

## RING-CAIRNS IN NORTH-EAST SCOTLAND

James B. Kenworthy, University College, Cardiff

In the area conventionally referred to as the North-east of Scotland - the counties of Banff, Aberdeen and Kincardine - three types of monument occur which are related to, though distinct from, the Clava ring-cairn tradition: NE Scottish ring-cairns, ring-cairns within recumbent-stone circles, and kerb-cairns (discussed p. 8 ). As the region has suffered from a lack of field-work and from a very great degree of destruction of monuments, the map and lists given here are most certainly far from complete. All available evidence, it is hoped, is summarized here. References for sites listed at the end are given there and not repeated in the text.

### Distribution (Fig. 1)

General. The small number of sites allows only a general interpretation of the distribution. Their absence from coastal areas, by and large, is worth noticing. It is surprising that there are no sites (save the marginal one at Sands of Forvie) between the Ythan and the Ugie, where the flint deposits occur. There is a general spread from the valley of the Bogie to central Kincardine. A NE type ring-cairn at Gownie, near Aberlour, in the Spey valley, falls within the area of distribution of Clava cairns proper and is not shown on the map. Any diffusionist explanation of the distribution, e.g. in terms of the spread of people along river valleys, requires assumptions about the previous settlement of the area and at present is more liable to hinder understanding than aid it. We simply do not have enough evidence.

NE Ring-Cairns, as Henshall (1963, 35) has pointed out, occur by and large in areas peripheral to the main distribution of recumbent-stone circles (RSCs), although in three cases an example lies within a mile and a quarter of a RSC with ring-cairn, and at Clune Hill a ring-cairn is adjacent to, and possibly earlier than, a RSC with ring-cairn. The distribution is diffuse, though there is a group of four sites at Raedykes. In common with RSCs, the NE ring-cairns seem to have been sited for preference in freely-drained positions, on soils that would have been fertile but relatively easy to clear and work.

Ring-Cairns within RSCs occur over most of the area of distribution of the RSCs (compare Fig. 1 with Henshall, 1963, Map 4), although they are absent from the RSCs in the area between the N and S branches of the Ugie,

