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The Excavation of a Cairnfield at Kildonan, Sutherland

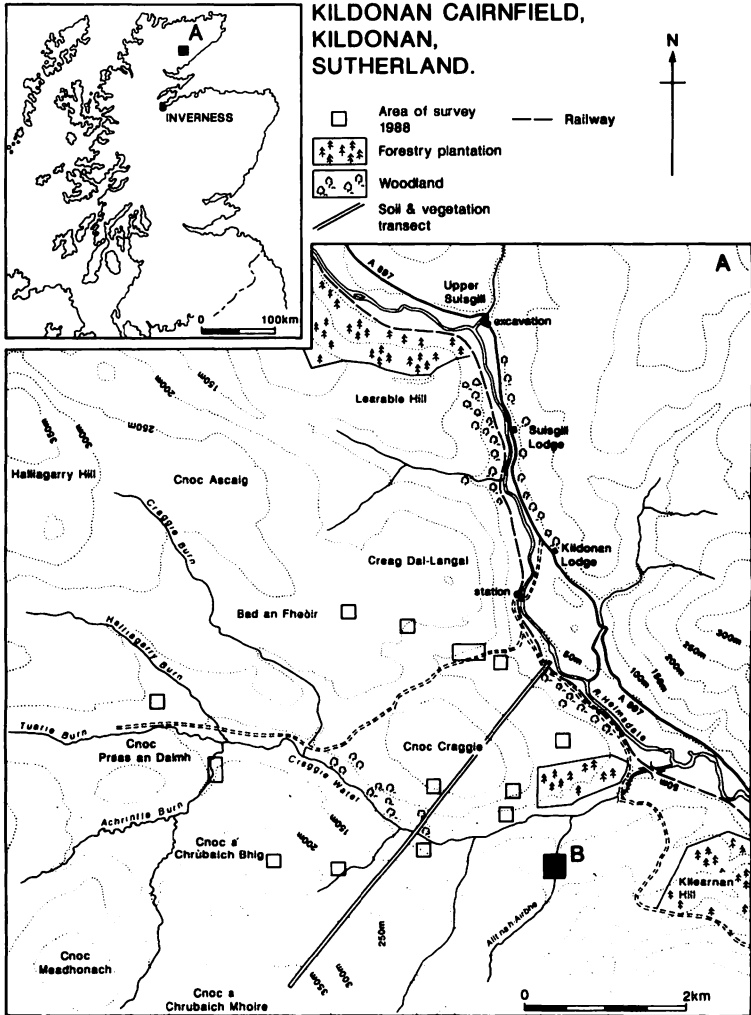
Abstract

Small-scale excavations were undertaken on a cairnfield in which possible structural evidence had been identified in test pits dug during a 1988 survey of the area (Lowe, forthcoming). Buried soils were recovered from beneath two cairns, and ard marks, sealed by peat, were noted. Radiocarbon dates were retrieved from the buried soils and the peat. No structures were revealed. Excavation was funded by Historic Scotland.

