

THE STORY OF THE EXCAVATION OF THE NEOLITHIC BURIAL CAIRN AT GLENVOIDEAN NS 997705

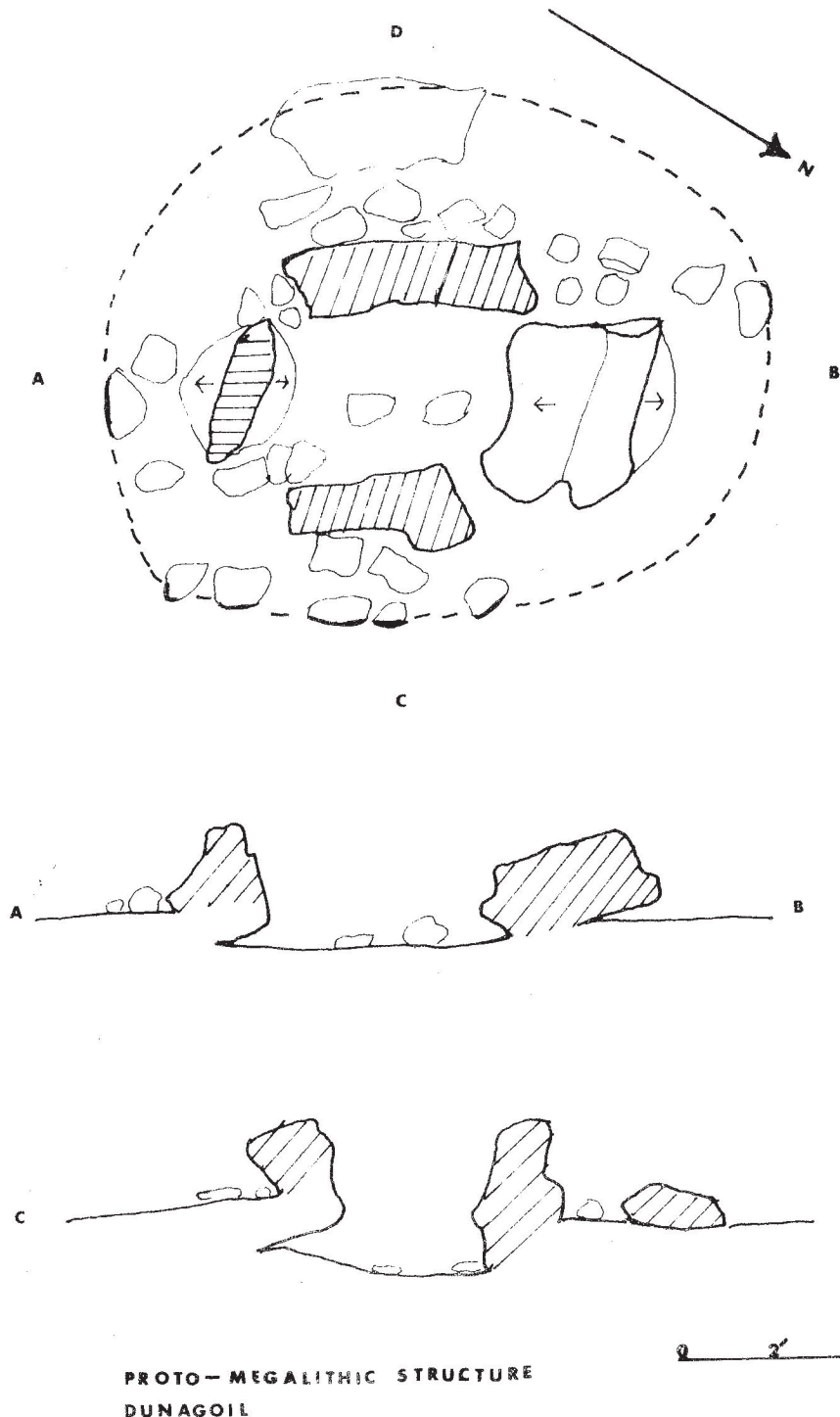
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It was in August 1962 that Mrs. D. B. Taylor (Isabel Milligan) first recognised that the two upright stones on the hill above the Kilmichael Chapel were part of a Neolithic Burial Cairn. When I visited it with her the two schistose stones stood 2'6" apart, there were stones between them and under the heathery tangle was a large flat stone. Behind was a green circular area about 30' in diameter, artificially flattened from the hillside.

