

## Excavation of a cairn at Cnip, Uig, Isle of Lewis

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### ABSTRACT

*A small cairn weathering out of a sand dune on Cnip (Kneep) headland by Bhalto (Valto) was excavated in 1976 and 1978. It proved to be a Bronze Age cairn of three periods, each associated with a burial, overlying a ploughed soil. The first burial was an inhumation in a short cist under an unusual D-shaped cairn with a well-defined kerb. This cairn was disturbed when a hole was dug through it for a small corbelled cist containing a cremation urn. Finally a kerb cairn with two concentric kerbs was built over the earlier structures. Within the central ring of the kerb cairn was an un-urned cremation burial.*

*A short account of some other artefacts found at Cnip is included in this report.*

### INTRODUCTION

The cairn at Cnip was noted by R B K Stevenson in 1972, and again by W F Cormack (1974). It may be one of the sites seen ‘near Berie Beach’ in 1936 by Lacaille (1937, 279–82), but his directions are vague and the identification uncertain. In 1972 only part of the cairn showed through the sand as an irregular oval of boulders, and this led Stevenson to suggest that it might be a Viking grave, and to recommend excavation before the cairn eroded further.

The writer, then working in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now part of the National Museums of Scotland) undertook excavation on paid leave from the Museum in two short seasons in 1976 and 1978.

### DESCRIPTION

The township of Bhalto is in the parish of Uig on the west coast of the island of Lewis. At its east end it merges into the smaller township of Cnip (or Kneep), which causes some confusion in nomenclature. At the time of excavation, the place-name was spelled Kneep, but since then all place-names in the Western Isles have been converted to Gaelic. The site lies on Cnip headland (NGR NB 099364), which projects into the long sheltered sea inlet of Loch Roag (illus 1). On either side the headland is flanked by contrasting beaches: Tràigh na Bhalto to the west is partly sheltered by rocks and affords some sort of harbour, while the long sandy Tràigh na Berie to the

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east is over a mile long (c 1.5 km). Between the shore and the infertile, rocky country inland lies a strip of machair. The extensive beach, dune and machair system at Berie has been described by Ritchie & Mather (1970, 59–62, fig 6:13, pl 9). Unlike so many beaches in the Outer Isles which are being eroded, Tràigh na Berie is stable, and even in places advancing seaward, fed from the sandy floor of Loch Roag. The prevailing winds in the area, at any rate in June, blow from the south or south-east, so that sand from the beach is blown up onto Cnip headland. Thus the machair cover on the headland, though locally disturbed by blowouts, seems to be very slowly increasing, as it has done over the centuries.

There is at present a series of blowouts, or sand bunkers scooped out by the wind, breaking the thin turf cover on the east side of Cnip headland, and the cairn was exposed in one of these. It lay at around 20 m OD, high on the side of the headland, with a fine view east over Loch Roag to the island of Bernera. The hillside now falls quite steeply below the site to the sea, but the cairn was built originally on a quite gentle slope, and some of the hillside south of it had eroded away together with the southern edge of the cairn. Most of the top of the headland is covered with blown sand, and the contours of the underlying rock are unknown, though here and there exposures of ice-smoothed gneiss rock protrude through the machair cover. As can be seen from the surviving dune facing to north and east, the cairn had been buried to a depth of some 2–2.5 m above its kerb in slowly accumulating sand before it was exposed in the blowout.

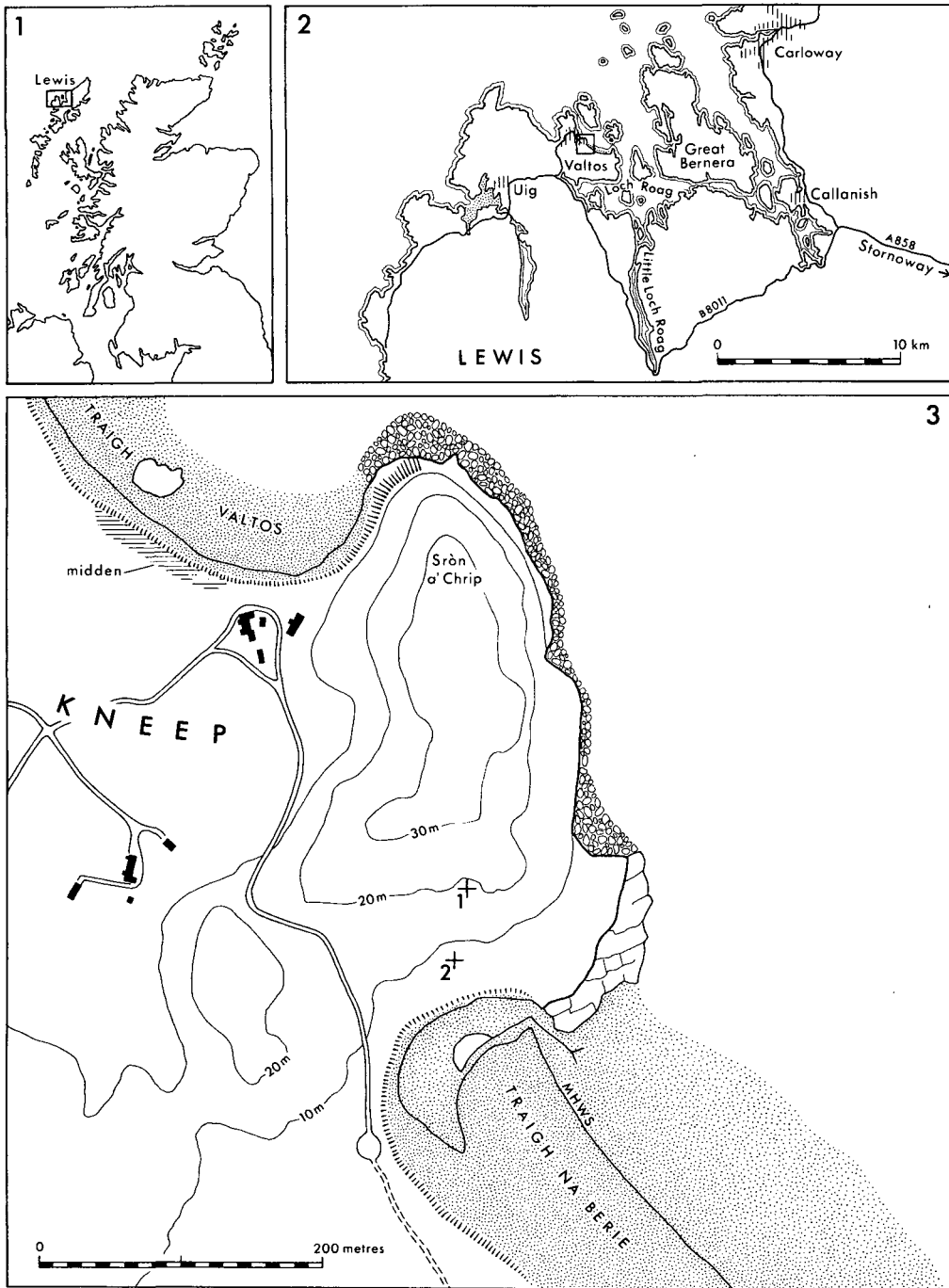
The cairn was excavated by the quadrant method, so that two complete cross-sections could be recorded. Most of the kerbstones have been left in position, and only in those areas shown in illus 4 was the underlying buried soil removed. Some of the large boulders forming the inner kerb of the kerb cairn had to be moved to get at underlying features, but most were returned to their positions after excavation. The other stones removed during excavation were then put back over the site, alternating with layers of sand, to help prevent future erosion.

All the stones used in the various phases of the cairn are readily available local rocks, such as can be picked up today from the base of the cliffs round the headland. Dr Livingstone and Dr Waterston of the Royal Scottish Museum examined specimens, and commented that all are typical representatives of a gneissic suite, such as migmatite, fine-grained granite, pegmatite and amphibolites.

## THE BURIED SOIL BELOW THE CAIRN

The cairn was built on a layer some 80 mm thick of dark brown, almost chocolate coloured soil (level 7), with clean blown sand below it. The depth of this underlying sand is unknown, though excavation of the corbelled cist showed it to be at least a metre deep. The thick buried soil is in contrast to the thin soil cover which supports the grass and flora of the present day and which, if buried, would leave only a thin trace of its former presence. A number of other buried soil surfaces, later than the cairn, showed as pale thin streaks in the face of the dunes formerly covering the site, and in other blowouts on the headland.

Part of the ground under the cairn was available for excavation, after removal of the cairn stones except where they supported later kerbs (illus 3). The buried soil was much disturbed by the later cairn, with many stones penetrating into it due to the weight above, so that no features could be distinguished on the surface of the soil, or within it. However, when the soil was carefully trowelled off, evidence for plough cultivation was found in a series of shallow ard-marks where the ard had occasionally broken through the soil and just penetrated the sand below. Even here the pattern was interrupted by disturbance of the sand from the cairn above, but a reasonably complete pattern was recovered and shown in illus 4 in relation to the kerb of the D-shaped cairn. The



ILLUS 1 Location Map: on plan 3, the cairn is shown by 1, and a structure found by Lacaille (1937, fig 2) by 2 (Based on Ordnance Survey map © Crown Copyright) Kneep is now known as Cnip, and Valtos as Bhaltos.



