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The Moon and the Bonfire.

An Investigation of Three Stone Circles in North-East Scotland

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Chapter 1

THE ORIGINS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

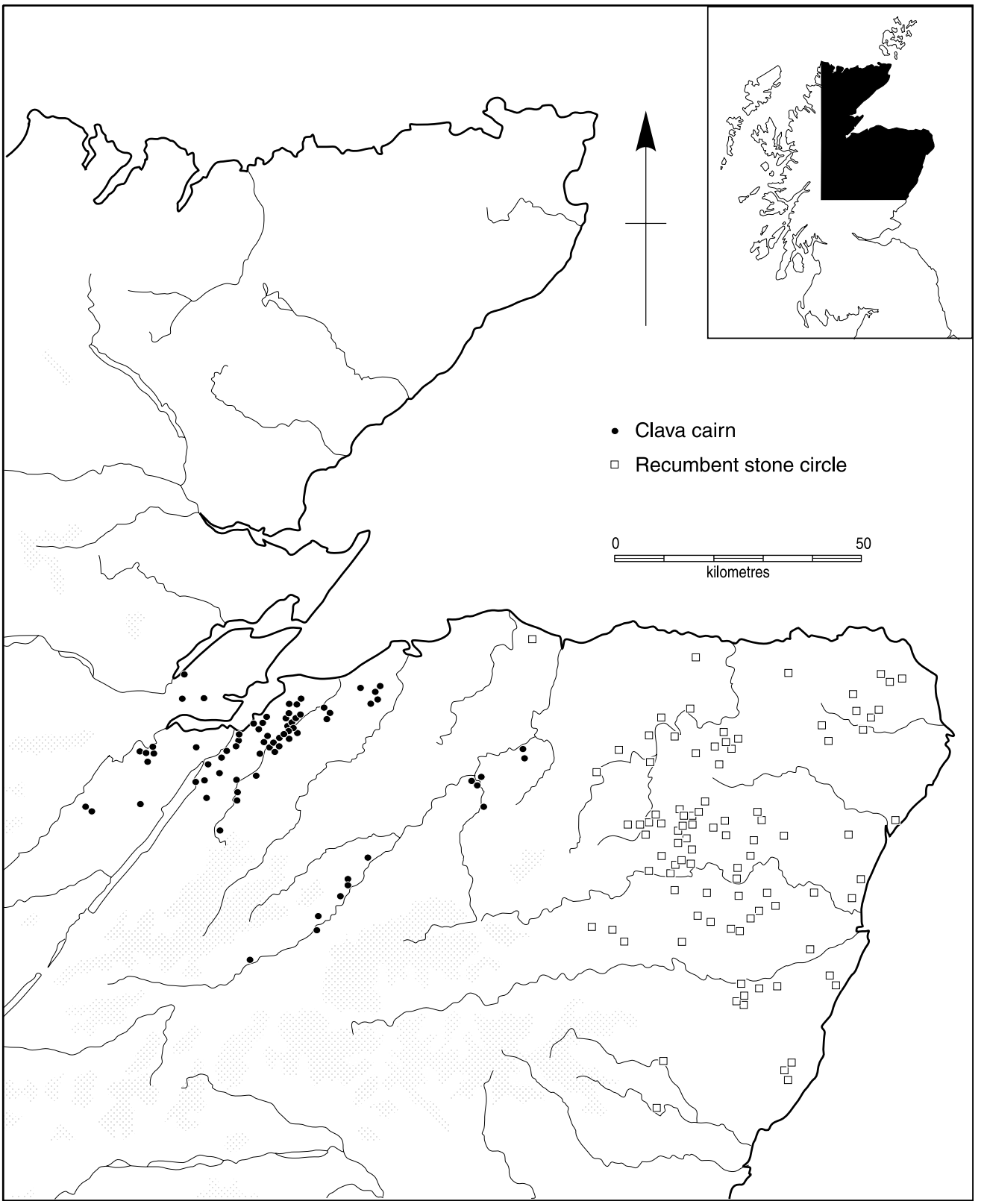
Richard Bradley

It is never easy to think of suitable terms to describe groups of prehistoric monuments, and sometimes the labels that are used hide as much as they reveal. In Scotland, two traditions of ancient architecture illustrate this problem (illus 1). Clava Cairns occur in the inner Moray Firth, and in Aberdeenshire there are recumbent stone circles, and yet it is agreed that these structures were closely related to one another (Burl 2000, chapter 12). Each includes a ring of uprights that normally encloses a cairn, but in one case that internal feature is quite inconspicuous, so the form of the perimeter gives these sites their name. In the other group, a stone circle surrounds a more substantial structure, and that cairn has become the defining characteristic of the monuments. The real differences between them are obscured by this terminology, for the contrast is one of scale.

