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Delfour ring cairn and stone circle -
Alvie, Highland





What is this ring of Stones?

In the 1845 Statistical Account of Scotland, the Reverend John MacDonald of Alvie describes this monument as '...the remains of a Druidical Cairn, enclosed by a circle of large stones, closely set up on end.' He goes on to muse whether the monolith might mark the grave of an important person and notes that the site still appears to be venerated locally, as the stones have been allowed to remain in the midst of arable land, despite 'a considerable interruption to the operation of the plough'.

Delfour is classified by archaeologists as a 'Clava cairn' and is thought to date to the Early Bronze Age. They group it with about 50 other similar structures, all of which share a range of features; while the name, itself, is derived from the famous cairns at Balnuaran of Clava.

Clava cairns usually consist of an inner and outer ring of kerbstones (the space between them filled in with smaller boulders) and a surrounding bank, or platform - the whole being enclosed by a ring of standing-stones. As with recumbent stone circles, like Loanhead of Daviot, the outer kerbstones and the standing-stones are usually graded in height, with the tallest situated in the south-west and the shortest in the north-east. Delfour is termed a 'Clava ring-cairn', but some have an entrance and passage that leads to the open chamber at their centre. These are termed 'Clava passage graves' and they appear quite similar to earlier Neolithic chambered tombs. Unfortunately, excavations within either kind of Clava Cairn have usually yielded little, but the stain of a crouched body was found at Corrimony, while traces of cremated remains occurred at Balnuaran of Clava.

While the Reverend MacDonald may have been wrong in believing the stones to be 'Druidical', he was undoubtedly right in supposing that the monument had been respected for hundreds of years by those who lived in its shadow. In Gaelic, math is 'good', and clach is 'stone'. Locals around Balnuaran of Clava reported that 'Clava' meant 'the good stones'; but it is also interesting to note that cladh is Gaelic for 'cemetery', so the purpose of these monuments may well have been partly understood long before they attracted the attention of archaeologists.

Like so many ancient monuments, Delfour is much depleted, as many tons of stone have been carted away in comparatively recent times. The one standing stone on the south-west, together with the flat slab situated at the foot of the surrounding bank on the west, are all that remains of the stone circle that once surrounded the cairn.





A site for burial, gathering, celebration?

The purpose of such monuments is still debated. Do they mark the location where bodies were once burnt upon funeral pyres, or are they rather the grave of one high status individual? The robbed state of Delfour would make it quite easy to look beneath the ground surface. Perhaps one day in the near future we will have the technology to do so in some detail, without disturbing what may be there.

Sources:

Bradley, R 2000 The Good Stones: A New Investigation of the Clava Cairns, (Society of Antiquaries Monograph Series No 17: Edinburgh)

MacDonald, J 1845 Parish of Alvie, Inverness, The New Statistical Account of Scotland: Inverness - Ross and Cromarty 14 (William Blackwood and Sons: Edinburgh and London) 87

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