



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC284

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90078)

Taken into State care: 1961 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CNOC FREICEADAIN LONG CAIRN



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CNOC FREICEADAIN LONG CAIRN

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument comprises two unexcavated neolithic long cairns sited about 60m apart in rough grazings on the brow of Cnoc Freiceadain. They are presumed to be more or less contemporary in date.

Na Tri Sithean ('The three fairy mounds') refers to these two mounds with another mound in the vicinity, but this name now generally applied to the south-west mound.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- Passes into State care in 1961. The intention was that this might be 'left as found', with nearby **Camster** excavated and restored.

Archaeological Overview

- Prehistoric burial monuments built by early farmers; demonstrate the impact of new funerary and related practices in northern Scotland.
- Two unexcavated (hence archaeologically 'pristine') neolithic long cairns sited about 60m apart on the brow of Cnoc Freiceadain, presumed contemporary. Probably constructed in second quarter of 4th millennium cal BC. Complex history of development anticipated. Has a high potential for being important to debates about influences from southern Britain, Ireland and the continent, and interactions with preceding forager communities.
- While not excavated, sound archaeological surveys and descriptions exist. It has the potential to provide substantial information on building techniques and funerary and related practices, with information about potting and lithic techniques and the local environment 3500 to 3750 years ago.
- The burials and artefact assemblages together with tomb architecture will substantially enhance understanding of how people viewed the dead 5500 years ago.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- The cairns have diagnostic field characteristics: long low compartmentalised bodies and mounded and horned ends, with some evidence, by way of protruding stones, for chambers, etc.
- Their chambers will probably prove to be corbelled and their entrances lintelled, but may include sophisticated architectural features, and possibly scratched decoration or decoration produced by pounding surfaces. The pottery in them is likely to include bowls of a high artistic standard.
- Orkney-Cromarty tombs tend to be located in prominent places on what would have been the edge of the inhabited landscape: domestic activity and settlement were separated from areas and activities involving the dead.

Social Overview

Not assessed.

Spiritual Overview

- We have no evidence that the monument currently fulfils a spiritual role.
- The tomb attests to belief in an afterlife amongst early prehistoric peoples in Scotland.
- The name 'Na Tri Sithean' (the three fairy mounds) shows that in later times people have ascribed a supernatural or otherworld value to the monuments.

Aesthetic Overview

- Prominent features on skyline: dominates local landscape.
- Sited on edge of hillside in rural location in large field, i.e. attraction of open countryside.
- With other similar mounds in the general area, the mounds allow an appreciation of early interactions between people and the landscape: they help substantially to provide a foundation for the built landscape overlain on the natural one.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Site is unexcavated therefore our interpretation is from field remains only. On the basis of field characteristics, this monument has exciting potential to further the understanding of the crucial relationship between neolithic tombs and domestic architecture, including, possibly, houses of continental type.
- Social and spiritual aspects are not formally assessed.
- Each tomb is different and needs to be considered in its wider context, starting from what is known of all aspects of local contemporary life, about which we can say very little for Cnoc Freiceadain. Archaeologists have tended to 'group' cairns on the basis their form, date and geographical distribution, but the more we learn about individual tombs the more such classifications are thrown into question.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- The cairns are of high archaeological significance for their potential to provide information about neolithic social and ritual practices and their relationship to other spheres of contemporary life. The relationship between tomb and house architecture has considerable future potential.
- The grouping of neolithic ritual monuments is a characteristic of such sites in Caithness, and an understanding of the chronological relationships between the two cairns will be of considerable importance, as will evidence about the group or groups which built them. Landscape and associations with other similar/broadly contemporary monuments in area is a key part of this monument's significance.
- The south-west cairn, known as Na Tri Sithean, is the largest long cairn in Caithness, an area where around 25 long cairns are recorded, and appears to be among the best preserved.
- As an unexcavated site this monument provides a useful counterbalance to the comparable excavated sites that Historic Environment Scotland presents to the public elsewhere in Scotland.

Associated Properties

The most closely related properties in terms of date and form are the **Camster Cairns** and **Cairn o'Get**, also in Caithness. A large number of neolithic chambered tombs (albeit of different form) can be found in Orkney (**Blackhammer, Cuween, Dwarfie Stane, Knowe of Yarso, Midhowe chambered tomb, Quoyness, Maeshowe, Taversöe Tuick, Unstan, Wideford**), around Inverness (**Clava** and **Corrimony**), on Arran (**Torrylin, Carn Ban**) and in Kilmartin (**Dunchrugaig, Nether Largie, Glebe Cairn, Ri Cruin**).

Taking Scotland as a whole there are related monuments with good surviving field characteristics which are accessible to the public (because they are on Forestry Commission or NTS land, for instance).

Keywords neolithic, long cairn, burial, houses, Caithness, Orkney