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Depicting the Dead: Commemoration Through Cists, Cairns and Symbols in Early Medieval Britain

Howard Williams

This article develops recent interpretations of mortuary practices as contexts for producing social memory and personhood to argue that early medieval cairns and mounds served to commemorate concepts of gender and genealogy. Commemorative strategies are identified in the composite character, shape and location of cairns and in their relationship with other commemorative monuments, namely Class I symbol-stones. The argument is developed through a consideration of the excavations of early medieval cists and cairns at Lundin Links in Fife.

The diversity of monuments found throughout Britain and northwestern Europe in the later first millennium AD has been interpreted from numerous perspectives, as indicating the distribution of tribes or ethnic groups, the dissemination of ideas and religious beliefs or as an index of changing social structures. More recently, monuments have been perceived as meaningful statements by the living for the dead. As 'texts' with iconographic programmes or constellations of allusions and metaphors, monuments can be regarded as sensitive indicators of shifting and diverse early medieval ideologies (Carver 2000; 2001; Driscoll 2000; Halsall 2003).

This article builds on these approaches by addressing the relationships between monuments and the selective commemoration of the social person in death (see also Williams 2001; 2006). To develop this argument, the article considers the shape, composite character, gendered associations and locations of graves and monuments from an early medieval cemetery at Lundin Links, Lower Fargo, Fife. The article considers how the mortuary practices can be regarded in relation to other contemporary forms of mortuary commemoration, particularly Class I symbol-stones. Before discussing the archaeological evidence, it is important to briefly consider recent theoretical trends in the study of social memory and personhood relevant to the case study.

While archaeologists of the early Middle Ages often encounter instances of many different types of monument associated with both single and multiple graves, a straightforward and simplistic understanding is often presumed for how monumental commemora-

tion functioned to symbolize and communicate the identities of the dead (e.g. Shephard 1979). There are four important points to be made to qualify this approach. Firstly, while some recent research has addressed the interactions between social memory and the location, shape and form of early medieval monuments (e.g. Lucy 1998; Williams 2001), limited attention has been afforded to how the materiality (Parker Pearson 2004), colours (Jones 2002), multi-media qualities (see Hope 2003) and multi-sensory aspects (e.g. Hamilakis 1998) of monumental architecture influenced how the dead were selectively remembered. Secondly, there has been negligible consideration of how the treatment of cadavers, material culture and monuments can be closely connected mnemonic strategies by which the identities of the early medieval dead were selectively remembered and genealogies negotiated (Barrett 1994; Jones 2001; Last 1998; Mizoguchi 1993; Williams 2003). Thirdly, beyond the debate surrounding the re-use of ancient monuments (e.g. Bradley 1987; Williams 1997), few studies have addressed the mnemonics of early medieval monument and cemetery biographies, including the processes by which monuments were constructed, altered, augmented, abandoned and destroyed (Bradley 2002; Holtorf 1996). Finally, there is a tendency for early medieval mortuary monuments to be viewed in isolation from other forms of monumentality in contemporary societies. A consideration of how different forms of monuments and ritual contexts provided complementary if distinct strategies for commemoration requires further attention (e.g. Jones 2003; Parker

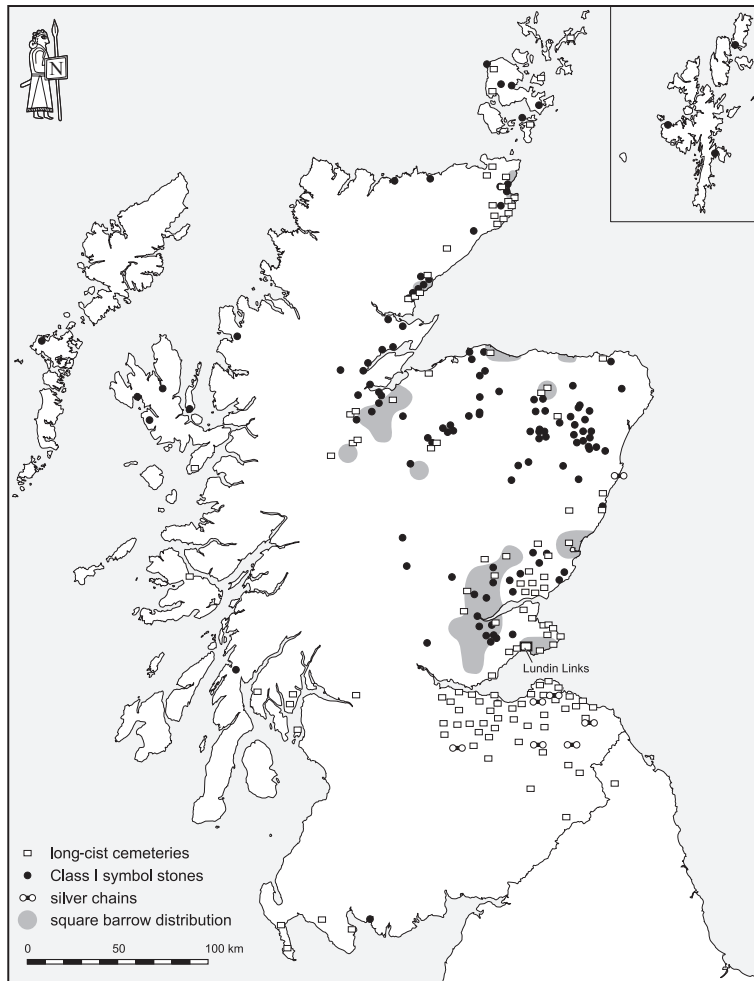


Figure 1. Distribution map of long-cist cemeteries and silver chains in southern and central Scotland with the distribution of low-cairns/square barrows and Class I Pictish symbol stones in eastern and northern Scotland (after Carver 1999, 41 and Foster 1996, 16, 73).

Pearson 1993). In combination, these four themes provide the basis for new perspectives on the mnemonics of dealing with the dead and monumentalizing graves in early medieval Britain (see Williams 2006).

Just as there has been restricted discussions of how monuments commemorated the dead, there have been few attempts to consider what kinds of identities were being constituted and commemorated by early medieval mortuary monuments. Despite awareness that the treatment of the deceased do not directly reflect the identity of the person in life (Halsall 2003; Härke 1997a), the view continues that social identities were constituted by a series of attributes (including age, gender, status and ethnicity) that reside in individual burials and accompanying monuments. In turn, by comparing the treatment of discrete burials, social structures can be reconstructed from mortuary variability (Crawford

2000; Härke 1997b; Stoodley 1999). While the recent studies have shifted the emphasis towards a consideration of the agency of the living in discussions of the character and variability of early medieval mortuary practices (Halsall 2003; King 2004; Lucy 1998), the nature of the identities created during funerals requires further research.

Inspired by anthropological studies of social identity and personhood, it has been recently recognized that early medieval concepts of the person might include 'dividual' as well as 'individual' characteristics (Bazelmans 2000). In other words, the social person or ancestor may reside not solely in the treatment and monumentality afforded to individual cadavers but also in the exchanges created between the living and the dead during mortuary and commemorative practices. Moreover, treatment of the single cadaver in death may relate not only to the identity of the person in life and the immediate kin but also to broader social and cosmological ideals of what a person is. From this perspective, the forms of identity recognized in early medieval graves and monuments may be more permeable and complex than is usually envisaged. In particular, personhood may be commemorated by the transformation of the dead through the mortuary process rather than through static display (Brück 2004; Fowler 2004; Williams 2004). Personhood may be articulated through the successive interactions between graves and monuments as opposed to simply through the attention afforded to individual interments (Fowler

2001; 2003). From this perspective, early medieval monuments might be seen as contexts where concepts of the person are cited and negotiated through a dialogue between the living and the dead rather than being interpreted as a direct index of the individual identities of those interred within or beneath them. Consideration of the complex and variable relationships between monuments, social memory and personhood opens up new possibilities for understanding early medieval mortuary practices.

Cists, cairns and symbol-stones

As a case study, the article will take forward these themes to show the relevance of recent theories of social memory and personhood to early medieval archaeology. Also it will illustrate how these themes relate to

unfurnished inhumation rites as well as the complex mortuary technologies (such as cremation and secondary rites) and collective monuments that they have usually been applied to (but see Fowler 2004; Brück 2004). It is hoped that this study will illustrate the relevance of the data from early medieval northern and eastern Scotland. This region has a long tradition of detailed studies and excavations (Alcock 1992; Ashmore 1980; Close-Brooks 1984; Proudfoot 1996; 1998; Wainwright 1955) yet has been repeatedly overlooked in recent studies of early medieval death and burial (e.g. Hadley 2001; Lucy & Reynolds 2002; Thompson 2004).

The Lundin Links cemetery is related to two overlapping and related sets of mortuary practices that need to be briefly reviewed before proceeding. Both mortuary traditions seem to have developed out of Iron Age practices and became widely practised during the period of kingdom formation and the adoption of Christianity in northern Britain between the fifth and eighth centuries AD (Fig. 1; Ashmore 1980; 2003; Carver 1999; Foster 1996; Smith 1996).

