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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUNCHRAIGAIG CAIRN



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DUNCHRAIGAIG CAIRN

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Dunchraigaig Cairn is an Early Bronze Age cairn located in Kilmartin Glen, Argyll. Kilmartin Glen is a world-class archaeological landscape, and one of Scotland's most important. There are a wealth of upstanding prehistoric monuments¹, including an Early Bronze Age linear cairn cemetery, consisting today of five massive cairns. Many other burial cairns exist in the Glen, of which Dunchraigaig is one. There are also the remains of stone circles, a timber circle, a cursus monument, a henge, standing stones, stone rows, and numerous rock art sites.

Dunchraigaig Cairn is approximately 30m in diameter and sits on a raised faint terrace, overlooking the southern end of Kilmartin Glen. The cairn was excavated by the Rev. W. Greenwell in 1864, following earlier excavations by the Rev. R. J. Mapleton. Three cists containing inhumations and cremated bone were found as a result of this work. Two Food Vessels and flint were also found in the cists, and a whetstone, a greenstone axe, a flint knife and some fragments of pottery were found in the cairn material. Only the Food Vessels have survived.

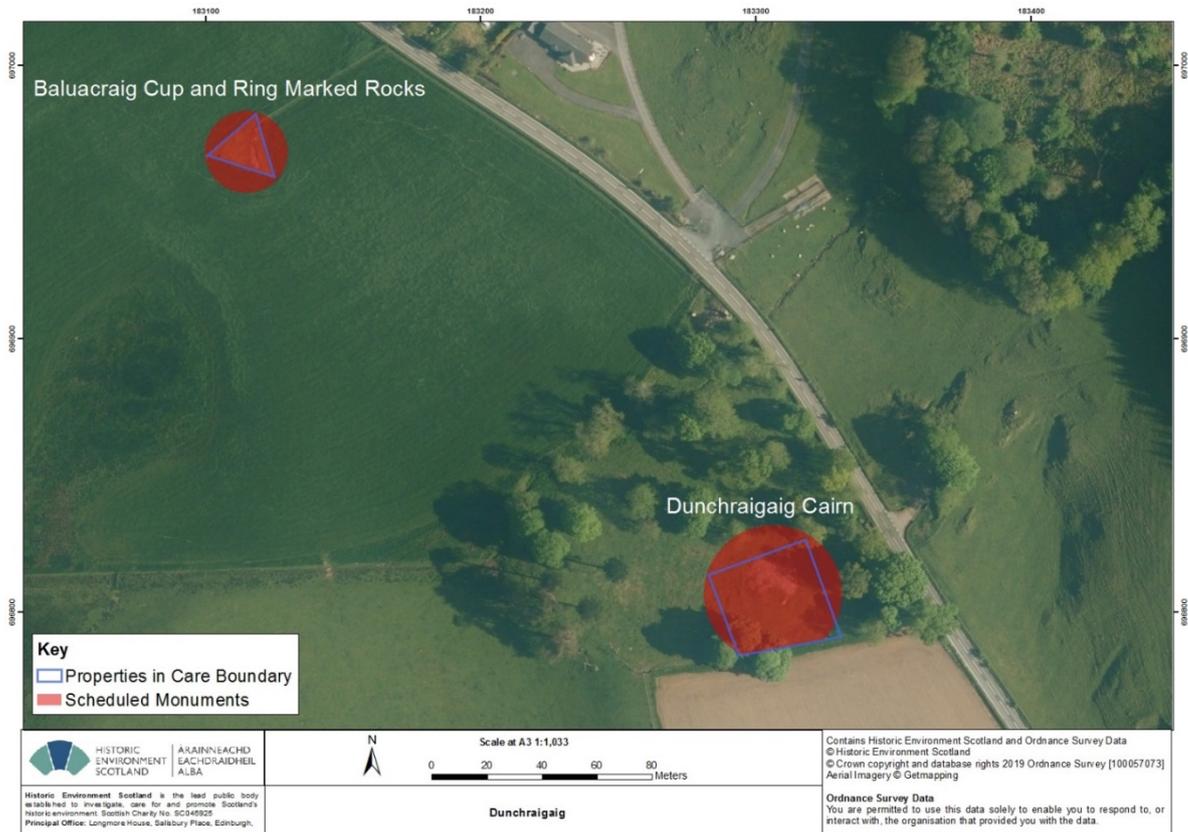
The site is not staffed, there is no entry charge and it is freely accessible throughout the year. Precise visitor numbers are not recorded, however annual visitor figures for Kilmartin Museum, which acts as a hub for the Glen, are 25,000 annually² which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.

