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Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90303)

Taken into State care: 1930 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

TOMNAVERIE STONE CIRCLE



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.

TOMNAVERIE STONE CIRCLE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument is a recumbent stone circle about 17m in diameter, built on top of an earlier ring cairn. It had a long, complex history of use from the middle of the 3rd millennium BC through to perhaps as late as the 17th century AD. It is situated on the crest of a prominent hill near Tarland and is surrounded by hills on every side, with spectacular views of the Grampian peaks to the south and west.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

At some time between 2570 and 2460 cal BC, a pit was filled with a charcoal-rich soil under the original position of the recumbent stone.

At some time between 1050 and 900 cal BC, human bones were cremated on the summit.

At some time or times between the 15th and early 17th century AD there was burning on the summit and a pit was dug into the centre of the monument, perhaps to receive one or more cremation burials.

1792: The monument at Tomnaverie was recorded as consisting of a few large stones, some upright, some fallen.

1842: The local ministers referred to two circles formed of large erect stones. It seems possible that this was not based on primary fieldwork.

1854: John Stuart mentioned two circles at the eastern termination of the ridge called Tomnaverie in a general account of the area; this too may not have been based on field observation.

1905: The quarry to the west had recently approached to within 3 feet of the one of the few stones still standing. The Tomnaverie recumbent stone circle included (a) an outermost ring, 56ft (17m) in diameter, comprising the recumbent stone, its two flankers (fallen), five erect stones and one fallen stone, and (b) a very incompletely visible concentric inner ring of stones (which subsequent excavation shows to have been misinterpreted in Coles' plan of the site). Coles was of the view that the massive 12.5-ton recumbent stone had been disturbed and had fallen forward by about 2 feet.

1917: J Ritchie noted that one of the standing stones near the edge of the quarry was undermined 'a few years ago', fell, and had since disappeared.

1927: The monument was scheduled.

1930: The site was brought into care, in return for which the local authority agreed to build a retaining wall at the quarry edge and Lord Aberdeen (the owner of the monument) agreed to fence the monument.

1931: Two medium-sized cairns were recorded 60 yards to the south of the circle on the brow of the hill, and two parallel walls 50 or 60 yards apart, running down to the cultivated fields beyond. However, in 1968 the Ordnance Survey found no trace of any cairns in an area of dense broom at the specified location.

1953: Some possible rock art recorded near to the monument.

1959: A Royal Observer Corps underground shelter was excavated approximately 60m to the south-west of the circle.

1968: The west flanker appeared to the OS surveyors to have been moved outside the circle since 1905. A kerb of stones c. 14m in diameter appeared to run up to the two flankers, and there were slight traces of the inner kerb of a ring cairn.

1999: In advance of proposals to improve access to the site, several previously unrecorded sites were located, including an old road, agricultural enclosures and field banks. An embanked enclosure surrounded a mound, possibly a cairn or a kiln. Some possible cup marks were located on boulders and bedrock close to the stone circle.

1999: The first of two seasons of excavation by Professor R Bradley, as part of a programme of site improvement which included the filling in of the quarry, path works and the extension of the guardianship area to take in a large area of the hillside, the quarry and the ROC shelter. The excavations showed that the monument was well preserved, although a recumbent stone and two flankers had been taken down and moved away from the quarry edge.

2000: The second season of excavation (see archaeological overview below). Survey of the hill identified the position of 29 cup-marked stones, while field walking in the vicinity located six lithic scatters roughly contemporary with the stone circle, suggesting that the monument had been located on the outer edge of the settled landscape.

2001: A watching brief during the excavation of a new access path to Tomnaverie stone showed that the track running parallel to the modern road was a simple terrace cut into the hill slope.

Archaeological Overview

The recumbent stone circle is situated on the crest of a prominent hill which has spectacular views of Lochnagar and other Grampian peaks to the south and west. As with many recumbent stone circles, the recumbent at Tomnaverie masks the immediate foreground and is aligned on a distant area of high ground, in this case Lochnagar, which is framed by the two flankers.

