

## HIGHLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL

## FIELD MONUMENTS

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD



1 SITE CODE HFC 84 S 1001	
2 NGR NC 831 411	3 QUAL CE
6 SITE NAME BEN GRIAM B.B.G.	
10 GENERIC TYPE FORT, SUMMIT + SETTLEMENT	
14 PERIOD/DATE BA = IA	15 DATING METHOD TYP
18 SHAPE	
19 THREAT AND DATE	
16 RELATIONSHIP OF ELEMENTS	
17 CONDITION INCOMPLETE	
21 GEOLOGY	
23 VEGETATION	
26 ASPECT 360°	
27 ALTITUDE 434 = 564m OD	
25 RELIEF STEEP SLOPES SUMMIT - ROCK CUTS	
28 EXCAVATION (EXCAVATOR: DATE: EXTENT: QUALITY)	
29 BIBLIOGRAPHY (AUTHOR: DATE: TITLE: JOURNAL OR PUBLISHER: VOLUME: DETAIL)	
1. ORDINANCE SURVEY: 1962: 6" MAP.	
2. ROANES: 1911: SUTHERLAND INVENTORY: H.S.C.: pp 108-9, No. 316.	
3. FRASER, R.W.: 1963: PREHISTORIC SCOTLAND: : p 158.	
4. SED(AI): 1983: LIST OF SCHEDULED MONUMENTS.	
5. RALSTON, I and SMITH, J.S.: 1983: PROC SOC ANT SCOT: VOL 113: pp 636-38	
6. RALSTON I + SMITH J: 1982: DISCOVERY AND EXCAVATION IN SCOTLAND (CBA SCOT): P 16	
30 GROUND PLAN NO.	31 GROUND PHOTO NO.
32 SLIDES NO.	33 HR. AP. NO.
34 NMR. AP. NO.	35 OTHER AP. NO. SOURCE RAP: 1060/SCOT/UX 76:3355-7
36 ARCHIVE AND LOCATION	
37 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY	38 SAMPLES
39 PALYNOLOGY	40 NUMERICAL DATES: RANGE: LAB NO.
41 SMALL FINDS	42 MUSEUM/LOCATION
43 OTHER	
44 NAME & ADDRESS OF OWNER	
45 ATTITUDE OF OWNER	
46 NAME & ADDRESS OF TENANT	
47 ATTITUDE OF TENANT	
48 ACCESS & RESTRICTIONS	
49 NAME & ADDRESS OF FINDER/RECORDER: DATE	
50 RECORDER: DATE 14.7.6.1985	
51 CHECK: DATE Am: 11.6.1985	
52 TEXT	

"See attached photocopies for text."



(2)

## HISTORICAL MONUMENTS (SCOTLAND) COMMISSION.

## INVENTORY OF MONUMENTS, ETC., IN COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND.

## PARISH OF KILDONAN.

316. *Hill Fort, Ben Griam Beg*.—Ben Griam Beg rises to a height of 1903', and strategically commands the approaches from the N. and E. coasts by Strath Halladale and Strath Helmsdale, as well as affording a prospect over a great area of country to the W., N., and E. To the southward the view is interrupted by Ben Griam More. The upper part of the hill is rugged, with remains of old red sandstone in out-cropping rock and detached slabs which have formed abundant material for fortification. Two main lines of defence fortify the summit. Approaching from the S., between the 1500' and 1600' elevations, a solid stone wall, some 5' thick, and in places still as much in height, runs down from the summit at the SE., and is carried westward along the edge of the shoulder of the hill for what appears to be a distance of some 500 yards, terminating at the edge of a mossy hollow, beyond which a precipitous rocky face (Creagan Iolaire) forms a natural defence to the W. Through the wall near the centre of its course is a gap, which has probably been an entrance. In rear of it, to the E., in the interior, is a circular depression. The absence of the wall across the short stretch of wet peat that fills the hollow at the W. end is not remarkable, as there would be a difficulty in obtaining a firm foundation on such material. A wooden palisade may have been used as a substitute. To the E. of the centre of the course of this wall there is a space of about 150 yards, over which there is an almost complete absence of stone on the hillside and where only the foundation of the wall is apparent. On the slopes below it, except at the gap mentioned, there is a perfect network of ruined walls or piled stones enclosing irregular spaces and forming an outer defence. At the W. end of the hill, above the mossy hollow, and passing round towards the N., the same system of defence is repeated, but at a higher level than on the S. face. Between the lower edge of this defence at its S. end and the wall along the edge of the shoulder, an open space is left, varying from 20 to 60 yards or thereby in width. Around the more or less level portion of the summit, towards the W., runs another wall, 4' to 5' thick, and at highest some 3' high, forming an enclosure, sub-oval in outline, about 500' in length by 200' in breadth (O.S. measurements). A break in the upper wall, just below the summit on the N. side, 6' wide, seems to have been an entrance. This wall appears to terminate to the W. of the actual summit, which is a rocky peak. Beyond the peak, some 40' distant, are visible the remains of another wall flanking the intervening space on the E. and running for a short distance (about 50') westward. Some 100' below this appears a network of ruined walls, from which starts the wall first described running along the shoulder. The NE. flank of the hill is precipitous, and the N. is also very steep. The actual top of the hill within the upper enclosure is wind-swept and barren, with little vegetation on it. There is no spring of water visible in the fort, but there are several on the hillside just below it.

