

CEBAC Community archaeology walks No. 9

We started walk 9 at the Back football club, and instead of walking anticlockwise around the planned route, we decided to go clockwise. This was in part because one of our walkers houses was then at the end of the walk, saving him retracing his steps, but also because it was becoming a bit of a tradition to go Deiseil or clockwise, around things when we could.

So contra the published route on the CEBAC website, the chambered cairn Dunan was the first site to be visited.



Figure 1: The route and sites along the way

Canmore has the following recorded descriptions of Dunan:

Sire 1: Dunan - Canmore ID 4295 - Site Number NB43NE 1 - NGR NB 45072 38199

Some 250 yards south-east of a small burn, Allt ant-Sniomh, on the gentle northern slope of a peaty moor, at an elevation of about 60 feet above sea-level, about 1 mile southwest of Coll farm and 3 ½ miles north-north-east of Stornoway, are the remains of the chambered cairn, Dunan. The cairn has been much disturbed and measures some 50 feet in diameter and 4 feet in height. Towards the eastern side of the mound is the northern arc of a circular chamber, 6 feet in diameter and now 3 feet deep, built of large boulders. Lying across the top of the chamber on the eastern side is a long narrow stone 8 feet 8 inches in length and 5 feet in girth, while almost parallel to it is a large slab, 6 feet long and about 3 feet wide, lying with one end on the tumbled stones in the interior of the chamber and the other end resting on the top of the wall. The entrance passage is not traceable, but possibly was towards the south-west, where there is a number of large blocks mingled with the smaller stones of the cairn. RCAHMS 1928, visited 3 July 1914.

This cairn situated on a low knoll is as described by RCAHMS except that its maximum height is no more than 3ft and the remains of the chamber are unconvincing: more probably they represent a modern adaptation of the remains, though the blocks still indicate that the cairn was chambered. Visited by OS (A L F R) 20 April 1964.

Having visited we would agree with the first description and disagree with the second; in that there was indeed clear and convincing evidence of a circular chamber to the eastern side, with at least three courses of stonework visible and cap stones slumped very close by. The capstones were so massive as to make it unlikely that they were repositioned for some modern adaptation. The chamber seemed to open roughly to the west, although no distinct passage could be made out to give a more accurate bearing.



Figure 2: The rounded chamber within Dunan



Figure 3: Possible standing stone

Just east of this, a slender, c2m long stone may have been another capstone, but its location and shape might suggest that it could have rather been a fallen peristalith-style standing stone. Peristaliths are standing stones found in a circle around “Hebridean” type chambered tombs, and a detail unique to our distinctive tomb architecture. This stone might be the one described in the third description above from CANMORE: “Lying across the top of the chamber on the eastern side is a long narrow stone 8 feet 8 inches in length and 5 feet in girth” – although the dimensions given would not seem correct for a “long, narrow stone”. This presumably must be some kind of mistake as it is the correct location and length, and there were no other similarly sized stones.



Figure 4: Unival chambered tomb, North Uist, with peristalith of standing stones

More research will be carried out and a detailed description made to update CANMORE in due course.

Site 2: Garadh Dubh style Head dyke

Interestingly, very close to Dunan, and in between it and the next chambered tomb we would visit, we found old Garadh Dubh style boundaries running through the moor, shown on the modern maps again as straight water courses:

