



Society of Antiquaries
of **Scotland**

The Moon and the Bonfire.

An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in North-East Scotland

Richard Bradley

ISBN: 0-903903-33-4 (hardback)

978-1-908332-32-5 (PDF)

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Bradley, R 2005. *The Moon and the Bonfire. An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in North-East Scotland*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.
<https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332325>

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The Moon and the Bonfire

For Nigel and Janet

THE MOON AND THE BONFIRE

*An Investigation of Three Stone Circles
in North-east Scotland*

RICHARD BRADLEY

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Sharon Arrowsmith, Chris Ball, Angela Boyle, Peter Brewer,
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Edinburgh 2005

SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF SCOTLAND

Published in 2005 by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 903903 33 4

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The Society gratefully acknowledges grant-aid towards the publication of this volume from Historic Scotland.



Typeset by Waverley Typesetters, Galashiels
Design and production by Lawrie Law and Alison Rae
Manufactured in Great Britain by The Bath Press, Bath

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this project grew out of discussions with Gordon Barclay and Ian Shepherd and the work was made possible by kind permission of the McRobert Trust Estate, The Master of Forbes and Aberdeenshire Council. All three excavations reported here were funded by Historic Scotland. They also funded the Howe of Cromar fieldwalking survey, the radiocarbon dates and the preparation of this monograph. Site works, including the re-erection of fallen stones at Tomnaverie, were organised on their behalf by Tommy Simpson. Fieldwalking on the Castle Forbes Estate was funded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The Commission also surveyed the three stone circles which form the subject of this study. We have received much help in kind from the Department of Archaeology at Reading University. We must also thank the many farmers who allowed us to walk their fields.

Many individuals contributed to the project. There were the specialists whose work appears in these pages but there are also the numerous students and local people who took part in the excavations and the subsequent programme of fieldwalking, often in dreadful weather. Some of them played a central role in these activities, including Michelle Campbell, Ken Cooper, Hugh Fearn, Regula Gubler, Andy Jones, Gordon Noble, Hannah Sackett, Ronnie Scott, Susan Seright, Sue Taplin, Aaron Watson – and Nigel and Janet Healey who made us welcome in Tarland and provided so much hospitality. It is to them that this book is dedicated.

We were greatly helped by the Inspectors of Ancient Monuments, Nick Bridgland, Sarah Govan

and Alan Rutherford, who were responsible for the sites where we were excavating, Patrick Ashmore who organised the radiocarbon dating of Tomnaverie and Aikey Brae, and the remarkable team from Historic Scotland who undertook the restoration of the stone circle at Tomnaverie. Gordon Barclay, Aubrey Burl, Neil Curtis, Strat Halliday, Gavin MacGregor, Sturt Manning, Roger Mercer, Colin Richards, Ian Shepherd and Adam Welfare were a vital source of advice and encouragement, as were Major-General John Barr of the McRobert Trust Estate in Tarland and Kay McArdle at the Castle Forbes Estate Office. Heather Sebire of the Guernsey Museum kindly provided a copy of Sir Henry Dryden's plan of Cothiemuir Wood. Sharon Arrowsmith produced the drawings of the profiles of the recumbents and flankers at Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood. Mark Johnston undertook the photographic survey of the excavation at Tomnaverie and Jim Henderson AMPA ARPS played a vital role in the project, taking many site photographs which were vastly superior to my own. Some of them are reproduced here, including the cover illustrations.

Lastly, I must thank all those who have made this study possible. In many cases their contributions speak for themselves, as they have written parts of the text, but behind the scenes Tim Phillips did much to organise the archive – and the present writer – to ensure that post-excavation work proceeded smoothly and efficiently. Aaron Watson and Margaret Mathews prepared the illustrations and Jim Henderson kindly allowed us to use his fine photographs of Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood.

Thank you all.

SUMMARY

This volume presents the result of three excavations and two fieldwalking surveys in Aberdeenshire. They were intended to shed new light on the character, chronology and structural development of the distinctive recumbent stone circles which are such a feature of north-east Scotland. Although the monuments share certain elements with other traditions of prehistoric architecture, and, in particular, with the Clava Cairns of the inner Moray Firth, no excavations at these sites had been published since the 1930s and their wider contexts had not been investigated by field survey. The new project took advantage of techniques which had not been used before, including pollen analysis and soil micromorphology, in an attempt to interpret these monuments in their wider chronological and geographical contexts. In that respect this work was the sequel to an earlier investigation of the Clava Cairns.

