

The excavation of a cairn at Pitcairn, Glenrothes, Fife

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INTRODUCTION

A boulder strewn, overgrown enclosure, marked on early editions of the OS 1:10,560 map as a plantation, and situated on high ground to the E of Pitcairn House near Glenrothes in Fife (NGR NO 2732 0266) was tentatively identified as the site of a cairn reported to have been opened about 1770 (*Statistical Account* vi, 1793, 52; *New Statistical Account* ix, 1845, 116). The site was to be destroyed by the Glenrothes Development Corporation in the course of the construction of a housing estate and, as all the other small mounds in the area which might have been the remains of the cairn had been definitely identified as 19th-century mineshafts, the enclosure was excavated by the Central Excavation Unit of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in the spring of 1977. The report of the 1770 excavation in the *New Statistical Account* stated that:

In 1770 a tumulus, which stood near Pitcairn House, was opened; a stone chest was found, full of human bone (in particular, several complete jaw-bones) standing east and west. At the east end were found two urns of bluish clay, full of bones evidently calcined and as white as chalk.

The whereabouts of the urns is not known.

The cairn lies about 950 m to the SW of the henge at Balfarg and about 1,150 m to the SW of the cairn at Balbirnie.

EXCAVATION

The oval plantation enclosure, some 30 m long and 20 m wide was formed by a rough wall surviving to a height of 1 m in places, running round the top of a low hill. Parts of the wall had been completely removed, probably to supply stone to line the upper parts of the two mineshafts which lay within 30 m of the site. Soil had built up inside the enclosure to the level of the top of the wall. In the S half of the enclosure, after the removal of up to 0.40 m of topsoil, a scatter of stones was located, in contrast to the rest of the enclosure where there were few stones. This scatter had a regular plan only on the W side where a sporadic arc of stones defined its limit. In its NW part this arc was fronted by a shallow but well defined gulley some 0.7 m to 1.3 m wide and 0.2 m deep. In the E part of the scatter no such arc or gulley was found and the stones were spread irregularly over the site. Only in the N quadrant were the stones more than one layer deep.

This stone scatter is interpreted as the remnants of a severely robbed cairn which originally had a diameter of c 14 m although, if the gulley mentioned above was in fact a robber trench dug to remove the boulders of a true kerb, the cairn would be a little larger.

Under the stone scatter a series of features was found. These were small uneven pits, each with a different shape and size and a fill of unstratified loamy soil. These have been identified as the products of animal burrowing and the growth of the roots of shrubs and small trees, filled by light soil. The origins of two features, however, (F26 and F27) are more problematic. These

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two pits, sealed under the traces of the 1770 disturbance, had uneven sides and bases, which suggested that they might have been formed by the growth of tree roots, although both produced charcoal and very small quantities of burnt bone from their fills. F26 was 0.9 m in diameter and 0.3 m deep, while F27 was 0.8 m in diameter and 0.25 m deep. Part of a blunted polished stone-axe was found in the charcoal deposit in F27. Dr Dickson of the Botany Department of the University of Glasgow has identified this charcoal as *Salix* (willow); the charcoal from both features was submitted for C14 dating (see appendix).

The pits appeared to have been formed by the removal of trees (prior to the disturbance of the cairn in 1770) but the radiocarbon dates from the charcoal apparently suggest activity at about the end of the 1st-millennium BC, but the possibility of contamination in samples GU-1003 and GU-1005 must be borne in mind.

The robbing of the stone of the cairn had been thorough enough to remove all definite traces of burial features: the only evidence for burials recovered was a very light scatter of burnt bone fragments and, indirectly, the types of pottery represented by the recovered sherds.

SMALL FINDS (fig 1)

The excavation produced sherds of four pottery vessels and two stone artifacts. None of these finds came from undisturbed contexts.

SF 1 A rim-sherd of a food-vessel (fig 1a) bearing cord-impressed decoration randomly across its outer surface was found to the W of the cairn.

SF 2 Four body-sherds of what may be tentatively identified as a collared urn were found near 1. A fifth body-sherd and a rim sherd were found in the topsoil of the S quadrant of the cairn. In places the outer surface of the urn had been decorated with horizontal finger-marks.

SF 3 A body-sherd of a creamy-faced rough fabric was found between the stones of the cairn near its centre.

