Landscape as archive: death, belonging and memory in the north

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THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

Good afternoon thanks for coming along to the talk and many thanks to the organisers for the invitation to speak today. Thanks also to Aki our session convenor and the other speakers in the panel. My name is Gina Wall and I am the Programme Director for the GSA Highlands & Islands campus, The Glasgow School of Art's northern campus located in the beautiful region of Moray. So, this afternoon I'd like to introduce you to a project that I've been working on with an Archaeologist, which emerged from Fieldwork and then a public lecture and finally resulted in the production of a Fieldguide which launches next week in Glasgow, but you have had a preview downstairs in the Relate North exhibition. Today I will introduce the project, and the place from which it emerged, alongside reading excerpts from the Fieldguide. At certain points, my presentation will move between registers, hopefully drawing out the different voices of the work.

Dr Alex Hale
Edinburgh-based archaeologist, works at Historic Environment Scotland and the University of Edinburgh, who recognises that his practice-based research spans different disciplines. He likes to work with collaborative, creative people and things. He likes seeing the weird in the everyday.
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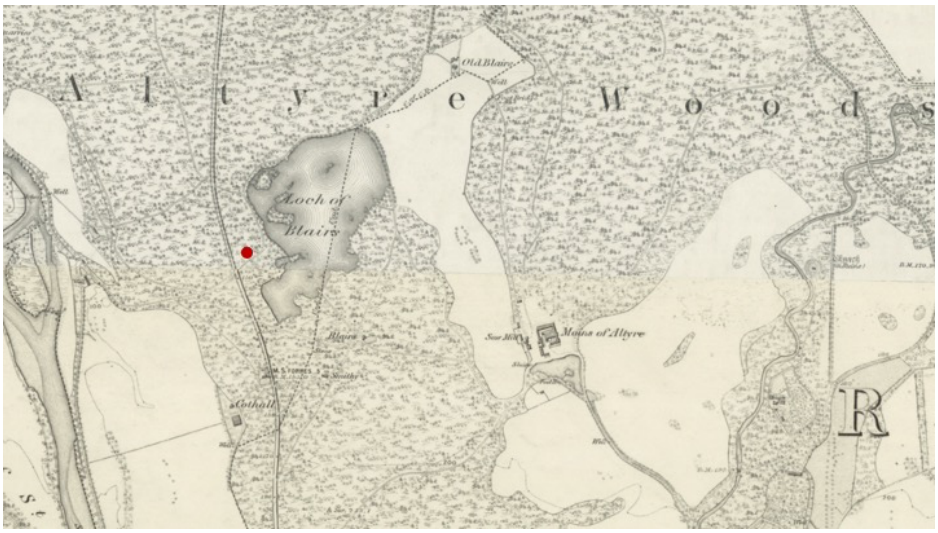
This project a collaborative one, and here is my partner in crime the very wonderful Dr Alex Hale from Historic Environment Scotland, the public body that takes care of the historic buildings and landscapes of Scotland. We often laugh about how Alex is a frustrated artist and I am a frustrated archaeologist! But as you see from this slide we have a shared interest in photography.