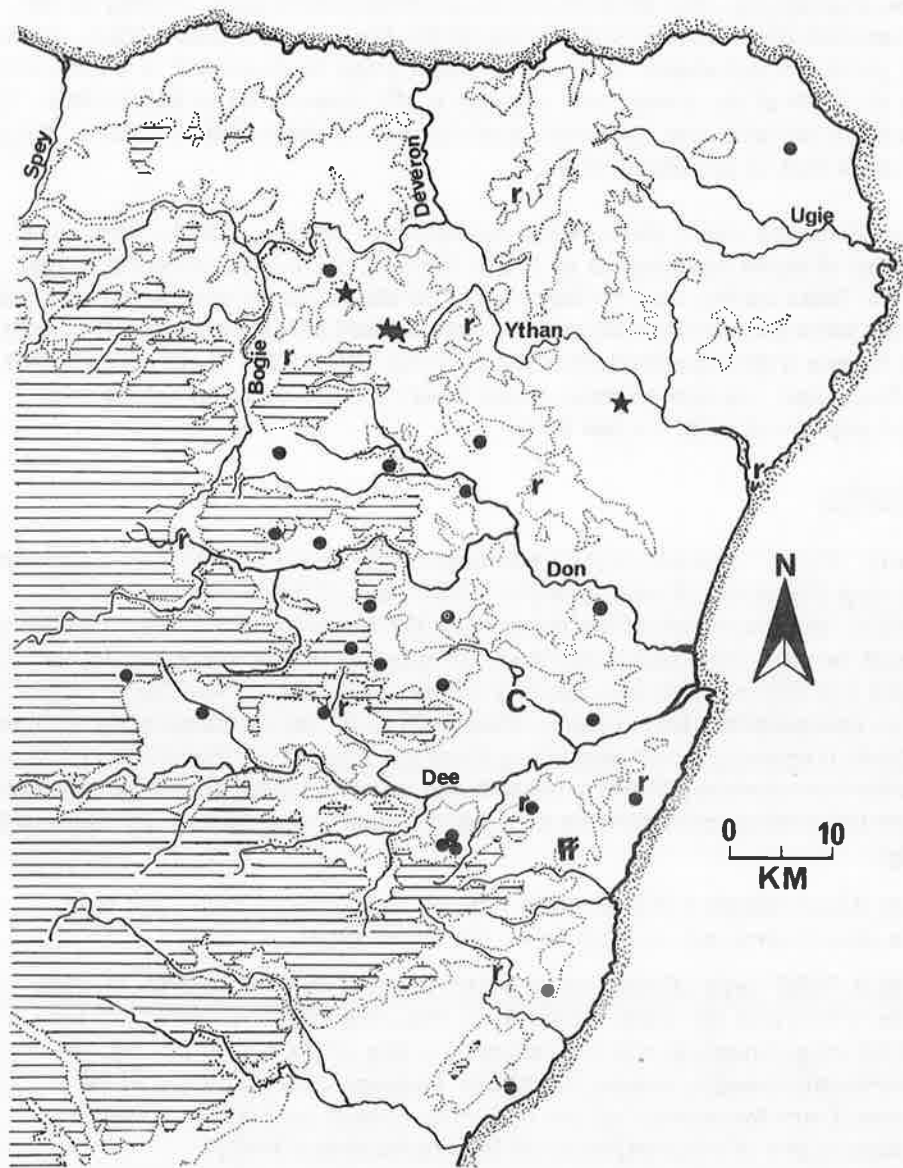


Figure 1. Distribution of NE Ring-Cairns **r** , Ring-Cairns in Recumbent-stone circles **●** , Kerb-Cairns **★** ; Cullerlie is indicated by **C**.

and between the Ythan and the Deveron. Though the sites are ruinous, this may be significant. The distribution is concentrated inland, mainly in the area between the northern tributaries of the Don, and the Dee valley, on the 400 ft platform and above. A group of three sites is clustered in the Sheeoch valley to the S of the river Dee, and there are three sites in Kincardine. The only site in the extreme NW of the area is that at Netherton. In siting, they agree with that of the other RSCs.

Kerb-Cairns are rare, there being examples at Raxton, Raich, and two in the group of three monuments at Logie Newton. This concentration in and near the Ythan valley may be fortuitous, as this class of monument has only recently been recognised and has not been looked for previously. The eight small cairns within the Cullerlie stone circle (C on Fig. 1) may be related to kerb-cairns, but are perhaps more likely to be related to cairns with central cist found within a few RSCs.

### Description

General. Fig. 2 is an attempt to summarize the main dimensions (cairn and inner ring diameter) of each site for which both of these dimensions is available, the maximum value being used for non-circular sites. Imperial measure is used here and in the text, as most of the values given by the sources are approximations, usually to the nearest foot, and there is no point in compounding inaccuracy. Also in Fig. 2, the corresponding values for Clava ring-cairns and passage-graves (derived from Henshall, 1963) are given for comparison. From a consideration of the grouping of the symbols certain interesting possibilities may be inferred<sup>1</sup>. These may be enumerated briefly:

(a) There exists a NE Scottish type of ring-cairn distinct not only in distribution but in form from the Clava type.

(b) A 'RSC' type of ring-cairn exists. It can be seen on Fig. 2, that the Clava and NE ring-cairns form discrete clusters, to which the RSC ring-cairns do not correspond, some of the latter falling, strangely enough, among the Clava Passage-Graves. As will be seen from the scatter of the RSC ring-cairns on Fig. 2, however, other types of ring-cairn could be used inside a RSC.

(c) There would seem to be a 'developed' type of ring-cairn, already implicitly recognised by Henshall (1963, 35). The inner ring is wide in relation to the overall cairn diameter - here the criterion has been adopted (arbitrarily) that ring diameter is

