

Ambrisbeg Hill: Enclosure and Cairn.

Interim report

Anne Speirs

Summary

An enclosure was noted on Ambrisbeg Hill in 1989. Two short excavations were undertaken in 1991 and 1993, in the course of which a round cairn was discovered on the same site.

Enclosure

In 1989 John McVey noted a rampart enclosing an area of rough grazing land, on the summit of a steep-sided ridge on Ambrisbeg Hill (NS 068 596). The rampart can be clearly made out on the south part, where the area is grass and scrub, but it is less distinct on the north side beyond the dry stone dyke, where there is a plantation of conifers. The only previous archaeological evidence from Ambrisbeg Hill was the discovery, in the 19th century, of a polished stone axe which is now in the Bute Museum.

In 1990 this enclosure was measured and planned by Elizabeth Rennie and members of the Bute Natural History Society, and the area enclosed by the rampart was found to be approximately 6.5 acres (2.4 ha). In 1991 a trench was opened at the south edge of the enclosure to investigate the construction of the rampart. The excavation revealed that this section of it was three metres wide and had a central core of hard-packed gravel and clay approximately one metre in width, enclosed by an edge of rather large stones. Six post holes were found in the top part, suggesting that there had once been a palisade, and there were also traces of a ditch on the inner side of the rampart.

During the 1991 excavation, a flat area to the front of the northern part of the enclosure was noted to have an edge of large stones protruding through the grass. The turf and soil was scraped off these stones, which appeared to have been placed to form a kerb.

1993 Excavation: the cairn

In 1993 a trench *A*, approximately 11 metres by 2 metres, was opened in this flat area outside the rampart (fig 1) and was found to contain a large quantity of stone. Trenches *B* and *C* were dug at right angles to it and these also contained large quantities of stone. It became clear that this was not part of the enclosure site at all but was a cairn of earth and stones. The flatness of the area was probably the result of the removal of stones from the upper part of the mound, possibly when the rampart was built. Estimating the age of the enclosure had proved difficult, due to the lack of any datable material. However, evidence from trenches *D* and *E*, which had been opened through the rampart, revealed that the cairn was overlain by the rampart and as the cairn was probably Bronze Age, the rampart was later, possibly Iron Age. Six post holes were exposed in trench *D* and two in Trench *A*, and their approximate positions are marked on the plan. There was no obvious entrance to the enclosure in the areas investigated.

The burial mound measured approximately 9 metres in diameter and less than 1 metre in height, and had a kerb of boulders with an infill of smaller stones and earth. Trenches *F* and *G* were opened round the edge of the cairn following the line of boulders, and in trench *F* a small, narrow stone cist was exposed (see photo 1). It measured approximately 40 cms by 25 cms and was full of large stones which were tumble from the cairn. At a depth of 20 cms the

