

## **Lochhill and Slewcairn: completing two important projects by the late Lionel Masters**

Alison Sheridan

The late and greatly missed Lionel Masters (August 1942–April 2019) was a well-known figure in the Glasgow Archaeological Society from the 1960s until the Noughties, and was its President from 1994 to 1997. As his obituary in the *Scottish Archaeological Journal* makes clear (Marshall and Leslie 2020), Lionel made a significant contribution to Scottish archaeology, not only through his excavations in Dumfries and Galloway and in Caithness, but also through his tireless work in adult education in the now-defunct Department of Extra-Mural and Adult Education at the University of Glasgow. This work included his establishment of a three-year Certificate Course in Field Archaeology – something that gave rise, in 1987, to the hugely successful Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists (ACFA), established by his students as a way of using the skills he had imparted to them to support both community-based and academic/commercial archaeology.

Having moved to Dumfries in 1966, Lionel undertook the excavation of two very important Early Neolithic funerary monuments – long cairns built over burnt-down rectangular timber mortuary structures – at Lochhill (1969–71) and Slewcairn (1973–81) in the former Stewartry of Kirkcudbright. He was especially interested in prehistoric cairns, and felt that these two sites would give his students and volunteers good experience in surveying, excavating and recording. The Lochhill monument had only been discovered the previous year, when the low hill on which it was located was brought under cultivation (Williams 1968; Henshall 1972, 159, 457).

The excavations were undertaken on a shoestring, with funding obtained from Glasgow University, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society and from Dumfriesshire Extra-Mural students. Additional funding for the first year of the Slewcairn excavation – which that year was co-directed by Ian Kinnes – was obtained from New England College in Sussex where he was then a lecturer, with American students from that College joining the more local dig team.

The excavations were carried out meticulously, with due attention to detail and with hundreds of photographs being taken, and both sites were completely excavated. Annual updates were published in *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland* (in 1969 and 1970 for Lochhill, and 1973–80 for Slewcairn), and a summary report on the results of the Lochhill excavation, including a radiocarbon date, was published in the journal *Antiquity* in 1973 (Masters 1973) and in *Current Archaeology* in 1972 (Masters 1972). An unpublished typescript interim report on the Slewcairn excavation was produced in 1977 (Masters 1977). However, no

final report was produced for either of the monuments, and while some initial post-excavation specialist reporting was undertaken, there were no funds to complete the necessary work or to publish the definitive reports, and so the archive remained in Lionel's house in Doune until after his death. The current author promised Lionel's wife Margaret that she would get the work done to bring both sites to full publication, and with assistance from Ian Marshall of ACFA and generous financial help from Glasgow Archaeological Society, the Prehistoric Society and Forestry and Land Scotland (per Matt Ritchie), that work has been underway since 2020, with a view to publication in 2024. Osteologist Angela Boyle, lithic specialist Torben Ballin and plant remains specialist Susan Ramsey have joined the author in studying the finds from the two monuments, and a suite of eight radiocarbon dates have been obtained so far. The results are exciting and they underline the importance of these monuments in advancing our understanding of the evolution of Clyde Cairns in south-west Scotland from their non-megalithic 'forbears'.

### ***Lochhill***

The long cairn at Lochhill, New Abbey (NGR NX 9688 6507, Canmore ID 65428) was located on the northern slope of a low hill, some 9 km south of Dumfries and around 3 km from the Nith Estuary, at an altitude of 48 m (Fig. 1). It is overlooked by Criffel, the highest hill in the area.



*Fig. 1 Location of Lochhill (L) and Slewcairn (S)*

Before excavation the monument appeared as a low, oval grass-covered cairn, 25 m long, 14 m in maximum width and 1.7 m high, with its broad end towards the north east, with a few stones poking through the vegetation. Excavation rapidly established that it was a trapezoidal cairn with a shallow megalithic façade made from overlapping granite slabs with some drystone walling above the slabs. From the centre of this façade a small slab-built 'chamber' extended into the cairn (Fig. 2). The cairn, which had clearly been subject to robbing, was edged by a

revetment of granite boulders and blocks, and the forecourt had been deliberately and carefully blocked with split and rounded boulders, among which were found three white quartzite stones.

