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A Chambered Cairn on Dour Hill, Northumberland

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INTRODUCTION

THIS paper describes recent survey work carried out on behalf of the Northumberland National Park at the "long" cairn on Dour Hill, Northumberland, during March and April 1996 by The Archaeological Practice, Department of Archaeology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The aim was to produce a detailed topographic survey of the monument, made possible by the removal of the dense tree cover which had engulfed and obscured the monument for most of this century. The survey revealed that the so-called "long" cairn is in fact a chambered cairn which has been modified during subsequent periods. The original chambered cairn is probably of Neolithic date whereas the later modifications, which include the addition of two cists, probably date to the Early Bronze Age. This is the only chambered cairn so far recognised in Northumberland. Henceforth, the monument is referred to as the "Dour Hill Chambered Cairn".

TOPOGRAPHIC SETTING

The Dour Hill chambered cairn is located at NT792021 on the north-east side of the Upper Redesdale valley (fig. 1). It is visible as an elongated cairn, though much of the monument is still obscured by a large build up of vegetation on the stone surfaces (fig. 2).

The cairn has suffered from robbing which included the building of an adjacent sheepfold (Hardy 1881) itself now largely robbed out, as well as the disturbance caused by tree roots, vegetation growth and the movement downhill of cairn material. The monument is positioned

on a shelf high up on the valley side, though still some way below the summit of 415 m O.D. in what is now a modern clearing in the forestry land (fig. 3). It lies between the 340 and 350 m contours, and without the hindrance of the present forest cover, the views from the monument would be panoramic from south-east to north-west. However, from north-west round to south-east the visibility would have been minimal due to the continued rising ground of Dour Hill in this direction. The cairn is situated roughly parallel with the contours of the valley side though it rises continuously from west to east.

PREVIOUS WORK

The only previous work undertaken on the so-called "long" cairn was the cleaning out and exposure of a cist which is still visible at the east end of the monument on its south side (fig. 4), by Drs. Punshon and Dunlop Miller in the summer of 1932 (Cowen 1934, 40). During this investigation a flint scraper was recovered from soil at the base of the cist. Although a number of very brief text descriptions of the monument have since been made (cf. Arkle in Craw 1932; Cowen 1934; Newbiggin 1936), they have provided conflicting interpretations, describing the monument variously as "3 small round cairns", "a long cairn" and "a natural feature with a round cairn on top" respectively. The monument since established as the Dour Hill "long" cairn (Masters 1984) has never been surveyed or systematically investigated.

A circular cairn with a central cist burial was discovered during tree planting in 1975 (Jobey 1977) and is located along a small forestry

