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Blawearie: a cairnfield excavation in a rock art landscape

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Introduction

In a research and writing career that embraces diverse subject material, one might justifiably claim that Stan Beckensall is the epitome of the Renaissance mind. Stan's publications include books and papers on literature, history, and archaeology, but it is irrefutable that he is best-known for his peerless contribution to the discovery, observation and recording of the prehistoric rock art of his adopted home county of Northumberland, and beyond. Stan's outputs in this research domain exude enthusiasm, his communication skills having been honed by his professional role as a teacher in both secondary and higher education. This, combined with an innate love of learning, has instilled a willingness to grapple with the many uncertainties and contradictions that confront the student of rock art in central and northern Britain. Notably, Stan is intrigued by the chronology of British rock motifs and their possible association with funerary monuments of the Bronze Age (Beckensall and Frodsham 1998).

The design and delivery of adult education programmes has been part of Stan's extensive repertoire, often encompassing walks with talks as a core element of the knowledge-enhancement experience for all those who have participated in his courses. These perambulations of the Northumberland landscape are distinguished by a vocabulary that evokes an atmosphere of the mystery of the past and this inspires an insatiable urge to know more. These qualities are central to the many rock art projects that Stan has worked upon, but it is especially true with regard to a certain field research initiative at a site known as Blawearie in the Fell Sandstone uplands of the county at Old Bewick, in the parish of Eglingham.

Blawearie cairn and its rock art context: the genesis of a project

The Blawearie excavation initiative was a product of the Beckensall skill-set as outlined above. Throughout the 1980s, Stan's teaching and communication talents were employed in the running of week-long summer field courses for adults at the Grade 1 listed Ford Castle, which then functioned as a residential teachers' centre of Northumberland County Council. The present authors were participants in 1982 and 1983 and shared with Stan a teaching background in the middle school sector, and a fascination for landscape studies. These were the bonding agents that were catalysed by field excursions that included visits to Blawearie, a derelict shepherd's house of mid-nineteenth century origin (NU 0845 2238; Figure 1), which became a source of mutual enchantment. The gravitational pull of Blawearie can be explained by its remoteness and its landscape context: it is a site that can engender obsession. The nearest settlement is Old Bewick which lies in the valley of a canalised stretch of the River Breamish at 98m asl. Passmore and Waddington describe this area as the Till Block in the Tweed-Till catchment (2009: 137–142). From the former Old Bewick Post Office (NU 06655 21540), a bridle path leads uphill north-eastwards for a distance of around 1700m to the site of the shepherd's house at 209m asl (Figure 2). It is a challenging climb over rough, often boggy, ground. Sheep populate the land, and for the uninitiated, an online visit (Blamhof 2013) is recommended for familiarisation with the characteristics of the terrain.

The walk to Blawearie is rewarding. The abandoned house commands attention and to the west offers views across the Breamish valley to the Cheviot Hills beyond. Sunsets can be spectacular but, as the Blawearie name suggests, the experience is one of incessant wind buffeting. The house stands on a rocky knoll, and an atmosphere created by desertion of the building is accentuated by the unsuspected rock-cut gardens and enclosures that were the creation of past generations of tenants. The last of these former occupants was in residence when journalist Paul Brown visited in the 1940s and his illustrated account is an intriguing read (Brown 1946: 134–137).

Blawearie Cairn is situated 300m west south-west of the eponymous house and upon a separate knoll at 198m asl (NU 0817 2229). It was excavated by the antiquarian cleric William Greenwell in 1865 and listed by him as 'CC, Eglingham' (Greenwell 1877: 418–421). The cairn is a kerbed monument of approximately 11m diameter, the precise characteristics of which were disguised by Greenwell's intervention and other unrecorded disturbances. In the early 1980s, three cists were visible and Greenwell mentioned the location of a previously opened fourth cist at the centre of the monument. At some point in its prehistoric past the cairn had a funerary purpose. For the rock art enthusiast, interest

Figure 1. Blawearie shepherd's house from the west south-west, 1975. Photograph by Stan Beckensall.