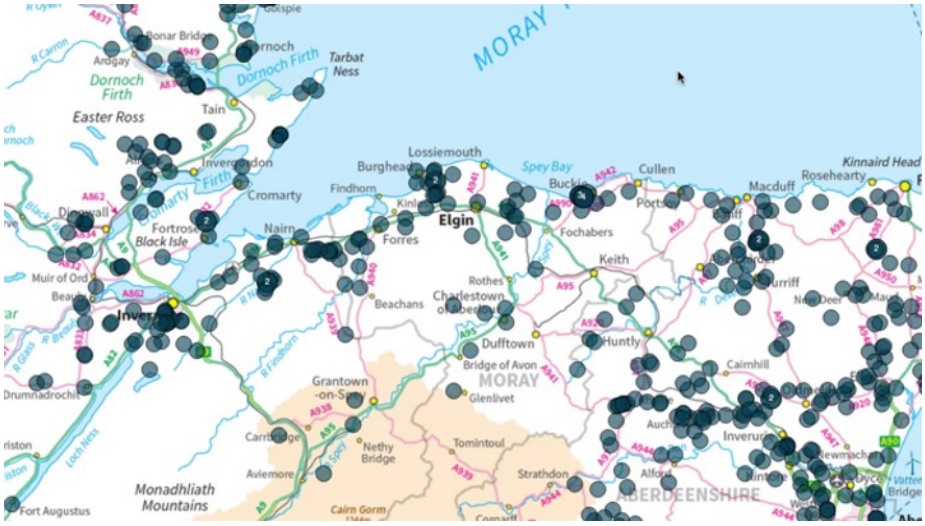
Through my own practice that is photographing, writing, walking, I work relationally with other disciplines so regularly think *with* other academics and practitioners. I appreciate engaging with a place *in difference* when you move through it with people who have very divergent disciplinary and embodied knowledges. I am inspired by the work of feminist philosopher and physicist Karen Barad, who does not talk of things or objects but of phenomena, which are material-discursive[1] - she writes: 'no priority is given to either materiality or discursivity; neither one stands outside the other.'[2] This attentiveness to the material [as a kind of discursive matter] draws me to work with academics from other disciplinary *practices*, and the intersection between art and archaeology is particularly interesting in terms of the opportunity it gives to reflect on landscape, time and material remains - our entanglement with that which hangs on *in place*.



A red dot overlaid on a very old map. This is the Ordnance Survey map of the Loch of Blairs very close to out northern campus from 1843-1882. The red dot (added by me of course!)

[1] material-discursive – entanglement of materiality and discourse or language. Photography as a material-discursive practice, archaeology
[2] Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway* p.177

indicates the location of a short cist which is a stone lined grave and was a common method of interring human bodies in the Bronze Age. When the 1843 map was drawn nobody, apart from those who witnessed the burial knew it was there. The short cist entombed and memorialised someone who lived in this landscape nearly 4,000 years ago. So when we think about the epoch of the burial, maybe the map is not so old after all.



There are many such cists in the landscape, some unearthed, countless others still buried, *unknown*. This reminds us that we need to take care where we walk – on what or on whom do we step?

The phone lights in the falling dark, a momentary ingression from a nearby constellation which feels so very far away. My mother is on the other end of the line.

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At the darkling of a day in the field in November, tired legs, light receding below the horizon, we search for a Bronze Age cist. We encircle the point on the map,

accurate to 10 meters. Through the paper portal, we key in to the landscape. We walk the site, looking, moving, doing archaeology. With visibility diminishing rapidly there is a startling discovery: the capstone of the cist has resurfaced.

The phone lights in the falling dark, a momentary ingression from a nearby constellation which feels so very far away. My mother is on the other end of the line.

Fig. 3. Cist at Loch of Blairs, Morayshire, showing end slab slightly displaced.

1931

The Loch of Blairs cist was re-discovered during the digging of a sand and gravel quarry into a glacial mound, to provide material for the development of the road network. From a brief report published in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland[2], it was investigated by J. Graham Callander, director of the National Museum of Antiquities. His words shed light on what was noticed at the time. The cist contained cremated bones and a broken pot, in archaeological terms identified as a Food Vessel. This form of pottery was in circulation around 4000 years ago, based on typological dating[3].

The report was accompanied by a photograph of the cist, taken from the south, looking into the dark void that had been made by the excavators creating an opening in the corner between the end and a side slab. The cist sits high up in the freshly-dug face of the quarry and the capstone is still in place. Upon opening and inspection, some objects from the cist were removed. Fragments of the Food Vessel and some cremated bones were taken to the National Museum in Edinburgh. It was the intention of Alister Gordon Cumming to fence off the site and leave it as it had been discovered[4]. Despite some of the contents of the cist being taken away in 1931, the place remained, an open-ended reminder of a person's life.

We can suppose that the re-surfacing of the cist, as a result of road building, didn't recover all of the remains of the person who was laid to rest there. Small fragments of cremated bone and pottery could have survived in the cist after its re-opening. This Edwardian intrusion ensured that the bones of the person and pot fragments have been dispersed across the landscape, from the floor of the quarry to the National Museum; a re-distribution of their material presence.