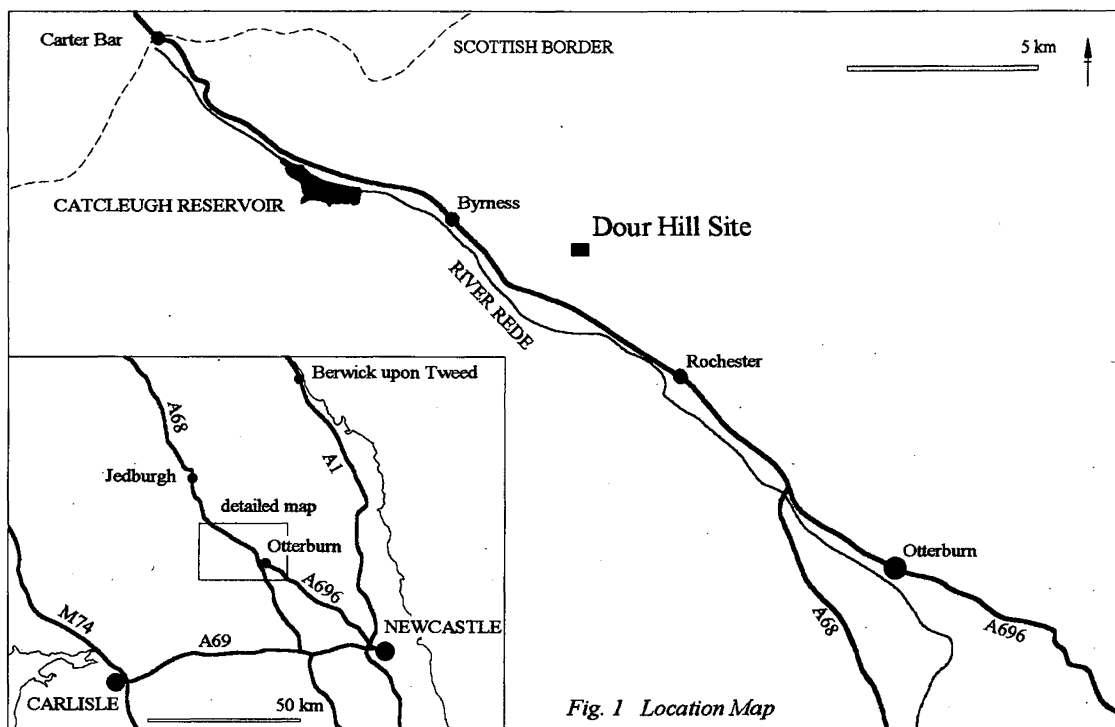


Fig. 1 Location Map

track c.250 m to the east of the chambered cairn (fig. 3). After its discovery was reported by the Forestry Commission to Professor Jobey, a small excavation was carried out on the cist area of the monument (*ibid*). The excavations showed that there had been two inhumation burials, one a child about 11 years and the other an infant of 6–9 months (*ibid*, 209). Each burial seems to have been accompanied by a food vessel, one of which was still complete, the other being represented by 7 small sherds scattered around the area of the cist that had previously been disturbed (*ibid*, 206). The complete pot is of Burgess' Northern Tripartite type (Burgess 1974), while of the fragmentary vessel, no more could be said except that it was from a globular or barrel-shaped vessel, decorated haphazardly with cord-impressed maggots (Jobey 1977, 206).

This cairn is now in a disturbed state appearing as a turf covered ring of cairn material with the exposed cist and capstone visible inside and located off-centre. This cairn was originally a low round cairn and not a ring cairn as it now appears (Beryl Charlton pers. comm.), and clearly dates to the Early Bronze Age given the primary association with a food vessel. It may, therefore, have been constructed contemporaneously with the modifications which took place on the chambered cairn nearby.

THE SURVEY

The topographic survey was undertaken by sampling the 3D co-ordinates of the vertices of a 0.5 m squared grid imposed over the monument. This allowed the form of the monument



Fig. 2 View of the chambered cairn looking north-west with chamber 2 in the foreground.

to be accurately captured, despite the dense vegetation cover and protruding angular cairn material, and for a 3D computerised model of the monument to be drawn in addition to a conventional line-drawing survey. For the surrounding topography, the grid resolution varied from 2 m to 4 m. Finer detail, where visible, was recorded individually. The majority of the survey was undertaken during a 2 week period in March 1996.

THE CHAMBERED CAIRN

The cairn has an overall NW–SE axis, a common feature of northern long mounds (cf. Manby 1970), suggesting a concern with solar events such as the rising and setting sun. This heavily robbed cairn measures 49 m long

over its entire length and is 5.4 m wide at the west end, 8 m wide in the centre and 5 m wide at the east end. The cairn is composed of angular sandstone blocks ranging in size from 20 cm across up to the orthostats at the east end, one of which (orthostat 1) measures 1.5 m by 1.16 m and protrudes 1.7 m above the ground surface. However, the average size of the stones is in the range of 20–40 cm across. A large stone, possibly outcropping natural or an earth fast boulder, is located at the west terminus of the cairn (fig. 5). It is unclear whether this ever marked the terminal of the cairn at this end, or whether it always lay beyond the extent of the cairn. The cairn can be divided, on a structural basis, into two broad phases on the basis of this survey. Each phase will be described in turn.

