CPAT Report No 1082

Blaen Hepste Burial Cairn

TRIAL EXCAVATION AND SURVEY

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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Report for Cadw

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The moorlands surrounding the upper reaches of the Afon Hepste, near Ystradfellte, in southern Breconshire, contain extensive evidence for early landuse, settlement and funerary and ritual practices. The earthworks of one site in particular, near Blaen Hepste, have been the subject of some debate in recent years. Although recorded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) as a Bronze Age barrow or hengiform monuments (RCAHMW 1997, 93-94; RC 107), it had been suggested that the remains could be associated with a post medieval horse gin. As part of the follow-up work associated with the Cadw-funded pan-Wales survey of prehistoric funerary and ritual monuments, a small-scale excavation was undertaken in the summer of 2010 in an attempt to ascertain the precise nature and date of the site.

Fig. 1 Blaen Hepste burial cairn under excavation in 2010. Photo CPAT 3149-0062

1.2 The earthworks lie on a slight natural eminence at SN 96331296 at an altitude of around 324m OD. They consist of an outer bank of earth and stone up to 0.3m high and 2.0m wide, with an external diameter of 12.9m. The internal ditch is about 2m wide and 0.6m below the top of the bank, surrounding a low central platform 5.5m in diameter with a slight hollow, to the south-west of which there is an earth-fast boulder. The eastern side of the site has been subject to some disturbance and the presence of dense reeds makes it hard to distinguish the earthworks in this area. There is, however, the suggestion of an eastern entrance where a break in the bank and ditch is flanked on one side by an edge-set stone. There are also breaks in the bank to the

north and south, although neither has an accompanying causeway across the ditch and are unlikely to be original.