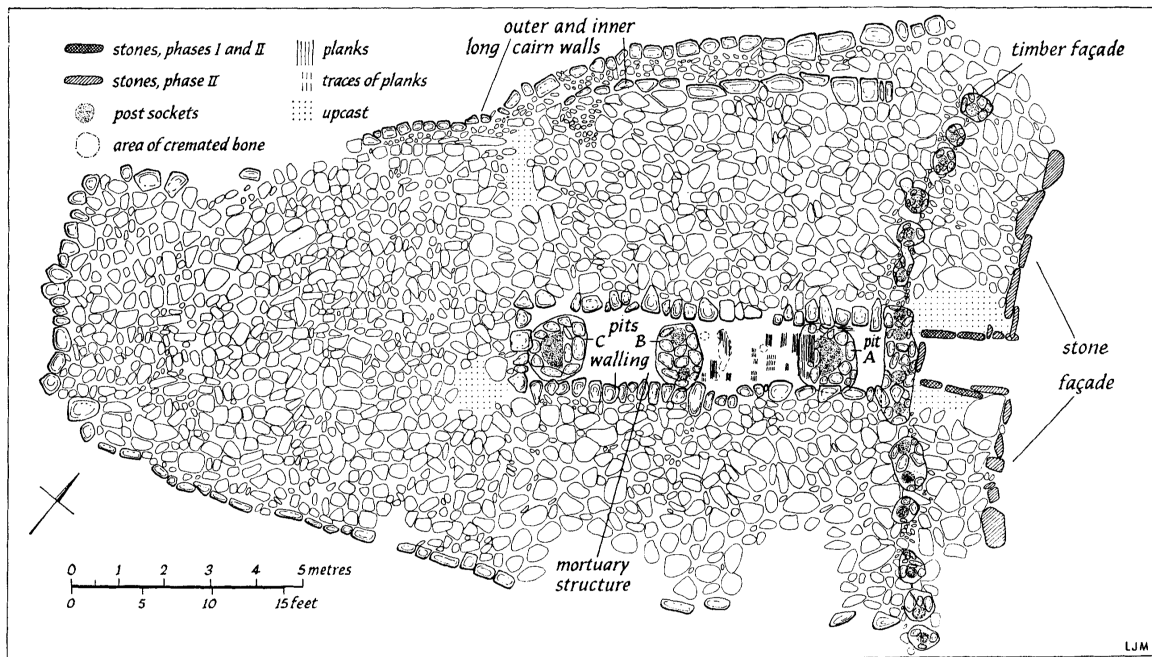


*Fig. 2 The Lochhill monument at an early stage of the excavation. The forecourt blocking material has been removed. Photo: Lionel Masters*

Further excavation revealed that the cairn, façade and (probably at least part of) the stone ‘chamber’ had been added to an earlier funerary monument that had started its life as a free-standing, open-sided rectangular timber mortuary chamber, 7.5 m long and with an average width of 1.4 m, set within a rectangular hollow that had been excavated through the ground surface to a depth of 12 cm and fronted by a shallowly curving façade made from 16 upright timber posts (Fig. 3). The four posts at the centre of the façade had been set into a trench, and in the upcast from this trench were found two pairs of the side stones of the stone ‘chamber’, suggesting that they may have been erected at this stage, extending from the centre of the timber façade in line with the mortuary structure to form a porch-like feature.

Each end of the mortuary chamber had consisted of a massive, split oak trunk around 90 cm in diameter, erected with the flat surface facing inwards, and set in a hole 75 cm deep – which suggests an original height above the top of the post hole of around 2.25 m. Mid-way between these D-shaped posts had stood a pair of smaller, round posts with diameters of

30 cm and 25 cm, set within an oval pit 75 cm deep, and traces of transverse oak planking (which Lionel interpreted as a floor) were found in one half of the structure. It is believed that the central posts had supported a platform upon which a human body – or part thereof – had been placed, and the abundant presence of birch bark in the chamber area indicates that the chamber had been covered with some kind of flat roofing (though not a pitched roof, as Paul Ashbee had proposed for similar structures found in southern England).



