

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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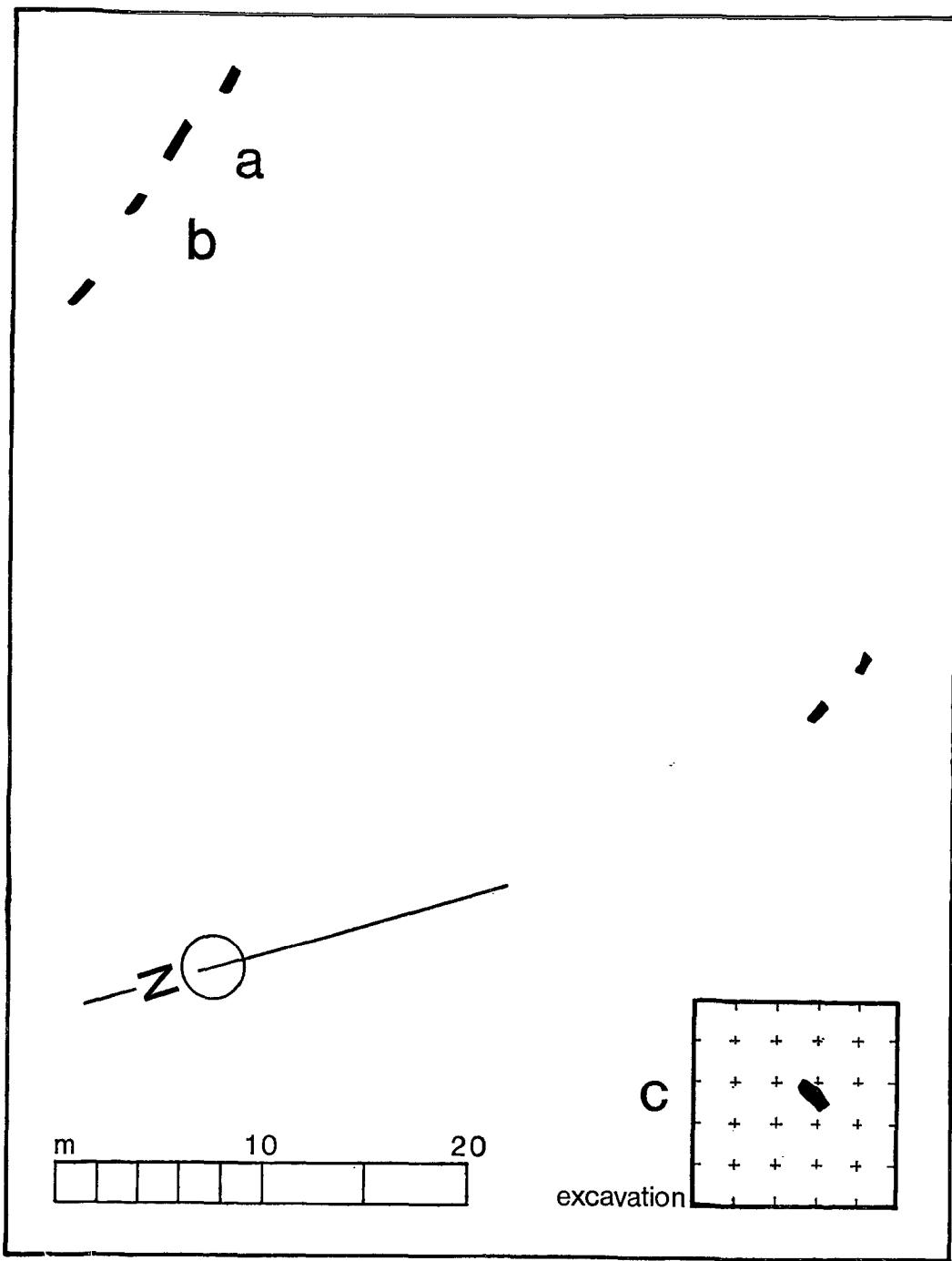


FIG 1 General plan

one a general view of the stone settings from the W and the other a detail of the holed-stone from the E with ten cup-marks; these views are now in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

