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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRN OF MEMSIE



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CAIRN OF MEMSIE

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The Cairn of Memsie stands about 4.5km south-south-west of Fraserburgh in agricultural land. It is a splendid and well-preserved example of a large round burial cairn built in latter half of the 3rd millennium BC and was once accompanied by two other large burial cairns and many smaller cairns. It is today about 24m in diameter and 4.4m tall.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

1723 Three cairns (each about 30m in diameter, and very tall), were recorded on Cairn Muir. They were spaced about 100m apart and accompanied by many small cairns.

Pre-1780 One of the cairns was dug into at its centre. Human bones were found and many of the stones at the centre were heavily burnt.

1790 A report in Scots Magazine stated that a stone cist, containing bones and earth, a flint 'dart-head', and a "little block of flint, was found" in the large cairn of Memsie.

1799 The Old Statistical Account of the parish of Rathen (1791-9) states that the three cairns "were very large till of late when great quantities of stone have been taken away from two of them" probably for building field walls.

1827 A medieval urn, now in the Museum of Scotland, was found some years earlier as one of the cairns was being cleared, with an iron sword near to it.

1845 The remaining cairn (that now in care) had been reduced to about 20 m in diameter and 4.5 m high.

1849 A beaker and a Late Bronze Age sword were found under a tumulus at Memsie some years earlier.

1930 The remaining cairn was purchased by the Ministry of Works to preserve it.

Archaeological Overview

The Cairn of Memsie is the last surviving large burial cairn in a landscape once locally rich in both large and small cairns. The other two large cairns were about 130m north-west and 200m west-north-west of the Cairn of Memsie. Some of the small cairns may have been field clearance cairns. Other small cairns may have covered burials.

The monument is situated on the low ridge of Cairn Muir. Made up of glacial gravel deposits, the area would have offered a relatively dry site for prehistoric communities in an otherwise poorly drained area and appears to have been used as a cemetery over a considerable period.

In the early 18th century it was reported that there were three cairns each about 100 yds in circumference and 40 ft high, spaced about 100 yds apart and

associated with many small cairns (Macfarlane 1906). The reported dimensions suggest a height to radius slope of nearly 1:1, which is not credible, because it is well over the angle of rest of rubble, unless the cairns had substantial inner retaining walls. The place name, according to Kirk and McKenzie (1955-6) implies 'rounded hillocks' suggesting that the cairns were not nearly as steep as the quoted dimensions would suggest.

The Old Statistical Account (1791-99) notes that large quantities of stone had been recently removed from two of the cairns, during which human remains were discovered. The above ground remains of the two denuded cairns appear to have been totally removed by the mid-19th century for road construction and building dykes.

By 1845 the remaining cairn had reportedly been reduced to about 60 ft (18 m) in circumference and about 15 ft (4.5) high, again the reported side slope was nearly 1:1 and probably either the circumference had been underestimated or the height over-estimated.

Photographs show that by 1930 the cairn had taken the form we see today, although in that year several cart loads of stone were removed from the cairn. The local farmer sold the stones of the cairn for use in constructing part of the harbour at Fraserburgh. To ensure its preservation, the Office of Works purchased the monument for £60 and paid another £15 to defray the loss of profit had the monument been sold as a quarry. Lord Saltoun, the previous landowner, contributed £40 towards the purchase of the cairn.

Many finds have been recorded from the cairns during the late 18th and 19th centuries, but the records lack detail. One of the cairns was dug into at its centre before 1780, revealing human bones and many heavily burnt stones. A stone cist, containing bones and earth, a flint 'dart-head', and a little block of flint, were found in the large cairn of "Memzie" before 1790. An iron or part iron sword was found next to a medieval pot in one of the cairns some time before 1827. A beaker and a broken Late Bronze Age sword were found under a tumulus at Memsie some years before 1849, apparently close to each other although their dates should be very different.

This very curious mixture of finds suggests that the cairns were occasionally used for burials from the 3rd millennium BC into the medieval period.

