Cairnderry chambered cairn, Dumfries and Galloway: survey and excavations 2002. Interim report

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Introduction: the background to the project

Two different types of Neolithic chambered tomb have been identified in western Dumfries and Galloway. The first group have been described as 'Clyde' monuments and are characterised by multiple chambers set within a long cairn with a stone-built façade (Henshall 1972). Four of the seven Clyde monuments in Dumfries and Galloway (Cairnholy I and II (Piggott and Powell 1949) and Mid Gleniron I and II (Corcoran 1969)) have been excavated and these sites seem to be early Neolithic in date and consist of several discrete phases (as shown at Mid Gleniron by Corcoran 1969). The second group of monuments are the 'Bargrennan' sites, of which 14 have been identified (Henshall 1972; Murray 1992). These sites have a small chamber or chambers with thin (often impassable) passages and are set within round cairns (Henshall 1972; Murray 1992). The only recorded excavation of a Bargrennan monument was at Bargrennan White Cairn in 1949 (Piggott and Powell 1949). However, the chamber had been robbed out and it has not possible to suggest a construction date for this site. Fragments of cremated bone and incised late Neolithic pottery were recovered from above the slabs lining the passageway, and charcoalised remains of oak found in a pit at the entrance of the passage (Piggott and Powell 1949, 150-1). It is not possible to tell if the later Neolithic finds date from an early or late use of the chamber and passage. Henshall produced a survey of all the monuments in 1972, and apart from Murray's (1992) reconsideration of the Bargrennan sites, little work has been done since. Vicki Cummings examined the landscape settings of the chambered tombs of south-west Scotland as part of her doctoral research and demonstrated that the Bargrennan monuments are not only structurally quite different to the Clyde sites but they are also located in radically different parts of the landscape (see Cummings 2001). The Clyde monuments are located in the lowlands on fertile land, while the Bargrennan sites are located in the marginal uplands of western Galloway (for further details see Cummings 2002). It is possible to interpret the differences between the Clyde and Bargrennan sites in two ways. First, the different distributions of these two monument types may suggest that the Bargrennan monuments were later in date than the Clyde monuments (this suggestion is favoured by Murray 1992). If this was the case it may suggest that people lived in the coastal regions in the early Neolithic and gradually moved inland over time. This model has implications for the origins of the Neolithic in this area and also for the economic use of the region throughout this period. Alternatively, the two monument types may be contemporary. There are several ways of interpreting this suggestion.

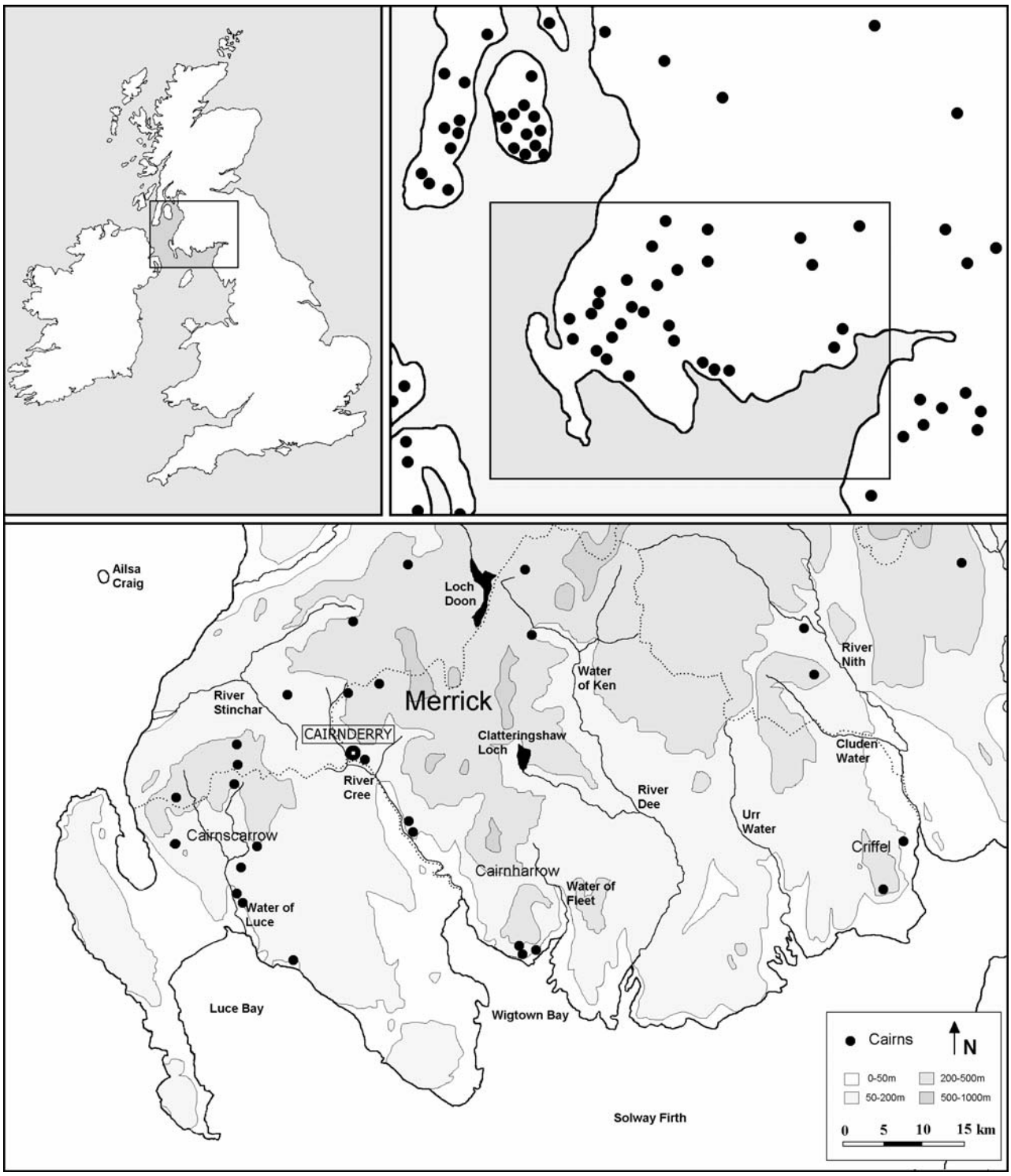

Figure 1. Location of Cairnderry chambered cairn in south-west Scotland (after Cummings 2002)

