	Grave 2	Edwards 1926: 162–3

<i>No</i>	<i>Circular cairns</i>	<i>Source and date</i>	<i>Measures and type of kerb</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Ref / images</i>
11	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	11½ft × 11ft (3.5m × 3.3m) horizontal kerb, corner pillars	Grave 3	Edwards 1926: 163–4; 1927: 198–9
12	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	11½ft × 11ft (3.5m × 3.3m) upright slab kerb, corner pillars	Grave 4	Edwards 1926: 164–7
13	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	20½ft × 13ft (6.2m × 4m) upright slab kerb, corner & median pillars	Grave 5	Edwards 1926: 167–9
14	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1926	6ft × 7ft (1.8m × 2.1m) horizontal kerb	Grave 8	Edwards 1927: 197–8
15	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1926	10ft × 10ft (3m × 3m) upright slab kerb	Grave 9	Edwards 1927: 199
16	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1926	8ft × 8ft (2.4m × 2.4m) no formal kerb	Grave 10	Edwards 1927: 199–200
<i>Long cists</i>					
17	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Barry 1902	‘pillow’ stone	Cist 1	MS/28/470/6 DC48557
18	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1925	6ft × 1ft 6in (1.8m × 0.5m)	No 1	Edwards 1926: 162
19	Ackergill Links ND35SW 12	Edwards 1926	6ft 8in × 1ft 6in (2m × 0.3m)	No 7	Edwards 1927: 196–7
20	Keiss, Stain ND36SW 5	Laing 1860s		‘Burial Mound’, nos 1–7	Laing 1866: 10, 13–15
21	Birkle Hills ND35NW 5	Laing c 1864		5–6 cists	Laing 1866: 30–1
22	Wester Broch (Castle Linglas) ND35NW 4	Barry 1890		4 cists, extended inhumations	Anderson 1901: 121–2

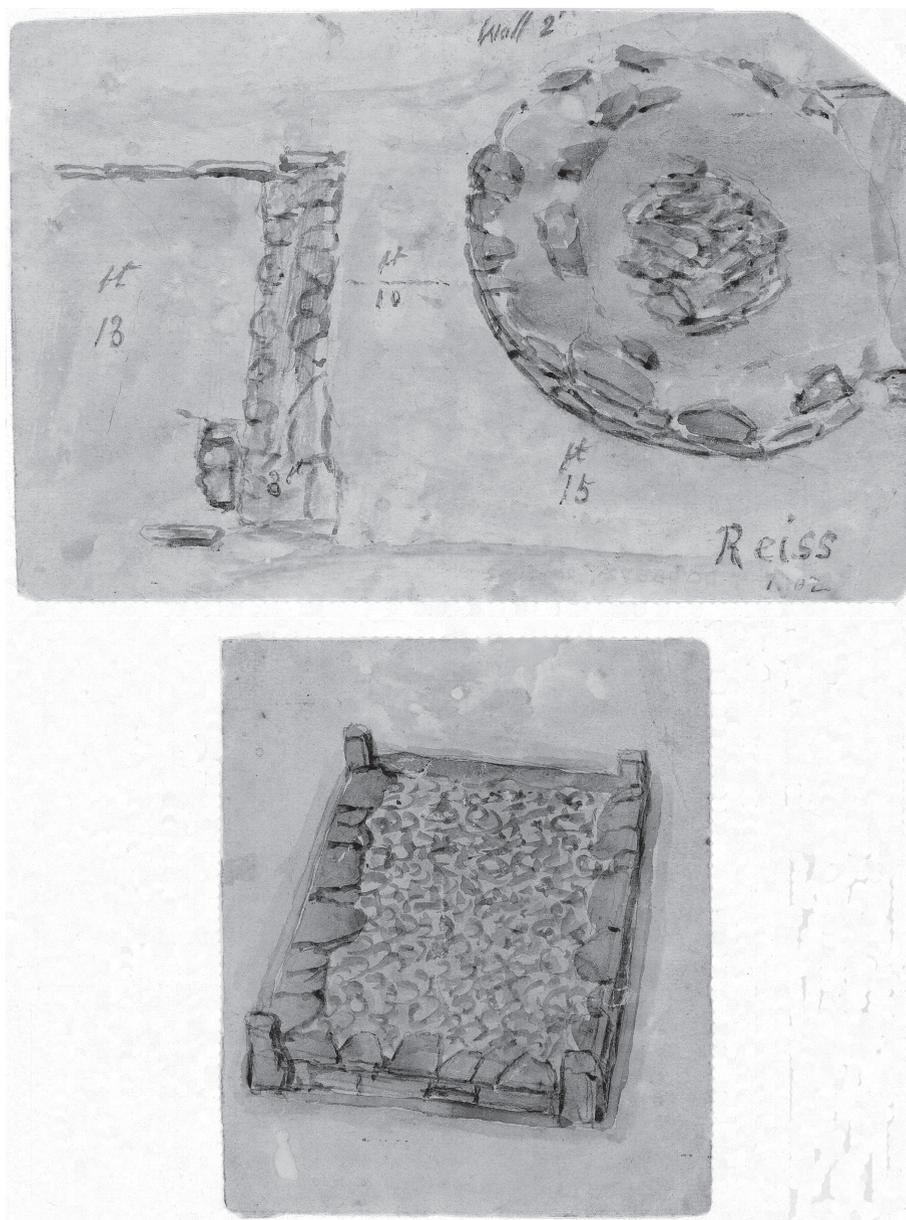
excavated at that time) and an isolated long cist ‘close to the place where the stone slab that you have in the Museum came from’ (no 17), which is an ogham-inscribed symbol stone (Fraser 2008: no 96.1). Nicolson’s watercolour of this cist draws attention to a kidney-shaped pillow stone at the head-end of the grave (RCAHMS DC48557).³ Barry described surface indications of other structures along the ridge for a distance of about 30m. In addition, some 92m from the Ackergill ridge in a smaller long mound of sand ‘running parallel with the shore’, he found a small

