

Giant's Grave excavation – what have we learned?

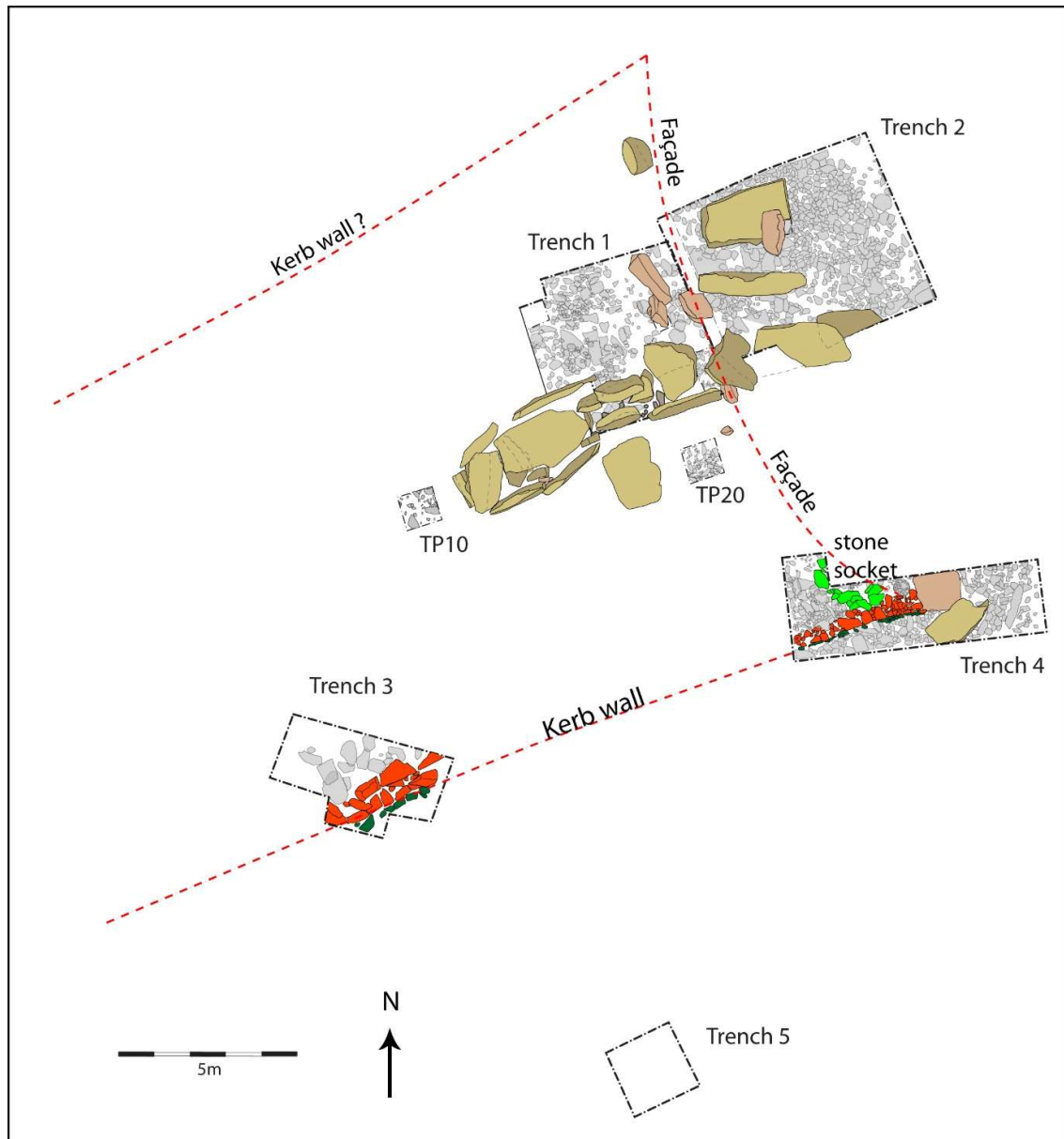
In August 2017 we completed a third and final season of excavation at the Early Neolithic Clyde-type chambered cairn at Slochd Meseach near Neraebolls, better known as the Giant's Grave. The scale of our investigation increased each year. In 2015 we spent one week evaluating the site with a series of test-pits and the initial geophysical survey. In 2016 we carried out two weeks of excavation (Trenches 1 and 3) and extended the geophysics to the edges of the forestry clearing. In our final year we were fortunate to be able to stay on site for three weeks and excavate further three trenches (Trenches 2, 4 and 5) and conduct additional geophysical, photogrammetric and 3D laser scan surveys. This has only been possible as a result of funding from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Islay Heritage and Bournemouth University, which supplemented the core funding from the University of Reading.