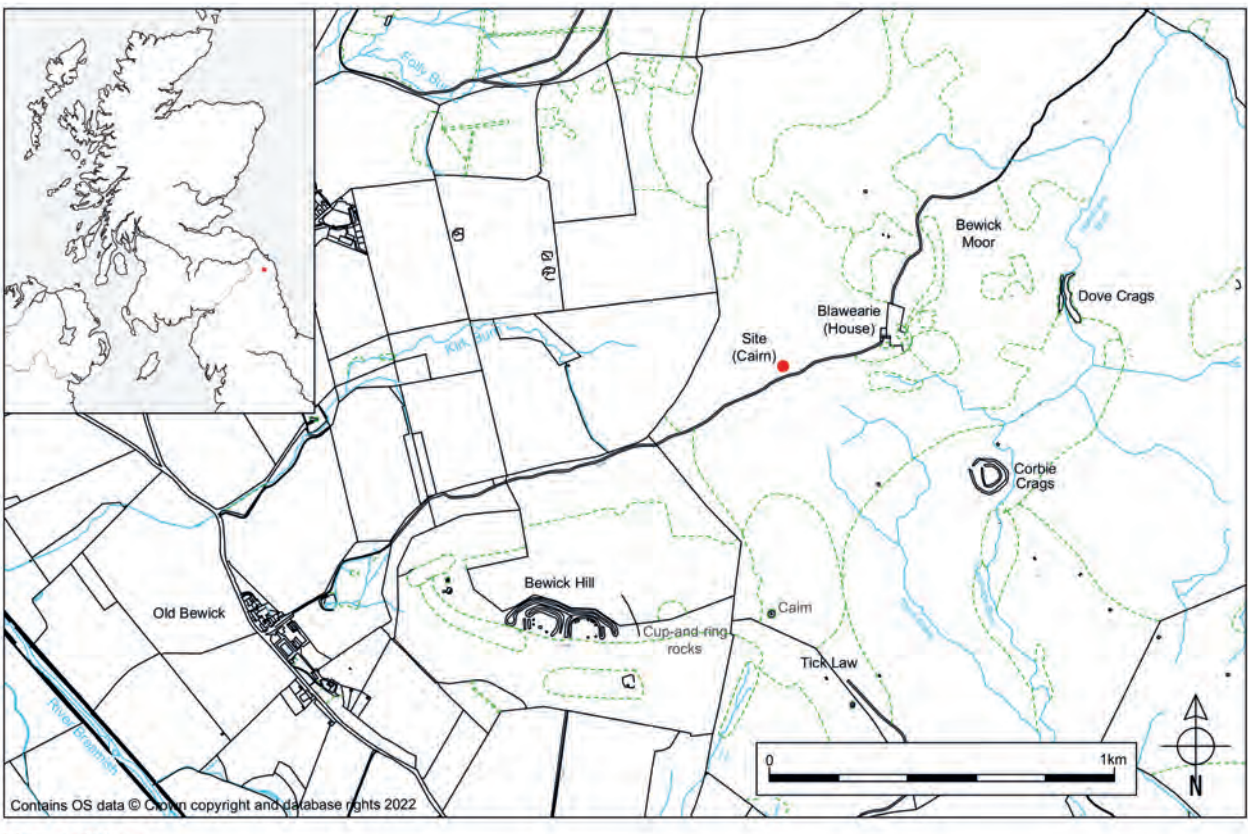

Figure 2. Location plan of Blawearie and associated landscape features by Jonathan Milward.

Figure 3. The principal Bewick Hill cup-and-ring site (H00581). Scale: 1.0m. Photograph by Iain Hewitt for the HELICS rock art database.

in Blawearie is amplified by the presence of 'decorated' rocks some 850m south south-west, on the east side of the double enclosure hilltop settlement of Bewick Hill (NU 075 216) at around 220m asl (Gates and Deegan 2009: 151, fig. 4.17). The complex rock art design shown as Figure 3 has been worked onto a large glacial erratic boulder of Fell Sandstone. The proximity of this rock art group prompted questions regarding a possible link with the prehistoric burial practices that took place at the cairn. Instances of the inclusion of cup-and-ring marked stones in monuments associated with Bronze Age disposal of the dead have been listed and discussed by Beckensall and Frodsham (1998). Greenwell noted no rock art at Blawearie Cairn, but his excavation was not exhaustive, leaving scope for speculation about this and other structural and chronological matters.

As acquaintance blossomed into friendship, we shared with Stan a number of visits to Blawearie and were smitten by the magic of the place. The outcome of subsequent discussions was the drafting of a proposal to excavate Blawearie Cairn and this was submitted to English Heritage. The document included an aim to test the validity of the link between cup-and-ring motifs and Bronze Age inhumation monuments with specific reference to the cairn. The application was approved, and preparation of the detail of the project plan began, with the field excavation programme scheduled to commence in the summer of 1984.