slab-built cairn over a burial, surrounded by a circular kerb 15ft (4.57m) in diameter (no 1) and part of a square or rectangular kerb (no 9), of which two photographs and a watercolour by John Nicolson survive (RCAHMS CA 628 & CA 629, DC48572; illus 2 & 3). This site he distinguished by the name ‘Reiss’, which suggests that it was to the north of the main Ackergill ridge, where there are several Reiss placenames.⁴

Barry also investigated another natural mound, known as Ackergill Mound, some 500m south of the Ackergill cemetery. Here,



ILLUS 2 Sir Francis Tress Barry’s excavation of circular cairn (cist 4) at Reiss, photographed in 1902 (SC1241724; © RCAHMS (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Sir Francis Tress Barry). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk)



ILLUS 3 Watercolour drawing by John Nicolson of Barry's partial rectangular cairn and circular cairn (cist 4) at Reiss (DP 102565 © RCAHMS (John Nicolson Collection). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk)

the top of the mound had been much eroded, but the basal course of a circular kerb of horizontally laid stones survived, which was illustrated both by photographs and by a

Nicolson watercolour, but unfortunately they lack dimensions (RCAHMS DC 48574; illus 4) (Table 1, no 5). Human and animal bones were found in the disturbed debris, including a



ILLUS 4 Barry's circular cairn on Ackergill Mound, photographed in 1902 (SC1241725; © RCAHMS (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Sir Francis Tress Barry). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk)

human skull, and a large stone slab may have come from a central cist. This cairn was in a thoroughly demolished state by the time that fieldwork was carried out in the area for the Royal Commission *Inventory* (1911: no 590).

Combining the accounts of Edwards and Barry, the cemetery on the sand ridge at Ackergill appears to have consisted of a minimum of nine rectangular or square kerbed cairns, three circular kerbed cairns and three long cists (Table 1). There seems to be no question from the descriptions that Edwards had unwittingly re-excavated any of Barry's

graves, and he was by then an experienced excavator. Additional outliers of the cemetery were Barry's circular cairn on Ackergill Mound and the circular and square cairns on the Reiss mound. The possibility that Barry's circular cairn 4 (no 1) at Reiss was the one remembered by Bremner in the 1920s, since both gave the diameter as 15ft, is perhaps countered by Edwards' statement that Bremner's cairn had not been excavated (1926: 170). Bremner's recollection of its discovery as 'a number of years ago' may also suggest that that it was found more recently than 1902. Nonetheless,

the question of whether nos 1 and 3 were the same cairn must remain open. The tally for the Ackergill area thus becomes 10 square or rectangular cairns and four or five circular cairns, along with three individual long cists. This represents a remarkable concentration of a special type of grave monument.⁵

CEMETERIES AT KEISS AND BIRKLE HILLS

Even before Barry began work at Ackergill, Samuel Laing had excavated long cists and a circular cairn near Keiss in the 1860s, which Edwards recognised as comparable to the graves at Ackergill Links (Laing 1866: 14; Edwards 1926: 173). Laing provided few details, but there were eight or more long cists set 'with wonderful regularity' at intervals of about 4.5m along a sandy ridge, which he named 'Burial Mound', and others had been found previously during road works (1866: 13–15) (Table 1, no 21).⁶ In the middle of the ridge was a circular kerbed cairn, 18ft (5.49m) in internal diameter with a central long cist, which he dubbed the 'Chief's Cist and Cairn' (Table 1, no 6). The kerb consisted of horizontal walling and the floor of the cist was at the same level as the base of the kerb, while the infilling cairn had larger stones in the central area over the long cist. The individual long cists each had a small covering cairn of stones and in one instance, one cist was set on top of another in a double-tier arrangement. This site was near Stain,⁷ at the north end of the sandy links of Sinclair's Bay, some 4km along the shore from Ackergill. Laing had also found five or six long cists set into a sand mound at Birkle Hills (Table 1, no 21), farther south along the shore of Sinclair's Bay, near which Sir Francis Tress Barry was later to discover a symbol stone re-used in the paved floor of a domestic structure (1866: 30–6; Fraser 2008:

no 97). Other cists may have been discovered without placing them on record, for Laing saw traces of stone cairns which he thought had already been opened (1866: 30), and he wrote later to George Petrie at Kirkwall, on 31 July 1866, saying that he hoped to 'open another Kist or two at Keiss' and invited Petrie to join him (RCAHMS MS 28/332/26). In addition, Barry encountered four long cists with extended inhumations stratified above the wall of Wester Broch (Castle Linglas), the larger of the two sand hills known as Birkle Hills (Anderson 1901: 121–2) (Table 1, no 22).

An additional inhumation grave was discovered at Stain in 1981, on the same sandy ridge as Laing's graves (Batey 1983). It was very disturbed and there was only a faint suggestion of a mound, but the skeleton, probably a female, wore a copper alloy ring on the third finger of the left hand.

PICTISH SYMBOL STONES AT ACKERGILL AND KEISS

In the summer of 1896, John Nicolson found a fragmentary symbol stone lying on the ground surface 'on the links of Keiss Bay', which is the slab with part of a salmon, a rectangle symbol and a short ogham inscription, now known as Ackergill 1 (Anderson 1897: 297; Fraser 2008: no 96.1). Anderson later made the location more specific by attributing the find to 'the links towards the south side of Keiss Bay' (now Sinclair's Bay) (Allen & Anderson 1903: 28). It was information from Mrs Louise Duff-Dunbar which pinpointed the find-spot to the 'northern end of that part of the mound which contained the four-sided graves, where it had formerly stood upright until its removal' and allowed Edwards to place it on his map close to the circular cairn 6 (Edwards 1926: 179, fig 1). Clarke has questioned the

reliability of this information (2007: 28), but Mrs Duff-Dunbar had been living at Ackergill Tower since at least 1901, when she was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and it is likely that she knew the area well. During Edwards' excavations in 1925, part of another symbol stone with a rectangle, Ackergill 2, was found 'lying on the surface' near the head end of disturbed long cist no 1 (1926: 179; Fraser 2008: no 96.2).⁸ It is possible that both symbol stones had been broken when the road was built along the ridge. The coincidence at one site of two stones carved with rectangle symbols may be significant, although Ackergill 2 was a thinner and less formal monument than Ackergill 1. The rectangle appears to have been a relatively early symbol and one which was favoured more in northern Pictland than in the south (Mack 1997: 13).

Sir Francis Tress Barry's excavations on his Keiss estate at Birkle Hills produced a broch in the larger sandy mound (Castle Linglas or Wester Broch) and a rectangular building on the smaller mound, in the paved floor of which was a broken slab incised with a triple-oval symbol and an elaborate disc with one 'handle' (*PSAS* 29 (1894–5): 272–3; Fraser 2008: no 97). This re-used symbol stone may have come from the long cist cemetery discovered by Laing almost 40 years earlier. Thus all three symbol stones from the Sinclair's Bay area seem likely to have been associated with cemeteries.

ELEMENTS COMMON TO THE CEMETERIES

The topographical preference for these cemeteries of cairns and long cists on Sinclair's Bay was to utilise natural mounds of stable sand close to the shore, particularly long mounds or ridges. These allowed a linear

layout for the graves, though it is impossible to know whether that was a deliberate aim or an inevitable consequence of the chosen topography. In considering the location of the rectangular cairn at Dairy Park, Dunrobin, Close-Brooks suggested that proximity to an early coastal trackway, recorded on an estate map of 1774, had been a decisive factor (1980: 334–5, fig 1), and this may have been the case for the cemeteries along Sinclair's Bay as well. The Caithness map in John Thomson's *Atlas of Scotland*, published in 1832, shows a track running from Staxigoe harbour, north-east of Wick, past the Tower of Ackergill and along the shore of Sinclair's Bay to Keiss and Freswick, and its route round Sinclair's Bay appears to have been followed by the field wall surveyed by the Ordnance Survey in the 1870s (illus 1). The origin of the track is likely to be far earlier.