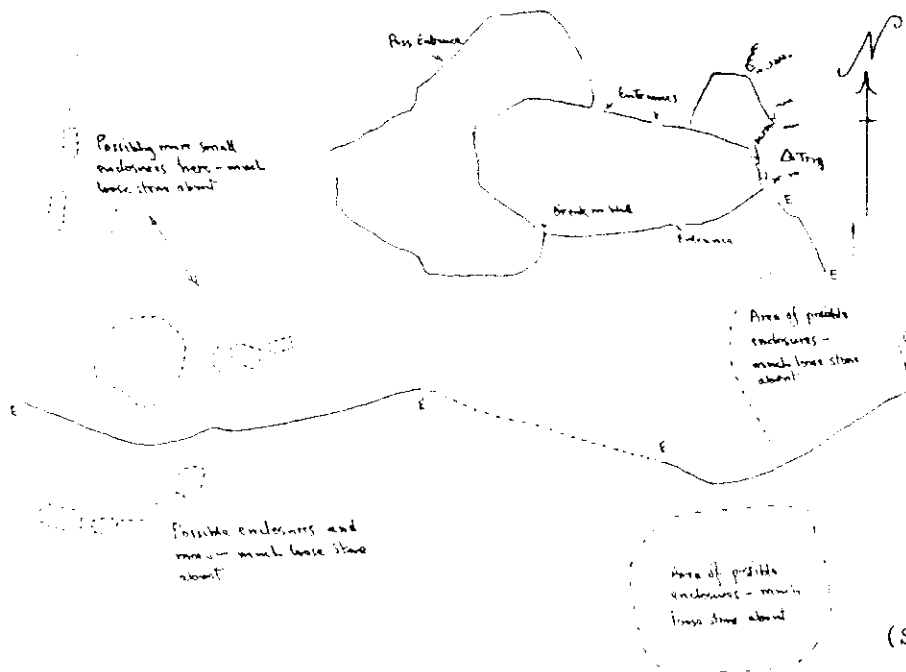
Lying among the ruins of the lower wall, roughly 150' below the summit, at the extreme E. end, is a round mill-stone of the native sandstone, broken in halves. It is 4' in diameter, 5" thick, and is pierced in the centre, with a hole 5' in diameter. To lessen the amount of piercing the stone has been previously flaked towards the centre in a circle of 1' 7" diameter, reducing the thickness to 2". Neither face of the stone is worn regularly smooth by friction, but there are depressions across the line of its revolution. Two other similar mill-stones are said to have lain on the slopes of the hill below the fortifications. One of them has now been rolled to the bottom.

See *Vertebrate Fauna of Suth., etc.*, p. 87.

O.S.M., SUTH., xlvii.

Visited, 18th Sept. 1909.