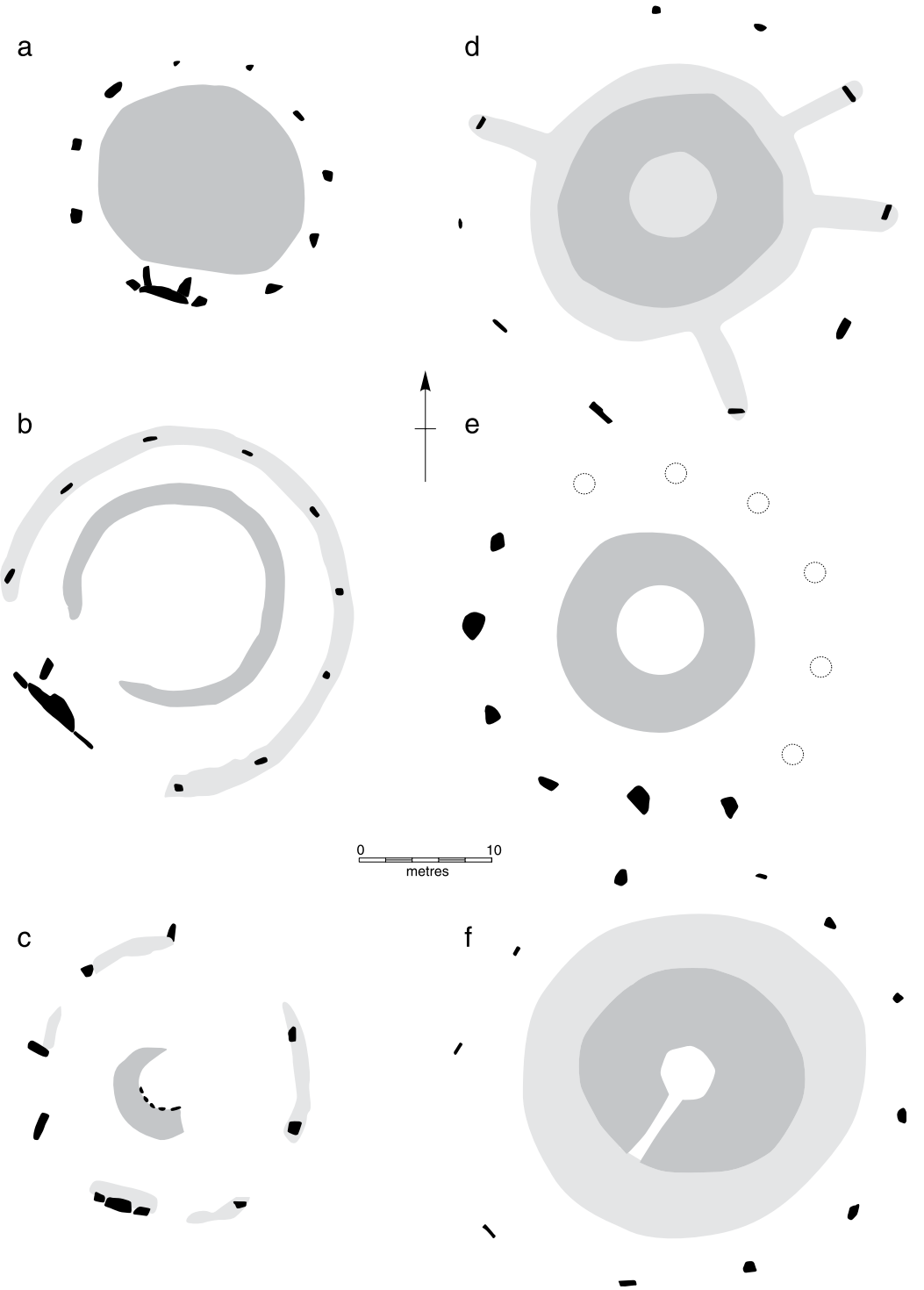
There are more problems with such a simple scheme. Not all the sites mapped as recumbent stone circles are classic examples of the type and those towards the south of the distribution have distinctive characteristics of their own (Barclay and Ruggles 1999). Recumbent stone circles and Clava Cairns occur in neighbouring areas. They have many features in common, but some of them are shared with other structures in Scotland and beyond. The most distinctive feature of the north-eastern group is the presence of a massive horizontal block, which is why these sites are called 'recumbent' stone circles, but somewhat similar features have a scattered distribution outside that region. The Clava Cairns are equally distinctive because a number of monuments combine a passage grave and a ring of monoliths (illus 2), but again there are comparable sites elsewhere. Other characteristics connect the monuments of Aberdeenshire and the inner Moray Firth but are not peculiar to either of those areas. Both groups make use of graded rings of uprights with their focus to the south or south-west, they employ materials of different colours or raw materials, and they incorporate cup-marked stones. Similar elements extend into other traditions (Barnatt 1989, 22; Lynch 1998; MacGregor 2002). They can be found on either side of the Irish Sea and involve not just rings of monoliths, but stone rows and megalithic tombs (Burl 1995; O'Brien 2002).