Introduction

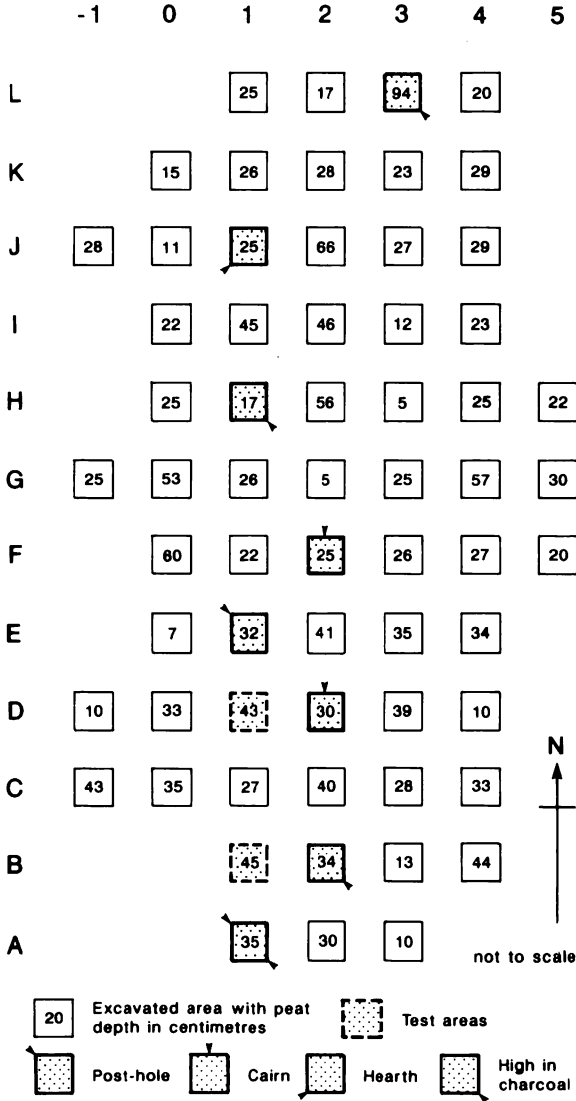
The cairnfield (NGR NC 906 184) is situated on the south side of the Craggie Basin, Strath of Kildonan, some 3.5 km south of Kildonan railway station and about 1.75 km north-east of Cnoc Craggie (Illus. 1). It lies at an altitude of between 120 m and 150 m on a north facing slope to the west of the Allt na h-Airbhe, and is bounded on the west by a waterlogged gully. The site was overlain partly by peat and partly by peaty loam; these deposits were on average about 300 mm deep but, in places, the soil cover deepened to over 0.90 m.

In 1988 an archaeological survey was undertaken in advance of a forestry application on five upland areas by the Craggie Basin. The intention was to determine which areas required preservation, which could be ploughed without further consideration, and to identify those areas which would require further investigation, including excavation, before afforestation (Lowe & Barber 1988). As part of this survey a soil sampling exercise was undertaken on the Allt na h-Airbhe cairnfield. A grid was surveyed over the site and sampled at 20 m intervals



ILLUS. 1 Location plan

Kildonan Cairnfield: Soil Pits and Peat Depths



ILLUS. 2 Location of test pits showing peat depths

in order to try and locate evidence for settlement in the vicinity of the cairns (Illus. 2). Some of the test pits revealed areas of high phosphate concentration indicative of human activity and, in Areas A1, E1 and J1, possible post-holes and a hearth were identified.

In 1990, ten areas were opened, each named after the pit they incorporated (Illus. 3). Thus, test pit A1 (1988) became Area A1 (1990). The cairnfield itself was not surveyed. The excavation was arranged and funded by Historic Scotland.

The aims of the 1990 project were:

- a) to investigate any structures associated with the possible hearth (Area J1) and post-holes (Areas A1 and E1);
- b) to section a selection of the cairns to retrieve structural information and dating material (Areas D2 and F2);
- c) to investigate the immediate vicinity of those 1988 pits which had displayed apparently anomalous, phosphate peaks by excavating areas, 2 by 2 m in size, around them (Areas B2, H2 and L3).

Two additional areas (Areas B1 and D1) were excavated for comparative purposes (see below).

Results

Area A1 (Illus. 4)

This 5 by 5 m trench was located on the sloping side of the natural gully on the west side of the cairnfield. The lower parts of the gully became flooded very quickly. Immediately upslope from the gully base, a series of accumulated sandy loam sediments, forming small mounds, was visible on the south side of the area, and a spread of flat stones or rubble, on the north. Both of these directly underlay peat. These sandy loam sediments proved to be only the latest in a sequence of lenses of silting, each band of which was between 100 and 200 mm thick. The lowest bands were grey and leached-out whereas the upper bands were rich red browns. Between each band was a thin layer of humic topsoil which also became more

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leached further down the profile. The soil test pit in which the possible post-hole had been noted was cut through one of the thickest parts of this sequence of sandy loam deposits, in the area immediately adjacent to the boggy gully. No post-holes were identified. It seems likely that the silting pattern is caused by light soils, mainly loam and sandy loam, washing off the slope and meeting raised bog water.

