

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

THE EXCVATION OF A STRUCTURED CAIRN

AT

CARNEDDAU, NEAR CARNO, POWYS

1989

ALEX GIBSON

## EXCAVATIONS AT CARNEDDAU CAIRN I - JUNE-SEPT 1989

The cairn at Carneddau (SN 999992) was discovered as a result of fieldwork undertaken by the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust in response to a Woodland Grant Scheme application. The site was recognised as a low, grass-covered mound measuring some 17m in diameter and situated within an area of dense reed cover. The maximum height of the mound stood no more than 0.5m above the surrounding ground surface and whilst occasional isolated patches of reed existed on the mound itself, these were generally rare. Surface indications such as irregularities and depressions in the mound structure suggested that the site had been extensively robbed and damaged and reports of a large pheasant shoot in the area suggested that the site may have been disturbed and used as a shooting butt.

Excavation of the site, funded by Cadw and with the full co-operation of the landowner Mr Watkins of Craig Fryn, took place over 10 weeks from June to September 1989 and proved that the cairn was almost completely preserved and was protected beneath a capping of flat stones which sealed all parts of the site and which showed little evidence of recent robbing.

Below this were two distinct contexts; a yellow and stoney soil forming a circle 7m in diameter in the central area and a circle of large, loose stones, 5m wide, forming a ring around this. A central cairn, overlying a rectangular cist, was located below the stoney soil in the central area (fig 1). This cist measured 1.24m long by 0.44m wide and 0.4m deep below the subsoil and it contained an unaccompanied cremation. This is unlikely to have been the primary burial, however, since small fragments of cremated bone and a badly crushed and fragmentary collared urn dating to the early Bronze Age were found around the cist and in the material of the covering cairn. It appears that this burial had been disturbed and thrown out, possibly to make room for the second, in situ, cremation.

It may be that this cist, and the central area, had been used on numerous occasions for a number of sepulchro-ritual activities since preliminary analysis of the soils undertaken by Dr John Crowther of St David's College, Lampeter, indicate high remnant phosphate levels for this area. It is possible that the area may have been set aside for the exposure of corpses prior to cremation burial in a manner paralleled on Neolithic sites in Britain.

This central cist and cairn provided a focal point for 10 pits containing charcoal and (in 7 cases) cremations or deposits of calcined bone. These pits were laid out in a rough arc to the north and east of the central area. Two of these pits also contained collared urns, one of them complete, and it is envisaged that these pits mark a period of ritual activity set around and focussing on the central features. The cremations may, indeed, represent the remains of bodies which had been allowed to exanimate in the central area.

This ritual activity was probably contemporary with an area of burning in the NW quadrant. Here a hearth was located which showed signs of intense burning and which contained a burnt, broken and badly abraded stone archer's wristguard of early Bronze Age type (fig 3). This hearth, like the central cist, may have been used on more than one occasion, and was certainly in use at the time that the cairn ring was constructed since many