1.2 Statement of significance

- Dunchraigaig Cairn is a rare example of what was once a large and complex Early Bronze Age Burial cairn.
- The cairn contained three cists, and cremated and unburnt bone – almost certainly human - was found inside. It is rare for human bone to survive in Kilmartin Glen, however the whereabouts of the bone found during the 19th century excavations is now not known.
- Important artefacts were excavated from Dunchraigaig Cairn, including two Food Vessels, which have survived and are now in the National Museums of Scotland collections.
- Dunchraigaig Cairn is one of a number of funerary and ritual monuments that make up the highly significant ritual archaeological landscape in Kilmartin Glen.
- Dunchraigaig Cairn has inherent potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past.

¹ RCAHMS 1988

² This figure relates to people visiting Kilmartin Museum to get information etc., as opposed to c.13,000 ticket-buying visitors. (Sharon Webb, pers.comm.)



Scheduled Area and Property in Care Boundary for Dunchraigaig Cairn and neighbouring Baluacraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks. For illustrative purposes only.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

The cairn is located in pasture, surrounded by a stone wall and mature trees close to the west side of the A816, the main road which runs from Lochgilphead in the south, through Kilmartin to Oban. The cairn is accessed from a car park located on the other side of the road. To the north lies **Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks** (another Property in the Care of Historic Environment Scotland) and to the south, a complex stone row including rock art marked standing stones, a henge, a barrow and a possible cursus at Ballymeanoch. Dunchraigaig Cairn and Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks both sit on a broad terrace, overlooking the glen floor, with views to the Crinan Basin and the sea.

The cairn was excavated by Mapleton in 1870, and again shortly afterwards by Greenwell. The results of these excavations are presented below in more detail, with a summary as follows:

The excavations revealed three cists. The first was found slightly to the north of the centre of the cairn. Greenwell reported that an inhumation burial had been placed on the top slab of this cist, which is very unusual to find in such monuments. The cist itself contained a Food Vessel, cremated bone and charcoal, and some flint chippings. Below the floor of rough paving was found a crouched burial. This cist is still visible.

A second cist, which is not now visible, lay to the east of the first cist. This contained a food vessel, cremated bone and flint chippings. A third cist, which

Greenwell thought to have contained the primary burial, lies in the south-east quadrant of the cairn. This cist contained burnt and unburnt bone from eight to ten individuals, which is an extremely unusual find. A whetstone, a greenstone axe, a flint knife and some fragments of pottery were reportedly found among the cairn material, however only the two Food Vessels have survived.

Today, the cairn is reduced in size as a result of ploughing and stone removal.

In 1932, Dunchraigaig Cairn, along with a number of other prehistoric sites on the Poltalloch Estate, came into State care. The cairn was scheduled on 7th July 1994 because of its inherent potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the past in terms of:

- Its well-defined field characteristics.
- Because it is part of a complex of monuments including a henge, standing stones and barrow at Ballymeanoch and a possible cursus.
- Because it has the potential to provide information about Bronze Age ritual and funerary practice whilst contributing to a wider understanding of the development of Neolithic and Bronze Age society.

See Appendix 1 for an archaeological overview of Dunchraigaig Cairn in context (including an overview of Kilmartin Glen's Prehistoric Monuments, and specifically the Early Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen).

Archaeological Overview of Dunchraigaig Cairn

Dunchraigaig Cairn is situated in mature deciduous trees, close to the A816 main road. The cairn was excavated by Mapleton, and by Rev. Greenwell in 1864, both of whom were prominent antiquarians. Greenwell includes the results of Mapleton's work in his published account³ and Mapleton's later⁴ article comparing burials in the area mentions the work at Dunchraigaig Cairn.

At some point following excavation, possibly after the cairn came into Guardianship, the site was partially reconstructed and prepared to facilitate public access.

The following description is based on Greenwell's published account (1866) which are summarised in the following description given in RCAHMS (1988).