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The cist at Altyre was first unearthed during major road improvements in 1931. A glacial moraine of sand and gravel was dug up to provide the materials to widen the road and in so doing, the cist was accidentally disturbed. There is a photographic image from the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities from 1932 which shows the cist as it was discovered in 1931 - seen here it is as it appears in our Fieldguide. The cist was prized open and some of its contents were taken to the National Museum of Scotland. These included fragments of cremated human bone and sherds of what is known as a Food Vessel, ornamental pots which were used in Bronze Age burials.

Sherds and bags © Gina Wall (Courtesy of National Museums of Scotland)

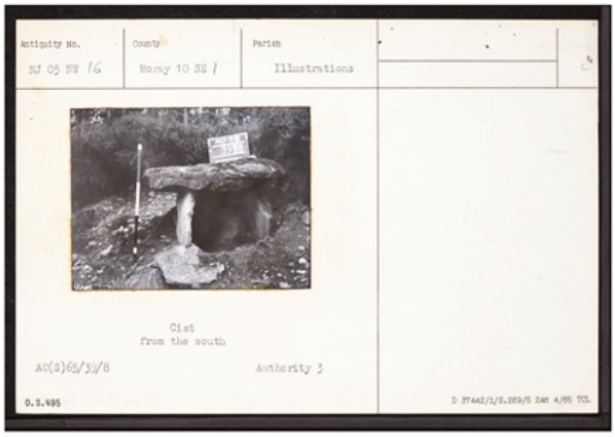
These pots were made of clay, the body of the land, decorated and fired and then placed in the cist. It is something of a misnomer to call these food vessels, for there is no evidence that they actually carried food. In many cases, it is unclear exactly what they were filled with, but sometimes they held the partially cremated remains of the occupant of the cist:

> *The sherds of the pot are carefully marked in an indented pattern; regular, triangular marks made with wood or perhaps the bones of a bird. The clay is strong, stony and rough, shot through with glinting mica; it looks like a small landscape, cliff-edged and rugged. The hand-built pot carries the traces of its making, the pressure of fingers pinching and stretching, layer on layer, we see the touch of your hands. We feel the care of making, the respectful ritual of building this vessel for another's remains.*

Meadowsweet Shroud © Gina Wall

Evidence of organic materials have been discovered with Bronze Age burials, in archaeology these are called *biofacts* or *ecofacts*. And they provide a sense of the more-than-human intra-actions at the time of the burial. A lovely example of an *ecofact* would be the presence of Meadowsweet pollen. It is thought that burial shrouds may have been made from Meadowsweet to protect the deceased. Meadowsweet (*Filupendula ulmaria*[3]) is a common botanical widely found in Europe with natural herbal qualities – salicylic acid, from which asprin is synthesized, was first isolated from the plant[4]. And although there has not been any analysis done of the cist remains from Altyre, and therefore no evidence of the presence of meadowsweet, I was speculating on this when I took this photograph in the field in 2021, close to the site of the cist. What interests me about these botanical details is that they connect, what in our human understanding seem like, moments separated by vast time scales. Ecofacts speak of the ongoing cultural relevance of plants, their use in the derivation of synthetic medicine and the importance of knowing the ground around you. They also remind me of what I have often overlooked, you could say I stood on somethings and somebeings that I just did not comprehend.

[3] ***Filipendula*** – comes from *filum* meaning thread, and *pendulus* meaning hanging, ***ulmaria*** means elmlike – possibly in reference to its leaves which reseamble the elm (*Ulmus*)
[4] Irving, M. (2009) *The Forager Handbook*, p.266



When the cist was initially unearthed in 1931, it was subsequently reburied in a process that is described by archaeologists as preservation *in situ*. It was re-excavated in 1965 by an archaeologist named Keith Blood, and subsequently reburied. This slide shows the record of the 1965 excavation which is held in Historic Environment Scotland's archive.