While it is possible to imagine two different communities living in Dumfries and Galloway and constructing different kinds of monument, it might also suggest that different parts of the landscape were directly related to different forms of monument. This may imply the uses of different locales in a seasonal round (people may have been moving inland over the summer months to follow game or to feed stock) or other connections between practices and places. A thorough programme of excavation of Bargrennan and Clyde monuments could allow some comparisons between Neolithic patterns of land use and those suggested by the robust evidence for seasonal use of the landscape by Mesolithic people (Cherry and Cherry 1997; Cole 1963; Cormack and Coles 1968; Edwards 1996).

The overall research programme

The excavation of a Bargrennan monument was proposed with a primary aim of obtaining material for radiocarbon dating. The dating of these monuments is crucial in developing our understanding of the origins and development of the Neolithic in this area. Furthermore, an examination of a Bargrennan monument may give preliminary indication of differences or similarities in the patterns of use and construction of Bargrennan sites compared to Clyde sites. It is anticipated that these results would form a new set of questions for further investigations into both sets of monuments and other Neolithic sites in the region.

Cairnderry sits at the centre of the known distribution of Bargrennan monuments and has three chambers set within a round cairn (Figures 1 and 2). The site has been robbed (see below) but it is possible that material may survive in at least one of the chambers. One of the primary aims of the excavation is to obtain material for radiocarbon dating. However, it is also desirable to gain a better understanding of the development of the site itself. Was the monument constructed in one single phase, or do the three chambers represent three separate phases of activity? Does Henshall's plan accurately represent the monument (see Figure 2)? Was there activity at the site prior to the construction of a monument? How was the monument used by people in the Neolithic and in subsequent periods? Was there activity around the outside of the monument? How does the material culture (where recovered) compare to that found within the Clyde monuments? In order to address these issues, a multi-season programme of investigation and excavation was proposed. This interim describes the

results of the first, preliminary season, which was designed to act as an assessment of the site for further work proposed in 2003/4.

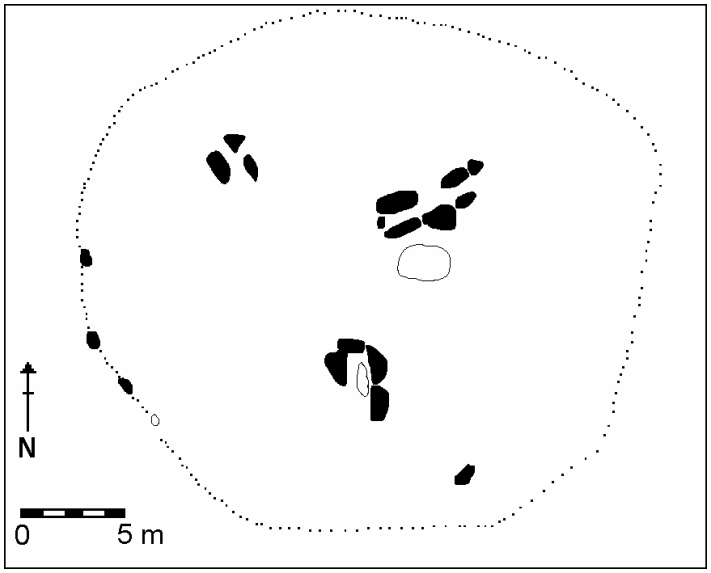

Figure 2. The plan of Cairnderry by Henshall (1972)

The location of the site

The site is set on the side of a valley on the edge of Glengruboch Moor at 155m OD, above the River Cree. The site is presently on Forestry Enterprise land in the heart of the Galloway forest. Trees surround the monument on all sides, although these are due to be harvested in 2006. The monument is located just off the A714, eight kilometres south-east of Barhill. The site is close to a stream, Goat Burn, although the stream cannot be seen or heard from the site itself. The cairn itself is situated on a natural rise in the landscape, and the body of the cairn seems to fully incorporate the prominence of this knoll. Prior to excavation the extent of the cairn was unclear, but it is now evident that the diameter of the cairn is roughly 25m across west to east.

Because the monument is surrounded by trees on all sides it is difficult to ascertain precisely the parts of the landscape that would be visible from the site. Since the cairn is located on the lower reaches of Wheeb Hill it seems likely that the view to the north-west would be restricted. It seems likely that the Merrick Mountains would be visible from the site (this is a characteristic of the Bargrennan monuments: see Cummings 2002). Views

to the south and west would also be quite wide-ranging, looking out to Barjarg Hill and the Barrhill pass.

Description of the monument

Prior to excavation, the monument was a large grassy mound covered with dense vegetation (mainly grasses and ferns), with a forestry road running immediately to the east of the mound. It was impossible to define the edge of the cairn, although it was clear that the monument had been disturbed in the past. Three chambers were visible at the heart of the mound, one to the north-east, one of the south and a third poorly-preserved chamber to the north-west. The north-east chamber survived as a number of slabs which defined a chamber and passage, and a displaced capstone lying to the south of the chamber. The southern chamber was the largest of the three and survived as several large slabs defining a chamber area, with the capstone lying on its side in the chamber. The third chamber survived as two opposing slabs which may be the sides of either a chamber or passage and a third displaced stone. In addition to the chambers, four large stones were visible to the west of the mound, and these are described by Henshall (1972, 448) as the remains of a possible peristalith. She also notes the presence of a stone a short distance from the southern chamber, which she also suggests may be part of a peristalith (we eventually recorded this as stone 1 within the kerb). She marks four of the five peristalith stones (stones 8 - 11 on our plan) as *in situ*. The site is surrounded by dense forestry in all directions which have severely disturbed or destroyed additional archaeological remains. A number of walls lie a short distance from the site, particularly to the west.

