

A NEW CHAMBERED CAIRN IN THE UPPER FORTH VALLEY

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A new chambered cairn has come to light in the course of tree-felling operations in a plantation to the north-east of Loch Lomond. It was one of a number of monuments visited by officers of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) in the autumn of 2006 in response to a request from Lorna Main, Stirling Council archaeologist. Another was an unusual group of prehistoric carvings cut into an outcrop, including cups, a rosette and large ring-markings. The cairn was first discovered by Jim Ferrall, the Harvesting Work Supervisor with the Cowal and Trossachs Forest District of the Forestry Commission, whose attention had been drawn by two large capstones exposed after the area was cleared of trees. He had been searching for a covered well or spring that was known locally to supply the farm at Creityhall on the Buchanan Estates, owned by the Duke of Montrose. Having located this in the gully of the burn a short distance to the south-west, he realised that another explanation would have to be found for the two large slabs. Such was the importance of his discovery that a two-person team from RCAHMS revisited the cairn on a cold but bright November's day later that year, recording it by measured plan at a scale of 1:100 (Figure 1). This find is described and considered within its local and wider context.



Figure 1. Ian Parker (RCAHMS) undertaking a measured survey of the chambered cairn by plane table and alidade. One of the upright slabs is visible centre right, alongside the two capstones.

The cairn is situated in Garadh Ban Wood, an area previously planted with conifers, only a short distance from the Drymen to Balmaha section of West Highland Way. It lies towards the leading edge of a broad flat terrace between two burn gullies at about 170 m OD (NS 4522 9189), and commands fine views to the south-west over Loch Lomond and the row of islands that marks the line of the Highland Boundary Fault. The cairn is now reduced to little more than a low stony mound measuring 15 m from N to S by 12 m transversely and up to 0.5 m in height. The remains of the chamber lie off-centre to the south-west and comprise of two upright stones and two displaced capstones. Its overall plan, however, can no longer be determined, and the two upright stones are set splayed to one another; that on the W measures 0.53 m by 0.25 m and 0.15 m in height, and that on the E, which is heavily laminated, 1 m by 0.18 m and 0.8 m in height. The first of the capstones, its SE corner resting on the smaller of the two uprights, measures 2.1 m by 2.03 m and up to 0.3 m in thickness; two fragments are broken off at its NE corner. The second capstone lies immediately adjacent to the N, flush with the surface of the cairn, and measures 2.3 m by 1.7 m and 0.17 m in thickness. Small pieces of quartz lie scattered across the surface of the cairn (Figure 2).

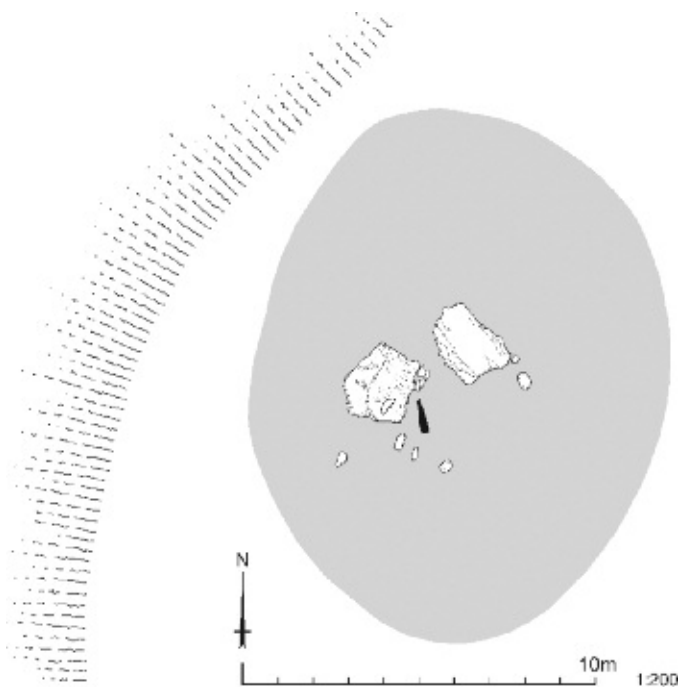


Figure 2. Plan of the chambered cairn.

