

Rediscovery of the Cist B Cap-stone at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian

Steve Sweeney-Turner, BA (Hons), PG.Dip, PhD
www.cyberscotia.com / suibhne@cyberscotia.com

Background

Cairnpapple Hill is a prehistoric monument of central importance to Lowland Scotland, and Lothian in particular. The site was first excavated by Stuart Piggott in 1947-48,¹ who identified its primary components as a Neolithic Class II circle-henge and a sequence of three Bronze Age cairns, although use of the site was found to extend from c.3500 BC to c.500 AD, a remarkable period of some 4000 years as a place of ceremony and burial. However, this paper concerns itself with only one specific Bronze Age object from the site – the cap-stone from one of two cist burials discovered within the second cairn. For purposes of this paper, this will be referred to as Cist B (after Piggott) from Cairn 2.

Following Piggott's excavation, the site was taken over by the then Ministry of Works, and an ambitious reconstruction of its main components was begun in 1949. Central to this project was the construction of a concrete, turf-covered dome to represent Cairn 2. However, of the two cists which Piggott found in that cairn, only Cist A was included in the reconstruction, and the fate of Cist B has, since then, been a matter of obscure controversy. Indeed, many have assumed it to be entirely lost.

Cist B Lore

Many scholars, site custodians and visitors alike have wondered what happened to Cist B following Piggott's excavation. One explanation in particular has emerged as pseudo-canonic, being promoted by several custodians across the years, eventually finding itself formally published in an exhibition of Cairnpapple artefacts,² and in 2004 even being included in the official Historic Scotland exhibition on the site itself.

According to this explanation, the reason why Cist B is not present on-site – let alone represented – is that Piggott's team accidentally broke its cap-stone on excavation. The assumption seems to be that it was irretrievably damaged, and that it was subsequently and surreptitiously removed from the site to hide the embarrassment of the excavation team. Yet no documentary evidence for the alleged destruction has ever emerged, and, moreover, no demonstrable theory regarding the subsequent whereabouts of the cist remains has ever been forthcoming.

Rediscovery

On 4th October 2003, the current author (then working as site custodian), noticed a rather uncharacteristically-shaped 'kerb-stone' in the Western edge of Cairn 3's kerb, quite out of keeping with the rounded shape and smooth condition of the kerb's many other stones. Moreover, it looked strikingly familiar. On consulting Piggott's excavation paper³ and comparing its photograph of the Cist B cap-stone with that in the Cairn 3 kerb, it was immediately clear what this 'kerb-stone' actually is, despite its current embedment within the turf:

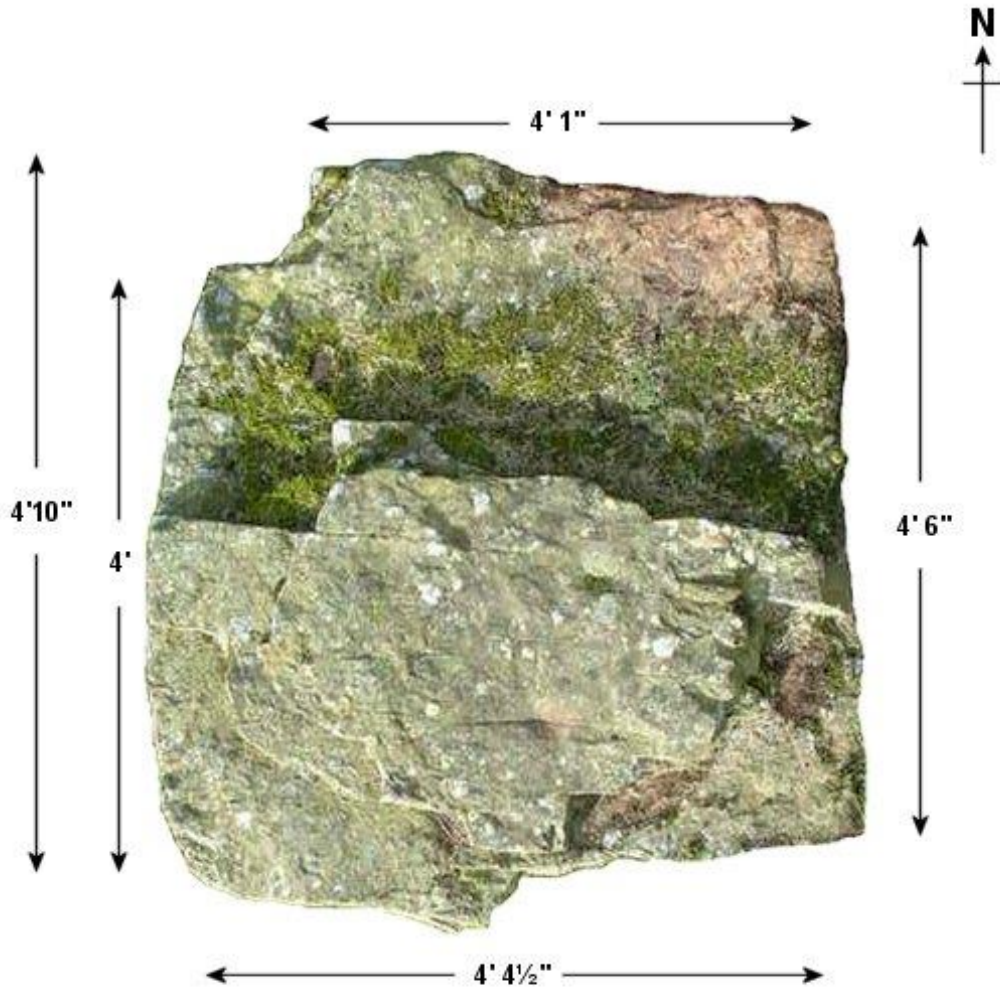


Piggott's Photograph of the Cist B Cap-stone During Excavation



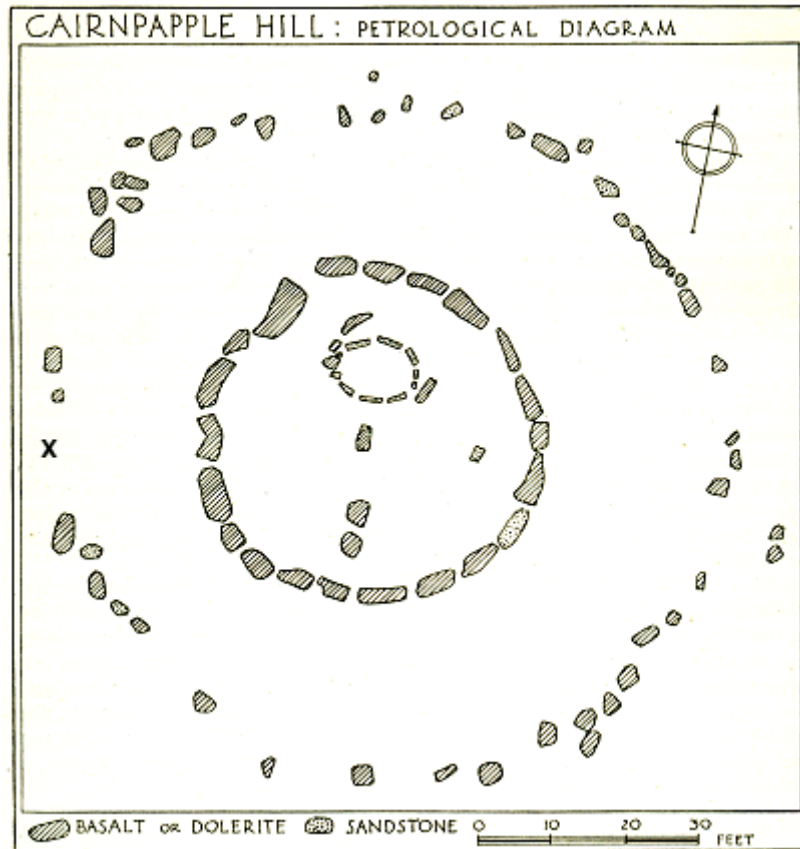
The 'Kerb-stone' on the Western Edge of the Cairn 3 Kerb

Piggott described the Cist B cap-stone as 'a sandstone block nearly 5 feet square and 1 foot 6 inches thick'.⁴ This description perfectly fits the assumed Cairn 3 'kerb-stone', although without excavation, its depth could only be estimated, with the most exposed corner (bottom-right in the above photograph) being around 1 foot 2½ inches deep. The diagram below gives approximate measurements of the stone's dimensions across its upper surface:



Approximate Measurements of the 'kerb-stone'

In addition, on consulting Piggott's petrological diagram of the site,⁵ it becomes obvious that there is a gap in the original kerb where this stone currently is (here marked by an X):



Piggott's Petrological Diagram

Clearly, then, this stone was not originally in its current location, and can only have been moved there after Piggott's diagram, either during or after the excavation.