“On a slight tree-covered terrace 280m NW of Dunchraigaig, there is a cairn of water-worn boulders measuring about 30m in diameter and up to 2.5m in height (Campbell and Sandeman 1964). Three stones, which probably form part of the kerb, are visible on the N, but ploughing and stone-robbing have obscured its original outline.

³ Greenwell, 1866: 47

⁴ 1870

Excavations by Greenwell in 1864, following those of Mapleton, revealed a cist within the cairn material, slightly to the N of the centre (Greenwell 1866). Aligned ENE and WSW and measuring 1.4m by 0.8m internally and 0.8m in depth, the cist is now constructed of five slabs, one of which is cracked, although Greenwell mentions only four. On the cover slab, which measures 1.9 m in length and 0.23m in thickness and is now partly concealed by cairn material, there was, according to Greenwell's account, an extended burial. The cist contained a Food Vessel, cremated bone and charcoal, some flint chippings, as well as a mixture of sand, gravel and clay; beneath an apparent floor of rough paving, the excavators uncovered a crouched burial with the head at the NE end of the cist. A second cist, which is not now visible, lay about 6.5m to the E with its long axis NE and SW; it measured about 0.46m by 0.38m and 0.38m in depth and was partly filled with gravel. On the surface of the gravel there was a Food Vessel, and cremated bone and flint chippings were found among the gravel. A third cist, which Greenwell thought to have contained the primary burial, lies in the SE quadrant of the cairn. Its floor was hollowed into the old ground surface and the sides are formed by roughly built drystone walls; part of the SE side has been removed. Aligned NE and SW and covered by a massive slab (3.8m long and 0.35m thick, and partly hidden by cairn material), the cist measures 2.6m by 1.3m and 1m in depth; it contained burnt and unburnt bone from eight to ten individuals with the deposits roughly separated by fragments of stone. A whetstone, a greenstone axe, a flint knife and some fragments of pottery were found among the cairn material. Traces of an excavation trench across the E half of the cairn may still be seen. The two Food Vessels are preserved in the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, but the other finds have not survived.”

The whereabouts of the human remains are not known.

Interpretation and Dating

Dunchraigaig Cairn is a rare example of a large and complex Early Bronze Age Burial cairn. It has unusual structural elements including three cists. The presence of both inhumation and cremation burials, and the volume of human remains found is unusual, and demonstrates differences in burial styles presumably over time. Greenwell's report of an inhumation burial being placed on the top slab of one of the cists is also very unusual. These factors may suggest that Dunchraigaig Cairn has been modified from an earlier chambered cairn. However, Henshall states “the cairn contains a curious large cist in which a number of cremations were found but it cannot satisfactorily be classified as a chamber”⁵ .

Sheridan dates the Linear Cemetery to the earliest Bronze Age (c. 2200-1900 BC) and she suggests that other imposing cairns in the Glen, including

⁵ 1972: 368

Dunchraigaig were also constructed at this time⁶. This dating is based on stylistic elements, however, it is widely accepted.

2.2 Evidential values

Dunchraigaig Cairn is one of the key sites in the Glen and would be a strong candidate for inclusion in any future research programme aiming to further explore the Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen. The site has been partially excavated and thus there is potential for undisturbed remains, both within the cairn and in the surrounding area.

The site has evidential potential to significantly inform our understanding of the past, in terms of:

- The design and construction of burial monuments;
- The nature and meaning of ritual and burial practices and their significance in prehistoric society;
- The unusually large number of burials, both inhumation and cremation, found at the site;
- Its relationship to other contemporary monuments and burials;
- Potentially undisturbed ancient botanical remains, which may elucidate the nature of the climate, vegetation and agricultural practices in the Glen when the cairn was in use;
- The distribution of similar sites in the landscape; and
- How sites of a similar age related to one another in the Early Bronze Age and in later periods.