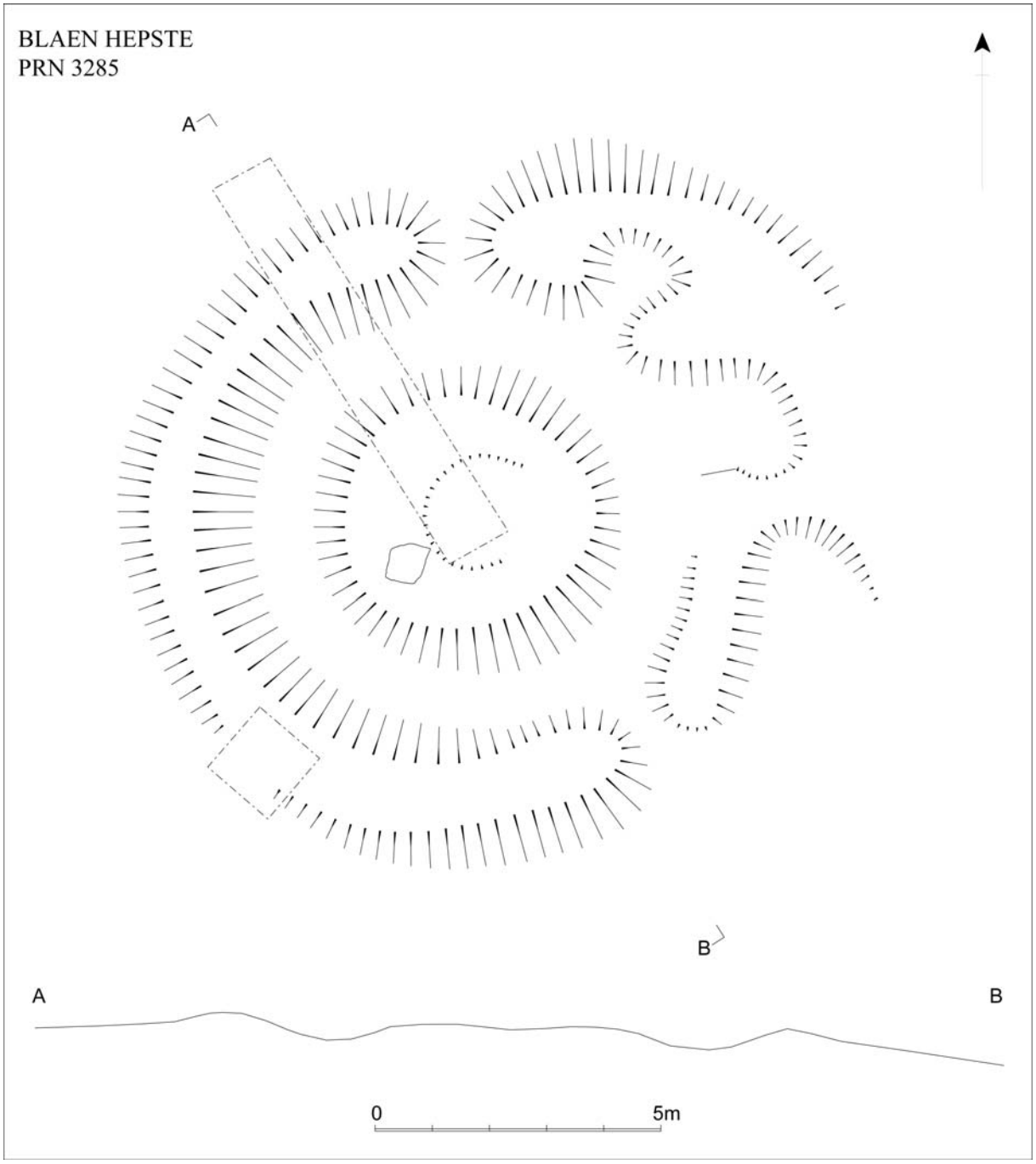

Fig. 2 Plan of the burial cairn at Blaen Hepste showing the location of the 2010 excavations

1.3 The site lies within the East Fforest Fawr and Mynydd-y-glôg Historic Landscape (Cadw 2001; Britnell 2008) and more specifically within the Mynydd y Garn character area which contains important remains of early settlement and land-use in the upper valley of the Afon Hepste and its tributaries. Visible remains include prehistoric drystone round huts, some of which are associated with irregular, linear drystone walls and banks, some forming curvilinear enclosures (Fig. 3). Two burial cairns are also recorded within the area, PRNs 5382 and 33611. The area was the subject of field survey as part of the project in 2010 (Jones 2011).