History of the site

An older OS map shows a sheep enclosure to the north-west of the cairn. Henshall (1972, 448) records that the cairn was greatly reduced some time before 1896 when it was recorded in its present condition. She suggests that the cairn was robbed for road building materials (Henshall 1972). Forestry had just been planted around the site when Henshall visited the site and the monument survives today in the same state that Henshall found it 30 years ago.

Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the preliminary season was to gain an accurate understanding of the state of the monument for future investigation. We wished to assess the survival of the cairn and the extent of the cairn, but without any excavation into the monument and deposits contained within it or surrounding it.

Methodology

The monument was planned and a contour survey was conducted prior to the excavation (Figure 4). A geophysical survey (using a fluxgate magnatometer) was carried out on the monument itself. A large trench (Trench A) was laid out in the north-west quadrant of the mound in order to reveal cairn material in this area (Figure 3). This trench was subsequently lengthened to the south-west. A second trench (Trench B) was opened up on the south-east side of the mound in order to examine a possible kerbstone.

Excavation results

We revealed the cairn in the main trench. Our scheduled monument consent specified that we were to undertake no excavation of structures or deposits, so we simply exposed and cleaned the cairn in the trench. For the most part, the cairn was in a good state of preservation. It consists of a number of similar sized boulders mainly with rounded surfaces (context 002) surrounded and covered by a reddish brown to reddish black root-rich clayey topsoil (001). In some places, the cairn seems to survive only one course deep, while in others it is clear that several layers of stone survive. However, in some areas the cairn stones had been completely removed, revealed an mottled layer of orange and pale yellow silty-clay soil (003). This layer was distinct from (001) where the stones were absent, and careful excavation of (001) revealed stone-holes left behind by removal of cairn stones (see Figure 7). At the top of the interface between (001) and (003) in some areas where (002) had been removed several small and fragmentary sherds of prehistoric pottery were recovered.

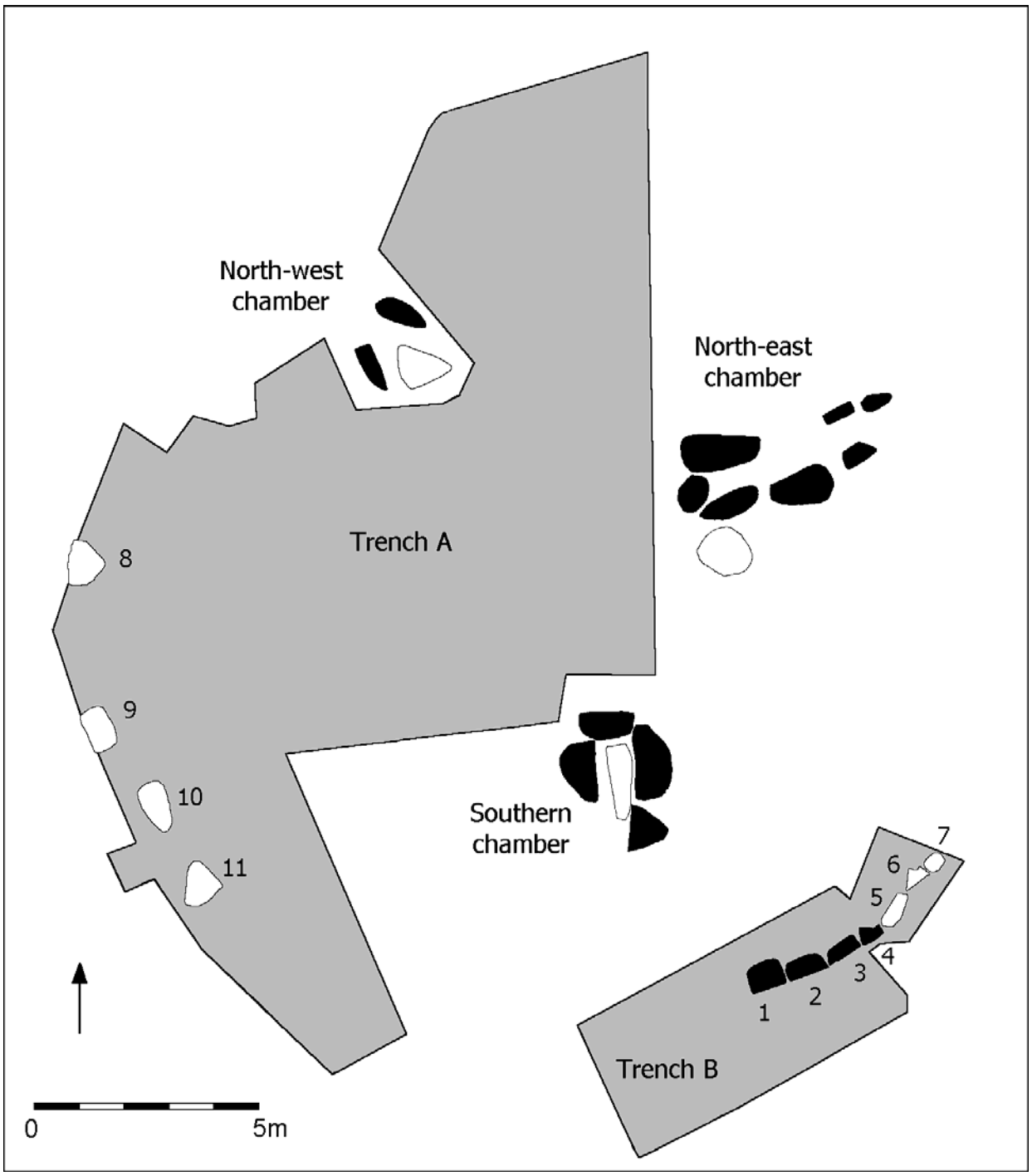

Figure 3. The trenches laid out at Cairnderry. Stones which are definitely *in situ* are in black.