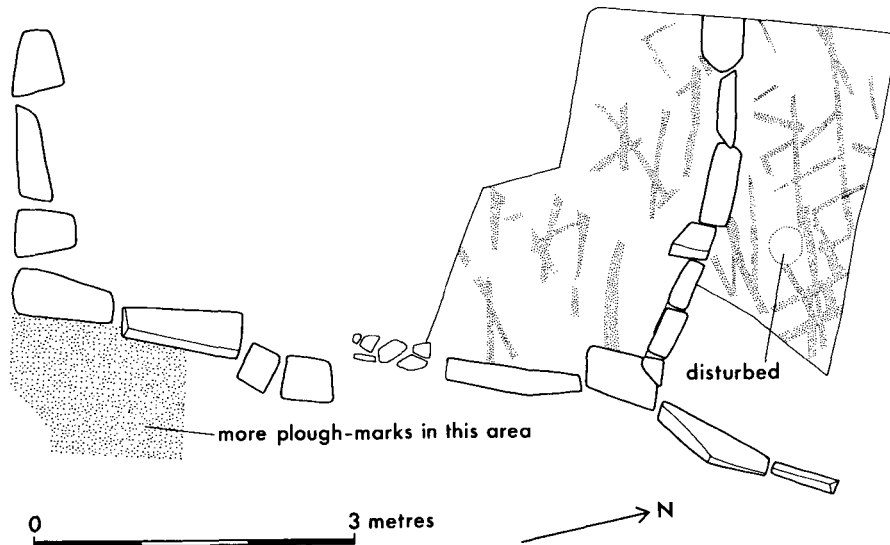
ILLUS 2 The cairn before excavation, looking south-west

surviving traces seem almost all to belong to two distinct episodes, one with two sets of marks at right angles to one another, and one single set, slightly better preserved, on a different alignment. The marks were typically some 0.3 m or so apart, but only some 20 mm deep. Only once was it possible to see one mark cutting another, where one element of the cross-ploughing cut one of the single set. A single untypical mark in two segments, running north east from just outside the north edge of the cairn, round-ended and round-bottomed in section, was probably not an ard-mark but perhaps an animal burrow. The traceable marks need not represent the only occasions when the soil was cultivated, and one or two marks do not fit the three typical alignments. On other occasions the plough may simply not have penetrated the underlying sand.

The ard-marks cover a more extensive area than the cairn, extending north as far as the limits of the trench. To the east more ard-marks on the same alignments were seen in a small area in front of the kerb (illus 3). To the south and west of the cairn the buried soil is truncated by erosion (dotted and dashed line in illus 4), but to the north and east it continues under sand dunes, and it appears that a considerable area of this ancient land surface may be preserved under the dunes.

All the buried soil was removed by trowel but it proved remarkably clean, free of the specks of charcoal, organic refuse, pot sherds and so on which might have been expected. The only artefacts found in the soil were four struck but unused flakes of quartz (catalogue nos 2–5), found together under the eastern edge of the cairn, and a few fragments of shells of edible shellfish (see fiche).

A sample of soil from level 7 taken from below a kerbstone on the south edge of the cairn



ILLUS 3 Plough-marks in the soil below the cairn

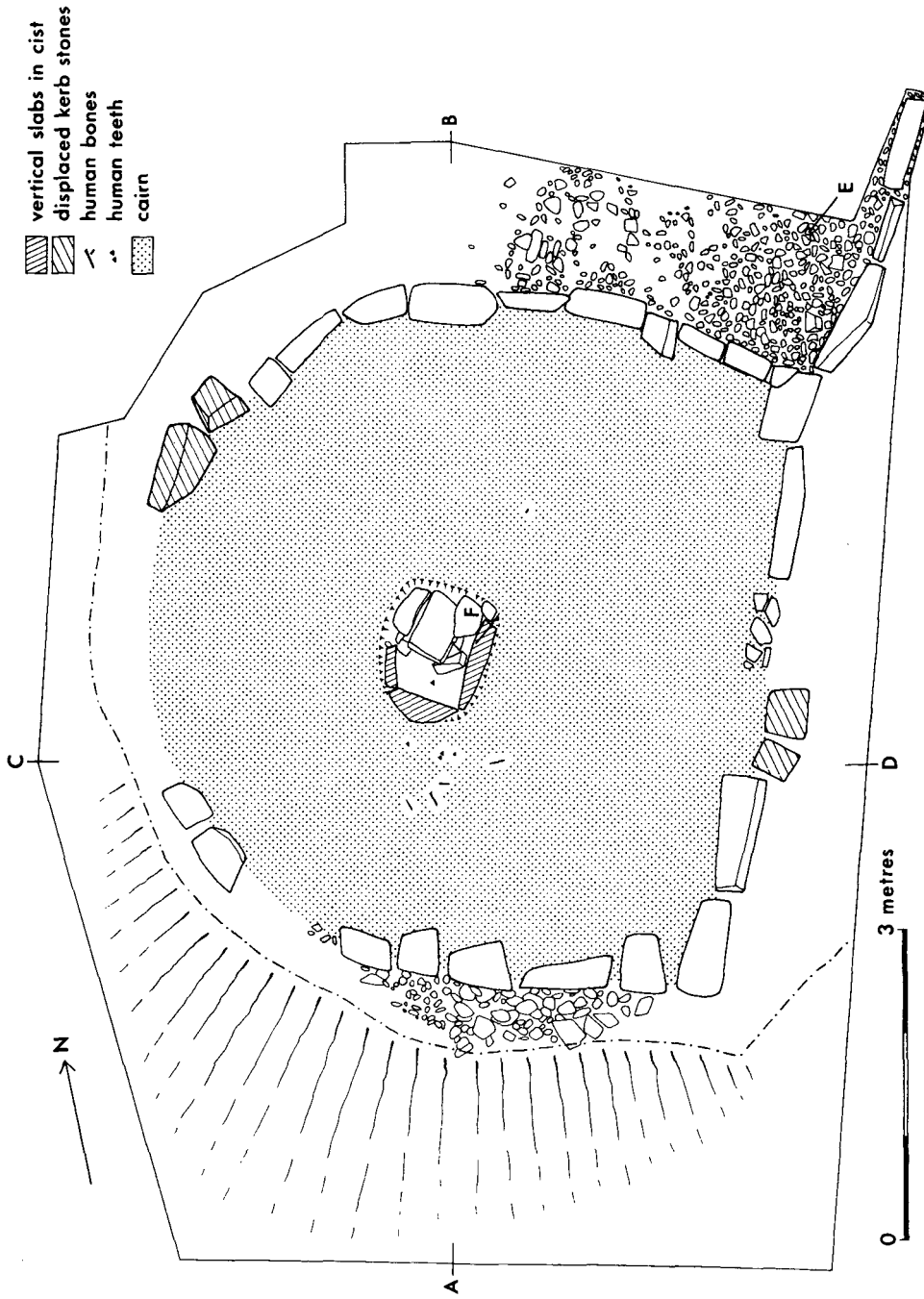
was submitted to Dr Whittington for pollen analysis (see fiche). Calcareous shell sand is unfavourable to pollen preservation, and he found pollen only of royal fern and hazel. The hazel pollen could have been local, or could have come from further afield, even from the mainland. The only trees growing locally today have been deliberately planted and protected from sheep, notably the willows near some croft houses, originally grown for making lobster pots.

### THE D-SHAPED CAIRN

The first structure to be built on the site was a stone cairn, D-shaped in plan, and defined by a carefully built kerb of stone slabs. Central to this cairn was a simple rectangular cist, cut through the old ground surface, and containing the inhumed body of an adult aged 35–45. This cist had been badly disturbed at one end by the later insertion of a corbelled cist containing a cinerary urn, which had destroyed one end of the earlier grave. At this time the capstone of the first cist had been lifted and one end slab and one side slab removed, while the bones had been dug out and thrown down on the ground to one side (illus 4). Some badly decayed human long bones and teeth were recovered in excavation, mostly from level 6, a dirty sand layer under the later kerb cairn, associated with the building of the corbelled cist. One tooth from the same individual was found in the upper part of the refilled rectangular cist, level 8.

Before disturbance, the cist seems to have been a typical short cist, its sides formed of five slabs (two short slabs making up one long side) and presumably covered with a capstone. It was partly filled with clean white sand (9) and then floored with a single thin layer of tiny beach pebbles. The cist measured some 1.30 m by 1 m by 0.30 m deep to the pebble floor. No construction pit could be found. A slab in the outer kerb of the later kerb cairn, some 0.86 m long, is probably an old capstone from the cist, found lying on the cairn and reused.