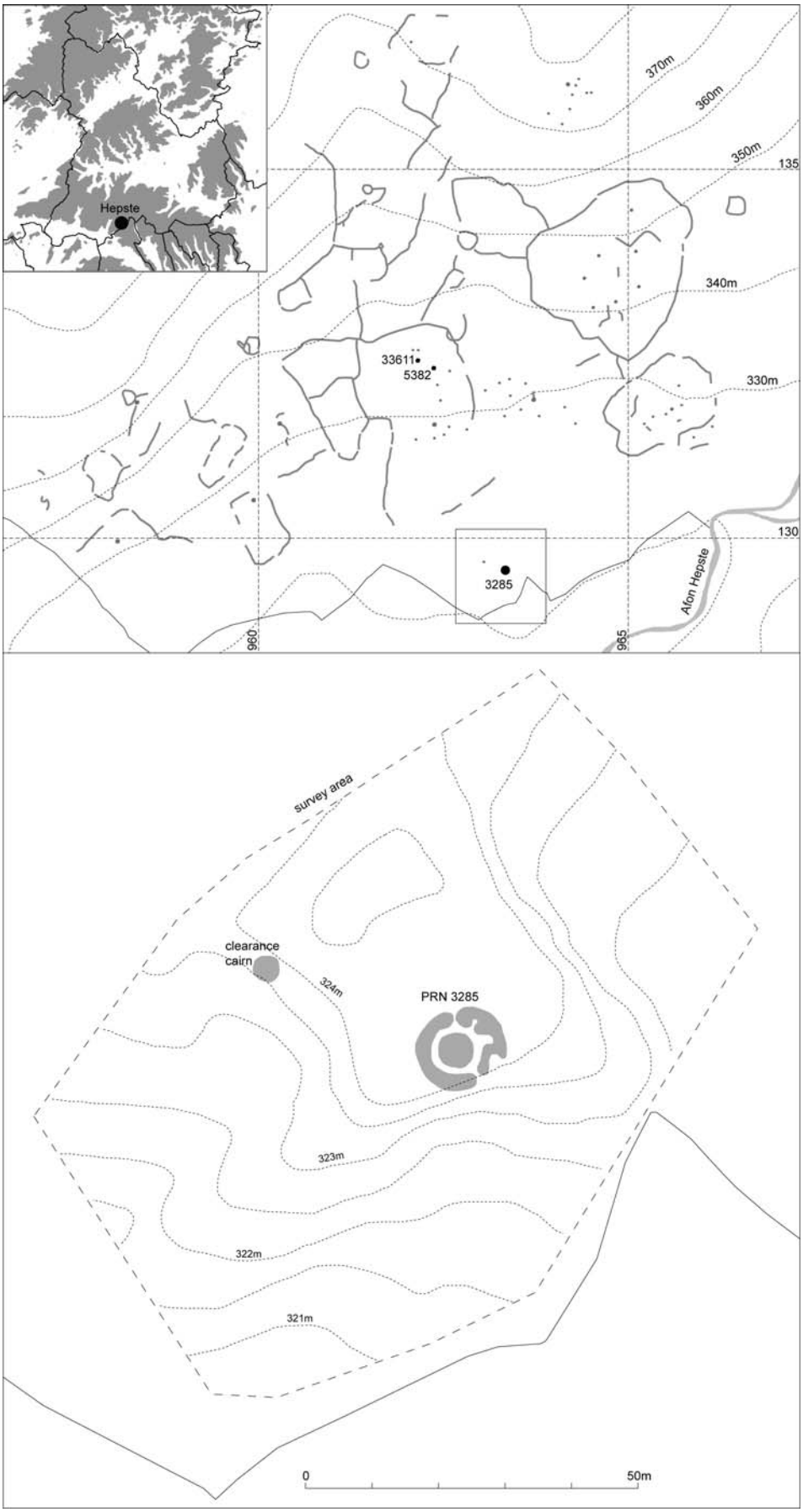

Fig. 3 Location of the burial cairn showing the surrounding field system

2 EXCAVATION

2.1 The excavations were conducted during August 2010 and comprised a hand-excavated trench around 7.75m in length and 1.2m wide, extending northwards from the centre of the site across the ditch and bank, together with a small area measuring 1.4m by 1.4m on the western side of the earthworks (Fig. 2). This smaller trench was positioned to investigate a slight hollow in the bank, although the results produced no evidence for any features other than a slight scoop which could have resulted from animal erosion. Numbers in brackets in the following text refer to individual contexts recorded in the site archive.