The first of these traditions is the long-cist cemetery. As with most of western and northern Britain in the middle and late first millennium AD (Petts 2002), southern and central Scotland is defined by unfurnished inhumation rites (Alcock 1992; Ashmore 1980; 2003; Close-Brooks 1984; Fig. 1). Bodies were probably placed wrapped in clothes, blankets or shrouds. Few grave-gifts are found with these burials and cremation is absent. The dead are oriented west–east, extended and supine. In many cases, these burials are found within ‘long-cists’: arrangements of stone slabs serving to contain and protect the corpse (Fig. 2). At some sites, monuments have been identified, including four-post timber structures and rectilinear enclosures (Rees 2002; Fig. 3). ‘Long-cist cemeteries’ can comprise cists as well as earth-dug graves, arranged in well organized rows. These cemeteries are sometimes associated with Latin-inscribed stones that, while internally diverse in function, helped to sustain the association of the long-cist tradition with the earliest phase of Christian mortuary and commemorative practices (Forsyth 2005; Proudfoot 1998). Good examples of these long-cist cemeteries are known from excavations at the Catstane (Cowie 1978; associated with an inscribed stone), Parkburn, Lasswade (Henshall 1955–56) and Thornybank (Rees 2002), all in Lothian, and Hollowhill in Fife (Proudfoot 1996, fig. 3). Given the apparent uniformity in burial rites, orientation and organization as well as the association with Latin-inscribed stones and the absence of explicit ‘pagan’ practices such as crouched burial and grave goods, long-cist cemeteries have often been

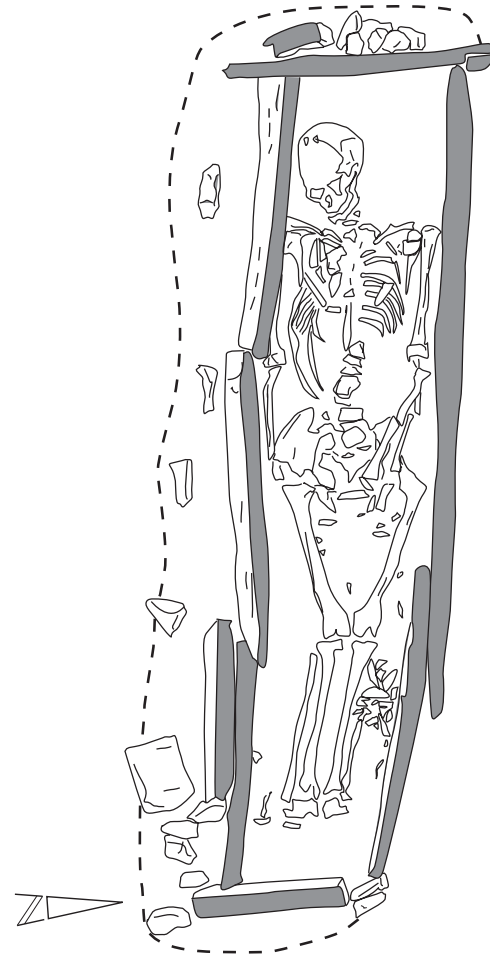
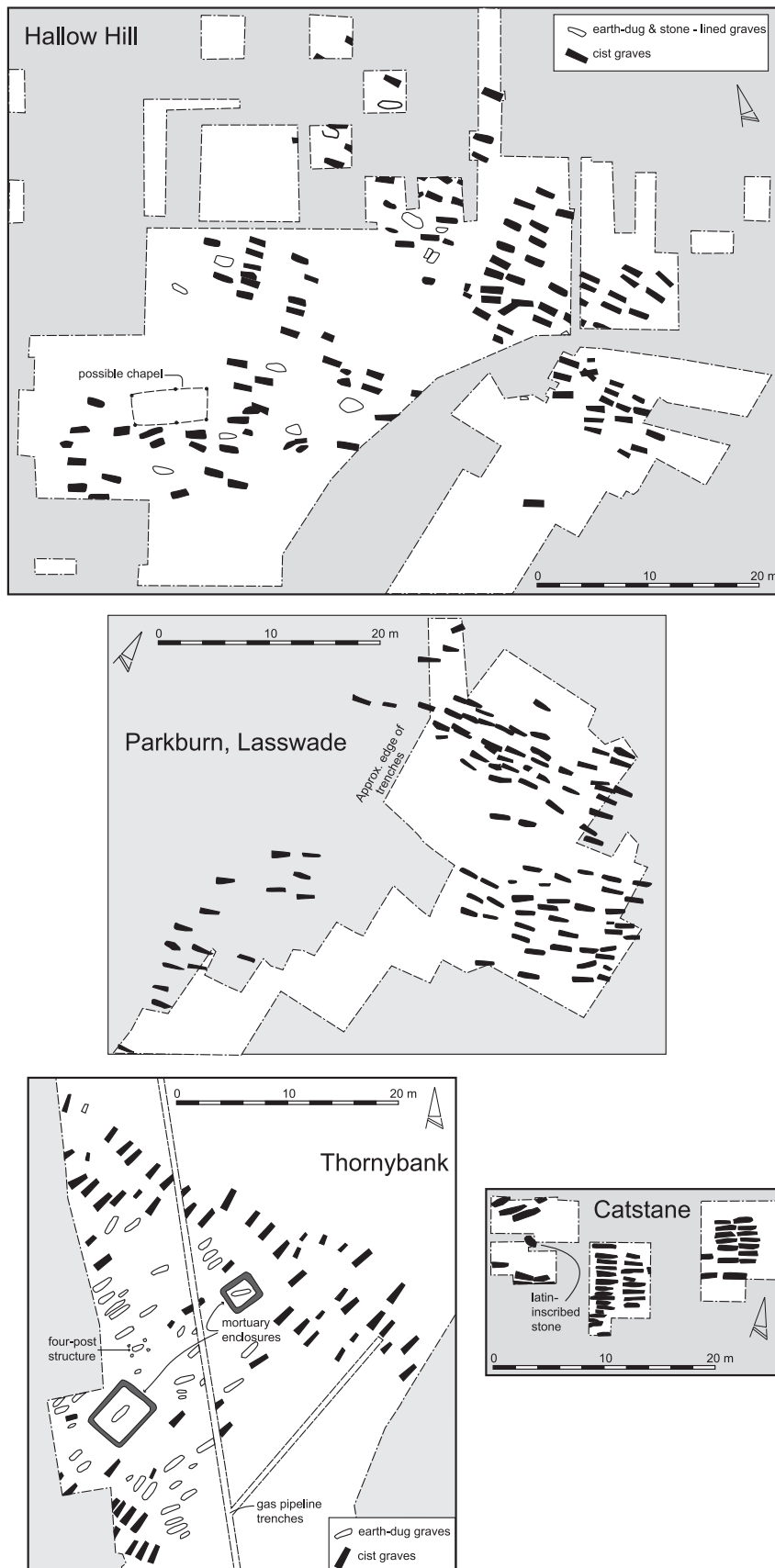


Figure 2. Plan of a long-cist burial from Hollowhill, Fife (after Proudfoot 1996, 403).

regarded as evidence of Roman influence and, or, Christian belief (e.g. Proudfoot 1998).

Fife sits towards the southern edge of another mortuary tradition that spreads down eastern Scotland from the Orkney Isles and is often connected with a series of early medieval peoples collectively known as the Picts (Fig. 1). In terms of burial rites themselves, this area is also characterized by west–east oriented supine and extended inhumations interred in either long-cists or earth-dug graves (Alcock 1992; Ashmore 1980; 2003; Close-Brooks 1984). There is evidence, however, that cremation may also have been practised in some areas (Ashmore 2003, 40; e.g. Downes 1997). These graves are associated with two contemporary monument forms.

The first type of monument is the Class I symbol-stone. These are crudely dated to the fifth and seventh centuries AD, and consist of erected undressed stones displaying Pictish symbols that frequently occur in pairs (Fig. 4). Symbol-stones have been attributed



numerous interpretations but most agree that some at least had a mortuary and commemorative function (Henderson & Henderson 2004). This argument has been supported by instances where Class I symbol stones were found close to, or incorporated into, early medieval cists and low-cairns, although it cannot be denied that these stones may have been re-used from elsewhere and could originally have served other roles in the early medieval landscape (see below; Ashmore 1980; Close-Brooks 1978–80; Mack 1998).

The second type of monument consists of square, rectangular and circular low-cairns and low-mounds often given the simplified ascription 'square-barrows'. In some cases, earth and stone monuments have been surveyed but, in other cases, only ditches have survived around ploughed-out monuments. Where excavations have taken place, 'square-barrow cemeteries' are found to cover long-cists and some have been associated with Pictish symbol-stones (Ashmore 1980; Close-Brooks 1978–80; 1984).

Classic examples where both these monumental forms can be seen combined are the monument from the Dairy Park, Dunrobin, Sutherland (Close-Brooks 1978–80; Fig. 4) and the cemeteries of Garbeg and Whitebridge in Inverness-shire (Stevenson 1984; MacLagan Wedderburn & Grime 1984; Fig. 5). The cairns can be bounded by a kerb with prominent stones at the corners. We also find the deliberate selection of beach pebbles with which to compose the cairn structure itself, sometimes selecting white

Figure 3. *Simplified plans of the early medieval long-cist cemeteries Hallowhill, Catstane, Parkburn Lasswade & Thornybank (after Cowie 1978, 180–81; Henshall 1955–56, 255; Proudfoot 1996, 393; Rees 2002).*

quartz pebbles for striking appearance (Bigelow 1984; Edwards 1925–26). The mounds or cairns can have ditches with interruptions at their corners. In these cemeteries, the monuments were often adjacent to each other and sometimes augment existing monuments. A further distinctive feature is that some of these cairns, when fully excavated, reveal more than one cist and multiple levels of cist-burials, as at Ackergill in Caithness (e.g. Edwards 1925–26; 1926–27; Fig. 6). None of these sites has been extensively excavated, so their full nature and variability are difficult to appreciate.

As with the long-cist cemeteries further south, the long-cist graves of northern Scotland lack grave goods and present poor skeletal preservation. Hence, these graves have received few of the social interpretations of mortuary variability commonly applied to early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (Arnold 1997; Lucy & Reynolds 2002). The only exception is the widespread assumption that both symbol stones and cairns might indicate the monuments of the social elite of Pictland. Equally, it has been observed that adult females seem to be preferentially selected for inclusion in square-ditched mounds and low-cairns, as at Dunrobin, Redcastle, Tayside, and Cille Pheadair on South Uist. This evidence may hint at a special social status accorded to these persons by the survivors (Alexander 1999; Close-Brooks 1978–80; Mulville *et al.* 2003; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 117–21).