A popular way of considering such observations has been to think in terms of the movement of people from one area to another, so that any discussion of these monuments is dominated by questions of chronology. Thus the first edition of Burl's study of stone circles derives the monuments in Aberdeenshire from the Clava Cairns, and the latter group of monuments from Irish passage graves (1976a, 160–90). In the second edition, the sequence has been reversed. In the light of radiocarbon dates, he now considers that recumbent stone circles developed first and provided the stimulus for building the Clava Cairns (Burl 2000, chapter 12). On a smaller scale, he suggests that the architectural variations among the Aberdeenshire stone circles can be explained by the spread of this tradition from the area around Alford where the original prototypes had been built. Thus some of those on Donside are likely to be older than the rest.

Another way of considering such evidence is to study the manner in which the monuments of different regions referred to more widely available ideas and brought them together to form local styles of architecture. Rather than considering the diffusion of structural devices, like the grading of monoliths by height, this approach emphasises the ways in which communities might refer to a shared body of knowledge and put it to their own use. In that case it is not just a matter of mapping the distributions and associations of a series of different attributes. It also concerns the ways in which people



1 Distribution of recumbent stone circles and Clava Cairns according to Burl (2000).



2 Outline plans of selected recumbent stone circles and Clava Cairns. The plans on the left show the following recumbent stone circles: a) Easter Aquorthies; b) Sunhoney; and c) Castle Fraser. The shaded area inside the plan of Easter Aquorthies shows the extent of a parch mark surveyed by Sharon Arrowsmith and Chris Ball. The plans on the right show the following Clava Cairns: d) Balnuaran of Clava central ring cairn; e) Newton of Petty; f) Balnuaran of Clava south-west passage grave.

expressed their identities and the beliefs on which they were founded.

It is difficult to chart the spread of particular architectural devices when so little is known about the chronology of stone circles. Nor is it possible to review the ways in which they were used when few have been excavated to a modern standard. It is abundantly clear that what appear to be unitary monuments went through a sequence of structural changes. There is a need for new evidence to inform the discussion.

In a sense this study is the sequel to an earlier programme of research on Clava Cairns (Bradley 2000). Like the sites themselves, the two projects have points of similarity. They were undertaken by some of the same people, they made extensive use of field walking, and each was designed to establish the evolution of individual structures and to obtain samples for dating. But there the similarities end. Work at Balnuaran of Clava was originally conceived in relation to wider debates about the nature of megalithic tombs, and during the early stages of the work less attention was paid to their local contexts. Research on recumbent stone circles had that emphasis from the outset and drew on the experience gained during the previous project. Moreover, this research was explicitly designed to help with the public presentation of two of these sites, Tomnaverie and Aikey Brae. In the case of Tomnaverie it also led to the reconstruction of a damaged monument.

