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Pityoulish Barrow cemetery - Aviemore, Highland

Crop marks, barrow cemeteries and the Pityoulish cemetery

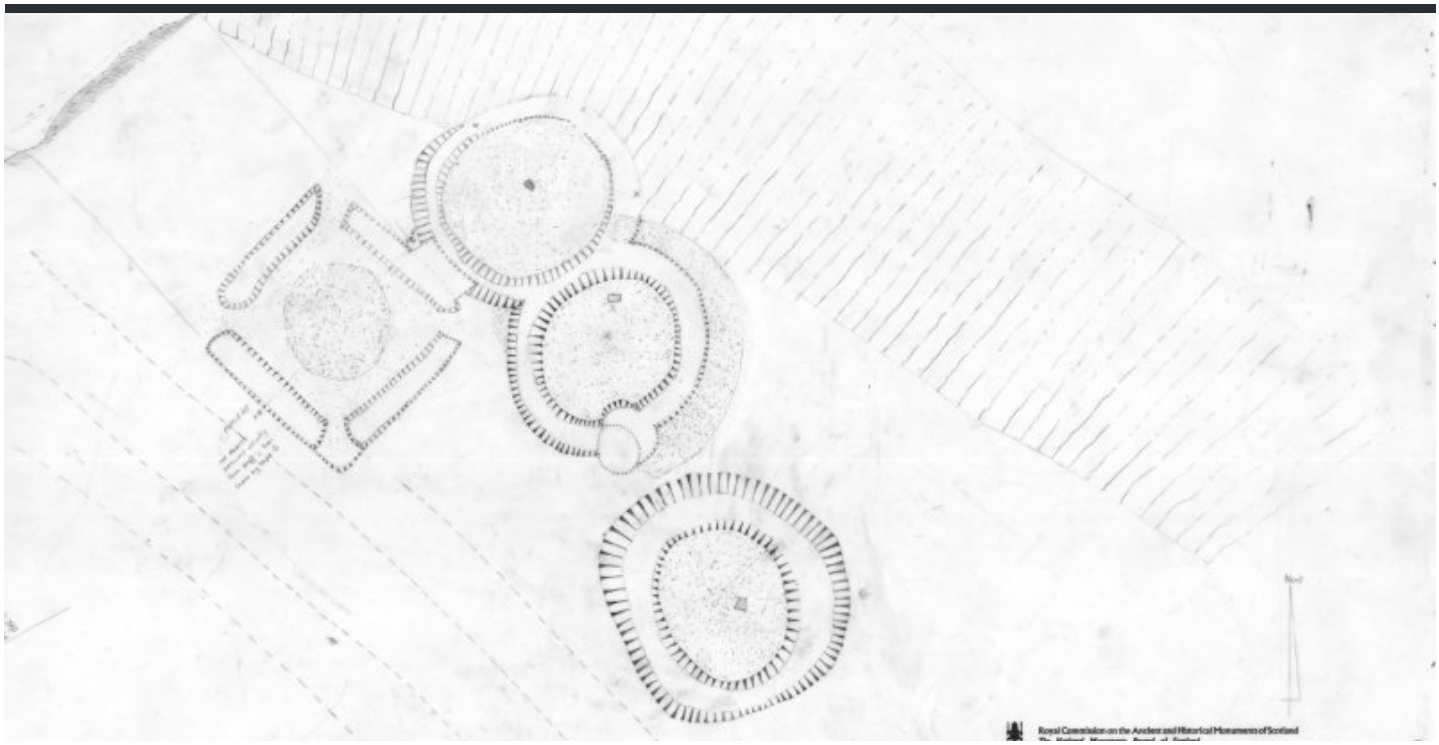
The cemeteries can tell us much about burial traditions during the time when they were built, usually known in Highland Scotland as the Pictish period. Many survive as archaeological crop-marks, because the physical remains of the barrows (a barrow is simply a mound of earth over a grave) have been removed over time, whether by natural erosion, ploughing or the actions of antiquarians. Crop-marks reflect the surviving buried remains, and in the case of barrows one can often see a square or circular ditch, within which there is a pit that marks the position of a grave. While these remains may offer much to the excavator (see Alexander 2005), imagine how exciting it can be to re-discover a barrow cemetery which is better preserved, where the mounds are still visible on the surface.

Pityoulish is one of these rare sites, all the more so as it stands on a terrace just above the River Spey in a landscape that has been heavily improved for agriculture. If you get the chance to visit you will find two groups of barrows, some 700m apart. The NE group, described here, contains one square and three circular barrows, but there is an additional mound, with a stone set against its edge, some 95m to the SE. The three round barrows measure about 5.5m in diameter within a shallow ditch, and stand to 0.5m in height, while the fourth square barrow is slightly larger. It too has a surrounding ditch, but this is not continuous and there are narrow 'causeways' at each corner (a diagnostic feature). Two of the round barrows have a stratigraphic relationship – one is certainly later than the other.