(SKETCH PLAN ONLY)

(NC 831411) Fort (NR)

(1)

The remains of the highest hill-fort in Scotland crowning the summit of Ben Griam Beg (1903 feet OD). It consists of a roughly oval enceinte 152m by 61m enclosed by a ruinous drystone wall, 1.8m thick and 1m in average height, and flanked at a lower level by enclosures on the west and NE. Some way below the fort on the south the remains of a wall of similar build cross the steep hillside. On either side of this wall there are traces of irregularly shaped enclosures. RCAHM noted the remains of a quern, 4 feet in diameter, amid the ruins of this wall. Feachem implies that the fort is Early Iron Age and suggests that the lower lying

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walls and enclosures represent an expansion into a much larger defended and occupied area. See sketch plan.

(OSFI:ES:23.11.1976)

The fort, as described and illustrated, occupies the flattish summit of the hill. Its wall is crudely constructed of slabs, and is of unusually slender proportions, though the steep rock-strewn hill slopes afford a good natural defence. The enclosures abutting on the west and north-east sides, and the crude wall extending southwards from the south-east corner before turning to the west, are of similar construction to the fort, except that the wall of the north-east enclosure is more slight. These appendages to the fort do not appear to be outer defences; they do not utilise any natural defence that may exist.

The several small, irregularly-shaped enclosures at NC 828409 are visible as platforms set into the slope on average 12.0m. across, with their lower edge retained by bands of stone. The interiors are noticeably clear of stones compared to the surrounding rocky ground. In no way do they resemble hut circles. There are other enclosures of similar type; those at NC 831409 being largely obscured by scree, and others at NC 828410 occurring on more level ground.

The fort and complex of walls and enclosures below it appear contemporary. The extreme remote and exposed situation of the complex probably indicates a temporary refuge for man and beast under threat of attack, rather than a permanent settlement.

(OSFI:NKB:29.4.1977)







# High altitude settlement on Ben Griam Beg, Sutherland

(5)

Ian Ralston\* and John S Smith\*

The limited celebrity of Ben Griam Beg, near Kinbrace in Sutherland (NGR NC 831 412), may be derived from the fact that it is crowned by the highest known hillfort in Scotland. The principal report on the site (RCAMS 1911, no 316) comments briefly that the fort is accompanied by an external settlement, described as a 'network of ruined walls', which is in fact of considerable extent and complexity. Located essentially around the 1500 ft contour (456 m), this outer settlement is at similar altitude to the platform settlement below the summit of Tap O'Noth (Gordon) (*Discovery Excav Scot 1981*), and poses interesting problems of the relationship of high altitude settlement to climatic decline in later prehistoric Scotland. The summit of Ben Griam Beg (578.5 m) affords wide prospects over the Straths of Halladale and Helmsdale, and the Orkney islands are readily visible.

The conical summit of this hill forms a conspicuous feature at the W end of the hill-ridge, which is aligned approximately E-W. The upper portions of the hill are liberally covered with scattered boulders of conglomerate and sandstone; outcrops of the former rock are common, particularly on the E side of the hill, where structural free faces would in themselves offer considerable natural defence. The uppermost portion of the hill is aligned NNW-SSE and is an area of active soil-creep forming terracettes, and severe wind deflation, an indication of the geomorphological activity consequent on the prevailing microclimate on the hilltop. These continuing processes have contributed to the warping and distortion of the alignments of the archaeological remains, which are for the most part reduced to vestigial traces of walling.

The summit itself displays little evidence of artificial defence: the clearest indication is offered by a detached sector of walling, consisting of a low spread stony bank, between the two principal conglomerate tors on the SW side. The clearest enclosure lies below the summit ridge on the W. This is the enclosure for which Feachem (1963) quotes dimensions. The interior of this enclosure is one extensively marked by active soil-creep terracettes, oriented N-S, at right angles to the slope of the ground. Regolith, displaced downslope, has built up against the drystone wall which defines the enclosure, causing it to bulge or tumble outwards. This stone wall, built of unevenly sized slabs of sandstone, survives to a maximum of 6-8 courses (c 1.5 m) in height for an equivalent width. The volume of debris which accompanies this wall suggests that its original height was not much in excess of what now survives. Remains of both the internal and the external wall-faces are intermittently visible. There are two entrance gaps in the N side of this wall; and one clear and one possible example in the S face. Since there appears to be little doubt that at least three of these entrances are original, it seems debatable whether a defensive function can be attributed to this enclosure. Some 6 m W of the principal entrance in the S wall, and just inside the wall line, are the distorted remains of a hut-circle, approximately 8 m in diameter. Another possible example, marked by a vestigial arc of walling, lies against the interior edge of the enclosure wall, W of the W entrance on the N side.