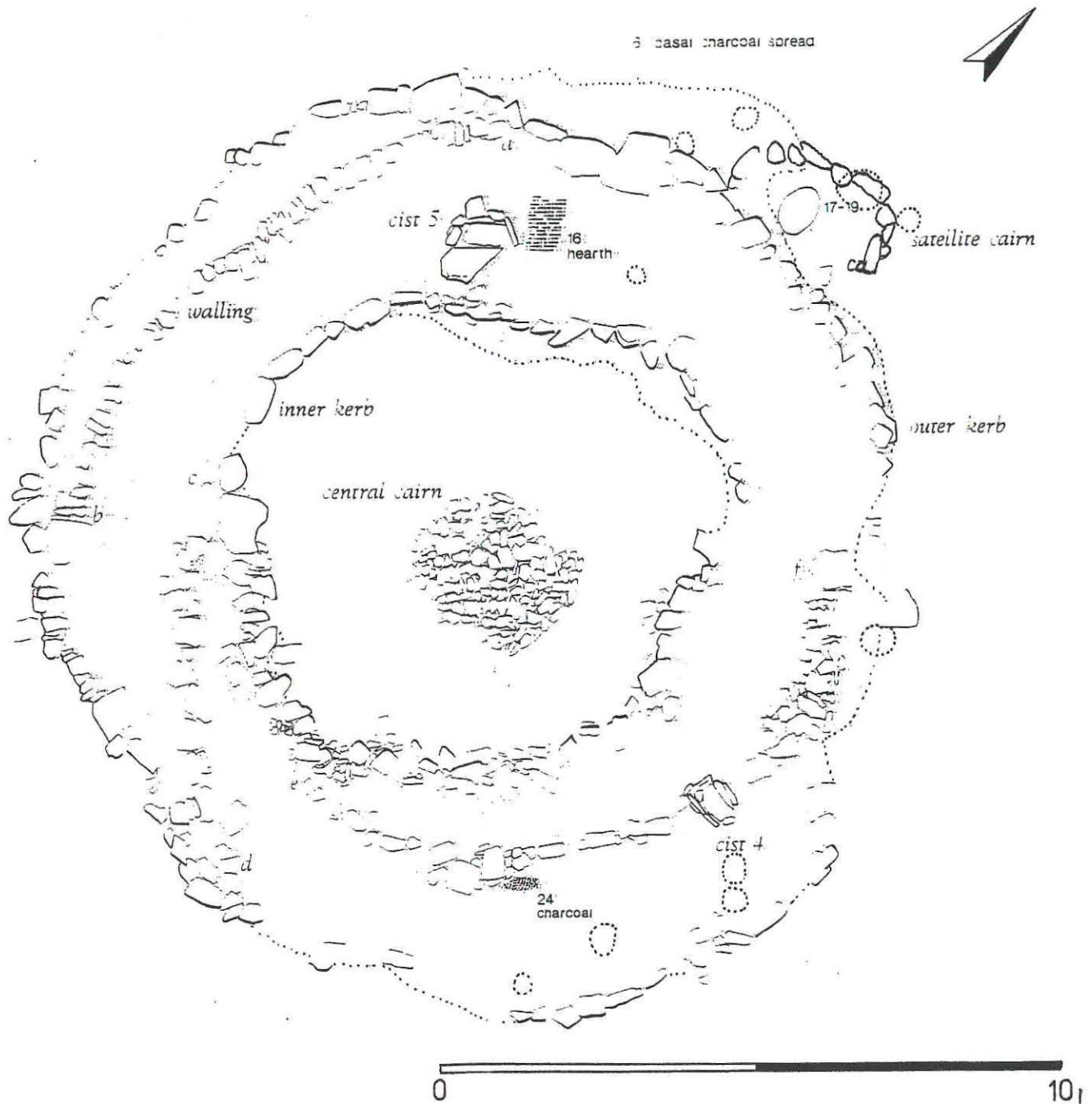


Fig. 1: Early features at Carneddau Cairn. Pits pre-dating the basal charcoal spread have dotted outlines.

of the cairn stones in the northwest and north of the site were reddened by fire. A layer of charcoal resulting from this fire was laid in a circle around the central area immediately prior to the cairn construction, the basal stones of which were laid directly on the charcoal. This charcoal also sealed the cremation pits mentioned above.



Four cists were located in the stone ring (fig 2). One in the east was empty though it may originally have contained an inhumation which has not survived in the acid soil. A second cist in the west contained a cremation with a flint knife and utilised flake and a third cist in the south east, and high in the cairn material contained the lower portion of a food vessel but only very few fragments of cremated bone. It is nevertheless interesting, that this is the first time in Britain that a food vessel has been found stratigraphically later in a cairn or barrow than a collared urn. The fourth cist was irregular and contained a cremation within an inverted collared urn. This urn, though crushed, had originally been complete and has an estimated rim diameter of c.45cm making it one of the largest urns so far found in Wales.