The cist had been covered with a low cairn of local stones of all shapes and sizes. Two



ILLUS 4 Plan of D-shaped cairn, the stone filling shown schematically. The capstones of a later corbelled cist fill the south end of the central rectangular cist. The dot-and-dash line marks the edge of the buried soil (7)

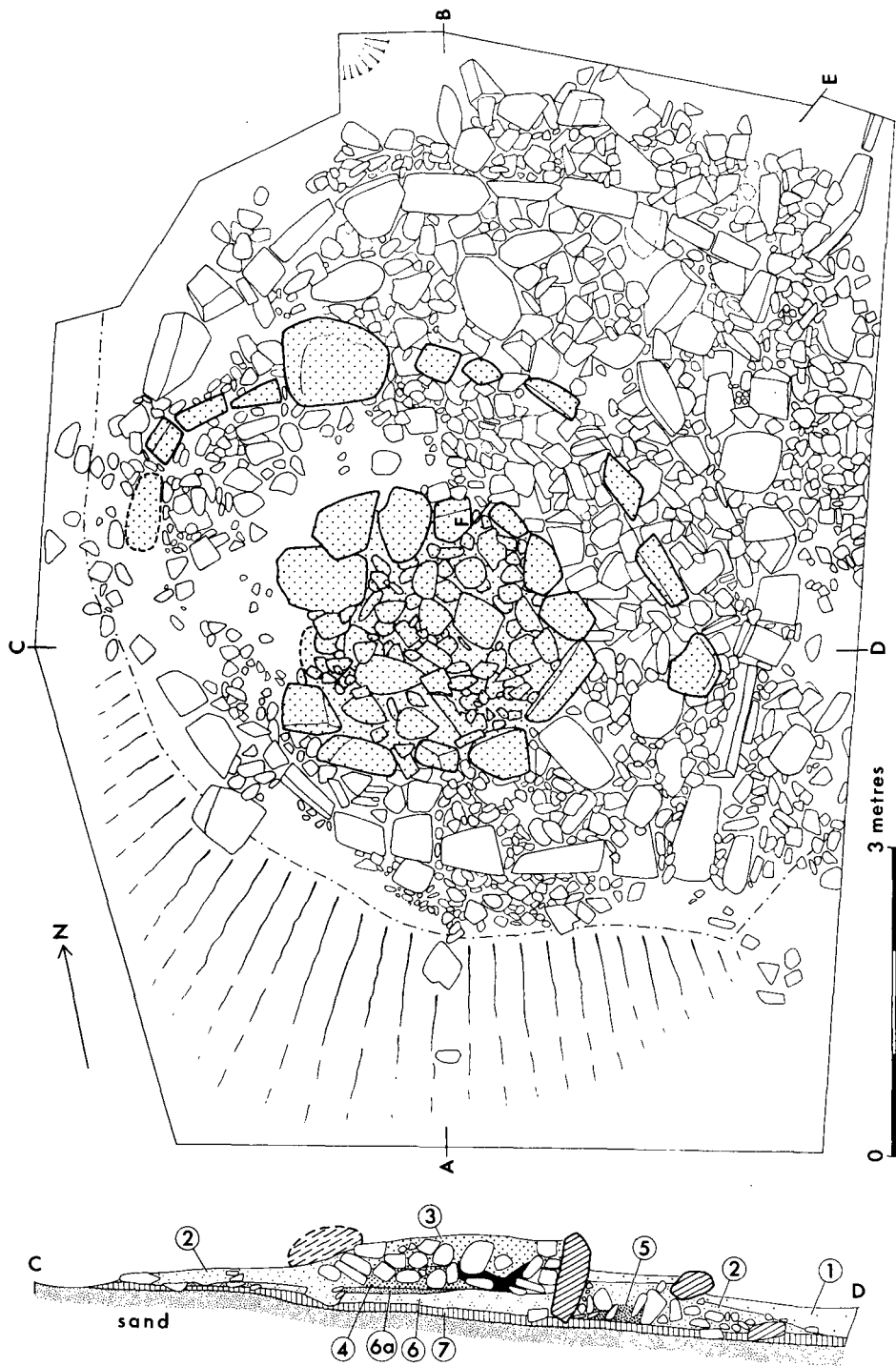


ILLUS 5 The kerb cairn standing on the remains of the D-shaped cairn

unusually large boulders measured some 0.84 m by 0.62 m by 0.30 m, and 0.77 m by 0.46 m by 0.33 m, but most others were readily lifted by one person. The body of the cairn had been considerably disturbed by the construction of the corbelled cist, when an area in the centre was cleared down to ground level. Many of the stones from the centre had been thrown out over the original kerb to the north and east (illus 6) and some further levelling may have taken place before the kerb cairn was erected. Small beach pebbles, around 100–120 mm long, had filled the spaces between the larger stones. These were mostly removed from the photographs and in drawing the plan, so that the large stones could be seen. Blown sand had infiltrated the remaining spaces between the stones and the pebbles, pale brown sand (level 2) at the top and medium brown sand further down (level 5). It seems likely that most of the original cairn stones are still present on the site, though much disturbed, and if so, and given the low outer kerb, it seems that the cairn was originally quite low, perhaps only 1 m or so high (illus 5).

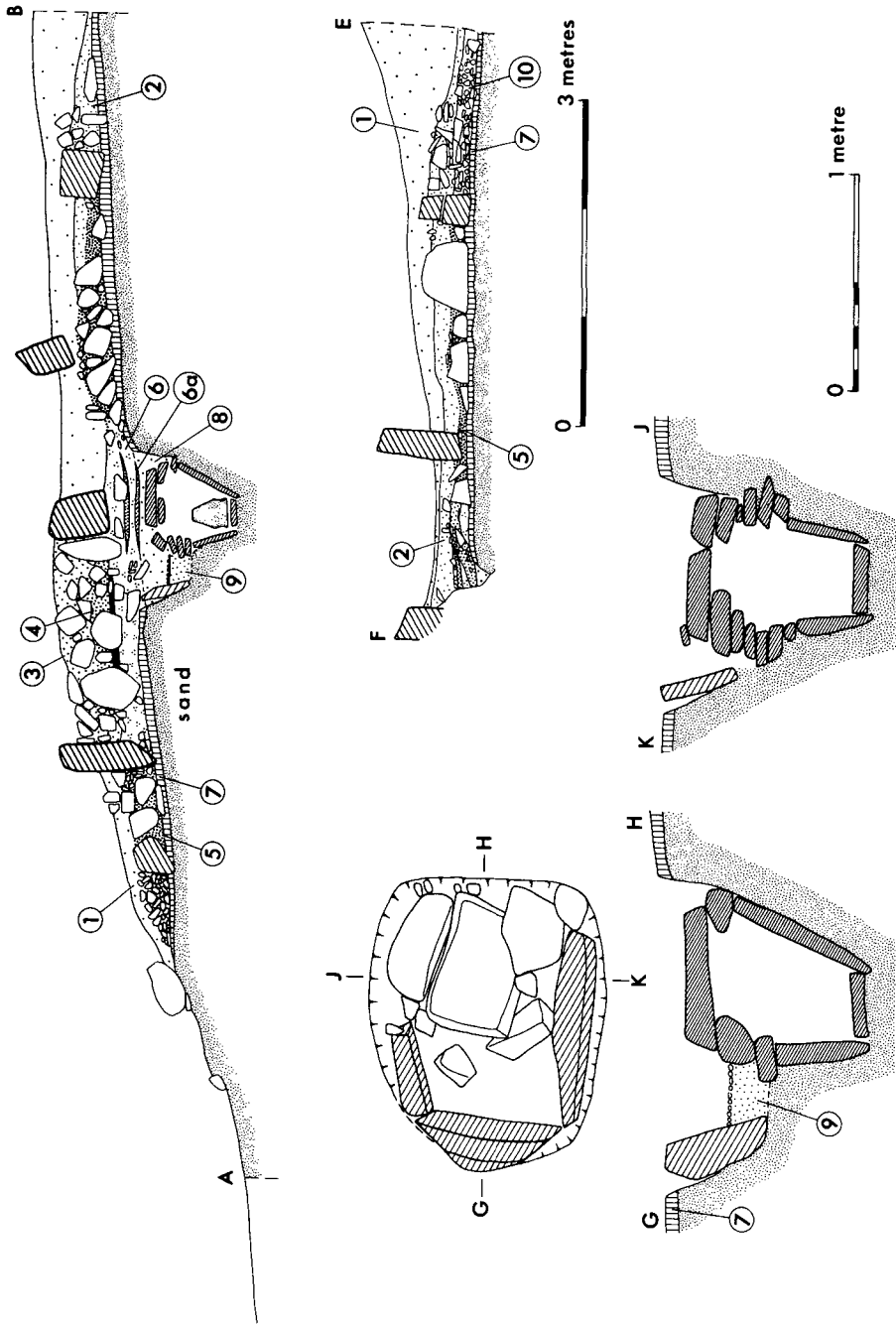
The kerb is largely intact, though a few stones are missing on the west side, one on the east, and some others are displaced (illus 4). Sections C–D cuts the cairn at a point where the west kerb is missing, and an east kerb slab has fallen outwards, but Section A–B shows both kerbs in position (illus 7). At the north-east corner the first part of the northern kerb is laid in two courses (illus 7 section E–F and illus 5). This may have occurred elsewhere, but if so the top slabs have since been dislodged. Many of the kerbstones are set vertically on their long axes. The maximum height of the kerb as preserved is about 0.50 m.

