

## Cairn 3, Acharn, Morvern, Argyll

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### ABSTRACT

*Describes a possible Iron-Age cremation burial inserted into a Bronze-Age cist.*

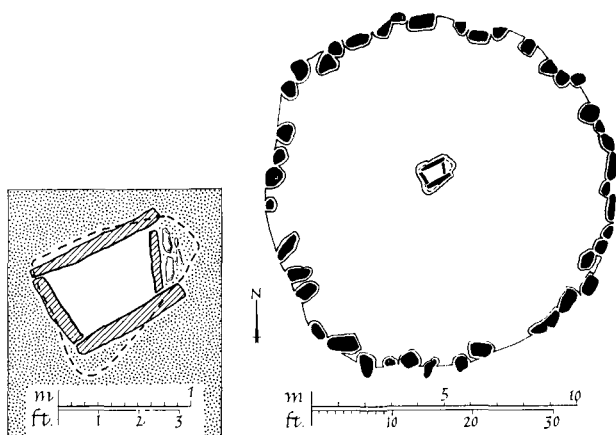
The interesting groups of Bronze Age cairns in the Aline valley were the subject of a paper in volume 106 of these *Proceedings* following our work at Acharn, Claggan and Kinlochaline, undertaken during the preparation of volume 3 of the *Inventory of Argyll* by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Ritchie & Thornber 1975; RCAMS 1980). At Acharn at the east end of Loch Arienas a group of cairns occupies a terrace a little above the level of the loch and some 300 m north-west of Acharn; cairn 3, a platform cairn, is the best preserved of these, measuring about 13.5 m in diameter and 0.6 m in height with almost the complete circuit of kerbstones still intact. Nothing further was known when the site was surveyed in 1974.

A central cist was, however, uncovered in 1977 and was at that stage excavated by Mr Thornber and its contents stored; in May 1984 the cist was plotted on to the earlier plan (illus 1) and in 1985 the contents were transferred to Edinburgh to enable sorting and identification of the bones and other artefacts to take place. The capstone is a large triangular slab (1.4 m by 1.05 m and 0.2 m thick) covering a trapeze-shaped cist, which measures some 0.7 m by 0.6 m internally and 0.4 m in depth; the cist appears to have been set on ground level rather than in a pit, but the immediate surroundings of the cist were not examined. The cist was full of debris to slightly below the level of the side-slabs, material that was thickly penetrated by bracken roots. The cist filled with water as the excavation progressed and the basal layers were baled out. There was a scatter of cremated material throughout the cist contents, but a definite concentration, accompanied by flint, a small round smooth pebble and sherds of pottery, was found in a small pit measuring some 250 mm in diameter dug into the subsoil. Also at the bottom of the cist, but close to one of the side-slabs, there were two little deposits of white quartz pebbles. In 1985 the loose soil and small stones that formed the filling of the cist were sieved, using a 3 mm mesh, and further sherds, bones and pottery were recovered.

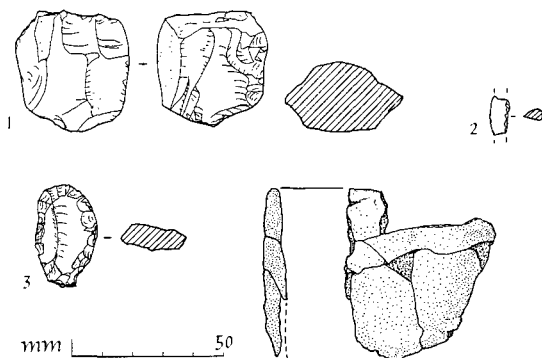
The sherds have been examined and drawn by Miss A S Henshall (illus 2). All the tiny sherds probably belong to one pot. It has been possible to reconstruct part of its profile, although the angle of the wall is uncertain and the base is missing. The pot is small with more or less straight walls and with a rim diameter of about 100 mm. The rim, from which four sherds survive, is simple and slightly flattened along the edge. The walls are about 7 mm thick, being slightly variable due to the pinching which has left the surfaces uneven. At the lower part of the largest piece there is the suggestion of a cordon or shoulder, but this may be no more than a local irregularity. The fabric is hard, with a fine texture but including a few quite large grits; it is dark grey with a buffer outer surface. The walls have

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ILLUS 1 Plans of cairn 3 and central cist



ILLUS 2 Flint and pottery from cist

broken cleanly along the building joints, indicating that the upper part consisted of two narrow rings of clay. The fabric is not appropriate for a pre-Iron Age pot, an assessment that accords well with the radiocarbon date obtained from the charcoal (see below), though the circumstances of the burial in a cist in a cairn are certainly notable. Lack of material of comparable date in the area inhibits further comment.

