



Biggar Archaeology

Bringing the past to the present

Excavation of a Bronze Age burial cairn at Woodend, Mossfennan Farm, Upper Tweeddale.

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Abstract

Partial excavation of a previously investigated cairn revealed the two cists already recorded and a rare example of rock art in Borders Region, details of the construction of the cairn were also uncovered.

Introduction

The site is on a natural fluvio glacial mound of sand and gravel, some 60m NE of Woodend Cottage and east of the A701 road from Broughton to Moffat; the site is almost equidistant between the road and the old Talla Railway line. The NGR is NT 121313 and it lies at c200m OD.

The site, as seen prior to the work was covered to some extent in nettles and with pieces of sawn timber and fallen branches from the surrounding pine trees. Only the southern half and upper edges of the central cist (Cist 1) was visible along with part of the cover slab of Cist 2. On the SE quadrant a significant depression and disturbance was evidently caused by rabbit burrowing, some of it recent.

Previous excavation (Stevenson, 1939) had been undertaken on the site but with hardly any record of what was found, indeed the excavator is unknown. This work had taken place some time during the 1930's and all that is known is that two cists were discovered along with 'several other similar burials, apparently in less well constructed cists'.

The work described here is part of an ongoing investigation of survey and excavation in Upper Tweeddale, the first phase of survey work (Ward,

2004) has been completed and the second phase is to excavate on selected sites to further enhance the untold story of the area.

Regrettably, the work on this location should never have been initiated, due to an oversight which was entirely the fault of the writer; the fact is that Woodend Cairn is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and as such may only be disturbed by permission from Historic Scotland. The site was therefore cleared of turf and soil in contravention of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 (Section 2). The mistake was realised before commencement of work on the actual structure of the site and excavation was immediately ceased.

In view of the fact that the actual archaeological deposits had not been altered, Historic Scotland was disposed to take a sympathetic view and to grant Scheduled Ancient Monument Consent to re-instate the site without further investigation, which has been done.

Excavation (fig 1)

A single irregular shaped trench measuring 9m N/S by 12m E/W and covering an area of approximately 75square metres was opened over the cairn. The excavation consisted of turf removal and hand trowelling and cleaning of the surface of the cairn. Particular attention was given to the search for artefacts at this stage as often pot sherds are found to have been broken on the surface of burial mounds in the Bronze Age, nothing of antiquity was found. The only area to be taken down to the underlying natural; which was shown to be a mound of alluvial sand and gravel, was in the SE quadrant (Pl 12) where there was disturbance by rabbit burrowing and an absence of stone.

The monument (Pl 1 & 2) was shown to consist of a dome shaped covering of stones laying on the natural mound and up to 0.7m deep at the summit and at the cairn edges only a stone or two deep. Within the cairn at least two short cists had been incorporated, these were both discovered in 1930's (Stevenson, op.cit.) when a partial excavation was undertaken.

Nearly the entire surface of the monument was exposed by turf removal, this was up to 0.2m deep, the underlying stone cover was then cleaned, but the northern side was found to have matted surface roots from the pine tree on that side, and could not be opened. It was at this point that the site's legal status was realised and work was immediately suspended.

Nevertheless a considerable new level of information was gathered concerning the nature of the monument.

All of the visible stone used in the monument consisted of the locally available greywacke. The cists and covering slab were comprised of natural tabular stones, whereas the bulk of the visible covering on the cairn were fist sized rounded cobble stones (presumably brought from the nearby River Tweed). Around some parts of the edges were large angular rocks which may have formed a kerb, and over the upper part of the cairn further large angular rocks protruded, including one with pecked rock art (below).

Cist 1 had several stones lying within it (Pl 3 & 4), in particular a large stone may have been the original northern end slab which was missing, and this rock would have fitted the gap. The other three side slabs were quite secure, vertical and in situ. Internally, the cist measured 0.6m wide by possibly 1.1m long, the long axis being on a N/S alignment. The depth was 0.6m from the upper edge of the side slabs to the natural, and on the base of the chamber were a few seemingly random cobble sized stones which did not appear to have been original. It appears that the cist was thoroughly emptied on the previous occasion and no finds were recorded then or made this time, nor indeed were any during the excavation reported here, other than modern rubbish and bullet and cartridge cases distributed over the site. The side slabs of the cist lay on the natural gravel; this allowed an estimate to be made for the depth of the cairn at the summit of the monument. It was unclear whether the cist had been inserted into a cairn, or if the cist may have been subsequently surrounded by cairn stones.

Cist 2 (Pl 5 & 6) was also known through the work of the previous investigator, and this time it was partially exposed lying below an irregular, natural shaped capstone which measured up to 1.4m by 0.8m by 0.2m thick. Only the cist width of 0.7m could be determined at the northern end, as the capstone was not moved. The capstone, presumably originally from Cist 2, lay at an angle over the cist. Below and beside the capstone was a quantity of broken glass from a mirror and various bottles and corroded metal from tin cans. This material, which filled two buckets, had apparently been dumped into the spaces left by the former excavations; it was obviously derived from the nearby Woodend Cottage. It was possible to approximately date the rubbish by the presence of quarter whisky bottles of c1930's style and therefore appears to have been deposited after the excavations of that time. Some of this material still lies within the cist as it was not excavated on this occasion. It was

possible to inspect the underside of the capstone using a torch and mirror and it was shown to have an irregular surface, unlike the flat upper surface.