A strange feature of the cairn is the prolongation of the straight ‘façade’ to the north (and probably also to the south, where the ground has fallen away due to erosion). Three slabs set vertically on their long axes continue the line of the ‘façade’, unfortunately under a high part of the dune crowned by the only clump of marram grass in the bunker. To preserve this stabilizing clump, the end slab had to be explored in a short tunnel. Packed against the north kerb and up against the back of the extended façade slabs was a mass of beach pebbles and a few larger chunks of gneiss (illus 7, section E–F, level 10). This level was two or three pebbles deep against the façade, but petered out to the north and west where no clear edge could be established. A patch of similar pebbling remains on the south side (illus 7; section A–B). The fact that the turf in 7 had grown up against some of the kerbstones to the north-west of the



ILLUS 6 Plan of cairn after removal of windblown sand and small pebbles, and section C-D. The kerb cairn, stippled, stands on the remains of the packing stones of the D-shaped cairn





ILLUS 7 Sections through cairn and corbelled cist

cairn suggests there had never been a pebble band all round the cairn, but just 'wings' each side, as seen on the plan. There was certainly no pebble platform in front of the cairn to the east.

The cairn measured some 6.80 m north to south, and 5.80 m east to west. The façade extended an extra 3 m north, and, if the cairn was symmetrical, the straight façade would have been about 12 m long. No artefacts were associated with the cairn.

### THE CORBELLED CIST

A round cist was later inserted into the centre of the cairn through the earlier rectangular cist, cutting down into the underlying sand. The new cist held an inverted cinerary urn with the cremation of an adult, possibly male (illus 8). The urn was very soft and degraded, and fell to pieces when lifted, but has been restored with the exception of the base, the most weathered part. Some covering of cloth or skin must have been tied over the mouth of the urn before it was inverted into the cist, or the bone would have fallen out. The cremated bone, which only partly filled the urn, was highly degraded and unsuitable for a radiocarbon date.

In order to construct the new cist, it seems that an area around the centre of the old cairn was cleared down to ground level, and the cairn stones thrown out over the kerb to the north (where they lay on the pebbles with no intervening turf line) and the east (where they lay on the surface of the buried soil, 7). On the plan (illus 6) the corbelled cist underlies the kerbstone marked F and the



ILLUS 8 Corbelled cist with capstones removed, looking south

stone west of it. The cleared area included all the ground later covered by the inner ring of the kerb cairn and more ground to the north-west, but exactly how much of the empty area seen on plan (illus 6) was cleared in antiquity, and how much is due to more recent stone robbing, is unclear. One end of the rectangular cist was destroyed, and the bones from the cist thrown out round it.

No construction pit was found for the round cist. It had a flat, polygonal floor slab, onto which the urn had been inverted, and the lower walls were made of seven slabs set vertically on their narrower, or pointed, ends, with two horizontal stones filling the last gap. Above this the cist walls were corbelled with smallish slabs or boulders set horizontally, their outer edges jammed back into the sand. The top was covered with two capstones lying side by side (illus 7). One side slab, much longer than the others (0.70 m), and the larger capstone are exactly the right size to be the missing side and end slabs of the rectangular cist and may have been reused. The corbelled cist measured a maximum of 1.50 m by 1.02 m at the top, and was some 0.70 m deep below the old soil level (7). The cist was partly filled with very light, fluffy white sand which must have penetrated through the gaps between the stones.

Stuck to the lower walls of the cremation urn was the remains of a black deposit some 2 mm thick, though most of it had fallen off and was lying mixed up with the cremated bones, from which it had to be separated with tweezers. Camilla Dickson examined a sample of this substance and reported that it seems to have been a liquid or viscous or semi-solid substance which had been boiled and carbonized, but that there appears no recognizable structure in it to suggest whether it was plant or animal. It certainly resembles the so-called 'burnt food residues' sometimes found on later pots in Scotland. This may indicate either that an old cooking pot was used for the burial, which seems unlikely, or that some ceremony took place using the urn which resulted in the burnt deposit; perhaps some sort of ritual meal being prepared, or even part of the body being cooked in the urn?

Most of the burnt deposit from the urn was submitted to Glasgow University for a radiocarbon date, and the following determination was received from M J Stenhouse:

GU-1174 'carbon' 1460 ± 55 BC uncal (d13c 26.5%)

#### LEVEL 6

After the construction of the corbelled cist, it seems that sand was used to fill the hole made in the old cairn material (levels 6 & 8). To what height the sand filling rose, and whether it was held down by a capping of stones is unknown, due to later disturbance by the kerb cairn. Level 6 was found mostly within the confines of the inner ring of the kerb cairn, but it also underlay some of the higher kerbstones of this ring and it extended a short distance (some 0.50 m) beyond the kerb to the north and west (illus 6 & 7, sections A-B, C-D). In both instances it tapered out as the ground level rose.

In the base of 6 over the area of the kerb cairn was a series of thin patches of burnt blackish-grey ashy material immediately overlying the old soil (7). Most of these were smears, but where they had any substance they occupied a few centimetres within the base of 6. These patches may have been related to the dirty grey lenses 6a within 6 over the corbelled cist (illus 7), but the kerb cairn kerbstones interrupted the sections at the vital points. In some of the black patches within level 6 a few tiny fragments of burnt bone occurred, too small for identification. There were also some black patches in the top of level 6.

Within 6 were found a number of scattered animal bones as well as human bone fragments. The bones were very soft and degraded, but from some 50 find spots of scraps of bone Mary

Harman has identified various human bones probably from one individual, here interpreted as the body from the short cist, and some cattle bones and teeth (see fiche). There were also edible shellfish remains from this level (see fiche). There is no obvious indication whether this is fortuitous midden material, suggesting a settlement close by, or the remains of a funeral feast, but it is stratified below the kerb cairn and certainly represents Bronze Age animals.

## THE KERB CAIRN

Kerb cairns in Scotland were isolated as a group by Ritchie (1971) and Ritchie & MacLaren (1972). They are small, low cairns with particularly tall kerbstones retaining them. The third element in the sequence at Cnip was just such a kerb cairn, though here with two kerbs, built on top of the existing structure. It seems that the earlier cairn must still have been visible as a stony mound. Unfortunately erosion had cut back the overlying blown sand levels on all sides, so there was no direct evidence for their relationship to the various phases of the cairn. The kerb cairn seems to have been built over the earlier cairn with little attempt to level it up, though some material may have been cleared off in the centre.

The central element in the new kerb cairn (dotted in *illus 6*) was an irregular ring of boulders, some rounder and some more slab-like, acting as a kerb to the central stone filling, the whole some 3 m in diameter and 0.90 m high above the old soil level. The boulders were alternatively set on the surface of the dirty sand, level 6 (perched blocks) and sticking down through it to rest on or in the old soil, level 7 ('pillar stones'). For instance, on Section A–B the eastern kerbstone of the inner ring was a perched block (in this case above the cists), and the western kerbstone a pillar stone. This method of construction was probably a simple way of utilizing irregular stones in such a way that their tops all reached the same height, though their depths differed. On the west side of the cairn one pillar stone had been robbed, perhaps recently, and its stone hole shows in Section C–D, while the outline of the next block has been projected onto the section.

Within the kerb was a closely packed mass of stone some 0.50 m deep, looser in places near the top where it had been partly disturbed. Between the stones in the upper half of this filling was light brownish sand (3) and lower down a slightly darker brownish sand (4) which had filtered down through the stones. Some of the sand in the top of the cairn may have blown out or been washed out by rain once the cairn was exposed, and then newer sand blown in again. One or two of the larger stones in the lower cairn fill had penetrated into the sand (6) below. Within layer 4, and lying partly on the sand (6), was a well-defined patch of fine, dense black burnt material shown as black on the section (*illus 6*). The top of this black patch showed the clear imprint of a stone which had recently been removed and replaced by blown sand (section C–D). The clean edges to the black patch would almost suggest that it had been contained in a bag or sack, but for the fact that some stones cut through it. Found partly in a big lump on top of the black patch and in the brown soil (4) above, and partly in small pieces scattered through the black patch, was a mass of cremated bone and a number of pieces of cramp. Cramp is a lightweight, slag-like substance discussed below, probably an accidental by-product of the cremation process. Some 1.53 kg were found. The cremation was of a young adult, possible male (see fiche).

The black material is assumed to be part of the pyre on which the body was buried, deliberately gathered up and incorporated in the cairn. Whether the burnt material was peat or wood charcoal has proved difficult to determine. The writer thinks peat is more likely, and Camilla Dickson, who examined a sample, writes, "The "black cinder" is most probably peat. It is highly humified with some tiny burnt fragments including rare minute charcoal and one small twig in the

peat'. However a chemical investigation by R Hetherington suggests the material is wood charcoal (see fiche), which might have included wood from peat bogs. In neither case was the sample suitable for radiocarbon dating.