Some of the Giant's Grave excavation team lined up along the façade with the chamber in the foreground and Trenches 2 and 4 in the background.

So what have we learned? Unsurprisingly, our understanding of the monument and its environs grew exponentially with every stage of the fieldwork. Although limited in their size, the 2015 test-pits have established general profile of the sediment build-up around the monument. Perhaps most significantly we were able to model the thickness of the peat, which varied from 0.3m to more than 1m in thickness, and to radiocarbon date the beginning of its formation to no more than three hundred years ago. Indeed, the landscape of this part of Beinn Tart-Mhill has undergone massive transformation in recent times from being a settled agricultural grazing landscape, criss-crossed by walls and dykes, to being quite rapidly depopulated, subsumed under peat and eventually covered by the conifer plantation. What was the environment like in the Neolithic remains unclear for now, but we hope that the analysis of the samples from the buried soil on which the chambered cairn was constructed might provide some clues. The 2015 test-pits have for the first time established that some

cairn material did survive below the peat, but we did not know what its extent was and whether the shape of the monument could still be reconstructed. Millennia of stone robbing and re-use has reduced the cairn to its footings, well below the height of the megalithic chamber it once covered. Two radiocarbon dates from the charcoal retrieved from the top of the surviving rubble in test-pit TP20 produced Early Iron Age dates (540-390 CalBC and 410-230 CalBC), indicating some activity at this time. At least some of this activity is likely to have been related to the robbing of the stone from the cairn, which was already substantially denuded by this time, judging from the level from which the charcoal came.



Plan of the excavations at the Giant's Grave chambered cairn showing the megalithic chamber and the location of the surrounding trenches and test-pits. The geometry of the cairn has been extrapolated from the archaeological evidence obtained by the excavation.

Our aims and objectives in 2016 were primarily to establish the structural sequence for the cairn and the chamber and to find out how were they built. Was the monument built in one go or were there multiple phases of construction and modification? Trench 1 was placed alongside the northwest side of the chamber where there was an apparent kink in its alignment between the back two and the front two compartments. This misalignment could have been a sign that the two parts of the chamber were constructed at different times, but our excavation instead showed that this was simply due to the differences in preservation with the front two compartments suffering much more from toppling and displacement of its roof and sides over time. In fact, the chamber appears to have been built as a four compartment structure from the start. The orthostats were placed in a shallow cut, wedged at the base with smaller rubble and probably levelled at the top with dry stone walling before being capped with massive capstones.

The appearance of the chamber as it is today is misleading in several aspects including the fact that it is visible at all. When first built it would have been covered by a massive cairn several times its width and length and most likely double the height too. The stone from the cairn provided material for the building of later structures and field walls across the hillside over the subsequent millennia, some of which may have been recycled more than once. Although the remains of the chamber still form an imposing structure, the sheer size of the orthostats is hidden by the surrounding peat on the outside and by the collapsed capstones, rubble and standing water on the inside. Trench 1 demonstrated the scale of the original construction showing the full height of the orthostats and establishing the true positions of those that have been toppled or displaced. Our excavation inside the chamber was limited due to its inaccessibility and the safety concerns posed by the inward leaning megaliths. We were able to excavate a small area at the entrance into the chamber and sampled its soil content for environmental analysis. The analysis are still in progress, but they have already identified wood charcoal and a grain of barley, which we will submit for radiocarbon analysis together with a selection of other charcoal and seed samples from across the excavation.



