

## Balnuaran of Clava: proposals for excavation in 1995

Richard Bradley

### Introduction

This proposal builds on the results of the 1994 excavation at Balnuaran of Clava. It adheres to the same basic principles as the original project design, but in certain instances that scheme has been modified to take account of our increasing knowledge of the monuments. As work on the central ring cairn is now complete, this application is concerned only with the two passage graves.

My original research design envisaged small scale work on the south-west cairn and more extensive excavation of the north-east cairn. This idea needs modification for two reasons. First, it seemed important to investigate the chamber of the north-east cairn because the records of Kathleen Kennedy's 1931 excavation suggested that it had been built over a layer of filling. We now know that Kennedy was not able to recognise purely geological deposits on the site, and there no longer seems any reason to take this interpretation at face value. Secondly, excavation in the core of the ring cairn showed that it was based on a foundation of massive blocks, which was difficult to excavate without damaging the monument. The old land surface could only be exposed in a small stepped trench. In the light of this experience it would be unwise to examine the internal structure of the north-east cairn, when its counterpart is so much lower. I therefore suggest two major changes to the scheme that I submitted a year ago. I no longer believe that excavation in the chamber of the north-east cairn would be useful, and I suggest that any investigation of the internal structure of the passage graves take place at the south-west cairn. Unfortunately, it would not be possible to transfer my original research design to this monument entirely, as its forecourt is dissected by massive tree roots. Thus any excavation of the internal structure of a passage grave would need to take place at the south-west cairn, whilst excavation outside one of these monuments would still focus on the north-east cairn.

The basic strategy, however, remains unaltered. Assuming that both passage graves had a similar history, the main elements in that sequence would be examined only once. Where any structural relationship is to be investigated in the ground at least half the surviving deposit would be left intact. In every case the buried soil would be studied by pollen analysis and micromorphology, allowing each exposure to be compared with all the others.

### South-west cairn

The 1994 excavation resolved two of the major problems associated with this monument. First, it showed that what Kennedy had interpreted as the original floor of the chamber was in fact the old land surface. This provided vital material for radiocarbon dating, soil

micromorphology and pollen analysis, and there is no case for undertaking more extensive excavation of the surviving deposits. Secondly, work in 1994 showed that a ramp or platform of rubble had been built against the kerbstones when the monument was erected. One function of this material was to hold the kerbstones in place as they lacked any sockets.

Other problems have still to be resolved. We know nothing about the internal construction of the passage graves, yet work on the central ring cairn raises some intriguing possibilities. Here we showed that the plan of the site was perhaps organised around a series of radial divisions extending from the centre of the monument to individual stones in the surrounding circle; some of these alignments were marked by external causeways. It is important to find out whether a similar structural principle extended to the passage graves at Clava, and with this in mind we would like to excavate a limited area of the cairn down to the old land surface. We propose to do this in between the back of the passage and the kerbstones north of the entrance, because by this means we can link our existing work outside the monument to a study of its internal structure. Taken together, the two seasons of excavation would record a continuous section from the external platform through to the heart of the cairn.

At the same time, we would like to investigate the outer half of the passage, including the area where it meets the external ramp. The relationship between these two features is critically important to interpretations of the monument. If the ramp was an original feature of this site, did it extend straight across the entrance? If so, the passage must have sloped upwards from the outset. Alternatively, the end of the passage may have been blocked during a secondary phase, as seems to have happened at Corrimony. In order to provide a clear answer we would need to excavate on both sides of the orthostats forming the northern limit of the passage and to extend our investigation into the inner edge of the ramp. A small extension to that trench would allow us compare the structure of the ramp in the entrance with its composition in the area excavated in 1994.

That external ramp presents another problem that still needs investigation. It is well known that the stones of the kerb are graded, so that they are highest towards the entrance and lowest on the opposite side of the monument. The ramp, however, is roughly the same height throughout. This may be an artefact of the 1931 restoration, and it is possible that originally the ramp was graded in the same manner as the kerbstones. If so, the upper level of the surviving earthwork may consist of material that has fallen from the cairn. In any event we cannot be sure that the only function of the ramp was to retain the kerbstones when these are so much slihter on the north-east side of the monument. These questions need investigating by a section through the ramp directly opposite that excavated in 1994. This would be located where the kerbstones are at their lowest but where there is documentary evidence that they were left in position in 1931.

The only technical requirements for all this work would be the shoring of the cairn and the propping of the orthostats. If this presented problems, it would still be worth excavating the internal filling of the passage and its junction with the ramp.