The flint and quartz were examined and illustrated by Miss Sinead McCartan (illus 2, nos 2–3; for notes to catalogue see fiche 2:F3).

- 1 Two inner chunks; grey-white; burnt, crazed and pitted; lightly corticated; lightly patinated.
- 2 Secondary chunk; grey-white; burnt and crazed; corticated.
- 3 Quartz; inner irregular flake; broken; distal surviving.
- 4 Inner flake; retouching flake; grey-cream; lightly corticated; 12:7:1 (illus 2, no 2).
- \*5 Inner flake; pale yellow; patinated; distal and laterals retouched; 33: 19: 5; L, 52; R, 43; D, 81; scraper (illus 2, no 3).

Six pieces were thus recovered from the cist, five of flint and one of quartz. The three flakes with surviving platforms suggest the use of direct percussion with a soft hammer. The outstanding piece is the scraper (illus 2, no 3). The distal and lateral edges have been modified with regular scalar retouch. Other pieces include one irregular quartz flake, three burnt chunks and a retouching flake. Although unusual, knapping debris is not unknown from such contexts (Clarke *et al* 1985, 170).

The charcoal from the cist was examined by Mrs Camilla Dickson, Department of Botany, University of Glasgow, who reported that it comprised: *Alnus* (alder), *Corylus* (hazel) and *Quercus* (oak). The sorted charcoal, which weighed some 8.0 g, was submitted to the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory, University of Glasgow and a determination of  $ad\ 125\pm 80$  (GU-2070) resulted. This confirms Miss Henshall's discussion of the potsherds. The cremated remains, which have been examined by Miss Mary Harman and Dr Dorothy Lunt and are described in detail in fiche 2:F10, were those of a young person aged about 20 years. No bones or teeth are duplicated and thus only one individual was present.

The excavation adds several new pieces of information about this interesting cairn group: the cist was perhaps used for burial on two occasions, the earlier deposit being represented by the flint, the later by the cremation and sherds. If this is so, it is one of a very small number of Iron Age burials identified in the west of Scotland. It also gives us the opportunity to note an early reference to the cairn group brought to our attention by Mr I F C Fleming. In *Archaeologia Scotica*, 4 (1857) Donald Gregory describes a visit to the Hebrides and the coast of Argyll which he undertook in 1831. Gregory describes the kerb-cairn at Achabeg and then notes the cairns at Kinlochaline, Claggan and finally Acharn.

In the neighbourhood of the castle of Kinlochaline, and on the north side of the loch, there is a field called Auchindruineach, translated the Druid's Field, in which is a circle of low stones similar to that above described. In a field called Dalnagairn, translated the Level Field of Cairns, about a mile inland from Kinlochaline, are still to be seen two complete circles of low stones, such as I have already described, but perhaps rather larger; and in the same field there were several more circles, which have now nearly disappeared. At Acharn, upwards of a mile farther inland than Dalnagairn, and in a level plain of considerable extent, there is an immense collection of cairns, none of them very high, evidently pointing out the site of some great battle. I saw the remains of a very large stone coffin, in which an urn with ashes was found. This coffin was discovered in taking away the stones from one of the cairns. Many more have been found in the same way, of which no traces are left; and there is no doubt that where the cairns have not been disturbed, there must be many still remaining. Near this remarkable spot is a pretty large circle of stones of no great height. Among those with whom I conversed, I could find no tradition relative to the collection of cairns at Acharn. (Gregory 1857, 363.)

It is possible that the 'coffin' should be linked to cairn no 2 and that the 'pretty large circle of stones of no great height' is indeed cairn no 3 of the *Inventory* account.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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