To the extent that the long-cist cemeteries, on the one hand, and the low-cairns, low-mounds and symbol-stones, on the other, represent discrete geographical traditions, relating to political groupings or religious belief, seems less clear-cut than it once seemed (Proudfoot 1998; Smith 1996). For large parts of eastern Scotland, there appear to be considerable overlaps between these traditions (Close-Brooks 1984, 96; Fig. 1). Long-cists are found throughout northern Scotland but their relative rarity in comparison with central and southern Scotland may in part indicate the relative availability of easily split rocks (Cummins 1999, 157; *pace* Proudfoot 1998,

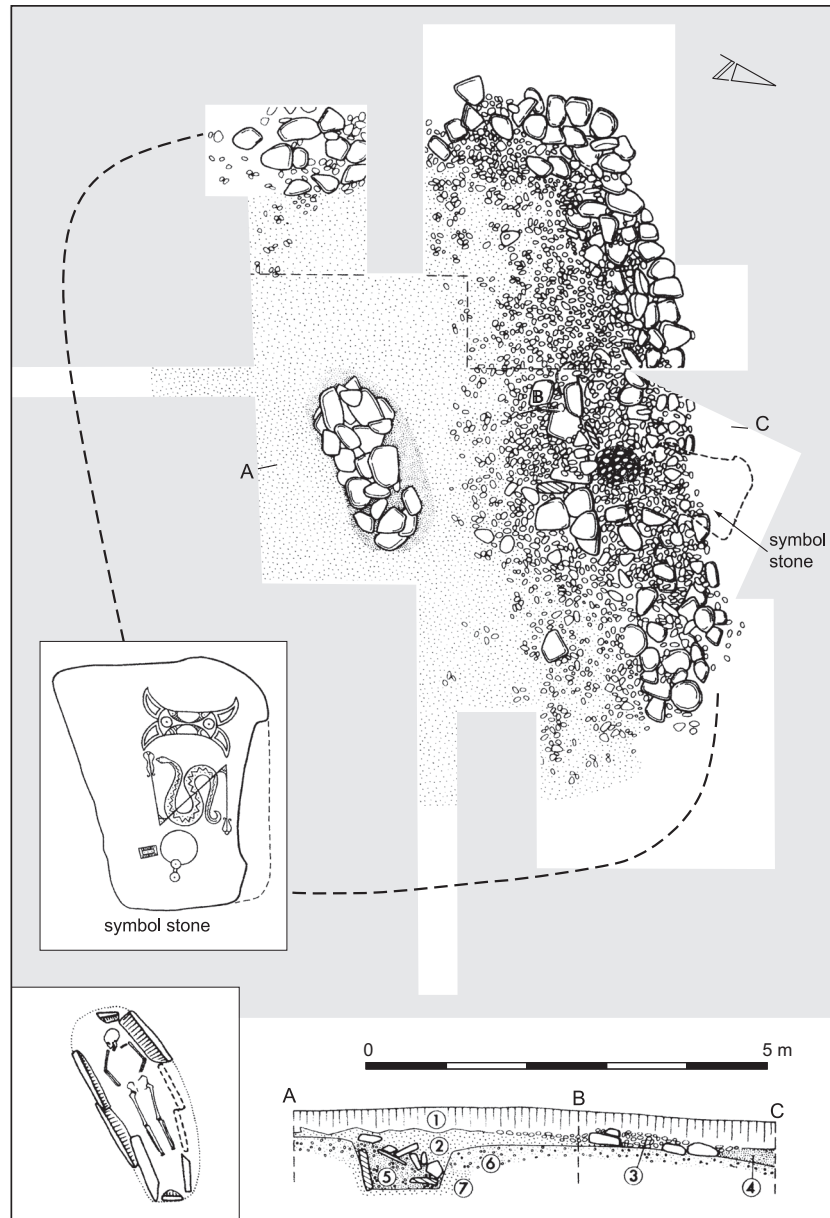
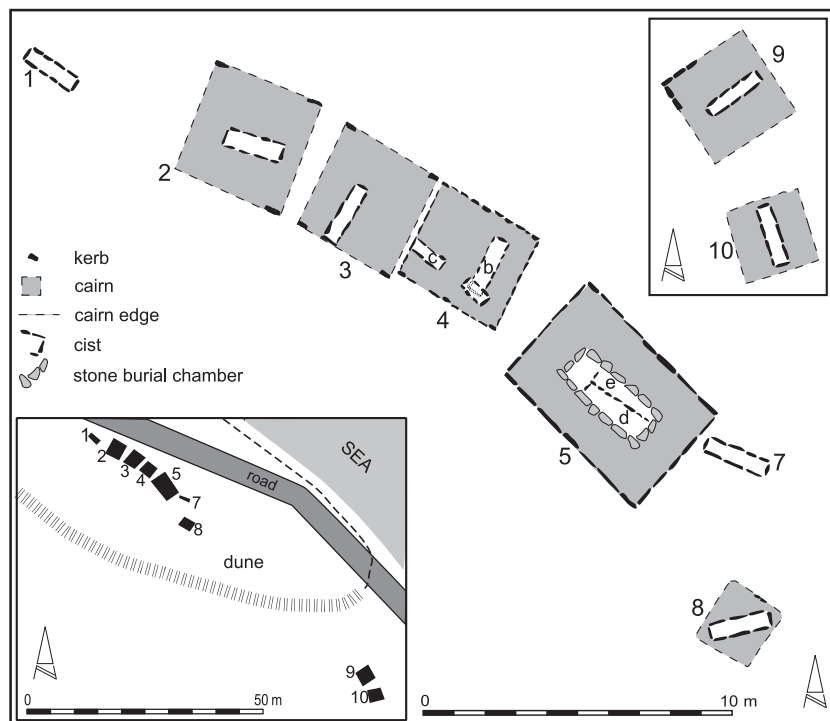


Figure 4. Plan of the square cairn associated with a Pictish symbol stone from Dunrobin, Sutherland (after Close-Brooks 1978–80, 331–2).

68–9). Equally, there is evidence to suggest that there is nothing exclusively ‘Pictish’ about square and rectangular low-cairns and mounds as they are now being recognized throughout central and southern Scotland (Ashmore 2003, 40; Rees 2002; Smith 1996, 28). Moreover, the distinction between ‘square-barrow’ and ‘long-cist’ cemeteries may be partly deceptive, caused by the circumstances of archaeological investigation. This is because visible cairns and mounds of square-barrow cemeteries may simply be the monumental focus of larger cemeteries of long-cists and earth-dug graves that have not been fully investigated. If so, the regions



Figure 5. Simplified plans of the square-barrow cemeteries from Whitebridge and Garbeg (after Stevenson 1984, 146, 148).



may share more similarities than at first appear.

It is in relation to both these traditions that we can now introduce the Lundin Links cemetery. The site displays characteristics connected to both traditions and is located in a region in which long-cists and low-cairns are known and broadly contemporaneous while the site is at the very southernmost limit of the distribution of Class I symbol-stones (Greig *et al.* 2000, 608–10).

Figure 6. Composite plan of excavations of low-cairns containing cists of possible early medieval date from Ackergill, Caithness (after Edwards 1925–26, 162 and Edwards 1926–27, 196–7).

Lundin Links

The Lundin Links cemetery was located on a south-facing slope between 5 m and 10 m above sea level to the west of the village of Lower Largo. The site was in dunes on a shelf overlooking Largo Bay on the north shore of the Forth estuary (Greig *et al.* 2000; Fig. 7). Excavations following storm erosion in 1965 and 1966 revealed a series of west-east oriented long-cists that fall into three types: those without monuments, those under rectangular cairns, those under circular cairns. There were a further two particularly distinctive features: a structure dubbed the 'dumb-bell complex' that consisted of two round cairns joined by an oval monument, and the 'horned-cairn complex' comprising a number of sub-circular cairns and crescentic structures (Figs. 8–9). Radiocarbon dates from the skeletons centre on the fifth and sixth centuries AD (Greig *et al.* 2000, 611).

The archaeological evidence was incomplete owing to storm damage, and only partly investigated. Moreover, a chronological sequence for the graves could not be determined due to the lack of both stratigraphy and inter-cutting. Earlier discoveries nearby suggest the excavations are likely to have revealed one burial zone within a larger cemetery (or cemeteries) that spread along the slope above the shore.

Graves may have also extended further inland (Greig *et al.* 2000, 586–7, NMRS (National Monuments Record of Scotland) NO40SW324; NO40SW13; NO40SW10) and, not far away, antiquarian accounts record further long-cists associated with prehistoric standing stones upon Lundin Links itself (NMRS NO40SW1).

Despite the fragmentary evidence available for the cemetery, the excavations revealed an intriguing set of mortuary monuments dating to the mid-first millennium AD. The coherent west-east orientation of the cists followed the contours of the coastline so it need not necessarily indicate that the graves were Christian but, considering the lack of accidental inter-cuttings, it suggests a sense of order, organization and respect for pre-existing monuments by the burying community (Greig *et al.* 2000, 605). Consequently, despite the ex-

treme variability of the monuments identified, common themes can be found in both the referential nature of the monuments and the 'composite' character of some of the monuments.

Round cairns

The adjacent round cairns 1 & 2 were composed of boulders and beach pebbles and both covered single sandstone cist graves. Cairn 1 covered an adult male, cairn 2 an adult female (Greig *et al.* 2000, 590–92; Fig. 10). There were subtle differences between the monuments. Cairn 1 was the more carefully constructed. A dressed sandstone disc, 60 cm in diameter, was placed below the pebble fill of the cairn but directly (and presumably deliberately) over the centre of the long-cist beneath. Cairn 1 was composed of tightly packed water-worn