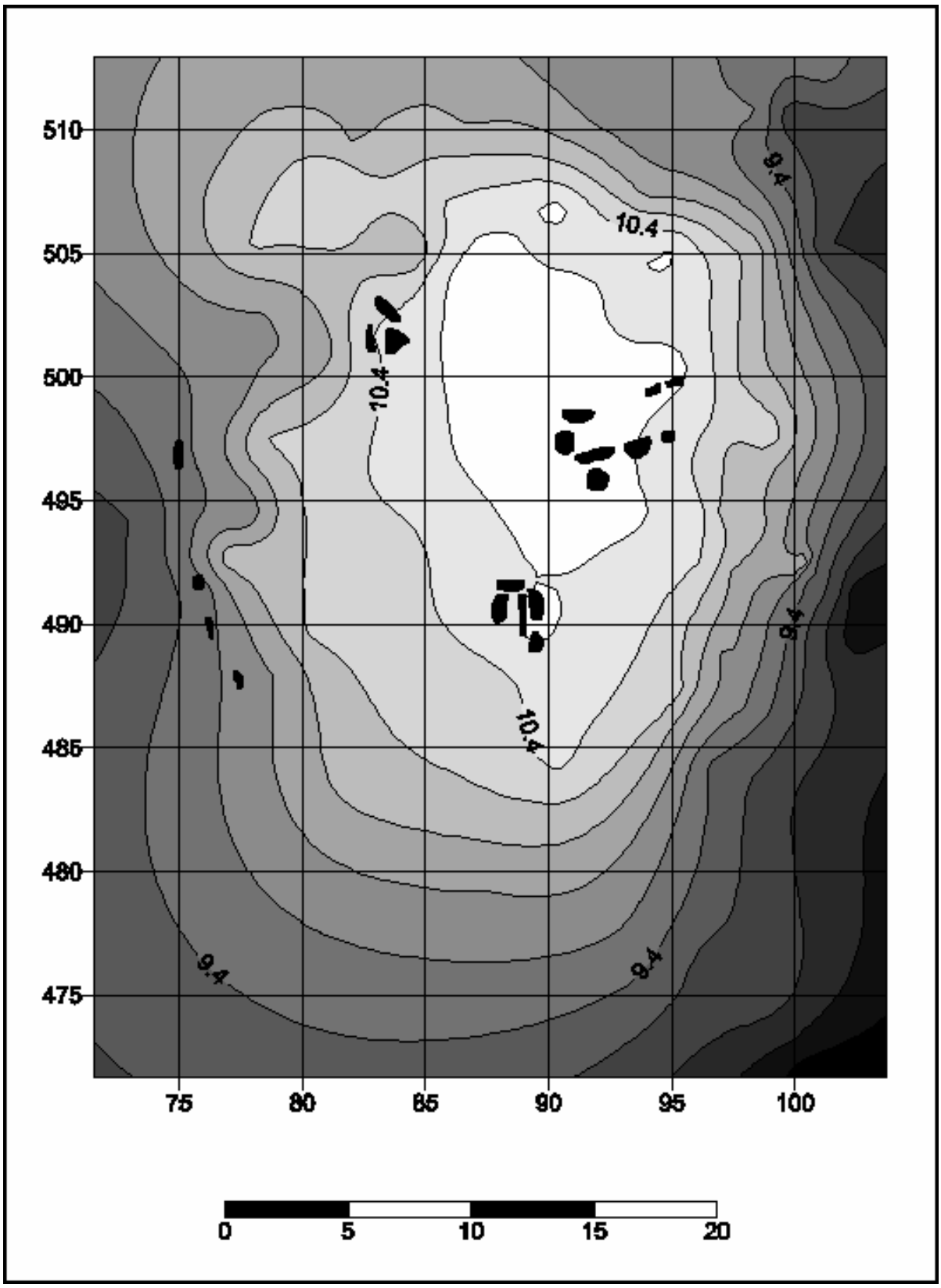

Figure 4. Contour survey around the site

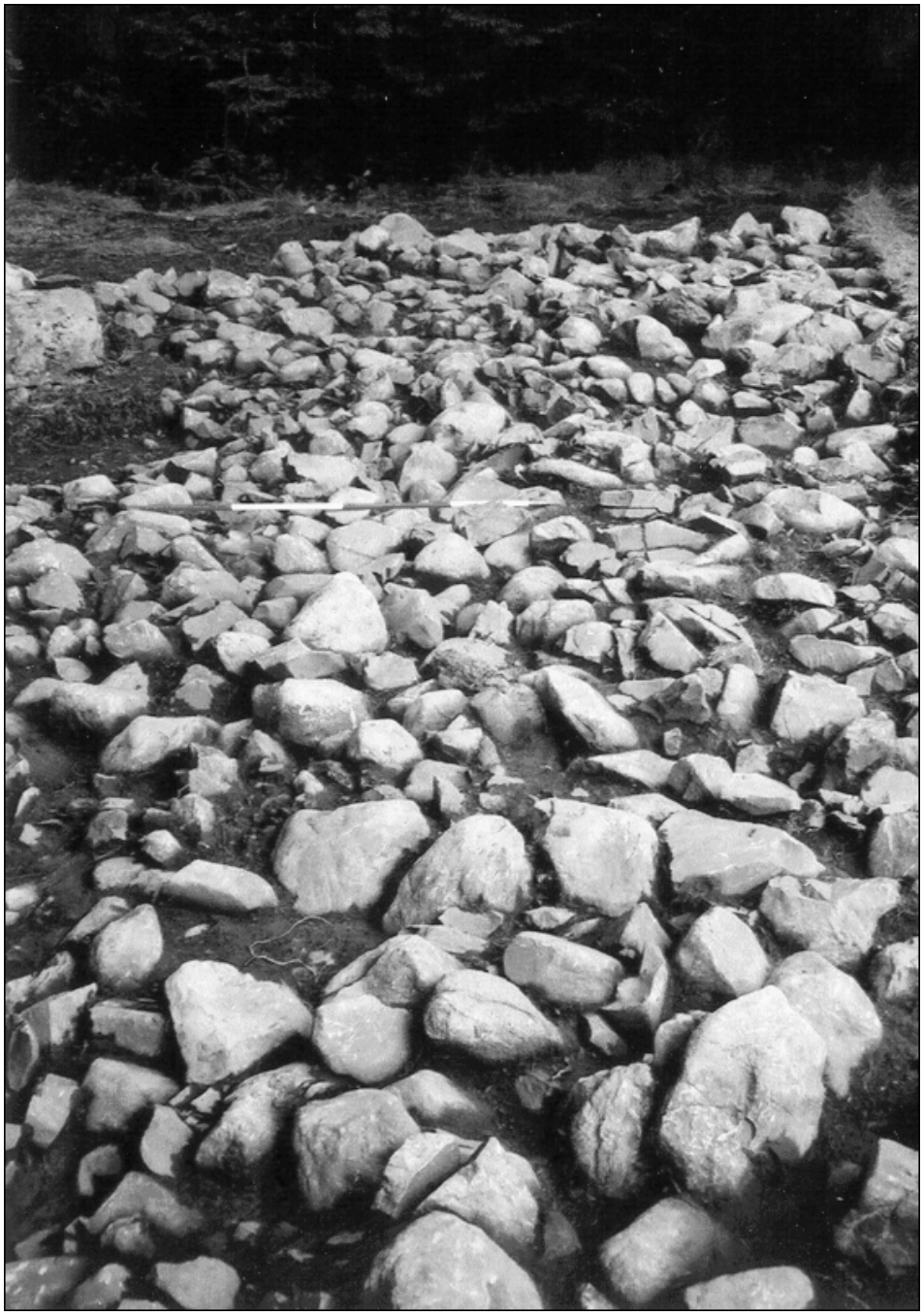

Figure 5. The cairn exposed to the north-west of the monument, looking north

There was also substantial evidence of the cairn having been robbed from the edges to the north and south of the main trench; in these areas there were large patches were no cairn material survives. It is suggested that the cairn here had been robbed in order to construct the structures noted on the old OS map (Jane Murray *pers. comm*.).