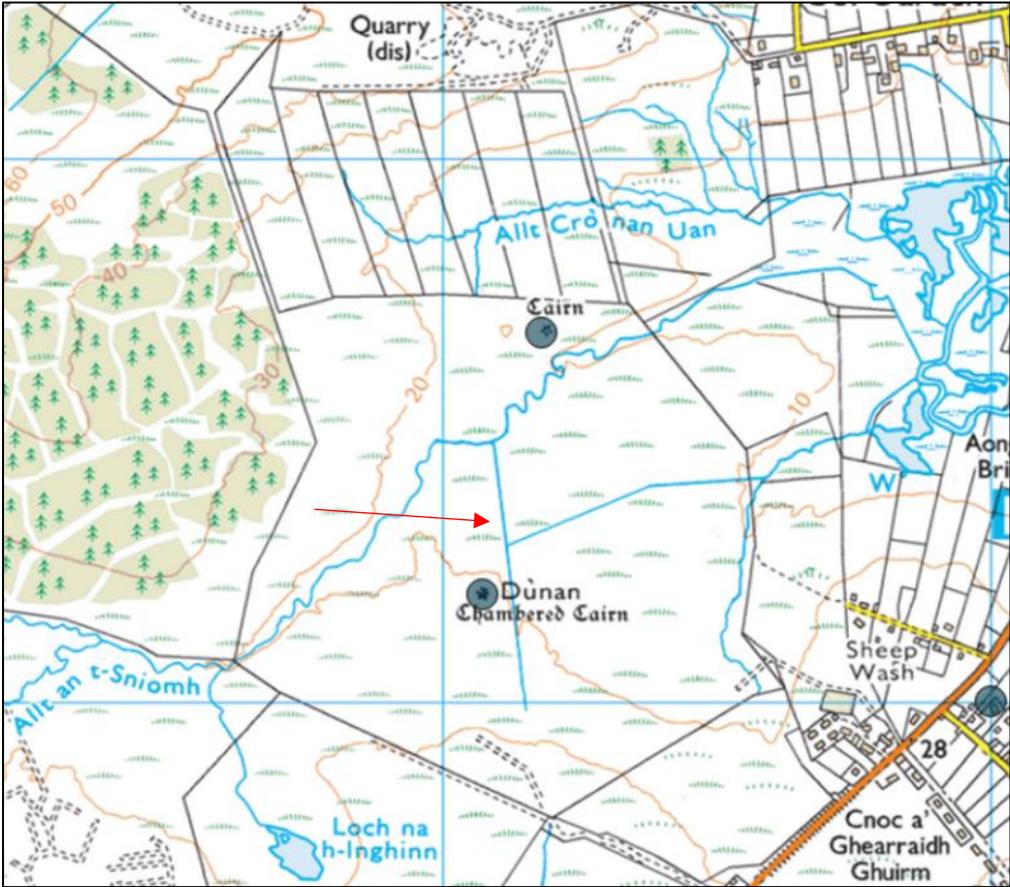


Figure 5: Suspiciously straight water courses, as seen in previous walks, actually the line of Garadh Dubh style dykes

