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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

GREY CAIRNS OF CAMSTER



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GREY CAIRNS OF CAMSTER

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Grey Cairns of Camster in the parish of Wick comprise a reconstructed Neolithic long cairn (so-called Orkney-Cromarty type long, horned cairn) and, about 200m to the SSE, a round cairn (so-called Camster tripartite type). The long cairn (about 60m long) has two internal chambers, entered from one of its long sides, and forecourts at each end. The round cairn (about 19m diameter) has a single chamber sub-divided into three parts.

Both monuments are sited in open boggy moorland and reached via duck-board paths.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The **long cairn** has a long history of exploration (see summary in Masters 1997). Prior to excavation, the long cairn had the appearance of a series of hummocks, joined along a spine.
- 1865-6 Anderson and Shearer trenched along the SE side of the cairn, revealing entrances to chambers A and B; both passage and chambers were also excavated. They found the passage and chamber of A almost intact; the roofing survived over the passage and outer compartment of B, but the rest had collapsed. Some human and animal bones were recovered in the chambers.
- By 1910 there had been some backfilling of the interior of the cairn and some subsequent minor collapse. There may have been further superficial disturbance during WW II.
- 1959 passes into guardianship.
- In 1967-8 Roy Ritchie undertook minor excavations by the entrance to the passages. This involved: removal of collapsed roofing and overlying cairn material superincumbent cairn in chamber A; consolidation of chamber B (requiring cutting of a major section from the NW edge of the cairn to the back of the chamber); and some removal of stone in the NE forecourt.
- In the 1970s further excavations were initiated with the aim of presenting a safe monument to the public: John Corcoran from 1971-3; Lionel Master from 1976-80. At the same time, reconstruction, rebuilding, consolidation and reconstruction took place (see Masters 1997, 129 for distinction), which was completed in 1981.
- The chamber of the **round cairn** was discovered shortly before 1851 and excavated in 1865. Inside the chamber, burnt human bone, flint tools and pottery were found. The passage had been deliberately blocked in antiquity, and within this they found parts of two skeletons, apparently placed in a sitting position.

- Roy Ritchie undertook excavations in 1966-7 (unpublished, all records lost): removal of cairn material above passage roof and around the chamber to facilitate resetting of some of the lintels, protecting them with a concrete cover, and placing a concrete cover with a glass panel over the chamber. Some hidden structural devices were encountered. Excavation in front of entrance revealed an entrance area defined by a drystone wall. The cairn has been restored to a regular rounded shape.

Archaeological Overview

- The round cairn has not been properly excavated and recorded in modern times, and is therefore not as well understood as the long cairn. There is no reason to believe that they are not contemporary (the grouping of Neolithic burial monuments is a feature of Caithness).
- The development of the long cairn is complex. Its construction, probably in the 2nd quarter of 4th millennium cal BC, was preceded by temporary occupation. Finds from the recent excavations include pottery of the early Neolithic tradition (Grimston/Lyles Hill) and worked stone tools (some of which were knapped at Camster). The pottery can probably be associated with the tomb builders. Two kite-shaped flint points are unusual in Scottish chambered tombs; their precise context at Camster is unclear. The phasing of the monument is still open to question:
 - Round cairn A and slightly later round Cairn B are finally incorporated in a long cairn with forecourts and revetments (Masters' preferred option)
 - Round cairn incorporated into long cairn which also includes chamber B
 - Single phase monument in which circular revetments are constructional devices.
- The tombs are the best known elements of a larger archaeological landscape about which very little is known.
- On the basis of excavations in the 1970s, **soil from beneath the long cairn** and in the SE forecourt proved to be a peaty podsol, with a number of burnt areas dated by radiocarbon to the early 4th millennium BC. Post-holes and stake-holes may relate to cairn construction. Of the finds found on the site, the majority were from areas under the cairn and below the forecourt blockings.
- **Passage and chamber A.** Corcoran found the outer part of the passage much as Anderson left it, leading to a pentagonal chamber with five orthostats and drystone corbelling above. Whether there was a light-box is not clear. His significant discovery was that there was an apparently substantial round cairn enclosing chamber A and the innermost part of its passage. The floor had only limited paving.
- **Passage and chamber B.** Cairn material above the inner passage was removed in preparation for restoration of the passage. Before restoration in 1967, the maximum height of corbelling in the chamber was about 2.3m; it is unclear whether the roof was originally a barrel or conical vault. Corcoran re-excavated floor of both passage and chamber. An internal revetment seems to be part of a circular revetment around chamber B.