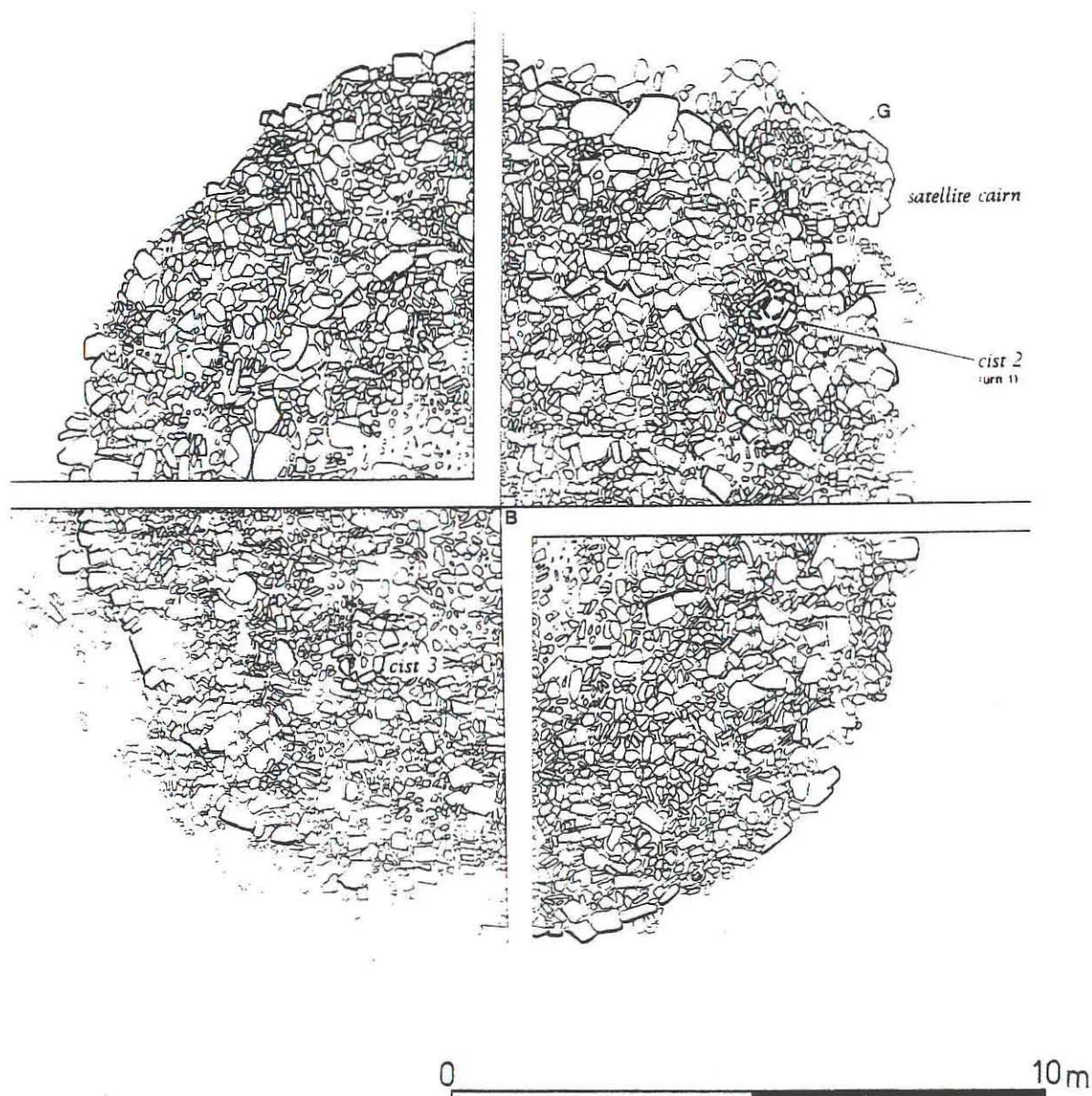


Fig. 2: Carneddau Cairn: later features

Sometime subsequent to this, a satellite cairn was appended to the northern arc of the main site and contained a cremation pit with evidence of intense in situ burning which had affected the subsoil to a considerable extent. This contained over a kilo of cremated bone.