The rest of the cairn was apparently comprised of compacted stones (Pl 7) of fairly regular size with some larger boulders and possibly slab like rocks protruding. On the summit was a scatter of loose angular stones which clearly had been deposited over the consolidated material of the cairn. This may have happened at the time of the previous excavation, or they may have accumulated before and/or after that event.

It was not possible to determine the true nature of the larger earth fast stones (Pl 8 & 9) seen in the cairn excepting that they did appear to form a perimeter which may indicate kerbing and in the case of some longer stones, further features.

However, lying almost immediately on the east side of Cist 1 is an angular rock (Pl 10 & 11) measuring 1m long and over 0.3m wide on the uppermost face, itself lying at an angle facing SW and away from the cist. The rock has fractured due to weathering in post deposition times, as indeed several other surface stones had, but on the widest part of the upper surface are at least seven concentric lines faintly pecked into the smooth flat surface of the stone. The lines are up to 10mm wide and appear to have been intended to form semi ovals on the edge of the rock. The outer ring forms an arc of c270mm on the long axis by c140mm on the short one (the former measurement being straight between the ends of the lines and the latter being a radius across the design). The terminals of the inner curved line are about 80mm apart. The lines are slightly irregular in distance from one another. Although it is far from certain, it does not appear that the rock has been part of a larger one with a more complete design on it, rather the pecking appears not to have been finished since the surface of the rock is similar in appearance overall while the abrasion of the carving varies.

Immediately south of Cist 2 was the area of rabbit burrowing with extant burrows (Pl 12). Cist 2, below the capstone had been adopted by the rabbits as a living space. However this same area was almost devoid of stone suggesting the cairn material had been completely removed, presumably by the earlier excavator. It is possible that this was where the 'less well constructed cists' were found. Given the consolidated nature of the rest of the mound covering of stone, it seems most likely that such material has been removed from this area.

Discussion

By the nature of the two cists this is clearly a Bronze Age funerary monument. The Upper Tweed area abounds in habitation, burial and ceremonial sites of this period (RCAHMS, 1967, Ward op.cit.) and indeed a similar site is visible across the River Tweed near Tweedford some 260m to the NNE. This site was excavated (Craw, op.cit) and several cists were discovered some of which produced a range of grave goods. It seems reasonable to conclude that Woodend cairn will also contain more burial features and probably objects.

It is clear that the only area of previous disturbance apart from the two cists was the area of rabbit activity. The stone over the rest of the site is securely consolidated, apart from the loose surface stones mentioned above. Larger angular and tabular stones are evidently lying beneath the cobble stones covering most of the site, and therefore they must have fulfilled some function of construction of the monument before its final covering of cobbles, the latter possibly as a sealing on abandonment of use.

The excavated site at Tweedford had cists lying near the edge of the cairn and it may be that some of the longer stones at the southern and western side of Woodend are in fact sealing cists. The similarities between the two sites is hardly surprising as the area is well attested as being one of the most prolific areas of Bronze Age archaeology in Scotland. Such cemeteries were probably used by a family unit, in each instance settlement sites are recorded on the hill slopes above the respective cairns.

Glacial mounds in Upper Tweeddale were often adopted as Bronze Age funerary sites, and several examples are recorded. Early Christian people also used these prominent natural features for their burials (RCAHMS & Ward, op.cit.) in fact several of the latter are in close proximity to Woodend cairn.

Conclusion

However conjectural some of the points in the above discussion are, it is abundantly clear that the Woodend cairn remains substantially undisturbed and notwithstanding the unfortunate circumstances of this work, a significant new level of data has been revealed which will enhance the importance of the monument in the context of its rich Bronze Age landscape.

The addition of a rare example of rock art to the area is an added bonus, and taken along with the carvings at nearby Tweedford, indicate that such artistic work may not have been as rare as previously supposed. Further examples may be discovered in the course of time.

It is hoped that this site, along with many others in Upper Tweeddale may eventually be given prominence as visitor attractions, in keeping with part of the aims and objectives of the Biggar Archaeology Group.

Acknowledgement

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References

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Photos and captions



Pl 1 Looking S showing E side of cairn with two cists, rock art stone on RHS of open cist. Note the disturbed and stone free area near the capstone of Cist 2.



Pl 2 Looking S showing W side of cairn with Cist 1 and rock art stone. Note the larger loose stones on top of the small compacted stones.



Pl 3 Looking S showing Cist 1 with possible end slab inside.



Pl 4 Looking E showing Cist 1 with possible end slab inside.



PI 5 Cist 2 looking W showing cist edge and capstone. The algae line indicates the part of the capstone previously visible.



PI 6 Looking W with Cist 2 and rabbit burrow.



PI 7 Looking N showing W side of cairn. Note the small compacted stones.



PI 8 Looking E. Note the larger stones around the edge of the cairn.



Pl 9 Looking NE showing slab of stone at SW side. Possible feature; cist capstone or kerb?



Pl 10 Looking W showing position of Cist 1 and rock art stone.



Pl 11 Close up of rock art stone showing pecked curves.



Pl 12 Looking N showing rabbit burrowing and stone free area.

Fig 1