Area E1

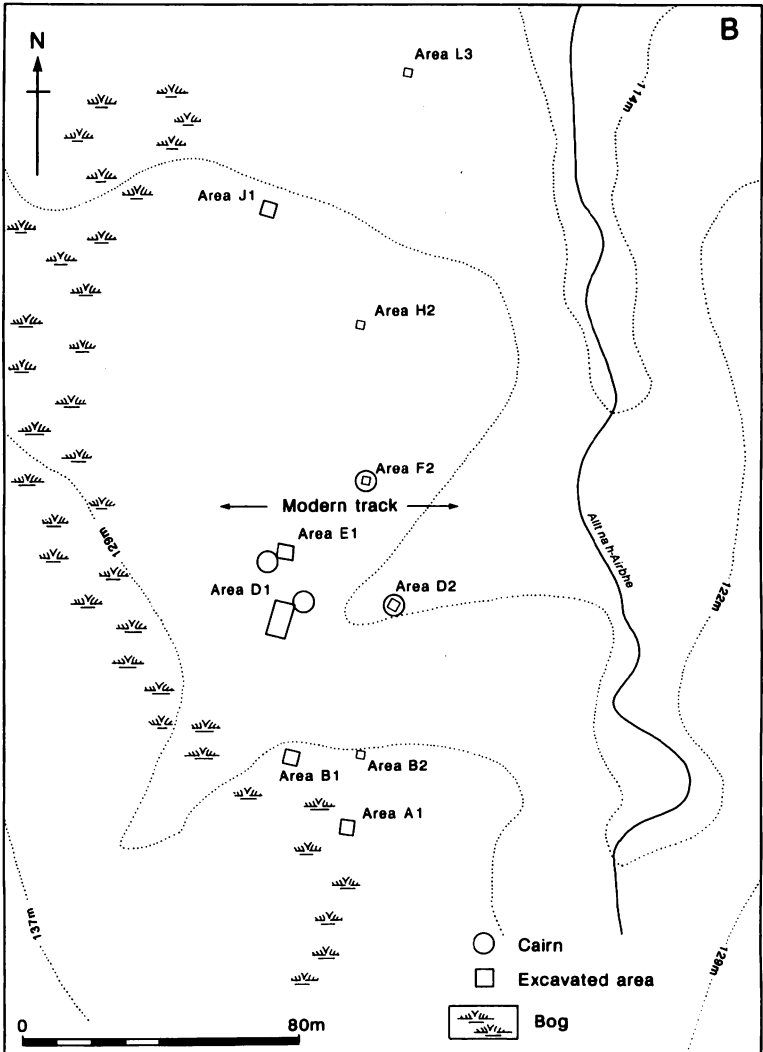
An area, measuring 5 by 5 m, was excavated to the south of a modern vehicle track which crossed the cairnfield from east to west. Immediately to the south-west of the excavated square lay a small cairn, situated on a natural prominence of concreted drift which extended into the cutting. The 1988 test pit, which contained a putative post-hole, cut into the buried soil in an area which had been very badly disturbed by animal and root activity. No convincing archaeological features could be identified in 1990. However, the presence of charcoal (noted in 1990) suggested that human activity had occurred in the area. A peat-filled linear feature was noted, running south-west to north-east across the cutting; this was examined in more detail in Area D1.