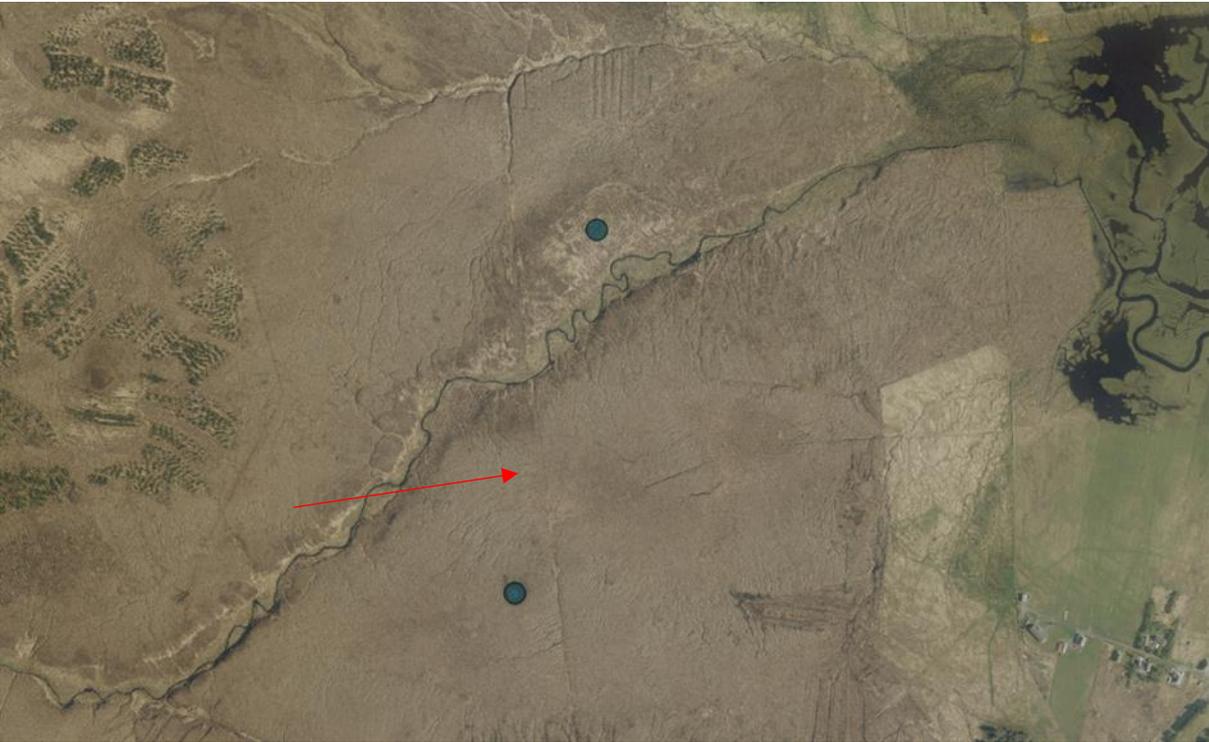


Figure 6: Aerial image of Garadh Dubh style dyke. Note it running north of the Allt an Sniomh, farther than the modern OS map shows