The cremation from the kerb cairn was submitted to Harwell for a radiocarbon date, after examination by Dr Denston. Unfortunately, insufficient carbon could be extracted for a conventional dating process, although this cremation was in better condition than that from the urn in the corbelled cist.

The outer kerb of the kerb cairn was composed of boulders set in an irregular ring with a maximum diameter of around 6 m. Only part of the circuit remained due to erosion on the south and west, where many stones had fallen away downhill. Ten kerbstones remained in position, and a stonehole for the next slab west was identified; this slab may have been removed recently. The kerbstones varied greatly in size and shape, reaching a height of 0.70 m above the old land surface. Most had been set up vertically. There are gaps between the kerbstones, and no sign that these gaps were ever filled. The stones on the west, where the cairn material was missing, were set on or in the old soil, but those further east had been wedged among the surviving packing stones of the earlier cairn. The three westernmost kerbstones were neat and slab-like in shape, and may be reused elements from the missing part of the D-cairn kerb. The next kerbstone is a very large boulder, then came two smaller stones, and then a large slab-shaped stone (on section E–F), some 0.86 m high, which may be the reused capstone of the original rectangular cist. The outer kerb is irregular in height as well as shape, and it seems no attempt was made at a uniform height, in contrast to the inner kerb. Many of the kerbstones show signs of breakage at the top, where they have weathered most, and they may originally have been a little taller. (In section A–B, the northern outer kerbstone appears to be floating on blown sand, but the base of the stone sloped down to the other corner which was wedged between stones.)

No evidence for any packing between the inner and outer kerbs was recovered. Though the outer kerb could be a later addition to the cairn, it seems best to regard it as contemporary with the inner kerb.

## POST-CAIRN SANDBLOW

Some time after the construction of the kerb cairn the site was buried by a series of sandblows, interspersed with longer or shorter periods of stability when soils started to form. These are now represented by dark bands in the dunes, which in summer dry out to pale grey and look quite insignificant and are only some 50 mm thick. Pottery sherds and other artefacts were found scattered on the floor of the sand bunker above and round the cairn, and must have come from these various soil layers, but no sherds were found *in situ* (see catalogue). As the sandblow had cut through several old soil levels, material of many different dates, including modern, was found together on the exposed floor.

## DISCUSSION

Elements of the early prehistory of the Outer Isles are known only from a few excavations at machair sites, notably at the Udal, North Uist (Crawford & Switsur 1977, with further references, and Crawford 1963–80); Rosinish, Benbecula (Shepherd & Tuckwell 1977; Shepherd 1976) and Northton, Harris (Simpson 1976). The sequence of occupation and burial at Cnip in part coincides with evidence from other sites, and in part yields new information.

## THE PLOUGH-MARKS (ILLUS 3)

The plough marks buried under the Cnip cairn cannot be dated exactly, but they underlie an Early Bronze Age cairn and so must be Early Bronze Age or earlier; in the absence of any evidence for Neolithic activity on the site a Beaker or an Early Bronze Age date may be more likely. There is one Beaker sherd from the area, found by W F Cormack in a midden behind Berie beach (catalogue no 20). The Beaker or Early Bronze Age settlement responsible for the ploughing and the early cairn cannot be far away, but the excavation gave no clue to its precise location. At Rosinish, Benbecula, an extensive area of plough-marks similar to those at Cnip was uncovered, with many Beaker sherds, and Beaker ploughing was also found at the Udal.

## THE QUARTZ FLAKES (ILLUS 9: 1-4)

The four quartz flakes from the ploughed soil at Cnip are quite at home in a Beaker/Early Bronze Age context in the Outer Isles. Several kilogrammes of quartz flakes and cores were found at Rosinish (Shepherd 1976) with Beaker sherds, while many of the barbed-and-tanged arrowheads from Lewis are made of quartz (among them three in the National Museums of Scotland, catalogue nos AD 1416, 1774 & 2235). Quartz industries have also been found with Beaker pottery at Barvas (Cowie 1986; 1987) and with late Neolithic/Beaker material on Ensay in the Sound of Harris.

Some worked quartz was found on Cnip headland by Lacaille during this investigation in 1936. Lacaille (1937) described three stone structures eroding out of sand dunes on Cnip headland, but captioned his illustrations 'Berie Beach', thus causing considerable confusion in the records. He found quartz flakes and cores, and what may be Iron Age or later pottery, in and around the structures and claimed that the quartz and pottery were contemporary (Lacaille 1937, figs 4, 8). His finds are now in the National Museums of Scotland. There is no reason to believe the quartz industry and the sherds are of the same date. It is now well established that artefacts of many periods may collect together in blow-outs in sand dunes, fallen from higher occupation levels since eroded away. It is likely that the quartz flakes and cores found by Lacaille are of similar date to those found under the cairn in 1976, and that they extend the evidence for early prehistoric activity in the area.

Much of the sand exposed in the 1930s at the time of Lacaille's visit had grassed over by the 1970s, and it was not possible to locate the sites illustrated in his figs 1 and 3 (unless, perhaps, his fig 3 shows the cairn excavated in 1976-8); however, both appear more like burial cairns than hut circles. The third structure shown by Lacaille (1937, fig 2) is visible today under grass. It comprises about two-thirds of a circular kerb of boulders enclosing a flat area some 6.50-7 m in diameter and it has been plotted in illus 1 as site no 2, not far away from the cairn.

Lacaille also claimed to have found stone tools made of various varieties of the local Lewisian gneiss (1937, figs 5-7). While the pieces he illustrates include many bits struck off a larger block, there is no evidence they were intended for or used as tools. These rocks when exposed to the weather become very soft, and a light blow takes off a flake. It is more likely that these pieces are simply the result of building activities, whether removed accidentally while moving rocks about, or struck off deliberately to get rid of an awkward corner on a stone. This is not to say that prehistoric man never utilized a gneiss flake in the absence of flint, but the gneiss flakes collected by Lacaille are not tools.

### THE D-SHAPED CAIRN

The D-shaped cairn with its central short cist is an unusual shape, but otherwise fits well with the many cist burials covered by round cairns of the Beaker/Early Bronze Age period in the rest of Scotland. The Cnip cairn predates the urned cremation in the corbelled cist with a radiocarbon date of  $1460 \pm 85$  BC uncal. While a number of short cists have been found in the Outer Isles in the past, Megaw & Simpson (1961) found none recorded as under cairns and only one other in Lewis, but most were old records. A cist with a flexed inhumation under a cairn has since been found at Udal, North Uist, with a date of  $1480 \pm 85$  BC uncal (Crawford 1974; 1980).

There are a few parallels for the curious outline of the Cnip cairn from three old excavations on the Scottish mainland. In each case there seems to have been an early D-shaped structure with a central short cist, overlaid by a later round cairn with its own associated cist or cists. These cairns were at Inverlael, Wester Ross (Cree 1914); Edderton, Easter Ross, with a concave façade (Joass 1868); and at Drannadow, Kirkcudbright, where a food vessel was found in a secondary cist (Edwards 1923). There is a rather smaller D-shaped structure within a round cairn at Foulden, Berwickshire, where the two elements may be contemporary (Craw 1914). A further semicircular cairn at the 'Relig Burn' (probably the Red Burn), Kilmorack, Inverness-shire, c NH 5046, is mentioned by Stuart (1868), but the Ordnance Survey have not been able to locate it.

These disparate structures, geographically scattered, should not be considered as representatives of a new type of cairn without much further investigation, nor need they all be interrelated. What is interesting is that the various D-shaped structures all seem to be early in the sequence of their respective cairns. It is possible that some of these cairns were influenced by the curved or straight façades of some late chambered tombs, such as those of the long cairns in Sutherland and Caithness. While there are few good plans of chambered cairns on Lewis, there is a straight façade at Garrabost and others on cairns in Uist such as Unival and Clettraval (Henshall 1972, 616, 618). It may well be that in some individual instances a knowledge of such earlier local structures influenced the builders of what would otherwise have been round cairns.

### THE CREMATION URN IN THE CORBELLED CIST

The D-shaped cairn covering the single inhumation in a short cist was succeeded by a cremation burial in an inverted urn contained in a small corbelled construction. While this sequence is familiar from mainland cairns both the urn and the cist construction present unusual details. How typical these are of the island tradition is unclear since no other cremation burial in an urn has yet been excavated in the Outer Isles.