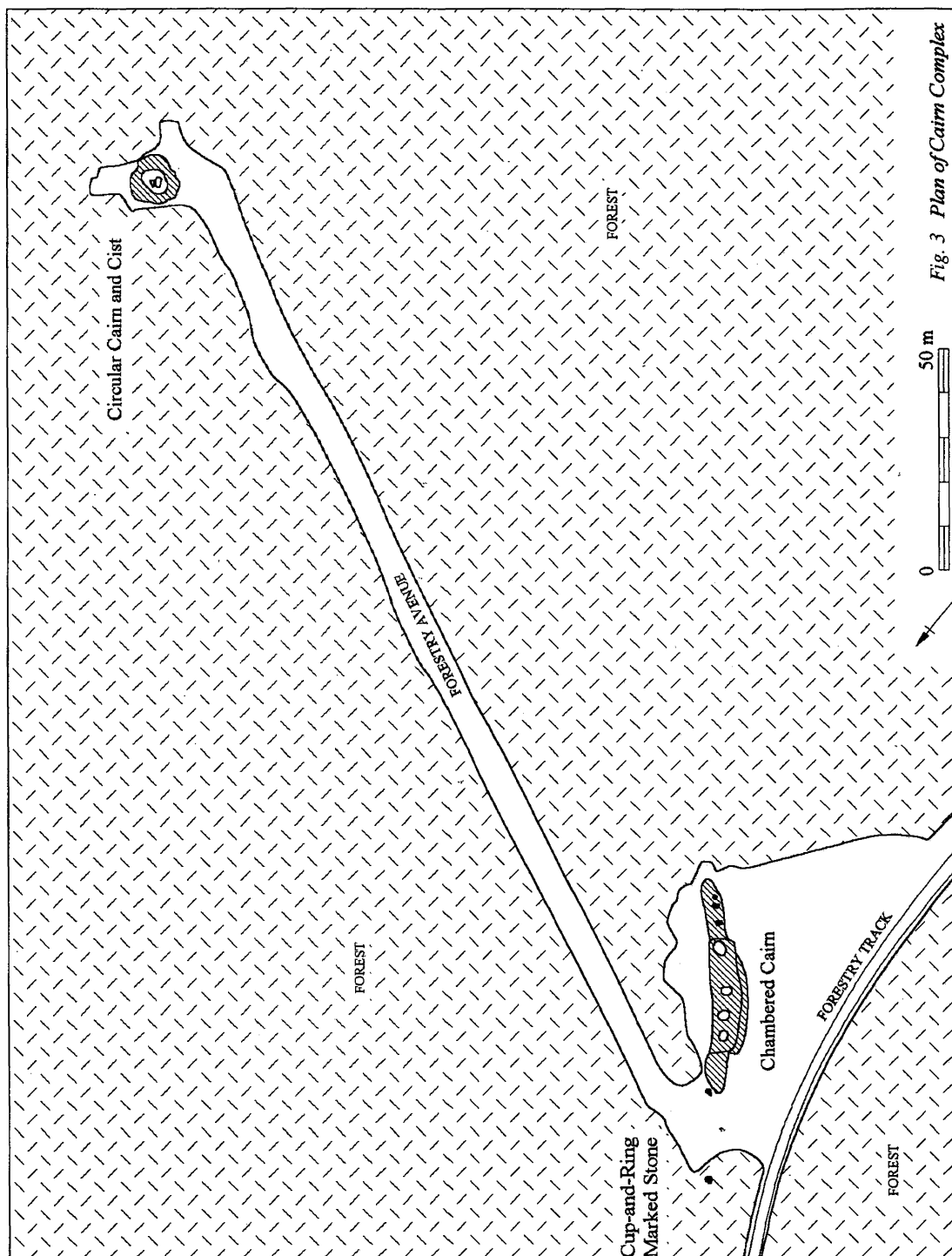


Fig. 3 Plan of Cairn Complex



Fig. 4 Cist at the east end of the chambered cairn. (Scale 0.2 m divisions.)

PHASE I

The original part of the cairn is the central D-shaped mound (fig. 6, Phase I), which contains two definite, and another two possible circular chambers within it. This earliest phase was constructed by first enhancing the south side of the natural shelf by building up an artificial level platform where the cairn was to stand. On top of this extended platform, made on the lip of the shelf, was then constructed the chambered cairn which approximates to a D-shape (fig. 6). The exact extent of this original part of the monument is not entirely clear on its eastern side due to extensive robbing, though it may be stated that its full east-west length was

in the region of 17.5 to 22.5 m. The width of the monument is more clear, being 7.5 m at its widest point, excluding the tumble on the north side.