2.3 Historical values

Archaeological features such as Dunchraigaig Cairn and other prominent monuments in Kilmartin Glen, including the nearby **Temple Wood Stone Circles**, and the Linear Cemetery were integrated into the designed landscape of the Poltalloch Estate. It is possible that the track known as the 'coach road' was deliberately designed so that the cairns and other monuments could be viewed when passing along this route. As an example of a landscape in which features have been re-used, respected and incorporated into a palimpsest spanning thousands of years, the whole of Kilmartin Glen and all the monuments it contains, including Dunchraigaig Cairn, has great historical value. The incorporation of prehistoric monuments into the designed landscape has undoubtedly contributed to their survival.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Dunchraigaig Cairn is a rare example of what would once have been a massive cairn with three stone cists. These elements equate to high architectural values.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

⁶ Sheridan 2012: 175-176

Dunchraigaig Cairn is dominant feature in the landscape, deliberately positioned near the Ballymeanoch Stone Row and the Baluachraig Rock Art site. It is a striking location, surrounded by mature specimen trees, part of a 18th and 19th century designed landscape and is a very pleasant place to visit. As such, it has very high landscape values.

2.6 Natural heritage values
To be assessed.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social Values

The social values of Dunchraigaig Cairn lie – together with the other Kilmartin Glen sites – as a visitor attraction, education and learning resource, and the atmosphere and special qualities of the place, all of which are highlighted in online social media reviews.

Dunchraigaig Cairn, like many of the Kilmartin Glen sites, is relatively easily accessible and the site is interpreted and presented in order to aid understanding and access. Two of the three cists at Dunchraigaig Cairn are visible today, with views of the interior of the cists being possible. The site is not staffed, there is no entry charge and it is freely accessible year round. Precise visitor numbers are not recorded, however annual visitor figures for Kilmartin Museum, which acts as a hub for the Glen, are 25,000 annually⁷ which gives an indication of visitor numbers and interest.

The site has an interpretation board installed by Historic Environment Scotland, and another in the car park on the other side of the A816 was installed by the Dalriada Project (a Heritage Lottery Fund funded landscape partnership scheme), both of which give visitor information on the site and other monuments in the area.

Kilmartin Museum was founded in 1997 and its mission is to inspire and educate people by interpreting, explaining and conserving the internationally important archaeological landscape, artefacts and natural heritage of Kilmartin Glen. A large percentage of tourists to the area cite the archaeological monuments and Kilmartin Museum as a reason for visiting. Cultural tourism is one of the region's largest economic drivers.

Kilmartin Museum's education team regularly use all the monuments in Kilmartin Glen in its education programmes. Kilmartin Museum organises a weekly volunteer-led guided walk along the Glen visiting the cairns in the Linear Cemetery and Temple Wood. Kilmartin Museum and the education service are part funded by Historic Environment Scotland.

⁷ This figure relates to people visiting Kilmartin Museum to get information etc., as opposed to c.13,000 ticket-buying visitors (Sharon Webb, pers.comm.).

In 2007, Kilmartin Glen was the setting for 'Half Life', a cultural event spread over several weeks which involved landscape art installations and a performance created by the Scottish theatre company [NVA](#) in collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland.

All these activities render Dunchraigaig Cairn as having very high social values.

It should be noted however, that the tourism generated by the national and international importance of the archaeological monuments is not necessarily seen as positive by everyone in the local community, since this presents certain challenges for farming, and restrictions related to other forms of land use.

Spiritual Values

It is clear that the site had great spiritual significance as a burial monument in prehistory.

There is anecdotal evidence that such sites are special for people today and this is evidenced by 'offerings' of flowers and other items⁸.

Cultural values

Dunchraigaig Cairn is situated in one of Scotland's richest archaeological landscapes. It has great significance as part of the Kilmartin Glen ritual and funerary landscape, and is also part of a multi-monumental feature, designed in prehistory to be imposing and awe inspiring and it has remained so to this day. It therefore, has great multi-generational cultural significance.

3 Major gaps in understanding

There are some major gaps in our understanding of the site. Although the site has been previously excavated, this work was undertaken at a time when modern, scientific dating techniques were not available. Therefore, no scientifically-determined date for the site is available, and the postulated date is based on stylistic evidence from other sites. The excavations did not include the whole site, and there is therefore further archaeological potential at Dunchraigaig Cairn. It should also be noted that the work undertaken found remains that are not typical of sites of this type.

There are further gaps in knowledge relating to the period to which this monument belongs. These have been recently summarised as key research questions:

- Where did the people who were buried in the ostentatious graves live? Was Kilmartin Glen only used as a place of burial and ceremony?
- Was there a hierarchy of settlement, reflecting an unequalitarian society?