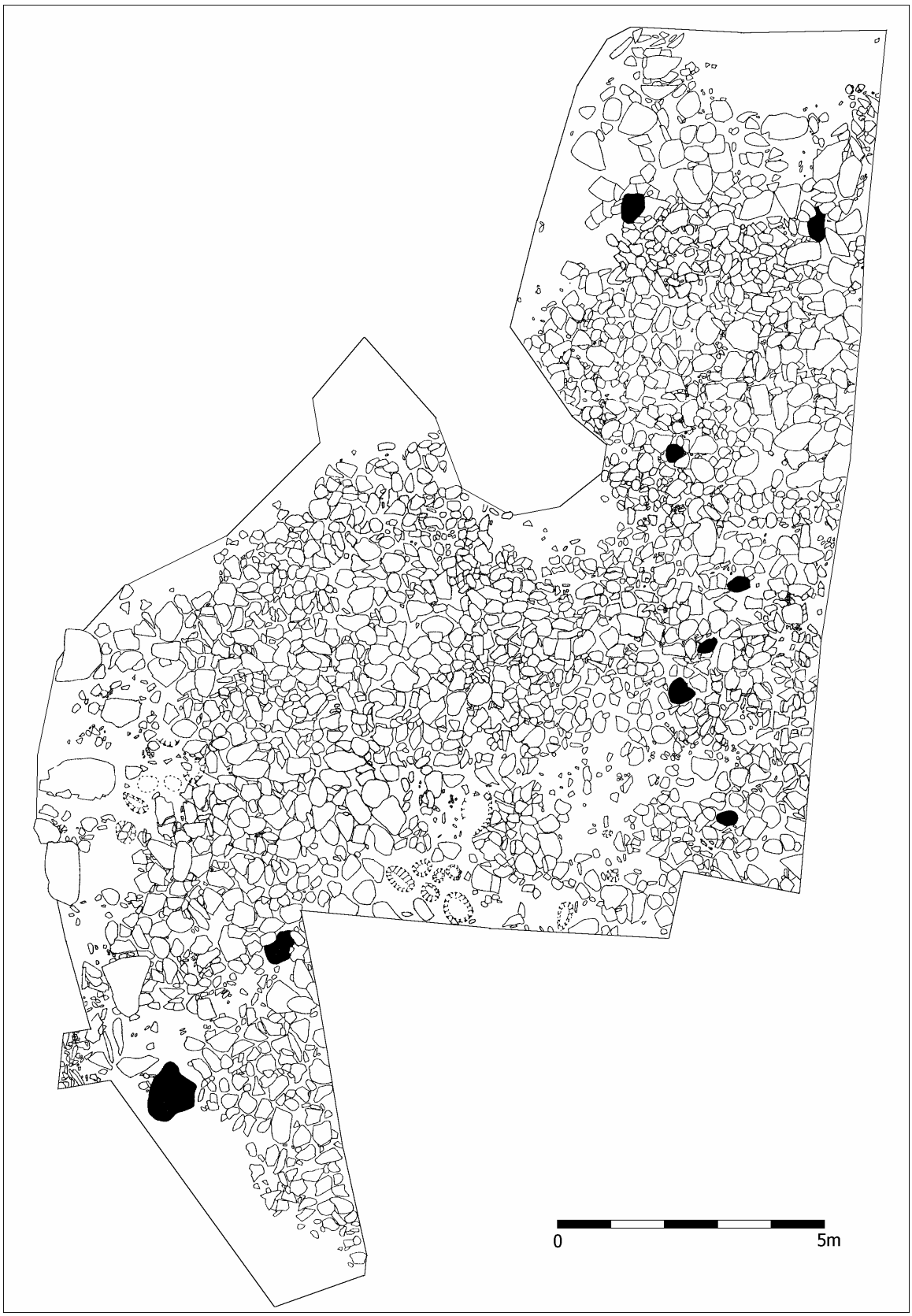

Figure 6. Plan of the main trench. Granite boulders are in black

Figure 7. A number of stoneholes in the western part of the cairn, showing how the cairn has been robbed away to the ground surface in a number of places

We also opened a second trench in the south-east of the site, around Henshall's suspected peristalith stone, which exposed part of a kerb. The kerb was a row of stones most of which exhibited a very vertical edge and flat plane facing outwards from the cairn. Although Henshall (1972) had speculated that there may have been a peristalith at this site it was not thought that there would be any evidence of an upstanding kerb. Kerbs have not been noted at any of the other Bargrennan monuments. Four stones of the kerb at Cairnderry (numbers 1 to 4) are *in situ*. The remainder of the kerb stones (numbers 5 to 7) seem to be slightly displaced, and do not quite follow the line of the other stones. In this southern trench