The archaeological plan (fig. 6) shows the location of the two definite chambers, the connecting passage and the two probable entrance passages, together with the location of the other possible chambers. The roofs of the chambers have for the most part collapsed inwards, as appears to be the case with most of the connecting passage, though the entrance passage A still appears partly intact. The chambers were surveyed around their top edges. The wider internal base of the chamber was inaccessible due to the fragile overhanging



Fig. 5 View along the chambered cairn looking south-east.

corbelling and the infill of tumble and vegetation.

Chamber 1 is the largest chamber and is roughly circular in shape. Collapsed cairn material has filled up much of the inside, though the remaining parts of the upper chamber walls are visible. Here the constructional technique is clear: the walls were corbelled to create a conical type chamber. There is, however, no visible evidence to indicate how these corbelled chambers were closed off at the top. It is possible that a large capstone may have originally closed the gap. This chamber measures 1.7 m in diameter where it is exposed at its highest edge, and the cairn around the chamber at this point measures at least 2 m

above the projected ground surface. There are two entrances into this chamber from the outside of the cairn, both of which are located on the north side and open on to the level shelf. These entrance passages are both short and narrow, measuring 0.6 m wide by 2 m long in the case of entrance A and 0.6 m wide by 2.5 m long in the case of entrance B. At least one of the entrances (entrance B) appears to have been deliberately blocked.

Chamber 2 is also circular in shape, though it appears to have a slightly smaller diameter than Chamber 1, this being 1.4 m. Again most of its interior has become filled with collapsed cairn material, though the north-west wall of this chamber is the best preserved section of

