

Excavations at Waulkmill, Tarland

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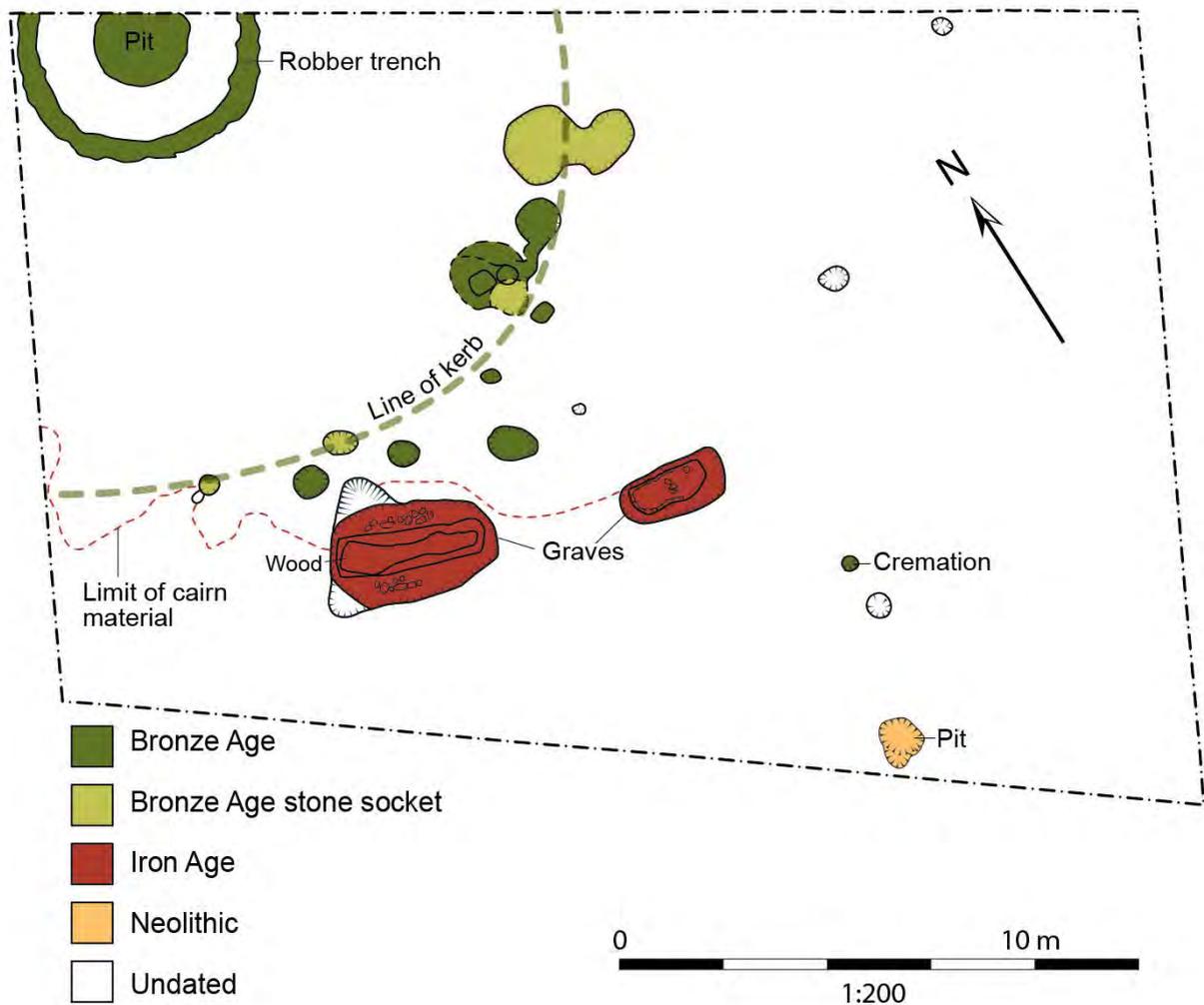


Waulkmill is located on the north-west edge of Tarland. Until the present project began, all that was known of its archaeology was the discovery in 1898 of a Roman Iron Age grave found while digging at sandpit. It contained a set of gaming pieces and a bronze penannular brooch dating from the second to third century AD. Other artefacts came from the quarry, including a miniature cauldron, but accounts of their discovery are confusing and it is not clear whether they were deposited in the same grave or in other features. Fieldwalking in 2000 found a few worked flints but suggested that the main density of prehistoric settlement was on higher ground to the north east.