*Fig. 3 Composite plan of the Lochhill monument in its final, pre-blockage form, by Lionel Masters. Note that the cairn stones covering the remains of the timber mortuary structure and façade are omitted*

Having stood for a while, it appears that the mortuary chamber and the timber façade were deliberately burnt down, and small boulders were thrown into the area where the chamber had stood while the embers were still hot. A low stone wall was constructed in the footprint of the former chamber, covering the outer edges of the three axial post holes, and at the same time a trapezoidal cairn was added, with its stone forecourt situated slightly beyond where the timber façade had stood. The stone ‘chamber’ was probably extended, and a back slab inserted, at this stage (Fig. 4). That cairn effectively sealed the site of the mortuary chamber and its façade. At the north-west corner of the cairn, an apparent extension of the cairn outwards, with an outer line of revetment, was initially thought to relate to a later phase of activity but Lionel later dropped this hypothesis in favour of the idea that the cairn design was amended during its initial construction.



*Fig. 4 Excavation of the stone 'chamber', 1970. Photo: Lionel Masters*

That was not the end, as far as structural modifications are concerned. There is evidence for localised cairn collapse, and the addition of buttressing material, but how soon this occurred after the cairn was completed is unknown. The blocking up of the stone forecourt façade is likely to have taken place during the Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age, when a Beaker pot was deposited on top of the cairn. In the more recent past the cairn and the forecourt blocking material were robbed, and a pit was dug at the rear of the stone 'chamber', perhaps in search of treasure. What the pit-digger unearthed, however, were over 180 sherds of Early Neolithic pottery of the Carinated Bowl tradition, representing eight or nine carinated and uncarinated vessels that may well have been deposited with offerings to the dead while the timber mortuary structure was in use (Fig. 5). Sadly, those sherds are the only element of the finds assemblage that cannot now be located, but their identification as early, 'traditional Carinated Bowl' pottery is clear from Lionel's photographs and excavation notes.



*Fig. 5 Rimsherds of early Carinated Bowl pottery. Photo: Lionel Masters*

The only human remains to be discovered at Lochhill were small fragments of calcined bone, in poor condition, found within the area of the mortuary chamber. Lionel's suspicion that the bones all belong to one individual has been confirmed by Angela Boyle, who has examined the c 223 g of bone fragments recently; they form part of the body of an adult male, with parts of the skull, of arm long bones, and a kneecap present. How these incomplete cremated body parts came to be in the mortuary structure is a matter for debate: Lionel argued that they were placed as a token deposit, after the structure burnt down, but it is arguably equally or more likely that they had been present in the mortuary structure, as disarticulated body parts, and became cremated as it was burnt down. This raises intriguing questions about funerary practices, discussed further below; what is striking is that just a single individual (and incomplete at that) was being memorialised in the monument. Perhaps that person was portrayed, for future generations, as a founding member of the community.

Apart from the Early Neolithic pottery, other artefactual finds were not abundant at Lochhill. Just twelve lithic artefacts were found – eleven of flint and one of chert (along with an unworked fragment of chert). Of these, only one is likely to relate to the initial use of the monument: a fragment of a heavily burnt scale-flaked knife of Early Neolithic type, which may have been in the mortuary structure as it burnt down. (The precise co-ordinates are not noted on the find label.) Torben Ballin's

report states that the other lithic finds comprise four pieces of debitage, two cores, two scrapers, a used denticulated tool, a fragment possibly from a second knife (not polished as had been claimed in *DES 1969*) and a flake with an indentation. One flint core, found in a pit at the top of the cairn, is of a Late Mesolithic type and may have been incorporated within the cairn material by accident. The chert flake is of local chert, and while most of the flint could conceivably have been obtained from the coast, two of the tools (the denticulated and indented items) are of black flint and may have been imported from a considerable distance to the south-east during the Late Neolithic; one was found on top of the cairn, the other in topsoil.

The fairly small Beaker found at the top of the cairn, decorated with zones of comb-impressed geometric motifs including criss-cross bands and nested chevrons, is of a type (short-necked, Clarke's 'N2' or 'N3' type) likely to date to between 2300 BC and 2000 BC. No bones were found with it and it is unclear whether it was related to any funerary activity.

