

The excavation of the holed-stone at Ballymeanoch, Kilmartin, Argyll

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INTRODUCTION

The Kilmartin area of Argyll contains one of the most remarkable concentrations of ancient monuments to be found anywhere in Scotland; at Ballymeanoch, 2.5 km S of Kilmartin village and a little to the W of the Lochgilphead-Oban road (A861), stands an impressive group of stones, some of them decorated with cup- and cup-and-ring markings, and an adjacent kerb-cairn (NGR NR 833964). The large cairn at Dunchraigag stands 400 m to the N and the ditched barrow of Ballymeanoch is some 500 m to the S. The standing stones form two linear settings, not quite parallel, aligned roughly N and S, and a fallen holed-stone (fig 1). The E setting consists of four uprights. The cup and cup-and-ring ornamentation of the two stones at the centre of this setting are well known (figs 1, 3, & 4), but a previously unnoticed cup-mark on the E face of the S stone has been recorded for the first time; it is situated about 1 m above the field surface and 0.5 m from the S edge of the stone. The second setting, 40 m W of the first, consists of two stones. Some 20 m NW of this there lay a fallen stone, which was pierced by a hole and bore a number of cup-marks. The fallen stone measured 2.75 m in length by 1 m in width and 0.25 m in thickness; it had become overgrown, the upper metre of it completely so, and was a hazard to farm machinery. As the monument was scheduled, the landowner, Commander R B Rankin, gave the required notice of his intention to move the stone; its excavation was therefore undertaken by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Department of the Environment and was carried out by the Central Excavation Unit in 1977.

The stone has been described or illustrated on several occasions in the past, and it is clear that it has fallen only within the last hundred years. Simpson (1866, 17, pl xviii) and Stuart (1867, 67, pl cxix) both made use of the same sketch as the basis for their engravings, and, though both show the stone in its approximate position, neither indicate the perforation, nor indeed the decoration on the other stones. Another version of this scene, however, illustrates the perforation clearly; this is in a notebook, now in the British Museum, Department of Prehistoric and Romano-British Antiquities, which was compiled by H D Graham at Lochgilphead in 1865. The stone settings are shown from the E with the holed stone in the background and the kerb-cairn in the foreground. A detailed description of the stone was published by Allen (1882, 115-17, fig 37): the stone 'has on its eastern face twelve cups, varying in diameter from 2 to 5 inches. At a height of 3 feet from the ground is an artificial hole of oval shape splayed all round and measuring 4 inches by 3 inches at the narrowest part, and 8½ inches by 6 inches at the widest, so that it is just large enough to put the hand through' Christian Maclagan sketched two views of the stone,

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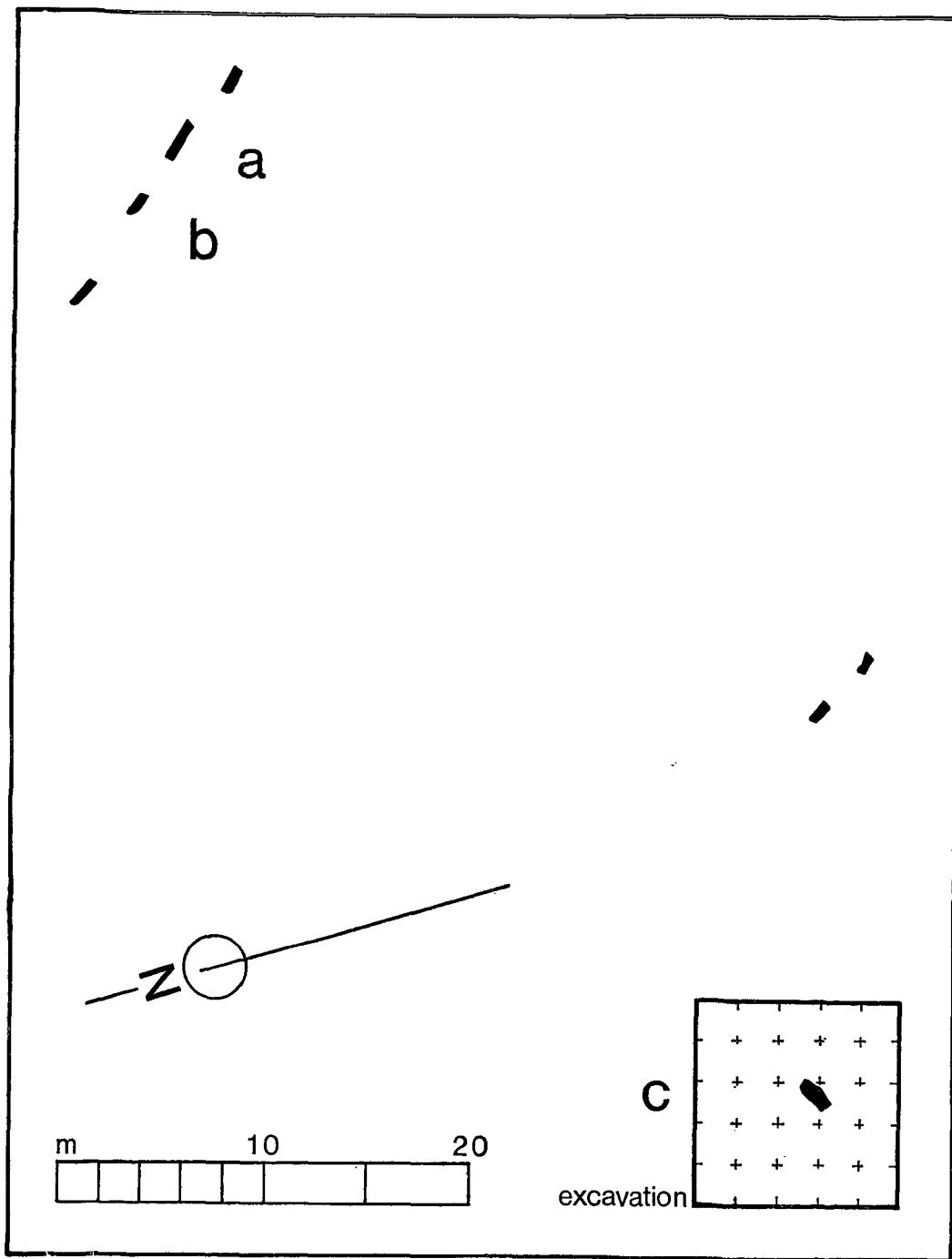