About 350 metres to the north west of the burial there had been a stone circle. It was demolished by the farmer about 1835, but it is recorded that it consisted of 11 or 12 stones. One of the monoliths was preserved, but at some stage it has been moved. The main aim of the new project was to identify the original site of the monument, to work out its original form and to compare it with its neighbour, Tomnaverie, which was excavated in 1999 and 2000.

Comparison with intact structures in the area suggested that the circle was probably erected on the western end of a low glacial ridge, and this is where the surviving monolith was located on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey map. For that reason the topsoil was removed by machine from an area measuring approximately 25 metres by 15 metres. The results of this work were surprising.

From the outset it seemed likely that the position of the stone circle had been correctly identified. The ploughsoil at the end of the glacial ridge contained an unusually high density of rubble, perhaps from a demolished cairn, whilst the field wall immediately to the south included some exceptionally large boulders which may have been taken from the monument. When the surface of the excavated area was cleaned it was immediately apparent that there had been a circular gully on the site. Other features became apparent during the same process. On excavation they proved to date from three (and possibly four) different periods. Here they are described in chronological order.



The excavated features and their likely dates.

1. A Neolithic pit

The earliest was a shallow pit containing pottery dating from the earlier Neolithic period between about 4000 and 3500 BC. Fragments of several vessels were represented and the filling of this feature was capped by a spherical nodule of quartzite. A few shallow post holes were identified nearby, but they did not define a recognisable structure. None has any dating evidence, and only one other Neolithic sherd was identified during the excavation.

2. An Early Bronze Age (?) stone circle

The second phase is represented by the surviving traces of the stone circle levelled nearly 200 years ago. Four components could be identified, all of them in the part of the excavated area that contained an unusual concentration of rubble. Four stone sockets were found following an arc that suggested that the original monument had been approximately 16 metres in diameter. One of the monoliths had a double socket, suggesting that the stone had been replaced. The stump of another standing stone still remained in the ground. The arc of stone holes followed the same curve as a series of shallower features interpreted as the setting of a kerb. If that is correct, approximately 30 % of the area of the original monument was within the excavated area. As expected, it had been built on the end of the glacial ridge where the ground fell away to the north, south and west.



The remains of the stone circle. The positions of the monoliths are marked by yellow buckets. The robber trench for the inner kerb is in the right hand corner of the trench.

The central area of the structure was represented by a curving gully cut into the boulder clay. It defined a circular area about 4 metres in diameter. Comparison with other sites suggests that it marked the foundation trench for a kerb of upright slabs defining an open court at the centre of the monument. The stones had been carefully removed, but sufficient evidence remained to suggest that the original structure was associated with large pieces of broken quartz whose distribution focused on the southern and western sectors of the ring.



The robber trench for the inner kerb and traces of the pit in the centre of the monument. The position of the cremated bone is marked by a setting of rounded boulders

It is clear that the stone circle was a little smaller than its neighbour, Tomnaverie, and the sizes of the excavated stone sockets rule out the possibility that there had been a pair of taller monoliths towards the south or south west. For that reason it is unlikely to have been another recumbent stone circle. At the same time it is unusual to find a monument in which the standing stones were set into the outer kerb; normally, they form two concentric circuits separated by a narrow space. That is not true of the unusual recumbent stone circles in Buchan, but a more local parallel for this arrangement is provided by the Blue Cairn of Ladieswell which is only 7 km from Waulkmill.

The most likely reconstruction of this monument is that it took the form of a low circular cairn, with an open space at its centre. On the outside it may have had a boulder kerb, but the inner court was probably defined by a wall of slabs set upright in the ground and was associated with pieces of broken quartz. The outer kerb incorporated a circle of standing stones set in their own sockets at intervals of about 3.5 metres. For that reason it is possible to estimate that the monument was originally defined by a circle of up to 14 monoliths; since they may not have been spaced at equal intervals around the circuit, the nineteenth century estimate of 11 or 12 stones may well be correct. The monument commanded an all-round view towards higher ground, but, in common with many stone circles in north-east Scotland, the main focus was towards the south and south-west. It shares one characteristic with recumbent stone circles. There is no dead ground immediately outside the monument, but the view is dominated by an intermediate ridge 3 km to the south and by distant views of the mountains of south Deeside.

There was no direct dating evidence for any part of this monument. It may be contemporary with Tomnaverie, but it is possible that it was built at a rather later date, during the Early Bronze Age.

3. Late Bronze Age (?) reuse of the stone circle

Two deposits of cremated bones were associated with the stone circle. They are attributed to a phase of secondary reuse during the Late Bronze Age, but this depends on comparison with the evidence from other excavated sites. This interpretation will be checked by obtaining radiocarbon dates.