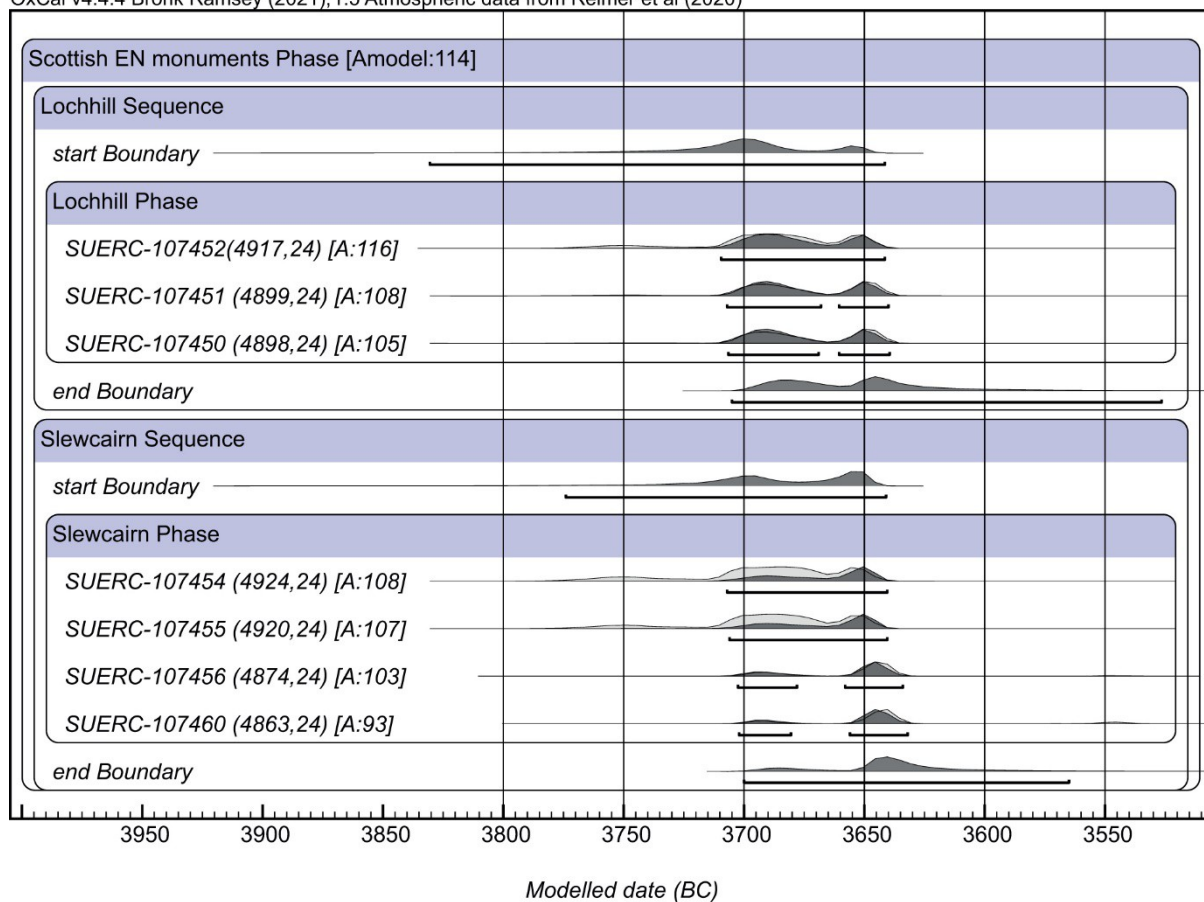
Activity at a much later date, but of unknown nature – a casual loss? A good-luck deposit? – is attested by a fragment of an Anglo-Saxon silver coin (Fig. 6). Identified by Lloyd Laing in 1970, this is a cut AR halfpenny of Eadgar, AD 959–975, made by the moneyer Durand (Laing 1973, 49). Other Anglian/Anglo-Saxon material in south-west Scotland was discussed by Laing (*ibid.*), and of course the famous Galloway Hoard, deposited around AD 900, includes Anglo-Saxon artefacts (Goldberg and Davis 2021).



*Fig. 6 Obverse and reverse of the cut Anglo-Saxon halfpenny of Eadgar.  
Photo: Alison Sheridan*

Forestry and Land Scotland have, for the current project, funded three AMS radiocarbon dates relating to the mortuary chamber – one from calcined human bone (SUERC-107450), one from birch bark (SUERC-107452) and one from the outer rings of an oak plank (SUERC-107451). The results are strikingly consistent (Fig. 7) and place this phase of the monument at 3706–3527 cal BC (95.4%; Bayesian modelling by Rick Schulting). These dates provide a far more accurate and precise estimate of the date of the mortuary structure than the conventional <sup>14</sup>C date that Lionel obtained in 1970 or '71 from a piece of planking (I-6409R, 5070 ± 105 BP, 4216–3641 cal BC).