FIG 1 General plan

overlying peat to produce the present top soil. Surviving traces of it are visible in the profile as a pinkish-grey podzol. The abundance of *Sphagna* on the present field surface suggests that only man's continuing interference prevents the re-establishment of peat bog in the area and further implies that the present environment is not of great antiquity. Beneath the enrichment zone were an undisturbed series of thin layers and lenses of sands and gravels. Removal of the top soil revealed, in the surface of the enrichment zone a series of grey strips averaging 0.6 m to 0.7 m in width, though up to 1 m wide in places. They were roughly parallel and were, on average, 0.7 m apart. Excavation showed them to be shallow and irregular; they nowhere penetrated more than 120 mm into the enrichment zone though they varied in depth as well as in width. They seem best explained as cultivation furrows and finds of green bottle-glass in them suggest that they are not of great age. They seem too wide and too widely spaced to have been the result of modern ploughing and yet not sufficiently widely spaced to have been the result of rig and furrow or lazybedding. Running at a slight but perceptible angle to the present field boundary they arguably predate this.

The stump of the fallen stone had survived in its socket and was visible at the field surface. It proved to be 1.05 m deep and 0.75 m wide and at a depth of 0.45 m its thickness was almost twice that of the fallen slab. The socket became clear upon removal of the top soil, appearing as a grey-brown area in the surface of the enriched zone; a well-developed iron-pan delineated part of its margin (fig 2). The stone had been fixed firmly in its socket by means of packing stones which projected into the top soil. After the removal of the packing stones and the excavation of the fill, three deposits of cremated bone were found. The two laid against the SE and NE faces of the stump were small deposits weighing not more than 5 grams each. The main deposit, weighing about

BALLYMEANOCH, ARGYLL.

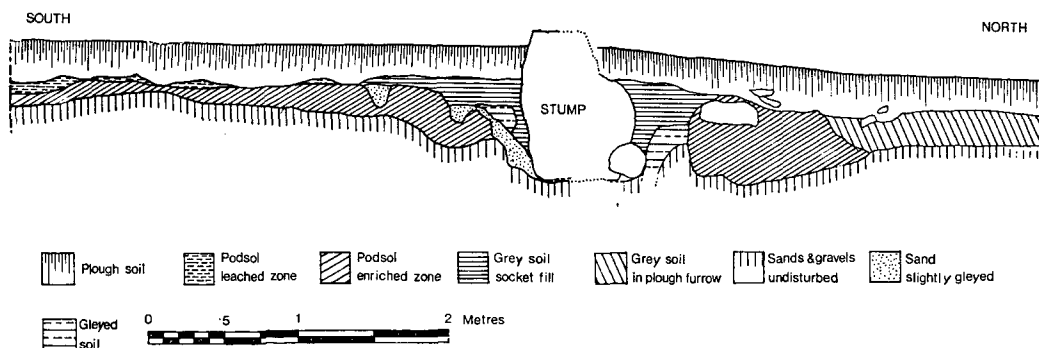


FIG 2 Section, N-S through the socket and stump