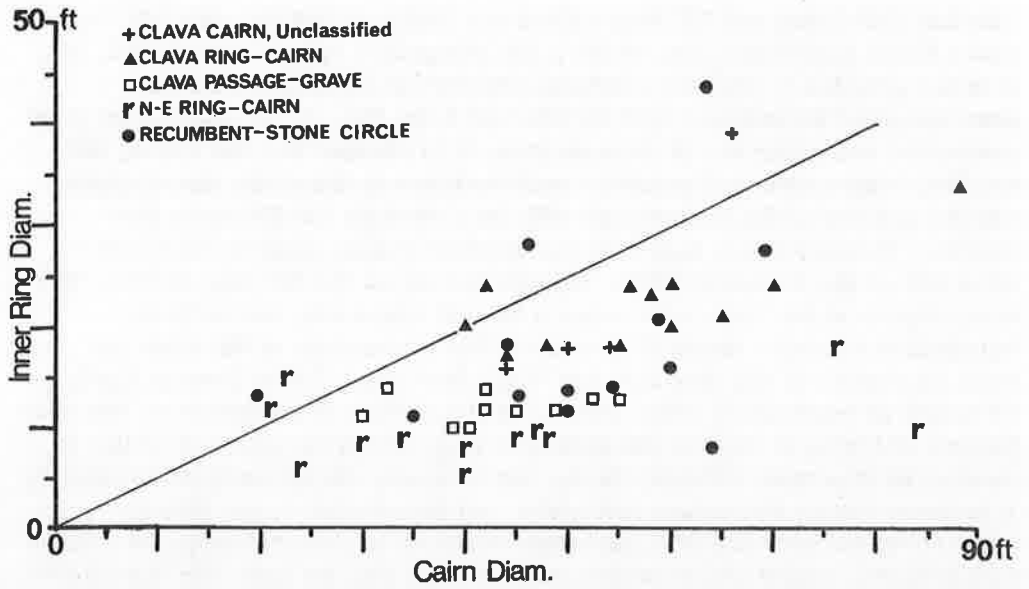


Figure 2. Comparative diagram of Ring-Cairns and Clava Passage-Graves.

equal to half the cairn diameter or more (the line drawn on Fig. 2). Such sites occur in all three classes of ring-cairn. It may also be noted that the enclosed cremation cemeteries at Weird Law and Whitestanes fall into this class, as would be expected if ECCs are indeed to be seen as a development from ring-cairns.

The fact that Clava and NE ring-cairns are distinct kills the idea that there was a Clava core-area from which a few stragglers spread into the NE, but it is not possible to suggest a definite alternative hypothesis. Several developmental sequences could be inferred from Fig. 2, but there is no good reason for accepting any of them as true. It is obvious that the Clava, NE and RSC ring-cairns are related - such features as the ritual use of quartz and the grading of the kerb-stones with the tallest on the SW make this obvious, though we may note that cup-marked stones occur in the Clava sites and on the stones of RSCs, but are lacking on the NE ring-cairns. The exact nature of the links must remain beyond inference, for we have insufficient evidence either to produce a fine chronology of the sites (we must be content to say that they are 'Late Neolithic - Early Bronze Age'), or to tell us much about other aspects of the culture of the builders. We must beware of trying to explain the spread of ring-cairns as necessarily due to movement of people; this may be so, but it is only one of many explanations. It is important to remember that ideas, not structures, move (though archaeologists have had an unfortunate tendency to personify objects) - ideas in a cultural, social and economic context for which we have only the slightest evidence. In reconstructing past events, therefore, extreme caution must be observed. There is no point in erecting a massive superstructure of supposition on a pinhead of fact. Such evidence as is available for NE and RSC ring-cairns is summarized below.

#### North-East Scottish Ring-Cairns (List 1)

Fifteen sites fall into this category, including Gownie, mentioned above, and Rappla Wood, Burreldales, which might possibly be a ring-cairn<sup>2</sup>. Five have been destroyed but are recorded, and of the rest, five have records of excavation. Only five of the sites seem to have been surrounded by stone circles, while the majority of the Clava ring-cairns were. In diameter the cairns vary from c. 84 ft at Cairnmore to 21 ft at Sands of Forvie. The general range is about 30 ft to 50 ft. The diameter of the inner ring varies from 5 ft at Gownie and 6 ft at W Mondynes to 20 by 23 ft at Selbie Hill, though this latter site is anomalous, falling neither into the main NE range of sizes or into the Clava range. The Forvie and Cairnwell sites fall into the 'developed' group as defined above. Apart from these sites, the rings of the

other sites for which figures are available fall in the range 8 to 10 ft as opposed to the Clava range of 15 to 25 ft. The cairns, like Clava ring-cairns, seem to have been quite low, some 3 to 4 ft high. Clune Hill seems to have lacked an outer kerb, and at Cairnmore the inner ring was of dry walling. Generally there was an outer kerb of boulders or slabs up to 3 ft high, and an inner ring-kerb of slabs set with their flat faces inwards. Grading of the outer kerb-stones, with the higher stones to the SSW is found at Raedykes and Forvie, and at Cairnwell a long stone was set in the kerb at this point. Raedykes SE and perhaps Clune Hill are flattened circles, and the Gownie cairn was oval; at Selbie Hill, Cairnmore and Raedykes NW the inner ring is sub-circular. The Rappla Wood cairn was set on a platform about 56 ft in diameter.