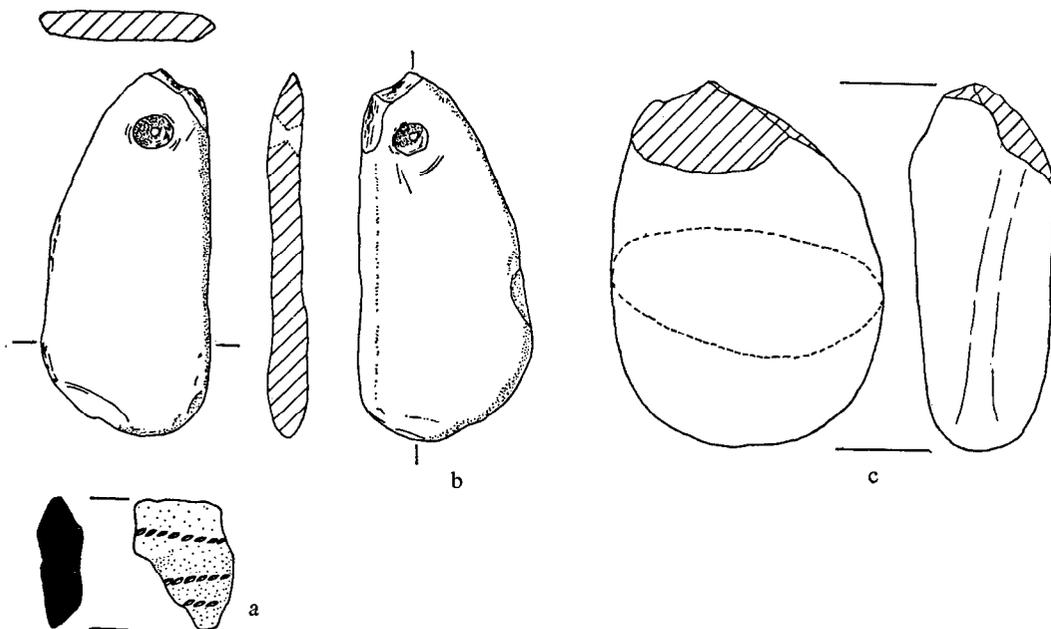


FIG 1 a, Sherd of cord-decorated food-vessel (SF 1); b, Perforated stone pendant (SF 5); c, Polished stone-axe fragment (SF 6) (scale 1 : 2)

SF 4 A sherd of the shoulder of a vessel made of a fine sandy ware was also found near the centre of the cairn.

SF 5 A perforated stone pendant (95 mm long, 45 mm wide and 11 mm thick; fig 1b) was found near 1 and 2 beyond the W edge of the cairn. It was made from a flat water-worn pebble of shale or phyllite and had been bored from both sides to produce an eccentric hour-glass shaped perforation. Both sides bear scores concentric with the perforation indicating perhaps that the boring tool widened not far above the point. Both faces of the pendant are smooth but that shown on the left side of the drawing (fig 1b) is smoother than the other. Powell (1973, 26) has suggested that differential smoothing of the faces of a pendant might show which face hung against the clothes of the wearer.

The few other pendants from funerary contexts in Scotland present a more careful finish than that from Pitcairn. The example found with the central burial at the Loanhead of Daviot cremation cemetery in Aberdeenshire (Kilbride-Jones 1936, 278) and that found at Drumduro, Aberdeenshire (DES 1960, 2) are both sub-rectangular and carefully smoothed. A more elongated example was found with an enlarged food-vessel urn at Kiltry Knock, Banffshire (DES 1977, 9; Shepherd & Cowie, 1977). None of the examples cited had been used as whetstones and the Pitcairn pendant, examined by Dr D V Clarke of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, conforms in this respect. However, the differences between the two edges of the pendant suggest that the straight edge has been used as a smoothing or rubbing tool. The Pitcairn example is, therefore, uncharacteristic of the majority of the pendants known from early Bronze Age funerary contexts in Scotland. At Barns Farm, Dalgety Bay, Fife (DES 1973, 65) a perforated whetstone some 5 cm long was associated with an inhumation accompanied by a food-vessel.

SF 6 The polished stone-axe fragment found in the upper part of F27 is made from a well cemented, lithicised Carboniferous sandstone or Old Red Sandstone (fig 1c). Mr J M Howell has examined the axe and contributed the following note:

The axe has a pronounced lateral twist, and pitting on its apparently blunted blade suggests that it has been used as a hammer or pounder. The butt has been broken off in antiquity. It is not possible to assign the axe to any known group. One face of the axe has been cracked by heat, perhaps by the burning of the charcoal eventually deposited in F27 with which it was found. Both edges are smoother than the faces and it is suggested that this was caused by wear on the edges either through use as a rubbing tool or the method of hafting employed. No hafting groove was noted on the fragment.

DISCUSSION

The excavation has added little to the information about the cairn given in the *Statistical Account*. The cairn appeared to be some 14 m in diameter, of unknown original height and may, on the basis of the antiquarian account, have covered a cist and two cremation burials. The *Statistical Account* reports are not clear on two points. Firstly, it is uncertain whether the urns containing the cremations lay inside or outside the E end of the cist. Secondly, there is a hint that the cist contained a multiple inhumation but the report cannot be trusted absolutely.