One can only conclude that the Ministry of Works team that engineered the site reconstruction in 1949 did not adequately consult either the excavation plans or the excavation team on the subject of Cist B, and if the excavators had temporarily placed the cap-stone in the Cairn 3 kerb area and then neglected to replace it, the reconstruction team may have assumed that it was indeed a kerb-stone, despite its strikingly un-contextual character.

Conservation and Reconstruction

Comparing Piggott's photograph of the stone with its current condition, it is clear that it has suffered some damage since excavation. Unlike the smooth natural boulders which are otherwise found in the Cairn 3 kerb, its structure is highly layered and thus at risk from frost damage and other forms of weathering. Indeed, this may account for the flaking of the top layers of its upper surface on what is currently its Southern end, when we compare it with Piggott's photograph. Clearly, if it had been restored to its original location on the inner East side of the Cairn 2 dome in 1949, this damage would not have occurred. There is therefore a strong conservation argument for restoring it to its original position within the dome, before further damage occurs. Furthermore, at the time of writing, it is simply in the wrong location, thus misrepresenting the site's actual structure. A restoration to the original location would therefore be both conservationally and representationally desirable.

One problem remains in that the stones which formed the wall of Cist B have also been misplaced. However, it is unlikely that the stones were removed from the site, and close comparison of Piggott's plans with the current location of stones across the site reveals that the cap-stone is far from being the only positional anomaly. It may be that some of

the anomalous stones will emerge as likely candidates for those Cist B's wall, shown below in their original position in Piggott's paper (following the removal of the cap-stone):



Piggott's Photograph of Cist B After Removal of the Cap-stone

On the other hand, Piggott states that this cist's wall was lower, less substantial, and less coherent than that of the particularly impressive Cist A. As such, it would be possible to use similar, substitute stones to reconstruct the wall, placing the authentic cap-stone on top of them. One fortunate factor here is that, unlike Cist A, Cist B was entirely closed by its cap-stone, and so only a consideration of the externally-visible character of the stones would be necessary – in many ways, the cist's wall is its least significant component, and could easily be reproduced in facsimile.

Bibliography

R.J.C. Atkinson, "Four New 'Henge' Monuments in Scotland and Northumbria", *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 1949-50, Vol.84 (1952), pp.57-66

Gordon Barclay, "Cairnpapple Revisited: 1948-1998", *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 1999, Vol.65, pp.17-46

Gordon Barclay & Doreen Grove, *Cairnpapple Hill* (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 1998)

Aubrey Burl, *Prehistoric Henges* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1991)

Stuart Piggott, short report, *Antiquity* Vol.22 (1948), p.35

Stuart Piggott, "The Excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian 1947-48", *Antiquity*, Vol.23 (1949), pp.32-39

Stuart Piggott, "The Excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian 1947-48", *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 1947-48, Vol.82 (1950), pp.68-123

Stuart Piggott, *Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1951)

Stuart Piggott, "Cairnpapple Hill", *The Scots Magazine* 51, 4, April 1955, pp.20-22

Stuart Piggott, *Cairnpapple* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1985)

Anna Ritchie, *Scotland BC: An Introduction to the Prehistoric Houses, Tombs, Ceremonial Monuments and Fortifications in the Care of the Scottish Ministers* (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 1999)

D. Stewart, "Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian (Torphichen Parish), Watching Brief", *Discovery and Excavation Scotland*, 2000, p.93

Notes

¹ Stuart Piggott, "The Excavations at Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian 1947-48", *Proc Soc Antiq Scot 1947-48* Vol.82 (1950), pp.68-123.

² "Pottery from Cairnpapple", Broxburn Library, West Lothian Council Museums Service, 28th July – 8th November, 2003.

³ Piggott, op.cit.

⁴ Piggott, *ibid.*, p.97. It should also be noted that the vast majority of stones on the site are of basalt or dolerite, not sandstone.

⁵ Piggott, *ibid.*, p.120.