Characteristic features and dating of burial cairns of the 1st millennium AD have been discussed by Ashmore (1980), who used the term 'low cairn', and by Close-Brooks (1984: 99), who proposed the term 'platform cairn', which has the advantage of being a more specific term and which has been widely adopted by archaeologists. Publication of the cemetery at Lundin Links in Fife prompted another look at dating, for there the rectangular cairn 6 appeared on radiocarbon evidence to be as early as the late 5th century and may be 'the earliest known in Scotland' (Greig et al 2000: 611). Germane to such an early start is the bronze chain found in Edwards' circular cairn 6 at Ackergill Links, for which Close-Brooks drew attention to the only good parallel in Scotland, a fragment of chain of 1st- or 2nd-century date from the Roman fort at Newstead (1984: 97). The Ackergill chain might thus be seen as an ancient heirloom, particularly as it belonged to the stratigraphically latest burial in the cairn (Table 2, no 4, Grave 6, F).⁹ Illicit sand quarrying at the site of the

Table 2

Details of Ackergill Links burials (bone analysis by T H Bryce in Edwards 1926 & 1927)

<i>No</i>	<i>Grave and skeleton</i>	<i>Stratigraphy of cist/skeleton</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Head-foot orientation</i>	<i>Position of skeleton</i>	<i>Notes</i>
4	Grave 6, F	uppermost	female	ENE-WSW	extended	with necklace
4	Grave 6, G	upper	male	SE-NW	on left side, knees flexed	
4	Grave 6, H	lower	teenager	ENE-WSW	extended	no skull
4	Grave 6, J	ground level	male	ENE-WSW	extended	
10	Grave 2	ground level		NW-SE		disturbed
11	Grave 3	below sterile layer	female	S-N	extended	
12	Grave 4, B	ground level	male	SW-NE	extended	
12	Grave 4, A	upper level	infant	NW-SE		
12	Grave 4, C	upper level	child	NW-SE		skull only
13	Grave 5, D	ground level (double cist)	male	NW-SE	extended	incomplete
13	Grave 5, E	ground level (double cist)	female	SE-NW	extended on left side	incomplete
14	Grave 8	below sterile sand	male	W-E	extended	
15	Grave 9	below sterile sand	female	SW-NE	extended	
16	Grave 10	ground level (two-storey cist)		S-N		incomplete
17	Cist 1	below ground level		NW-SE		disturbed
19	Cist 7	below ground level	female	NW-SE	extended face down	

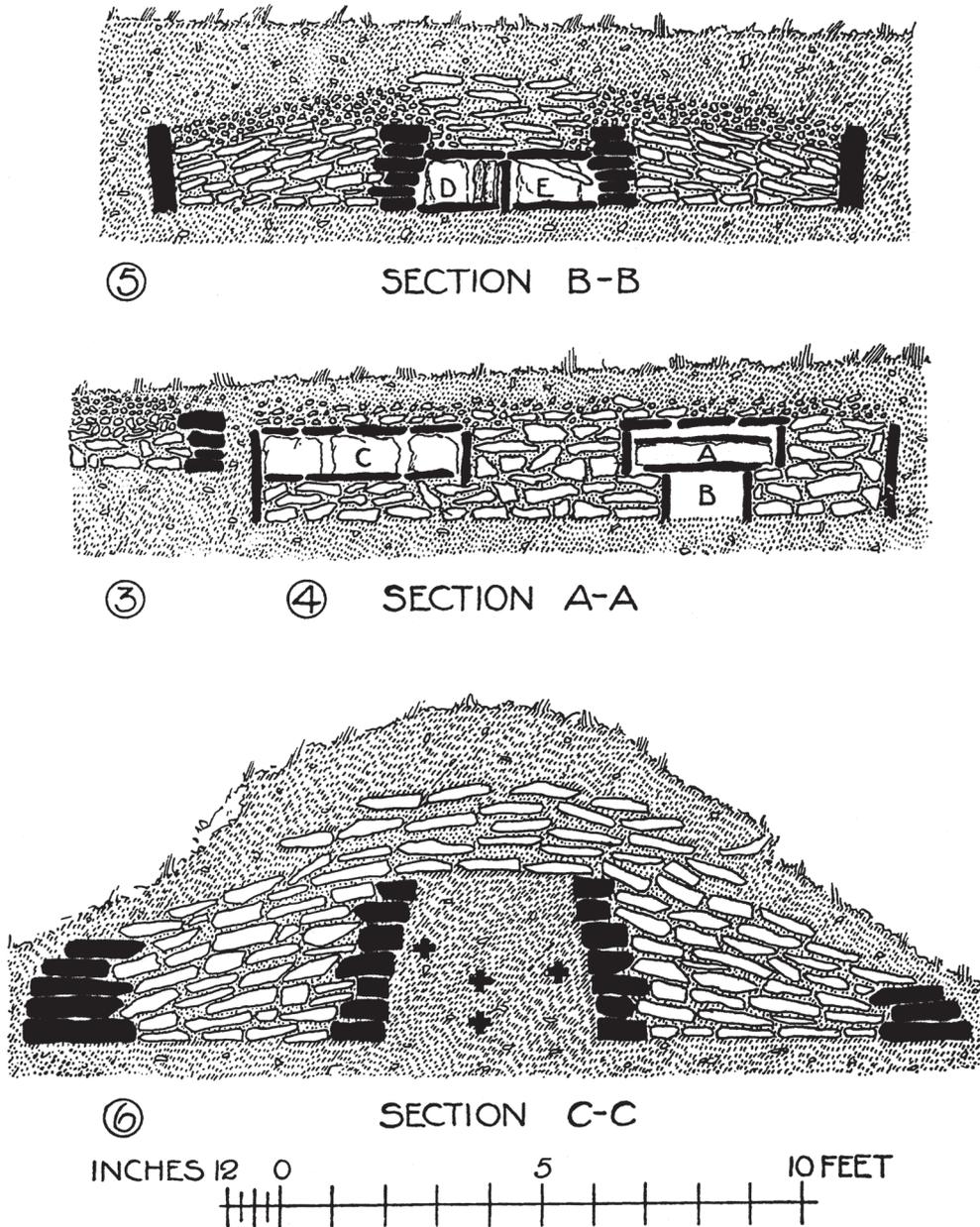
Ackergill Links cemetery in the last decade prompted work which resulted in the retrieval of a stray human femur, radiocarbon dated to AD 250–470 cal (Patrick Ashmore pers comm; Hunter Blair 2004). This early date helps to bridge the chronological gap between the bronze chain and the expected date span of the cemetery. A similar date was obtained from human bone recovered from within Whitegate broch near Keiss, at the northern end of Sinclair's Bay (ND 35416120; Sheridan 2008: 204), confirming activity in the area sometime in the 3rd to 5th centuries.

