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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90074)

Taken into State care: 1925 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CLAVA CAIRNS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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CLAVA CAIRNS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

'Clava cairns' comprise five discrete areas which are sited on a glacial terrace overlooking Nairn River and its floodplain (numbering refers to guardianship map):

Group no. 1: two passage graves, a ring cairn and a kerb cairn, collectively referred to as the Balnuaran of Clava group;

Group no. 2: an apparent cairn and monolith at Miltown of Clava;

Group no. 3: a monolith at Mains of Clava NW;

Group no. 4: a partial ring cairn at Mains of Clava SE;

Group no. 5: the remains of a chapel.

The chapel site has not been investigated and remains very poorly understood; it is presumably medieval. The rest of the monument, particularly Balnuaran of Clava, has long been of antiquarian interest, but it is only with Professor Richard Bradley's work of 1994-6 that we have reliable evidence about the site and can begin to truly understand it (the lettering system used below relates to his scheme for identifying different elements of the complex).

Groups 1, 2 and 5 are accessible to the public. The guardianship deed does not describe the extent of the areas at 3 and 4, and public access is not advertised.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- **Group no. 1** (complex known as Balnuaran of Clava). In 1870-1, the owner diverted a road which ran between the monuments to protect sites A-C and H within a new enclosure. Unfortunately the new road breached the stone circle of the SW passage grave and two of the monoliths were reset to conform to the new arrangement. At this time some fallen uprights were erected, much of the vegetation around the monuments cleared, some cairns robbed to build walls, and trees planted, perhaps to evoke the idea of a druidical grove. In 1930-31, Katherine Kennedy undertook an exercise which resulted in clearance of stone from the monuments and some excavation, as well as further vegetation clearance.
- The SW (A) and NE (C) passage graves are very similar in plan and construction. Each comprises well-preserved sub-circular chambers entered along a passage through a sub-circular cairn (about 15.5m in diameter), faced internally and externally with kerb stones, some of which are decorated with prehistoric art. Stone platforms surround the cairns, extending as far as a ring of monoliths.
- The outer kerb of the SW passage grave was originally intended to lean back into the body of cairn. The walling of the chamber varies: a basal course of erratic blocks; dry stone walling above, including some reused rock art; and sandstone blocks above this with evidence for corbelling. Of the 12 original monoliths, 11 survive (two removed in 1870; three re-erected). Reconstruction of the cairn in the 1930s apparently removed evidence for a possible forecourt.

A porch at the entrance to the cairn may have been exposed between 1883 and 1910. The chamber was first explored in 1829; Bradley found that the original floor did not survive in Kennedy's 1930s trenches, but revealed evidence for Late Bronze-Age use. Piggott (1956) demonstrated that the surface of the platform was once paved with sandstone slabs.

- The NE passage grave is enclosed by a rubble platform defined by monoliths (11/12 monoliths survive; three re-erected). It is unlikely to have possessed a forecourt or porch. The ramp is up to 1.3m high and extended 9m from kerb. The tallest monolith outside the entrance to the cairn may have been re-erected in the wrong position in 1880s – it may also be upside down! In the recent past, many of the air pockets in the chamber wall were filled with cement, so it is difficult to find evidence for reused rock art. Bradley found evidence for three previously unrecorded excavations (filling of passage removed to natural subsoil; large hole in surface of platform; serious disturbance of interior). A few bones had been found in the chamber before 1882; the chamber floor had probably been destroyed before Kennedy undertook her work. Scatters of cremated bone were found on the surface of the platform, as well as many Late Bronze-Age lithics (worked stone tools).
- The central ring cairn (B) comprises a circular wall of rubble with an inner and outer kerb surrounded by a low platform. The interior is completely open with no sign of an entrance. The whole is enclosed by a ring of monoliths (9/11 survive; three were re-erected in 19th century). Three rays of low stone bank link the standing stones and the outer kerb. Cup-marks exist on several stones. The piecemeal clearance of stone can be documented, as can vegetation clearance which badly disturbed much of the external area. Bradley's excavations produced evidence for activity between the monoliths and kerb, eg worked flint and quartz scatters, as well as a cremated burial of the 1st millennium AD.
- The 'kerb cairn' (H) is a badly damaged site on the edge of the guardianship enclosure. Excavated by Piggott in the 1950s, the present remains comprise a ring of 15 kerbstones which have been disturbed by tree roots. There may have been a grave in the hollowed area in the centre. Carvings give the impression of a 'threshold' on the E side of the monument.
- Within this complex are also some stone banks, possibly later field walls.
- **Group no. 2** Prior to excavation in 1990, this monument comprised a roughly rectangular cairn measuring 10 by 6m with a large standing stone about 3m from its SW corner. A substantial grass covered mound extended to the S and E. Limited excavation was undertaken by Historic Scotland to establish the nature of the monument. One stone was found to be peck-marked. The results support the widely held opinion that this is a badly-robbed tomb of the Clava type (about 12m diameter) overlain by a more recent rectangular cairn. The interpretation is, however, problematic. No stratified deposits were disturbed and there was no dating evidence.

- **Group no. 3** Bradley undertook extensive geophysical survey which suggests that the surviving monolith is all that remains of a stone circle which surrounded a cairn, about 20m in diameter, the centre of which was 17.5m away. A Neolithic stone axe was found about 1m away from this stone in 2003.
- **Group no. 4** Bradley cleared the vegetation from this monument and undertook topographical and geophysical survey. This confirms that this is the robbed remains of a ring cairn. The visible remains comprise a low bank of rubble about 19m in diameter, eight of the nine visible stones forming the arc of its inner kerb.
- **Group no. 5** The remains of a chapel of unknown date can be traced on the ground. Without further investigation, it cannot be determined where this was also the site of a prehistoric burial monument.