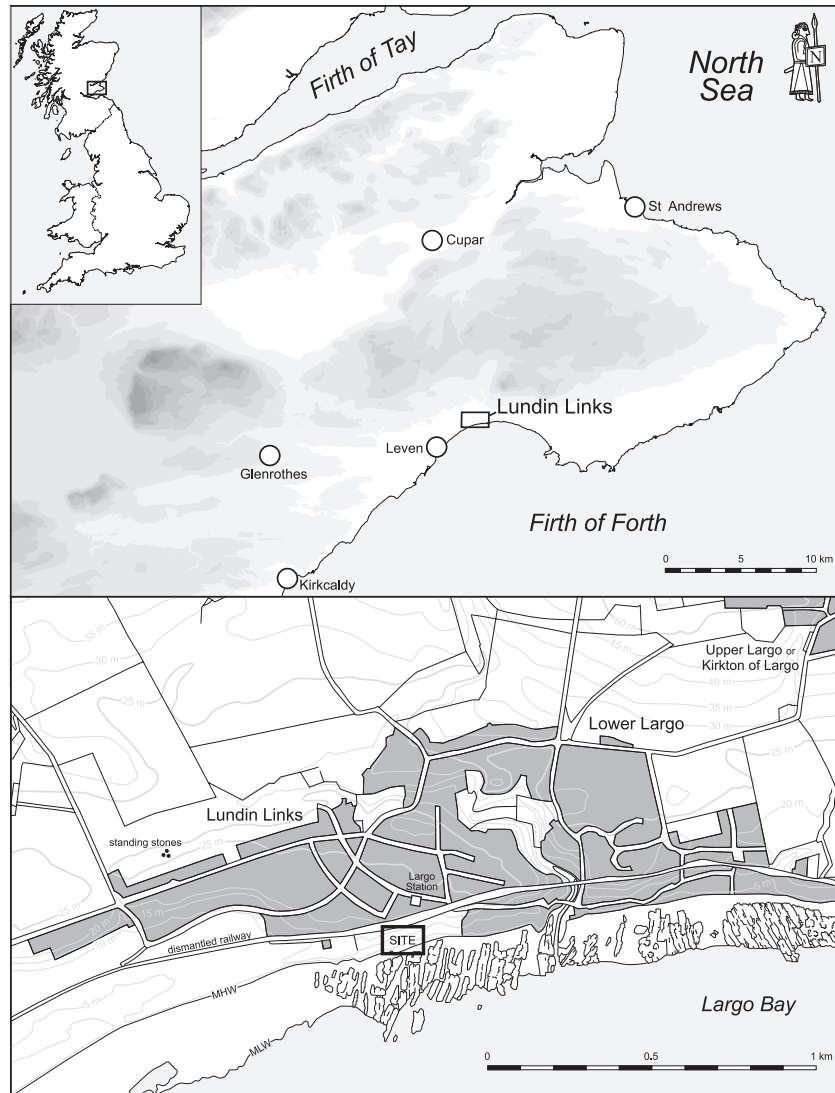


Figure 7. Location of Lundin Links, Fife.

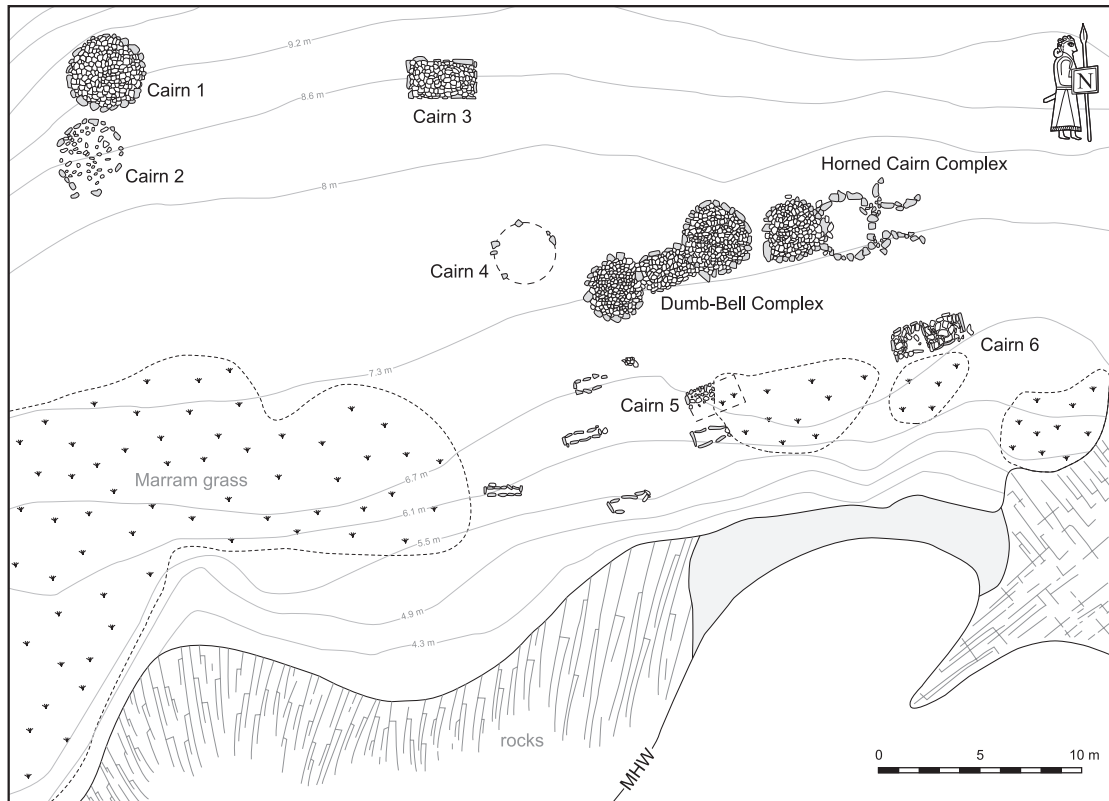


Figure 8. Plan of the monuments at Lundin Links, Fife (after Greig et al. 2000, 589).

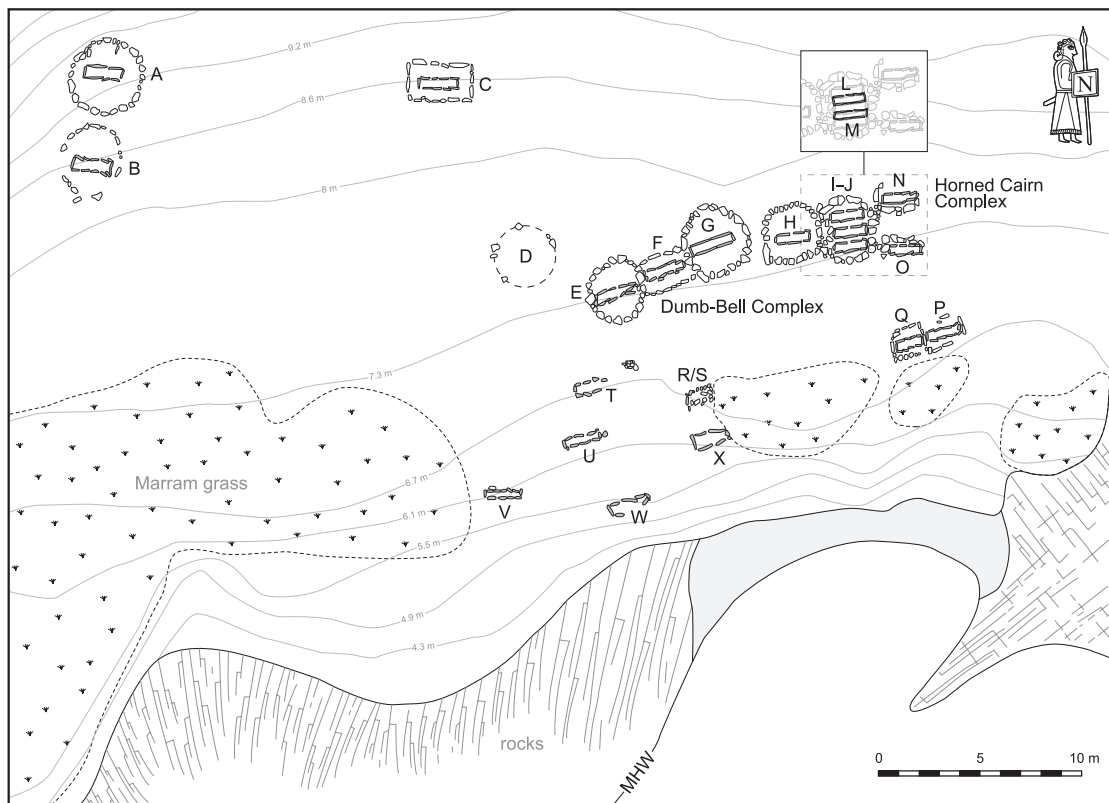


Figure 9. Plan of the cists at Lundin Links, Fife (after Greig et al. 2000, 591).

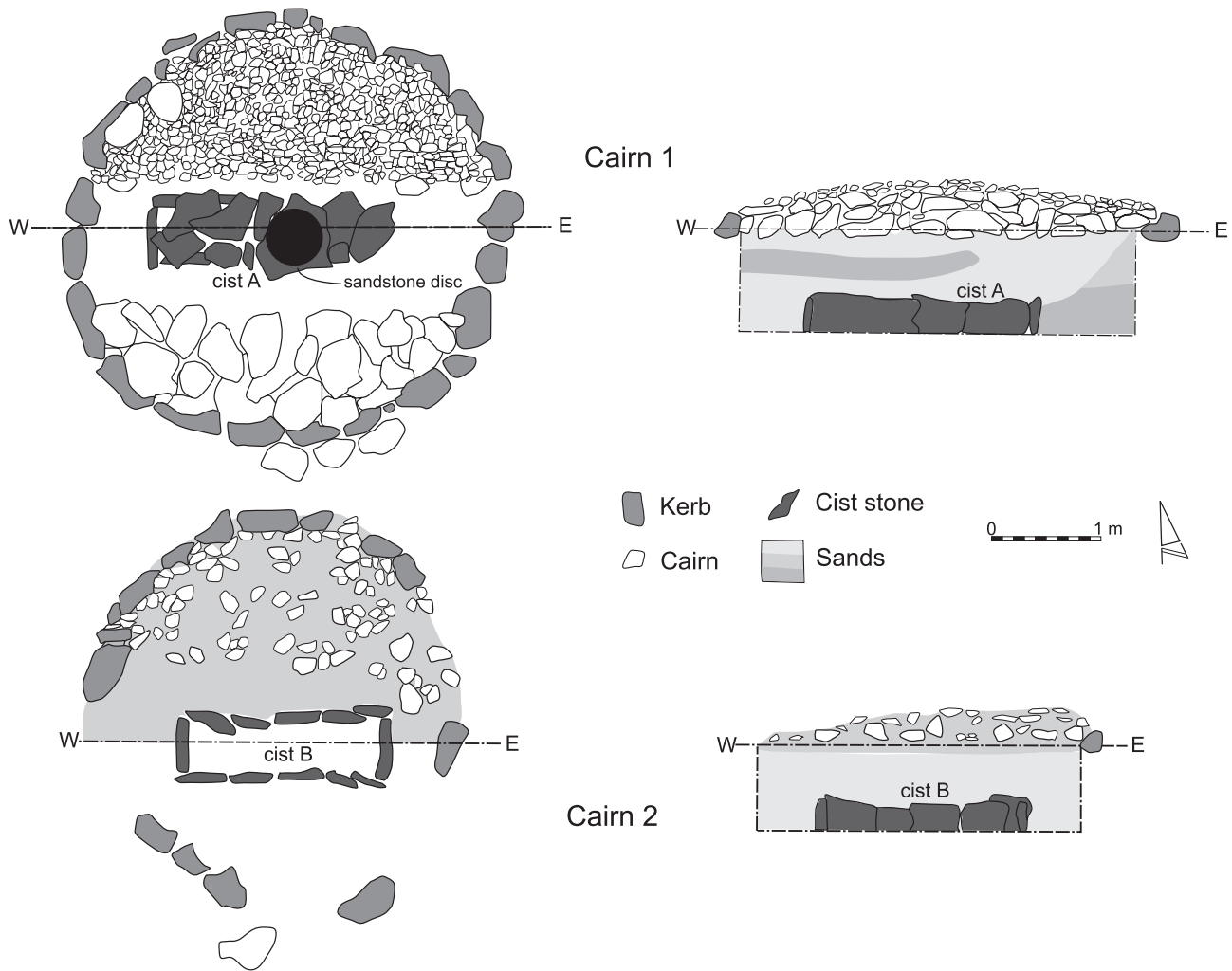


Figure 10. Annotated plans and sections of the two round cairns 1 & 2 (after Greig et al. 2000, 592).