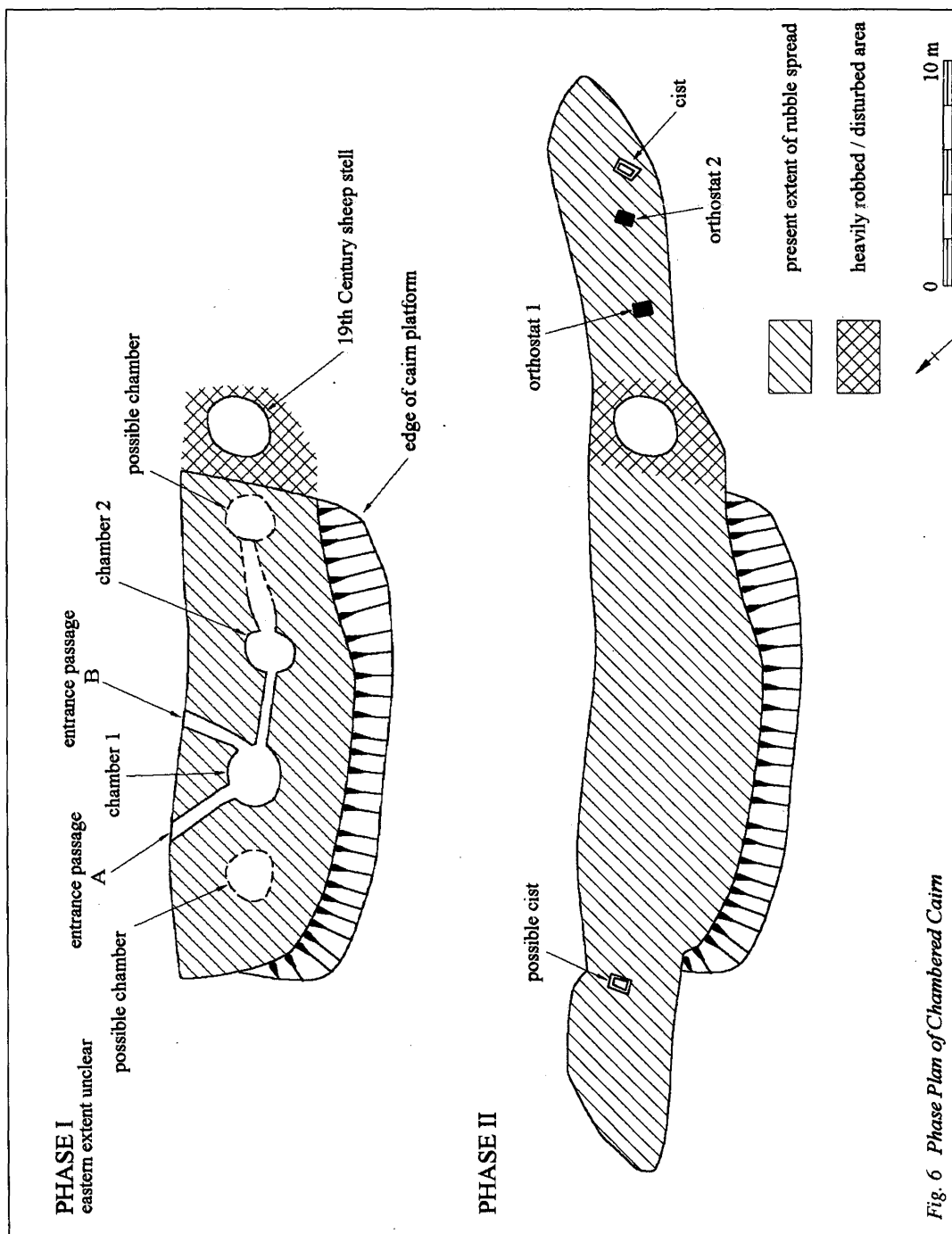




Fig. 7 Detail of the corbelling in chamber 2. (Scale 0.1 m divisions.)

corbelling that is presently visible (fig. 7). A stone with one deep and one shallow cup mark is located on top of the remaining wall of the south side of this chamber. As this stone is now loose it is not certain whether it is in its original position. However, even if it has been moved it must certainly have come from somewhere within the cairn. In its current position the cup marks face upwards, out of the tomb, and as such this kind of positioning is similar to that of the cup marked slabs at Dalladies (cf. Piggott 1973) and Newgrange (O'Kelly 1982), where the cup marked surfaces are also located on the sides of slabs facing out of the tomb. The deep cup mark on the Dour Hill slab (fig. 8) is certainly hand crafted, whereas

the shallower cup mark could be of natural origin. Another stone next to this one has a cup and groove, though they are probably the result of natural weathering.

Chambers 1 and 2 are connected by a largely collapsed passage which runs for 3 m east-west between them (fig. 6; fig. 9). This passage is visible as a narrow corridor of linear collapse. A few of the capstones along the length of this passage still appear to be in position and empty spaces can be frequently observed below them. However, vegetation cover on much of the cairn material restricts the visibility of many of the details of this feature.

Vague traces of a third chamber are evident to the west of Chamber 1 (fig. 6), hinted at by



Fig. 8 Cup-marked stone next to chamber 1. (Cup-mark approx. 6 cm diameter.)

an area of roughly circular collapse with voids visible between the stones. In addition the area which has been heavily robbed out to the east of Chamber 2, at the eastern extent of the original cairn, may have contained another chamber as the connecting passage can be traced running further east from Chamber 2 before that too is truncated by the robbing.

The circular feature to the east of the robbed area and located beyond the D-shaped built-up platform for the original cairn is almost certainly Hardy's sheep stell (cf. Hardy 1881). The robbing of the east end of the chambered cairn was no doubt carried out to construct the adjacent stell. The dense vegetation on and around the stones prevented a

more detailed analysis without the stripping away of this vegetation cover.

The position of this chambered cairn was carefully thought out so that the cairn rested on the shoulder of the valley side shelf. The entrances to the cairn, and thus the front of the cairn, open on to the flat shelf. This level area to the front of the cairn affords a space in which activities and an audience could be situated, reminiscent of the forecourts of the better known chambered tombs of Scotland and Wessex. Also, the location of the cairn on the shoulder of the shelf means that the view from the shelf to the cairn entrance/s (i.e. the main focus of attention) is embellished by the panoramic backdrop of the far valley side



Fig. 9 Collapsed connecting passage running from centre right towards top right. (Picture shows approx. 5 m length of cairn.)

immediately visible over the top of the cairn, thus providing a dramatic setting for the enactment of ceremony and ritual.

PHASE II

A distinct second phase, marked by the remodelling of the monument, resulted in the creation of an overall form vaguely resembling the “long” cairn mentioned by previous commentators. This remodelling comprised the addition of a wing, or extension, to both the east and west ends of the chambered cairn, which still remained approximately central to the new monument layout.