OxCal v4.4.4 Bronk Ramsey (2021); r:5 Atmospheric data from Reimer et al (2020)



*Fig. 7 Bayesian model, by Rick Schulting, of the newly-obtained radiocarbon dates for Lochhill and Slewcairn commissioned by Forestry and Land Scotland*

### **Slewcairn**

Located just 5.79 km south-west of Lochhill, and situated on the slope of Meikle Hard Hill, the long cairn at Slewcairn (NGR NX 9239 6142, Canmore ID 65491) offers many similarities with its neighbour (Figs 8,9). It, too, is a trapezoidal long cairn (c. 25 x max. 15 m) with a megalithic façade that covered the remains of a burnt-down timber mortuary structure, and its forecourt was deliberately blocked, almost certainly at a time when Beaker pottery (of All-Over-Cord type) was in use. It differs

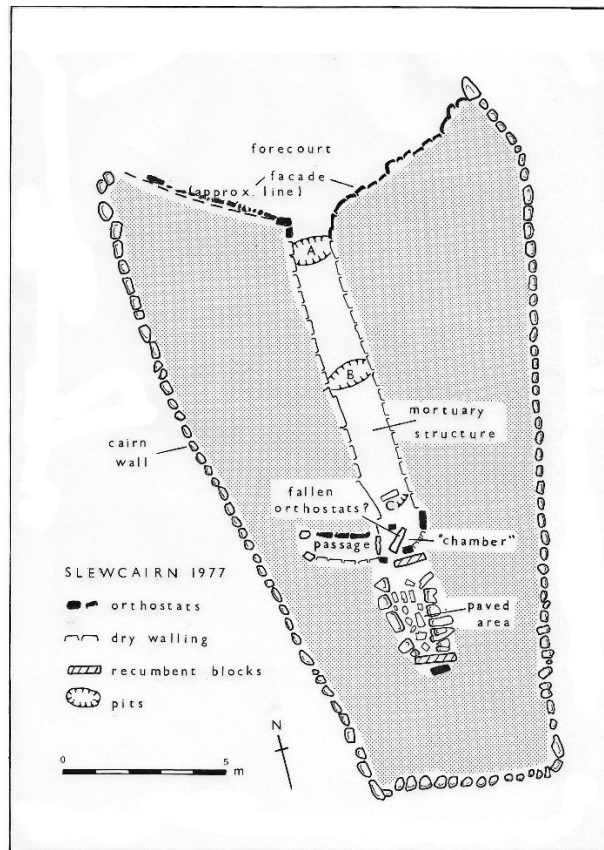


from Lochhill in having had a paved area behind the roughly N–S-orientated mortuary structure; in containing the cremated remains of seven individuals; in producing a larger artefactual assemblage; and in experiencing a more complex history of modification. Moreover, no trace of any timber façade was found, although any such traces may have been destroyed when the cairn was constructed.



*Fig. 8 Slewcairn in 1974, showing the façade. Photo: Lionel Masters*

The history of the monument includes the insertion of a ‘passage’ leading to a ‘chamber’, constructed by hollowing out part of the cairn (Fig. 9); the deposition of All-Over-Cord (AOC) decorated Beaker pottery in the forecourt prior to (or around the time of) its blocking; and the deposition of a coarse pot, possibly associated with a tiny amount of cremated bone, in a pit beside the cairn; this last act may well have occurred during the Early Bronze Age. Later still, the cairn was robbed, and in the relatively recent past, lambing pens were constructed using its stones.



