

Part of Historic Environment Scotland



CANMORE


NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



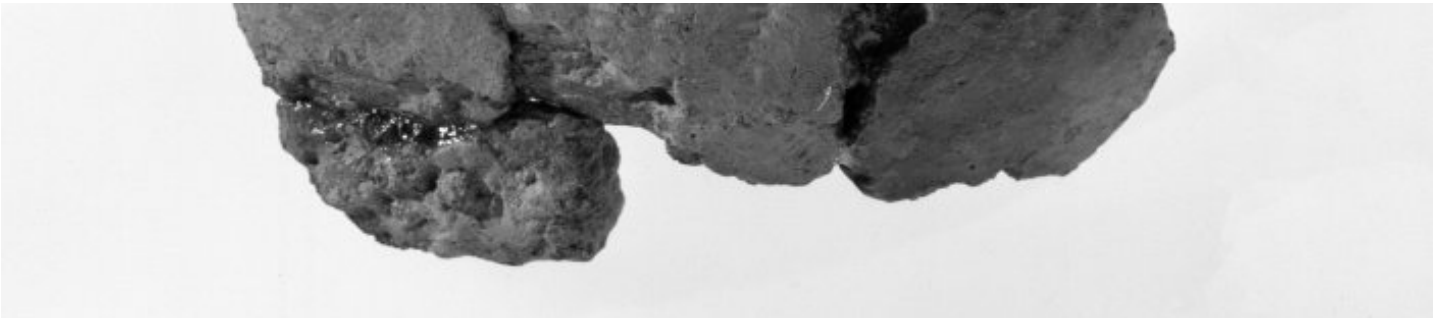
Archaeology InSites



[Return to Archaeology InSites](#)



Swaites Hill 'Hero's cairn' - South Lanarkshire



Who was the cairn built for, and why?

Glancing up from the busy road that traverses the valley of the River Clyde, you can see the remains of what was once a great Early Bronze Age burial cairn silhouetted against a wintry sky. For the inquisitive visitor who steps out of their car a steep climb through the fields of the farm brings an open view of the surrounding landscape and, just as the crest of the ridge is reached, a close-up view of what little is left.

Earlier travellers through this valley surely knew the occupants of the cairn, or could at least find out – were they their buried ancestors, famous figures of local lore, landowners, warriors or even poets perhaps? And the ceremonies that surrounded their burial were perhaps also remembered with warmth and emotion: the cremation of bodies on funeral pyres; the deposition of ashes in carefully made pottery urns; the digging of pits and the construction of stone boxes (known as cists) to hold the urns; and finally the gathering of stones to create a large cairn to cover them. Yet with the passing of time these individuals and their stories have been forgotten.



An 'ignoble' past

The cairn too has suffered an ignoble recent past. Its stones, once piled high in honour of the dead, were robbed away, used to build the dykes that criss-cross the farming landscape of recent years, and a small enclosure for animals tacked onto one side. Little is left and when one famous archaeologist (David Christison) was drawn to this distant silhouette, it appeared to him as an enclosure, a place of defence rather than of burial. With this laying bare of the cairn, so its innermost skeletal secrets were revealed. The Ordnance Survey, when taking down the names of every local place in 1858, recorded that it was 'an ancient sepulchral tumulus' which 'bears the mark of excavation'. A contemporary source recorded the discovery of a sextet of cinerary urns in a stone cist, now all lost once again.

But robbers and diggers are not always thorough and another cist, although disturbed, survived to be studied in more detail with trowels, pencils and tapes. In 1976, they found such delights as 'whipped cord impressions' on the pottery and cremated bones that were 'finely comminuted' (reduced to tiny fragments). Beyond this, however, the small excavation helped establish the chronology and morphology of burial cairns in the area. There are another 25 nearby, and the type of urn associated with them is known as a 'Food Vessel', broadly dated to the Early Bronze Age (2200-1750BC). The finds from the cist are now carefully housed in our National Museum and available for further study. Perhaps someday we may know more of the anonymous hero (or heroine) who gives the cairn its current name.

On the cold winter day I stumbled over the cairn, a herd of cattle huddled around a feeder full of hay, set without ceremony in its centre. Hefty with years of breeding, they too form a link with the farmers of the past, who took time from their fields and cattle to building a once prominent elegy to their most revered. Their ungulate hoofs ensure there will be more finely comminuted material for future diggers to discover.

Sources:

OS Name Book Lanark No. 16, 5; Irving and Murray 1864; Christison 1890; RCAHMS 1978; Stevenson 1979

George Geddes - Archaeology Project Manager



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/47644/swaites-hill>
<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1539426>
<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1539409>



#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)



[Accessibility Policy](#)
[Buying Images](#)
[Cookie Policy](#)
[Legals](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Contact](#)
[MyCanmore](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[User Guide](#)



SUPPORTING
year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

© Historic Environment Scotland. Scottish Charity No. SC045925