The robber trench for the inner kerb and the partly excavated pit in the centre of the monument.

The first group of cremated bone was found in a pit dig into the centre of the monument. It was not the first feature to be excavated in this position, but it was the only one associated with human remains. Their position had been marked on the surface by a setting of rounded pebbles. Preliminary examination suggests that the deposit consists of pyre debris from which all but the smallest fragments of burnt bone had been removed.

By contrast, a second group of cremated bone was found in a shallow pit 9 metres outside the stone circle. In this case there was virtually no charcoal. The bones had probably been cleaned after they had been taken from a pyre. Again they were not associated with any artefacts. The chronological relationship between these two deposits will be investigated by radiocarbon dating.



The unurned cremation outside the stone circle.

4. Roman Iron Age graves

When the stone circle was located it seemed that, like many others, it would have possessed a pair of particularly tall monoliths towards the south. At first two candidates were identified by excavation. It was possible that they were associated with the demolition of the monument around 1835, since they included granite flakes in their fillings. That initial estimate proved to be wide of the mark and, as work proceeded, it became clear that both features were much too large to be the pits left by the removal of standing stones. In fact they were the positions of Roman Iron Age graves that had been located beside the older monument.

The first of these to be excavated was roughly rectangular in outline and a little over 2 metres long. The lower levels of this feature were lined with large stones which seem to have been packed around a wooden coffin, of which no trace survived. Bone was not preserved by the acid soil but at the east end of the grave there was a bronze penannular brooch and in its centre a set of gaming pieces strikingly similar to those discovered in 1898 during work in the nearby quarry.



The grave associated with a penannular brooch and the gaming set.

The second was a larger oval pit, measuring 3.25 by 2 metres in maximum dimensions. In its lower filling there was the dark stain left by the sides and end of another wooden coffin, the base of which was still preserved. It was in very poor condition, but samples of the wood were taken where it survived intact. They probably represent parts of a single plank. Again human bones were not represented, but the heavily mineralised teeth of a cow were recorded at the west end of the grave. They may represent all that survives of a jaw. With them were the remains of two bronze rings, the exact character of which will not be known until they have been conserved.



Fully excavated grave showing traces of a wooden coffin.



The surviving traces of the wooden coffin.



Detail of the coffin after excavation.



The grave and associated coffin under excavation.



Two bronze rings in the larger grave.



Cattle teeth at the end of the larger grave.

The association between the graves and the stone circle can hardly be a coincidence. The remarkable assemblage recovered from the sandpit in the nineteenth century is most unusual, and it is still more striking that one of the burials found in 2012 should have been accompanied by an identical set of artefacts. It was located only a short distance outside the stone circle, and it seems possible that its long axis was influenced by the outer kerb of that monument. The second grave was even closer to the prehistoric structure and came within a metre of its kerb. Again its orientation may have been affected by the configuration of the standing stones. The link between the burials and the Bronze Age monument was only emphasised because flakes apparently detached from the monoliths were distributed throughout the fillings of both these graves. That cannot result from the deliberate destruction of the stone circle as it was intact until it was removed in 1835.



The relationship between the graves and the stone circle. The fully excavated graves are to the left of the picture, and the positions of the monoliths are indicated by yellow buckets. The settlement site at Melgum is in the right hand edge of the wood visible in the background.



The surviving enclosure / roundhouse at Melgum.

It is possible that both these burials formed part of a larger cemetery extending along the raised ground between the prehistoric monument and the sandpit 350 metres to its east. That would be remarkable, but so are some of the stone-built settlements in the vicinity, the nearest of which is recorded at Melgum 750 metres to the north west. They contain the remains of unusually large roundhouses, some of them accompanied by souterrains. Their chronology has never been established, but it is tempting to suggest that such unusual features might have been contemporary with the creation of this remarkable group of burials. Some of the contents of these graves ally them with the Roman world, but their close relationship to an ancient monument of a specifically local type suggests that the people who commemorated their dead there were emphasising their independence and their sense of their own history. These are questions that will need to be investigated as the finds are studied in detail.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to all the people who took part in the project, and especially to Nigel and Janet Healey who provided help of many kinds. The work was undertaken by permission of the McRobert Trust which also provided valuable help in kind. We are especially grateful to Air Commodore Bob Joseph, Simon Power and Rab Blackhall for their support. We must also thank Jane Clark, Fraser Hunter and Bruce Mann for their encouragement and good advice.