#### North-east cairn

The layout of this excavation is based on work at the ring cairn in 1994, but it also involves the investigation of an area immediately outside the entrance of the passage grave. It is in this position that specialised structures and deposits of artefacts have been discovered at comparable monuments elsewhere in the British Isles.

The excavation would have three main objectives. Again it would investigate the relationship between the kerbstones and the ramp, which is much higher here than it is at the south-west cairn. The trench layout should also allow us to determine whether this ramp had originally been broken at the entrance to the passage grave and whether the tomb was closed by a later blocking. Much of the kerb was rebuilt in 1931 and these sections are located against stones that were left in their original positions.

The second objective of this excavation is to sample half the forecourt of the tomb in order to determine whether this had formed the focus for specialised structures or deposits. As at the central ring cairn, the excavated area extends outwards from the monument to include elements of the stone circle that surrounds the site.

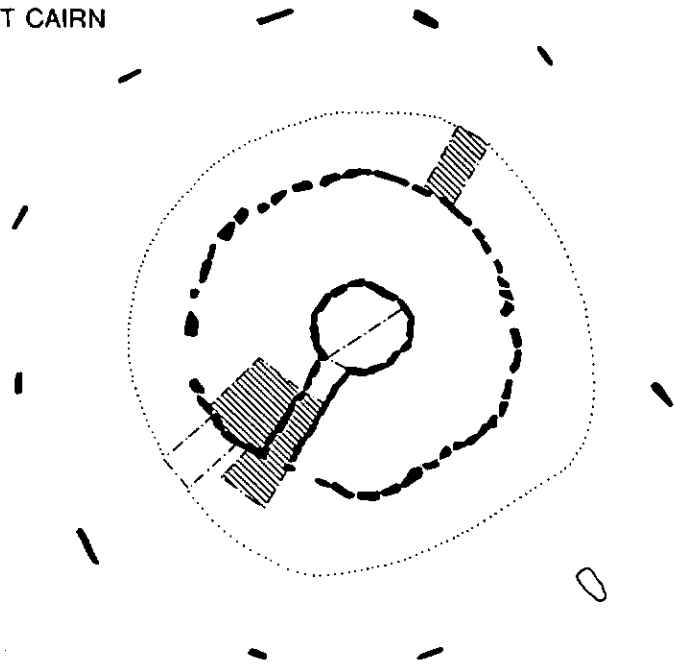
Work on the ring cairn in 1994 showed that the space between the outer kerb and the stone circle contained an additional burial. In 1995 we would like to explore a similar sector in between the monoliths and the passage grave in order to make a direct comparison with that evidence. Again the excavated area would take in the uprights of the stone circle.

The only technical requirements for this work would be the propping of the monoliths and possibly of any unstable kerbstones.

This work is intended to complete the programme of sample excavation on the guardianship monument at Balnuaran of Clava, although we hope to follow it with a campaign of field survey between Strathnairn and the Moray Firth. A preliminary reconnaissance of the cultivated land in that area is being undertaken between now and the end of the year.

Balnuaran of Clava

SOUTH WEST CAIRN



Excavation in 1994



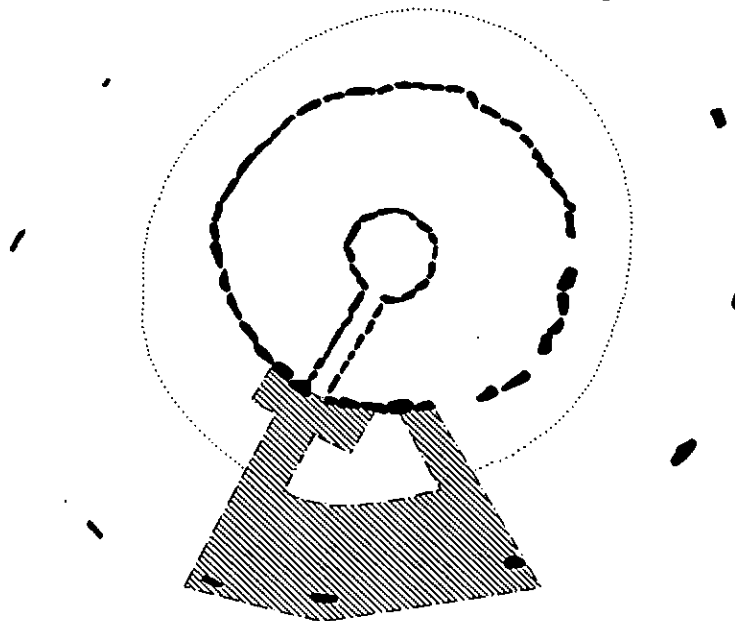
Proposed excavation in 1995



Edge of platform



NORTH EAST CAIRN



metres