Distinctive features of these platform cairns generally are round and square or rectangular plans, horizontally coursed or upright slab kerbs, corner pillars, median pillars, covering layers of white pebbles, extended inhumations and a barren layer of sand separating the burial from the base level of the kerb, and Ashmore recognised a diversity within each cemetery which he suggested indicates 'an indifference to detail' (1980: 351). At Ackergill Links in particular he commented that 'the orientation of the cists varied in a manner statistically indistinguishable from random' (1980: 348). In addition to these, now well known, features, the cemeteries around Sinclair's Bay display other notable characteristics. Individual long cists were originally covered by small cairns of stones, which would have rendered them easily visible at surface level, and cists within kerbed cairns were also covered by extra cairn material. At Ackergill Links, the two square cairns, nos 11 and 12, were set so close together that cairn no 12, stratigraphically the earlier of the two, must have been clearly visible at the time when cairn no 11 was built. Cairns 4 and 13 stand out for the construction of an oblong walled chamber at ground level, within which burials were made (illus 5). The chambers were slightly corbelled, and in the case of cairn no 4, the chamber measured 2.21m long by a maximum of 1.22m wide

and 0.99m high. It was unfloored and filled with sand, within which were four skeletons at different levels, the highest and latest being a woman around whose neck was the bronze chain already mentioned. The chamber in cairn no 13 was 3.05m long by 1.07m wide and 0.53m high, and its interior was partly divided into a double slab-built cist, 2.44m long, paved and roofed. Edwards' section through cairn no 13 clearly shows that the chamber had been re-used, perhaps when the double cist was constructed to hold a male and a female, because the layer of white pebbles topping the cairn had been cut through to allow access to the chamber (Edwards 1926: fig 5, section B–B; illus 5). The purpose of the corbelled chamber appears to have been to act as a re-usable burial vault.

Cairns 12 and 14 were also re-used for burials later than the primary burial. The primary cist B in cairn 12 was at the old ground level, and two later cists A and C were inserted at a higher level, cist A immediately on top of cist B. One end of cist C was set against one of the upright slabs of the kerb of the cairn (illus 5). The kerb of cairn no 14 consisted of horizontal walling except for two upright slabs in the middle of the north-east side, which may originally have acted as the end-slabs of a long cist which was destroyed when the surviving cist was inserted. This latter cist was set well below the level of the base of the kerb and, unusually, was at an angle diagonal to the square of the cairn itself, the only way in which a cist of the desired length could have been fitted within the kerb. Few structural details are available about Laing's discoveries at Stain and Birkle Hills, Keiss, but there is mention of one cist set above another at Stain (no 20), which might indicate two burial events (1866: 10).

While most of the inhumations at Ackergill were laid out extended and facing upwards, one was laid face down (no 19) and at least



ILLUS 5 Edwards' sections through cairns 4, 5 & 6 at Ackergill Links (1926: fig 5)

two were laid on their left sides (nos 4 & 13), in one case with the knees flexed (no 4) (Table 2). In the long cist cemetery at Stain, Keiss, the bodies had mostly been laid extended on

their right side (Laing 1866, 10). Burial with the body on one side is rare, and Maldonado has recognised that in Scotland this practice occurs in the Late Iron Age, mostly in the north

and mostly below stone cairns (2011: 19–20). At Ackergill, the burials of this type were of a male in a re-usable cist beneath a circular cairn (no 4) and a female in a secondary cist beneath a rectangular cairn (no 13), and they were the only burials to be orientated south-east to north-west (Tables 1 & 2).