Cinerary urns in Scotland are usually buried in a simple hole in the ground, sometimes with a stone slab under them and occasionally a stone over as well. Rarely the inverted urn is enclosed in a crude cist made from a basal slab with a few irregular slabs set round it vertically, and a top slab. Examples include an encrusted urn burial at Aberlemno, Angus (Childe 1943), and an enlarged food vessel urn at Dunfermline, Fife (Close-Brooks *et al* 1972, 124–5, with further references). Similar small polygonal cists are also found containing un-urned cremations as at North Mains, Strathallan (Barclay 1983, 206–7, Burial B). The different building technique of the corbelled cist at Cnip may be simply an example of building methods appropriate in sand but not in earth. Crawford (1977) reports on the excavation of three corbelled chambers at Rosinish, Benbecula, one large with two small outliers. The large chamber, 2.13 m long and 1.2 m high, contained the bodies of two individuals and two unusual collared pots, and one of the other cists contained another similar pot. No cremations were found. The large cist was constructed, like that at Cnip, with a basal course of vertical slabs and horizontal slabs above. Crawford comments that this is a common building technique in sand and occurs at all levels at the Udal, North Uist. Crawford suggests that the

collared pots at Rosinish had evolved from local Beaker traditions, perhaps under the influence of cinerary urns. He also notes that a comparable monument, badly eroded, may have been present at the Udal.

The cremation urn from Cnip has no exact parallels, but could be regarded as a plain relation of enlarged food vessel urns (illus 9:5). In profile it closely resembles an urn from North Mains, Strathallan, though the rim form is different (Cowie 1983, 161, fig 32b). The walls of the Cnip urn are also thinner than usual for cremation urns. Cowie (*ibid*, 257) comments that all known Food Vessel urns from northern Britain bear at least some ornament. However, there may have been rather more of a plain pottery tradition on the west coast, though the nearest published groups that may be comparable are from Islay. At Kilellan Farm a large collection of pottery from a domestic site in the machair includes highly decorated pots, some of which resemble food vessels, enlarged food vessels and even encrusted urns, but Burgess (1976, 196, fig 10.6) notes that the bulk of the pottery consists of large plain shouldered jars with simple thinned rims. The shapes, at least of the two published examples, differ from the Cnip urn, but the general idea is similar. A closer comparison can be made with a vase-shaped Food Vessel from Tràigh Ban, Islay (Ritchie & Stevenson 1982). This has a similar profile to the Cnip urn, though it differs in having an elaborately decorated rim.

The cremation urn from Cnip may be regarded for the moment as a local variant of the Enlarged Food Vessel tradition. The radiocarbon date of  $1460 \pm 55$  BC uncal from burnt material inside the urn is acceptable for such an urn burial. Cowie (1983, 257) suggests 'a very imprecise date range of c 1600–1200 BC uncal for the currency of these types as funerary vessels'.

#### THE KERB CAIRN

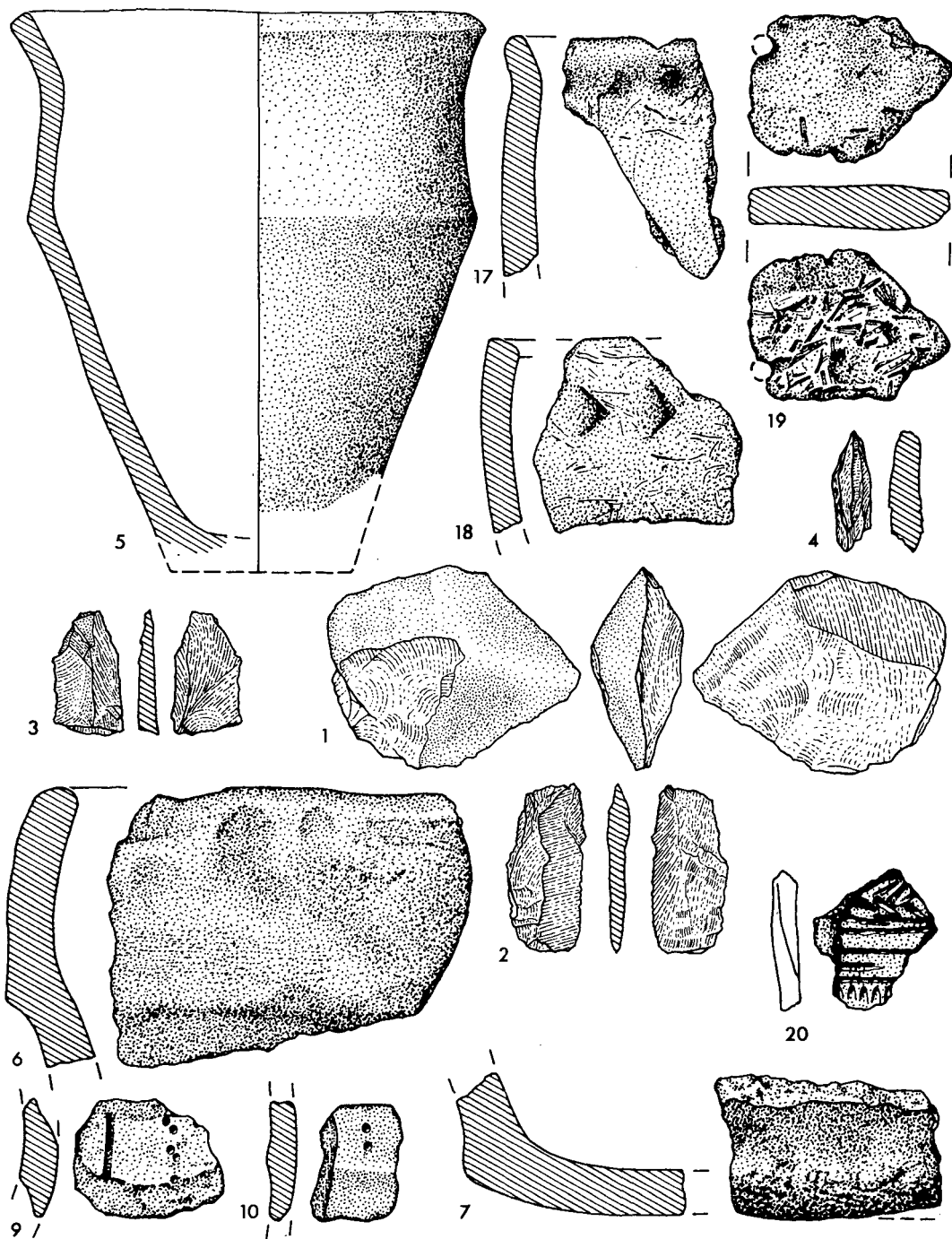
Kerb cairns were first noticed as a distinct group by staff of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in the course of fieldwork for the Argyll *Inventories*, and similar cairns were soon recognized in other parts of Scotland, particularly Perthshire, Aberdeenshire, and Mull (Ritchie 1971; Ritchie & MacLaren 1972; RCAHMS 1980). Cnip is the first kerb cairn to be found in the Outer Isles.

Kerb cairns have been defined by Ritchie & MacLaren (1972). They have tall kerbs in relation to their overall diameter and are filled with cairn material level with the tops of the kerb, giving a drum-like appearance. Lynch & Ritchie (*in* Ritchie *et al* 1975, 30) make the graphic comparison of a kerb cairn to a petrified 'charlotte russe'. The inner element of the Cnip cairn confirms closely to the general type, though at 3 m in diameter it is smaller than many. While kerb cairns are usually some 5 to 6 m in diameter or larger, there are a few other small examples such as Cairn 3 at Claggan and Cairn 2 at Kinlochaline, in Argyll (Ritchie *et al* 1975) and the notable group of small cairns within a stone circle at Cullerlie of Echt (Kilbride-Jones 1935, 215–23). The small cairn at Cairnpapple is no longer considered part of the group (Ritchie *et al* 1975, 33).

The cremation rite is common to kerb cairns, and the deposition of the cremation within the body of the cairn was found also at Claggan cairn 1, loose in the fill (Ritchie *et al* 1975) and at Monzie in Perthshire, where it was contained in a small stone cist. The black substance found with the cremation at Cnip has been interpreted as part of the pyre, which may also be the explanation for charcoal found at Claggan and at Monzie. However, the concentrations of quartz pebbles or quartz chips found on other kerb cairns were not found at Cnip. Where the soil and other stones are dark, white quartz becomes conspicuous and interesting, but at Cnip the sand is nearly white, and the boulders used in the cairn are gaily coloured, spotted or striped with pink, white, grey and black, against which quartz flakes look quite dull. In any event quartz was not used deliberately, although plenty of coarse quartz veins occur in the rocks on the site.

Cramp was associated with the cremation at Cnip. This curious slag-like but very lightweight





ILLUS 9 Pottery and quartz artefacts. 1-4, quartz, and 5, cremation urn, from excavation of cairn. 6-20, sherds from the vicinity; scales 5, 1:4; the rest 1:2

substance is often found with cremations in the Northern Isles, but this is believed to be the first occurrence in the Western Isles. Many attempts have been made to explain cramp, and there are discussions by Sofranoff (*in* Hedges 1975, 91) and Fleet (*in* Ritchie 1976, 46–8). It seems to be an accidental byproduct of the cremation process in an island environment and while seaweed has been suggested as the cause, perhaps used for fuel, it may be no more than the result of reaction between the bones, the pyre and the local sand when heated to a high temperature. An attempt by Gerald Ponting to produce cramp by heating animal bones and seaweed to a high temperature in the laboratories of the Nicholson Institute, Stornoway, produced only awful smells in the school corridors.

