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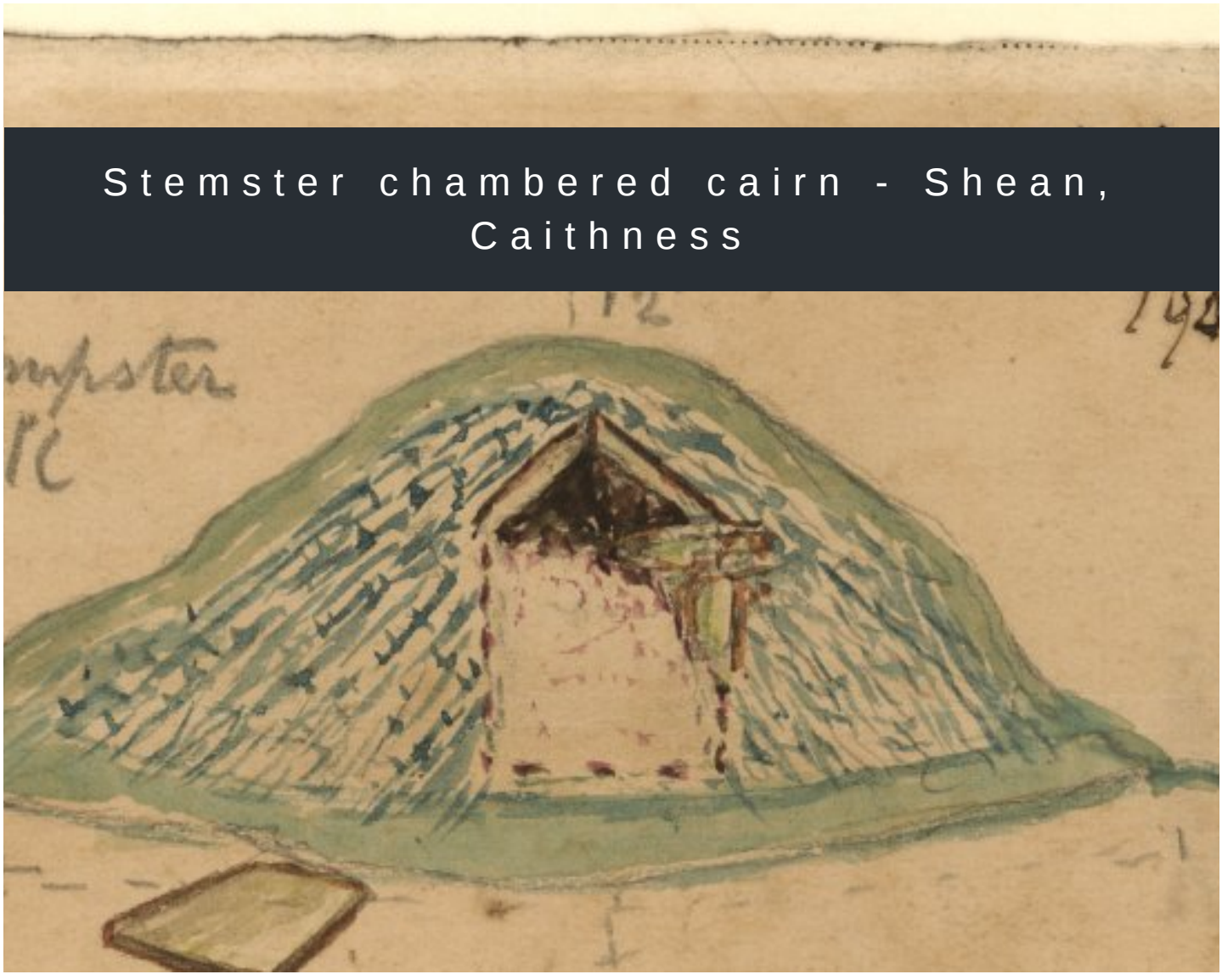
Stemster chambered cairn - Shean, Caithness



Explanation and excavation

Caithness boasts one of the richest archaeological landscapes in Scotland. The countryside is littered with prehistoric remains, including numerous Neolithic tombs, commonly known as chambered cairns. These great mounds, made of stone and turf, have internal chambers and come in many shapes and sizes, including: round, oval, heel-shaped, 'short horned', long, rectangular, or 'double horned'. Some are small and simple but others have multiple internal compartments and low, narrow passageway entrances. The flat nature of the available stone in Caithness provided Neolithic communities with the perfect building material to construct these spectacular, 5000 year old examples of architecture and engineering.

In the late 19th or early 20th century the chambered cairn at Stemster, Shean , was excavated by two of the most notable archaeologists of their time, John Nicolson and Sir Francis Tress Barry. Nicolson was a talented artist who recorded their findings through drawings and paintings. These fascinating illustrations provide the only surviving visual record of the excavation of the chambered cairn.

The long cairn at Stemster is about 46m long and sits in a prominent position on top of a gently rounded hill. Although now collapsed, there would once have been a stone-lined passageway, leading to an internal square chamber. The chamber was recorded as 8 foot in height, with two upright flagstones in each corner. The floor was paved with five large flagstones which stretched right across the chamber, from one side to the other. Nicolson and Tress Barry may have been the first people to enter the tomb in over 3000 years. Inside they uncovered the remains of a human skeleton in a crouched position. The body had been positioned in a corner of the chamber inside a ring of five small grey stones on a low slab. A clay pot had been buried with the bones. Later in the excavation a second burial was discovered, near the top of the cairn.

