

## The Clava Excavation

We are excavating at Clava until the beginning of September. Why are we working here? And what do we expect to find?

There are three main monuments at Clava, all of them used for burying the dead. At either end of the fenced area there are circular cairns with a central chamber and a passage. Each appears to be built on a platform of rubble and is revetted by a kerb of upright stones, highest to the south-west and lowest to the north-east. Just outside these platforms are circles of upright stones, which are graded in a similar manner. Originally the entrance passage was roofed by horizontal slabs so that it could only be entered by crawling. The chamber was much higher and had a domed roof sealed by one or more horizontal slabs which no longer survive. The burials were those of only one or two adults who had been cremated; more burnt bones were scattered on the surface of the platform. Both chambers are decorated with "cup marks" (circular hollows created by pecking the stone with a quartz hammer) - their original meaning is unknown. Both the cairns with passages are aligned on the midwinter sunset. Our excavation is intended to investigate several problems: were the cairns and platforms built at the same time as one another? Were the entrances to the passages blocked when the tombs went out of use? Are the stone circles parts of the original monument, or were they added later? And what kinds of activities took place on the platform and outside the entrance of the tombs? We also need to know more about the date of these monuments, which we believe are about 5000 years old - that is to say, they are older than other places you may have visited like the Ring of Brodgar and Stonehenge but roughly contemporary with Newgrange and Maes Howe.

In between these two monuments is a circular enclosure without any entrance, defined by two walls of upright stones and a filling of loose boulders. Like the other cairns, it is surrounded by a ring of monoliths, three of which are linked to the line of the wall by low banks of rubble. The interior of the monument contained a scatter of cremated bone, which was eventually covered by a layer of rubble extending to the full height of the wall - this has now been removed. We investigated this monument last year, when we found that the internal structure of the enclosure preserved an arrangement of radial walls. Three of these extended outside the cairn as the low banks of rubble connecting the outer wall to the monoliths. In between two of these banks there was a cremation burial covered by slabs.

This is the last year in which we shall be digging at these particular monuments, but work will continue towards a new study of the Clava Cairns. We shall estimate the age of the three monuments by radiocarbon dating, study the environment in which they were built through a study of the fossil pollen buried below these cairns and will try to locate any associated settlements by studying the distribution of prehistoric stone tools in the ploughed fields between here and the Moray Firth.

For more details you might be interested in our guided tours which take place every day except Thursday at 12.00 and 4.00. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.