Objectives of this paper

It is not intended that this contribution should constitute a slavish reiteration of the findings of the Blawearie Cairn excavation project. This took place over five one-week summer seasons with an additional week in the Autumn of 1986. On-site work was completed in 1988. An academic report was published in 1996 (Hewitt and Beckensall) and this is the recommended source for details of the archaeological findings. In tandem with the excavation aims as specified in the published paper, the teaching background of the project team determined that it should provide an opportunity for high school students to become involved with the techniques, strategies, and transferable skills development that archaeology can provide. Comment upon this aspect of the Blawearie excavation programme was not included in the final excavation report, which offered no room for such diversification. To redress this imbalance, the aim of this chapter is to expand the scope of the published 1996 paper in line with the following objectives:

1. to provide an account of the Blawearie project as a structured archaeological field school initiative;
2. to examine and discuss the significance of the archaeological evidence from the site with regard to the potential link between prehistoric rock art and Bronze Age funerary practices in northern Britain;
3. to engage in a reflective critique of the project with reference to its limitations and impact.

The field school

The decision to excavate Blawearie Cairn using a team of young people from local high schools presented the three-strong project management team with a challenge. From the outset it was envisaged that a balanced on-site curriculum would need to be designed that would include equality of opportunity for participation in a range of problem-solving tasks, acquisition of manual excavation techniques, and social skills development. It was imperative from the outset that the Northumberland County Council Education Authority should be a principal stakeholder. Recruitment to the annual field school events was on a voluntary basis, but the process needed to be seen to be fair including matters relating to accessibility taking into consideration individual abilities and disabilities. This was a formidable hurdle because Blawearie is a remote site, presenting constraints that had to be overcome.

Project management

In response to the accessibility dilemma, the field school was granted the use of a residential base at the Lucker Field Centre, 12 miles north-east of the excavation site. Led by a Deputy Head Community, the Centre became the hub for a daily minibus commute to Old Bewick. Meals and scope for social interaction were part of the available package. Applicants were self-funded with the project appealing to potential university students and participants in the Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award Scheme, amongst others (Beckensall 1987: 39–40). Field Centre accommodation capacity limited the number of places available each year, but indicatively there were eight students in the first season of the project drawn from four high schools. In the final year, 1988, the student excavation team was nine in total which was close to the optimum number for a monument of just 11m diameter. During the summer season of 1986, a one-off involvement by an international conservation group inflated the workforce beyond the capacity of the cairn and it became necessary to extend the reach of the fieldwork to the rock art motifs on Bewick Hill where non-intrusive survey work was undertaken.

Aside from the infrastructure provided by the local authority, assistance in kind was forthcoming from the landowner, whose support for the investigation was invaluable. An international energy company contributed to costs. Photography was enhanced courtesy of RAF Boulmer from where helicopters on moorland manoeuvres occasionally landed to borrow project cameras for the purpose of taking air photographs for the archive. A VHS video record was also kept (Figure 4). The British Museum funded the excavation and conservation of an urned cremation discovered during the 1986 season, and the University of Durham provided expertise and facilities for post-excavation analysis of samples collected on site.

Figure 4. R.A.F. Boulmer helicopter visit recorded on VHS-format video by Stan Beckensall (standing closest to centre). Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

No rough terrain vehicle was available to the field project until the 1987 season, therefore access to site was accomplished by an uphill walk from Old Bewick. Essential equipment such as manual digging tools and survey apparatus needed to be stored in a vacant cottage in the village and carried to site each working day. Limited tent accommodation was erected, but this was for the purpose of weather shelter only: risk assessment indicated that overnight stays on the moor constituted a hazard. For enhanced site safety in those pre-mobile phone days, Citizens' Band Radio handsets were available during the final three years on site. A mobile, secure site office was added to the amenities in 1987.

Teaching and learning

At the outset of the planning process, it was determined that all participants in the Blawearie Cairn project should benefit from as broad an experience as possible, the focus being on individual or small group teaching. Each day began and ended with a whole-group briefing with impromptu team talks taking place as occasion demanded. To achieve optimum value from the course for each person in the group, and in the best interest of the archaeology of the cairn, it was essential to ensure that everyone had clear daily, sometimes hourly, targets. This instilled self-confidence in each participant's ability to successfully execute tasks, follow procedures and understand objectives. Advice and guidance on request had to be available at all times.