McAdam (1974, 61–5) has listed the Scottish examples of multiple inhumations, multiple cremations and cases of cremations and inhumations found in the same cist. Peterson (1972, 22) has discussed the phenomenon of multiple burial in England and Petersen, Shepherd and Tuckwell (1974, 43) have discussed multiple cremation in Britain in addition to listing the multiple cremation deposits in Britain known at the time. Petersen (1977, appendix ii) has subsequently brought this list up to date.

Although cremations (including some multiple deposits) have been found with inhumations in cists and graves in Fife (Watkins 1973, 65) only that found at Craigdhu, Dunfermline (Chalmers 1859, vol 2, 286–8) appears to have included a cremation deposit enclosed in a pot in a cist with an inhumation. Given the rarity of the practice, however, it seems more likely that at Pitcairn the cremations lay outside the cist. McAdam listed 19 multiple inhumations, six definitely deposited simultaneously and five deposited successively. Only one, at Ballymeanoch in mid-

Argyll (Greenwell 1866, 348) contained more than two inhumations, but only the teeth of the individuals were recovered and the grave had been disturbed. It would seem, therefore, that there are no reliable parallels in Scotland for the 'several' jawbones supposedly found at Pitcairn in 1770. However, Petersen (1972, 27) has listed multiple inhumations, including triple inhumations, on the Yorkshire Wolds.

In general there is very little apart from the remaining structure of the cairn which can, with any certainty, be compared with the features in early Bronze Age burials in Scotland.

The diameters of 28 cairns and barrows in Fife are known. Eleven are between 11 m and 15 m across and five are between 16 m and 20 m across. Ten have diameters greater than 20 m and two diameters of less than 10 m. Pitcairn would, therefore, seem to be typical of Fife cairns in this respect.

Only six other barrows and cairns have been excavated in Fife including Craigdhu, Dunfermline. Two have been excavated to modern standards, at Balbirnie (Ritchie 1974, 1) and Barns Farm (*DES* 1973, 65). Those at Pitreavie (Beveridge 1876, 240) and at Greenhill, Balmerino (Hutcheson 1902, 635) produced a cist each and a number of cremation deposits under a mound and a cairn respectively. The section through the large cairn at Collessie (Anderson 1878, 439) produced an inhumation and cremations.

At Balbirnie, a cairn 15 m by 14 m covered a complex series of cists and secondary cremation deposits. Two of the cists contained double cremations, one associated with a food-vessel bearing whipped cord and incised decoration. As at Pitcairn, only a fragment of the kerb survived.

At Barns Farm a round barrow covered six cists, three earthen graves, two hearths and a series of pits.

The occurrence of cremation and inhumation and of food-vessel and collared urn sherds at Pitcairn would seem to be typical of the cairns so far excavated in Fife.

CONCLUSIONS

All the pottery and both of the stone artifacts were found in unstratified contexts presumably due to the disturbance of the cairn in 1770. This fact, combined with the thoroughness of the robbing of the cairn and the ambiguous nature of the antiquarian account makes it impossible to offer more than tentative suggestions about the cairn and its burials.

In conclusion, therefore, it would seem that if the antiquarian account is interpreted in the light of the results of the excavation, the cairn may have covered a cist which perhaps contained more than one inhumation (possibly accompanied by the food-vessel represented by the single sherd). In addition, there may have been two cremation deposits in urns (one of which may be represented by the urn sherds found outside the cairn). The status of the other two vessels represented by sherds 3 and 4 (which lack identifiable characteristics) is uncertain.

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Finally, I would like to express my thanks to my assistants during the excavation, Miss Jill Kendrick and Mr John Morfey.

APPENDIX

Three samples were sent to Glasgow University for C14 dating. All dates are given uncorrected.

GU-1003	2166 ± 90bp	Charcoal from near the bottom of F26.
GU-1004	12050 ± 200bp	Charcoal from the upper part of F27. It is likely that this sample was contaminated by a very small piece of coal which was not noticed during collection or pre-treatment. This sample was the smallest submitted and was well below the optimum weight.
GU-1005	1941 ± 75bp	Charcoal from the upper fill of F26. This sample was the largest submitted.

The two samples from F26 have given broadly comparable dates. GU-1005, as the larger of the two, is, in the opinion of the dating laboratory, probably the more reliable. GU-1004 was such a small sample that even very slight contamination made the date worthless. It is the opinion of the laboratory that contamination by root material would not have made GU-1003 and GU-1005 significantly young. Therefore, the felling of the trees burnt to produce the charcoal found in F26 can probably be placed in the last three centuries BC and the first two centuries AD.

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