the kerb encompassed slipped cairn material (012) above *in-situ* cairn stones, and was abutted by slipped cairn material outside the cairn, covering in places a layer of bright orange fill included very small flat stones which may have slipped from the cairn (013) abutting the lower part of kerb-stones 2 and 3 where it was exposed through a shallow sondage. This fill must rest above the original land-surface, and at present conceals the base of the kerb-stones. Future excavation of this fill may reveal prehistoric deposits around the kerb if any are present. Furthermore, there was considerable disturbance in front of these stones, with a large quantity of rubble (012)

deposited in front of kerbstones 4-7. These stones were so loose and fragmented it seems they may have been placed there reasonable recently, perhaps when the rest of the cairn was robbed.

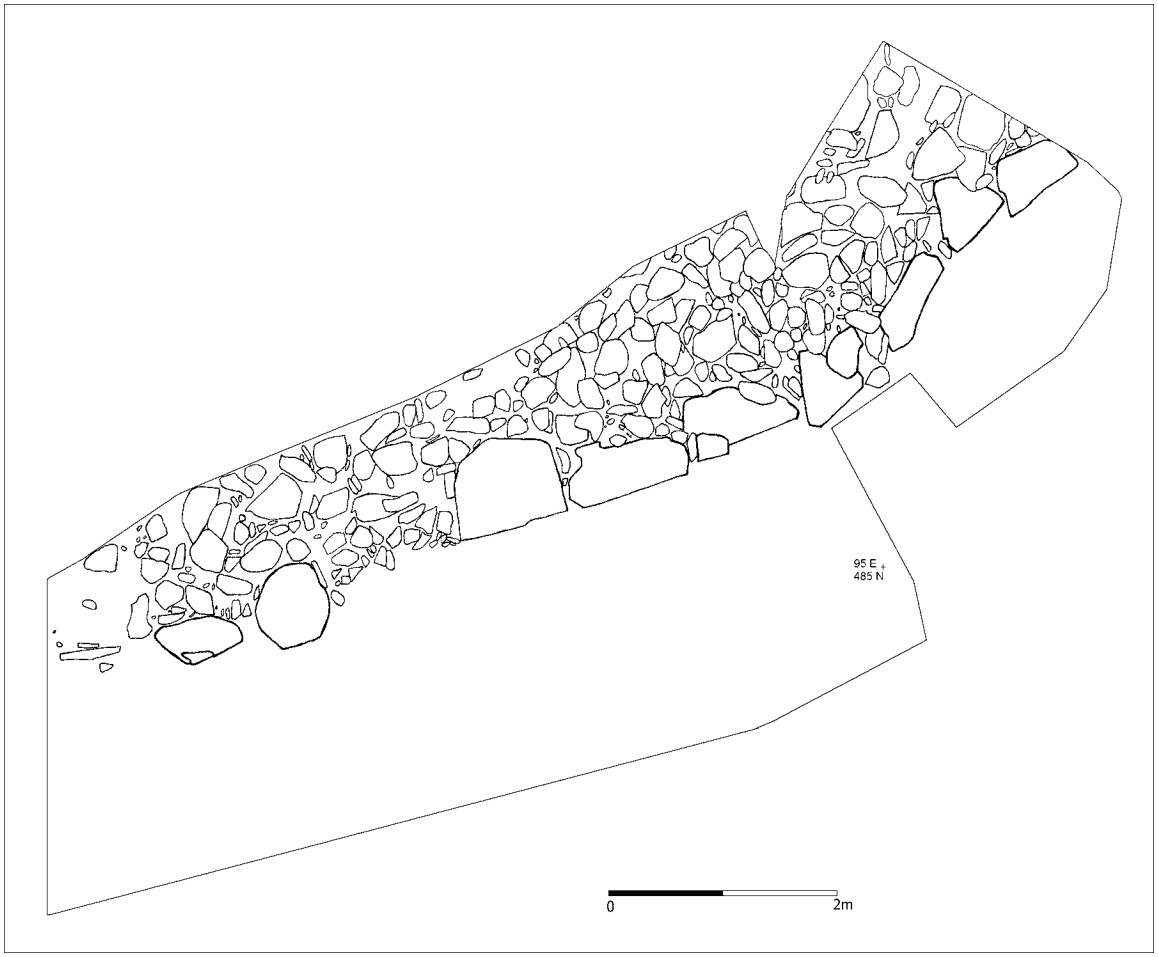

Figure 8. Plan of trench B. The kerb stones are marked with darker lines.

