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Excavation and Survey at the Ord, Lairg, Sutherland, 1977-78

Abstract

A small scale rescue excavation near the summit of the Ord, Lairg, Sutherland, identified evidence of narrow cultivation ridges beneath a later phase of broader ridges. These undated features were set within an extensive complex of monuments dating from the Neolithic to recent times. An area of 7ha was surveyed, concentrating on small cairns, lynchets, stony banks and walls which defined areas of early agricultural use.

Introduction

In 1976 the BBC announced proposals to construct a new transmitter near the summit of the Ord, a prominent hill immediately to the west of Lairg, at the southern end of Loch Shin in Sutherland (Fig. 1). The wealth of archaeological features on the Ord had long been recognised (RCAHMS 1911) and, even though the transmitter site had been selected so as to avoid the more obvious monuments, there were genuine concerns that important remains might be destroyed.

With funds from the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Scottish Development Department (now Historic Scotland), a small excavation was carried out in March 1977. Improved access for construction of the transmitter and subsequent maintenance was also planned and the opportunity was, therefore, taken to survey the area from the transmitter site to the public highway, focusing on the existing trackway. The following year the BBC provided further funds which allowed the survey area to be extended to the south.

An archive report with full survey drawings was prepared

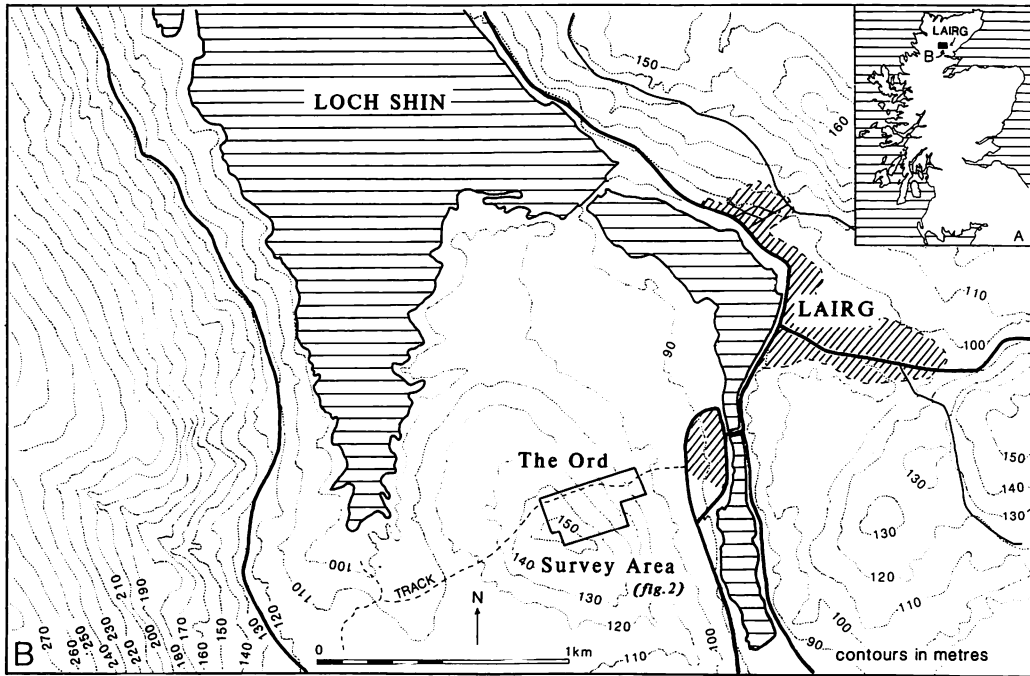


Fig. 1 Location map

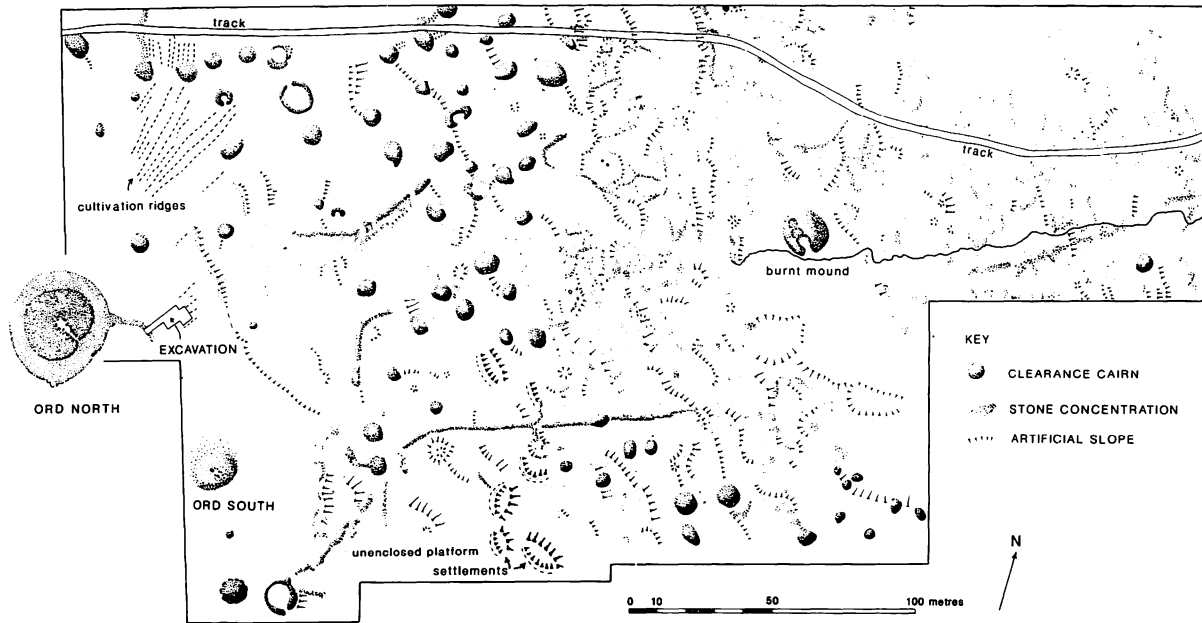


Fig. 2 Ord Survey showing area of excavation