*Fig. 9 Plan of Slewcairn in 1977, by Lionel Masters*

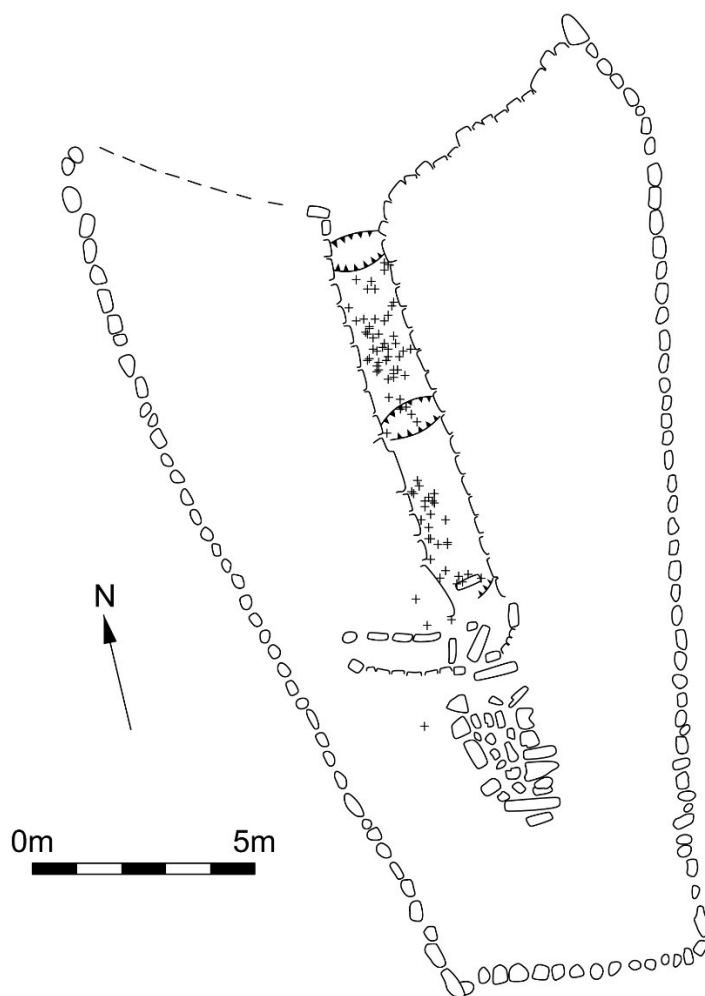
As at Lochhill, the mortuary structure (8 x 1.0–1.1 m) was constructed from a split oak trunk, with a central posthole between the two halves. When it was burnt down, stones were thrown into the rectangular area while the embers were still hot, and then the footprint of the chamber was marked by a low stone wall, constructed when the cairn was built (Fig. 10).



*Fig. 10 View along the walling constructed on the footprint of the timber mortuary structure, 1976. Photo: Lionel Masters*

The paved area behind the mortuary structure was delimited on the N and S by two standing stones. The only finds in this area were sherds of Early Neolithic ‘traditional Carinated Bowl’ pottery – the same kind of pottery found in the forecourt area.

The pattern of finds is distinctive. A much larger and better-preserved assemblage of calcined human bone was found than in Lochhill, virtually all of it in the area of the mortuary chamber (Fig. 11). Angela Boyle’s painstaking work has established that the partial remains of seven individuals are present: at least three male and two female adults, and two sub-adults whose sex cannot be determined. The bones show signs of having been cremated with the flesh still on, and here, as at Lochhill, this raises the fascinating question of what happened to the bodies. The working hypothesis being formed now is that complete bodies may have been laid out on the paving, to allow partial decomposition, then parts were transferred to the mortuary chamber, being cremated when the chamber was burnt down. Alternatively, complete bodies may have been placed in the chamber, then parts were removed; there is much of the ‘choreography of death’ still to be worked out.

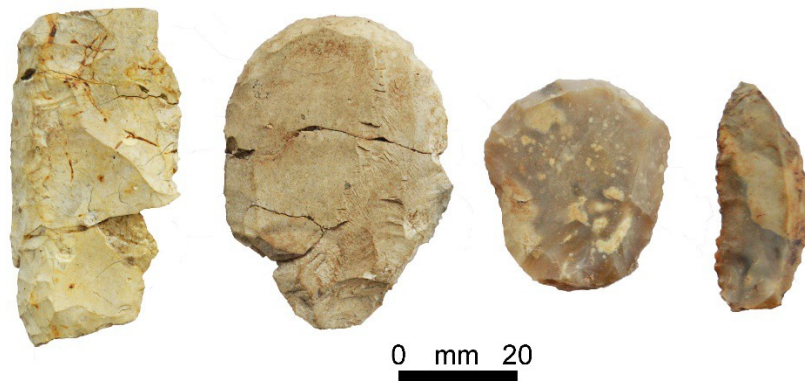


*Fig. 11. Distribution of calcined bone. (Note: the small amount from a probably EBA pit outside the cairn is not shown). Plotted from Lionel Masters' data by Alison and Linda Sheridan*

The pottery comprises over 360 sherds of Early Neolithic pottery of traditional Carinated Bowl type, found not only on the paved area (>60 sherds) but also in an old land surface in the forecourt (nearest to, and in line with the mortuary chamber: >300 sherds) and under the cairn; among the forecourt blocking material; in the 'porch' area; and among the stones of the cairn. Three tiny sherds of AOC Beaker were found in the forecourt, and the sherds of a thick-walled, coarse, decorated pot was found in the pit just outside the W edge of the cairn (not shown in Fig. 10, as found post-1977).