The identification of the monument as a cairn is beyond question, and the size of the two large capstones argue for a chamber of Neolithic date rather than a cist of the Early Bronze Age. Geographically, the majority of Neolithic chambered cairns in the area belong to the Clyde tradition of megalithic building, a regional grouping that covers Argyll, the islands of Arran and Bute, much of south-west Scotland and up into Perthshire. Cairns of the Clyde group typically comprise a chamber defined by large stone slabs set on edge, often overlapping, sometimes subdivided into smaller compartments by septal slabs, and covered by a mound of stones and earth. In simple examples the covering cairn may be circular or oval, with access into the chamber only available from the body of the cairn and by the removal of a capstone, but in more developed forms, often of more than one period of construction, a series of large upright stones, arranged in a shallow semi-circle, define the façade of a forecourt in front of the entrance leading into the main chamber. Cairns elaborated in this manner tend to be trapezoidal on plan. Associated artefacts and the few radiocarbon dates that are available for this type of tomb, suggest that the Clyde cairns belong to the earliest phase of Neolithic monument building in Scotland (fourth millennium BC).

So where does the cairn in Garadh Ban Wood fit into this overall pattern? In terms of its surviving architectural detail, there is perhaps not enough visible evidence to place the cairn within the Clyde grouping, and only excavation can really provide the answer. Nevertheless, with capstones of such size, the monument is much more than a simple cist, and its oval shape and central chamber defined by thin edge-set slabs, slightly splaying and suggestive of an overlap, are in keeping with the more simple examples of Clyde-type tombs. As such, it provides us with a very welcome addition to the otherwise thin distribution of Neolithic funerary monuments in Stirlingshire, but one that has seen significant additions over the last thirty or so years.

The first of these new discoveries emerged in 1980 with the identification of a hitherto unrecorded long cairn at Edinchip, near Lochearnhead in Perthshire (Davidson and Henshall, 1984). This was followed in 1991 by the recognition of a chambered cairn at Auchenlaich near Callander, incorporated into the south-south-east end of an exceptionally long stony mound (*DES 1991*, 9). Then, in 1992, during the RCAHMS field survey of the area around the Braes of Doune, another four were found, three of which were identified as Clyde-type tombs (RCAHMS 1994, 6-8). More recently, in 2000, another Clyde-type chambered cairn was discovered at Carie during the RCAHMS Ben Lawers survey, undertaken in partnership with the National Trust for Scotland. In terms of the overall distribution of Neolithic funerary monuments, this steady trickle of new discoveries has helped to bridge the gap between the outlying group of cairns previously recorded in the glens of Perthshire and those examples in Argyll and the south-west. More tantalizingly, it holds the promise of yet more to come, particularly in areas covered by extensive forestry plantations that are now reaching maturity (Figure 3).

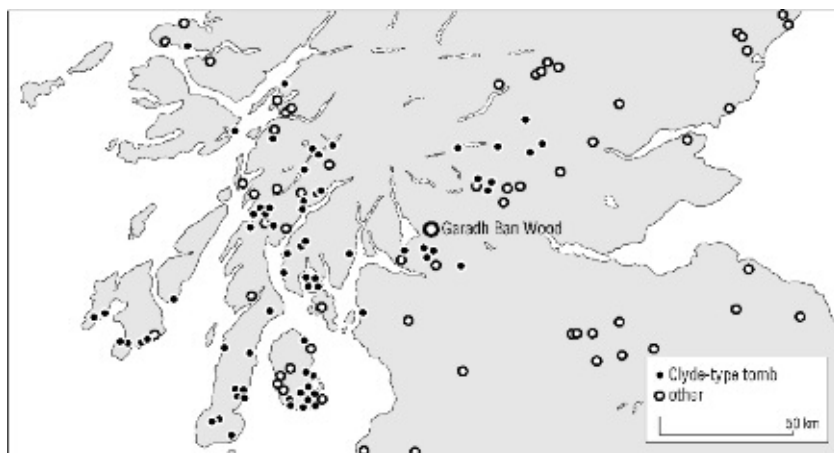


Figure 3. Distribution map showing the cairn in relation to Clyde-type tombs and other Neolithic funerary monuments.

