

High altitude settlement on Ben Griam Beg, Sutherland

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The limited celebrity of Ben Griam Beg, near Kinbrace in Sutherland (NGR NC 831 412), may be derived from the fact that it is crowned by the highest known hillfort in Scotland. The principal report on the site (RCAMS 1911, no 316) comments briefly that the fort is accompanied by an external settlement, described as a 'network of ruined walls', which is in fact of considerable extent and complexity. Located essentially around the 1500 ft contour (456 m), this outer settlement is at similar altitude to the platform settlement below the summit of Tap O'Noth (Gordon) (*Discovery Excav Scot 1981*), and poses interesting problems of the relationship of high altitude

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settlement to climatic decline in later prehistoric Scotland. The summit of Ben Griam Beg (578.5 m) affords wide prospects over the Straths of Halladale and Helmsdale, and the Orkney islands are readily visible.

The conical summit of this hill forms a conspicuous feature at the W end of the hill-ridge, which is aligned approximately E-W. The upper portions of the hill are liberally covered with scattered boulders of conglomerate and sandstone: outcrops of the former rock are common, particularly on the E side of the hill, where structural free faces would in themselves offer considerable natural defence. The uppermost portion of the hill is aligned NNW-SSE and is an area of active soil-creep forming terracettes, and severe wind deflation, an indication of the geomorphological activity consequent on the prevailing microclimate on the hilltop. These continuing processes have contributed to the warping and distortion of the alignments of the archaeological remains, which are for the most part reduced to vestigial traces of walling.

The summit itself displays little evidence of artificial defence: the clearest indication is offered by a detached sector of walling, consisting of a low spread stony bank, between the two principal conglomerate tors on the SW side. The clearest enclosure lies below the summit ridge on the W. This is the enclosure for which Feachem (1963) quotes dimensions. The interior of this enclosure is one extensively marked by active soil-creep terracettes, oriented N-S, at right angles to the slope of the ground. Regolith, displaced downslope, has built up against the drystone wall which defines the enclosure, causing it to bulge or tumble outwards. This stone wall, built of unevenly sized slabs of sandstone, survives to a maximum of 6-8 courses (c 1.5 m) in height for an equivalent width. The volume of debris which accompanies this wall suggests that its original height was not much in excess of what now survives. Remains of both the internal and the external wall-faces are intermittently visible. There are two entrance gaps in the N side of this wall; and one clear and one possible example in the S face. Since there appears to be little doubt that at least three of these entrances are original, it seems debatable whether a defensive function can be attributed to this enclosure. Some 6 m W of the principal entrance in the S wall, and just inside the wall-line, are the distorted remains of a hut-circle, approximately 8 m in diameter. Another possible example, marked by a vestigial arc of walling, lies against the interior edge of the enclosure wall, W of the W entrance on the N side.

The character of this enclosure, dominated on the E by the craggy summit of the hill, against which it is backed, and stopping short of the military crest on the W, suggests that it is unlikely to have functioned as an entity. Indeed, its W end is enveloped at a lower level by a tumbled dyke, which encloses both the bare stony ridge of the hill and the boulder-strewn slopes to N and S. Where best preserved, on its N and SW sides, this wall is essentially similar in character to that of the upper enclosure. There are no irrefutable indications of settlement within this enclosure.

Approximately 45 m below the fort on its SW side is a further enclosure, evidently non-defensive. This is an irregular circle in shape. Its interior, apart from vestigial traces of a stony bank which can be followed half-way across its diameter, is markedly stone-free. Immediately outside the perimeter of this enclosure on its NE side are the much-distorted remains of rubble-built rectangular enclosures, approximately 10 m across, now substantially infilled with peat.

A third major dyke runs across the slope of the S of this enclosure. It is essentially similar in character to those first described above, but does not appear to be defensive as it is not related structurally to any of the other lengths of walling. S of, and therefore below, this dyke is an area of steep boulder-strewn hillside at around 460 m OD.

On closer inspection, a suite of man-made features can be seen which are interspersed with the naturally-tumbled slabs. The principal element of this system is a series of dykes, for the most part forming sub-rectangular enclosures, the shape of which has in many cases been distorted by

soil-creep and subsequent peat growth. However, other elements incorporated into this pattern include

- (a) stone clearance heaps, primarily on the upper margins of the system,
- (b) connecting lengths of track,
- (c) small 'annexe' enclosures, less than 5 m across,
- (d) possible hut circles, some scarped into the slope.

In all, a preliminary count suggests there may be c 30 individual elements in this system, which must cover a little less than 1 ha. A second similar system was noted, again below a detached length of dyke, approximately 120 m E. Similarly located in a boulder-strewn area at approximately 460 m OD, this comprises about 40 individual elements intimately associated with each other. A third system, perhaps 250 m further E, appears principally to contain rather longer and narrower plots, again defined by distorted lengths of walling.

These high-altitude field plots and settlement traces occur well above the altitudinal band (upper limit c 250 m) to which the hut circle settlements, like Kilphedir (Fairhurst & Taylor 1971), are normally restricted on the mainland of Northern Scotland (K. Sabine, pers comm). In the light of their subsequent distortion through soil-creep, and partial submergence under peat, the hypothesis may be advanced that the Ben Griam Beg system may predate the onset of less-favourable climatic conditions in the sub-Atlantic. As such, it would predate systems such as Kilphedir, the only suite of such traces which are presently dated by isotopic means on the Northern Mainland (Megaw & Simpson 1979, 498). In view of the similarity between the architecture of the 'head-dyke' above these systems and the walls enclosing the summit area and its W spur, the possibility of a second millennium BC date for the entire complex may perhaps not be discounted.

REFERENCES

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