The east extension measures between 13 and 18 m long and 4.6 m wide, tapering to 2 m at its east terminus. This wing still stands to a height of 1 m above the projected ground surface in places. Within this extension are two large sandstone orthostats; orthostat 1 (fig. 10) measuring 1.5 m by 1.16 m by 1.7 m visible above ground surface, and orthostat 2 (fig. 11) measuring 0.8 m by 0.6 m by 1 m visible above ground surface. The occurrence of orthostats within the body of long mounds is evidenced elsewhere at sites such as Skelmore Heads, Raiset Pike, Slewcairn, Lochill and probably also at nearby Bellshiel Law (Masters 1984). Presumably contemporary with the construc-



Fig. 10 Orthostat 1. (Scale 0.25 m divisions.)



Fig. 11 Orthostat 2. (Scale 0.2 m divisions.)

tion of this eastern extension is the cist burial within it which lies 0.9 m to the east of orthostat 1 (fig. 3), which perhaps functioned as a burial marker. It was from the base of this cist that a flint scraper was recovered during earlier investigations (Cowen 1934).

The west extension measures 9 m long and 5 m wide, tapering to 2 m at its western terminal. This part of the cairn stands up to 1.5 m high in places above the projected ground surface. There are a few upright and leaning sandstone slabs, and a large orthostat located together in this west extension (fig. 12). These appear to be the remains of a slumped or disturbed cist, however the density of vegetation

over this area precludes any definite attribution as a cist without systematic removal of the surrounding vegetation and some excavation work. The possible orthostat has at least three unusual shallow disc shapes, averaging 5 cm across, on its surface.

CHRONOLOGY

Typically, the chambered cairn can be expected to be a Neolithic monument and probably dates to the earlier part of this period. However, chambered cairns have a long currency within the Neolithic, extending



Fig. 12 Possible cist at west end of chambered cairn. (Scale 0.1 m divisions.)

generally from the fourth millennium into the mid third millennium B.C., and thus this typological dating only provides a very broad temporal indicator. The cup marked outcrop rock, identified and recorded by Beckensall (1995), also probably dates to this same broad period. The cist burial at the east end of the remodelled chambered cairn indicates that this monument was still being used into the Early Bronze Age (c.2000–1400 B.C.), when a secondary remodelling of the monument appears to have taken place. The round cairn excavated by Jobey, with its cist and food vessel associations, is certainly datable to the Early Bronze Age and may, therefore, be contemporary with the cist burial/s and remodelling of

the chambered cairn. This continuity of burial on this part of the valley side, together with the reuse of the chambered cairn, indicates that the sacred associations with this specific area persisted over a considerable period, possibly for a thousand years or more.

ASSOCIATIONS

Dour Hill was evidently considered a significant area throughout the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, and possibly even from earlier times. Even though this area is now heavily disturbed and masked by the artificially constructed forest, it has still been possible to

identify an important cluster of ceremonial monuments which include: (i) a multi-period chambered cairn, (ii) a cup and ring marked outcrop, (iii) a round cairn with internal cist and, (iv) two other possible round cairns of unknown form or date, identified by Jobey (1977), but which could not be relocated during the course of this survey.

There are very few chambered cairns known in northern England, and apart from Dour Hill, no others are presently known from Northumberland. A number of chambered tombs are known from the south of the region including the concentration in the Peak District (Manby 1958; Hart 1981) and two in Staffordshire (Manby 1970). Further north chambered cairns become rare with known sites at the Pikestones on Anglezark Moor, Lancashire (Lynch 1966), the Black Hill cairn, Bradley, West Yorkshire (Raistrick 1931) and the chambered cairn on Great Ayton Moor, North Yorkshire (Hayes 1967) widely dispersed. In south-western Scotland there are a significant number of chambered tombs in Dumfries and Galloway including the Bargrennan group (Murray 1992) and other cairns such as Slewcairn (Masters 1984) and Cairnholy (Piggott and Powell 1949). However, in the eastern borders in general there are, apart from Dour Hill, only a few possible, though unconfirmed, sites. These sites include the one mentioned at Spithope, also Upper Redesdale, in the Northumberland County History (vol. XV, p. 38), 3.5 km west of Dour Hill (Masters 1984). Although this site was recently thought to have become "lost" in the forest (Masters 1984) it has just been rediscovered by forestry workers and the tree cover around it removed (Paul Frodsham pers. comm.).