immediately after the fieldwork and copies were deposited with the SDD. At that time it was not felt that the results warranted formal publication but since then interest in early agricultural activity has developed considerably, and recent survey and excavation work associated with highway construction to the south of Lairg has provided a mass of new data (McCullagh 1995). It, therefore, seems appropriate that a summary account of the earlier work should now be made more widely available.

The Excavation

The transmitter was to be constructed barely 20m to the east of the large chambered tomb, known as Ord North, which was excavated by John Corcoran in 1967 (Henshall 1972, SUT 48; Sharples 1981). The site lay just off the summit of the hill to the north-east, on a relatively level area commanding an extensive view of Loch Shin and over the village of Lairg (NGR NC 5737 0561; Fig. 2).

Before excavation there was clear evidence of ridge cultivation preserved predominantly in the vegetation. A faint stony bank which ran towards the chambered tomb passed the transmitter site to the south and the excavation area was extended to include a section across this feature. In all, a little under 60 square metres were excavated.

The soil profile

The heather vegetation covered a shallow peat 250mm in depth (1). Beneath this was a typical upland podsol comprising a leached horizon of grey, silty mineral soil (2) which also included a high proportion of larger grit. The brown horizon (3) below represented a humus-enriched layer and beneath this was a well-developed pan of redeposited iron (4). The natural subsoil (5) comprised a glacial till of light brown sand and gravel which also included rounded boulders.

The date of podsolisation is not known but it most probably relates directly to the agricultural exploitation of the area.

From a practical point of view, however, the effect of leaching was to remove humus and iron from one horizon in the soil profile giving what may be a misleadingly homogeneous appearance. It is worth noting that most features were only identified once the leached horizon had been removed.