Archaeologists excavated one of the round barrows at Pityoulish in 1953. The circular earthen mound appeared to cover just one burial placed in a rectangular pit near its centre. The excavation confirmed anecdotal evidence that the site had been robbed, perhaps by those in search of grave goods, sadly a relatively common occurrence prior to the development of an archaeological profession. Despite the robbing, they found skeletal remains, concentrations of charcoal and a small stone marking one side of the pit. The excavators report, published in 1955, included a thorough description of the skeletal remains by Dr I H Wells of the Department of Anatomy at the University of Edinburgh:

"These remains comprise portions of the skull, mandible and uppermost three cervical vertebrae; and the lower ends of both femora, remains of both tibiae and fibulae, and some of the bones of both feet. The ossification of the limb bones and of the base of the skull shows this individual to have been fully adult. At the same time the short length of the lambdoidal suture which is preserved shows little evidence of closure and indicates an age probably less than 35 years. Although the skull bones are thin the muscle markings are strongly developed and the mastoid processes large, suggesting that the skeleton is most probably male." (Rae & Rae 1955, 158)

Even in the 1950s, the careful analysis of small fragments of skeleton could tell is a lot about a person from the past. But archaeological science has come a long way in 64 years, and a reanalysis of the bones (if they survive) would no doubt tell us much more, perhaps including the diet of the man, and the area he was brought up.


Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Some interpretations

So what can we say about burials from this period? It appears that the tradition of burying people in barrow cemeteries like this was long-lived. Dating evidence from a range of barrow cemeteries demonstrates their use from around the 3rd to the 11th century AD. But it is important to bear in mind that our methods of dating are still relatively crude, and that apparent similarities in the morphology of burials and in their date, perhaps masks regional and cultural variations. There are many questions to keep the archaeologists of the future busy!

Finally, it is worth thinking about the location of many of the barrow cemeteries (RCAHMS 2007, 123-4). Most are positioned adjacent to rivers, or close to the sea, on relatively flat natural terraces. In some cases, these locations favour the formation of cropmarks due to their well drained and light soils, but others have no doubt been carefully considered by the builders, reflecting boundaries of control or management, or a more symbolic explanation. Archaeologists have suggested that they might have appealed as 'liminal' places. The term, which describes a position at a boundary or threshold (between land and sea for example), might help us interpret the sites in their contemporary landscape, culture and environment. We know from ritualistic deposits that water had a meaning beyond the functional in the Iron Age; perhaps bodies of water such as the Spey were seen as gateways between different worlds? The positioning of the barrows close to the water may have been significant, as if the placement of the burial allowed the soul of the person to pass across a liminal zone to another world.

References:

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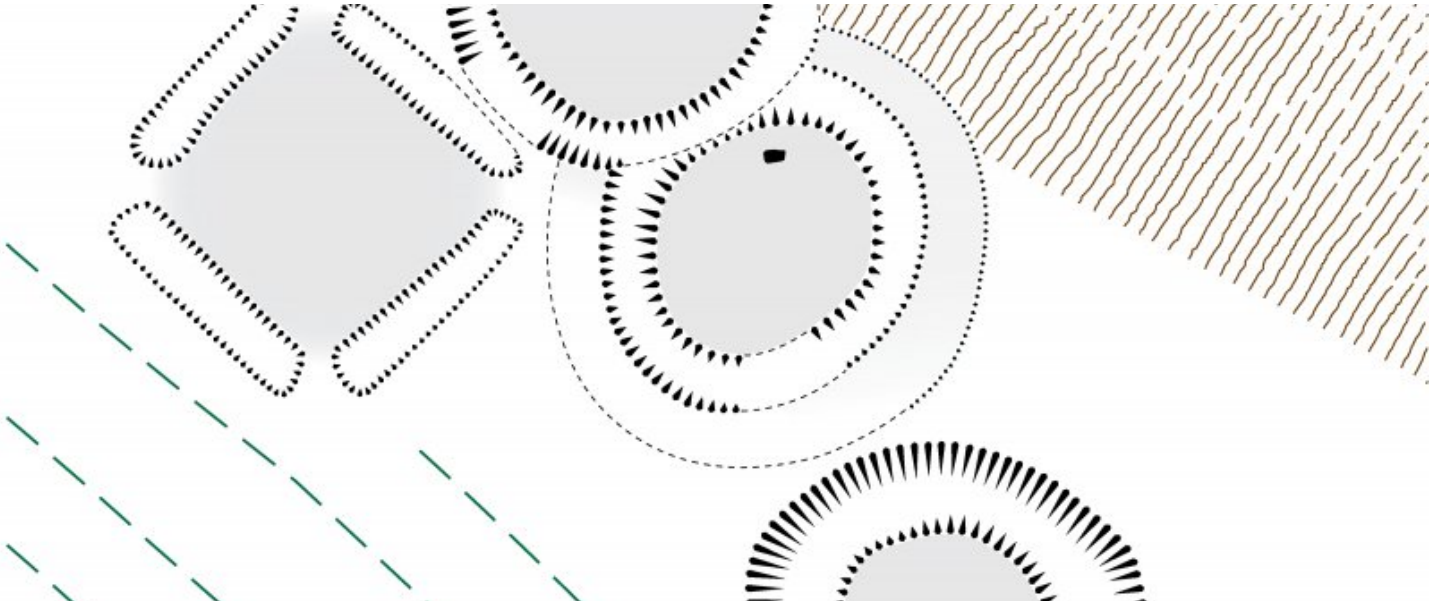

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