Only two sites have been excavated in modern times, Raedykes SE, which yielded no evidence of use, and Sands of Forvie (see pp 4-5). At Gownie, there seem to have been two phases of use; over an undisturbed primary deposit of black sticky earth with charcoal, cremated bone and quartz fragments lay, in the centre of the ring, a disturbed deposit containing 'ashes' and about a dozen sherds of pottery. At Cairnmore 'the interior towards the bottom was full of a very black sticky stuff' (Anderson, 1902, 676); Dummuis yielded a similar deposit with cremated bone, and at Cairnwell the inner ring contained black earth, bone fragments, charcoal fragments, and a central arrangement of five sherds in a quincunx, the sherds now being lost. Perhaps this too is an indication of two phases. The Sundayswells Hill inner ring, dug about 1890, though disturbed, seems to have differed from the other site - it was filled with soft soil, and contained an AOC beaker and 'some small bones' (Ritchie, J., 1919, 75). Secondary structures occurred in the cairn at Cairnmore; two small cists were discovered a few yards S of the ring, one containing a cremation, the other a hoard of 'magical' objects of Roman date or later, and 3 yds S of these an oblong pit was found (its relationship to the cairn is unclear) containing ashes, cremated bone fragments, and some sherds of a handled Food Vessel. At Rappla Wood, two cists, each containing an urn (one an Enlarged Food Vessel with a Class IB razor) and cremation, were found in a secondary ridge of stones set round the cairn, and another cremation was found in the SW edge of the platform on which the site was set.

A primarily sepulchral function, then, may be attributed to these sites, usually cremation burial, but Sundayswells Hill and Raedykes show this is not universal. This is in line with the Clava evidence (Henshall, 1963, 29-30), where ring-cairns have so far yielded cremations only, but the passage-graves have yielded both cremation and inhumation. As far as dating is

concerned, we have little to go on. The only feature of the Gownie and Forvie pottery is that it is virtually undateable. There is nothing to contradict a Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age date for the construction and use of the NE ring-cairns.

### Ring-Cairns within Recumbent-Stone-Circles (List 2)

Although the majority of the recumbent-stone-circles have been badly mutilated, and are scantily recorded, twenty-one of the eighty or so known sites enclosed ring-cairns. So, as far as may be judged from surface indications, did the Kincardine sites of the Cloch, Benholm and the Camp, Montgoldrum. It is clear, however, that a ring-cairn was not a universal feature of RSCs. Such sites as Cothiemuir Wood, Keig (Coles, 1901, 214-17), and Candle Hill, Inch (Coles, 1902, 540-5) enclosed cairns of more normal type. At some sites, e.g. Hill of Fiddes (Anderson, 1779, 246), the central area may have been left clear, enclosed by a bank of earth and stone running between the stones of the circle. As similar banks are found at sites with ring-cairns, e.g. Garrol Wood (Fig. 2, p. 3) and Sunhoney, this feature cannot simply be the ultimate development of the ring-cairn - though the two ideas may ultimately have been combined, as perhaps at Netherton, Lonmay, where, if we are to believe Maclagan (1875, Pl. xxvii), the inner ring had a diameter of 44 ft in a 'cairn' 64 ft in diameter, whose outer margin coincided with the line of the stone circle.

In what follows I have avoided adopting a typology of RSCs, despite the great variation they show. This variation can possibly be explained in part by the fact that the builders of the monuments were trying to integrate two sets of ideas - here the 'RSC idea' and the 'ring-cairn idea' - and adopting varying solutions. There is no necessity for geometrically complicated sites such as Garrol Wood to be of different date from the simple ones.

