

The Giant's Grave, Slochd Measach Isle of Islay

Exploring the first Neolithic people in Scotland

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From the Mesolithic to the Neolithic on the Isle of Islay

The transition from mobile hunting and gathering to Neolithic farming lifestyles is one of the most pivotal events in human history. The Neolithic emerged in Southwest Asia around 11,000 years ago, and then spread across Europe, reaching Scotland sometime around 6000 years ago. We are exploring the appearance of the Neolithic on Islay by studying one of the first Neolithic burial tombs on the island: Slochd Measach, otherwise known as the Giant's Grave.

Exposure of the massive stones that once stood at the eastern end of the tomb. These would have made a striking statement about the continuing presence of the ancestors within the Neolithic world

The earliest evidence for people in Scotland comes from the end of the Ice Age, around 14,500 years ago at Howburn in South Lanarkshire and at 12,000 years ago at Rubha Port an t-Seilich on Islay. They lived by hunting and gathering, continuing that lifestyle for more than 8000 years during the Mesolithic period. On Islay we have found several of their campsites at Gleann Mor, Bolsay, Coulererach and Storakaig. Quite suddenly, around 6000 years ago, those campsites disappear and new types of archaeological remains are found: pottery, polished stone axes, the bones from sheep, goat and cattle, and large burial monuments known as chambered cairns.

This evidence marks the start of the Neolithic period. It reflects not only the change to an economy based on herding animals and growing crops, but new attitudes to the land, to society and especially to death. Although the evidence remains sparse, it seems likely that the first Neolithic people in Western Scotland had spread from Northern France, sailing up the Irish Sea and ultimately replacing the indigenous Mesolithic hunting and gathering communities. But whether those Mesolithic people had also adopted the Neolithic lifestyle themselves, whether they had embraced or resisted the new incomers, and the precise timing of the start of the Neolithic, remains little understood.

Burying the Neolithic dead on Islay

Several Neolithic burial tombs are known on Islay. They have rectangular shaped chambers constructed from slabs of stone, and would have been surrounded and covered by a cairn made from stones – we call these tombs chambered cairns.



Port Charlotte chambered cairn, located next to the football pitch at Port Mor, is the only Neolithic tomb which has been excavated within recent times. The excavation, undertaken between 1976 and 1979, indicated the tomb had been constructed at around 5900 years ago. Four compartments were discovered, making up a long chamber, with evidence for a concave façade and a large standing stone at its entrance. Only a few human bones had survived, located within just one of the chambers.

Each tomb is likely to have served a Neolithic community, possibly acting as a ritual centre for people who were living across a wide area. Several bodies are likely to have been placed within each cairn, perhaps with each compartment housing the dead from a specific family. It seems unlikely that all of the deceased had been placed within the tombs. Instead, the tombs are more likely to have been for the founding members of the Neolithic communities when they first established on Islay.



Frachdale chambered cairn is located on the Oa. Only a small amount of the cairn material has survived, and it appears to have been a single compartment within the tomb. At the eastern end of the tomb are two massive portal stones, which would have once formed an impressive entrance.

Rediscovering The Giant's Grave



The Giant's Grave burial tomb is at Nereabolls, and is now surrounded by coniferous forest on the slopes of Beinn Tart a'Mhill. It was slowly being buried beneath peat and bracken. In the summer of 2015 we began clearing the vegetation so that it could be properly surveyed.

The tomb has a chamber with four compartments, with the two inner compartments having been constructed from massive stone slabs. Because of the acidic peaty soil, no human bones will have survived within the compartments, all of which are waterlogged.

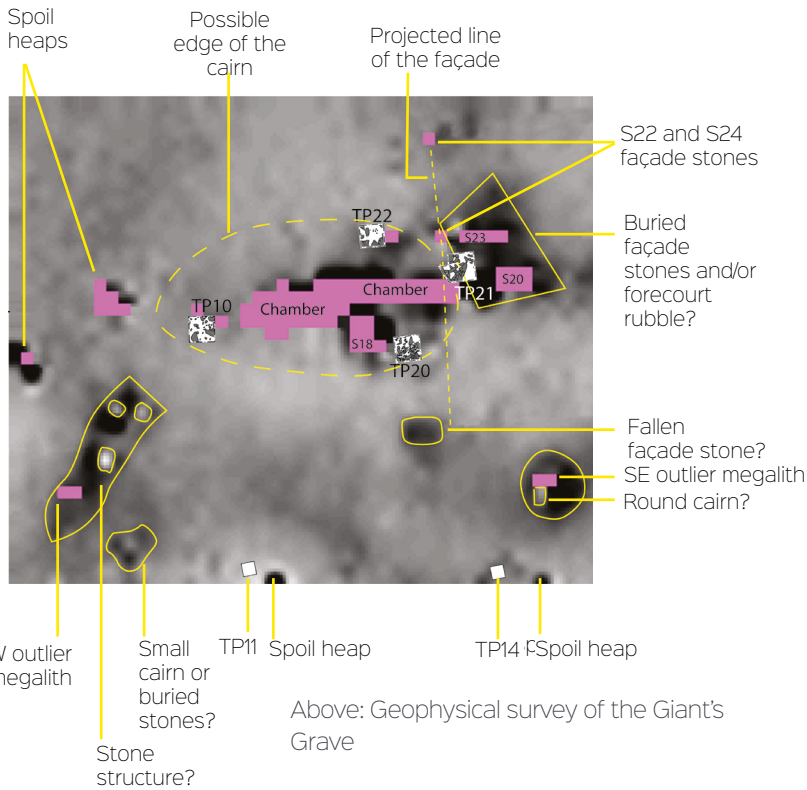
Many of the stones are very large, suggesting there had once been an impressed façade to the tomb, one designed to both honour the dead and to impress visitors.