EXCAVATION

A 10 m square centred on the stone was excavated; two 1 m square sondages dug in the SW and SE corners of the excavated area indicated the general soil conditions. Beneath the surface vegetation the humus merged imperceptibly into the dark-brown, heavy, poorly drained top soil. At an average depth of 0.22 m the plough soil gave way to a bright orange-to-red layer. This is the zone of secondary enrichment or induration of an ancient podzol. The eluvial or leached layer (Limbrey 1975, 79-81) of the podzol seems in the main to have been intermixed with a thin 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 *Sphagnum* 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

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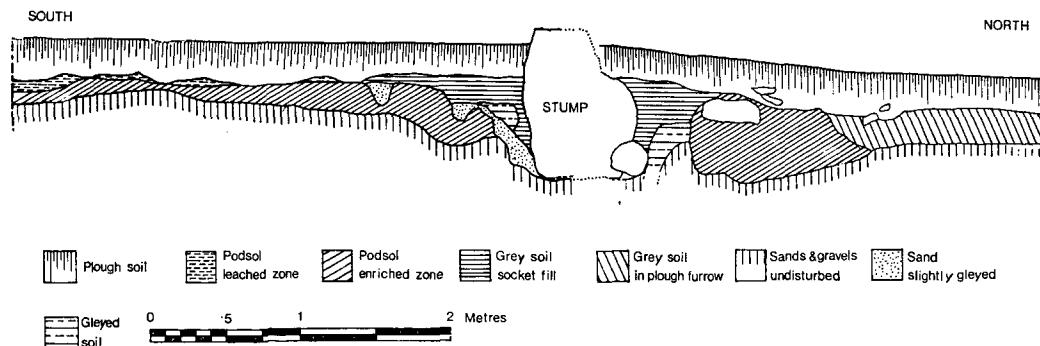


FIG 2 Section, N-S through the socket and stump

90 grams (wet weight), was found on the SW side near the bottom of the socket. A single smear of bone was observed on the NW side. All the deposits are in primary association with the erection of the stone.

When fully excavated the socket presented an unusual appearance; the upper third appeared as a wide shallow basin, while the lower portion was quite narrow, the side walls never more than 150 mm from the stone. The packing stones were wedged into the lower section projecting through the upper basin into the top soil. This curious configuration could have resulted from the puddling of a narrow strip round the stone by animals, though it may well be original. Partly overlying the socket on the SE side, an oval lens of small stones was found beneath the top soil and partly sunk into the enrichment zone. These did not dip into the socket and so must represent quite recent disturbance.

Before excavation the exposed face of the slab displayed no ornamentation other than the hour glass perforation. The top 0·92 m of the stone had broken off, presumably at the time of its fall. When both sections were turned over this upper section was seen to bear three cup-marks and the lower some seventeen cup-marks. The stone is a finely bedded sandstone and is in a very poor condition, laminating along its bedding planes. Thus it was impossible to be confident that all the cup-marks were man made or to determine whether they had been pecked or ground into the surface. Simpson (1866, 36) had counted eighteen cup-marks on the holed-stone and, on the last occasion on which the stone is recorded as still standing, Allen (1882, 117) counted twelve cup-marks. The hour-glass perforation from which the stone derives its generic title was, when the stone was erect, about 1 m above the field surface (Allen, 1882, 116, fig 37). At its narrowest constriction the hole measures a mere 70 mm by 90 mm and this, the waist of the hourglass, is positioned asymmetrically within the thickness of the stone, being 180 mm from the decorated face and only 70 mm from the other face. This, and the fact that the stump is almost twice the thickness of the fallen slab, suggests that the standing stone had been split in two in antiquity and that one part is now lost.

DISCUSSION

The cremation deposits are the only finds that are in primary association with the erection of the stone. The total weight of bone recovered is a little less than 100 grams, and this does not seem to represent a complete cremation. This, and its division into separate deposits about the stone, might suggest that it is of a dedicatory nature. Deposition of cremated bone in and about the sockets of orthostats is relatively common. Ritchie (1974, 8) has noted their existence at the stone circles of Balbirnie, Fife, and Stonehenge, Wiltshire, at the standing stones of Orwell, Kinross-shire, and at Pitnacree, Perthshire, and even within the postholes of timber-built ritual circles like The Sanctuary and Woodhenge in Wiltshire. Indeed the ubiquity of the practice reduces its value as an indicator of culture or date.