Recumbent stone circles have a number of structural elements whose relationship to one another has never been resolved, nor is there any agreement over their chronology. Both questions became a major focus of this work. There are several components to consider. At most sites there is a ring of between eight and thirteen uprights which may increase in height towards the south or south-west where two tall pillars or

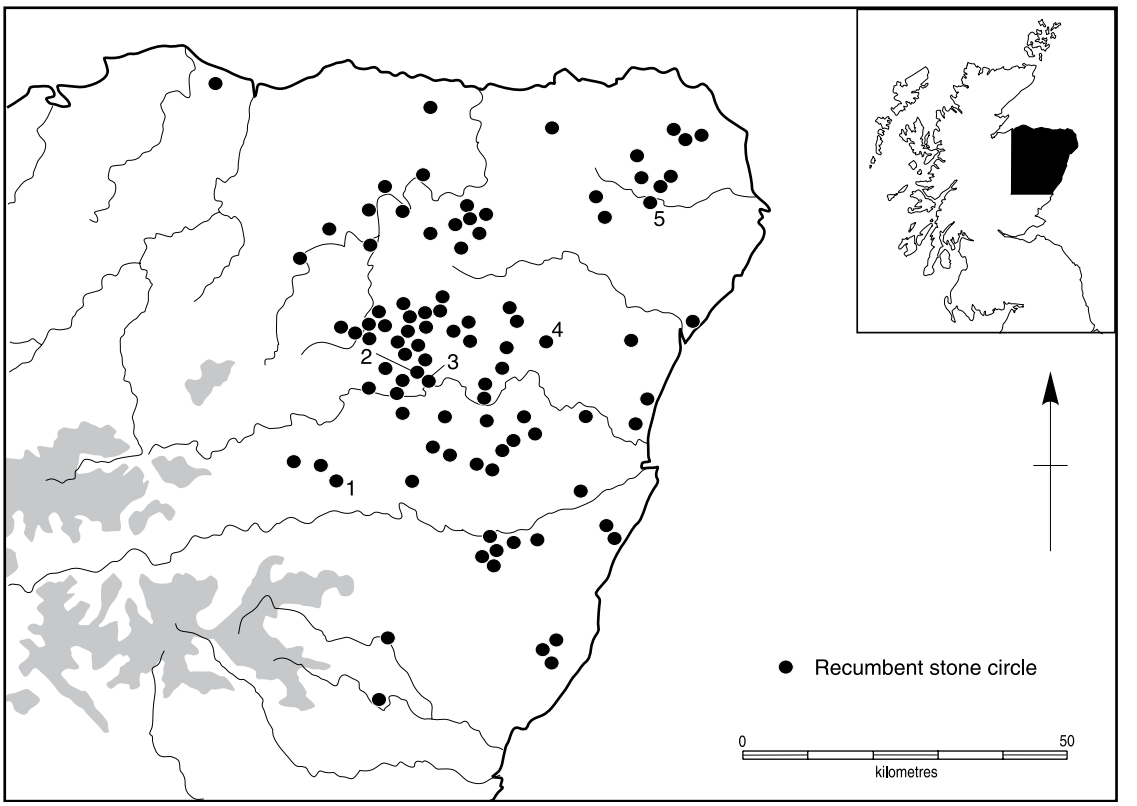
3 The recumbent and flankers at Sunhoney. (*Source: Aaron Watson*)

4 General view of the restored recumbent stone circle at Strichen.

'flankers' mark the limits of the recumbent stone (illus 3 and 4). Sometimes the components of the circle are linked by a bank or wall, and in certain cases a tail of rubble extends outside them. Inside the recumbent there are often traces of a cairn. At some sites this had originally been open at the centre, but such 'ring cairns' or 'platform cairns' (the distinction is based on their profile – see Lynch 1993, 113) were generally filled in during subsequent phases. Less frequently, the interior of the stone circle is occupied by a more substantial round cairn. Either may be associated with human remains and with evidence of burning.