Archaeological features (Fig. 3)

The stony bank visible from the surface was revealed as the remains of a collapsed stone wall (7). The basal stones were set into the leached horizon (2), but fallen stones lay well up in the overlying peat (1). It, therefore, follows that the wall was constructed before the peat growth began although its collapse took place while peat was forming. Given the abundance of stone in the immediate vicinity and the absence of more recent structures it is unlikely that much stone had been robbed. Judging from the amount of stone it, therefore, seems that the wall could never have stood very high.

Other features of archaeological significance were identified beneath the leached horizon (2). These included a shallow depression (8), no more than 150mm deep and up to 1.7m wide, which contained a fill of black peaty soil above a shallow lens of light brown silt. The fact that it seemed to run parallel to the wall might indicate that the two features are associated, but the stratigraphy suggests that the depression preceded the wall.

Towards the south-west end of the trench a series of sharp grooves (6) provided clear evidence of cultivation by plough or, possibly, by ard. The grooves ran parallel to the ridges which were faintly visible from the surface and they all stopped abruptly just short of the edge of the depression (8), perhaps indicating a direct association.

Running obliquely across the excavation trench from east to west were four shallow gullies (9) no more than 40mm deep, between 200 and 350mm across, and set 0.8 to 1.3m apart. These gullies contained a black, fibrous peaty soil above a grey silty deposit and were interpreted as the bases of trenches defining a different phase of narrow ridge cultivation. The gullies must have remained open for some time to allow the accumulation of the silt and peat before being covered by layer 2 which was

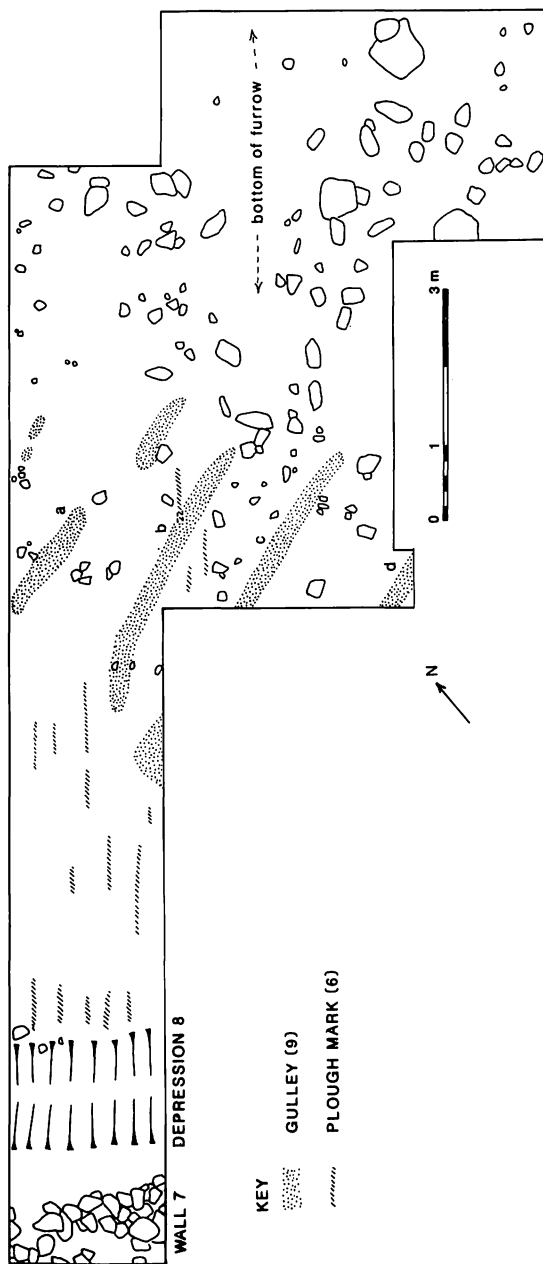


Fig. 3 Excavation plan

presumably spread over the furrows during later cultivation. One gully and one of the cultivation marks intersected, but in spite of careful cleaning the fill of the two features was so similar that it was not certain which was the earlier. On balance it was felt that the cultivation marks followed the gullies, not least because the former were aligned with the ridges visible from the surface.

Interpretation

In retrospect it is regrettable that it was not possible to obtain radiocarbon dates for samples recovered from the shallow gullies. As a result there are no absolute dates but a provisional sequence can be demonstrated.