Several other recumbent stone circles were probably visible from the site for a few millennia. Twenty-nine cup-marked stones have been recorded in the area immediately around the stone circle. Fieldwalking on 86 ploughed fields nearby in the Howe of Cromar located six concentrations of lithic artefacts of roughly the same age as the monument. All this suggests that Tomnaverie was located in an area regarded as having some sacred significance, on the outer edge of a well-used landscape, and looked both onto land managed by several different social

sub-groups and areas given some sacred significance by those groups. This suggests that in the last half of the 3rd millennium BC the land was divided up between families, each farming in the valleys and claiming grazing land higher upslope. An alternative explanation is that groups, each with a separate social identity, used both the valleys and the up-slopes for grazing in common, but each had a recognised area for burials and rituals. Distinguishing between these and other explanations 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.

It is clear that an understanding of Tomnaverie is only possible if the archaeology and landscape of a wide area around it is taken into account.

The excavations in 1999/2000 showed that the monument was well preserved, despite some damage from the quarry. A pit with a charcoal-rich fill, under the original position of the recumbent stone, was dated to between 2570 and 2460 cal BC. At the centre of the monument was a polygonal cairn, open at the centre and defined by a massive kerb of slabs and glacial boulders. That kerb had been revetted on the outside by a bank of rubble which sealed a few sherds of Beaker pottery, which should be later in date than the pit unless the beaker was very early compared to most others which have been radiocarbon dated. The interior of the cairn was linked to the outer kerb at about 13 points by radial divisions, which seem to be a primary feature of the monument.

In a subsequent phase, the existing cairn was enclosed by a recumbent stone circle. The monoliths were set in sockets cutting through elements of the earlier monument, and the recumbent stone had originally rested on top of the bank of rubble supporting the exterior of the cairn. When this happened, one section of kerbstones was demolished and the cairn was extended to join the flankers on either side of the recumbent stone.

Remains of what is thought to have been a cremation pyre on the summit were dated both to between 1050 and 900 cal BC and to some time between the 15th and the first half of the 17th century AD. In this latter period also, a pit was dug in the centre of the monument to receive one or more cremation burials.

In an interim discussion of the significance of the evidence revealed during excavation, it is 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 activity dated to about 1000 BC has to be seen as re-use by people who may not have shared the vision of those who lived in the 3rd millennium BC. Indeed, that is a pattern seen at several other stone circles in Scotland. The reasons behind the activity dated to the early modern period remain opaque, but the medieval urn and iron sword found in one of the cairns at Memsie and a similar pot found in a cairn at Abbey St Bathans suggest a pattern of re-use

of much earlier monuments in the late medieval to early modern period for ritual activities, perhaps associated with death.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

The monument appears to have originated as a fairly rough platform and ring cairn, albeit with radial internal lines presaging the placing of the upright stones of the circle. The kerbing of the ring cairn was adjusted when the recumbent stone and its flankers were placed in position. This suggests a clear long-term architectural intention even in the early phases of construction. Use of red granite stones for the cairn probably reflects a concern for colour, because selection of stones for their colour is a feature of other recumbent stone circles and Clava Cairns.

Social Overview

Recumbent stone circles share some features with the Clava Cairns, which group regionally to the west of the recumbent stone circles. They can be regarded as a local, perhaps extended family: social identity may have been anchored at 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

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

The meaning of the medieval to early modern activities at the site is unclear, but it does suggest that spiritual aspects of life were not focused solely around Christianity.

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?

Were recumbent stone circles, including Tomnaverie, 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?

Was the period between construction of the platform and cairn and construction of the recumbent stone circle long or short? Have the radiocarbon dates from Tomnaverie caught all significant periods of activity?

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 with settlements far away?

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.

Tomnaverie promises to provide new insights into the beliefs of the rural people of Scotland in the medieval to early modern period.

Associated Properties

Easter Auqhorthies; Loanhead of Daviot; Cullerlie; Cairn of Memsie; Balnuaran of Clava; Corrimony; Machrie Moor stone circles; Calanais; Ring of Brodgar

Keywords

recumbent stone circle; cairn