It seems, therefore, that the cairn largely survives in the centre of the monument, but has been severely robbed out in places and around the edges. The north-western side of the cairn has also been severely disturbed by the presence of trees. The possible peristalith identified by Henshall is most likely not *in situ*, although the possibility exists that these stones may have been displaced from a kerb higher up the cairn. These stones (numbers 8-11) are quite unlike the kerb stones in the south of the monument, being far larger, bulkier, and not having extremely flat surfaces. The kerb identified to the south-east side of the cairn was not found on the western side of the cairn, but may extend round the eastern side.

Figure 9. The kerb exposed to the south-east of the site, with the large southern chamber in the background (will get better picture shortly)

Finds

Pottery was found in the area around the centre of the cairn and to the north of the south chamber, at the interface between the topsoil and the subsoil under the cairn. There are two possibilities which we consider may explain the presence of this pottery. Firstly, it may predate the cairn or date to the construction of the cairn. Secondly it may have been laid down during the period when the stones were robbed out - for example, if it had been emptied out of a chamber at that time. We favour the first explanation at present, but future excavation underneath *in situ* cairn may resolve the issue. The pottery has been examined by Alison Sheridan and Trevor Cowie of the National Museums of Scotland. The pieces are all very small, and many are abraded; but from their thinness and fine, undecorated fabric, together with the presence of a probable gentle carination on one sherd, it is likely that they belong to the Early Neolithic Carinated Bowl tradition (Sheridan *pers. comm.*). A probable rimsherd has also been found which is narrow, upright, and gently rounded one that is in keeping with the probable gentle carination and an overall attribution as a Carinated Bowl. Sheridan suggests their presence is as residual pieces, providing a useful *terminus post quem* for the monument. Two pieces of flint were found from the same area - neither contain diagnostic features. There was also artefactual evidence for recent activity, including a number of pieces of glass and the

metal base of a shotgun cartridge. Many of these were found in the stone holes, suggesting deposition during or following the robbing the cairn.

Geophysics

A magnatometer survey of the monument was conducted by Rowena Hart (Cardiff University) in the hope of revealing the extent of the cairn and the placing of further kerbstones. The results are presented in the Appendix but are unfortunately rather inconclusive. The magnatometer gave significant readings for the large stones of the chambers and the kerb where those stones were exposed or visible, but did not pick up any other large stones under the ground. It was also not possible to define the edge of the cairn from the readings, even in exposed areas. However, the magnatometer did display an exceptionally high reading to the north of the cairn where we had dug a small sondage revealing the top of a very bright orange subsoil. The high reading here was comparable to the kind of readings produced by kilns. Again, the high readings were limited to the exposed area and readings dropped off sharply around that area. One of the aims of future excavation should be to excavate this area to look for remains of burning or metal.

No geophysics were conducted in the area surrounding the monument as this area is covered by thick forestry to the south, west and north which has severed disturbed the ground, and a forest road runs around the cairn immediately to the east.

Discussion

The results of this preliminary season are potentially very exciting. We have demonstrated that not only that a cairn still survives in many places at this site, but we have also revealed the first evidence for a kerb at a Bargrennan monument. This has interesting implications for interpreting the origins of this monument, potentially linking it with the broader passage grave tradition, perhaps supporting claims for connections between the Bargrennan monuments and passage graves in Ireland. Finds of earlier Neolithic pot sherds, probably abraded and highly fragmentary remains of Carinated Bowls, provide an early *terminus post quem* and contemporary existence of Clyde and Bargrennan monuments still cannot be categorically excluded as yet. We would also like to make the following suggestions following from our results:

- There were no signs that the cairn was constructed in a sequence. There were no differences in the fabric or construction of the cairn to suggest that small cairns surrounding chambers were later joined together. Rather it appears that at least the lower course of the cairn now visible was laid down at one time.
- The western chamber has collapsed and the rear orthostat has been removed at some point in the past. Severe disturbance around the rear of this chamber indicates that the back of the chamber was further into the centre of the cairn than earlier plans suggest. There was no cairn material in this area, and we did not excavate the looser fill of the void at the back of the chamber.
- A kerb ran around the cairn outside the southern chamber. Its shape suggests that the passage was narrow and ran directly to the perimeter of the monument with no forecourt.

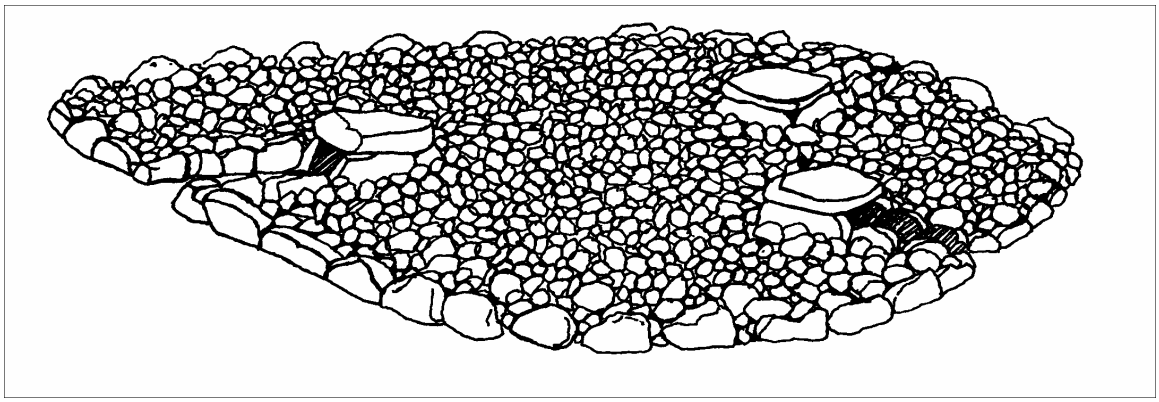

Figure 10. Reconstruction of the cairn at Cairnderry (picture by Rob Law)