pebbles whereas cairn 2 contained a mixture of angular and rounded stones as well as coarse gravel and sand. We have no evidence of which monument was placed first, or whether the monuments were contemporaneous. What can be said is that the cairns respected each other's location and referred to each other in shape while retaining distinctive features of composition. In combination, the monuments served to commemorate the relationship between the interred individuals.

Rectangular cairns

Other cists and monuments at Lundin Links were physically connected. Of the three rectangular cairns identified around long-cists, cairn 3 covered a single grave. In contrast, cairn 5 covered a burial that was subsequently re-used by the insertion of a secondary cist without altering the existing cairn material. A bro-

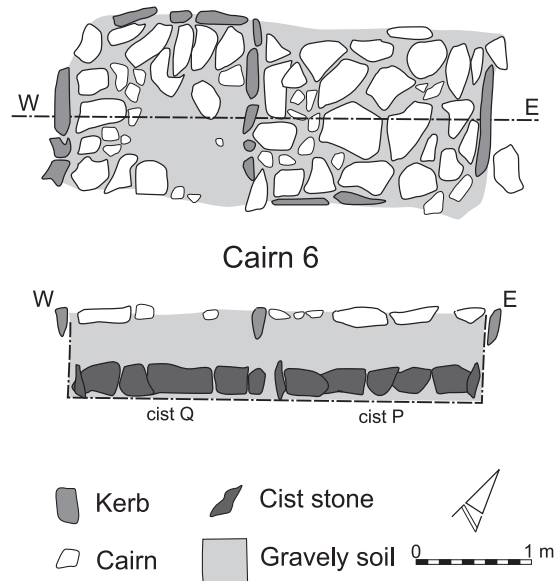


Figure 11. Annotated plan and section of rectilinear cairn 6 (after Greig et al. 2000, 594).

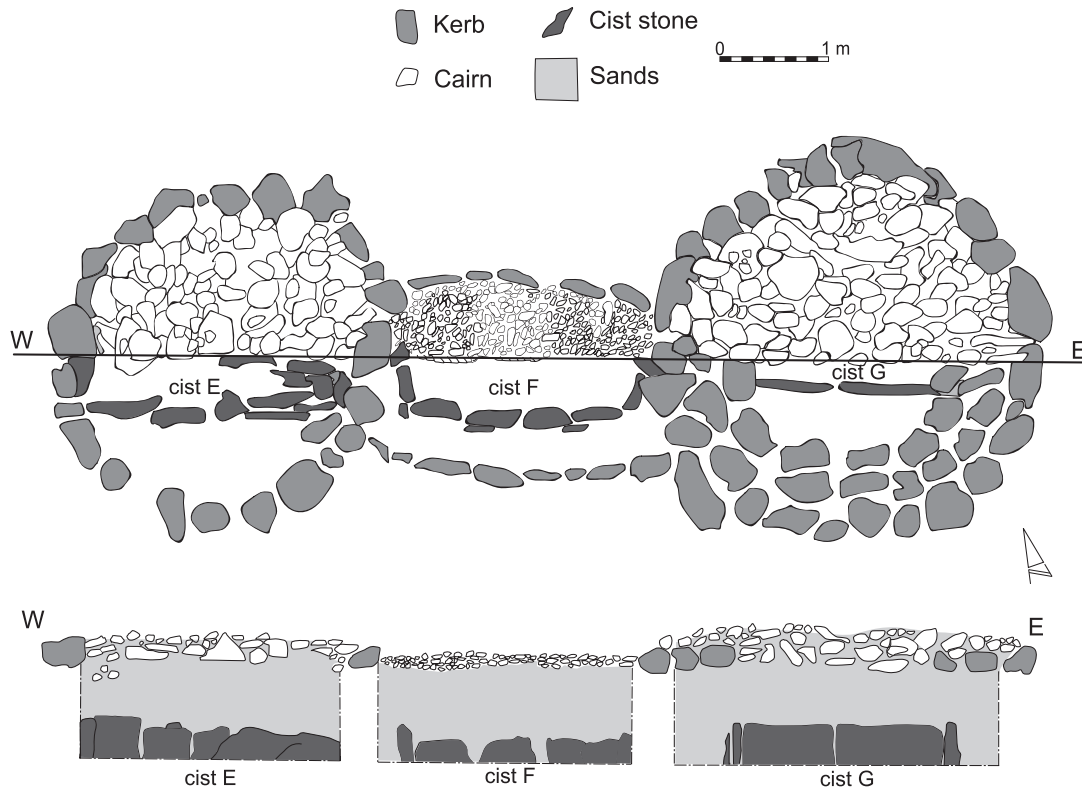


Figure 12. Annotated plan and section of the dumb-bell complex (after Greig *et al.* 2000, 596).

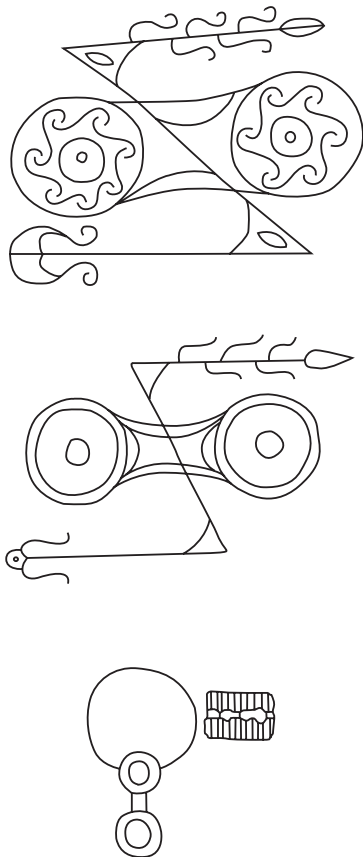


Figure 13. Selected Pictish symbols bearing similarities with the dumb-bell complex (after Foster 1996, 72; Henderson 1967, 105).

ken sandstone disc similar to that found in cairn 1 was used as part of the lid of the secondary cist (Greig *et al.* 2000, 592). Both burials were adult males, the primary aged 17–22, the secondary burial 30–40 years.

Contrasting with both cairns 3 and 5, cairn 6 was a composite monument covering two cists juxtaposed end to end. Both contained the skeletons of adult females which, as we shall see below, may be significant (Greig *et al.* 2000, 594; Fig. 11). Indeed, the arrangement of kerb stones within the cairn suggests an overall design for the composite monument. While we do not know whether the cists were interred at the same time or successively, the resultant cairn created a clear association between the burials, perhaps commemorating the relationship between burials rather than the individuals interred in isolation.

So far, we have seen relationships between burials memorialized through the location, referential and composite character, and the use of differently shaped cairns. However, two further monumental complexes at Lundin Links — the dumb-bell and the horned-cairn — take these commemorative practices further.

The dumb-bell complex

The dumb-bell complex consisted of two round cairns, each covering a single long-cist, but of different compositions. The western cairn was composed of a kerb

consisting of a single line of boulders. In contrast, the eastern cairn comprised a kerb three boulders thick (Greig *et al.* 2000, 595; Fig. 12). The oblong cairn linking the two monuments also covered a single cist. The arrangement of three cists and cairns strongly suggests that there was an over-all plan among mourners for memorializing all three graves upon the same west–east alignment.

The dumb-bell shape is among the most common of the Pictish symbols, usually referred to as the ‘pairs of circular discs’ and ‘double-disc’ motifs (Allen & Anderson 1993a, 59–60). This motif is widely employed in commemorative contexts, and examples of this symbol can be found elsewhere in Fife and neighbouring counties on both Class I inscribed stones and later Class II sculpted slabs (Allen & Anderson 1993b, 285, 287, 302, 346). The same symbol has been recognized close by on the walls of Doo Cave and Jonathan’s Cave (Allen & Anderson 1993b, 371–2; Fig. 13).

The double-disc motif has a wider significance. It is found on portable artefacts such as the bronze Monifieth plaque (Cummins 1999, 90), ‘Pictish’ silver chains (Henderson & Henderson 2004) and the silver plaques of the Norrie’s Law hoard (Allen & Anderson 1993b, 369; Graham-Campbell 1991; Fig. 14). Striking similarities can be found in the shapes formed by parts of portable artefacts with elite associations. These include the handles of mirror-symbols found on Pictish stones (Allen & Anderson 1993a, 69; Fig. 13) and the paired circles formed on the terminals of silver penannular brooches from Pictland and elsewhere in northern Britain (Henderson & Henderson 2004, 97–105). There is also a similarity to the shape formed by the terminal ring of ‘Pictish’ silver neck-rings (themselves sometimes adorned with Pictish symbols) found in southern Scotland (Cummins 1999, 82; Henderson & Henderson 2004, 87).