It has been argued that the stone circles were the oldest features on such sites (I Shepherd 1987). This is a logical proposition, for in other parts of Britain rings of free-standing monoliths are commonplace. Moreover there are a number of cases in which it can be demonstrated that cairns were built inside them during a subsequent phase. Among the best known examples in Scotland are Balbirnie and Temple Wood (J N G Ritchie 1974; Scott 1989). There is little direct evidence from the north-east, although this was the sequence suggested by the excavator of Loanhead of Daviot (Kilbride-Jones 1935). Something similar may have happened at Berrybrae where the remains of a stone circle were incorporated in a later walled enclosure (Burl 1995, 95–7 and 2000, 220).

The dating of recumbent stone circles has been influenced by the evidence from other regions which suggests that rings of upright stones existed by the early third millennium BC. This depends on radiocarbon dates from Callanish (Ashmore 1999) and the Stones of Stenness (Ashmore 2000, 125 and 2001, 125). In the east of Scotland there were further clues as to the origin of these monuments. Their distribution seemed to complement that of henges, which are assigned to the Late Neolithic period (Barclay 2003, fig 8.2). There was evidence of Neolithic ring cairns too, one of which may have been associated with standing stones (A Shepherd 1996), and the timber circle at Balfarg seems to show the characteristic grading towards the west. It provided radiocarbon dates between 2900 and 2450 BC (Mercer 1981). Such clues have been helpful, for the direct dating



5 Distribution of recumbent stone circles according to Burl (2000) showing the sites considered in the text. 1 Tomnaverie; 2 Old Keig; 3 Cothiemuir Wood; 4 Loanhead of Daviot; 5 Aikey Brae.

evidence from recumbent stone circles is slight. Few of the artefacts have satisfactory contexts and all the sites examined on a large scale have been badly disturbed. In Chapter 5 I shall argue that Beaker pottery was directly associated with the stone circle at Loanhead of Daviot, but most of the ceramics from these monuments may refer to secondary activity. The only radiocarbon dates come from Strichen and 'a very late context' at Berrybrae and fall in the Early Bronze Age (Burl, pers comm and 2000, 376–7). Neither excavation is published and at the moment it is unclear whether all the dates are relevant to the development of recumbent stone circles. On the other hand, those which fall between about 1900 and 1550 BC do seem to provide a *terminus ante quem* for the example at Berrybrae.

This new investigation was designed to resolve some of those issues, and for that reason the individual sites were selected with special care. Two principles were important here. Since Burl had suggested that recumbent stone circles originated on Donside and spread only gradually to other areas, it was necessary to consider sites across their entire distribution (illus 5). At the same time, so many recumbent stone circles had already been excavated that it was essential to keep disturbance to a minimum. The policy that was adopted was to strip and plan one complete but damaged monument and to sample the surviving areas of stratigraphy to establish the structural sequence. In the light of that project two better preserved sites were then tested on a smaller scale to find out whether such a sequence might be of more general application.

Despite its peripheral location, the Deeside stone circle at Tomnaverie was selected as the main focus for this research. The site had been damaged by quarrying in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when some of the monoliths had been taken down (Coles 1905, 208–14). It seemed justifiable to investigate this monument on a large scale in preference to better preserved examples. As we have seen, the site had been placed in

Guardianship to prevent its destruction. Thought needed to be given to its display to the public. Burl describes it in these terms: 'Tomnaverie, … a once fine recumbent stone circle, is a wreck … Its stones are now a jumble' (1995, 10). One of the objectives of work in 1999 and 2000 was to disentangle this wreckage. It was important to find out how much of the monument actually survived. In the event the damage was less severe than Burl and other writers had supposed and it was possible to establish the original layout of the cairn and the stone circle.

The sites examined in 2001 were Cothiemuir Wood on Donside and Aikey Brae in Buchan. In each case they had undergone considerable damage in the past. Some of the monoliths had fallen or been removed and the central areas of each site had been disturbed. On the other hand, parts of their perimeters still preserved the stratigraphic relationship between their main components: the stone circle and an internal cairn at Cothiemuir Wood, and the ring of monoliths and an enclosure wall at Aikey Brae.

Lastly, one of the aims of this work was to interpret these individual monuments in their wider setting. To this end pollen analysis and soil micromorphology were undertaken on samples from Tomnaverie and Cothiemuir Wood and a large area of cultivated land surrounding each of those monuments was investigated by field walking. The results of these different studies are presented in the following pages.