Implications for future work proposed in 2003

In coming seasons it is proposed that we expose and record the remainder of any portion of the cairn not already exposed, and excavate the chamber deposits. Furthermore, the area outside the kerb should be fully excavated to expose any deposits or features just outside the monument. The full extent of any kerb should be recorded. We also propose to examine the cairn itself in order to fully understand the sequence of construction at the site and evaluate any pre-cairn activity. The key aim would be to obtain material for radiocarbon dating, but further work would also be critical for gaining an understanding of the overall construction and use of the monument and land beneath and around it. Therefore, in the 2003 season we would like to excavate each chamber, the passages, and the areas around the kerb as well as

expose the remainder of the cairn and kerb. In the 2004 season we would like to remove *in situ* cairn material to assess the possibility of earlier activity and examine the structure of the cairn itself where sufficient thickness of cairn permits.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the British Academy, the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Prehistoric Society, Cardiff University and Manchester University for funding this project. Many thanks to Matthew Ritchie at Historic Scotland for help obtaining scheduled monument consent and to Jane Murray for advice in the field. Rowena Hart conducted the geophysical survey of the site and helped produce the contour survey. John Evans visited the site during excavation and provided useful advice on understanding the soil profiles. We would also like to thank the excavation team, Marcus Brittain, Simon Colcombe, Anthony Cummins, Anna Jones, Rob Law, Dave Marcus, Gemma Midlane, Phil Richmond and Ian Walbridge for all their hard work.

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Appendix

List of finds

Find Number	Context	Description	Co-ordinates
1001	001 (trowel)	Potsherds - broken, 9 pieces	87E/ 494N
1002	001 (trowel)	Flint - cortex: 3cms x 2cms x 2cms	87 / 494
1003	001 (lower interface, found in trowelling)	Potsherds - found as 23 fragments in cluster within 1m of each other	86 / 494
1004	001 (mattock)	Glass, clear and smashed, 1cm x 2cms	83.5 / 499.5
1005	001 (trowel)	Stone sample - fragmented cairn material	N extent of trench
1006	001 (mattock)	Longbone of small animal, 13.5 cms long.	S of NW chamber
1007	001 (trowel)	Fragment from green glass bottle	80 / 495
1008	003 (trowel)	Flint flake 1.5 x 1cm	88.5 / 494.4
1009	003 (trowel)	Potsherd, c.1.5 x 1cm	88.4 / 455.6
1010	003 (trowel)	Potsherd sub-1cm	88.2 / 494.3
1011	003 (trowel)	Potsherd; 1 piece 2.5 x 2cms, possible carination?, some smaller fragments	88.3 / 494.5
1012	003 (trowel)	Potsherds, 2 sub-1cm pieces	87.1 / 494.1
1013	003 (trowel)	Potsherds, 3 fragments	85.8 / 494.2
1014	003 (trowel)	3 small potsherds	84.8 / 494.1
1015	001	2 pieces of green	82.6 / 492.9

		bottle glass	
1016	003	Metal base of shotgun cartridge	75.68 / 495.12 / H. 9.44
1017	003	Charcoal	75.693 / 493.4 / 9.391
1018	001	Clear bottle glass with vertical ridges, sherd c. 8 x 5 cm	77.158/ 488.649/ 9.523
1019	001	Large chunk of thick green bottle glass, c. 10 x 7 cm	96.269/ 487.186/ 9.977
1020	001	Grooved stone, c. 4 x 4 x 2 cm	90.90 / 483.64/ 11.44 90.1
1021	001	Complete coca cola bottle, clear, thick glass, c. 18.5 cm tall	Topsoil just outside trench, wedged upside down with mouth resting on cairnstone: 90.007/ 497. 004

Contexts relevant to the interim report

A number of contexts were assigned to layers which were geological in origin, to fills of topsoil in shallow stone holes and to different areas of cairn material which were later subsumed under a single context.

001 is topsoil, thick with roots, very damp, very humic. The topsoil is thin, and in places the cairn stones (002) are exposed. The topsoil sits as a heavy water-logged layer above the stones, and does not drain well.

002 are cairnstones. In most places only one course remains, in some places 002 was altogether absent. Size of stones varied but most were over 50cms in diameter.

003 is an orange/yellow mottled and rather faded-looking clayey subsoil. John Evans suggests that it has been given this appearance by the weight of the water-logged topsoil and the anaerobic conditions caused by this. It is also likely to be the original pre-cairn

land-surface. It exhibits a distinct rise under the location of the cairn, indicating that the cairn was laid over a natural mound. In several of the exposed places stone-holes are visible. Exposed areas drained well. All finds from 003 were from the upper interface with 001 where 002 was absent.

011 are kerbstones. Size of kerbstones varies, with the face of each stone being between 54 and 104 cms broad, and the top of the stones being up to 69cms wide. The height of the stones has not yet been established since they are abutted by 012 and 013.

012 are broken and dislodged stones sitting within a loose soily topsoil matrix just outside the extent of the cairn. They may be dislodged cairn stones, though are generally flat and sharp in shape rather than rounded like the cairn stones.

013 is a bright orange layer abutting the lower part of the kerb stones 2, 3 and 4. The layer was not excavated but may be the top of a very old slump of cairn material and soils and it has the potential to cover some deposits contemporary with the use of the site if any are present in that vicinity.