Archaeological Overview

- Groups 1, 3 and 4 are recognised as part of a cemetery: the monuments are arranged on two axes which converge at the SW passage grave. Group 2 and other related remains indicate this was only one of several such foci in this area.
- The monuments at Balnuaran of Clava (Group 1) are the type-site for 50 or more stone-built monuments found around the Moray Firth, a well-defined regional group of earlier prehistoric monuments which combine some of the attributes of the ring cairn, the passage grave and the stone circle. It is therefore all the more significant that Bradley's recent work at Clava has for the first time provided scientific dating for such monuments. Rather than being late Neolithic, as previously assumed, they date from about 2000 cal BC (the Early Bronze Age) and have evidence for extensive reuse in the Late Bronze Age (around 1000 cal BC), the kerb cairn probably belonging to this period.
- There are a range of archaeological reasons for believing that the cemetery was conceived as a unitary phenomenon: the coherent plan; shared structural components and construction techniques (organisation of stones in relation to source, colour and shape; grading of height of kerb stones and orthostats; way in which decorated stones are incorporated). There is no evidence for a long time-scale of construction between the different elements of the sites.
- Pollen evidence suggests that the cemetery was constructed on the edge of an expanding clearing; a mixed agricultural economy was being practised in the vicinity. Although few people were apparently buried in such monuments, large numbers were needed to build them. The location of settlements is unknown, although there is the possibility that houses were recycled to form some of the core building material.
- Clava-type cairns appear to have been sited in places that were suitable for settlement (good land, access to water, etc). This means that the tombs are no

longer distant from the settlements, and this must reflect a shift in the attitude of the living to the dead.

- There is a high probability that significant archaeological remains survive in the unexcavated parts of the guardianship areas, not least the unexplored chapel site.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The chambers of the passage graves were originally corbelled; the tops of the cairns are lost, but the visitor can gain a reasonable sense of what was originally intended.
- Considerable thought went into the plan and construction of the graves (see below).

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed.
- Some members of the public were concerned recently when some trees were marked for felling.

Spiritual Overview

- The alignment of the passage graves on the midwinter sunset suggests a prolonged period of observation before construction, and demonstrates the interest which prehistoric farmers had in the sky. The stones around the graves are also graded in height, to further emphasise this axis. The majority view amongst prehistorians is that religious beliefs expressed by monuments such as this, and beliefs about the surrounding landscape and the movements of the main astronomical bodies, were intimately linked, rather than the layout of the monument's expressing a 'scientific' astronomical approach.
- Balnuaran of Clava is apparently of spiritual interest to certain sectors of today's population. Offerings are sometimes left at the site, even smashed garden gnomes! Some examples are given in Richard Bradley's *Good Stones*.
- Little is known of the date and nature of the chapel (Group 5). It is possible that the juxtaposition of a Christian site and a far earlier, but significant complex of visible prehistoric monuments, was intentional.

Aesthetic Overview

- Clava-type cairns appear to have been deliberately sited in places that were not dominant in the landscape – they are almost hidden.
- The cairns contain a large number of prehistoric cup-marks (prehistoric rock art). Their function is unknown. They could be reused from another place, but it seems likely that their incorporation in the cairn was purposeful rather than through chance.
- The people who built the cairns carefully selected which type of stone (source, colour and shape) they put where.

- The mature trees at Balnuaran of Clava are a beautiful feature and were planted by Victorian romantics to enhance the druidical qualities of the site. However, there is a tension between the impact of their roots on sub-surface archaeology and the special atmosphere they bring to the site. Maintaining an appropriate balance calls for careful management.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The most significant gap is a complete absence of any detailed research into the chapel site, which has tended to be ignored, perhaps because it does not relate chronologically to the rest of the monument and its associated archaeological landscape.
- Questions remain about parts of the site (not least Groups 3 and 4), as well as the surrounding landscape, not least where the people who built these monuments lived. However, our knowledge has been advanced considerably by Bradley's work of the 1990s. Ongoing fieldwalking by Tim Phillips and Aaron Watson in the area around Clava is helping to fill in this picture.
- Where are their predecessors in the area buried?
- why is a cairn element so similar to that of much earlier monument types and what implications might that have?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The prehistoric monuments at Clava comprise part of one, if not two, well-preserved Bronze-Age cemeteries. Not only are there outstanding upstanding remains that can be visited/are visible from the road, but the sub-surface archaeology has begun to tell its own story and has the potential to unlock further secrets.
- The builders of the graves paid especial attention to architectural details, such as the grading and choice of coloured stones. This hints at complexities of belief and social practice that are reinforced by the astronomical alignment of the passage graves. Such an awareness of the annual solar cycle can be assumed to be closely linked to the agricultural cycle.
- The distinctive character of the tombs here has led archaeologists to name a special class of monument after it.
- To judge from the concentration of graves, this was an important place for ritual, burial activities in the Bronze Age. Where people lived is as yet unknown. While the main phase of activity was fairly short-lived, it may be no coincidence that the parts of the cemetery continued to be used over the succeeding millennia for burial (note 1st millennium AD cremation and medieval cemetery, for instance).

- The chapel site has tended to get ignored, but this may be of high archaeological significance in its own right, and its relationship to the prehistoric cemetery merits attention.

Associated Properties

Corrimony. Monuments of similar date, and also with landscape qualities, are to be found at **Kilmartin**. Stone circles with some related features can be visited at **Tomnaverie** and **Loanhead of Daviot**.

Keywords Passage grave, cairn, burial, stone circle, standing stone, chapel, prehistoric rock art, cup-marks, colour, astronomy, Clava cairns, Bronze Age, 1st millennium AD, medieval, Highland