It appears that the gullies (9) reflect the earliest recognisable cultivation which took the form of narrow or cord rig. The irregularity of the spacing and the absence of plough or ard marks on the same alignment might suggest spade cultivation, but spade marks were equally elusive, and it is possible that the evidence has been removed by the later cultivation.

The accumulation of silt and a peaty humus in the furrows shows that cultivation was then abandoned for some time. The fill of the furrows also suggests poor drainage and this, in turn, might imply that the iron pan was already causing difficulties.

Nevertheless, the area was again brought into cultivation, but on this occasion the ridges followed a different alignment and the survey of surface features showed that they were broader, measuring between 2 and 2.5m across. The earlier furrows were covered as the mineral soil (2) was disturbed and spread, and it was possible to trace the profile of the broad rig as an undulation in the surface of layer 2, visible in the north-east section. The depression (8) may reflect a headland or define a boundary for the cultivation plot and it is perhaps significant that above this feature the mineral soil (2) was noticeably darker, distinguishing it from the material above the cultivated areas.

Finally, a low wall, possibly constructed of field clearance stone, was built across the line of the ridges, perhaps

following the course of the earlier depression. The fill of the depression and the peaty nature of the cultivation marks suggests the soil was very humic and acidic, perhaps indicating drainage problems, and this may provide a realistic explanation for the final abandonment of cultivation in this area. Certainly peat was developing as the wall collapsed and Carter has quite reasonably suggested that, although cause and effect cannot easily be distinguished, the development of peat might closely follow the cessation of cultivation (Carter 1994). Certainly the iron pan within the excavation area was completely impervious causing the trench to fill with water after even modest rainfall but, once the pan was broken, water drained freely.

Dating

The monuments on the Ord range from the chambered tombs of the 3rd millennium BC through to settlements and field systems in use until the clearances of the last century. This provides an exceptionally broad chronological framework into which the excavation sequence might be fitted. Excavations at Gruids, about 1.5km south of the Ord, produced a C14 date of the early 15th century AD for narrow rig cultivation (Carter 1994, GU-3858), so it is possible that the entire sequence belongs in the late/post-medieval period.

The association of broad rig with cultivation marks, possibly made by an ard, may seem unusual, but in the context of an upland area of the northern Highlands this need not be so. Fenton has highlighted the affinities between the simple ard of prehistoric times and the *crann-nan-gad* and other single stilted ploughs used in the western Highlands into the 19th century (Fenton 1976, p. 36). Depending on the profile of the coulter, there is little reason why such relatively recent implements could not leave cultivation marks indistinguishable from those of an ard. A further argument for the use of such a tool on the Ord is the single direction of the marks. In prehistoric contexts ard cultivation marks generally indicate cross ploughing which could not, of course, apply to ridge cultivation.

Evidence from Allt na Fearna Mor (McCullagh 1995), about

3km south of the Ord, raises the possibility of an earlier chronology, at least for the initial phase. Here samples taken from the base of the shallow peat range from 1760 +/- 50 BP to 650 +/- 50 BP (GU-3345 and GU-3333 respectively) with the majority falling in the 7th to 10th centuries AD (calibrated). However, it is worth emphasising Carter's important observation, that the dates relate to the base of the peat and, although they provide a valuable *terminus ante quem*, the actual cultivation could be much earlier. It is also worth recalling that the summit of the Ord lies some 150m above OD whereas both Gruids and Allt na Fearn Mor are about 50m lower and in less exposed locations. As more evidence is gathered for the date of the onset of peat growth, it is clear that local conditions play a crucial role. Without more site specific information further speculation is unlikely to be fruitful.

The Survey

In the late 1970s there was no established methodology for recording large landscapes, nor was there easy access to the sophisticated EDM equipment which is now commonplace. This survey was therefore completed using taped offsets from a series of baselines established using tape measure and optical square. The advantage of this technique over some of the more advanced technologies is that the archaeologist is forced to cover every part of the survey area, and the person standing beside the feature is also the person who draws the actual plan. The disadvantages are that the margin of error is greater, cumulative errors can develop and there is difficulty in compensating for the slope.

