

5. THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND PRE-TOMB ACTIVITY

A slot trench was excavated from the outside edge of two of the chamber orthostats to the edge of the excavation area and between two kerbstones that were visible from the upper surface of the cairn (Illus 5 and 8). Field observations and micromorphology concluded that a buried soil, comprising a thin, peaty podzol (021), survived largely undisturbed between the chamber orthostats (004) and the kerbstones (006) (Ellis 2023). This soil was capped by a mixed deposit comprising disturbed buried peaty podzol, small clasts of sandstone (020b) and a disturbed blocky turf (020a); the stone within (020b) is thought to be construction waste, small lumps of stones knocked off the orthostats and trampled into the soil during construction. A very small amount of hazel charcoal was obtained from both buried soil horizons (021) and (020), the former dating to 3320–2930 cal BC (SUERC-122897) and the latter to 3500–3140 cal BC (SUERC-122896) (Table 1). The apparent inversion of dates is probably just a reflection of the relative age of the soil, mixing action of soil biota, and possibly the result of the trampling and mixing of soil horizons during the construction of the monument when the footprint of the chamber orthostats and footprint of the kerb were cut through the turf (as discussed below).

Within the chamber the ground surface and the primary burial (see below) were sealed by a dark brown to black soft silt loam (036) which is interpreted as a disturbed buried soil and which is thought to be equivalent to the soil (020a)/(020b) found under the body of the cairn. Interestingly, heather pollen was much more common in (036) than in the largely undisturbed soil over which the cairn was built (021) (Table 4) and one explanation for this is that heather sprigs were laid on the soil within the chamber creating a dry fragrant interior carpet onto which human remains could have been placed.

Pollen and phytolith analyses (Appendix 3 and Jenkins 2023) have shown that, prior to the construction of the passage tomb, the immediate landscape was dominated by open damp herb-rich meadow or grassland, with woodland of mainly alder, hazel, and birch located much further afield (Table 4). The presence of a small amount of hazel charcoal in the buried soil is perhaps the residue of small fires lit around the monument during the course of its construction; such fires would have provided warmth and could have been used to cook food. Fibrous material (024), interpreted as re-deposited turf which had been used as a packing medium for the kerbstone found in the centre of the excavated slot trench (Illus 5), also contained pollen indicative of open, possibly grazed grassland.