Certain details of the platform cairns suggest a common repertoire of building techniques. The kerbs of circular cairns always take the form of horizontal walling, not only at the Caithness sites but also at Birsay in Orkney and at Lundin Links in Fife, although in the latter case built of boulders rather than coursed walling (Morris 1989: 109–27; Greig et al 2000). Deliberate separation of the cist and its cairn by a deep layer of clean sand occurs at Ackergill in cairns 11, 14 and 15, and this feature has been found at Lundin Links and Birsay and also at Sandwick in Unst, Shetland (Bigelow 1984). In cairn 16 at Ackergill, there was a double-tier cist, where the covering slabs of the upper cist were immediately beneath the base of the cairn and the cist itself was full of sand, while the lower cist held an extended inhumation. The sand in the upper cist was apparently a deliberate filling and may have acted in the same way as the sand layer in cairns 11, 14 and 15 in deliberately separating the burial from the cairn.

It was the discovery in the second season at Ackergill of a cist 1.6m below the surface of the sand under cairn 14 that alerted Edwards and subsequent excavators elsewhere to the possibility of burials below the level of the base of the cairn. Edwards went on to locate a cist 1.2m below the kerb of cairn 11, which he had excavated in the first season without finding any trace of a grave because he had not dug deep enough (1927: 198). At Sandwick in Unst, the well-preserved skeleton in cairn SWC was found in a shallow pit beneath a mere 0.2–0.3m depth of sand, but although

the interior of the second cairn, SWD, was excavated to a depth of 1.5m, no burial was found, despite the presence of a line of ‘cover slabs’ similar to and at the same level as those in the other cairn (Bigelow 1984: 121). Here cairn SWD appears genuinely not to have covered a burial.

A rectangular cairn was excavated on a raised beach by Joanna Close-Brooks at Dunrobin (1980: 329–30, fig 2), the stratigraphy of which is of interest in relation to those at Ackergill. Here the subsoil was gravel overlain by sand, and both sand and turf were stripped in order to build a horizontal slab kerb directly on the gravel, and a central pit for a long cist was dug from the same level. The cist appeared to have been covered by roughly corbelled slabs. Clean yellow sand was laid within the kerb and over the cist, and topped with pebbles. In this sequence, the clean sand layer assumes an importance which is equivalent to the role of sand in Ackergill cairns 11, 14, 15 and 16. Some 30m to the north-east was a group of long cists, which may have been part of a larger cemetery together with the rectangular cairn (Close-Brooks 1980: 343). One long cist was associated with a symbol stone, which was used as a capstone, and it contained one, or possibly two, male inhumations together with an iron artefact, possibly a ferrule (Close-Brooks 1980: 334, fig 5.6).¹⁰

FROM CAITHNESS SOUTH TO FIFE

Several of the characteristic features of the Sinclair’s Bay cemeteries appear in the cemetery at Lundin Links on the coast of Fife, dated by radiocarbon analysis to sometime between the late 5th and early 7th centuries (Greig et al 2000). These include topographical location on coastal sand dunes, the combination of cairns and long cists, the

presence of both circular and rectangular kerbed cairns, a linear layout and cists set well below the level of the kerb of the cairn. Kerbs were all horizontal apart from cairn 6, which had a shallow kerb of upright slabs. There is also evidence of re-use, for within the oval enclosure of the 'Horned Cairn Complex' were two long cists with their paved floors at a depth of 1.40m below the boulder kerb and above them were three cists with their floors at a depth of about 0.80m (Greig et al 2000: illus 15). The upper cists were finished with capstones but no cover slabs are mentioned for the lower cists, where the sand infilling the cists would need to have settled over the defleshed skeletons before the upper cists could be built without risking subsidence. Radiocarbon dates covering the 5th and 6th centuries were obtained for all three of the upper burials (I, J & K) but none is available for the earlier burials (L & M). The burial beneath the adjacent round cairn produced one of the earliest dates for the cemetery (H), calibrated to AD 400–540, and it is tempting to attribute burials M and L to a similar period. A corroded iron pin was found beneath the right femur of the female skeleton in lower cist L, probably a shroud pin. No symbol stone has been associated with this site, but it can hardly be fortuitous that the so-called 'Dumb-bell Complex' resembles a double-disc symbol, while the 'Horned Cairn Complex' has a distinctly anthropomorphic appearance. Howard Williams has taken the implications of the Lundin Links cemetery even further, not only drawing attention to the similarities between the designs of the Dumb-bell and Horned Cairn Complexes, Pictish symbols and domestic architecture but also arguing that such monuments commemorated concepts of gender and genealogy (2007).