Area J1

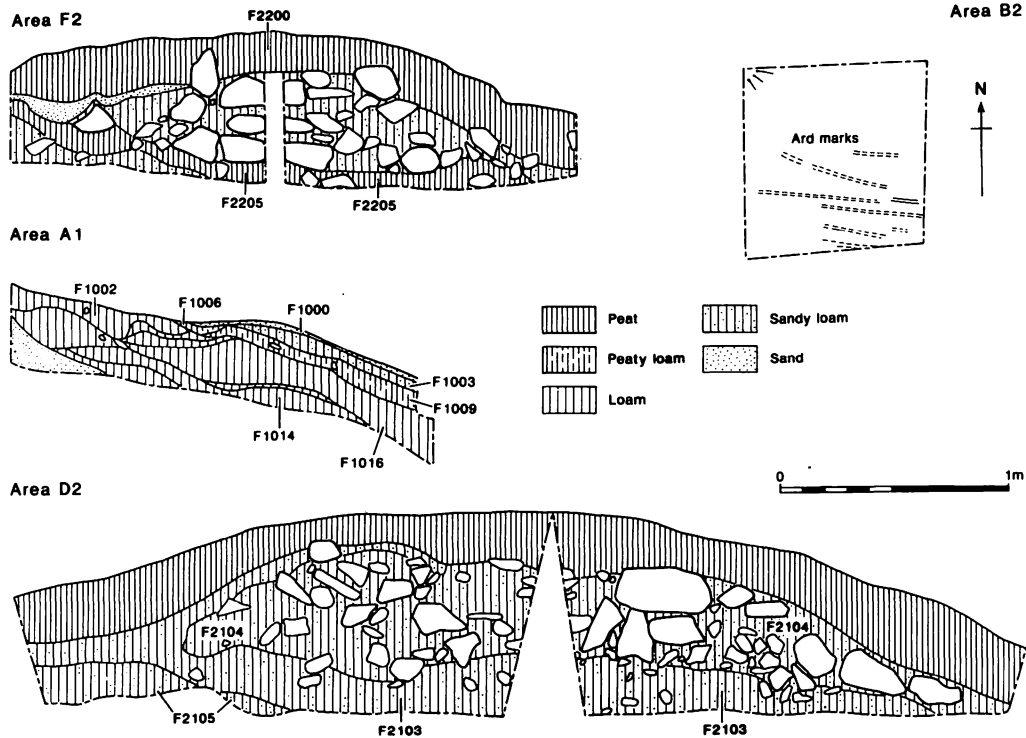
A trench, 4 by 4 m, was opened where a putative hearth had been identified in 1988. As in most areas, the buried soil surface was very uneven. Charcoal was present in a hollow which ran from east to west. No *in situ* burning was noted and the presence of a hearth could not be confirmed. It is likely that root and animal activity had dispersed charcoal throughout the soil in the area.

Area B2

An area, 2 by 2 m, was excavated where anomalously high phosphates had been recorded in 1988. A buried, sandy loam topsoil underlay c300 mm of peat, but no anthropic features were apparent. Ardmarks were found in the bottom of the buried B horizon immediately above the drift (Illus. 4). The



ILLUS. 3 Location of excavation trenches features



ILLUS. 4 Section drawings

base of the peat (>50 mm in thickness) was radiocarbon dated to 1070 ± 50 BP (GU-2949) which provides a *terminus ante quem* for the ardmarks. This calibrates to AD 935-1025 with a probability of 69.2% or AD 880-1040 with a probability of 95.5% (after Pearson et al. 1986).

Area H2

Peat, some 500 mm deep, was removed from an area measuring 2 by 2 m, centred on another anomalously high phosphate concentration. The peat covered a very stony buried soil, 200-300 mm thick, which in turn overlay a stonier, buried B horizon. No archaeological features were identified.

Area L3

In a further area where high phosphate had been recorded, a 2 by 2 m trench contained the greatest peat depth of all the areas examined, presumably because the cutting lay on the edge of a slope which rose to its north side. It is possible that leached phosphates from a wider area than normal were collected in this hollow. No archaeological features were identified.