The following Easter we started to excavate and excavation continued in a series of short campaigns. The final one should be at Easter 1970. The full report will appear after that. At least 90 people took part in the work, there were members of the Buteshire Natural History Society, members of the Cowal Archaeological Society, men of the Royal Navy, students from Dundee and Cambridge as well as interested friends who came for the odd day's work. The work could not have been accomplished without the help of the girls and boys of the Junior Naturalists who acted as bucket boys. One or two, who came back season after season, acquired a seeing eye for soil changes and a skill in trowelling, notably Sandra Strong and Hugh Doggart.

Work started on the Saturday before Easter, by Tuesday the outline of the burial chamber was defined, 7" below the modern surface. It took the rest of the week to clear it as we took out one half of the fill at a time to see if there was any layering in the soil. This left very little room to manoeuvre, so slowing down the work. The chamber was filled with earth and stones, a deliberate filling after the final burial. A long rectangular stone stood upright in one corner, it may have had some ritual significance or it may have slipped from its position as a lintel stone.

The great excitement came when the rim of a pot appeared. From then it was what Wheeler described as a



PROTO-MEGALITHIC STRUCTURE
DUNAGOIL

"watch-maker's job" working with penknife, teaspoon and brush until two crushed pots and one small complete one lay clear on the floor of the chamber. As the pots were very friable they were left for several days to dry out and firm up. This gave time for planning and photography. Their extreme friability made lifting the pots difficult. The everted rim came away at a touch showing that the hand-made pots had been built up, with the rim added in a strip after the main pot had been formed. The small pot was found intact, upside down. It, too, had been built up. The base just fitting the palm of the hand, would have been pinched out and the upper part added as a rolled out strip, the lugs at the join being functional and decorative. One could see the thumb mark of the potter as she — for making pots was probably the women's job then — pressed the two parts together, squeezing out the little projection as she did so. The rim was then added in another narrower strip. After lifting, the pots were left to dry out for several weeks before Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Scott of Kelvingrove Museum started on the very difficult task of putting them together. Seen in the Bute Museum they make a wonderful exhibit. The two larger ones have holes bored under the rim, presumably to hang them on the wall. One is decorated with neat scorings from rim to carination, the other with criss-cross incised lines over the base.

Nothing else was found in the chamber, no bones, no trace of the purple stained earth which sometimes shows where a body once lay. The acidity of the soil and the constant seeping of water into the chamber probably accounts for this disappearance of any skeletal remains. There were patches of burning at the foot of the chamber, one extended under the west slab showing that fires must have been lit after the site had been levelled for the chamber.

After the main chamber had been cleared we began to excavate the outer chamber which, to begin with, had a filling similar to that of the main one. Then we uncovered a slab which filled the whole area. This proved to be the upper part of the Upright C which must have broken off and either fallen between the two uprights or been placed there. Underneath was quite an elaborate packing of flat

stones built against the north slab of the main chamber. Two flints, probably dropped accidentally, were in the fill, as well as some rim sherds which the Scotts were able to make up into the 4th pot in the exhibit in the Museum.

While the clearing of the chamber was going on two trenches at right angles to each other were dug into the cairn to find its structure. The large flat stone, weighing about 5 tons, was cleared. This capstone was lying beside Upright A, obviously not in its original position. To move it we had the help of men of the Royal Navy who first organised a team of 14 pulling ropes fixed round it, but the stone did not move. However the tactics which were probably used by the Neolithic builders were successful, rollers and levers. This stone would have covered the main chamber. Why it was left where we found it, is a question we cannot answer. It may have been moved after the cairn was abandoned; or the people who inserted the last burials may have had difficulty in replacing it on the chamber. As they were going to cover the cairn and abandon it they just left it there.

Gradually as the many different features of the great burial place were uncovered it became apparent that it had been in use for a very long time, even many centuries. It was used and abandoned, altered, used again and finally blocked. As more and more of these Neolithic Burial Cairns are excavated more and more are proved to have structures of more than one period within them. At Glen Iron,¹ near Stranraer, a cairn which looked oval on the ground was proved to have been two separate round ones joined together at some later stage. At Monamor² in Arran the earliest pottery found was 800 years older than the latest form present.

The first cairn surrounding the axial chamber at Glenvoidean was probably round, two uprights flanking the entrance to the main chamber. These uprights were well matched for size and shape. Later the cairn was added to, both at the north and at the south. To the north two more uprights were added with a curved edge to the forecourt. One of the uprights has disappeared though the hole where it once stood was found. The other, irregular in shape, gave

the builders much trouble in its erection. They had to jamb 3' upright stones in front of it and to cradle the V shaped back with large slabs of stone. While the landward kerb of the forecourt was made of well matched slabs which would have stood up proud, the seaward side had rectangular stones lying on the ground.

