



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

Property in Care (PIC) ID:	PIC255
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Last Reviewed:	2005 (2025 update to include Empire connections)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

LOANHEAD OF DAVIOT STONE CIRCLE



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

LOANHEAD OF DAVIOT STONE CIRCLE

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument at Loanhead of Daviot in Aberdeenshire is situated on a broad shelf near the summit of a gentle ridge with commanding views to the south. It includes a recumbent stone circle about 20m in diameter and an enclosed cremation cemetery. Excavations in 1934-5 showed it to be a complex prehistoric funerary and ritual monument with a long and varied history of use and reuse. The area in care includes an Iron Age bloomery.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical overview

- Around or after 2500 cal BC a cairn or cremation platform was built.
- Subsequently a recumbent stone circle was built.
- Between the middle and end of the 2nd millennium BC a cremation cemetery was built next to the stone circle.
- 1817 Several small urns were found during trenching about 160 m south-east of the stone circle, and an inverted urn was found whilst levelling a small hillock 160 m south-south-west of the stone circle.
- 1832 A corroded 'brass dirk' which may have been a bronze dagger was found whilst trenching 165 m east of the stone circle.
- 1863 A stone ladle about the size and shape of an ordinary breakfast cup was found by workmen 'cleaning out' the stone circle. This may explain the robbing recorded during excavation in 1934-5.
- 1867 Survey by Ordnance Survey showing the stone circle as circular with the number of stones known today. The enclosed cremation cemetery to its south-east and the bloomery site to its west appear to have been covered by woodland.
- 1902 F R Coles recorded that the monument was in a clearing left by the proprietor when he planted the area around the circle and gave specific thanks to the landowner for doing so. The landowners were the Setons of Mounie, who gained at least part of their wealth through compensation for enslaved people after 1834.¹ Coles' plan and sketches of the recumbent stone circle showed the recumbent split, and the eastern flanker fallen; four other stones were upright and four prostrate. Inside the stone circle was a low stony bank defining a large oval area.

¹ [Surveying and Analysing Connections between Properties in Care and the British Empire, c.1600-1997](#)

- 1925 The monument was scheduled.
- 1933 It was taken into guardianship.
- 1934-5 The area of the stone circle and enclosed cemetery was extensively excavated by Kilbride-Jones. Prior to the excavation five of the ten monoliths had been prostrate, and these were re-erected in their original sockets.
- 1936 An early bloomery, in a saucer like depression about 15 m west of the stone circle, was excavated by Kilbride-Jones.
- 1939 The finds from the excavations were presented to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.
- 1989 Stones were removed from the central space of the ring-cairn and the monument was returned.
- 2001 The monument was rescheduled.

Archaeological overview

Loanhead of Daviot Stone Circle is a complex prehistoric funerary and ritual monument, which has as its main feature a recumbent stone circle. It is situated on a broad shelf near the summit of a gentle ridge at an altitude of about 160m with commanding views to the south. A central ring cairn, overlying evidence of burning including cremated bone, has a prominent kerb and occupies most of the interior of the circle. Immediately to the south-east of the stone circle, two arcs of drystone walling define a cremation cemetery.

The stone circle, or the cairn preceding it, seems to have served as a focus for burials in the neighbourhood. In 1817 several small urns were found during trenching about 160 m south-east of the stone circle, and an inverted urn was found whilst levelling a small hillock (perhaps a burial mound) 160 m south-south-west of the stone circle. It was apparently ornamented, and contained bones and burnt matter. It was broken by the workmen's picks. In 1832 the ground 150 to 200 m east of the stone circle was trenched, presumably for agricultural improvements. A corroded bronze dagger was found 165 m east of the stone circle and a short cist, oriented east-west and containing 'wasted' bones and earth, was found 200 m east of the stone circle.

It is not certain whether those who built the recumbent stone circles, probably in the latter part of the third millennium BC, were pastoralists ranging over a wide area and burying their dead in sacred places, or mixed farmers who lived locally. Distinguishing between these and other possibilities requires new field work to determine whether there were settlements associated with each of the recumbent stone circles.

It has often been suggested that recumbent stone circles were planned to allow observations of the setting of the moon at particular times of the year. More recently the importance of landscape features such as distant hills or mountains has become the focus of monument-related landscape analyses. It is very hard to suggest ways in which these different modern ideas about the monuments can be shown to be more true than others. Perhaps both explanations have an element of truth and perhaps the monuments had more than one meaning for those who built and used them.

The stone circle is about 20.5m in diameter (it is not truly circular, being slightly elongated on a roughly north-south axis) and consists of eight standing stones, two flankers, and a massive recumbent which has been split in two along a natural fissure by the frost. On the stone immediately east of the east flanker there is a roughly vertical line of 5 small cup marks. The monoliths were set in shallow sockets and surrounded by small cairns, which served to support them. In one of these was found a pot of a type found elsewhere mainly in 2nd millennium BC contexts. It contained calcined bones. A similar pot was found in another support cairn, and a short cist with a cremated burial and a Pygmy urn in a third.

Within the main circle was an inner ring, about 16 m in diameter, of smaller stones forming a kerb to a cairn. They had been disturbed near to the massive recumbent stone, and one prostrate kerb-stone overlay second / early first millennium style pottery. The excavator believed that a “fender of stones” was built into this inner ring on the north side of the recumbent stone in order to keep the cairn away from it. This has recently been reinterpreted as a modification associated with erection of the recumbent stone circle, suggesting that the inner ring was earlier than the circle.