In the event it was decided to record the features with reference to the surface slope of the hillside and not to attempt to produce a levelled plan. It is worth recalling that a fall of 50m over a horizontal distance of 400m gives a slope length of 403m so the difference is not highly significant.

A scale of 1:200 was used for the original survey drawings. This allowed detailed recording of individual features and it

was also possible to represent many topographical characteristics. However, given the reduction needed to present a clear plan for publication, most topographical details have been omitted and archaeological features have been simplified (Fig. 2).

It is also worth emphasising that, although the area supported a fairly dense heather cover at the time of the survey, a more recent visit in September 1996 showed that the heather is now noticeably higher and thicker. Consequently, features which were clearly visible in 1977-78 can no longer be recognised. This applies particularly to the ridge cultivation and to the less obvious of the stone features which are now completely obscured.

Fig. 2 is largely self-explanatory, but it is worth drawing attention to several features and summarising the principal characteristics. To avoid confusion with the many sources and surveys of this area the NMR reference numbers have been included where possible.

The monuments fall into three groups:

Funerary and ritual features

The two neolithic chambered tombs of Ord North (NC 50 NE 16) and Ord South (NC 50 NE 17) are well known, fully recorded and published. There is no need to describe them further here, but the smaller round cairn, 8.5m in diameter, about 30m south-east of Ord South is worth noting (NC 50 NE 19). Unlike the other small cairns on the hillside, the perimeter of this neat cairn is carefully defined by almost continuous orthostats. The apparent care in construction together with its location on the crest of the ridge suggest ritual or funerary function consistent with a date in the Bronze Age.

Settlement features

Three clear hut circles lie within the survey area (NC 50 NE 13): two are about 100m north-east of the Ord North tomb and the third is about 40m south-east of Ord South. The largest hut is, in fact, oval with internal dimensions of 8.6m x 7.5m and represents a substantial structure, but neither its size nor

its shape are exceptional for this area (see, for example, the huts identified at Allt na Fearn Mor (McCullagh 1995)). The other huts are a little smaller with diameters of 5.2m and 7.5m.

The hut walls are now defined by low, heather-covered banks with few identifiable features but, when surveyed in 1977, several large stones were visible protruding through the surface. In the case of the largest hut, the stones seemed to define a wall between 0.9 and 1.1m thick, built of a double row of orthostats with a north-west-facing entrance also marked by an orthostat. The wall is slightly wider either side of the entrance and this is a characteristic seen in the southern hut also. Entrances to the two smaller huts face south-east. Analogy with the huts excavated by McCullagh suggests a date in the second half of the second millennium BC, but such structures clearly had a long currency.

Towards the south of the survey area are five less distinctive features which appear to be cut into the hill slope. Around the uphill side of each there is a slight bank which arcs around a marked scarp. At the foot of the scarp is an elongated oval and relatively level area which, in turn, is defined on the downhill side by a further break in slope. Overall they measure about 7m x 12m and are orientated along the contour. Initially these features were thought to be natural, or else to reflect an interrupted pattern of lynchets associated with cultivation. However, closer examination suggests that they may represent settlement sites terraced into the slope similar to the unenclosed platform settlements identified most commonly in the Border areas. Firm evidence is absent but this is offered as a suggestion which might be picked up by fieldworkers who are active in this area.

Finally, the substantial burnt mound, 15m x 14m (NC 50 NE 80), was also recorded, although the diagnostic burnt stone seen by the OS surveyors in 1979 was not visible in 1977 and a clear identification was not possible. The feature has been disturbed on the north-west side where two hollows have distorted the characteristic kidney shape. The very broad chronology of these sites was highlighted twenty years ago by Hedges (1975), and that pattern persists today with sites such

as Graeanog in north Wales demonstrating two or three phases of use spanning the late third to early first millennium BC (Kelly 1992).