The lithic assemblage includes artefacts of imported Antrim flint (Fig. 12) and of imported pitchstone (Fig. 13), a volcanic glass like obsidian, from the Isle of Arran. Torben Ballin has identified both unburnt and burnt artefacts of both materials, and once again the distribution pattern is interesting (Fig. 14): the pitchstone artefacts are all from the buried soil, mostly in the forecourt, for example. The only

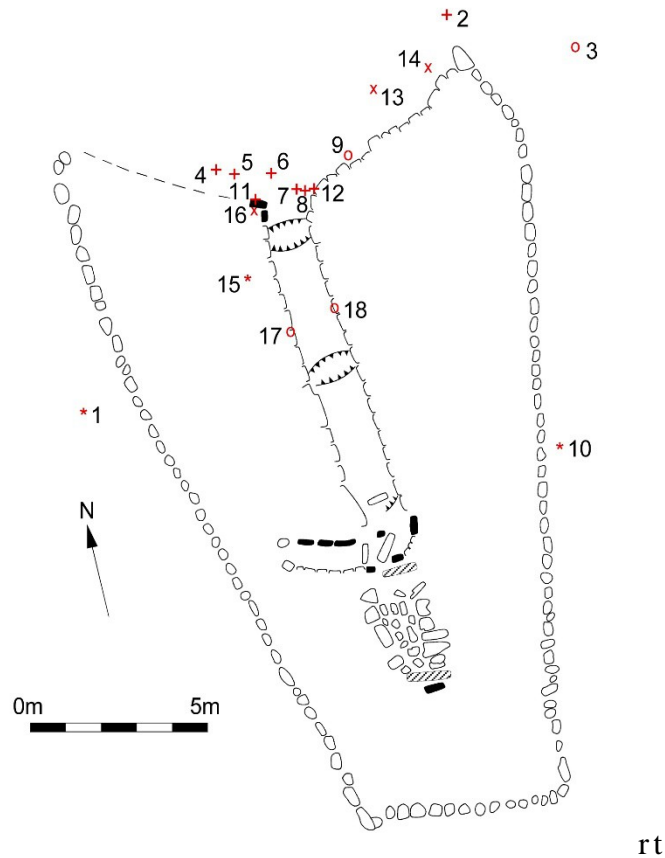
lithic finds in the mortuary chamber area were two flint knives and a leaf-shaped arrowhead, all burnt.



*Fig. 12 Examples of flint artefacts from Slewcairn. The two on the left, if not all four, are of high quality Antrim flint. From left: burnt scale-flaked knife; burnt end scraper; end scraper-cum-knife, unburnt; scale-flaked/serrated knife, unburnt. Photo: Beverley Ballin Smith*



*Fig. 13 Examples of unburnt (top) and burnt (bottom) pitchstone from Slewcairn. Photo: Alison Sheridan*



*Fig. 14 Distribution of pitchstone, by Torben Ballin*

A suite of five radiocarbon dates, funded by Forestry and Land Scotland, have revealed that the 'mortuary chamber' phase of activity – dated by samples of burnt birch bark (SUERC-107455), calcined human bone (SUERC-107456 and -107460) and oak charcoal (SUERC-107454) – dates to *3701–3566 cal BC (95.4% probability)*, making this potentially contemporary with its counterpart at Lochhill. A further date, of *3332–3015 cal BC (SUERC-107453, 4450±24 BP)*, from burnt hazelnut shell found under the façade, could be contemporary with the addition of the 'passage' and 'chamber', but this is impossible to prove.

### ***Conclusions***

Work on the finds continues, with more details of the overall narrative needing to be added, and the project is on target for full publication in late 2023 or early 2024. Different interpretations from those adopted by Lionel are being considered, and plans are afoot to undertake isotope analysis of the calcined bones to see whether the dead had been brought up locally. Glasgow Archaeological Society, like the other funders, is thanked for its generous support of the project. Watch this space!

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