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Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC181

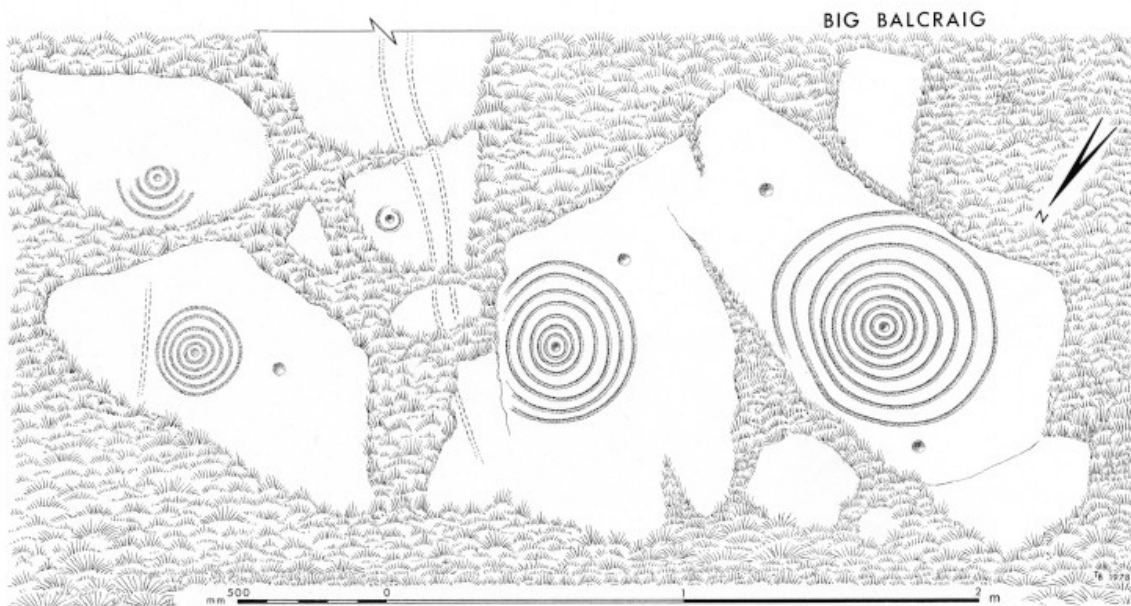
Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90032)

Taken into State care: 1931 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

BIG BALCRAIG AND CLACHAN CUP AND RING MARK ROCKS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.



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BIG BALCRAIG AND CLACHAN CUP AND RING MARK ROCKS

SYNOPSIS

Big Balcraig and Clachan comprise two separate sets of prehistoric carvings on rock outcrops 500m and 150m respectively north of the B7021, 2 miles NE of Port William in Galloway. The carvings mostly consist of cup-and-ring marks; the largest, encircled by seven rings, measure 750mm in diameter. Other incised marks include incomplete semicircles and radial grooves.

Both Big Balcraig and Clachan rock outcrops are enclosed behind iron railings and have been covered with turf to reduce erosion. The carving can therefore not be seen at firsthand.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **Late Neolithic / Bronze Age** – the rock carvings are probably made at some date, or dates, between 2500 and 1000 BC. Why they are created is a mystery.
- **1931** – The two sets are taken into care, along with other nearby ancient monuments (**Barsalloch Fort** and **Torhouse Stone Circle**).
- **1977** – A third rock outcrop, 11m NNW of Big Balcraig, is found also to have cup marks on it.
- **1986** – two more groups of cup-marked rocks are discovered to the west of Big Balcraig.

Archaeological Overview

Cup-marked rocks have been found at over 100 sites in Galloway. The south Machars has an exceptional concentration, including Big Balcraig and Clachan, and the three groups at nearby **Drumtroddan**. Whilst the rock carvings themselves represent something of a mystery, their existence testifies to the presence of late Neolithic/Bronze Age communities in the vicinity. At present the surrounding prehistoric landscape is little understood, but doubtless much remains to be discovered.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

Big Balcraig, in a field known as Far New England, consists of at least four complete cup-and-rings. Two cups have seven encircling rings, measuring 750mm in diameter, two more have six encircling rings and another cup five. Other carvings include incomplete semicircles.