Cup-marks are the most commonly found of all the prehistoric art motifs. Their geographical range covers the entire Atlantic sea-board and they range in date from later 4th-millennium BC (a stone beneath Dalladies long barrow, Kincardineshire) to the 2nd-millennium BC when they are frequently found on the stones of beaker and food vessel cists in Scotland (Simpson & Thawley 1972). In Ireland they have been recorded on stones in ringforts and stone forts of the later Iron Age. Their value as indicators of cultural or chronological context is therefore virtually non-existent. The cup-and-ring marks of stones A and B (fig 3-4) belong to the group of motifs which MacWhite (1946) classified as Galician. This would relate them to the rock scribings of which there are several fine examples in Kilmartin Valley. These are held, in general, to be Bronze Age

in date though the reasons for this are not clear. The relationship between the artwork and the erection of the stones is not clearly discernible since in each case the motifs may have been applied after the stone had been erect for some time. The absence of cup-marks on the stump of the holed-stone might be seen as support for this contention. However the occurrence of the ornamentation on only one face of each of the stones and the presence of motifs at points up to 4 m above the present ground surface suggests that the stones were decorated whilst lying on the field surface prior to erection.

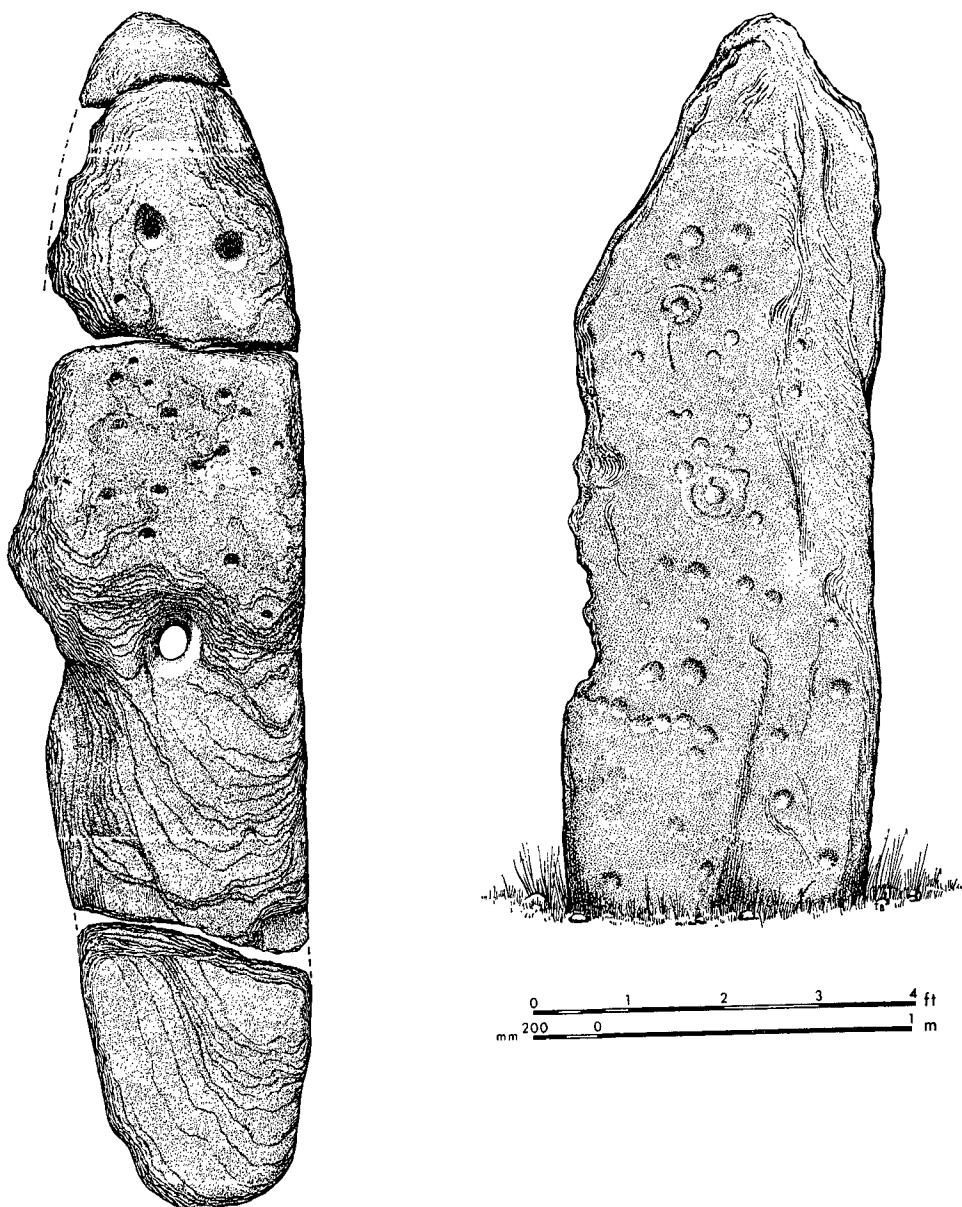


FIG 3 Decorated stones. Left: excavated stone C; right: E face of stone B (see fig 1).