An unusual feature of the Cnip cairn was the outer kerb, about half of which was still in position though the rest had eroded downhill. The remaining 10 stones of varying shapes and sizes formed part of an irregular circle some 6 m in diameter. No other kerb cairn had a closely comparable feature. At Portavadie cairn 1 there was some sort of lower outer element, (Marshall, *in* Ritchie *et al* 1975), but with incomplete excavation it is not clear if this was a one-phase or two-phase monument. The circle surrounding the cairn at Fowlis Wester is a different concept and could predate the cairn (Ritchie & MacLaren 1972, fig. 4). It is particularly confusing that the outer cairn at Cnip seems to be free-standing, though it looks as if it was intended to retain something. It was argued above that this was unlikely to have been a stone cairn, but the possibility remains that the outer ring could have retained a fill of sand or even sandy turves, that might eventually have blown away. If the outer ring was indeed filled, then the cairn may have had some resemblance to Claggan cairn 1 (Ritchie *et al* 1975), where there was an outer ring c 5 m in diameter of irregularly sized boulders of varying heights, retaining a fill of earth and stones, and a lower inner ring of boulders defining a central space some 2 m in diameter within which was most of the cremation. However, Claggan seems to have been a one-phase monument, and the inner ring did not show.

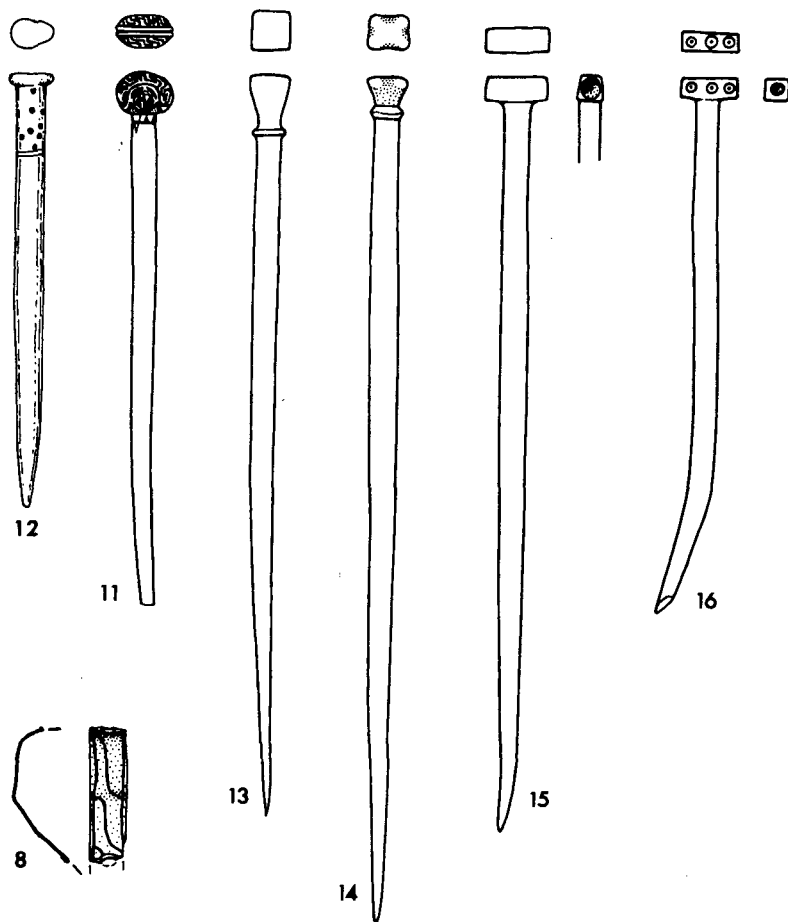
The outer ring at Cnip could be a later addition, perhaps added on the occasion of a later burial. The ruinous state of this part of the cairn precludes any conclusion.

All other kerb cairns have been free-standing monuments; Cnip is the first to be part of a stratified sequence, occurring later than the cremation urn burial. The only direct evidence for the date of kerb cairns has come from Graham Ritchie's excavations in Argyll, where he obtained radiocarbon determinations of 975 BC uncal  $\pm$  50 and 1058 BC uncal  $\pm$  40 from charcoal associated with the cremations in Cairns 1 and 3 at Claggan (Ritchie *et al* 1975). The dates of 462 BC uncal  $\pm$  55 and 586 BC uncal  $\pm$  80 from the old land surface under Cairn 2 at Claggan seem surprisingly late, but only more determinations will show if they are misleading. Meanwhile a date for kerb cairns in the later part of the Bronze Age seems likely, and the evidence from Cnip would fit well with such a date. There is no direct stratigraphic evidence for the length of time that elapsed between the urn burial and the erection of the kerb cairn, but the latter sits very awkwardly on the site, suggesting the earlier cairn was partly obscured by grass or sand when the kerb cairn builders came to lay out their new monument.

#### LATER FINDS (ILLUS 9 & 10)

A few artefacts of later date were found during the period of excavation, some lying on the present ground surface near the cairn, and some further afield. The more diagnostic are listed in the catalogue, together with some old finds which come either certainly or probably from Cnip headland.

Most of the pottery sherds catalogued are undated and could range from Iron Age through Norse to later medieval (illus 9: 6–7, 9–10, 17–20). Alan Lane has kindly commented on nos 7 and 19. He notes that sagging bases, similar to 7 from the sandblow near the cairn, are found in Norse levels at the Udal, North Uist, and this could be a related piece. No 19, from the midden at the back of Bhaltois beach, is part of a perforated slab or platter; these are also found in Norse levels at



ILLUS 10 Bronze strip, 8; bone pin, 12; and bronze pins, 11, 13–16; from Cnip headland or nearby; scale 1:1

the Udal (Crawford 1977, 131). They may be baking plates. A fragment from late levels within the broch at Dun Carloway, Lewis, may be from a similar platter (Close-Brooks 1977, 164–5, no 43), but this was found with pottery thought to date to the fifth to seventh centuries AD.

The kidney-headed pin, no 11 (illus 10), is a stick pin, the head related to Fanning's kidney-ringed, polyhedral-headed type of ringed pin (Fanning 1983). The design on the head is a botched example of a simple knot formed from two interlaced loops, better seen on the pin from Garvard, Colonsay (Ritchie 1981, 278–80). The drawing in Lacaille (1937, 295 fig 9) is an idealized reconstruction; the drawing here (illus 10, 11) is more accurate. Only four examples are known in Scotland. Besides Cnip there is the one from Garvard, another from North Uist or Bernera (Close-Brooks & Maxwell 1974, 288–90, no 978) and a smaller pin in the National Museums of Scotland from Glenluce, corroded and with no decoration visible. These few pins are closely related to the more common kidney-ringed pins, which are

concentrated in the Outer Isles (list in Fanning 1983). He comments that no kidney-ringed pins from Scotland are dated, but that Irish examples have been found in 11th- and 12th-century contexts, while in Dublin the small kidney-headed stick pins are normally found in 12th-century or later strata.

The two crutch-headed pins (illus 10: nos 15, 16) have lost their rings, but belong to Fanning's stirrup-ringed class. Fanning (1983) lists another five complete examples and six others which have lost their rings. Many are decorated with circle and dot motifs, as no 16. He comments that stirrup-ringed pins are fairly securely dated to the 11th–12th centuries at sites in Ireland, and queries the apparent occurrence of two such pins in a ninth-century context at Jarlshof.

The last two metal pins (illus 10: nos 13, 14) are closely related, and were called 'frustrum-headed' and 'astragaloid-headed' by Laing. He suggested (1973, 71) that they were a Viking type, but later (1975) thought 'they do not appear to have been current later than the early Viking period and do not occur in contexts earlier than the 8th century'. In fact almost all are stray finds and can hardly be said to have any context at all. Number 14 is the only astragaloid-headed pin known, and is here included as a variant of the frustrum-headed group. Of the frustrum type, Laing (1973) listed one from Boreray, two from Lismore, Argyll, and the two pins from Cnip. To these may be added others in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland. There are two from a late or disturbed level at Dun Beag, Struan, Skye, where finds included medieval coins (Callander 1921, 124–8: NMS catalogue nos GA 1078–9); one from Luce Sands; two from Boreray, Harris (NMS: GT 243–4); one from North Uist or Bernera (Close-Brooks & Maxwell 1974, 298, no 977: then dated as pre-medieval, following Laing 1973); and an old find from Urquhart Castle, Inverness-shire (Samson 1982, 473–4, no 78). The last has two notches either side of the head and resembles an astragaloid pin when seen from above, as does one from Dun Beag.

To these can now be added a new find from Urquhart Castle (Foster *et al* 1985, 5, fig 6f). This is unstratified, but came from excavations on the 'Motte' occupied by the 13th-century and later castle. It could, less plausibly, be rubbish survival from the Pictish phase, but there is only one other possible artefact of that date, part of a quernstone.