Clachan, in an adjacent field known as Near Windlestraw, has four cup-and-rings, surrounded by some with radial grooves. The largest – a cup with seven encircling rings - measures 750mm in diameter.

Both sets of rock carvings were carefully executed using hard tools to create motifs, including cups, rings and spirals of varying geometrical qualities. Why they were created, and what the various motifs represent, are mysteries. In Scotland, such rock carvings are normally to be found on the fringes of the lands settled in prehistory, and it is possible they may have marked territorial boundaries, where the farmed lands gave way to the untamed landscape of hill and loch.

Not all prehistoric cup-and-ring marks are found on rock outcrops. They survive on individual standing stones (eg, **Temple Wood**) as well as on slabs found in burial cairns (eg, **Cairn Holy 1**).

Similar rock carvings are found elsewhere in SW Scotland (eg, nearby **Drumtroddan Cup-and-Ring Marks** and Ballochmyle, Ayrshire), in Argyll and eastern Scotland, in Ireland (where especially complex rock carvings have been recorded in the Boyne Valley), and elsewhere along the Atlantic seaboard of Europe, including Brittany, NW Spain and Portugal.

Although the reason why they were created remains a mystery, the markings are likely to have had a more immediate and practical use to the people who carved them than those more commonly applied by modern society (see below [Social Overview](#)).

Social Overview:

The modern interpretation of these prehistoric carvings – normally termed ‘Rock Art’ - arouses a good deal of interest, and engenders considerable ingenuity in attempting to solve the riddle of their existence. In the 1930s, during which decade Big Balcraig and Clachan came into state care, the noted local artist, E A Hornel, had casts made of the ‘Rock Art’ at High Banks, near Kirkcudbright, for display at the Stewartry Museum.

Countless theories exist as to their meaning and use. These include: maps (the cups and rings representing houses, henges and other monuments), metal prospecting, representations of the heavenly bodies (sun and stars) or belief systems.

Both Big Balcraig and Clachan have been covered over with turf to aid their preservation and so the carvings cannot be seen. There is no formal access path and as they are situated within a field then the Scottish Outdoor Access Code <https://www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot/> should be followed.

Spiritual Overview:

Neither Big Balcraig nor Clachan currently plays any known spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview:

An appreciation of European ‘Rock Art’, as represented at Big Balcraig and Clachan, might be aided by analogy with rock carvings from other parts of the world. For example, the strongly geometric use of pattern within Australian aboriginal art is reminiscent of these carvings.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- When precisely were these rock carvings created, by whom and for what reason?
- How was the surrounding land being farmed when the rock carvings were created? It is becoming increasingly important to view such sites 'in the round', and not just as entities in themselves.
- How did these rock carvings relate to other nearby groups (eg, **Drumtroddan**), and to the cup-and-ring marks discovered in the burial chamber of **Cairn Holy 1**)?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- Big Balcraig and Clachan are good examples of a distinctive form of rock carving prevalent across SW Scotland during the late Neolithic and Bronze Age.
- Together the two sets represent one of the most conspicuous legacies of our remote ancestors to survive in the contemporary landscape.
- This form of rock carving had a wide distribution across the Atlantic seaboard of Europe, suggesting that common meanings were being expressed. Such 'art' has the potential to help inform us about the nature of these widespread prehistoric societies.

ADDENDA

Associated Properties:

(some other notable cup-marked rock carvings in the region) – Ballochmyle (Ayr);
Cairn Holy 1; Drumtroddan Cup-and-Ring Marks; High Banks
(Kirkcuds)

(other cup-and-ring marked rocks in HS care) – **Achnabreck; Ballygowan;**
Baluachraig; Cairnbaan; Kilmichael Glassary; Nether Largie Mid
Cairn; Nether Largie North Cairn; Ri Cruin

Keywords:

cup; ring; prehistoric rock art; carvings

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