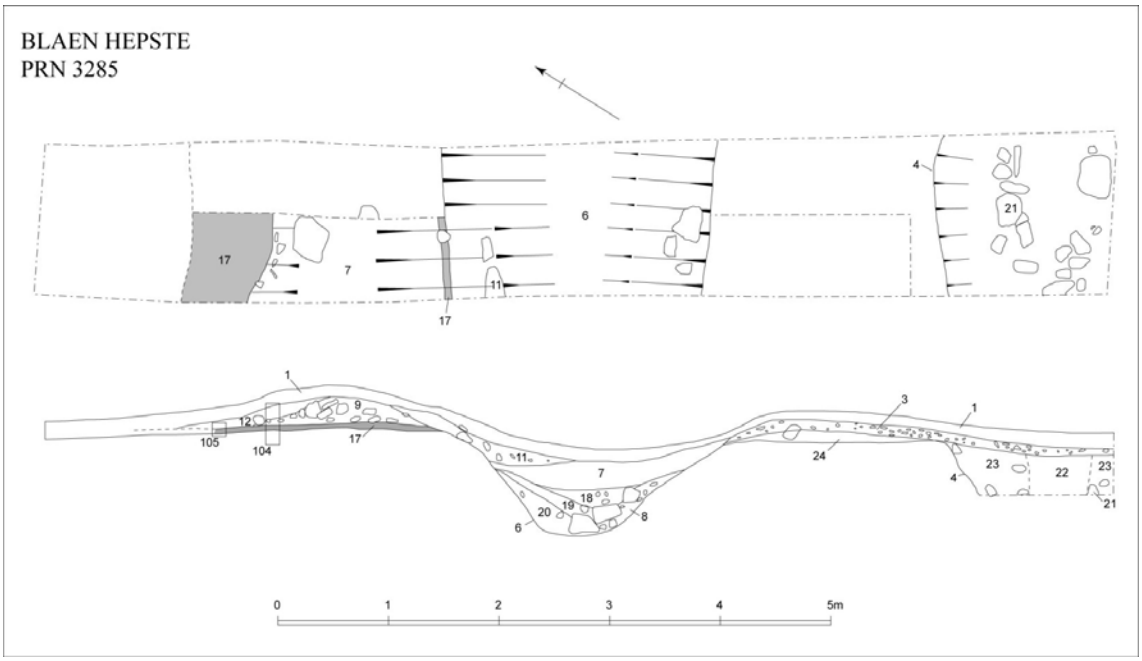

Fig. 4 Plan and section of the 2010 excavations

2.2 The turf and topsoil (1), which consisted of a peaty loam around 0.1m thick, was removed to reveal the three main components of the monument: the ditch, the external bank and the internal mound.

The ditch

2.3 The ditch (6) was around 2m in width and 0.7m deep, below the surface of the subsoil (Fig. 5). It was noticeable that the outer edge of the ditch had a slightly steeper profile than the inner edge and the base was slightly rounded, with a width of around 0.5m. The basal fill consisted of an orange-brown sandy-silt (20) which contained frequent angular stones representing weathering from the external bank, together with a brown sandy silt (8) which also contained frequent stones, the material having weathered from the inner edge of the ditch. These deposits were sealed beneath a layer of grey-brown silt (19) up to 8mm thick which was derived from the exterior, and a layer of brown, stony, sandy silt (18) 12mm thick, derived from the interior. It may be presumed that the surface of these deposits represent a period of stabilisation with the upper ditch fill, a relatively stone-free, grey-brown sandy silt (7), having accumulated gradually to a thickness of around 0.2m. Final infilling consisted of further stoney material (11) being redeposited from the bank against the outer edge of the ditch. No artefacts were recovered from the ditch, although a bulk soil sample was taken from context 19.

Fig. 5 The excavated ditch section viewed from the west. Photo CPAT 3149-0056

The bank

2.4 The external bank was composed of stony material (9) which was presumably upcast from the ditch to form a bank around 1.25m wide and up to 0.2m high. The nature of the fills within the ditch clearly indicate that the bank was originally somewhat higher and there is some indication that both sides of it may have been revetted with larger stones, although these only survived on the outer edge of the crest where a line of stones (10) appeared to have been placed deliberately. The existence of a similar revetment against the inner edge can only be surmised, and the presence of large stones within the lower ditch fill (20) provides the only evidence. The erosion of the bank is represented by redeposited material on the outer (12) and inner (11) faces.

Fig. 6 The excavated section through the external bank, showing the buried peat deposit (17) and, in the foreground, one of the larger stones (10). Photo CPAT 3149-0071

2.5 The bank sealed a peat deposit (17), which was up to 5mm thick, and extended beyond the bank to the north, where it became indistinguishable from the peaty topsoil, and had clearly been truncated by the ditch. A bulk sample of the peat was retained for palaeoenvironmental analysis, together with two soil tins which provided samples of the peat and bank material (see Fig. 4, 104 and 105 and Fig. 6).