⁸ Such actions can inadvertently harm archaeological sites, and visitors are reminded that the use of candles or naked flames are not permitted at any HES properties.

- Was there regional variability in subsistence activities during this time? How typical is the evidence from Kilellan and Ardnave?
- Was control over the flow of metal the only source of wealth and power in this part of Scotland at that time?
- Was the incoming metal just Irish copper, or were bronze items or ingots also coming in? And was there any local exploitation of copper?⁹

Added to these research questions is also a lack of understanding about the relationship of burial monuments, such as individual cairns and the Linear Cemetery, to other contemporary ritual and funerary monuments as well as those of later periods. In addition, the nature of the contemporary climate, vegetation and agricultural practices in the Glen in and around the major prehistoric monuments remains relatively unexplored.

4 **Keywords**

Bronze Age; round cairn; cist; Kilmartin Glen; Argyll

5 **Associated properties**

- Achnabreck Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Ballygowan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Baluachraig Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Cairnbaan Cup and Ring Marked Rocks
- Carnassarie Castle
- Dunadd Fort
- Kilmartin Crosses
- Kilmartin Crosses
- Kilmichael Glassary Prehistoric Rock Carvings
- Kilmartin Glebe Cairn
- Kilmartin Sculptured Stones and Neil Campbell Tomb
- Nether Largie Mid Cairn
- Nether Largie North Cairn
- Nether Largie South Cairn
- Ri Cruin Cairn
- Temple Wood Stone Circles and Cairns

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⁹ Sheridan, 2017

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Appendix 1: Archaeological Overview: Dunchraigaig Cairn in Context

Kilmartin Glen's Prehistoric Monuments

Kilmartin Glen is located in Argyll and Bute, on the west coast of Scotland. The landscape of the west coast of Scotland is typified by rocky hills and relatively deep Glens. The undulations of the land and the underlying rock formations generally follow a north-west to south-east trajectory. Kilmartin Glen follows that pattern, being narrower at its northern end, with steep sided hills and gravel terraces, broadening out to the south into a flatter, wide area which intersects with the south west end of the adjacent Kilmichael Glen. The south is bordered by the Knapdale Hills, and the flatter area to the south-west is now the Mòine Mhòr – an expanse of peat bog which gradually changes to salt marsh towards the Crinan Estuary and the open sea. The Kilmartin Burn flows down the Glen, joining the River Add as it emerges from Kilmichael Glen, before meandering through the Mòine Mhòr to the sea. Both watercourses have been extensively altered by canalisation and straightening as part of the 19th century land improvements by the Poltalloch Estate.

The wider area of Mid Argyll and Kilmichael Glen which intersects Kilmartin Glen contains a number of important sites. There is, however, an extraordinarily dense concentration of monuments in Kilmartin Glen itself. Many of these are upstanding, highly visible prehistoric monuments¹⁰, including burial cairns within a linear cairn cemetery. There are also the remains of stone circles, a timber circle, a cursus monument, a henge, standing stones, stone rows, and numerous rock art sites. It is a world class archaeological landscape and one of Scotland's most important.

The dramatic topography of the Glen and surrounding landscape almost certainly lent itself to the creation of a highly significant prehistoric ritual, funerary and ceremonial landscape. Belief, social status and particularly the relationship between the living and the dead have been expressed by generations of people through cultural practices relating to the use and disposal of high status artefacts and the construction of complex and powerful monuments in an already naturally striking landscape. The dense concentration of artefacts in the Glen is also outstanding: "Many individual finds such as jet necklaces or Food Vessels have been found in other parts of Argyll, but the dense distribution around Kilmartin is unique."¹¹ Evidence for the earliest activity around these themes dates to the earliest Neolithic (3800-3700 BC)¹² and accumulates through to the Late Bronze Age (1500-1100 BC), a timespan of some 2,300 years¹³.

Mid Argyll's rock art stands as one of Europe's finest groups of prehistoric monuments. The concentration is unparalleled in Britain. Rock art in the area

¹⁰ RCAHMS 1988

¹¹ RCAHMS 1988: 14

¹² Sheridan 2012: 166

¹³ *ibid*

appears both on earth fast bed rock and also on monuments. Recent work on dating rock art sites points to those created on earth fast bedrock as being late Neolithic, between 3000 - 2500 BC¹⁴, although it should be noted that only relatively few radiocarbon dates are available. Some cairns in the Linear Cemetery, (**Nether Largie North Cairn, Nether Largie Mid** and **Ri Cruin Cairns**) have a number of structural features which have been carved with rock art. This is rare, and some may be reused elements from other monuments. No such features have been detected at Dunchraigaig Cairn, however the site has many other similarities with the cairns in the Linear Cemetery.