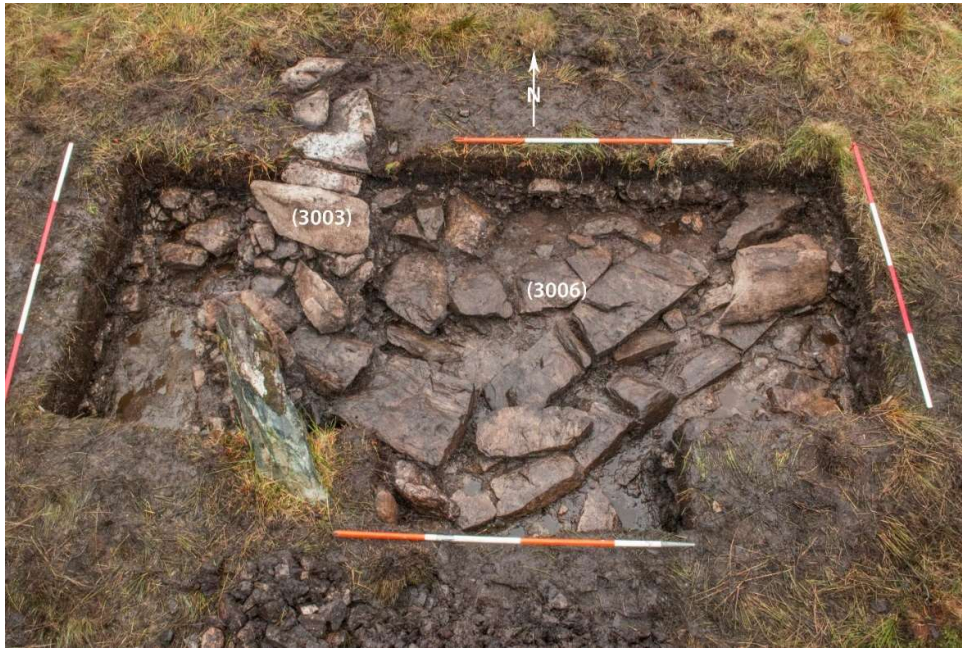
Tom with one of the orthostats exposed in Trench 1 showing the difference between the portion visible above the surface of the peat and the full height of the chamber in the trench.

The cairn itself was built against the sides of the chamber with large blocks often stacked vertically against each other in the direction of the front of the monument. They were then wedged and secured with smaller stones. The top layer of rubble was clearly disturbed through robbing and trample. There were not many finds in this material apart from a single worked flint tool and a number of possible quartz artefacts, which were, by large, much more dubious, as quartz sheers and breaks from the parent geology and is widespread on the site in its natural state. Considering the paucity of the prehistoric finds it is perhaps understandable that we were quite excited to find a small whisky bottle at the top of the sediments in the chamber. This is Islay after all! The bottle contained small amount of liquid, which has not, as yet, been sampled.



Whisky bottle from the chamber

Our smaller trench (Trench 3) was positioned at the location of one of the two outlying megaliths to the southwest from the chamber. This area also showed some interesting high resistance anomalies in the results of the geophysical survey. We found out that the outlying megalith was moved and incorporated into a south-north orientated wall, which we could trace in the geophysics for about 20m or so under the peat to the edge of the clearing. The wall was overlying a rubble platform or an area of cobbling, which extended across the entire area of the trench and beyond. Both the wall and the cobbling looked to be using the stone available from the cairn to create useful dry standing perhaps for sheep or cattle, but whether this activity belongs to the late prehistoric, medieval or more recent period, we simply cannot say until we get the results of the radiocarbon dating in due time. Underlying the layer of cobbling, however, were the remains of the Neolithic cairn – first disturbed and tumbled - then well preserved in the form of a substantial retaining kerb. The kerb was built as a double skin wall with carefully chosen flat rectangular stones. The kerb wall ran on the same orientation as the chamber with possible paving made of thin flat stones on the outside and massive stone blocks making up the base layer of the cairn on the inside. Thus, we got the first indication of the limits and the size of the cairn beyond the visible remains of the chamber and it was looking big! How big, we still did not know.