Therefore, the Dour Hill chambered cairn takes on particular significance given the rarity of this type of monument in northern England. However, as none of the long cairns of the borders have been extensively excavated, it may be that chambered structures are not as rare as the present external form of these monuments indicates. Consequently we may expect further evidence to emerge during the course of further research, which would show a wider distri-

bution of Neolithic chambered monuments than is apparent at the moment. At present, this survey only demonstrates our ignorance of the stone cairns of this region, hence the surprise of the chambers. After his excavations of long cairns in nearby Dumfries, Masters (1984, 72) observed that, "Neither at Lochill nor Slewcairn were any of the elements visible before excavation, which provides us with a reminder, if one is needed, of the limitations of fieldwork [field survey] evidence".

On the lower lying areas of northern England earthen Neolithic barrows are more common (cf. Manby 1970). Excavation on many such sites has shown evidence for timber mortuary structures underlying these mounds, or possibly having once formed wooden chambers. The most recently excavated example of a timber mortuary structure with timber façade was the Neolithic cairn at Streethouse on the Cleveland coast (cf. Vyner 1984). It is entirely possible that in the stony northern uplands, in areas which have escaped the ravages of the plough and stone robbing, other undetected chambered cairns exist possibly as the translation in stone of the timber and earth counterparts on the lower lying ground. The Streethouse cairn is in a lowland location where, unusually, outcropping stone was available for a cairn, being positioned as it is on the coast near a rocky cliff line. However, even in such situations the chamber and facade were still constructed from timber rather than stone and as such no doubt reflects the relative ease of access to different raw materials in different environmental situations.

As more of the Neolithic cairns of northern England are investigated it seems that continued access to the remains of the ancestors, by way of chambered burial places, was indeed an important aspect Neolithic life in the north. Archaeologically this remains more difficult to detect in the north and east, where most of the chambers were made from timber, than in the west where monumental cairns in megalithic stone are more common. However, in remote upland areas of the north which have escaped severe robbing and intensive land-use, such as at Dour Hill, stone built chambered cairns do

exist. Many others may await recognition, though this is hindered by the present surface form and visibility of many upland cairns, and is therefore, only something which archaeological excavation can reveal in most cases.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this area of Dour Hill has been a focus for ceremonial activity of varying nature over a long period extending, it seems, from the earlier Neolithic through to the Early Bronze Age. Clearly this part of the landscape was marked out as being of particular significance by many generations who continued to appropriate that significance as they reworked monuments into new forms (i.e. the chambered cairn and its subsequent phases) and ultimately constructed new forms (i.e. the round cairn) of their own, no doubt to express the reworking of beliefs, social order and relationships with the natural world. Indeed, the acts of creating new monuments out of the old may in themselves have contributed to the creation of new cosmogonies (Barrett 1994).

At present, though, the Dour Hill complex still remains poorly understood in terms of (i) its actual extent, (ii) its chronology (except in general terms) and, (iii) its changing relevance over time to the people who used these monuments. However, with the clearance of the forest around the site it has now been able to be more accurately surveyed and characterised. Therefore, although this survey has added to our knowledge of this monument complex it is really just the first stage of recording in our attempt to understand them.

POSTSCRIPT

Since the fieldwork was completed and this article submitted for publication, two standing stones, one with a cup mark on its vertical side near its base, have been discovered on a subsequent visit. These standing stones are aligned roughly on the same alignment as the forestry avenue marked in fig. 3 but situated further to

the east beyond the round cairn. They therefore form a roughly straight line with the cup and ring marked stone already noted. As these stones are upstanding and form visible markers when walking along the contours of the hill it would seem that they demarcate an ancient routeway across the hillside which led directly past the round cairn and down past, or to, the chambered cairn. It may be no coincidence that the forestry avenue takes this same route. This suggests that this burial complex was sited on an old track, possibly sacred, marked out by standing stones and carved rocks. The forest still conceals undiscovered archaeological treasures!

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Abbreviations:

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 AA⁵ Archaeologia Aeliana, 5th series
 PSAN⁴ Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle, 4th series
 PSAS Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

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