Kilmartin Glen's prominent monuments attracted antiquarian and archaeological interest from the early 1900's and a wealth of important artefacts have been found as a result of that work. Survey and recording of much of the Mid Argyll landscape was undertaken by local antiquarian Marion Campbell of Kilberry and Mary Sandeman in the 1960's¹⁵. In more recent decades, the work of Kilmartin Museum, academics, and developer funded archaeologists have discovered many other monuments, subsoil features and artefacts. In addition, members of the public have also found artefacts by chance. All this knowledge has significantly contributed to the understanding of Kilmartin Glen and the surrounding areas, firmly establishing the Glen as one of Britain's most significant archaeological landscapes.

As noted above, most of the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age monuments are of a ceremonial or funerary nature. The earliest evidence of domestic occupation in the Glen dates to the later Bronze Age, leading some to speculate that the area was used solely for ritual purposes. No systematic survey or excavation programme has been undertaken across the whole Glen landscape, however. Therefore, the archaeological record is likely to be biased towards large and upstanding monuments than more ephemeral subsoil features and it is entirely possible that people were living in the Glen in earlier prehistoric periods as well as utilising it as a ritual landscape but the evidence for this has not yet been found.

Dingwall and McGowan noted that many of the archaeological monuments in the Glen lie within areas developed as designed landscapes in the 18th and 19th centuries in particular¹⁶. It is very likely that the most conspicuous monuments, including the Linear Cemetery, Dunchraigaig Cairn, **Baluachraig** Rock Art site, **Temple Wood Stone Circles**, Nether Largie and Ballymeanoch Standing Stones were deliberately incorporated as significant points of interest in these landscape designs.

The Early Bronze Age in Kilmartin Glen

The use of copper appeared in Argyll in the 25th century BC and, by the 22nd century BC, this was alloyed with tin to produce bronze across Britain and

¹⁴ Sheridan, 2012: 171; Jones and Riggott 2011: 253

¹⁵ Campbell and Sandeman 1962

¹⁶ Dingwall and McGowan, 1996: 43

Ireland¹⁷. Other changes also occurred, including the construction of cairns containing just one or two individual burials. This is markedly different from the earlier Neolithic practice of communal burial¹⁸. It is widely accepted that social stratification is visible in the archaeological record at this time, and in Kilmartin this is expressed by the construction of striking and conspicuous funerary monuments, as well as the acquisition of prestigious objects and ornaments¹⁹. Although this is seen elsewhere in Britain, the intensity of finds in Kilmartin is remarkable. Sheridan has suggested that Early Bronze Age elites in Kilmartin were able to control the flow of copper and also possibly bronze from Ireland to the north-east of Scotland, which was expressed in terms of conspicuous consumption and large scale monument building as the elites visibly demonstrated their wealth and power²⁰. It is possible that mining was also taking place in, and around, the Glen as there are copper deposits which were certainly exploited in the early modern period²¹. Whether copper was acquired locally, or from further afield or both, the connections of the people living in Kilmartin were clearly wide ranging. Evidence in the form of materials or stylistic affinities suggest these extending to Ireland the North East of Scotland and Yorkshire²².

The Early Bronze Age, described by Sheridan as a 'golden age' in Kilmartin²³, saw the construction of a highly visible, deliberately imposing Linear Cemetery, and other massive cairns in the Glen, of which Dunchraigaig Cairn is one.

The monument complex at Ballymeanoch and the Baluachraig Rock Art site are visible from Dunchraigaig Cairn.

¹⁷ Sheridan 2017, RARFA

¹⁸ RCAHMS 1988: 14

¹⁹ RCAHMS 1988; Sheridan 2017, RARFA

²⁰ Sheridan 2012:175; Sheridan 2017 RARFA

²¹ Steiniger 2012

²² Sheridan 2012: 177

²³ Sheridan 2012: 175