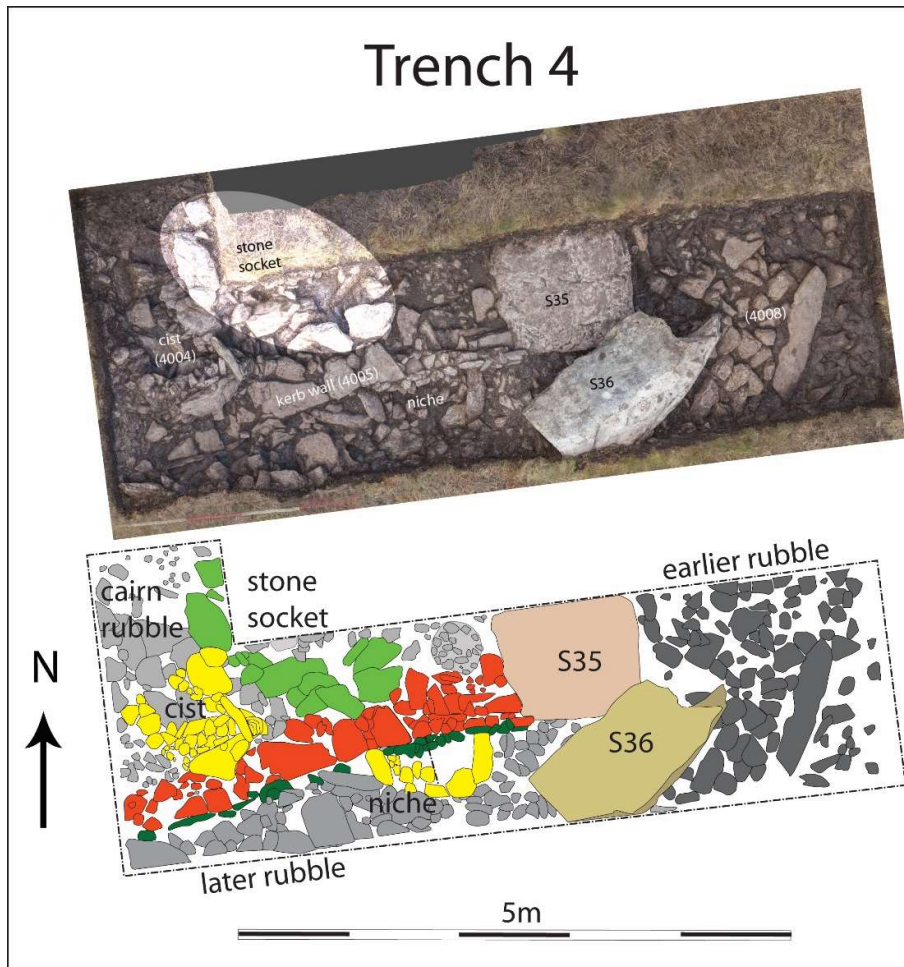


View of Trench 3 showing late wall (3003) at the top and a diagonal kerb wall and cairn structure (3006) at the base.

This was to be one of the main questions carried through into the 2017 season. Our initial electrical resistance survey could not help us in this respect due to the thickness of the peat in the area of the back of the monument, so we employed a different method called Electrical Resistance Tomography (ERT), which was much slower, had a greater penetration, but less resolution. This has generated massive amount of data, which when combined with the detailed topographic survey will enable us to construct a 3D model of all subsurface high resistance among which we hope we will be able to extrapolate the full shape of the cairn, if it actually survives to its original extent.

Our excavation, however, was focused on the front of the monument with Trench 2 extending from, now backfilled, Trench 1 across the line of the façade into the forecourt of the tomb. Trench 4 targeted the meeting point between the projected line of the façade to the southeast and the projected line of the kerb wall that we discovered in Trench 3. If they were to meet this would have confirmed our ideas about the overall shape and structure of the cairn. Trench 4 also had a task of figuring out the role and place of another outlying megalith and further high resistance geophysical anomalies suggestive of buried stones or structures.