Contemporary domestic architecture may provide a clue as to the significance of this unusually shaped monument. Pictish houses have rarely been excavated outside the Western and Northern Isles and, where investigated, can be found to take on various shapes, both circular and rectangular. A common theme linking them is their multi-cellular character in which circular or rectangular rooms are connected by corridors. Instances of this pattern can be identified at Buckquoy and Pool from Orkney and Bostadh on Lewis (Fig. 17). This arrangement bears more than a passing resemblance to the double-disc motif as it appears on symbol-stones and in the Lundin Links cairn (Hunter 1997, 12–13; Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 111; Ralston 1997). Although similar dwellings are as yet unknown from Fife, it is tempting to speculate that the dou-

ble-disc motif on artefacts, cave-art, symbol-stones and in the plan of the dumb-bell complex at Lundin Links could all have been intended to resonate with contemporary domestic architecture. While the meaning of these associations eludes us, the evidence suggests that the dumb-bell at Lundin Links was a widely deployed Pictish symbol rendered on a monumental scale.

The horned-cairn complex

The horned-cairn complex at Lundin Links was an elaborate monument comprising eight cists (Greig *et al.* 2000, 595–600; Fig. 15). The western cairn was heavily kerbed with stones and covered a single cist (H). The eastern structure, covering cists I–M, consisted of a sub-circular kerb of boulders. The presence of a kerb of stones without cairn material over the cists suggests that it was a different form of monument from the other round cairns in the cemetery. Rather than a cairn, we may be seeing simply a burial enclosure. Alternatively, the kerb could have served as the post-pads for a circular mortuary ‘house’ raised over the cists. Structure I/M was a ‘multi-storey’ monument with two lower cists and three higher ones. The upper burials were located in the spaces between the lower ones, suggesting a careful planning and respect for existing cists. Two cists at the eastern end of the complex were surrounded by symmetrical crescents (‘horns’) of stones (N & O). As with structure I/M, there was no direct evidence of cairn material. Thus we have an associated arrangement of at least four discrete monuments, three overlying single graves, and a fourth associated with five cists.

A resemblance to a single Pictish symbol is much more elusive than with the dumb-bell complex. The closest connection that can be suggested is that the complex alludes to different Pictish symbols. For example, the crescent-stone arrangements may evoke the commonly identified ‘crescent’ motif (Allen & Anderson 1993a, 62), while the entire structure might be seen to have a passing resemblance to the ‘notched-rectangle’ motif (Allen & Anderson 1993a, 68; Fig. 16). Similari-

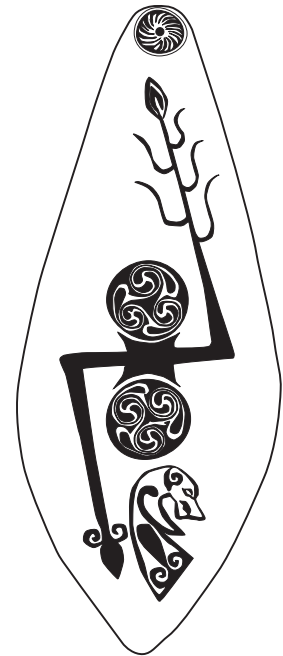


Figure 14. A silver plaque from the Norrie’s Law hoard bearing the double-circle and Z-rod motif (after Henderson & Henderson 2004, 89).

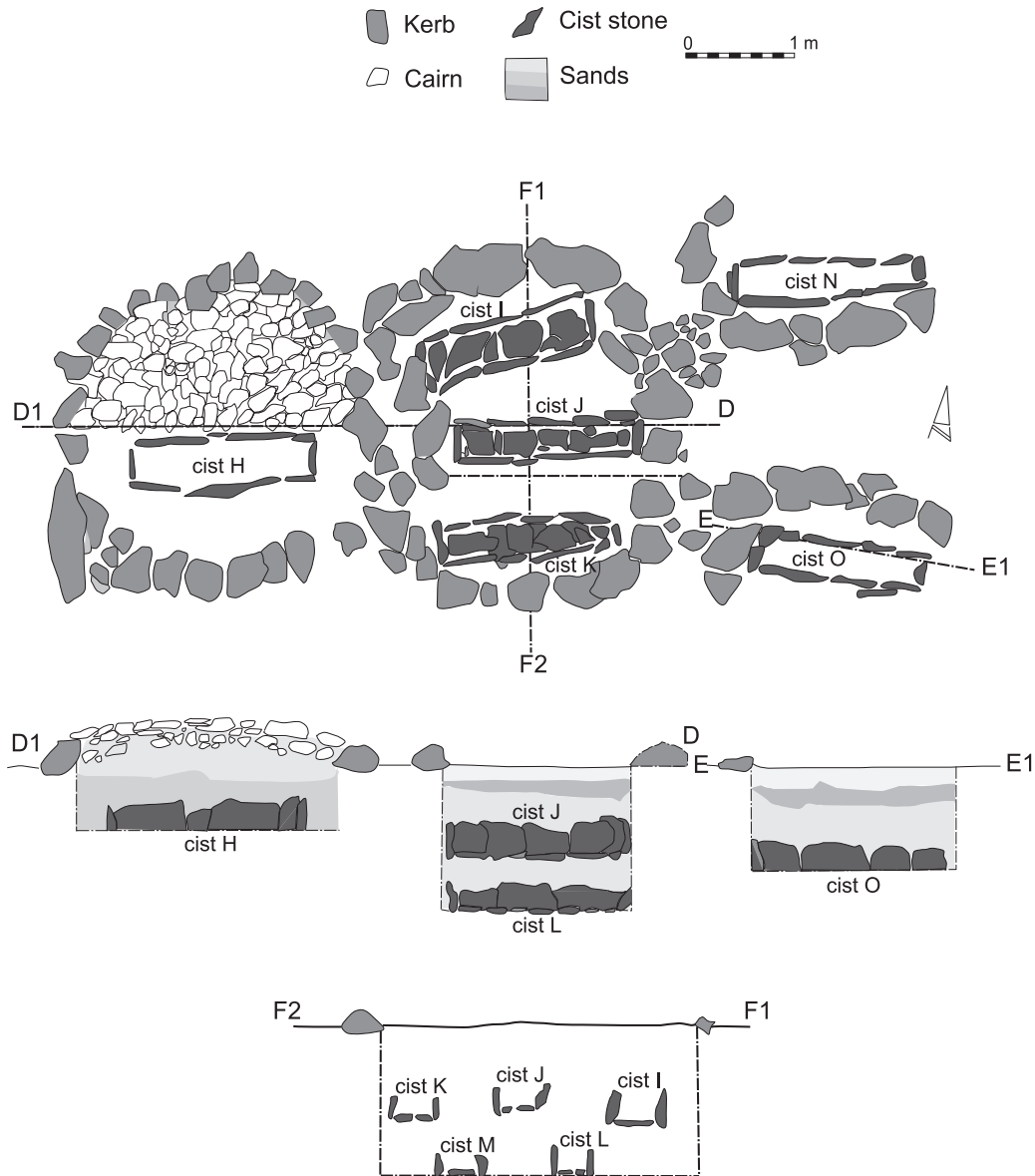


Figure 15. Annotated plan and sections of the horned-cairn complex (after Greig et al. 2000, 599).

ties can also be noted with the double-crescent motif identified in association with the female burial at the Dairy Park, Dunrobin (Close-Brooks 1978–80, 332–3; Figs. 4 & 16). As with the double-disc motif, there are similarities between this monument and the complex histories of Pictish houses like the sub-rectangular house from Howe on Orkney (Hunter 1997, 9–10; Fig. 17). The monument is therefore a combination of two or more abstract motifs comprising crescents or curved lines and rectangles or straight lines. The emphasis on circles is shared with the dumb-bell complex but the appearance could not be more different.

Despite the lack of a precise parallel between the horned-cairn complex and a single Pictish motif,

it is notable that the pair of complex and distinctively shaped monuments at Lundin Links, aligned upon the same contour, parallels the common pairing of symbols upon Pictish symbol-stones (Samson 1992; Forsyth 1997, 90). The tentative conclusion is that the two monumental complexes at Lundin Links represent a pairing of Pictish symbols rendered on a monumental scale.

Gender and genealogy in the cairn complexes

The osteological evidence from the long-cists adds to the significance of the composite characters and shapes of the Lundin Links monuments.

First, all the burials excavated were adults. The absence of children could easily reflect the partial

excavation and taphonomic biases rather than past mortuary practices. Yet it remains clear that cists and cairns in this part of the cemetery were not afforded to infants and children.

The osteological evidence shows that there is a balance between males and females among the graves excavated. However, the distribution of sexed adults also suggests a selective and careful process at work (Fig. 18). The dumb-bell complex contained the juxtaposition of male and female burials. Both individuals interred beneath the circular cairns were males (40–50 years in west cairn, 35–45 years old in east cairn), whereas the oblong cairn in between overlay a younger adult female (about 25 years: Fig. 12). We have already seen that round cairns referring to each other contained opposite sexes whereas multiple interments in rectangular cairns 5 and 6 were of the same sex. It may therefore be the case that the identities and locations of individuals in the dumb-bell complex were carefully selected.

Even clearer patterns were revealed in the horned-cairn complex. The western circular cairn was situated over a long-cist containing a female of around 30 years of age. In the eastern enclosure, all five cists contained adult females. Moreover, there is an age distinction between the upper and lower cists. The two lower burials were both females who died in their 20s, while the three upper burials were females in their later 30s upon death. Finally, of the two cists within the crescentic stone-settings, no skeleton survived in the northern setting but, once again, the skeleton in the southern setting was a female aged 25–30 (Fig. 16). In other words, seven out of the eight cists, and all that could be sexed, proved to be adult female skeletons (Greig *et al.* 2000, 595–600). While the unlikely possibility that all burials were interred contemporaneously cannot be completely discounted, it seems evident that the identities of individuals were remembered over time and successive burials chosen for inclusion that augmented the gendered associations of the monument.

One might cast doubt over the reliability of the sexing of the skeletons originally conducted in the 1960s. However, not only is the report of high quality but also the bone evidence was reappraised and the original findings confirmed in the late 1990s. Moreover, had there been a bias in the original sex determinations, it would have been more likely that females were identified as males, not the other way around (see Mays 1995, 38). The sex determinations therefore can be taken as reliable.