The central mound

2.6 The ditch surrounded a central area between 4m and 4.4m across which had been raised slightly by the deposition of a stony, sandy loam (3) around 8mm thick. This sealed an underlying deposit of orange-brown sandy-silt (24) which was of a similar thickness, although it was not clear whether this had been deliberately deposited or could have been a sealed ground surface.

2.7 The slight depression which was visible on the ground surface, covering an area around 1.8m across, was mirrored in the surface of the stony deposit, the removal of which revealed a large pit (4), at least 1.2m across, which was offset from the centre of the mound on the south-eastern side. There was no clear relationship between this and deposit 24. Only the northern edge of the pit lay within the excavated area, although during the excavation there was the impression that the southern side and western end were only just beyond the confines of the trench.

Fig. 7 The central pit viewed from the west, showing the distribution of larger stones (21). Photo CPAT 3149-0045

2.8 In the upper levels of the pit there appeared to be some distinction between a central fill (22) and an outer fill (23); both were sandy silts, although the outer fill was more orange than brown. With depth this distinction between the fills became less clear, although the fact that there was some differentiation was reinforced by the distribution of larger stones (21), as depicted in Figs 4 and 6. The stones, which were up to 0.3m across, had not been deliberately set but rather gave the impression of having come to rest against an object which was no longer apparent. Assuming that the central pit originally contained a burial the distribution of stones would indicate the position of the body, of which no physical trace remained, within an area around 0.45m wide and aligned roughly north-east to south-west. The decomposition of a

body would also account for the subsidence which was evident within the pit, forming the depression visible on the surface.

2.9 The pit was not excavated to its full depth with the larger stones remaining *in situ*, as depicted in Fig. 7. No cultural material was forthcoming, although small fragments of charcoal were recovered from the fill which were later identified as hazel by Astrid Caseldine, University of Lampeter, prior to the submission of one sample to SUERC for AMS dating. The resulting date has been calibrated date at 95.4% probability level to 4550 – 4370 cal. BC, suggesting that the charcoal had been redeposited within the pit.

3 RADIOCARBON DATING

3.1 A sample of Corylus charcoal from the central pit was submitted for AMS dating to SUERC in East Kilbride. The calibrated dates are calculated by OxCal v3.10 (Bronk Ramsey 2005) using the IntCal09 atmospheric calibration curve with Atmospheric data from Reimer *et al*. (2004).

SUERC-32378
Context 22, corylus charcoal
Find No. 100
Radiocarbon age 5650 ± 30
Calibrated date at 68.2% probability: 4520 – 4450 cal. BC
Calibrated date at 95.4% probability: 4550 – 4370 cal. BC