Trench 4



Plan and annotated overhead photo of Trench 4 showing main structural features

All of these objectives were met. The outlying megalith (S36) proved to be displaced and simply lying on top of everything else. Considering its location it is perhaps most likely to have been one of the façade stones, perhaps even the very end façade stone whose socket we found just over a meter away to the northwest. The socket contained packing of large angled stones, which once secured the stone in its place. After the removal of the stone the socket filled up with loose rubbly fill. The packing stones were abutted and probably of the same build as the kerb wall, which met the façade at this point. The kerb was made of less substantial stones than those in Trench 3, but it matched its alignment perfectly, thus giving us the basic shape of the cairn on the southern side of the monument, which we presume would have been mirrored in the north. The front of the kerb wall abutted a large flat stone S35, which seem to have been either part of the design or incorporated part of an earlier structure. This projection essentially formed a short hornwork, which rested on more extensive rubble in the east part of the trench, which either forms additional hornwork/platform on which the rest of the cairn was built or, alternatively, the remains of an earlier cairn. The kerb was abutted by later rubble deposit from the south. The excavation in this area uncovered a small niche built against the face of the kerb wall, which contained two smashed up pots, one on top of the other. Immediately to the west was a small

incomplete cist, which was constructed from the cairn stones into which it was set. The cist contained damaged but complete pot, which was lifted together with its content for excavation in the laboratory. The content will be analysed and the pot professionally conserved. Both sets of vessels are thought to be Bronze Age in date and the cist pot, at least, was likely to have either accompanied a burial or have contained cremated remains. The acidity of the peaty soils does not allow for the bone preservation, but we hope to explore different ways in which the archaeological science might be able to tell us about the contents of the vessels. The construction of the cist and the niche and the deposition of the pottery vessels in association with possible burial(s) represent fascinating insight into the continued importance of the Neolithic chambered cairn, which would have been constructed some two thousand years earlier.



Complete pot from Bronze Age cist in Trench 4



James with some of the decorated pottery from the niche in Trench 4

In Trench 2 we exposed a mass of rubble which was underlying a long thin monolith S23, which lay prone on the surface and it may have been either one of the façade or portal stones. The other portal stone S20 is leaning at 45° and is overlain by another displaced megalith S19. Up to now we thought that S19 was probably a capstone, however, it is equally possible that this was a façade stone and that was deliberately placed to block the entrance into the chamber, located between jamb stones S24 and S25. Distinctive green rubble deposit abutted S19 in its new position and it may have been also part of the blocking activity, as its extent was limited to the entrance area. Elsewhere in the trench, successive rubble deposits were spread across and thinning out away from the façade. Certain areas contained many flat regular stones, which were clearly different from the stones used to construct the body of the cairn in Trench 1. Considering their position at the front of the façade it is probable that they once formed dry stone walling between the upstanding façade megaliths as a part of 'post and panel' construction technique common in Clyde-type chambered cairns. An entire pot base was found on top of one of these flat stones. The rubble overlain by S23 was in turn overlying a much broader stone megalith S33, which must have been another façade stone and was lying directly on the old ground surface at the base of the trench.



Overhead photogrammetry views of Trench 2 at different stages of excavation showing fallen and leaning portal and façade stones and rubble.

You can explore 3D versions of these and other photogrammetry models produced by Sarah Lambert-Gates at <https://sketchfab.com/sagesuav/collections/giants-grave-islay>.

In Trench 5 we targeted a spread of complex looking high-resistance geophysical anomalies and uncovered yet more rubble. We think this was a tumble of cairn material, which rolled down the slope. Below this rubble was a buried soil horizon, which contained few flint artefacts including a finely worked, but perhaps unfinished, leaf-shaped Neolithic arrowhead.



In conclusion - we have learned a great deal about the construction, appearance and dismantlement of the chambered cairn. Our picture of how it may have been used in the Neolithic is not as clear as we could not safely examine much of the chamber, which may well have been robbed of any original content long time ago. We got some important insights into

the continued use of the monument for burial and perhaps other rituals in the Bronze Age. This sense of reverence, however, may have disappeared by the Early Iron Age, when much of the stone from the cairn seems to have disappeared to be reused elsewhere, leaving most of the megaliths, which were perhaps too heavy and unnecessarily big for what was needed. Although the excavation is finished in the field there is an enormous amount of post-excavation studies still to take place. All our finds and environmental samples are going to be looked at by appropriate specialists and will hopefully bring further insights into the environment and the activity on and around the site. Crucially, we will be sending a selection of charcoal samples, from as many different stratigraphic levels as we can, for radiocarbon C14 dating and this will give us much more accurate chronology for the different phases of activity that we could recognise archaeologically, including the date for the construction of the chambered cairn itself. We will make sure to share any new developments through the Islay Heritage newsletter and the Facebook page.