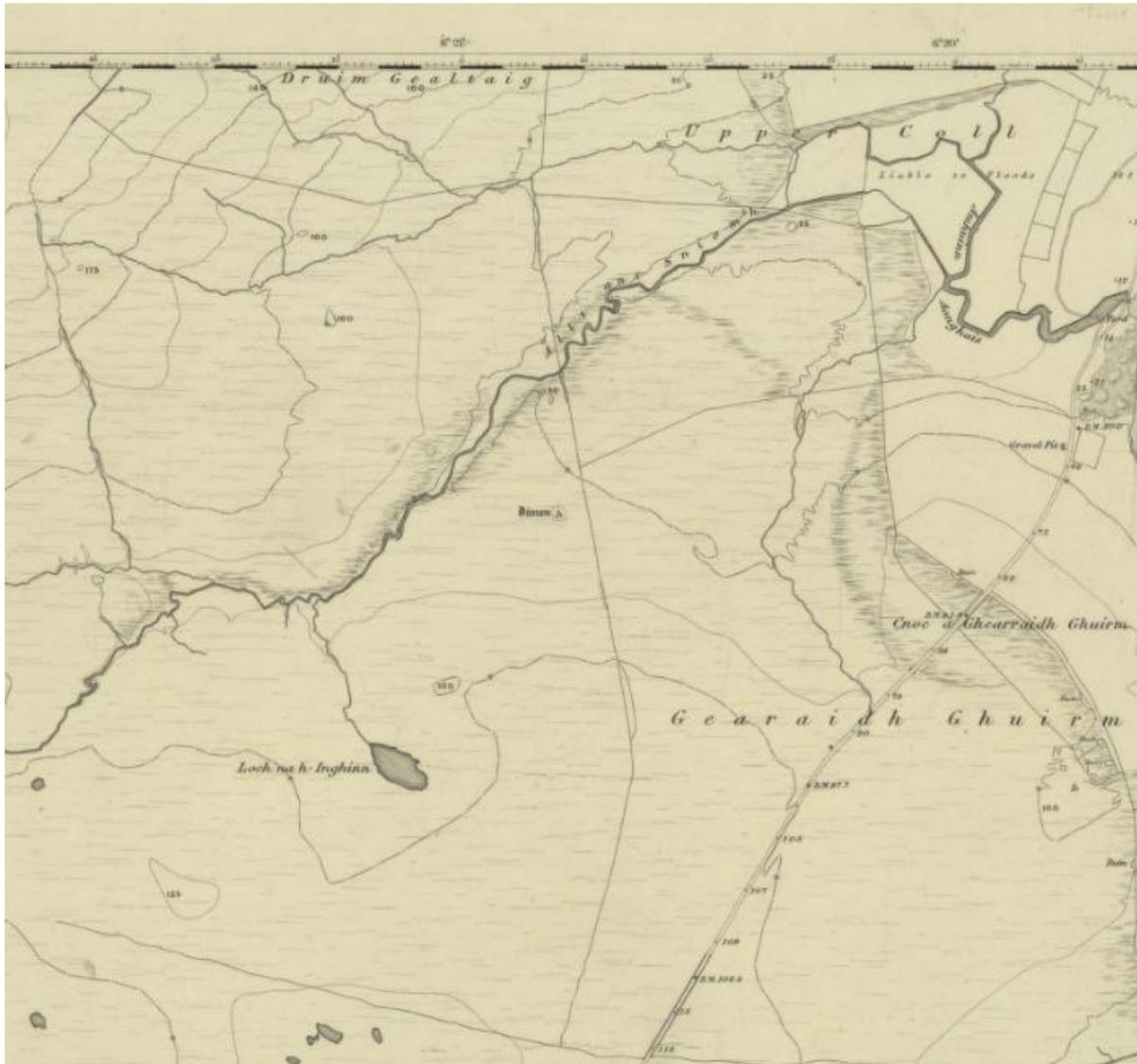


Figure 7: Head dyke shown on OS 1st ed 1852

This dyke runs around the low lying settlement areas between them and the inland moors and would therefore more likely be a head dyke for stock management rather than a land division boundary.



Figure 8: DI walking the dyke. Note ditch to left hand or moor side.

It is interesting that these dykes run so close to the Chambered tombs. This would suggest two possibilities – firstly that these tombs were located upon pre-existing boundary lines, or alternatively that the boundary lines were positioned near the pre-existing tombs. As these tombs were some of the earliest physical changes that humans made to the landscape, shortly after we began farming, the first is not likely. The second suggestion might be more sensible as the tombs must have been landmarks, known to everyone, and may have constituted the line of less substantial or even ideological boundaries before these substantial dykes were made. This could have been purely expedient of course; i.e. they were handy landmarks to use on an otherwise featureless moor. However it could have been more than that – the tombs may have actually represented the burial places of various different coastal communities, and therefore positioned in between river courses at a distance inland from the cultivated and occupied areas. This might have made them ideal locations for land boundaries in the future.

More credence to this idea could be gained from the tracing of these head dyke type boundaries north, where they also run past the other known chambered tomb in the area, Cairn a Mharc. Further, as we speculated in previous walks, there is the possibility that Stein Sheol (NB 46421 42234) and Cnoc na Maide (NB 45778 40872) were also chambered tombs. All of these sites are on similar prominent locations in between water courses on the edge of the moor, overlooking the fertile low lying areas, and very close to similar boundaries. A further possible example is the “Clachan Glas” at Barashader mentioned in Walk 8.

We should not forget of course that in the Neolithic it was warmer and drier and the blanket bog had not yet formed. However the tombs would have still been on the edge of the lower fertile cultivated areas, and in between them and the wild forests of the interior.

Site 3: Allt An t sniomh - Chambered Cairn (Neolithic) - Canmore ID 4298 - Site Number NB43NE 4 - NGR NB 4518 3868

Canmore has the following entries for this tomb:

On the top of a low rise are the remains of a roughly circular cairn, largely grass-covered but with cairn material exposed in the centre where it has been hollowed by robbing. Its diameter is approx. 40ft and maximum height 4ft. No large slabs are visible, but its proximity to Dunan (NB43NE 1) makes it probable that this too was chambered.

Visited by OS (A L F R) 20 April 1964.

Scheduled as Allt an-t-Sniomh, chambered cairn. Information from Historic Scotland, scheduling document dated 3 February 1992.

We all agreed that the "hollow" atop this cairn was actually a small building not unlike a Shieling. The best evidence of this was that we could make out the low remains of walls running around the edge of the hollow in a sub-circular shape roughly 4m x 3m. It made a fine place to sit down for lunch!



Figure 9: Diane inspects the “hollow” atop Allt an Sniomh Chambered tomb

However there was another quite obvious piece of evidence that this had been a habitation at some point in that the cairn was surrounded by a defined area of Feannagan, best visible on aerial imagery:



Figure 10: The defined area of feannagan surrounding the cairn (brighter green - just above and right of blue dot). Note the head dyke boundary running up to the left.

