



Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC279

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90048)

Taken into State care: 1961 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2004

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

CAIRN O'GET



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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CAIRN O' GET

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Cairn of Get (also known as Cairn o'Get or Garrywhin), in north-east Caithness, is a small Neolithic short-horned cairn of Orkney-Cromarty type. In its original form a central burial chamber (up to 3m high) was entered through a low short passage (the outer end of which was paved). Subsequently the cairn was enlarged and elaborated with projections or 'horns'. The passage and chamber are now unroofed, their stone having been robbed for making a nearby dam in the 19th century.

The site is approached following a walk across rough ground. It forms one element in an extensive archaeological landscape.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- First excavated 1866, at which point the top of the cairn was already lost.
- Body of cairn collapses further due to neglect.
- 1961 site comes into guardianship.
- Further minor excavations in 1985.

Archaeological Overview

- Work in 1985 showed that the 19th-century excavators, Anderson and Shearer, had removed all *in situ* deposits and this limits our scientific knowledge of this tomb. The cairn has projecting horns and is edged by a double wall. The chamber is bipartite, with an antechamber and a main chamber, separated by portal stones and changes in width. In 1886 the main chamber was 2.5 m high and corbelled. Its maximum height is now 1.85 m but evidence of corbelling still survives. The main chamber (and probably also the antechamber) contained a mass of ashes of charred wood, and animal and human bones, up to 0.45m deep, as well as finds of flint (including leaf-shaped arrowheads) and mostly undecorated Neolithic pottery. Above the ash layer, in the antechamber, were the remains of seven or eight inhumations. Unstratified finds include a sherd of Unstan Ware pottery. All of the finds and bones are lost. The evidence suggests a long history of use and re-use of the tomb for a range of burial rites.
- There is some evidence in northern Scotland that tombs such as this functioned in their initial periods of use as a fixed point within a landscape of transitory human settlement. The cessation of venerative use at sites such as this may thus mark a very substantial shift in the human land use towards more permanent settlement, fixed land ownership and an intensification of arable land use.
- Four short cists have been found about 30m south of the cairn. It is situated within an exceptionally well-preserved historic landscape that contains significant prehistoric remains spanning several millennia of human activity.

- There has been extensive fieldwalking of areas around this site as part of the Caithness Fieldwalking Project which has served to illuminate the non-monumental archaeological record for the Neolithic of the wider area, and for earlier Mesolithic as well as later Bronze Age activity. Scatters of worked flint tools have been found, and some of these excavated.
- Dating of this site may tentatively be related to dates from comparable monuments in the vicinity (to some extent **Camster** but especially the Tulloch of Assery cairns, and a little further afield the chambered cairns at Ord, near Lairg). Caithness has perhaps the best dated (in terms of quantity not necessarily quality) chambered cairns outside Orkney, but that says more about absence of dates elsewhere than the quality of the Caithness situation.
- There has been little work on the archaeology of Caithness in general since the 19th century, and as a result the archaeology of this area is not as well-known or as well understood as it deserves to be.
- 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.
- RCAHMS undertook a detailed new mapping of this area in summer 2004.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Unfortunately, the roof of the cairn does not survive, but we can assume that the passage was lintelled and led to a corbelled central chamber. Construction of such tombs, even on a small scale such as this, provides evidence for the skill of their builders.

Social Overview

- The social environment in which this particular tomb was constructed is not well understood, but the construction of communal burial monuments such as this clearly involved a significant commitment of resources.
- The cairn is one of the two southernmost chambered cairns of a group of 13 in the Yarrows / Warehouse area. Other clusters occur in Caithness, notably around Loch Calder and at Sordale. Unless agriculture has destroyed many cairns elsewhere in Caithness, this striking pattern implies large burial zones separated by much larger zones in which domestic activities predominated, a distinctive pattern implying that many different communities brought their dead long distances to sacred areas (but see below, major gaps in understanding).

Spiritual Overview

- The ways in which human bones are buried in a monument such as this provides evidence for complex ritual practices and beliefs.
- The distinctive pattern of clusters of cairns implies the existence of sacred zones to which communities brought their dead.

Aesthetic Overview

- The tomb is sited on open moorland, dominating the area to the east but cut off from the main group of chambered cairns at Yarrows / Warehouse by a ridge. When originally constructed, it would have had a bigger visual impact than it now does.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- There are no scientific dates for the activity at this monument, and the complexity and time depth of its use is known only approximately.
- This monument did not exist in isolation, and the surrounding landscape is rich in upstanding (and presumably sub-surface) prehistoric archaeology. Much of it is buried in peat, which probably started to form long after the cairn was built. There is therefore a considerable potential to understand better the local communities who might have built such a monument, their agricultural practices, etc. The results of the Caithness Fieldwalking Project by Amelia Pannett need assimilating into any future interpretation.
- In particular, the dozen other cairns in the area have, along with Cairn o'Get, a huge potential for unravelling the burial practices of northern Scotland 5750 to 4500 years ago, while excavation in intervening areas could test the hypothesis that this was a zone largely devoted to burial and associated rituals with domestic sites largely restricted to different zones in Caithness. However, Cairn o'Get may not be truly part of this grouping but relate to nearby settlement between it and the coast. The opportunity to compare and contrast a relationship like this, common in Orkney, with a very different larger landscape pattern is of considerable importance.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- This now roofless round cairn provides an insight into the ritual beliefs and practices of people living in northern Scotland about 5750 to 4500 years ago.
- It is one part of an extensive landscape of well-preserved and important prehistoric and later remains (not in State care) which has the potential to shed light on the farming communities who built this cairn and who over many generations substantially changed its landscape setting.
- This cairn now feels fairly 'remote'. However, the builders and users of the tomb were familiar with what was happening elsewhere in Scotland and had access to resources (such as flint) that had travelled some distance.

Associated Properties

Broadly contemporary monuments exist at **Cnoc Freiceadain** and **Grey Cairns of Camster**, as well as the many chambered tombs a little to the north, in Orkney (see, for example, **Midhowe and Maeshowe**). NB Camster cairns are not far away as the crow flies, but modern roads give the impression of the sites being a long way away. The early Bronze Age 'Clava cairns' (**Clava, Corrimony**) are later examples of prehistoric burial cairns.

Keywords cairn, burial, Neolithic, Caithness, Highland, archaeological landscape