Together with the careful planning of the horned-cairn, it is tempting to regard the monument as a collective repository for selected females from a particular family. Thus the completed monument was not a family

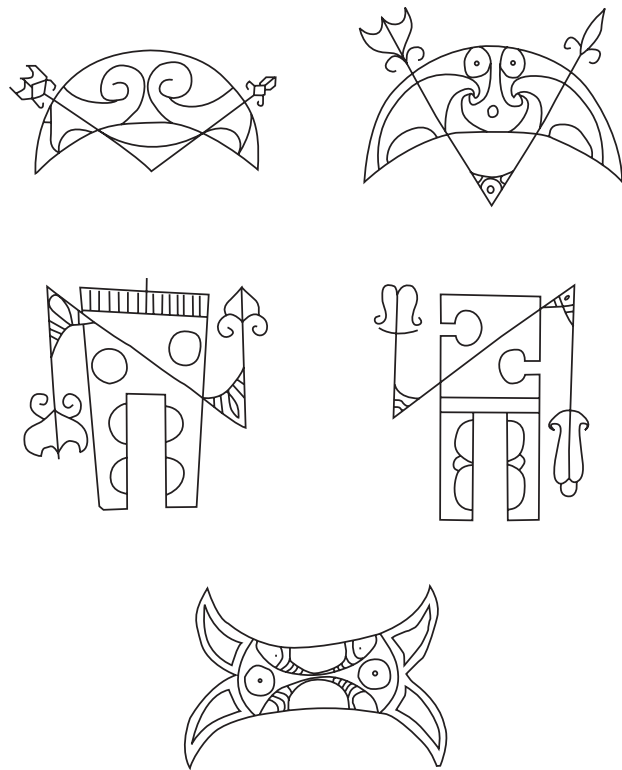


Figure 16. Selected Pictish symbols bearing similarities with the horned-cairn complex (after Close-Brooks 1978–80, 332; Foster 1996, 72 and Henderson 1967, 105).

tomb but commemorated the female genealogy of a particular social group.

Cemetery and topography

Lundin Links appears to demonstrate two instances where the monuments were orchestrated to create monumental symbols, one with clear female-gendered associations. When we look at the overall plan of the cemetery, it appears that, while males and females were mixed throughout, the exclusive use of the horned-cairn complex for adult females indicates that age and gender were manipulated to make statements about genealogy. In this light, the shapes and associations of cairns can be viewed more broadly as statements by the survivors about the dead. Even the simple square, rectangular and circular monuments may be regarded as designed to convey statements not only about the individuals interred beneath them but also the relationships between graves, although the sample is too small for any patterns to be convincing.

With regard to the location, the monuments were clearly not erected to be sky-lined as with burial mounds elsewhere in early medieval Britain. The cairns were low arrangements of stones: seen in plan, their shapes would easily be experienced by those standing

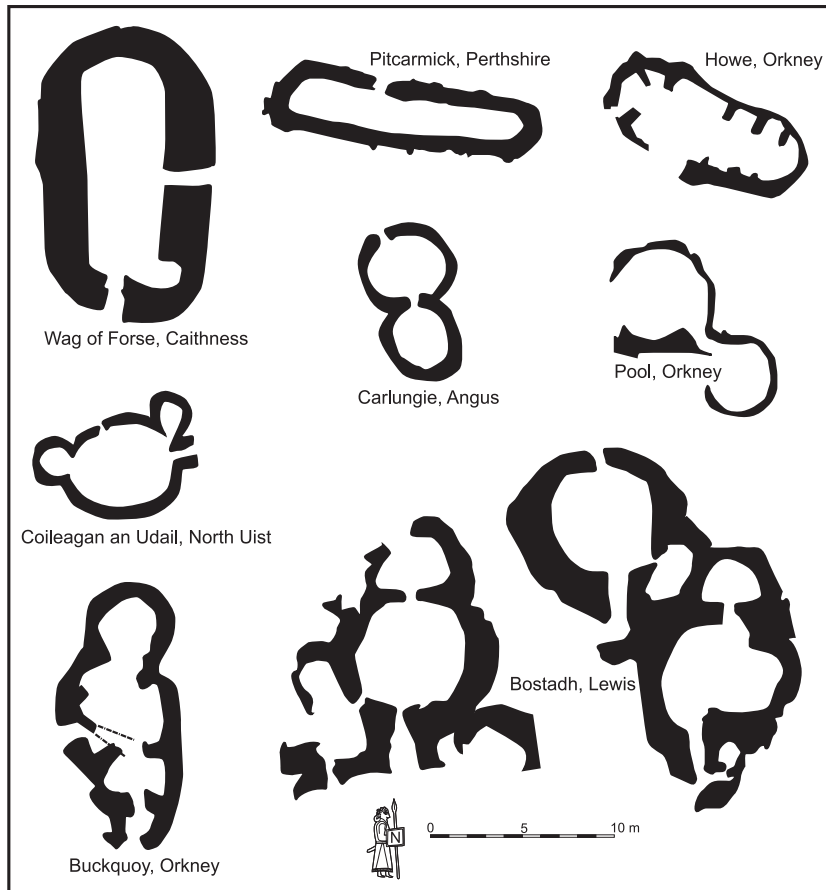


Figure 17. A selection of Pictish house-plans illustrating their multi-cellular character (after Ralston 1997; Hunter 1997, 13; Parker Pearson et al. 2004, 111).

immediately around them. Yet the location of the cairns on a shelf above the shore meant that anyone traversing the higher ground immediately inland would have a good view of their form and layout. Equally, the sea-facing shelf could have made the cairns (as with the cemetery as a whole) striking land-marks for those travelling by boat along the coast (Fig. 7). Consequently, while the cairns were primarily intended to be viewed in immediate proximity by groups of mourners, the site facilitated the experience of the cemetery over wider distances from land and the sea (Härke 2001; Williams 2001).

The early medieval societies along the east coast of Scottish were both fishing and farming communities but it is unlikely that the situation of the monuments is simply a passive reflection of proximity to contemporary coastal settlements. The location may have been selected to promote the visible presence of the dead over the community and also to other communities in the region. An intentional interaction between the cemetery and its environs mirrors a recent observation concerning the location of Pictish symbol stones on the Tarbat

peninsula. Martin Carver argues that they were placed so as to mark the approaches to the peninsula from the sea (Carver 2004; 2005, 26–7).

Cosmological significance for the Lundin Links cemetery's location might also be considered. In a discussion of Scottish folklore, historical and archaeological evidence for recent centuries, Tony Pollard (1999) has argued for an enduring association between the sea shore and concepts of liminality and the dead. Certainly, location with a sea-view was a common feature of these burial sites (e.g. Alexander 1999; Close-Brooks 1978–80; Edwards 1925–26).

Discussion: composite monuments, symbol-stones and monumental symbols

Lundin Links may seem extraordinary in the use of composite monuments for commemoration of the relationships between graves. Yet, prior to the widespread adoption of churchyard burial in northern and western Britain, we find various manifestations of this practice. Amidst the Pictish tradition of northern and eastern Scotland, we

have already seen composite and abutting cairns and mounds with multiple burials, sometimes with cists situated on multiple levels and employing careful use of stones and pebbles (Edwards 1925–26; 1926–27; Stevenson 1984, 146, 148; Fig. 5).

There are other uses of monuments as collective commemorative foci throughout northern and western Britain, including the re-use of prehistoric monuments as commemorative foci (Driscoll 1998; James 1992; Petts 2002) and as enclosures for multiple burials (James 1992; Stanford *et al.* 1995). We also find the re-use of abandoned Roman buildings by early medieval cemeteries (Leach 1986; Watts & Leach 1996).

Rectangular mortuary houses have been identified around single burials in northern and western Britain but they are also found in association with small collections of graves. In these cases, the monuments appear to commemorate successive mortuary episodes, as recognized at Tandderwen, Clwyd and Thornybank, Lothian (Brassil *et al.* 1991; Rees 2002, fig. 3).

Inscribed stones located in early medieval cemeteries can also be regarded as monuments com-

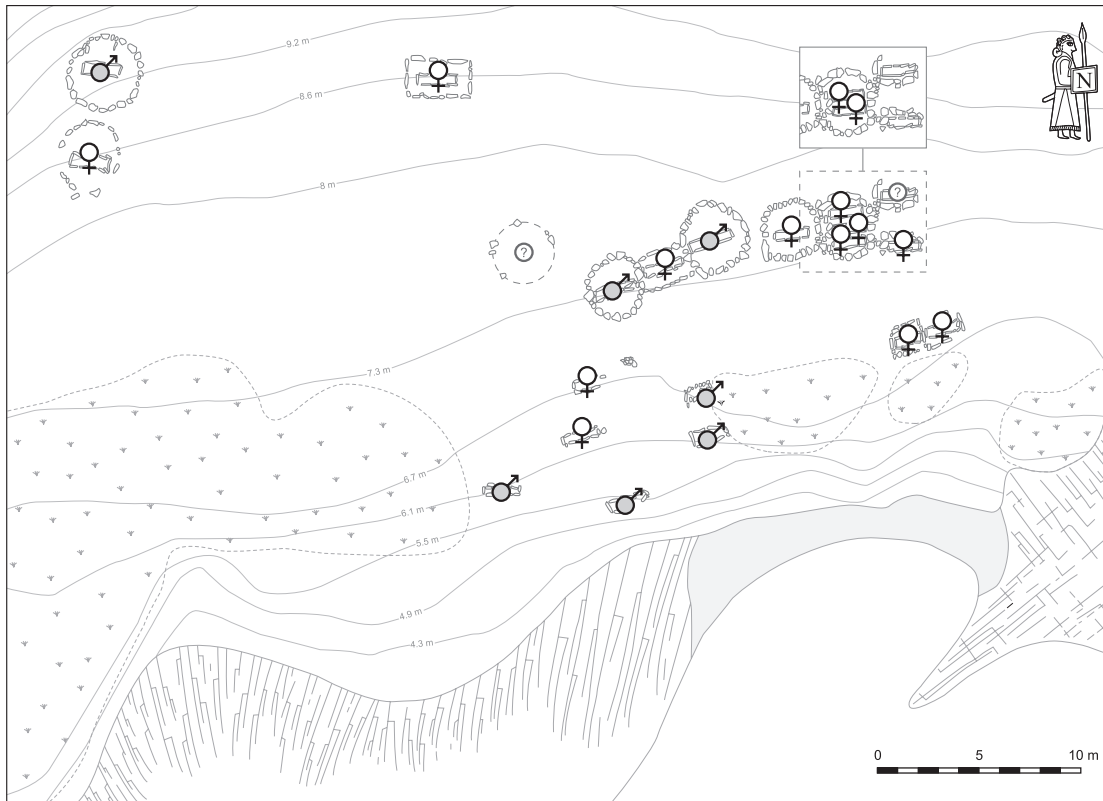


Figure 18. *Distribution of sexed adult skeletons from cists at Lundin Links (after Greig et al. 2000, 591).*

memorating social groups rather than individuals, through their location with special graves at the heart of cemeteries rather than simply denoting the names and marking the graves of the individuals whose names are inscribed upon them (Williams 2006). This argument applies as much to the Latinus stone from Whithorn as it does to the Catstane at Kirkliston (Forsyth 2005).