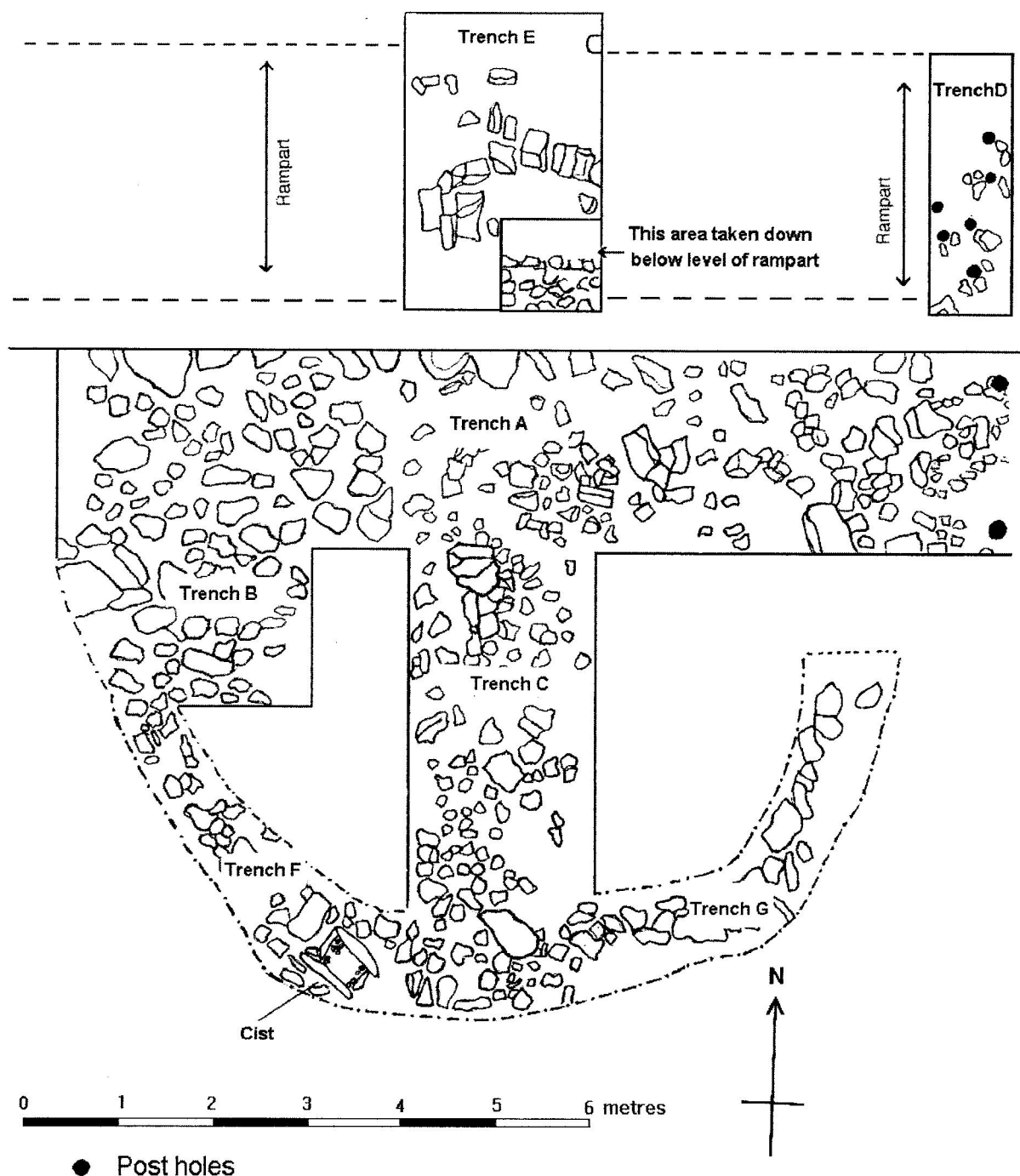


Fig 1: Plan of 1993 excavation at Ambrisbeg Cairn.

base of the cist was found, and although the central part had been disturbed by large stones which had fallen in, it had clearly been lined with small quartz pebbles. Since the cist was so small and contained no artifacts, it was possibly used for the burial of a baby. As it lay at the edge of the cairn, well above the old surface and dug into the mound, it would have been inserted after the construction of the main cairn.

Conclusion

The discovery of this cairn adds to our knowledge of the landscape of this area. Several other Bronze Age cairns have been recorded in the Scalpsie area; the best preserved was dug by Professor Bryce. He recorded this cairn as measuring 43 feet (13.1m) in diameter, somewhat