The cairn itself was of a similar size and shape to Dunan but more overgrown. No doubt it was a chambered tomb originally, but this handy source of stone had been used by someone to create a dwelling in the last few hundred years. The habitation made in the top of the cairn may even have originally been the chamber of the tomb.

It might be suggested that whoever did this was an outcast from the village, or an enterprising Cottar squatting on the land.

Site 4: Land boundary dyke

Runs from NB 45070 38840 on the first dyke described above as **Site 2** towards Back football club, i.e. it runs perpendicularly to the first dyke and is therefore likely to be a land boundary between two areas rather than a head dyke for stock management.

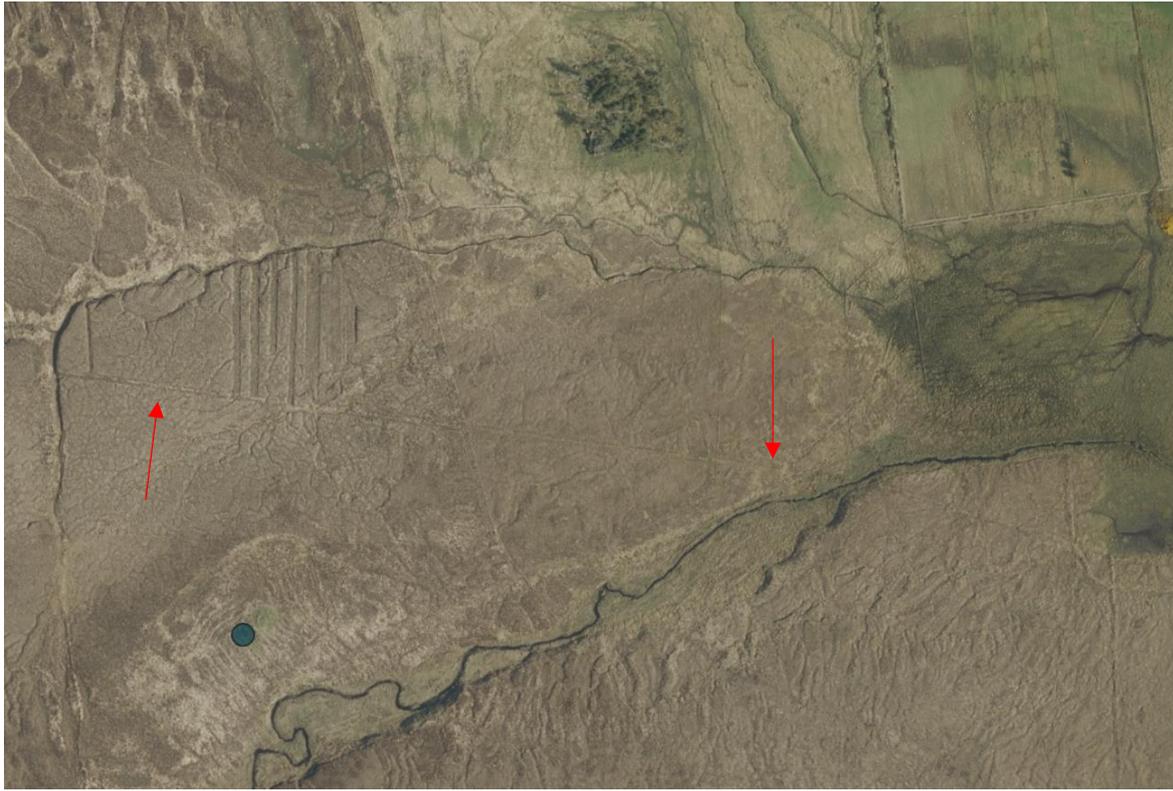


Figure 11: Line of the perpendicular land division boundary dyke



Figure 12: As for figure 11 on the OS 1st edition 1852



Figure 13: Land division dyke running out from the football club (white roof) at the centre of Coll beach

The stream just past this site is called Allt Cro nan Uan or, the stream of the lambs. In yet another example of the modern echoing the ancient, there are numerous modern fences delineating areas here which are just for that purpose. Some of the dykes visible on the 1st edition and still traceable today may have been the ancient equivalent.