Area D2 (cairn; Illus. 4)

One quadrant of a cairn was examined in an area measuring 2 by 2.5 m, although the total area of the cairn extended to over 9 square metres. Peat cover was between 250 and 300 mm deep and was, predictably, slightly thicker towards the bottom of the slope. A c50 mm thick layer of bleached, sandy loam occurred between the peat and the stones on the south-east side. The boundaries between this and the sub-cairn material, and between either of these and the buried soil outwith the cairn, were indistinct, all the soils being sandy loams. The medium to large stones were apparently closely set but there was much interstitial soil. The body of the cairn was up to 0.7 m thick. The buried soil appeared to have a very low humic content but it proved possible to obtain a radiocarbon date of 2450 ± 80 BP (GU-2951). This calibrates to 690-385 BC with a probability of 69.6% and 810-390 BC with a probability of 95.6% (after Pearson et al. 1986). This date provides a *terminus post quem* for the

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construction of the cairn. An apparent ridge of iron pan was found in the buried B horizon towards the edge of the cairn.

Area F2 (cairn; Illus. 4)

Area F2 also contained a cairn, smaller than that in D2, and located on a more pronounced slope. The south-east quadrant of the cairn, c1.4 m by 1.05 m, was excavated. Peat cover ranged between about 100 mm and 300 mm. As in Area D2, there was a bleached layer of sandy soil beneath the peat on the uphill side of the cairn which reached a maximum thickness of just over 100 mm. The body of the cairn itself, up to 0.60 m thick, comprised medium to large stones in a matrix of very dark brown, sandy loam. Beneath the cairn was a layer of peat, less than 100 mm thick, a sample from which produced a radiocarbon date of 1420 ± 60 BP (GU-2950). This calibrates to AD 605-670 with a probability of 69.6% or AD 520-700 with a probability of 95.5% (after Pearson et al. 1986). This date provides a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the cairn.

Area B1

Area B1 was located on the same slope as area A1, at the bottom of which was a badly drained natural gully. However, Area B1 did not reveal the same silting pattern as its southern neighbour. There appeared to be charcoal flecking throughout the buried soil, but excavation revealed that this was concentrated in root holes and rabbit burrows. A similar pattern emerged in Areas E1 and J1 where charcoal had been carried into the buried B horizon through bioturbation. No features of anthropic origin were identified.

Area D1

Finally, a large (10 by 7 m) area, chosen at random within the cairnfield, was investigated. A cairn was located immediately outwith its north-west edge, on a natural prominence of drift. The only man-made feature within the excavated area consisted of a broad furrow or gully, 1 to 1.5 m wide, which was aligned east to west across the area. This was similar to a feature noted in Area E1. The limited depth of the peat/humic topsoil which

had developed over this feature (and that in Area E1) implies that they are part of a much later cultivation/drainage scheme.

Discussion

Cairnfields in Scotland are commonly found in association with late Bronze Age hut-circles. The absence of these in the vicinity of the cairns under study led to a hypothesis that they dated from an earlier period of clearance, possibly during the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. It is possible that associated houses of these periods were built of wood, unlike the later hut-circles, and would have left no surface indications. It was to test this hypothesis that several areas of potential house sites, identified on the basis of the 1988 survey results, were excavated.

The excavations, however, found no evidence for the existence of early habitation in the area and, indeed, none of the putative post-holes, hearths, areas of high phosphate, or other potential indicators of house-sites could be shown to represent definite structures. On the contrary, radiocarbon dates from the excavation indicated that clearance and cultivation in the area date to the Iron Age and later. It seems that these activities began in the Early Iron Age and were resumed during the Dark Ages, with two dates centred around AD 630 and AD 975.

The earliest date from the cairnfield is roughly contemporary with Phase V at Upper Suisgill (GU-1326; 630±60 bc), a settlement site located about 7 km further north along the Strath of Kildonan (Barclay 1985). This site was occupied throughout the first millennium BC and included a series of wooden houses, souterrains and evidence of cultivation. The earliest date from the present excavation is also similar to a *terminus ante quem* date for hut occupation on Site 3 at Kilearnan Hill (GU-1917; 695±100 bc), located some 2 km east of the cairnfield (Haggerty, forthcoming).

Therefore, the evidence from the Allt na h-Airbhe cairnfield fits comfortably into the known archaeological and chronological framework for the central area of the Strath of Kildonan. The hypothesis that the cairnfield might be

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associated with later Neolithic or Bronze Age activity was not sustained.

Acknowledgements

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