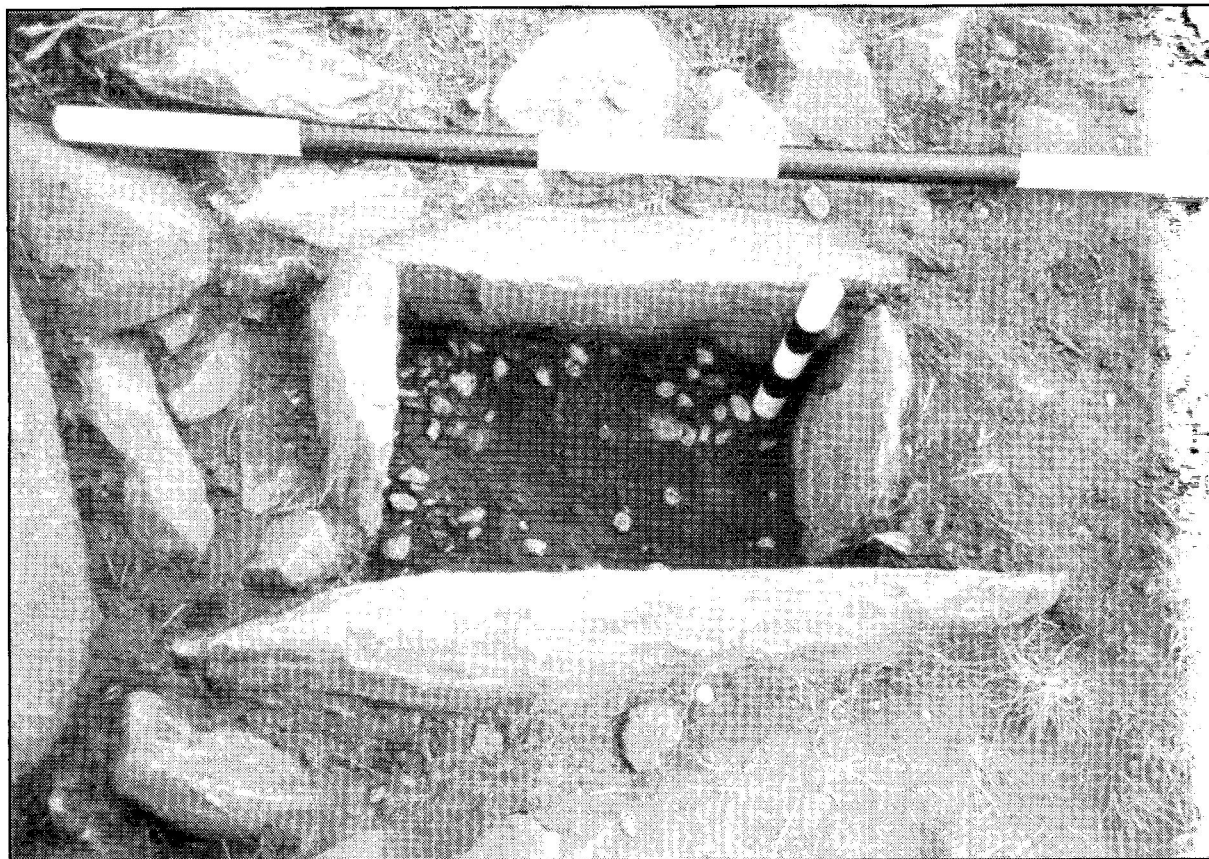


Photo 1: Small cist inserted into side of Ambrisbeg Cairn, as revealed during 1993 excavation.

larger than the Ambrisbeg cairn (Bryce 1903), and he discovered an undisturbed cist containing a food vessel, burnt bone and several other items (now in Royal Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh.) This cairn can be seen next to the road at Scalpsie Bay. The Ambrisbeg Cairn would originally have been a substantial mound of stones, and being prominently situated would have been readily visible from a considerable distance.

Acknowledgements

Work on the Ambrisbeg Cairn was carried out by a team of volunteers from the Bute Natural History Society who were greatly assisted by Elizabeth Rennie and Robin Callender. Thanks are due to Bute Estates and to Mr Robertson of Birgidale Knock for their co-operation and helpfulness during the survey and excavations.

Reference

Bryce, T H, 1903 On the Cairns and Tumuli of the Island of Bute, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, Vol XXXVIII (1904), 52-57.