The general impression given by the degree of variation in the RSC ring-cairns is that as well as using a specific 'RSC type', the builders felt free to use other types - NE at Sunhoney; 'developed NE' at Castle Fraser; Clava type at Esslie the Greater, probably Old Keig and Clune Hill (where, however, the inner ring seems to have been enlarged by an unrecorded excavation); 'developed Clava' at Tomnaverie and Netherton. Various methods were adopted to make the recumbent stone at once part of the outer circle and part, so to speak, of the ring-cairn kerb. At Hatton of Ardoyne, an egg-shaped site, this was done by setting the S sector of the kerb on the same line as the circle, and grading the kerb-stones in height, so that the recumbent appears as the highest slab in the kerb. A similar feature

existed at Netherton, but this seems to have been a true circle. At Garrol Wood the recumbent is set 12 ft inside the circle on which the construction of the stone circle is based (and since the centre of this circle is the centre of the inner ring of the ring-cairn, this has the effect also of bringing the recumbent nearer the ring), and at Binghill and Aquhorthies the recumbent is also set well within the line of the circle. Methods are found whereby the kerb of the ring-cairn is connected to the flankers of the recumbent. At Binghill and Garrol Wood there is a marked asymmetry, and the same feature occurs at more normally circular sites. At Loanhead of Daviot this asymmetry is related to the placing of the recumbent with the E end closer to the centre of the circle than the W end (i.e. one end on the line of the circle, the other on or near the line of the cairn-kerb). This feature is also seen at Tillyfourie. There seems usually to have been some kind of 'platform' between the recumbent and the ring-cairn. This was kerbed with slabs, but at Ardlair the ring-cairn, which seems to have been little more than a ring of earth and stones, was joined to the recumbent by two large slabs, one projecting at right angles from each end of the recumbent - presumably again forming a platform.

The largest RSC ring-cairn, certainly more than 90 ft in diameter, is the Blue Cairn, Ladieswell, where the stone circle, some 76 ft in diameter, was set within the limits of the cairn, and the inner ring was about 12 ft in diameter. Of the cairns for which reasonably reliable figures are available, six fall into the range 40 ft to 55 ft and six into the range 55 ft to 70 ft, Garrol Wood is 34 by 38 ft, and Castle Fraser was the smallest, with an inner kerbed ring backed apparently by an earthen bank, having an overall diameter of about 20 ft. Ring diameters fall into the range 10 ft to 15 ft, except for Old Keig, Esslie the Greater and Clune Hill which fall in the Clava range, Sunhoney, which falls in the NE range, Tomnaverie, with a ring 28 ft in diameter, and Netherton, already discussed, c. 44 ft in diameter. At Tillyfourie there was possibly a second ring about 10 ft in diameter situated to the NE of the central ring. In the Loanhead of Daviot cairn there was a crescent-shaped stone setting. The cairns were low, no more than 3 or 4 ft high, and seem on occasion to have been reduced to little more than a pavement of stones. The outer kerb could be of slabs, as at Hatton of Ardoyne, or of boulders, as at Garrol Wood, varying in height from about 1 ft to 3 ft. The Loanhead cairn lacked an inner kerb, but generally there seems to have been a ring-kerb of flat slabs, as in NE ring-cairns.

In considering the evidence yielded by the sites, discussion must be confined to the ring-cairns. Fifteen have provided evidence about their use, but only two have been excavated in modern times. The excavation of Loanhead is



hardly satisfactory, but although the central ring seems to have been disturbed in the nineteenth century, it yielded 5 lb of cremated bone, and sherds of plain, flat-bottomed pots, other sherds of which were associated with Beaker and 'Lyles Hill' sherds elsewhere on the site. The 'crescent' in the cairn covered an area measuring 9 ft by 6 ft 3 in of sticky black earth with charcoal and bone fragments. At Old Keig the central area had been disturbed and the inner kerb probably removed, before 1692, and 'ashes of some burnt matter' were dug out. The excavation showed that an area under the cairn had been baked by intense heat - possibly from a cremation pyre? Scraps of Beaker and sherds of flat-rimmed pottery similar to that at Loanhead were found; the former came from the old ground surface. At Cairn Curr the central area yielded 'great deposits of black charred earth and stones', small sherds (now lost), bits of charcoal, and many quartz fragments, and as at Rappala Wood, a secondary ridge of stones set round the cairn contained two urns (one a large Encrusted Urn, NMA EA 21) in holes surrounded by slabs, with cremations, set at the S side, a cist with urn fragments on the N, and on the E a cist with charcoal fragments. Broken bones, apparently of sheep and deer, and some pottery (lost) came from the ring at Blue Cairn, Ladieswell. At Sunhoney there were deposits of cremated bone, some charcoal, and black earth, over which lay fire-marked stones in the centre, and at the S edge of the cairn was a circular stone-built cist with a 'deposit'. A central pit aligned NE - SW, and measuring 5 ft 6 in by 1 ft 9 in and 4 ft in depth, with a basal layer of small boulders on which lay some cremated bone and a few sherds (lost) was found at Hatton of Ardoyne. At Netherton, the finding of calcined bones is recorded. The inner ring at Yonder Bognie contained an 'urn', and traces of paving, below which a deep layer of bones and burnt matter was found. At Tyrebagger there was a central circular cist, but its contents are not recorded. The only find in the inner ring at Ardlair was a pit 4 ft in diameter and 2 ft deep, covered by a pitched 'roof' of two stone slabs. The pit was filled with light loam, becoming black towards the top where charcoal and cremated bone were found. The whole area of the Castle Fraser circle was paved, including the inner ring, where charcoal and burnt bones were found beneath the paving. At Garrol Wood, excavated by Coles in 1904, a slab-lined, funnel-shaped pit (2 ft 2 in in diameter at the top and 10 in in depth) lay at the centre of the ring. It was filled with comminuted burnt bone. Four other cremation deposits, each apparently representing a single person, a charcoal deposit, and some sherds were also found in the ring. Aquhorthies produced charcoal, half-calcined bones and black greasy earth and in the ring was evidence of 'three or four bodies having been laid out so as to form the perimeter of a circle', with at the centre a cist of boulders containing black mould and pieces of bone. The irregularly-placed slabs, the only find from the ring at Esslie the Smaller,