Three sites were examined by excavation. These were chosen to span the main distribution of recumbent stone circles. They were Tomnaverie on Deeside, Cothiemuir Wood on Donside and Aikey Brae in Buchan. The surroundings of Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood were also examined by large scale fieldwalking. The project took into account the results of older excavations at monuments of this kind but did not attempt to interpret their surface remains as this work was already being conducted by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The principal excavation was at the Guardianship monument of Tomnaverie and was designed to inform the redisplay of the stone circle to the public. At the conclusion of the project, some of the recently fallen monoliths and kerbstones have been replaced in their original positions. Work at Cothiemuir Wood and Aikey Brae was on a smaller scale and was intended to see whether the structural sequence postulated at Tomnaverie was of wider application.

In all three cases it is clear that ring cairns or closely-related monuments were the earliest

structures and that the recumbent stone circles were a secondary development and may even have been associated with the closure of these sites. Tomnaverie produced sherds of Beaker pottery. A series of radiocarbon dates in the later third millennium BC is associated with the first stage in its structural development. There is little chronological evidence from the other sites, but two dates in the first millennium BC are probably associated with a later reconstruction of the monument at Aikey Brae. Tomnaverie was extensively reused during the same period and saw a further phase of activity in the 16th or 17th century AD. The central part of that monument was associated with a deposit of cremated bone.

The three excavated sites shared a number of distinctive architectural features. The people who built them seem to have been especially concerned with the character of the stones that they employed in their construction. These might be graded by height or arranged according to their shape, colour and texture. This applied to the kerbs and to the rings of monoliths, and at Cothiemuir Wood similar concerns may even have extended to the surface of the internal ring cairn. Each of the monuments made considerable use of the contrast between red and grey or white stones. Quartz was important at all three monuments, two of which were also decorated with cup marks. At Tomnaverie, the surface of the primary cairn included a series of radial divisions and a number of arcs of boulders, which may have been used to decorative effect. The central area of that monument showed signs of burning and may have been used as a cremation pyre, but not necessarily in its primary phase.

There was little evidence of domestic activity in the surroundings of Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood. This is shown by the evidence of fieldwalking, which found that the main indications of earlier prehistoric settlement were some distance away from these monuments. The same interpretation is

supported by the evidence of pollen analysis and soil micromorphology. Very few artefacts were found in any of the excavations and even fewer in the areas close to these sites, although a large number of cup-marked rocks were located outside the stone circle at Tomnaverie.

The closing discussion emphasises three main features: the chronology and evolution of recumbent stone circles; the distinctive way in which these monuments were constructed and eventually closed by the erection of a recumbent stone circle; and their relationship to other traditions of prehistoric architecture in Britain and Ireland. This involves a new interpretation of some sites in Northern Britain, including Loanhead of Daviot, Old Keig, Moncrieffe and Oddendale, but it also introduces new ways of thinking about the structural development of individual monuments. Perhaps this followed a sequence that was laid down from the outset and took place over a short period of time. Many sites

seem to have been organised according to celestial alignments.

Recumbent stone circles have features in common with other architectural traditions in Scotland and beyond, but these are combined in an entirely idiosyncratic manner. The argument is illustrated by a detailed comparison with Clava Cairns. At the same time, a number of distinctive features do seem to be shared between local styles of monument which were important during the Early Bronze Age. They include the presence of human remains, evidence for burning, and southern or south-westerly alignments which may have been associated with the moon and sometimes with the setting sun. Such monuments seem to contrast with earlier traditions and may even emphasise an association between the dead and the hours of darkness. This argument has implications for the ways in which such monuments are studied. It also has lessons for the practice of landscape archaeology.

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The restored recumbent and flankers at Tomnaverie viewed by moonlight (*source: Jim Henderson*)

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Back cover

The Aurora Borealis at Tomnaverie stone circle (*source: Jim Henderson*)

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PREFACE

In a sense this study begins and ends with Alexander Keiller, one of the pioneers of field archaeology in Britain (Murray 1999). A local landowner, from about 1920 he engaged in his own study of the stone circles of north-east Scotland. In an address to the British Association delivered in Aberdeen in 1934, he said this:

I have ... given a great part of the last fifteen years to examination, record, and survey of every megalithic monument within the territory under review (1934, 2).