Agricultural features

In 1977 the survey identified cultivation ridges on the more level and less stony area near the summit, to the north and east of the Ord North tomb. The ridges tended to run across the contour and were rather irregular, varying in width from about 1.2m to over 3.4m. Now it is almost impossible to identify any of these features within the survey area, but to the south-west, on the other side of the hill, similar ridges can still be seen, apparently associated with curvilinear field enclosures.

Over 60 clearance cairns were also surveyed and, although the majority are now covered by heather, the largest examples remain clear and well defined. The cairns are concentrated on the upper part of the hillside, and indeed continue around the Ord to the north-west and south of the survey area. Significantly, the cultivation ridges tend to occur in areas with relatively few clearance cairns and they are absent where clearance cairns are most dense.

The less prominent cairns can be difficult to recognise beneath the present vegetation and it is now almost impossible to distinguish between some of the low and rather spread cairns and the more amorphous scatters of stone which were once very common on the hillside. Several cairns are hollowed out in the centre, but given the distance from any recent structures it seems unlikely that the stone has been removed for building unless, of course, it was robbed in antiquity for construction of other features on the hillside. Alternatively, the cairns might have been disturbed in the belief that they once contained burials or grave goods. This is perhaps not completely impossible and the distinction between clearance and burial cairns might be one of context rather than physical appearance.

Amongst the cairns are traces of several low stony banks, now almost completely obscured by heather. These tend to run down the hill slope and, although they are intermittent and in places very spread and disturbed, they seem to represent

the remains of stone walls.

Running along the contours are a series of lynchets which occasionally link several cairns. The distinction between man-made lynchets resulting from cultivation and natural terraces on the hillside is very difficult to identify with any certainty. The plan reproduced here includes all the more sharply profiled terrace or lynchet-like features, but it seems very likely that some are entirely natural while others will be predominantly natural but perhaps emphasised by agricultural activity.

Taken together the ridges, cairns, lynchets, walls and stony areas might all be seen as component parts of a field system, but no clear or consistent pattern emerges from the detailed survey and the excavation is of little help because of the lack of dating evidence.

Conclusion

Within an area of about 7ha, human activity from the Neolithic to the recent past is represented by a range of well-defined monument types. Amongst these monuments is an extensive field system comprising both broad and narrow cultivation ridges, clearance cairns, lynchets, stone walls, cleared areas and stony areas. It is asking too much of a small scale project to resolve the complex relationships between these features, but it is clear that there was no consistent pattern of agricultural use.

The broad ridge cultivation identified in the survey seems to represent the latest phase of cultivation. Some clearance cairns may relate to this phase, but generally the cairns are located elsewhere and are probably earlier. Walls and lynchets are important because they link other features and certainly several cairns are linked by lynchets which, together, seem to define small cultivation plots particularly in the north-west of the survey area. The walls are rather intermittent and do not impinge on the cairns so it is difficult to link these two elements, but one wall does seem to meet a hut circles, perhaps suggesting a direct relationship. Possibly

the walls and the cairns belong to different phases of activity and, given that the walls are apparently more disturbed, they might be the earlier. Of course the excavation showed that at least one low stone wall was the last feature before peat growth began in that area, so this speculation must be treated with caution. Interestingly, one wall seems to cut through the group of possible unenclosed platform settlements, perhaps suggesting that they had been abandoned by this time.

Furthermore, lynchets are not exclusively found with cairns or *vice versa*. It is particularly noticeable that lower down the hillside there are fewer cairns, but small lynchets seem to combine with contrasting stony and relatively stone-less areas to define very small field plots. At the time of the survey this was thought to be significant, but the present condition of the area suggests that this may be a function of the variations in vegetation rather than a reflection of human activity. The lynchets towards the lower ground to the east are generally rather less pronounced, very difficult to recognise and could, indeed, be natural.

Given the limited nature of the evidence, further speculation is of little value, and it is better to await the hard evidence which is emerging from the extensive programme of work carried out by McCullagh at Allt na Fearn Mor. It is a tribute to all concerned with this more recent project that such an important and positive contribution to our knowledge has been salvaged from the destructive aspects of modern highway requirements.

Acknowledgments

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