It had long seemed strange to the writer that the pins had not appeared in known Viking contexts, but only as stray finds or on sites where there had been medieval occupation. It seemed that there might be dated examples at Dublin, and in 1990 several people most kindly replied to questions about the Irish material. Debbie Caulfield reported no frustrum pins from the Dublin excavations, and Cormac Bourke could find only one example, undated, in the Ulster Museum. However Ragnall Ó Floinn of the National Museum of Ireland sent a list of some seven similar pins from Ireland with comments on their context: Derrynaflan, County Kildare; Naas, County Kildare (NMI: 1969; 75); Lough Pairc Crannog, County Galway (*Proc Roy Ir Acad*, 32c (1914–16), 147–51, pl 17, fig 33); Clea Lakes Crannog, County Down (Collins & Proudfoot 1959, fig 4:8); Greencastle, County Down (Gaskill-Brown 1979, 62–3, fig 8:1); Ballyroney Motte (Waterman 1955, 96, fig 10:11); and Trim Castle, County Meath (Sweetman 1978, 181, fig 24:1). The Naas pin was a stray find; the Derrynaflan pin unstratified from Ó Floinn's excavations there. At Lough Pairc Crannog the assemblage dates to the late 10th century, or later, and included two spurs and two arrowheads of the 13th century. The Clea Lakes pin was an old find from a site with both Early Christian and medieval finds. At Greencastle there is no Early Christian material and the finds should relate to the occupation of the castle, built in the 13th century. The pin from Trim Castle came from a level dated to c 1250, and that from Ballyroney from a castle apparently built and deserted within the 13th century. Ó Floinn comments that the evidence from Trim Castle and Ballyroney is convincing and the pins are almost certainly 13th century in date.

He also points out that the Irish pins (except that from Lough Pairc Crannog, with a square head) have rectangular-section heads, and were termed spatulate by O'Rahilly (1973). The Scottish pinheads are all more or less square in section, save one from Dun Beag and the new pin from Urquhart Castle,

which have heads rectangular in section. However, all the pins are very similar, having a collar below the head, and it is not unreasonable to suggest a date around the 13th century for the Scottish pins also.

Since the above was written, Batey (1992) has discussed the new Urquhart Castle pin in some detail, added a new pin from Loch Boralie, Sutherland, and drawn attention to another from Perth apparently found in a 14th- or early 15th-century context. She illustrates the pins only by photographs, not drawings, and the shape of the Loch Boralie pinhead is unclear. On the dates of these pins, Batey comes to much the same conclusion: the archaeological evidence for an early date is far from certain, and they are likely to be medieval. Batey uses the evidence from Urquhart Castle and Perth to suggest, with due caution, a post-13th-century date for the two Urquhart Castle pins at least. The Irish parallels presented here show that a 13th-century date is possible. Clearly more stratified pins are needed to refine the chronology.

The piece of sheet metal with a simple step pattern (no 8) could perhaps date to the same context as some of the pins. Since the excavation of the cairn, a Norse female burial of the later 10th century has been found some 18 m west of the cairn, while another was found near Bhaltos school in 1915 (Welander *et al* 1987). Thus from Cnip headland, and the area round, have come sherds, pins and other finds which suggest that somewhere at hand there is a settlement spanning the 10th to 13th centuries AD.

## FINDS FROM THE EXCAVATION (ILLUS 9)

(Now in the National Museums of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh)

- (1) Large thick secondary flake of quartz.
- (2) Secondary flake of quartz, blade-like in shape.
- (3) Secondary flake of quartz, unites with piece no 2.
- (4) Inner flake or core fragment of quartz.

The four quartz flakes were found together in the old soil (level 7) sealed below the eastern part of the cairn. A detailed description of these flakes by Rosemary Bradley is given in the fiche. Her microwear examination showed that all four pieces were unused, and that the surfaces of flakes 2 and 3 united, the flakes having been struck successively off a core.

- (5) Cremation urn from the corbelled cist. Vase-shaped urn with a carination about two-thirds of the way up, a concave neck, and a bevelled rim sloping outwards. Pinky-brown ware with numerous stone grits of all sizes up to 11 mm across showing on the inside surface. Outer surface light brown, blackened from above carination to rim. Inner surface red-brown, blackened from carination down to just above base. Reconstructed from fragments; part of the base is missing. Height 330 mm, rim diameter 280 mm.

## OTHER FINDS FROM CNIP HEADLAND, BHALTOS BEACH AND BERIE BEACH (ILLUS 9 & 10)

(National Museums of Scotland registration numbers are given where appropriate)

During the excavation a number of pottery sherds and a bronze fragment were recovered from sandblows on Cnip headland, and pottery was found in a midden exposed at the back of Bhaltos beach. Excavations on the site of the latter have since revealed two wheelhouses and other structures (Armit 1988). Few pieces can be accurately dated, and most of the pottery can be assigned only to a range from Iron Age to medieval. The few pieces with features are listed here, together with some earlier finds from Cnip and Berie.

## CNIP HEADLAND: SHERDS FROM SAND DUNES IMMEDIATELY NORTH AND EAST OF THE CAIRN

- (6) Rim sherd of somewhat 'collared' form, of uneven shape, black ware with many fine to medium stone grits; sooted outside. HRC 55.
- (7) Base of pot, buff inside, black outside, of very hard stone-gritted ware with sagging base. The underside has a crackled or roughened effect somewhat analogous to grass-marking. HRC 4.

## SAND DUNE SOME 20 M WEST OF CAIRN ON CNIP HEADLAND

- (8) Narrow strip of bronze, surviving length 20 mm, broken at each end across a rivet hole; 5 mm wide. Decorated on one side with an incised step pattern.

## SAND BUNKERS ON TOP OF CNIP HEADLAND, NORTH-WEST OF CAIRN

- (9) Sherd of hard-fired ware, buff inside, pink outside, with impressed dots and a line. HRC 2.
- (10) Similar sherd, grey ware, with impressed dots. HRC 11.

## PREVIOUS FINDS FROM CNIP HEADLAND

- (11) Bronze pin with kidney-shaped head, the point missing. The worn head has a lozenge-shaped panel on either side, bordered by step pattern, one panel (illustrated) having a garbled version of a quatrefoil interlace and the other an even more garbled pattern. A groove crossing the head was intended for inlay, perhaps a twisted silver wire. On the stem below the head there is an incised line with traces of pendant triangles. Surviving length 170 mm. FC 247.

This pin was found by Lacaille (1937, 279–82, fig 9c) and given to the museum as from Berie Sands, but Lacaille's description makes it clear the pin came from the 'southern slope of the rocky headland near Kneep' (Cnip) at some 30 ft (c 9 m) OD.

- (12) Bone pin, round in section with a flat, oval head; the neck decorated with dots. Highly polished, and perhaps relatively modern; 57 mm long. FC 231.
- (13) Bronze 'frustrum-headed' pin: 96 mm long. FC 229.
- (14) Bronze 'astragaloid-headed' pin: 111 mm long. FC 228.
- (15) Bronze crutch-headed pin, its loose ring missing: 100 mm long. FC 230.

The pins 12–15 were given to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now Royal Museum of Scotland) in 1913 as part of a collection from Uig parish. Their provenance is given in the museum register as 'from a shell-mound at Knap' (spelt 'Knap' in the donations list, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 47 (1912–13), 341. Since no other place of this name is known in the parish, Kneep (Cnip) must be intended, and the headland, where Lacaille found 'kitchen-middens' in 1935, seems a likely spot for the 'shell-mound'.

- (16) Bronze crutch-headed pin, its loose ring missing. The head is decorated with dot-and-circle motifs on each side and on top: 700 mm long, tip broken.

This pin was recorded in 1976 when in the possession of Ian MacDonald, Post Office, Bhaltos, Isle of Lewis. His father had found it on Cnip headland long before.

## BHALTOS BEACH MIDDEN: NGR NB 097366 (SHOWN ON ILLUS 1)

Midden material outcrops in a thick band at the base of the low sandy cliff behind the beach, and stretches back to a stream behind.

- (17) Rim sherd of hard-fired, stone-gritted, light brown ware, dark grey in break, with some organic temper; a row of round impressions below the rim. HRC 20.
- (18) Rim sherd of hard-fired, stone-gritted brown ware, with two finger-nail impressions. HRC 21.
- (19) Small sherd of soft, pinky-buff, grass-tempered fabric with a grass-marked base. From a flat pottery slab or 'platter' with part of one tapering perforation remaining. HRC 22.

BERIE BEACH: NGR c NB 100360

- (20) Sherd of beaker, ornamented with rows of tooth-comb impressions and short impressed lines. Now in Glasgow Museum & Art Gallery. This sherd was found by W F Cormack (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1973, 48) in a blowout in the low machair behind Berie Beach, together with many tiny sherds of Iron Age or later pottery, also in Glasgow Museum & Art Gallery. He reported a structure analogous to the then unexcavated cairn on Cnipp headland, 'a rough central cist and an outer kerb about 5m in diameter'. A careful search in 1978 failed to relocate the site, but it may have been disturbed by campers or caravaners who use this part of the beach.

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