Although there are related cairns elsewhere (Greig et al 2000: 608–9), the cairn and long cist cemeteries around Sinclair's Bay in

Caithness and at Lundin Links in Fife form a distinctive group for which the physical link, if there is one, can only be maritime activities. The small square cairns of the islands of Eigg at Laig (RCAHMS NM48NE 52) and South Uist at Cille Pheadair (NF71NW 19) may well also have been the result of seaborne trade and social exchange among the Western Isles, whether or not they can be regarded as Pictish.

NORTHERN MAINLAND PARALLELS FOR THE ACKERGILL LINKS CEMETERY

In a letter to James S Richardson of HM Office of Works, J G Callander, Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, wrote of two cairns on Dunnet Links on the north coast of Caithness (NMS UC 73/26; 23 January 1934). The information came via A J H Edwards from Simon Bremner in Caithness, and one of the cairns was described as having 'peculiar structured features within the mound', which may imply that it was similar to the chambers in the Ackergill Links cairns. Callander wrote on 2 February to Bremner telling him that Richardson might arrange for the cairn to be excavated, but unfortunately this appears not to have taken place. Another unusual site of potential interest was at Stittenham in Ross and Cromarty, excavated in 1847, where a low small mound covered a deep oval pit containing a long cist (RCAHMS MS 28/360, DC 53795), and where two carved stones were found in the vicinity at Ardrross (Fraser 2008, nos 118.1 & 118.2). The cist was 2.44m long and apparently empty, but the entire structure had been built with care and planned design, for the lower part of the pit around the cist was filled with stones and the upper part with red clay, and the sealing mound consisted of blue clay topped with black earth.

Of particular interest as a parallel for Ackergill Links cairn 4 is a site recorded by Mrs Katharine Duff-Dunbar in a letter dated 25 August 1932 (RCAHMS MS 28/344/1).¹¹ Close to the shore at Ness of Quoys, Canisbay, was a double grave pit set within a low rectangular wall built of boulders, enclosing an area 1.63m × 1.42m. There were two skeletons with their heads at the south end of the pit, and the whole enclosure was covered with boulders. There was no mention of an outer kerb but if excavation concentrated on the grave pit it could have missed an outer kerb. With the skeletons was a bronze tube about 0.10m long and open at one end, which was unfortunately lost but which may have been a ferrule for a spear shaft.

Gravegoods are rare amongst Late Iron Age burials in Scotland and Canisbay, Dunrobin, Stain and Ackergill are among those which stand out in having objects other than the occasional shroud pins. A comparable northern parallel is the assemblage associated with an inhumation in a long cist at Sandwick in Unst, Shetland, which included a polished stone disc, a copper alloy ornament and a steatite bead (Lelong 2005).

CONCLUSION

Additional information from material in the Sir Francis Tress Barry Collection in RCAHMS Archive has demonstrated that the cairn and long cist cemetery on Ackergill Links was more extensive than was indicated by Edwards' excavations in the 1920s. Though best known for his work on Caithness brochs, Barry was also an enthusiastic excavator of burials, and he worked on sites at Ackergill Links, at Reiss and on Ackergill Mound. There were also cemeteries of uncertain extent farther north, along the shore of Sinclair's Bay at Birkle Hills and Stain, near

Keiss. Ackergill became the type site for circular and square or rectangular platform cairns once its Pictish origin was recognised (Ritchie 1974: 31–2), and it remains so, but re-appraisal of the evidence uncovered by Edwards suggests that there was a feature unique to the site: burials in walled chambers built at ground level. Evidence for re-use of burial monuments at Ackergill Links and at Lundin Links in Fife demonstrates that not only the cemeteries but also individual monuments within them remained in use. An explanation for the remarkable similarity between the cemeteries at Ackergill and Lundin Links may be sought in maritime activities along the east coast of Pictland, while the platform cairns in the Northern and Western Isles appear to be individual links in a wider maritime chain. Location close to sandy beaches is also common to coastal barrow cemeteries, such as Redcastle in Angus (Alexander 2005), for the same reason.

The idea of the rectangular kerb forming an enclosure appears to have been adopted by Norse incomers in Scotland, for kerbs such as those round grave 10 at Pierowall in Westray and Kiloran Bay in Colonsay are not found in the Norwegian homeland (Thorsteinsson 1968: 168; Ritchie 1974: 31; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 119).¹² This suggests that at least some of the square and rectangular platform cairns in northern Scotland were still visible, if not still in use, in the 9th century.