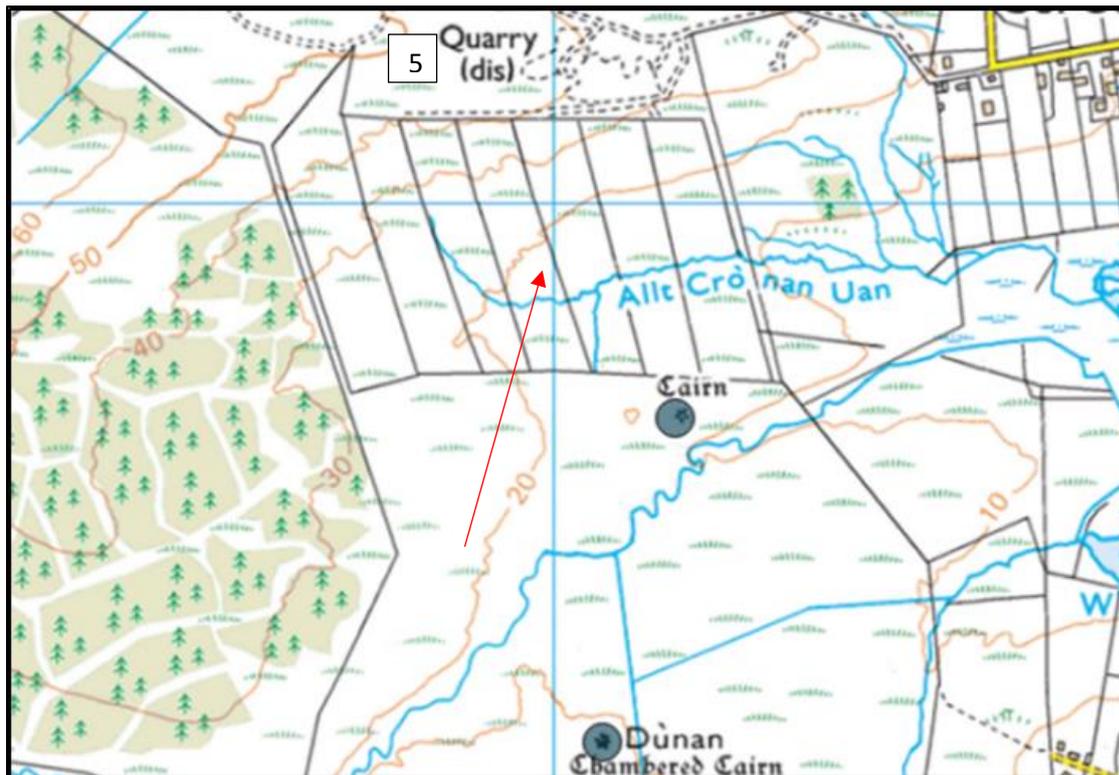


Figure 13: Modern fences thought to be enclosures for lambs

Site 5: Quarry

Just north of these there is a Quarry marked upon the map. We had wondered whether this may have had outcropping rock suitable for quarrying the large stones needed for the chambered tombs as the land around here is very rolling and we wondered how the builders of the tombs won their stone. However although there were some quite sizeable erratics in the deep deposits of boulder clay there were no outcrops and the quarry was more likely for gravel.

There were two shielings located near here on canmore (**Druim Ruisg - Shieling Hut, Canmore ID 136386 - Site Number NB43NE 10 - NGR NB 4538 3946** and **Allt Cro Nan Uan - Shieling Hut - Canmore ID 136388 - Site Number NB43NE 11 - NGR NB 4538 3934**) but these were not quickly found and by this time we were all happy enough with the days adventure and marched back to the start. We passed by a "farmstead" - **Canmore ID: 136383** which one of our number remembered but was now destroyed and a modern house built in its place. The many midden sites around the beach will likewise have to wait for another day.

Another fine day!