A common feature of these cairns is their location on the fringes of the uplands, and in the case of the cairn in Garadh Ban Wood, its geographical position provides extensive and truly stunning views to Loch Lomond and further to the south-west. The paucity of comparative sites in the lower-lying ground can in part be explained by the intensity of later land use, reducing sites to little or no surface traces, but aerial photography is helping to extend the distribution of Neolithic burial monuments, supplementing the archaeological record with the discovery of at least two long barrows. One of these lies at Glenhead on the edge of a terrace to the south-east of the Ardoch Burn in Kilmadock parish, Stirlingshire, and while the barrow itself has been levelled by ploughing, the cropmarks of its flanking ditches are visible on aerial photographs. At Craighead, just across the border into Perthshire, a comparable pair of narrow ditches has also been revealed by aerial photography. No trace of a chamber can be detected on the aerial photographs of either, so it is not possible to claim that these are ploughed-out chambered cairns. It is perhaps more likely that these are unchambered long barrows, which are traditionally regarded as the typical funerary monuments of the eastern seaboard. When excavated, such barrows as that at Dalladies, Kincardineshire (Piggott, 1974), and more recently at Eweford West, East Lothian (Lelong and MacGregor, 2007), these have been found to cover timber mortuary structures, rather than stone-built chambers. Another timber mortuary structure was also found beneath the unchambered round mound at Pitnacree in Strath Tay, Perthshire (Coles and Simpson, 1965).

While fieldwork has been able to enhance the record of Neolithic funerary monuments in the fringes of the uplands, aerial photography is providing the equivalent for the adjacent lowlands. The RCAHMS programme of aerial

survey, however, is contributing much more than this, for it has added significantly to the repertoire of Neolithic monuments in the lowlands, revealing mixed assemblages of round and long mounds, timber halls, mortuary enclosures and cursus monuments. Examples of all of these monuments are now known sweeping up into the Forth Valley. The two long barrows have already been mentioned, while the large circular mound at Tulloch Knowe, near Doune, may well turn out to be a round barrow of Neolithic date (RCAHMS 1979, 9, No. 29). A timber hall has now been excavated at Claish just outside Callander (Barclay, Brophy and MacGregor, 2002), while a pit-defined cursus monument has been excavated at Bannockburn (Rideout, 1997). What was once considered a rather barren area in Neolithic Scotland has been shown to contain a diverse range of circular, long and very long monuments. This contrasts with the uplands, where the monuments are largely limited to chambered tombs and decorated stones.

Geographically, central Scotland sits at the seam between these two zones. On the face of it this appears to reinforce the long-standing view that stone built monuments occur to the west and timber built monuments to the east. However, nothing is ever as simple and clear-cut, and the excavations in advance of an extension to a sand and gravel quarry at Upper Largie, near Kilmartin in Argyll, led to the chance discovery of a pit-defined cursus and a pit-defined enclosure, both monuments more typically associated with lowland Scotland (DES 1997, 19-21). In effect, we should anticipate that the lowland repertoire extends throughout the uplands. In this sense, the monument at Auchenlaich (see above), three times as long as any other known long barrow, is more readily interpreted as a bank barrow or cursus, providing an upland expression of a type of linear monument more commonly found in the lowlands.

The cairn in Garadh Ban Wood has not only added to the number of Neolithic funerary monuments within this part of central Scotland, but has also contributed towards a greater understanding of the early prehistoric settlement. That so many new monuments have been identified in an area that can hardly be described as remote, must surely beg the question of what others yet await discovery.

Acknowledgements

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