Induction to, and development of, manual excavation techniques was an expectation of all members of the project team, both students and teacher-directors. Other activities available included levelling, drawing plans and sections, entering data on recording *proformae* (e.g., context records), linear measurement, finds identification, photography using an appropriate scale, sample collection, and the reception of site visitors (Figure 5). Respect for the environment of the cairn was an important expectation given that it provided a habitat for a number of moorland species.

Progress, constraints and solutions

The scope for teaching archaeological skills, techniques, and concepts was determined by the strategy employed for any given season together with the nature and demands of the site. At the outset (1984), Blawearie Cairn was largely

obscured by a dense cover of well-rooted moorland grasses and heather. This vegetation required careful, systematic and sympathetic clearance to reveal the shape and surface features of the monument. It was tough physical work, but in preparation for the following year, a grid was set out within a defined excavation area and an initial site plan was drawn. These activities provided teaching and learning opportunities. Occasional finds generated enthusiasm, providing team members with material for briefing journalists and the reception of other visitors to the cairn.

Season two equated to an archaeological evaluation whereby sample areas of the cairn were investigated in more detail. Proceedings were much interrupted by rain, but new features were identified, and the site plan was correspondingly enhanced and extended. Limitations to the range of equipment and facilities available were exposed, and with the project poised to move into research mode in 1986, there was much forward planning to be done. The change in emphasis from evaluation to research project demanded a larger human resource and greater sophistication of site infrastructure.

Throughout the course of the first two seasons, teaching situations had involved students in discussion regarding problems encountered during the discharge of their responsibilities. For example, with reference to the drawing of features, two concerns were identified.

> *Problem 1* Accurate recording of the plethora of cobblestones that comprised the greater part of the cairn was difficult to achieve with conventional drawing frames because the uneven surfaces of boulder clusters made it impossible to stabilise this equipment, therefore wasting time and forfeiting accuracy.
>
> *Problem 2* When drawing sections through negative features such as the sockets of displaced kerbstones, base lines tended to sag, particularly when wind gusts cut across the site, which was most of the time.

In response to these issues, the following solutions were forthcoming.

> *Solution 1* The troublesome drawing frame was redesigned. Two 1.0m × 1.0m models were produced, each equipped with four telescopic legs with spirit levels set into the two horizontal axes of the frame. Thus, the frame could be levelled above any stone cluster in conformity with the site grid and, if desired, levelled in accord with site datum. The frames were designed to disassemble for movement to and from site. Two 0.5m × 0.5m drawing frames were produced for use in plotting features in confined spaces (Figure 6).
>
> *Solution 2* The drawing of sections through negative features whilst avoiding the trauma of sagging datum lines was a problem that had been encountered by Peter Reynolds, Director of the Butser Ancient Farm Research Project, Hampshire. In a chapter devoted to data recovery, Reynolds alludes to what he called a 'protophit', described as a measuring instrument with a horizontal bar to which is fitted a sliding chock that acts as a guide for a vertical calibrated rod for depth measurement (1979: 89–91). Though not commercially available, illustrations within Reynold's text made it possible to construct a version of the protophit for use at Blawearie, albeit with a modified recording system (Figure 7). Excavators found it to be easy to use, results improved, and valuable time was saved.

Figure 5. The excavation team at work (1988) including levelling using a dumpy level and calibrated staff. View from the photographic platform. Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

The range of on-site surveying techniques employed was extended in 1986 with the loan of a plane table.

Assessment and evaluation

Assessment of progress and achievement was formative. Each team member was encouraged to keep a record of their personal involvement in accordance with their individual targets and aspirations. There were no overarching assessment criteria.

Press cuttings record enthusiastic feedback from students, at least two of whom went on to read archaeology at universities in Scotland and England. Significantly, the experience of working with sixth-form students inspired the

Figure 6. Drawing a plan using the redesigned drawing frame made for the Blawearie project by Ken Bone. Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

Figure 7. Section drawing using the 'protophit'. Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

contribution of Bournemouth University to a project funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England entitled 'Inclusive, Accessible Archaeology' in partnership with the University of Reading. The publications generated by this collaboration were disseminated across the higher education sector and included the Archaeological Skills Self-Evaluation Toolkit (ASSET) which also had an online presence (Phillips *et al.* 2007). The educational component of the Blawearie Cairn project had a long reach.