- The **tail of the long cairn** is mostly composed of local Middle Old Red Sandstones. Some structural patterns of building have been discerned. Masters found that different stones had been used for inner and outer revetment where it exists: those on the outer were thinner and darker in colour and the revetment would have been lower. As presently restored, the long cairn is retained by a double revetment throughout its NE half and by a single revetment in the SW half, apart from a short continuation of the double revetment on the SE side, from the NE façade to the entrance to chamber A. Masters considers that this reconstruction was incorrect for the NW side in the NE half of the cairn, an area where the excavation may have been too hasty.
- As now restored, the main features of the **NE forecourt** comprise a shallow forecourt area, formerly filled with stones, defined by a low platform and short, stepped horns. An unbroken drystone façade was built roughly with and behind this platform. Apart from Anderson's initial excavation and some temporary preservation measures taken by the MoPBW in 1967-8, the excavation and subsequent restoration was the work of Corcoran (and Iain MacIvor) in 1971. Two stones recovered from this area were decorated. On the basis of the information available to him, Masters disagrees with the reconstruction of the steps and low, outer revetment wall: he is not aware of any evidence for the steps or the outer revetment. The façade is apparently so well preserved because of the existence of a second revetment behind it.
- Anderson apparently did not excavate the SW end of the cairn. The **SW forecourt** seems to have been deliberately blocked. The façade may have had an irregular backing revetment. Without direct evidence for the form of the façade, it has been restored on the basis of the profile of the NE façade, to a height of 1.4m above ground level at the centre.
- Two **cists** were discovered built into the fabric of the long cairn.
- A **massive stone** block, measuring up to 1.9m and weighing in excess of 2 tonnes, was located some 4m beyond the edge of the long cairn revetment on the NW side and at the edge of the revetment collapse. Beneath it an undisturbed soil profile was found.
- The **round** cairn is not as well understood as the long cairn because of the nature of its excavation and lack of reporting. However, there is no reason to believe that they are not contemporary. The group of Neolithic burial monuments is a feature of Caithness.
- A late 19th-century sheepfold, about 10m SE of horn C and surely built from robbed cairn, was demolished in 1985 and replaced with a new one about 100m to the NE.
- There has been little work on the archaeology of Caithness in general since the 19th century, and as a result the archaeology of this area is not as well-known or as well-understood as it deserves to be.

- Orkney-Cromarty tombs tend to be located in prominent places on what would have been the edge of the inhabited landscape: domestic activity and settlement were separated from areas and activities involving the dead.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Both the long and round cairn were reconstructed in the latter half of the 20th century. A large element of the upstanding long cairn has now been disturbed and is no longer authentic. Such reconstruction is problematic and questions remain about some of the details of what was done at Camster (see above).
- As reconstructed monuments, where the burial chambers can be accessed as enclosed spaces, these cairns enable the visitors to gain a vivid impression of the scale and complexity of such monuments, and how they functioned. The passages are particularly low, and this has a bearing on how human remains, etc might have been brought in and out.

Social Overview

- The cairns provide an insight into the skills and technical expertise of early prehistoric farming communities in northern Scotland. Their construction involved access to considerable resources of stone and people, and this would have required considerable organisation. However, the social environment in which these particular tombs were built is not well understood.

Spiritual Overview

- The interiors of the tombs were used for the burial of human remains, and we interpret the forecourts as having had a ritual function, where activities could have been visible to more people than were able to see what went on in the tombs. However, we cannot determine the precise nature of the burial rites at Camster.
- Amelia Pannett suggests that the cairns may have been deliberately sited around the Camster Burn for cosmological reasons. This burn can be regarded as the source of the Wick River. The Neolithic people who built the tomb might have been drawing on notions of purity and fertility often attributed to a river source. The siting of such monuments may have enabled this concept to be permanently fixed in the landscape.

Aesthetic Overview

- The cairns are sited in open moorland, although modern forestry is encroaching from certain directions and, it seems likely, a wind farm from another. One of the most important views of the site is from the direction of the road when the sinuous profile of the reconstructed long cairn, situated on a low rise, forms a distinctive profile against the sky.
- The long cairn, particularly its forecourts, is aesthetically pleasing in its form and the detail of the stonework.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Despite recent excavations, the precise scientific date of the tombs and their development is not known.
- Little is known of the archaeology of the surrounding area, including where the people who built the tombs lived, and what the landscape looked like at this time. Ongoing research by Amelia Pannett of Cardiff University is beginning to address this:
<http://www.caithness.org/history/archaeology/camsterbypannett/index.htm>. RCAHMS are also undertaking an extensive mapping survey of the area to the E of the cairns in Summer 2004.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- These cairns provide an insight into the ritual beliefs and practices of people living in northern Scotland about 5750 to 4500 years ago.
- The long cairn at Camster is a particularly spectacular monument which, in its reconstructed form, can be compared with the more usual field remains of such sites (eg **Cnoc Freiceadain**). As such, it is the most visible and accessible monument of its type on the northern mainland of Scotland and a useful reminder of the archaeological potential and hidden complexities of similar unexcavated field monuments.
- As is common with Neolithic monuments in Caithness, these burial monuments form part of a group. As yet, very little is known about their immediate archaeological context.
- These are visually impressive monuments – the long cairn’s form and construction is particularly attractive – they are best appreciated in an open landscape.
- While the reconstruction of these monuments is perhaps controversial, the story behind this and the decisions that were made can help illuminate not only the past, but the conservation issues of today. The decision to reconstruct Camster was taken with a view to leaving the others, e.g. **Cnoc Freiceadain** alone.

Associated Properties

Broadly contemporary monuments exist at **Cnoc Freiceadain** and **Cairn o’Get**, as well as the many chambered tombs a little to the north in Orkney (see, for example, the ISCS for **Midhowe and Maeshowe**). NB Cairn o’Get is not far away as the crow flies, but modern roads give the impression of the sites being a long way away. The early Bronze Age ‘Clava cairns’ (**Clava, Corrimony**) are later examples of prehistoric burial cairns.

Keywords Camster-type cairns, burial, tomb, long cairn, round cairn, Neolithic,
Caithness