He was intolerant of previous studies and scathing about the ways in which these sites had been interpreted:

Strange as it may seem, there is probably no part of the British Isles concerning which, archaeologically, more misrepresentation has been foisted upon students than the territory under review. [It] ... would indeed appear to have been for centuries the happy hunting ground of irresponsible cranks and monomaniacal theorists, many of whom have not done the country the doubtful honour of a visit ... (1934, 1).

Even Fred Coles, who had planned these monuments before him, did not meet his exacting standards:

Whatever one may think of him as an observer, a recorder, a surveyor, or an artist, ... I have had probably more opportunity than anyone living to mistrust him wholeheartedly in each of these several capacities (1934, 16).

Keiller had planned a major publication on the results of his surveys, but, as with many of his projects, this did not materialise. What did result from his activities was a new awareness of the monuments of north-east Scotland and of the need to preserve them. He concluded his paper to the British Association on a pessimistic note:

I feel that an unhappy duty must devolve upon me as representing, in some sort, on this occasion, local

archaeology, and that is to apologise, in all sincerity and with bitterness of heart, for the condition in which those who have travelled to Aberdeen will find our ancient monuments (1934, 22).

He expanded on this point in two privately printed papers which described the state of the local stone circles and proposed policies for improving it (Keiller 1927 and 1928). Again his comments were trenchant. A small sample will suffice. Of Corrstone he said:

The present condition of the circle is perfectly frightful. It is indeed perhaps one of the worst examples of a megalithic monument, scheduled or otherwise, in the whole of Scotland (1927, 3).

Stonyfield provoked the comment that:

One is appalled at the squalid, unkempt appearance of the circle. Although a scheduled monument, the area is full of hen houses and coops and tin platters, which rubbish lies about everywhere ... The whole place has an air of dirty slovenliness which is worse than anything else of the sort at any site in Aberdeenshire, save the disgusting Netherton of Crimond ... and the even more squalid Hill of Fiddes ... (1928, 11).

One of the monuments which was most imperilled was Tomnaverie. This was being removed by quarrying. Keiller persuaded the owner, Lord Aberdeen, to halt the work, but some of the stones had already been taken down. In 1927, he wrote that:

The immediate danger ... has now been held up, but whether this is due to the hectic riot which I created in the quarry last summer or to the subsequent scheduling neither matters nor can be decided (1927, 16).

Keiller proposed that 'the only solution to the problem before us is for all these monuments ... to be vested in the Office of Works, who will thereafter undertake the responsibility of preservation' (*ibid*, 19). That was exactly what happened at Tomnaverie where the damaged remains of the stone circle were taken into

Guardianship. The same happened at Loanhead of Daviot. Keiller had achieved his aim of publicising these monuments, and in the 1930s two large scale excavations were undertaken. Howard Kilbride-Jones worked at Loanhead of Daviot and Gordon Childe excavated Old Keig.

The new work reported here results from a similar initiative, and it had two aims of which Keiller might have approved: to shed fresh light on the chronology and interpretation of recumbent stone circles, and to improve their presentation to the public. The monument which he had helped to save from destruction at Tomnaverie was central to this exercise and, almost seventy five years after his 'hectic riot', the fallen stones have been re-erected and work has commenced on filling the abandoned quarry. On the day that the monoliths were replaced in their original positions, we were visited by Keiller's cousin, who had known him when she was a child. She felt that he would have been pleased with the outcome.

This monograph offers a new study of the excavated evidence from recumbent stone circles,

based primarily on the evidence of Tomnaverie and two smaller projects at Cothiemuir Wood and Aikey Brae. Although it does consider the results of older excavations, it is intended to complement the programme of survey at these monuments being carried out by the Scottish Royal Commission. When the results of both projects are available, I hope that they will do justice to the remarkable archaeology of this area.

Lastly, a word on the title of this book. 'An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in North-east Scotland' is accurate but utterly prosaic. It says nothing about the extraordinary character of these places or the ways in which they were used, and yet these are among the very features that we set out to investigate. For that reason I have borrowed the title of an Italian novel, *La Luna ei Falò*, published by Cesare Pavese in 1950 and translated into English in 1952. The two books have nothing else in common, but, when you read this study, I think the reason for my choice will be obvious.

RICHARD BRADLEY