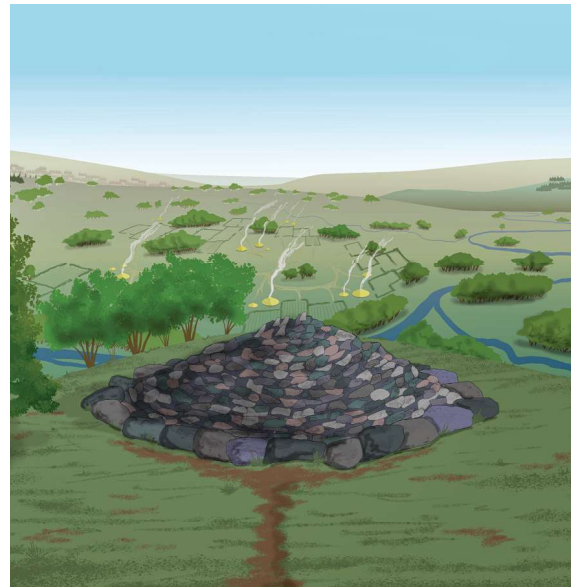


BRONZE AGE CAIRNS: TEACHERS' NOTES

Bronze Age Cairns

Cairns are burial monuments that were in use in the Neolithic period and Bronze Age. A previously unrecorded Bronze Age cairn was identified and excavated as part of the Whiteadder project; you can find out more about the results on the website.

The cairns that were created in the Bronze Age (c. 2500 BC - 800 BC) are perhaps less impressive than their Neolithic counterparts, being more mound-like in appearance. The dead were either buried in the ground and the cairn built over the top, or buried within stone boxes (cists) that were inserted into the cairn material. Bronze Age communities also made use of existing Neolithic burial monuments, inserting burials into these earlier cairns. This indicates that it was not the building of the cairn that was significant within the burial rite, but the placement within the cairn itself.



Artists' impression of the newly identified cairn as it might have looked in the Bronze Age

Homes and Farms

The scene depicted in our reconstruction drawing shows a landscape lightly covered with trees: birch, hazel, pine and oak. Bronze Age people were farmers so, like their Neolithic predecessors, they cleared trees to create more space for growing crops and pasturing animals.

Traces of Bronze Age farming are visible in the remains of their fields. Low banks define areas of cultivation; small piles of stones show where they were removed from arable fields to avoid breaking the plough; lynchets (ridges formed along the downhill side of a plot by ploughing) define the edges of fields. Cord rig – narrow ridges around 1.3m in breadth, covering areas up to 0.5ha – forms undulations in the landscape, providing surface traces of prehistoric cultivation.

Homes in the Bronze Age were circular, known to us as roundhouses. Some had stone and turf walls while others were built of stone, forming circular homes up to around 15m in diameter. They are believed to have had conical thatched roofs. A large central hearth provided warmth and light, and the interior space may have been divided by woven wattle screens. Though all are named roundhouses, it is very probable that some were used as craft spaces and workshops.

For those that were domestic in nature, each roundhouse was probably home to an extended family group. Traces of these ancient homes are visible in the landscape today as low rings with a break for a single doorway.

Beaker People and Pots

During excavations at the possible cairn site close to the Whiteadder Reservoir, one small fragment of pottery from the Bronze Age was discovered (right). It is a piece of a type of pot known as a Beaker.



Fragment of Beaker from the newly identified cairn



3D model of a reconstructed Beaker from a Bronze Age burial in Caithness

Beakers are bell-shaped pots that are thought to

have been first produced in Iberia – what we now know as Spain and Portugal – and were brought here soon after. People from all over what we now know as Europe moved into what we call Britain, bringing Beaker pots and a new culture with them. Beakers are usually covered all over with decoration featuring geometric designs such as zig zags, lines and triangles. The beaker from the cairn was covered with rows of tiny dots created with the teeth of a comb.

They are often found alongside burials, suggesting that these pots played an important role in Bronze Age burial traditions. They were probably used for drinking from. Scientific testing can even tell us what was inside the beakers, so we know that sometimes they held alcoholic or hallucinogenic.

Activities and Resources

You'll find a selection of activities and resources in the Learning Zone, including:

- A short video about the piece of Beaker from excavations as mentioned above

- A video tutorial on making replica Beakers

- Two worksheets, one about creating patterns and one to create a decorative Beaker design

- An image of a number of beakers, to inspire your learner while making or drawing their beakers