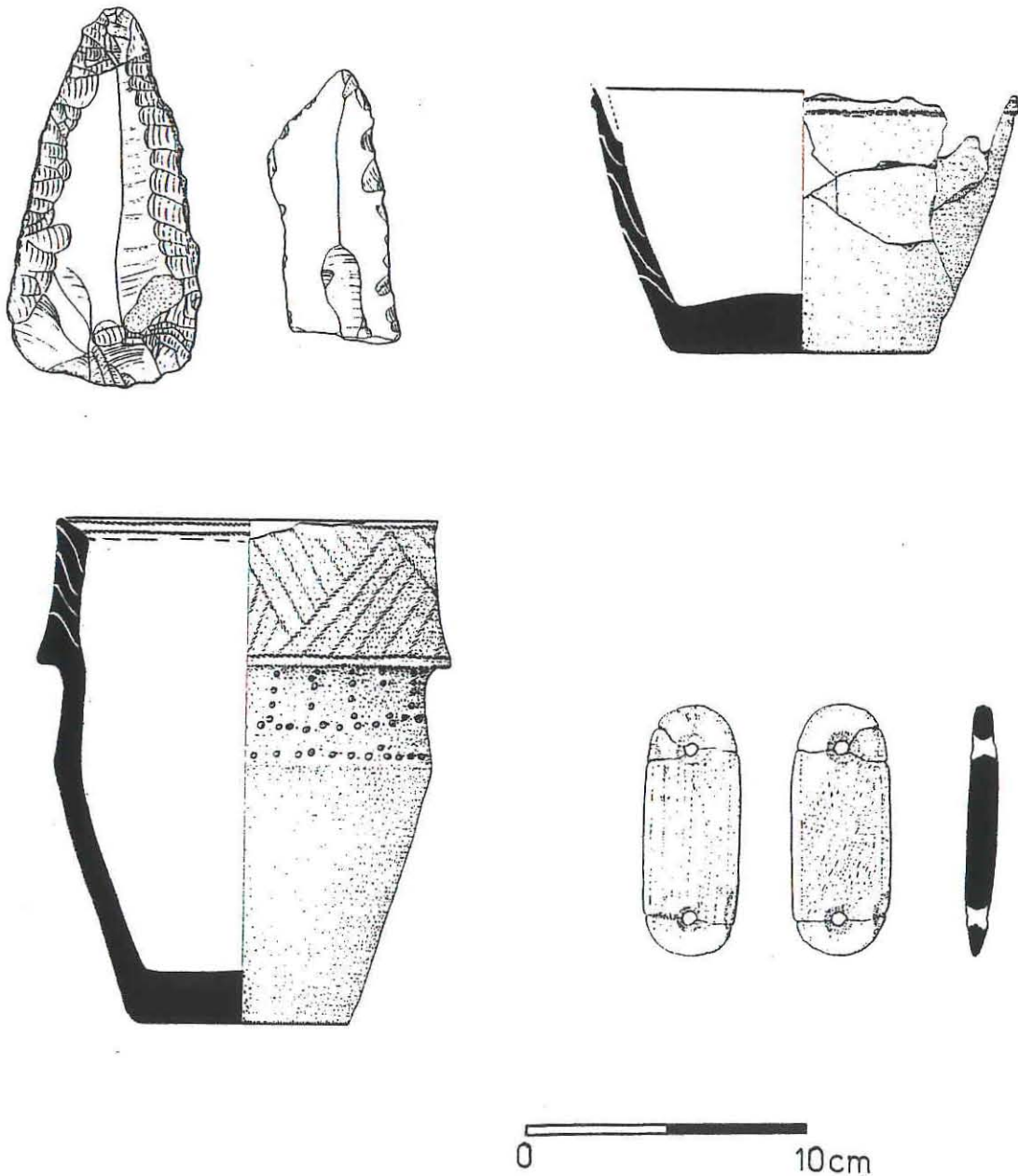


Fig. 3: Selected finds from Carneddau Cairn. Flints from cist 1, food vessel from cist 4, collared urn from pre-cairn pit and archer's wristguard from the hearth.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the pyro-ritual activity took place in the arc of the circle extending from the northwest to northeast - the maximum setting and rising points of the midsummer sun. There is clearly an emphasis on this northern arc echoing the cardinal point orientation of many stone circles and it may be worth mentioning the proximity of Y Capel stone circle, some 1km to the east.

Selected radiocarbon dates and detailed palaeoenvironmental reports are still awaited. Preliminary pollen analysis has shown that pollen did, in fact, survive in the soils of the cairn and it is hoped to be able to tie the pollen spectra in with pollen cores recovered from nearby bogs. Hazelnut shells and oak charcoal have so-far been recognised in the material from the pits and from the charcoal layer below the cairn ring. It is hoped that a full picture of the environment at the time of the cairn building will be reconstructable.

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