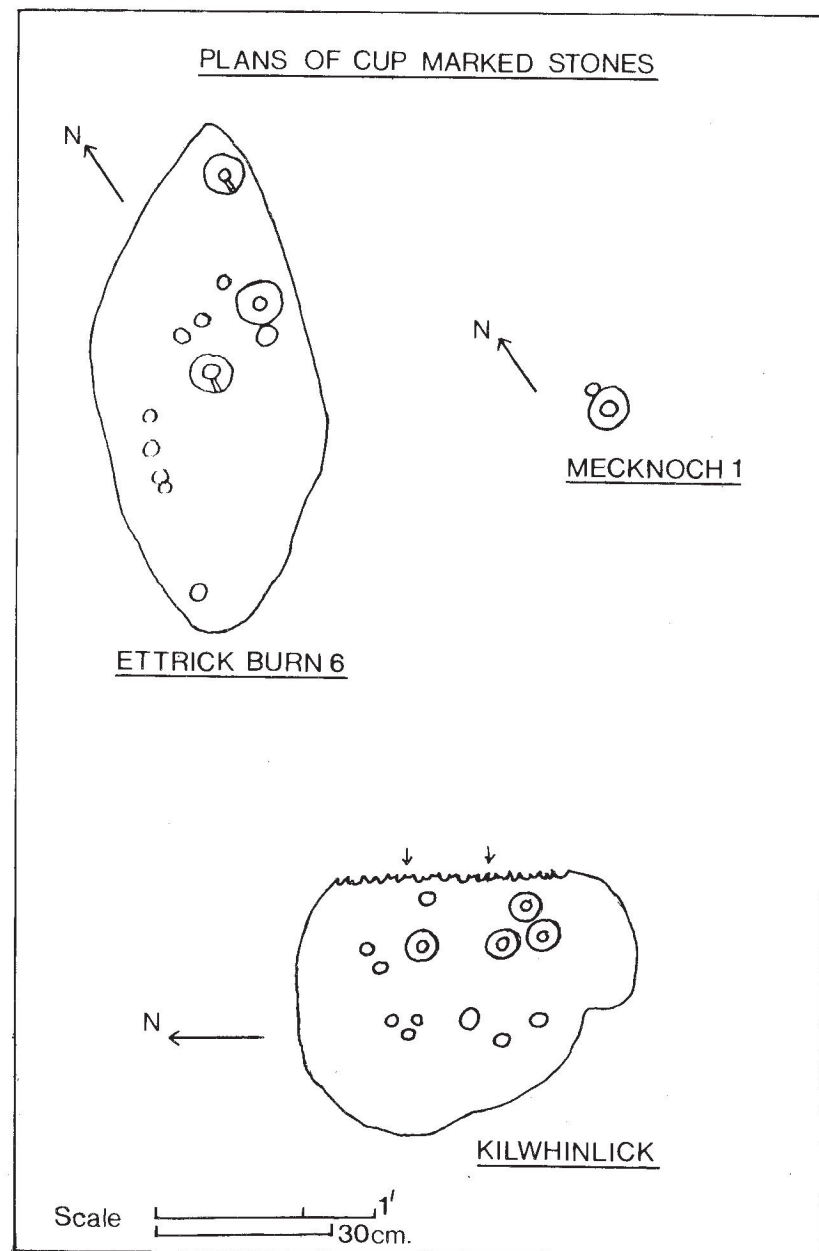




THE INVESTIGATION OF KILBRIDE CAIRN

NS 045687

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In 1981, Mr Dan Boag showed me a hitherto unrecorded Bronze Age cairn up the Ettrick Burn from Kilbride Farm. The Bute Estate gave willing permission for an investigation. Mr Crawford Currie, the farmer at Kilbride, was most interested and could not have been more helpful during the time we were working there. The investigation was carried out by members of the Buteshire Natural History Society under the direction of the writer. Members of the Cowal Archaeological Club also helped.

The Kilbride glen is very steep-sided rising from 100m at the burn to 200m about the level of the cairn. The slope is approximately 1 in 4. During the last Ice Age the glen was scoured by ice which left slabs of schist as it passed down. The soil is very thin.

The cairn has been much robbed in antiquity. An early track runs up the glen just below the cairn. This has an edging of stones on its upper side for 200m or so on each side of the cairn and stones have also been used in the bottoming of the track – these stones probably came from the cairn. As there are no walls or buildings on the hill where cairn material could have been used, it seems as though the cairn was never very high.