Platform cairns were a northern variant in the 1st millennium AD of a wider burial tradition which encompassed circular and rectangular ditched barrows and as such are clearly not unique to the Picts. It was, nonetheless, a preferred form of burial monument for a restricted section of Pictish society. Adomnan records the burial in the 6th century of a Pictish military leader in Skye,

beneath a cairn raised on the foreshore (Bk I, 35), which may give an indication of one, at least, of the social strata for whom cairn burials were considered suitable. It may be noted that the fact that the Pict had just been baptised was no impediment to his burial in a pagan monument.

It is unfortunate that at present there is very little evidence for the settlements of the local population around Sinclair's Bay, for this was clearly a focus for burial activities in Pictish times.¹³ The concentration here of platform cairns and long cists, together with three symbol stones, makes the area unusually rich in Pictish monuments, while the evidence for the re-use of the monuments indicates that their importance to the contemporary community was long-lived. Sinclair's Bay is undoubtedly an area which would reward further research on the ground.

NOTES

- 1 Many manuscripts and books were transferred to the National Library of Scotland and Register House (now the National Archives) in 1934. Papers on Bath and Somerset were sent to Bath Library in 1947 and a collection relating to Shetland was sent to Shetland Library (now Shetland Archive) in 1968.
- 2 Sinclair's Bay was also known as Keiss Bay. Ackergill Tower is a 15th-century tower house with later modifications and additions.
- 3 Nicolson was already well known for both his artistic abilities and his archaeological work. Anderson noted that Nicolson 'in addition to his artistic tastes, has a keen eye for anything remarkable in the way of antiquities' (1897: 297).
- 4 The placename 'reiss' is ON for 'ridge', whereas the 'gill' in Ackergill is ON for 'ravine' and refers to the rocky shore nearby, probably combined with a personal name (Nicolaisen 1982: 82–3).
- 5 A hint of another circular cairn in the Reiss area of the links comes from notes written by Mrs L Duff-Dunbar on her excavation in May 1933 of a cairn exposed by coastal erosion, some 5.80m in diameter, surrounded by a ditch, within which were stone-built structures (RCAHMS MS 467). Two upright slabs set end to end might have been one side of a cist some 2.40m long with one end-slab surviving, but four conjoined 'cist-like graves' luted by clay with signs of burning and the 'great dampness' of a site close by a burn suggest that the site had, latterly at least, a non-funerary purpose (there was charcoal but no burnt stones to suggest a burnt mound: ND35NW 9; ND 3403 5674). Neither pottery nor human bones were found but, as Mrs Duff-Dunbar pointed out, the damp conditions could account for their absence. On balance, it seems best not to include this site as a platform cairn.
- 6 John Nicolson drew a map of north-east Caithness in 1906 to show the sites of Barry's archaeological researches, which has five locations of 'burial cairns' and 'burials' in the Ackergill/Reiss area of the coast, together with one location of 'dwellings' at Reiss (RCAHMS 1998: fig 2; DC 33643). The map also shows three cairns and 'dwellings' along the shore to the north, near Burnthouse of Reiss.
- 6 The placename 'keiss' is ON for '(rounded) ridge' (Nicolaisen 1982: 83).
- 7 In Thomson's *Atlas* the name Stain is given as Stane (1832).
- 8 Ackergill 2 was not incorporated in a cist as stated in Greig et al 2000: 588.
- 9 A crude bronze chain of S-links was found with a bronze cross in a curious crouched burial near the churchyard at Kingoldrum, Angus (Chalmers 1854), but this is likely to be a later medieval burial.
- 10 For the Northern Isles, in addition to the circular cairns at Birsay in Orkney and the square cairns at Sandwick, Unst, in Shetland, it is worth mentioning the possibility of a cairn associated with a fragment of a symbol stone at the Sands of Evie, Rendall, Orkney (Fraser 2008: no 174). There is a Thomas Kent photograph (Orkney Archive TK 4109) of the discovery of an inhumation grave on the Sands of Evie, probably in the early 1930s, which shows an unusual number of stones around the burial, and it is possible that this was a Pictish square or circular cairn, which became eroded by the sea. The carved stone is water-worn and had clearly been on the beach for many years, and it is possible that the symbol stone had originally stood on or near the burial cairn.

- 11 Mrs Katharine Duff-Dunbar of Hempriggs House near Wick was daughter-in-law to Mrs Louise Duff-Dunbar of Ackergill Tower and had herself been elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1930.
- 12 The idea was taken by the Norsemen from Scotland to Iceland, however, where a grave at Hrífunes had a rectangular kerb (Eldjárn 1965: 68).
- 13 Apart from the possibility of post-broch settlement at Wester broch and the 'dwellings' mentioned above in note 5, there is only a 'hut-circle' excavated by Cree and Curle in 1910, north-west of Ackergill Tower (Cree 1911), from the vicinity of which a crutch-headed bone pin had been found (PSAS 73 (1938–9): 333).

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