Still from a spinning 3D Scan of the capstone © Alex Hale

Latterly, it resurfaced, or at least was rediscovered *on the surface*, in 2021 when my colleague Alex and I visited the site. This time, the capstone had emerged through the process of natural collapse due to weathering and the activity of tree roots and other plants. An agency of an altogether different kind.

In the Fieldguide we reflect on being open to the address of the person from the cist as a kind of spectral encounter. This person altogether real, yet dispersed, is a disruptor, an ambiguity who pricked our conscience. In the simple mathematics of life, the deceased will always outnumber the living[5], death and periods of mourning are common features of life, yet each passing is entirely irreproducible and unique. Either inevitably or strangely, I'm not entirely sure of which, my own world aligned with the research and production of the Fieldguide through the personal arc of my mother's entry into the final stages of her life, her passing and her interment. The different parts of my life became contiguous, the pages of the Fieldguide folded into Autotheory[6].

To be open to haunting is to stay at the surface, to understand it as a nexus of times – pasts, presents, futures, and to allow the spectral to leak through, to affect. For the spectre is not a thing, nor an apparition, nor a trick of the quantum light, but a way of being in and of the present.

Resting place © Gina Wall (Courtesy of National Museums of Scotland)

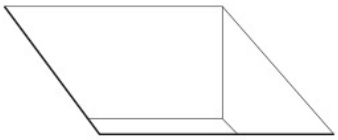
[5] Population Reference Bureau estimates 107 billion people have ever lived, current world population around 8 billion. UN estimates that the world population will stabilise around 10 billion sometime after 2200 – the living will never outnumber the dead.

[6] Autotheory is a literary tradition involving the combination of the narrative forms of autobiography, memoir, and critical theory.

Based on the weight of the bone material held in the National Museum of Scotland store in Edinburgh, it is clear that the body of the person who was interred at Altyre is scattered across the landscape. A proportion is held here in this bay, a final resting place of sorts, its cold flat light has the feel of a morgue.

Such a small quantity of bone, you are not altogether t/here.

Although we deploy archaeological methods, through our creative approach to the material we practice archaeology somewhat against the grain, or perhaps we might call it counter-archaeology. This intra-active 'doing/being' of archaeology takes place at the surface, it is resolutely anti-extractive, attending to what Rodney Harrison calls the archaeology *in* and *of* the present. Right here on the surface different timeframes intersect – past/present/future – these are encountered through site survey, walking, looking, feeling with our bodies, as the great Scottish writer Nan Shepherd put it in her masterwork *The Living Mountain*: 'my eyes were in my feet'[7]. Counter-archaeology calls into question our extractive practices with the graves of others. We can legitimately ask is this ethical, is this justifiable, is this caring? Does sending grave goods and partially collected bodies to lie in a museum store constitute good custodianship? By distributing bodies in this way, what kind of ancestors are we being?



skylark, woodpigeon, blackbird
open sky, hedgerow, granite
wet rose petals, pink touched with green

void space, dusty memory
sandy soil
you are folded back in

Lair and poem © Gina Wall

[7] Shepherd, N. (2011) *The Living Mountain*. p.46

For Alex and me, the Fieldguide became a space to reflect on our intra-actions in the world, acknowledging our ethical respon-ability. To return to Barad:

> ethics cannot be about responding to the other as if the other is the radical outside of the self. Ethics is not a geometrical calculation; 'others' are never very far away from 'us'; 'they' and 'we' are co-constituted and entangled through the very cuts 'we' help to enact [8]

In creating relations of care by thinking *with* others, those with whom we are intimately entangled, we acknowledge the need for care-full custodianship of landscape, place, and soil. Following Stacy Alaimo, we *think* the stuff of the world as always already *in community*. Landscape, place, soil are communities within which 'we' are co-constituted. Although repatriation (and it was interesting to hear Rauni speak of rematriation during her keynote) and reburial is virtually unheard of with prehistoric remains, by allowing ourselves to be open to the address of the person from the Altyre cist, we begin to understand the necessity of such an action. Perhaps it is time to return these sherds and bones to their rightful place in the land.

[8] Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway.* pp.178-9