With the adoption of Christianity, the clustering of successive graves around and within early medieval shrines, chapels and churches rendered them foci for worship but also for the commemoration of multiple and successive graves (e.g. Hill 1997; see Williams 2003). This evidence suggests not that early medieval monuments commemorated an anonymous collective of ancestors (see Shanks & Tilley 1982) but that the dead were remembered in relation to each other through different strategies for creating collective commemorative foci.

Against this range of evidence for composite commemorative monuments in northern Britain in the fifth to eighth centuries AD, Lundin Links is less unusual than might first appear. Indeed, the assumption that any single monument functioned to commemorate exclusively the grave or graves over which it was raised may reflect the imposition of modern expectations onto the early medieval past rather than direct observation

of the interconnected sequences of burials and monuments revealed in the archaeological evidence.

By extension, it can be argued that Pictish symbol-stones commemorated not simply individuals but the relationships between the living and the dead, and referred to relationships between the dead (Close-Brooks 1978–80; Mack 1998, fig. 4). The Lundin Links monuments can be seen as an unusual permutation of this significance. To develop a more specific appreciation of the significance of the shape and composite character of the Lundin Links monuments, it is necessary to give further consideration to the interpretations of Pictish symbols and the Class I symbol-stones.

The monumental scale of the abstract symbols at Lundin Links could be regarded as simply reflecting their ubiquity on many types of art used in contemporary southern Pictish society. The symbol-stones, cave-art and depictions of dress and personal items suggest a society obsessed by adorning surfaces and materials with abstract designs (Foster 1996; Henderson & Henderson 2004). Yet a specific commemorative function to the shapes chosen to create symbols can be suggested.

There are three classes of Pictish symbol motifs: artefacts (commonly interpreted as renditions of antler combs and either bronze mirrors or Roman paterae),

animals, and abstract symbols. The abstract symbols are by far the commonest. These symbols have been described repeatedly as 'mysterious' and 'stubbornly undecipherable' (Hines 2003, 98) and unsurprisingly have attracted all manner of interpretations (e.g. Jackson 1984; Thomas 1963). Yet most writers would find it difficult to disagree with Charles Thomas's suggestion that they have a commemorative context despite the problems with precise interpretation (Thomas 1963; 1984, 175). Moreover, Ross Samson (1992) and Kathryn Forsyth (1997) have developed a strong argument that the symbols formed part of a writing system akin to the ogham, Roman and runic scripts found elsewhere on early medieval stones. It is argued that pairs of symbols denoted bi-syllabic personal names. The mirrors and combs may have augmented or changed the gender of the names associated with them. On later stones, paired symbols appeared to be at locations comparable to those of the personal names on other stones, supporting the interpretation of them as highly stylized pictographs, perhaps commemorating ancestors (Carver 2005, 29). The associations of Class 1 symbol stones with graves might support this interpretation (Mack 1998, 9; Samson 1992; Thomas 1963).

From this evidence, it appears that Pictish symbols were not mysterious but an overt form of commemoration. Yet the assumption that symbol-stones were memorials to individuals and were exclusively associated with individual graves is more problematic in two ways (*pace* Thomas 1963, 65). First, while stones may have been memorials marking a single grave, their low frequency on any given site suggests they were restricted to selected burials that provided foci for the entire cemetery. In this sense, even if denoting the identities of one or two individuals, the monument's prominence made it a focus for subsequent burial rituals. We must entertain the possibility that the stone noted a familiar or clan name rather than the name of an individual, and that the stone marked a burial plot or zone within the cemetery rather than a single grave (*pace* Mack 1998, 9).

Symbols may have been integral to how individuals were remembered not simply because they composed and displayed the names in a public monumental setting but also because they were icons of the genealogies to which the dead belonged. This point has already been made by Charles Thomas (1984, 179): names on stones fix the deceased in relation to ancestors even if these ancestors were not mentioned in person. Early medieval names not only served to symbolize personal identity and accumulated prestige, they also reflected genealogy, real or invented (van Houts 1999). In this light, even personal names are a symbol of 'di-

viduality' rather than 'individuality' in early medieval society, serving to emphasize relational links between generations and contemporaries.

This dividual significance of Pictish symbols is clearer when we recognize that symbol stones often commemorated more than one person (Forsyth 1997, 92; Thomas 1963, 67). Even when only a single person seems to be represented, it would be simplistic to assume that the monument did not serve to link a range of persons both living and dead. When displayed on monuments, these names took on a new significance, because, like glyphs or corporate logos in the modern world, they conveyed not only the identity of the individual but also the social relations that mourners attributed to them, whether actual or idealized. The association of symbol-stones with cists therefore need not be a one-to-one relationship: stones may have been used to mark burial plots or cemeteries as a whole and the corporate identities of these groups. Displayed on symbol stones, the identities of the dead were projected both back into the past as genealogies were evoked and forward into the future through the expectation that the monument would endure. Indeed, because of their striking and memorable shapes and public location, the ability to decipher the name itself need not have been necessary for the monument to be effective in promoting the identities of both the living that raised the monument and the dead it commemorated.

Returning to Lundin Links, there remains a fundamental difference between the symbols carved on symbol-stones and the monumental symbols created from composite monuments. It is argued above that pairs of symbols on Class I symbol-stones created a monumental script naming persons and perhaps indirectly commemorating a network of associated actors, both living and dead. Yet at Lundin Links monumental symbols were composed from the successive burial of selected dead persons. The contrast between the stones and the cairns may suggest a more complex relationship between symbols and dead persons in Pictish society. While identity of persons could be 'composed' and commemorated by pairs of symbols, multiple persons could be employed in mortuary rituals to 'compose' a monumental symbol. Although it is somewhat speculative given the limited evidence available, it is tempting to suggest that we may perhaps be seeing a family, household or clan 'name' embodied in the shape and composite nature of the monumental complexes at Lundin Links.

The suggestion that the Lundin Links monuments employ shape, space, and a composite character to commemorate successive burial episodes takes our

understanding of the commemorative significance of Pictish symbols in new directions. The possibility that the Picts were distinct from their neighbours in practising matriliney and that Pictish females were accorded a higher status than was common in other early medieval societies has been well rehearsed but largely discounted on the historical evidence (e.g. Woolf 1998; Ross 1999; *contra* Samson 1992, 59). The importance of gender and geneology is supported by the clustering of graves of adult females in the horned-cairn complex.

This pattern resonates with increasing evidence from elsewhere that selected adult females were given elaborate mortuary expenditure (Close-Brooks 1978–80) and that a substantial minority of symbol-stones may commemorate women (Samson 1992, 58–9; *pace* Thomas 1963, 75). This need not indicate a distinctively ‘Pictish’ social organization in which women had an elevated social status but the mortuary evidence does highlight the role of women in Pictish society for archaeological narratives that all too frequently seem obsessed with kings, warriors, craftsmen and priests (e.g. Alcock 2003).

Across early medieval Britain and northwest Europe, we find contexts in which selected women took on important roles as commemorators and the commemorated, connected to their distinctive roles as custodians of social memory and mediators of inheritance. The archaeological evidence for the shifting construction of gender relations in the mortuary context has been explicitly discussed for Merovingian and early Anglo-Saxon ritual, including some evidence in the latter case of the organization of cemetery space being connected to gendered identities (e.g. Parfitt & Brugmann 1997, 120–21; Halsall 1996; Stoodley 1999, 126–9). The emphasis upon female identity in the construction of gender might be regarded as a phenomenon associated with periods of social stress caused by migration, religious conversion or political transformation (Stoodley 1999). We might cite the wealthy barrow burials of adult females dated to the later seventh century among the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (e.g. Speake 1989) and the prominent role of women in the raising of rune-stones in Viking Sweden (Sawyer 2001) as instances, at times of religious conversion, where women were closely implicated in commemorating and being commemorated.

The prominence of selected adult females in mortuary ritual and commemoration may be connected to their key role in caring for and lamenting the dead. This would make certain women pivotal creators, mediators and transmitters of the memories of ancestors and genealogies, for their own families as well as for those they married in to (Innes 2001; van Houts 1999, 65–92, 94). With their death, the

community would not only lose their value as forgers of marriage alliances and progenitors of heirs but could also lose lynch-pins connecting the past to the present. In all senses, their loss may have been a crisis, prompting the survivors to afford her a distinctive mortuary ritual. The choice to bury these adult females in close proximity within composite monuments may have been one solution to this concern; serving to materialize the identities of the dead person in relation to similar ancestors and enhancing the identities of the families and, or, the wider communities that they had been part of in life.

Conclusion

The report for Lundin Links is modest about the implications of the site, concluding that it was used by ‘a fairly small Christian community with a tradition of burying men and women under different cairns ... for three or four generations’ (Greig *et al.* 2000, 606). This article has endeavoured to show that we can begin to say something more about the relationship between cists, cairns and symbols in the commemoration of the dead in early medieval northern Britain. We have seen how, at Lundin Links, the remains of selected adults were interred and protected in cists and beneath cairns that were located and shaped to associate the deceased with the identities of graves beneath earlier monuments. We have observed the importance of gender as a structuring principle, influencing the location of graves. The evidence suggests that a dialogue was being maintained and negotiated between the living and the gendered identities of the dead through mortuary rituals and monumentality. Early medieval mortuary practices at Lundin Links involved the strategic use of location, monument-form and a mixture of discrete and composite monuments to depict relational concepts of the person in death.

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