At the centre of the cairn was a broad shallow pit, which contained a hearth and patches of abundant cremated bone and pottery.

The excavator believed that the stone circle was erected first, followed by the construction of the internal ring cairn. However, recent excavations at Tomnaverie and Aikey Brae suggest a different sequence. It may be that activity at Loanhead of Daviot began with a series of cremation pyres. The cremation platform was elaborated over time with the construction of a kerbed cairn. The erection of the monoliths to create the stone circle, probably soon after the construction of the cairn, is interpreted in this reading of the evidence as an act of closure of the ritual site.

Immediately to the south-east of the circle is a cemetery. Between it and the circle was a cist burial. The cemetery was defined by two arcs of drystone walling set in shallow ditches leaving entrances to the east and west. Pyre sites survived inside it. A central burial in a shallow scoop contained the partially incinerated remains of a man, with a perforated sandstone pendant where the wrist had been. The pyre had been placed over the body and, unusually, the partially cremated remains had not been

gathered up. Surrounding this central cremation more burial deposits were found, 12 in urns and 8 in pits.

It has been suggested that the monument was in some sense 'closed' by construction of the recumbent stone circle. If this is right – and it is to some extent speculation – then the adjacent cremation cemetery may have replaced the area of the stone circle as a place for funerary activities; but the activity at the latter which seems to have taken place in the latter part of the 2nd millennium BC could be seen as re-use by people who did not share the vision of those who lived in the 3rd millennium BC. Indeed, that is a pattern seen at several other stone circles in Scotland.

Attached to the circle on its eastern arc was a low earthen bank, possibly medieval, extending in a south-east to north-west direction, most of which was removed when the cemetery was excavated.

Excavation of a saucer like depression about 15 west of the stone circle revealed a bloomery covering an area roughly 7 m by 4 m. Quantities of charcoal and pottery were recovered. The scattered nature of the remains indicated a destruction shortly after the bloomery fell into disuse. Although the excavator thought that the pottery from the bloomery demonstrated an Iron Age date it is conceivable that the main monument was used as a source of charcoal and the pot sherds reached the bloomery site inadvertently.

Artistic/Architectural overview

The monument appears to have originated as a fairly rough platform and ring cairn. The kerbing of the ring cairn was adjusted when the recumbent stone and its flankers were placed in position. The general impression from this and other recumbent stone circles is of a continuity of architectural vision from first construction through to setting up of the stones of the circle.

Social overview

Recumbent stone circles share some features with the Clava Cairns which group regionally to the west of the recumbent stone circles. A local, perhaps extended-family, social identity may have been anchored around each individual recumbent stone circle, but the clusters of similar monuments suggest larger kin groups while the similarity of recumbent stone circles over a large area and their differences from and similarities to the Clava Cairns suggest some social cohesion at much the same size as modern Council Areas. The almost mutually exclusive distribution of henges and recumbent stone circles perhaps implies a different social structure in the north-east from that in other parts of Scotland. Thus perhaps three levels of societal grouping can be seen in north-east

Scotland. If this is true it is highly unusual, indeed probably unique within Europe.

Little social significance seems to attach to the monuments today. Nevertheless, in our age of globalisation, some sections of society attach a particular significance to stone circles and similar monuments and their associated landscapes. It may be that this tendency will increase as the rest of society becomes more uniform, reincarnating the importance of the monuments as markers of local identity.

Spiritual overview

Loanhead of Daviot reflects a society much more integrated into beliefs about the natural world than the largely urban societies of modern Britain.

Aesthetic overview

The aesthetic importance of these monuments rests partly on the way that they sit in the landscape, but also on our appreciation of the use of massive stones to give a material expression to the beliefs of the early peoples of the area.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- The wider area may contain further features despite the 19th century trenching of several nearby fields and the planting of a wood around the site. The cemetery was not suspected before the site was excavated; and it does not seem to have been damaged by tree roots. Several 2nd millennium sites have been discovered within a few hundred metres of the circle. The wider area should be regarded as extremely sensitive and should not be disturbed outwith archaeological investigation.
- Are recumbent stone circles, including Loanhead of Daviot, designed to frame sacred landscape features, or to be used at particular times of the year when the moon was setting at particular points in the south-west? Or neither or both?
- We do not fully understand how the monument was used in the various phases of its construction. Was it a restricted place, closed to most of the community? Was it designed to be approached from the front, side or rear? Did this change over time?
- There is not scientific dating for any of the features from the site.
- Was the period between construction of the platform and cairn and construction of the recumbent stone circle long or short? What date

was the later prehistoric use of the site? Was the nearby bloomery really used in the Iron Age?

- Who had the right to be cremated there? Were the bones found in excavation only a small proportion of those cremated there, with the rest being disposed of elsewhere?
- Were there nearby settlements associated with each recumbent stone circle, or were they used by people with a largely mobile pastoral economy?.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The monument is a fine and well preserved example of a type which provides unique insights into social organisation over a large area in the 3rd millennium BC.
- More clearly than most early monuments, recumbent stone circles provide insight into how the spiritual life of the people was integrated with beliefs about their landscapes.
- The abundant finds of many different periods from Loanhead of Daviot contribute significantly to our understanding of prehistoric ritual and funerary practices.

ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Easter Aquhorthies, Tomnaverie, Cullerlie, Cairn of Memsie, Balnuaran of Clava, Corrimony, Machrie Moor stone circles, Calanais, Ring of Brodgar.

KEYWORDS

Recumbent stone circle, enclosed cremation cemetery, bloomery

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