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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC105

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90307)

Taken into State care: 1963 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TORRYLIN CHAMBERED CAIRN



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TORRYLIN, CHAMBERED LONG CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Torrylin is a Neolithic long cairn of Clyde type, much disfigured and reduced in size by stone robbing, ploughing and dumping of field clearance stones. It is now difficult to determine its original shape, although most cairns of this type are trapezoidal or rectangular on plan (see Carn Ban). What remains of the cairn covers an area of about 20m in diameter, with the chamber exposed for viewing at the north end. Measuring 6.7m x 1.2m, the chamber is composed of at least four compartments and has been excavated on at least three occasions in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Documented finds include four human skulls, bones from several adults, a fragmentary Neolithic lugged bowl and a flint knife. A variety of animal bones, including ox, pig, lamb, bird, otter and fox, were also recovered, but it is highly likely that the otter and fox remains represent animals using the tomb as a den.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Mid-19th century: Torrylin is extensively quarried for stone and considerably reduced in size. Around this time, the cairn was dug into by a local farmer, who exposed the burial chamber.

c. 1860: Chambers cleared of earth and stones by J MacArthur, a local antiquarian.

1893: Excavation of the third compartment by a Dr Duncan.

1900: T H Bryce excavates the south chamber.

1963: Torrylin is taken into care.

1994: Torrylin is scheduled.

Archaeological Overview

Although now heavily mutilated, Torrylin was probably similar in form to the well-preserved long cairn at Carn Ban. The excavations carried out by Duncan and Bryce suggest that Torrylin received burials over a long period, and that bones were sorted and placed in specific areas of the compartment. Duncan noted that skulls he recovered appeared to be buried at varying depths, while Bryce found that while the bones he unearthed were scattered, they were mainly found along the walls of the compartment, while skulls were found in the north-west and north-east corners. The lugged vessel recovered from the cairn has no decoration, but is similar in form to one recovered from Nether Largie South long cairn.

Animal bones recovered from the site included ox, pig, lamb or kid, bird, fish, fox and otter. The latter pair are considered to be the remains of animals who used the tomb as a den. A large proportion of the domesticated bones were from younger animals. The bird bones included some leg and wing bones of small birds and humeri from a large bird. The bones of exotic mammals and birds occur at

other Neolithic tombs, and may have played a part in the rituals associated with this monument.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Clyde-type cairns are common to Argyll and south-west Scotland. A characteristic feature of Clyde cairns is a semicircular or elliptical forecourt, where the front of the cairn has a façade of large upright stones. Most Clyde cairns have a central burial chamber entered by a passageway from the façade. These chambers are of dry-stone construction, with a slabbed roof supported on corbels. Some possess secondary burial chambers opening from the narrow end of the cairn or from its sides. At substantially excavated sites such as the Gleniron cairns in Galloway, it is possible to trace round cairns edged by rough kerbs within the larger long cairns.

Social Overview

This site has no known social significance at present. However, in the 19th century, it appears that burial cairns were regarded with trepidation by the islanders. Writing in 1873, MacArthur relates a local tradition about the grim end of the farmer who was responsible for quarrying Torrylin. In a footnote, he comments: 'This tradition is well-known in Arran, and has tended to deepen the feelings of superstitious dread with which these monuments are generally regarded.'

Spiritual Overview

Chambered cairns are believed to represent a belief in an afterlife by the Neolithic communities that constructed them, and some appear to have been used for as long as 1,000 years. Although this belief system is poorly understood, it is likely that the deceased were believed to join a group of 'ancestors'; and that various rituals were carried out in the forecourt prior to bones being interred or on other occasions when the ancestors were invoked. Animal bones recovered from Torrylin may be evidence for ritual feasts held at the site.

Aesthetic Overview

The path to the cairn runs through woodland and is a pleasant walk, and from the cairn the visitor has an impressive view of Ailsa Craig.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

The site was excavated prior to the development of modern scientific dating techniques that could have assisted in our understanding of the monument.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Torrylin is a Neolithic long cairn of Clyde type, and was probably used by the local community over a long period of time.
- Excavations at Torrylin recovered the remains of several adults, one child and an infant from birth. These bones may have been specifically arranged in a certain way.

- Animal bones recovered from the cairn may represent the remains of ritual feasts or sacrifices.
- The stonework of the internal burial chamber is fairly well preserved and is characteristic of Clyde-type cairns. When viewed in conjunction with Carn Ban, visitors can gain a clearer picture of how a Neolithic long cairn was constructed and what lay within.
- Chambered tombs of differing forms are common to parts of Scotland, Ireland and the Atlantic coast of Europe, and can be seen as an expression of a commonly held prehistoric belief system, including a belief in an afterlife. As such, study of these monuments might be able to help us appreciate the beliefs of these distant communities.
- The farming communities who placed their dead within these tombs did so over a period of more than 1,000 years, and the remains may have reinforced their identity with the land and their sense of having a right to farm it.
- Torrylin is part of a cluster of related monuments in the Lagg area that have the potential to inform us about how prehistoric society was organised and developed.

Associated Properties

Carn Ban, Arran; Nether Largie North; Gleniron; Cairnholy

Keywords

Clyde-type cairn; façade; forecourt; long cairn; animal bones; Neolithic; T H Bryce; Dr Duncan; J MacArthur; superstition