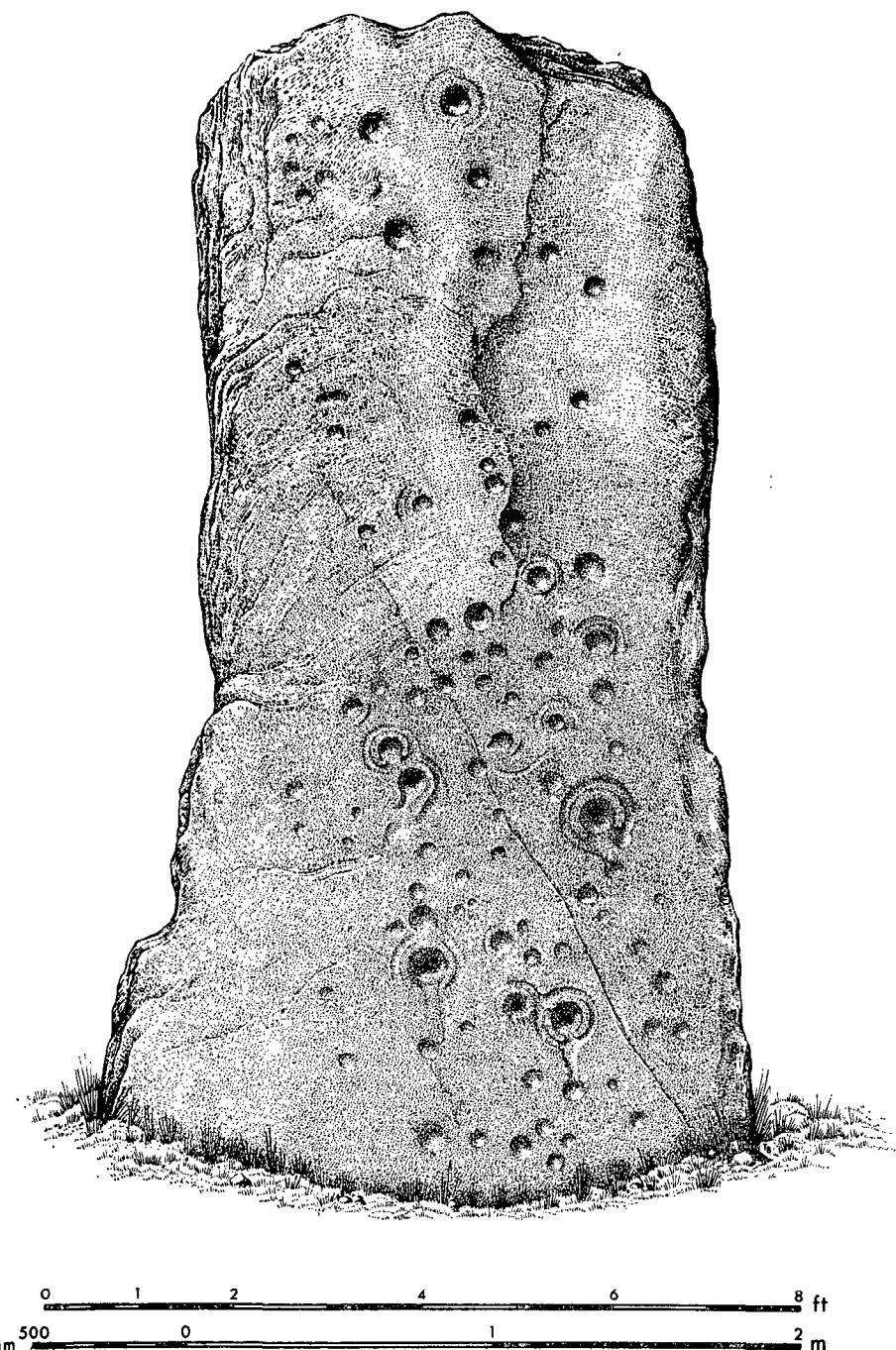


FIG 4 E face of decorated stone A (see fig 1).

Local tradition has it that the stone was used to seal bargains and betrothals by hand-fasting through the perforation (Campbell & Sandeman 1962, 24, no 158). Similar customs have been treated in detail by Marwick (1976) in his discussion of the folklore of the Stone of Odin, Orkney. Alternatively, a tradition associated with a number of holed-stones is that cures for several, if not all, diseases are said to have been effected by passing the patient, or his afflicted parts, through the perforation. A holed-stone called 'Clach Thuill' at Crossapol Farm in Coll was a specific for consumption, Men-an-tol, Madron Parish, Cornwall, cured rheumatism, rickets and scrofula (Grinsell 1976, 89), whilst the holed-stone in the bed of the Teigh River, Dartmoor, was passed through by 'faithless wives and fickle maidens' who sought forgiveness for their infidelity (St Leger-Gordon 1965, 59). Specifically Celtic legends of these holed-stones do not seem to exist and the few Irish examples such as those at Cum Oilean, Cape Clear Island, County Cork and Tobernaveen, County Sligo, are like the Ballymeanoch example, singularly bereft of legendary powers.

The dimensions of the holes are usually small; that at Holland House, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, measures 70 mm in diameter and, with Ballymeanoch, seems typical. That these will not comfortably admit even one hand does not detract from the emotive power of these legends. It merely emphasises that they are rationalisations of later inhabitants who were trying to understand a phenomenon of which they knew as little as we do. Their only danger lies in that they encourage us to see a unity of image and of function in a monument type of which there are not more than twenty examples in the British Isles and those examples so widely distributed that no such unity can, in fact, be postulated.

The absence of evidence for further stone sockets or indeed for any other prehistoric activity in the area surrounding the holed-stone and the fact that it makes a sharp angle (of 67 degrees) with the average line of the alignment can be seen as indicating that no strong relationship exists between the two or that if such a relationship exists it is founded in the builders' social and religious system and can only remain a matter of speculation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A debt of gratitude is due to the landowner, Cmdr R Rankin for his permission to excavate the site and for his help and interest during the excavation. Within the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate, Mr P J Ashmore initiated the excavation arrangements and was most helpful throughout. Dr D J Breeze and Dr J N G Ritchie read the typescript and the writer is most grateful to them for their comments and assistance; the views expressed in this paper are, however, the responsibility of the writer alone.

We have illustrated here the decorated stones (figs 3 & 4). These were originally drawn by Mr T Borthwick under the direction of Mr B O'Neill the then Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments, whose untimely death prevented their publication. The drawing of the holed-stone published herewith is also by Mr Borthwick to whom I am most grateful.

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The Society is indebted to the Scottish Development Department for a grant towards the cost of this paper.