Blawearie: the archaeology of rock art and communal memory

The *raison d'etre* for the Blawearie project was to test the validity of the supposed association of rock art with Bronze Age funerary monuments. This aim was documented in the excavation report for the site (Hewitt and Beckensall 1996). Specifically, the term 'rock art' alludes to the prehistoric style that is manifest in Northumberland: cups, rings, and serpentine grooves such as those on the eastern slopes of Bewick Hill (Figure 3). A reader of the report might be puzzled to note that it is devoid of comment on this key aim, an omission that, on reflection, is perhaps explained by oversight and the fact that no examples of rock art were observed in the cairn or in any of its neighbouring satellite cairns to the north north-east. The discussion that follows is intended to rectify this deficiency.

The development of the monument

Excavation revealed five phases in the development of the cairn, none of which has absolute dates. Relative dates were achieved by the identification of distinct chronological boundaries within the archaeological record and the typology of finds that were found in association with each phase. Despite a diligent recovery strategy used throughout the field project, no suitable samples were available for radiocarbon dating.

Phases 1 and 2

Phase 1 comprised pre-cairn features including traces of the roots of a tree, but in Phase 2 the perimeter of the cairn was defined by a circle of contiguous kerbstones. It was noted that the adjoining sides of some kerbstones had been pecked or stippled with a hard, sharp tool to ensure a tight fit with a neighbour (Figure 8). Another characteristic of the kerbstones is that their tops represent a mix of two shapes, some being flat whilst others terminated in a point, or apex (Figure 9). This variation in kerbstone form seems to be deliberate and must have required careful selection of the component stones, the precise source of which was not established. The rock-cut gardens of Blawearie House offer a starting point for specialist petrological analysis, although this was not undertaken during the project.

Manual shaping of the kerbstones is likely to have been needed in most cases. It has been estimated that the completed kerb circle comprised close to 40 stones, but just 24 remained in their original locations. It is therefore impossible to speculate upon the original numbers and arrangement of the two kerbstone shape types; it is conceivable that an astro-calendrical function was sought by the kerb builders although this hypothesis remains untested. Throughout the time

Figure 8. Excavation 1988: cobblestones from the wall of the cairn have been removed and systematically grouped for examination and reinstatement. Photograph by Stan Beckensall courtesy of RAF Boulmer.

Figure 9. A kerbstone on the east side of the cairn is an example of those that were stipple-tooled to form a tight fit with a neighbour. Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

that the kerb circle was intact, the cairn seems not to have been used for funerary practices.

Phase 3 was broadly contemporary with Phase 2. It entailed the setting down of a cobblestone wall against the standing kerb line both inside and out. The purpose of the wall was probably to prevent the kerbstones from tilting out of line. Despite Greenwell's nineteenth-century examination of the cairn, much of the internal cobbling remained in place in 1984. Throughout the course of the 1980s fieldwork, each component cobblestone was systematically lifted and checked for signs of cup marks, but none were found (Figure 10).

Phase 4 represents a transformative period in the development of the cairn because at this time the monument was used for a mix of burials within cists and cremation deposits. An Enlarged Food Vessel of Bronze Age date was the repository for one cremation, thus providing an indicative date for this phase. The cists within the cairn numbered six in total. Of these, three were unearthed by Greenwell who also reported a fourth example (previously disturbed) that had existed at the centre of the monument. With the exception of the central cist, all these stone-lined burial chambers survived for re-examination. Two further cists were discovered during the 1984–88 excavations, and what might be counted as a seventh example was found within Satellite Cairn 1, 3.5m to the north north-east.

Each of the extant cists was subjected to close archaeological scrutiny which revealed that their capstones had been plundered from the kerbed perimeter of the cairn. The covers of Cists A and C (Greenwell's 1 and 3) were both former kerbstones with apex-tops. In the case of the Cist A capstone, notches had been cut close to what would have been its base, suggesting that the stone had been rope-dragged from its original place in the kerb of the cairn. The orthostats of the cists are likely to have come from the same source. The sum of the component cist stones, taking account of broken examples, indicated that 14 were

Figure 10. In the foreground, three tilted kerbstones in the western arc of the cairn represent the mix of flat- and apex-top types. Immediately beyond, the apex-topped Cist C capstone is a displaced kerbstone. Blawearie House is on the distant horizon. Photograph by Irene Hewitt.

re-purposed kerbstones, a figure that is close to the number of stones that were missing from the perimeter of the monument.