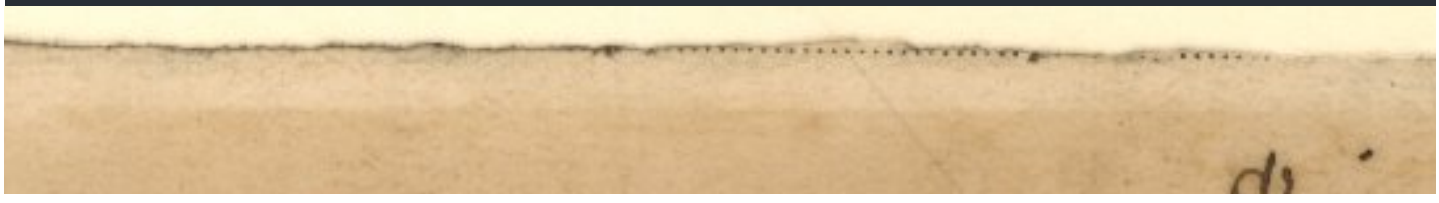
'Houses of the dead'

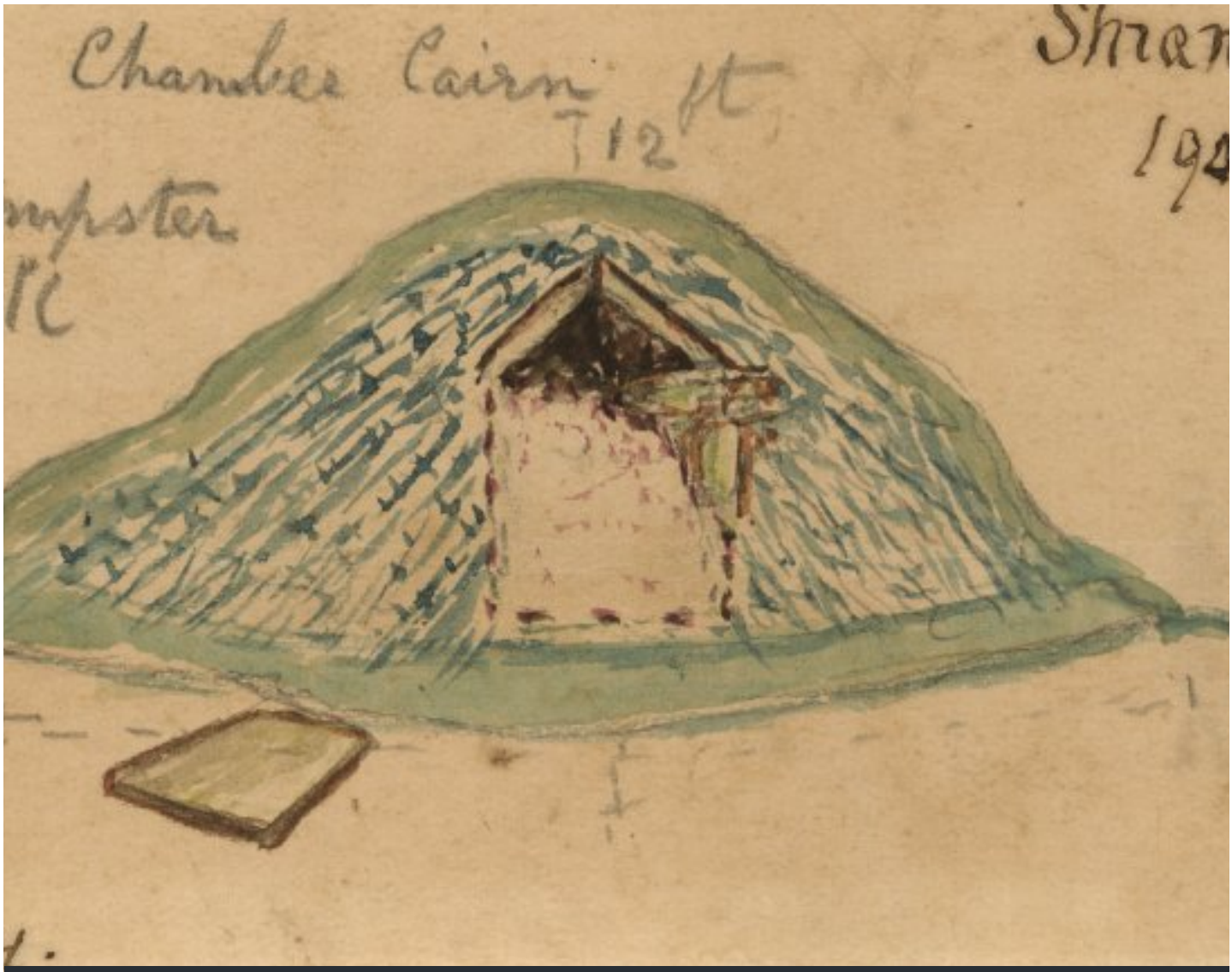
Archaeologists believe that these remarkable structures were 'houses for the dead' and a place of ceremony and worship. This suggests that the communities who built them had a belief in some kind of afterlife, although we may never know what that would have been or meant to them. Perhaps they were a place to keep the dead safe, or perhaps they were consider to be a place for souls to rest before passing on to the next life where they would join their kinsfolk? Alternatively, the tombs may have been constructed to keep the dead locked away, ensuring the safety of the living. Despite the variety of archaeological interpretations, all agree that these sites must have played a very important role in the lives of Bronze Age communities.

Join us next week on Archaeology InSites as we explore the truly hidden monuments of Scotland's Neolithic period. These 'crop mark' sites are often only visible from the air. Some of them are so vast they span almost 600 metres – equivalent to almost six football pitches laid out from end-to-end!

Maya Hoole - Archaeology InSites project manager

https://canmore.org.uk/site/8505/shean-stemster
http://her.highland.gov.uk/singleResult.aspx?uid=MHG2361
http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM11239





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