are more likely to be displaced kerb-stones than the remains of a cist. The site had apparently been disturbed.

Burial by cremation then, possibly at more than one time at Garrol Wood and Esslie the Greater (where there may have been inhumation also), seems to have been part of the function of the sites. The occurrence of 'ritual pits' and the central grave at Hatton show that there is a slight difference from the NE ring-cairn series. It is, however, unnecessary to ascribe a purely sepulchral function to the RSCs, especially in view of what is said above about the combination of ideas. There is slightly more evidence for dating than there was for the NE ring-cairns, and there is horizontal stratification at Loanhead, where the circle is earlier than a cist with Food Vessel, which itself is earlier than the enclosed cremation cemetery with urn burial. The Beaker sherds from this site and Old Keig give some idea of date. I have discussed the dating of these sites elsewhere in the context of all the RSCs (Kenworthy, 1970, 41-2). It may be seen as roughly the same as for NE ring-cairns - Late Neolithic to Early Bronze Age. Obviously much work remains to be done before we can be more specific.

#### Notes

1. As far as possible these inferences have been tested statistically, showing that despite the small sample available, they seem to be significant. It is hoped to publish this work in more detail elsewhere.
2. I have omitted the site at Greystone, Alford (Henshall, 1963, 33), as it is probable that the bank round the site is recent.

#### Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Dr Graham Ritchie, at whose instigation this paper was written, for his help and discussion. It is obvious from the text how much I owe to the work of Miss Henshall. It would be invidious to mention all the people who have so kindly assisted me in my work and provided information, but to them all I offer my warmest thanks. Finally, I must thank Professor R.J.C. Atkinson, Patrick Ashmore and Eurwyn Williams for reading and commenting on the text.

## Lists

### 1. North-east Scottish Ring-cairns

#### Banffshire

1. Gownie, Aberlour. NJ 28 42  
PSAS, XXV (1890-1), 20-1

#### Aberdeenshire

1. Cairnmore (Cairnhill), Monquhitter. NJ 7839 5225  
Anderson, 1902, 675-88
2. Rappla Wood, Burreldales, Fyvie. NJ 7362 4027  
PSAS, IV (1860-2), 429-31; X (1872-4), 435-6
3. Dummuies, Drumblade. NJ 5609 3699  
OSNB, 25 (1871), 65; Henshall, 1963, 36
4. Sands of Forvie, Slains (ABN 8). NK 0108 2628  
Henshall, 1963, 398
5. Selbie Hill, Keithhall and Kinkell. NJ 7977 2282  
DES (1963), 1
6. Cairnbeg, Strathdon. NJ 40 13  
Unpub. photo., A. Keiller, 1927
7. Sundayswells Hill, Kincardine O'Neil (ABN 9). NJ 6165 0365  
Henshall, 1963, 399

#### Kincardineshire

1. Cairnwell, Banchory-Devenick (KNC 1). NO 9071 9733  
Henshall, 1963, 400
2. Clune Hill, Durris (KNC 2). NO 7949 9495  
Henshall, 1963, 400
3. Raedykes (Centre, 1 and 2, NW, SE), Fetteresso (KNC 4-6). NO 832 906  
Ritchie, J., 1923; Henshall, 1963, 401-2; DES (1965), 24
4. West Mondynes, Fordoun. NO 7660 7879  
NSA, XI (1843), 86; OSNB, 9 (1863), 105-6