Whatever its purpose or significance to the local upland communities of Phases 2 and 3, those who used the cairn in Phase 4 were using it in a way that was different to that of their forebears. A major shift in culture and philosophy is implied by this revision in outlook and practice. If any of the cist stones had been inscribed with rock motifs, then it follows that Blawearie would attract comparison with sites such as Fulforth Farm, Witton Gilbert, County Durham. This is a presumed cairn with a cist, the capstone and an orthostat of which were elaborately decorated with cup, ring and groove designs (Baker and Wright 2009; Beckensall and Frodsham 1998: 53–60).

It is not clear if the Fulforth rock art panels were found in their primary location or if they had been introduced from elsewhere as cist-construction components. In the absence of contrary evidence, the striking difference between the Fulforth Farm cist stones and those from Blawearie is the absence of rock art in the latter case. This simplistic observation might be misleading: the Blawearie cists were lacking in decoration, but they had been tooled and shaped. This might have been regarded as significant by the Phase 4 cist builders and the stones were selected for funerary rituals for that reason. It is also possible that importance was accorded to the original location of the stones in the cairn's kerb and the function that they served in that position. These observations should be noted in any re-appraisal of similar sites. No attempt had been made to introduce stones from the decorated rock outcrops east of Bewick Hill, 850m to the south-west.

Phase 5 of Blawearie Cairn is characterised by at least one instance of early medieval artefact deposition. In 1985, a blue glass melon bead was found outside of, but close to, the hitherto unexcavated Cist D. Beads of this type have been attributed to the ninth and tenth centuries AD (Hewitt and Beckensall 1996: 267) and this discovery might attest to the continued recognition of the cairn as a place of cultural importance at this time.

Nine amber beads were found in a loose arrangement in the southern quadrant of the cairn between Cist A and the site of the lost central cist referred to by Greenwell. The beads were perforated for hanging as a necklace or bracelet; the hole through the largest bead had been enlarged by long-term wear. It is conceivable that these amber beads were deposited in one of the nearby cists from which they were removed by the activities of antiquarians. Working

on this assumption, the amber beads would date to the Bronze Age. Alternatively, the spatial coherence of these beads as a group within their context, suggests that they could have been deposited as an heirloom jewellery item, an event that could also belong to Phase 5.

Discussion

Blawearie was a project engendered by obsession, motivated by educational objectives, and focused upon archaeology. It did not produce evidence to verify a link between funerary monuments of the Bronze Age and the phenomenon of cup-and-ring art, but the results of the investigation did demonstrate a complex process of constructional development during which succeeding generations identified with the site whilst changing their perceptions of its meaning and function. Whilst certainty is elusive, the first embodiment of the site was naturalistic: a low knoll upon which grew a tree, its root matrix being traceable in the pre-cairn soils. This tree may have had qualities that inspired veneration, a hypothesis suggested by the apparent need to circumscribe it with a kerb of artificially shaped stones. This development effectively superimposed a monument of human construction upon a natural feature of unknown significance.

The Phase 4 modification of the kerb circle as a focus for burial and cremation involved the acquisition of the monument's Phase 2 kerbstones and their reuse in the construction of cists. The acid soils of the Bewick Fell Sandstone moorland dissolve uncremated bone. Consequently, it was impossible to determine or estimate the number of individuals represented by the cist structures which could have been opened and resealed numerous times in accordance with need and/or customary practices. Analysis of samples indicated that the urned cremation (context 089) contained the remains of two adult males, whilst the un-urned cremation material included one adult and a child of about five years. Questions arise regarding the criteria for interment at Blawearie and other similar sites. Family or dynastic qualification might have been a requirement, but the fact that the cairn evolved into a small cairnfield with 'satellite' cairns lying outside of, but close to its northern arc, suggests the need for an expansion of funerary space. Enlargement of the cairn to conceal an un-urned cremation at its outer south-west perimeter is another indicator of pressure on available ritual space. On occasion, grave goods were provided, but organic tokens such as food offerings were not scientifically traceable. The deposition of the melon bead of early medieval date in Phase 5 suggests that the cairn continued to be the subject of veneration several millennia after its original construction. Such late deposits have been recognised in the archaeology of other sites, including Money Mound, near Horsham, West Sussex, excavated by Stan (Beckensall 1967: 13–30).

The 1984–8 work at Blawearie suggests a new avenue of enquiry into the relationship between funerary monuments of the Bronze Age and the stones that were used to construct them, whether decorated or not. In the light of the evidence from the cairn, it is arguable that the time has come for a reappraisal of other similar sites in the north of Britain and western Europe.

Acknowledgements

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