To the south is a lateral chamber with a set of small portal stones at its entrance. Nothing was found in this chamber apart from patches of burning on the floor. Its main chamber has one long, thick stone as its south wall. The north side is a loosely built wall which might have been adapted from the cairn round the axial chamber. On the other hand this lateral chamber may have been the first structure on the site built with its own small cairn, which would later have been covered in the major re-construction of the burial mound. It is to try to settle this sequence of building that a further campaign is planned for Easter 1970. The landward edge of the cairn has a well built edge, eight courses deep at one part, the south end has a well built kerb of rectangular blocks. The seaward edge has slipped down the hill so its structure will never be known. After the last burial the forecourt and front edge of the cairn were blocked with a fanning out of flat stones, most impressive when first cleared. The chamber was covered and the landward kerb was masked by cairn stones.

At every stage of development ritual fire must have been of the greatest importance as at intervals all round the cairn we found patches of burning. In the forecourt the heat must have been intense as the earth and stones were reddened and burnt.

Sometime in the 13th century Medieval people inserted a corn drying kiln in the cairn just behind the main chamber, in fact the upright stones of the flue ran back to back with the south end stone of the chamber. They probably had no idea of the nature of the mass of stones they were working among and using for the making of their kiln. In doing this they have, of course, destroyed much of the evidence which would have helped us to learn about the building of the cairn. A little spread of shells, just outside the kiln gives one a picture of the corn driers sitting on the edge of the platform

eating shell fish. The kiln, like the one at St. Blane's³ is much shallower than the later ones which are found beside the deserted crofts in Bute. There is one up the hill at the croft of Glenvoidean. A few shreds of green glazed ware, similar to the pottery found at St. Blane's and Little Duna-goil gave a date for the kiln. No trace of where the Medieval farmers lived has so far been found.

It is really impossible for us to imagine the fears and taboos of these Neolithic people living in the end of the third millenium B.C. Their beliefs must have been compelling forces. The hundreds of burial cairns found all over Europe and Britain make it clear that there was some idea of life after death. Whether the elaborate blocking of the forecourt and the covering of the chambers were to keep the spirits of the dead in the cairn or to prevent evil spirits from disturbing the departed can never be known. Real organisation of a considerable number of people would be needed to construct any of these cairns which were probably reserved as mausoleums for the chiefs of the clan. Very few Neolithic domestic sites are known, the one at Townhead, Rothesay and the newly found one at Auchentegan, Glendaruel, are the only ones known in this area, so at the moment our knowledge of these people is lop-sided. The Neolithic Revolution, as Childe called it, was a tremendous advance. As the first farmers, these Neolithic people became masters of their surroundings, making the forces of nature serve them. The cairn they built on the hillside above the Kyles of Bute is truly a monument to the strength of their beliefs and the skill of their hands.

1. Transactions Dumfriesshire and Galloway N.H. and Arch. Society, Vol. XLI. Pg. 99 ff.
2. Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Vol. XCVII. Pg. ff.
3. Transactions B.N.H.S. Vol. XV. Pg. 33 ff.

THE LONG-NARROW "HOUSE" AT GLENVOIDEAN NS 004675

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Description of the site.

After the Rising of 1745 Major Roy was directed by the Duke of Cumberland to make a map of Scotland. This remarkably accurate map shows that the crofts and tracks at the north end of Bute were then about 300' above the present road which runs by the shore. At this upper level is the ruined homestead of Glenvoidean which has two rectangular buildings (29' 6" x 13' 9"; 17' x 11') and a small in-by field within a containing wall. A corn-drying kiln was built on the wall, at the highest point of the little settlement. The kiln has a distinct "scarcement" ledge above the sloping stones which form the deep bowl of the kiln. There is no clear evidence to date this settlement with any precision but it was probably occupied at the end of the 18th Century.

100' below the ruins of Glenvoidean settlement are the foundations of the Long-narrow "house." Its unusual features — the choice of a site which required excavation to make a level floor, the use of large boulders in the walls, the use of a large amount of quartz, the choice of a site with the live rock so near the surface and the proportion of the building (36' x 10' 6") seemed to warrant the excavation carried out in 1964 and '65.

Construction of the "house."

The "house" has been built at right angles to the contour of the hillside. At the eastern end the ground has been excavated to a depth of 3' to give a level base for the building. Against this excavation has been built a wall of which 6 courses remain. From the amount of tumble behind and in front of this wall it may be assumed that it was originally free standing for one or two courses.

Along the north wall large stones, up to 3' 8" in height, are set in as orthostats. The irregular shape of these stones