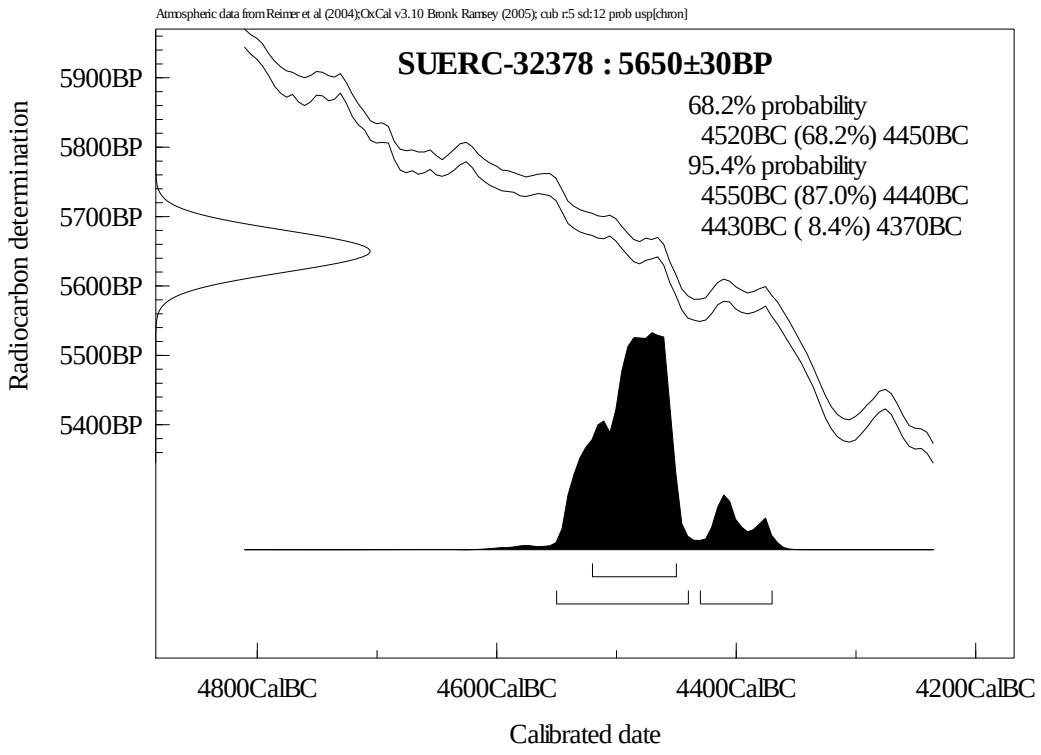

Fig. 8 Calibration of the radiocarbon date

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The excavations have demonstrated that the earthworks appear to be the remains of an unusual form of burial monument which may also have had a ritual element. The presence of the external bank is certainly reminiscent of hengiform monuments, an association which is strengthened by the possible entrance causeway on the eastern side of the monument. It has been assumed that the central pit held a burial, although the soil conditions were such that no trace of human remains survived. The distribution of stones within the pit, together with a degree of subsidence, strongly suggests the former presence a body. There was no evidence to indicate whether the burial was a primary feature of the monument, or whether the original earthwork comprised the ditch and external bank, perhaps as a ritual monument, within which a body was later interred.

4.2 The cairn occupies a prominent location in a landscape which is rich in the remains of prehistoric and perhaps farming. Although other burial cairns exist within this landscape the unusual form of this monument sets it apart from the simple stone-built cairns which are predominant.

4.3 The site is not unique, however, and two similar sites are recorded at Carnau Gwynion, near Ystradfellte, around 4.2km to the west-north-west (PRNs 3264 and 5733). Both earthworks comprise a ditch with an external bank and the case could be argued for an association between these sites and the cairn at Blaen Hepste, all three perhaps indicating a regional variation of a Bronze Age funerary and ritual monument.

4.4 The radiocarbon date produced from hazel charcoal within the central pit may indicate activity within the area during the Mesolithic, around 4550 – 4370 cal. BC, although it is possible that the charcoal could have occurred naturally.

5 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

5.1 The writer would like to thank the following: Wendy Owen, for her assistance with the excavations; Matthew Williams and Judith Harvey, Brecon Beacons National Park; Mr Anderson of the Graziers Association and Mr Rees, the local grazier; Astrid Caseldine, University of Lampeter; and Cadw for funding the excavation.

6 REFERENCES

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Cadw, 2001. *Register of Landscapes, Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in Wales. Part 2.2: Landscapes of Special Historic Interest.*

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APPENDIX 1

SITE ARCHIVE

24 context record forms
Context register
Finds register
1 A2 site drawing
1 A4 site drawing
77 digital photographs, CPAT Film. No. 3149
Photographic catalogue
EDM survey – Hepste2.dxf, Hepste2.dwg

Finds:
100 Charcoal sample from context 22/23
101 10 litre soil sample from context 19
102 10 litre soil sample of peat deposit 17
103 30cm soil tin – profile of peat deposit
104 10cm soil tin – profile of peat deposit