The character of this enclosure, dominated on the E by the craggy summit of the hill, against which it is backed, and stopping short of the military crest on the W, suggests that it is unlikely to have functioned as an entity. Indeed, its W end is enveloped at a lower level by a tumbled dyke, which encloses both the bare stony ridge of the hill and the boulder-strewn slopes to N and S. Where best preserved, on its N and SW sides, this wall is essentially similar in character to that of the upper enclosure. There are no irrefutable indications of settlement within this enclosure.

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Approximately 45 m below the fort on its SW side is a further enclosure, evidently non-defensive. This is an irregular circle in shape. Its interior, apart from vestigial traces of a stony bank which can be followed half-way across its diameter, is markedly stone-free. Immediately outside the perimeter of this enclosure on its NE side are the much-distorted remains of rubble-built rectangular enclosures, approximately 10 m across, now substantially infilled with peat.

A third major dyke runs across the slope of the S of this enclosure. It is essentially similar in character to those first described above, but does not appear to be defensive as it is not related structurally to any of the other lengths of walling. S of, and therefore below, this dyke is an area of steep boulder-strewn hillside at around 460 m OD.

On closer inspection, a suite of man-made features can be seen which are interspersed with the naturally-tumbled slabs. The principal element of this system is a series of dykes, for the most part forming sub-rectangular enclosures, the shape of which has in many cases been distorted by soil-creep and subsequent peat growth. However, other elements incorporated into this pattern include

- (a) stone clearance heaps, primarily on the upper margins of the system,
- (b) connecting lengths of track,
- (c) small 'annexe' enclosures, less than 5 m across,
- (d) possible hut circles, some scarped into the slope.

In all, a preliminary count suggests there may be c 30 individual elements in this system, which must cover a little less than 1 ha. A second similar system was noted, again below a detached length of dyke, approximately 120 m E. Similarly located in a boulder-strewn area at approximately 460 m OD, this comprises about 40 individual elements intimately associated with each other. A third system, perhaps 250 m further E, appears principally to contain rather longer and narrower plots, again defined by distorted lengths of walling.

These high-altitude field plots and settlement traces occur well above the altitudinal band (upper limit c 250 m) to which the hut circle settlements, like Kilphedir (Fairhurst & Taylor 1971), are normally restricted on the mainland of Northern Scotland (K Sabine, pers comm). In the light of their subsequent distortion through soil-creep, and partial submergence under peat, the hypothesis may be advanced that the Ben Griam Beg system may predate the onset of less-favourable climatic conditions in the sub-Atlantic. As such, it would predate systems such as Kilphedir, the only suite of such traces which are presently dated by isotopic means on the Northern Mainland (Megaw & Simpson 1979, 498). In view of the similarity between the architecture of the 'head-dyke' above these systems and the walls enclosing the summit area and its W spur, the possibility of a second millennium BC date for the entire complex may perhaps not be discounted.

#### REFERENCES

- Fairhurst, H & Taylor, D B 1971 'A hut circle settlement in Kilphedir, Sutherland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 103 (1970-1), 65-99.  
Feachem, R W 1963 *A Guide to Prehistoric Scotland* (1 edn). London.  
Megaw, J V S & Simpson, D D A (eds) 1979 *Introduction to British Prehistory*. Leicester.  
RCAMS 1911 *Second Report and Inventory . . . county of Sutherland*. Edinburgh.

"NC 831 412. Below the outer enclosure of the fort on Ben Griam Beg and at an altitude of c.460m is a suite of sub-rectangular enclosures, stone clearance heaps, possible hut circles, some scarped into the slope, small 'annexe', enclosures connecting lengths of tracks. The interior of the fort includes at least one hut circle and an area of active soil creep forming terracettes and active wind deflation, an indication of the geomorphical activity consequent on the prevealing microclimate of the hill top." (6)



ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD

[illegible]