### 2. Ring-cairns in Recumbent-stone circles

#### Aberdeenshire

1. Netherton, Crimond. NK 0434 5722  
Maclagan, 1875, Pl. xxvii; Trans Buchan Field Club, I (1887-90), 82;  
PSAS, XXXVIII (1903-4), 284-8
2. Yonder Bognie, Forgue. NJ 6006 4577

- Stuart, 1867, xxii; Coles, 1903, 127-31
3. Cairn Curr, Tullynessle and Forbes. NJ 5522 2052  
PSAS, VII (1866-8), 24-5; Stuart, 1867, lix-lx
  4. Ardlair, Kennethmont. NJ 5525 2795  
Maclagan, 1875, Pl. xxviii; Stuart, 1856, xxii; Coles, 1902, 557-9
  5. Hatton of Ardoyne, Oyne. NJ 6598 2676  
Stuart, 1856, xxii; Coles, 1901, 241-6
  6. Loanhead of Daviot, Daviot. NJ 7477 2885  
Kilbride-Jones, 1935
  7. Old Keig, Keig. NJ 5965 1939  
Archaeologia, I (1749), 336-43; PSAS, LXVII (1932-3), 37-53; LXVIII (1933-4), 371-93
  8. Tillyfourie (Whitehill), Monymusk. NJ 6431 1350  
PSAS, I (1851-4), 141; Coles, 1901, 203-8
  9. Castle Fraser (Balgorkar), Cluny. NJ 7150 1252  
Archaeologia, XXII (1829), 201-2; Coles, 1901, 197-201; 1904, 300-2
  10. Tyrebagger Hill, Dyce. NJ 8595 1321  
Maclagan, 1875, Pl. xxviii; PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 188-91
  11. Blue Cairn, Ladieswell, Logie-Coldstone. NJ 4113 0633  
Ogston, 1931, 108-9; Aberdeen Univ Review, XXXIII (1950), 428-9
  12. Tomnaverie, Coull. NJ 4865 0349  
Forbes-Leslie, 1866, 193; PSAS, XXXIX (1904-5), 208-12; LI (1916-17), 34
  13. Auld Kirk of Tough, Cluny. NJ 6250 0928  
Maclagan, 1875, Pl. xxviii; PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 171
  14. Tomnagorn, Cluny. NJ 6514 0775  
PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 173-9
  15. Sunhoney, Midmar. NJ 7159 0569  
Archaeologia, XXII (1829), 202; Stuart, 1856, xxi; PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 181-7
  16. Binghill, Peterculter. NJ 8552 0237  
Coles, 1901, 189-91

#### Kincardineshire

1. Esslie the Greater, Banchory-Ternan. NO 7171 9159  
PSAS, XIV (1879-80), 301-3; XXXIV (1899-1900), 162-6
2. Esslie the Smaller (West Mulloch), Banchory-Ternan. NO 7225 9215  
PSAS, XIV (1879-80), 303-4; XXXIV (1899-1900), 166-7
3. Garrol Wood, Banchory-Ternan. NO 7232 9122  
PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 157-62; Coles, 1905
4. Clune Hill, Durris. NO 7947 9495

- PSAS, XIV (1879-80), 299-300; XXXIV (1899-1900), 153-5; Ritchie, J., 1919, 71-3
5. Aquhorthies, Banchory-Devenick. NO 9018 9634  
Archaeologia, XXII (1829), 203; PSAS, V (1862-4), 133-4; XXXIV (1899-1900), 145-9
  6. The Camp, Montgoldrum, Arbuthnott. NO 8166 7720  
PSAS, XXXIV (1899-1900), 107; XXXVII (1902-3), 193-5
  7. The Cloch, Benholm. NO 7817 6788  
Stat Acct, XV (1795), 238

### 3. Kerb-cairns

#### Aberdeenshire

1. Raxton (Shethin), Tarves. NJ 8815 3280  
Coles, 1902, 526-7
2. Raich, Fergie. NJ 6188 4365  
Coles, 1903, 125-7
3. Logie Newton, Auchterless. NJ 658 392  
Forbes-Leslie, 1866, 223; Coles, 1903, 97-101