In 1954 a short cist was exposed in a trench, 130 m west-north-west of where the westernmost large cairn once stood, about 1.1 m below ground surface. There was no capstone, and the cist was filled with earth, among which were found only some Beaker sherds.

Few large cairns of this period survive in good condition. It seems fairly clear that the Cairn of Memsie has been damaged by excavation, but this seems likely to have been fairly limited in its extent. The stone cist and 'dart-head' (no doubt an arrowhead), broadly suggest a date for the cairn in the later third 3rd or the earlier 2nd millennium BC, and the beaker from one of the other cairns suggests a similar date for the cemetery. However those finds may have been associated with

secondary rather than primary burials. Other large burial cairns of this period are on the sites of earlier monuments, often embanked enclosures and they often have later burials associated with them. Whether the bronze sword accompanied an inhumation or cremation seems less likely. Such swords were often broken and buried or thrown into rivers as, apparently, votive offerings at the end of the second millennium BC and the beginning of the first. The small glazed medieval urn and single edged iron sword are very curious discoveries. A similar pot was found with a burial in a cist at Abbey farm, near North Berwick.

Overall, the cairn is a fine survival, a remaining marker for a once impressive cemetery. Not all of the small cairns which once surrounded it need have been for burials. Some may have been field clearance cairns like those surviving in an area of 12 ha in the nearby Birnie Wood (although the number there has decreased since they were discovered through air photography in 1976). Its archaeological potential remains very high, and, as demonstrated by the 1954 discovery of a cist burial with a beaker some 400 m away, so does that of the surrounding area. This aspect of the archaeology of the cairn is discussed further below.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

Visually the cairn is impressive only for its size. If early accounts of its ratio of height to circumference have any truth in them it must have substantial inner retaining walls.

Social Overview

The cairn is the last large remnant of a cemetery of at least 3 unusually large cairns, with other burials (some perhaps under smaller cairns) surrounding them. It lies on a gravel ridge which may have been favoured in the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC for grazing and for burials, and which was possibly used as a routeway in an otherwise poorly drained area. Thus it may have been a socially significant area at the time the cairns were built.

We are not aware of a strong modern social significance.

Spiritual Overview

The cairn and its companions demonstrate the belief in some sort of afterlife, and the artefacts show that this afterlife was one in which the spirit continued activities which the person buried had practised during life.

Aesthetic Overview

The cairn today can only be appreciated properly through on-site interpretation including reconstruction of the landscape around 2000 BC showing the cairns, the gravel interfluvial area and the Sinclair Hills rising above a surrounding relatively poorly drained area.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

The major gaps in understanding are manifold.

- There has not been any full academic synthesis of the information about Memsie since 1956, nearly 50 years ago. A fuller understanding could be aided by geophysical survey and test pitting in the surrounding area to help understanding of the monument in its landscape.

- We have little more than broad spatial information about its relationship to the other cairns of the cemetery. Despite agricultural clearance in the surrounding area there is a reasonable prospect (judging by the 1954 discovery 400 m away of a cist burial at a depth of over 1 m) of survival of some features related to the other cairns which once formed part of the cemetery.
- We have only very general information about its environment when built. The cairn will cover an old ground surface which will contain pollen and other plant remains which will allow some landscape reconstruction.
- We have no information about its internal structure. The cairn is probably far more complex than it might appear to those unversed in the results of excavations elsewhere in Scotland. It may include revetments and possibly underlying earlier structures.
- It is far from clear what date construction started, and how often it was used for secondary burials. The record of discovery of human bones from some of the cairns and the several artefacts retrieved during clearances suggests that there will be material which can be dated by scientific methods.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The cairn is an impressive survival of a large cemetery.
- The cairn is a significant relic of a once impressive funerary landscape.
- Although damaged it undoubtedly still contains highly significant information about the late 3rd and early 2nd millennia BC.

Associated Properties

Kilmartin Cairns, Cairnpapple, Ring of Brodgar,

Keywords

cairn, burial, Bronze Age, third millennium BC, second millennium BC,