On first seeing Kilbride cairn two aspects strike one; first, the position on the steep side of the hill and second, the large roughly built cist. The cairn appears oval with an inner and an outer edge on the East. The North and South sides have practically disappeared making it difficult to see the original shape. The longer axis points down the slope. The outer edge to the East could well have been added to prevent cairn material from slipping down the hill. Some massive stones just further down the slope may have helped with this too. The inner cairn incorporated live rock to the South and used three large lumps of quartz and well chosen stones in its construction. The two edges came together at the West end where the cairn, now only one stone deep, merged with the hillside.

Two cists lie off centre in the inner cairn. One, running North to South is near the South edge. It is unusually large for a Bronze Age cist being 1.500m long. Mr Currie and his father before him knew of the cist but not of its significance – they thought of it as a lambing pen of some earlier shepherd. The side slabs are rough irregularly shaped schist. The South slab is wedge shaped 0.780m at the top and 0.430m at the foot. It now slopes outwards to the South. A packing of stones

fills the gaps between it and the irregularity of the East and West slabs. The cairn material is now level with the top of the East slab.

A large rectangular stone (1.850 x 0.900m) lies athwart the North end slab which collapsed inward. A stick pushed in behind this collapsed stone meets no resistance indicating a hollow space behind it. This large stone extends 1.000m to the West of the cist. It is flat on the top, about 0.200m thick at the West end and 0.520m thick where it overlies the North end of the cist. It has an upright stone wedged against the West end, the top of it level with the flat stone. Stones are packed against part of the South side.

This large stone weighing perhaps half a tonne would have fitted over the cist as a cap stone. The sheer weight of it coupled with the thickness of the awkwardly shaped under-side would have made it very difficult to pull it off the cist to its present position.

When Dr. J. N. G. Ritchie of the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments (Scotland) visited the site, he was of the opinion that it had never served as a cap stone. There were several slabs lying nearby, two or three of which could have covered the cist. He advised against trying to have it pulled off the North end of the cist. It would indeed have been very difficult to have got lifting equipment up the hill to do so. While no artefacts were found to date the cairn securely, he considered that the nature of the structure of the cairn and of the cists was sufficient evidence to say that it was Bronze Age.

Within the cist was a loose fill of stones, bracken and earth. Lichen was growing 0.300m down the inside of the East slab to the top of this fill. Under this was a layer of smaller stones and dark brown earth which was darker towards the centre. This overlay a rough paving of stones (0.200 – 0.250m) lying at the foot of the slabs. This paving did not cover the floor of the cist completely. The cist was 0.700m deep.

The second cist, lying 1.000m North East from the North East corner of the large cist was smaller. It has been pulled about so much that it is impossible to guess its original plan. One slab 0.950 x 0.600m and 0.150m thick was presumably a side slab. Another stone 1.000m lies flat under cairn material. There is a wedge shaped stone 0.850 at the top 0.550 at the bottom and 0.300m deep which may have been an end stone. These give some indication of the size of the cist.

At the North West corner of the cairn is a mound of stones higher than the rest of the cairn material. This might indicate the original height of the cairn, but the lie of the stones makes it more likely that it was made of stones thrown up from the cairn area by some earlier investigator.

Kilbride is the 13th Bronze Age cairn to have been recognised on Bute. Rullecheddan and two on the foreshore North of Kerrytonlia have disappeared. Little Kilmory is under ploughed land and one of those at Scalpsie is nearly ploughed out. The mounds of Ardrosdale, Scalpsie, Scoulag Moor, Suidhe Hill, Glen Callum Bay and two on the foreshore at Kerrytonlia are clearly visible. Bronze Age cists or cairns have been added to the Neolithic Burial cairns at Glecknabae, Glenvoidean and Hilton. These are not included in the 13 cairns. All have presumably been used for burials or as cenotaphs and all are roughly round but within these limits it is the individuality of design in each and every one that strikes me rather than their similarities. The three Bronze Age cairns I have worked at in Argyll (Portavadie, Gariob and Auchentegan) re-inforce this impression.

The Road to School

There is an old track running up the glen passing just below the cairn. Mr Currie told us that long ago, the children of the glen went to Shalunt School over the hill, following that track. With five farms in Glen More and crofts and larger families then than now, there might have been a fair number of scholars in the early eighteen hundreds.

While digging the cairn we followed the track but it was lost in the wet moorland higher up the glen. Then, some time later, we followed another track running up North West from Shalunt Farm. It too was lost on the moor, but when we climbed a little further we looked down on the Kilbride glen and realised that we were on the "scholar's way." It must have been a struggle for them in rough weather to reach the school on the shore at Shalunt, but easier than going to the other school at Glecknabae. Both schools were run by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge.