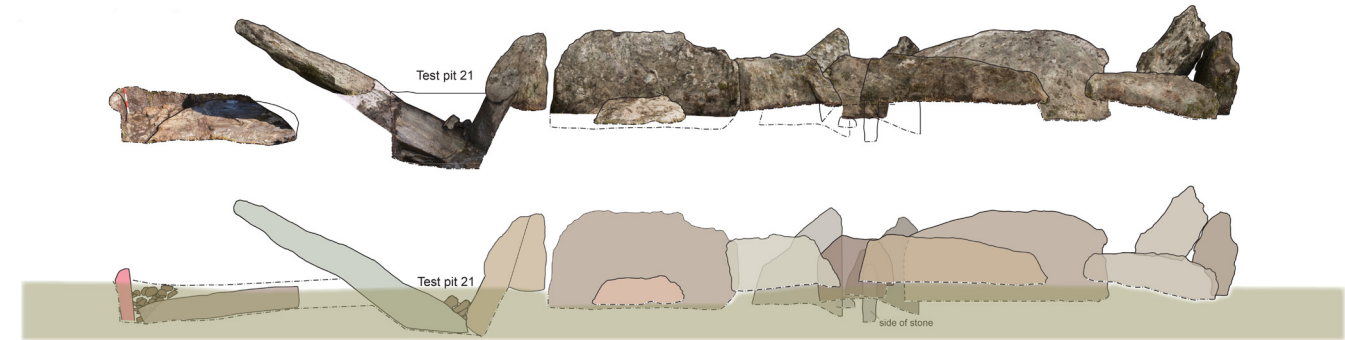


Beginning to explore

In 2015, we used geophysical surveying techniques and small-scale test excavations to begin exploring the burial tomb.



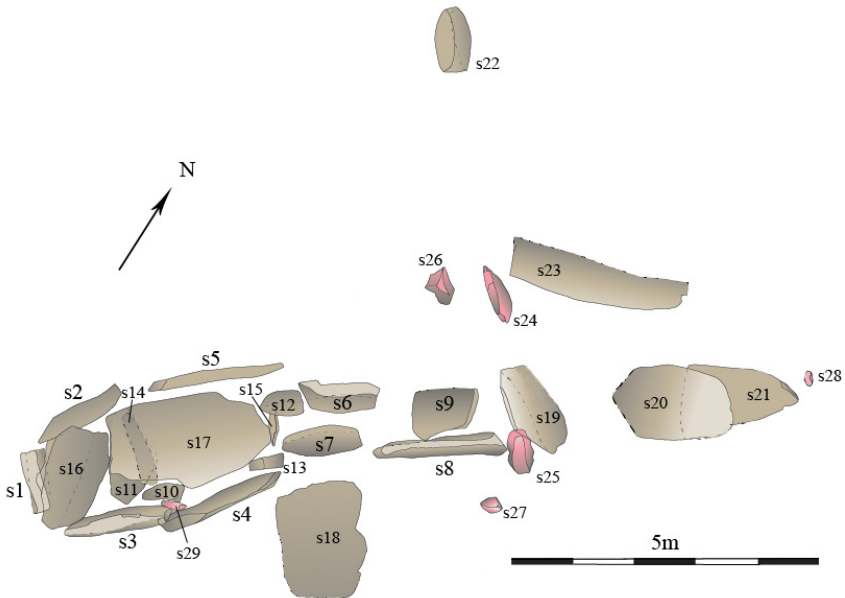
Above: Geophysical surveying techniques
Below: Exposure of the rubble, now buried below peat, which had once been used to construct the cairn around, and possibly over the tomb



Elevation drawing of the Giant's Grave

Future work?

Having now surveyed the Giant's Grave, we hope to begin excavation in the summer of 2016. Only full excavation will reveal the architecture of this impressive tomb.



Plan of the Giant's Grave



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