12 General Discussion *by T Neighbour*

The cairn at Olcote formed the latest recognizably prehistoric component of a site which perhaps developed since the Neolithic. The four broad phases identified were:

Phase 1: Features beneath the cairn (Illus 6; Illus 7; Illus 8)
Phase 2: Cultivation marks and preparation of the ground (Illus 7; Illus 8; Illus 9)
Phase 3: The kerbed cairn, including construction and adaptation (Illus 10–18)
Phase 4: Features cutting the cairn, including post-holes, field drains and stone-robbing (Illus 10).

The first three phases are discussed at length in the following section.

12.1 Possible Neolithic activity (Phase 1)

The formless array of pits sealed beneath the cairn almost defies interpretation. Such confused post and pit patterns are common in Neolithic sites of probable domestic character, particularly in the east of Scotland, such as Spurryhillock (Alexander 1997), and it is conceivable that the pits preserved beneath the cairn at Olcote fall into this category (Illus 7). However, many of the Olcote pits seem to have belonged in four- and six-post square, rectangular, triangular and kite-shaped settings (Illus 8, A-Q). Ellison and Drewett have indicated a range of possibilities for such post arrangements (Ellison and Drewett 1971), including raised granaries and exposure platforms for corpses. Although their paper is concerned with two-, four- and six-post structures of Iron Age date, their logic can still be applied to the demonstrably pre-mid-Bronze Age features sealed beneath the cairn at Olcote. Furthermore, there is abundant evidence for the practice of excarnation during the Neolithic in most areas of the British Isles (Scott 1992).

It is conceivable that the features beneath the cairn at Olcote were of Neolithic date, a time when burial took an egalitarian form with bones being collected in communal ossuaries (Barclay & Russell-White 1993; Ashmore 1996). Typically, similar bones were collected in groups, rather than as discrete individuals, suggesting that burial took place either after the flesh had either been removed from the bones or had fallen off. It is suggested that the small arrangements of pits at Olcote are all that remains of a series of excarnation platforms (see Barclay & Russell-White 1993, 174, illus 72, for a graphic image of a putative excarnation enclosure at Balfarg). The rectangular arrangements (Illus 8, A, G and L) were of suitable dimensions to have supported a platform on which a body could be laid prone. The smaller arrangements could have been for platforms for the exposed remains of children or bodies in a crouched or sitting position. Although nothing of the posts survived above ground, there are numerous ethnographic parallels for the 'seemingly bizarre practice of secondary disposal of the corpse' (Metcalf & Huntington 1991, 35) from North and South America, Central Asia and elsewhere. Transitional rites, such as exposure of the dead, are frequently complex and of long duration, often involving great feasts and elaborate rituals to deflect the hostility of the recently departed soul (van Gennep 1960, 146; Metcalf & Huntingdon 1991, 34). The absolute minimum duration of the transition rite is the time taken for the bones to be free of decaying flesh:

> Documented particularly well in the nineteenth century [amongst the peoples of the north-west of America and Canada] are the huge carved cedar poles that were erected for various reasons, often memorial and sometimes for the physical containment of human remains. Despite the effort that went into producing and shaping these 'totem' poles, and in many cases the supreme quality of the craft and art, they were not maintained but left to decay, physical reminders of the passage of the dead from the world of the living to that of the ancestors (Pitts 2000, 257).

Sadly, any ornate decorated timbers from the presumed excarnation platforms at Olcote are now lost to us. However, their location on the same line as the north avenue of the main site at Calanais (and on the spot chosen for the construction of the cairn some centuries later) lends credence to the excarnation podia hypothesis. It is possible that this was a liminal zone, where bodies were exposed until defleshed, whereafter they were taken up the main avenue at Calanais for interment in the chambered tomb within the circle (Ashmore 1995). This proposed direct journey is at odds with the route along which the dead were escorted from their liminal location at Woodhenge for burial at Stonehenge, as suggested by others (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998). This route involved a river journey down a meandering stretch of the River Avon, before processing up to Stonehenge which, it is suggested, was intended to confuse the spirit of the dead (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998). The more direct route proposed here for the passage of the dead from Olcote to the Calanais stone circle might indicate a different attitude to the soul of the departed. Perhaps there was less fear of the mali-

ciousness of the newly dead, or the defleshed corpse now no longer represented a threat. It has been suggested that such rites of passage were commonplace (Pitts 2000). Ceremonial landscapes such as those on Salisbury plain, mainland Orkney and the complex centred on Calanais standing stones must have been extremely important, perhaps literally a matter of 'life and death'.

12.2 Bronze Age activity (Phases 2 and 3)

12.2.1 The cairn

The cairn at Olcote is of unusual morphology, dating from the mid 2nd millennium BC. Recent excavations in the Hebrides have revealed cairns of strikingly similar morphology to the one at Olcote. In particular, a circular, double-kerbed cairn has been excavated on Cnoc an Tursa, to the south of the main site at Calanais on the alignment of the avenue (Campbell & Coles 1999). Two circular cairns of similar diameter to the Olcote cairn, both with double kerbs and urned central cremations, have been investigated on Vatersay (Branigan & Foster 2000, 192–215) and the authors suggest that they discovered many more during survey work. On Lewis, the D-shaped cairn at Cnip also has two kerbs (Close-Brooks 1995). Thus, the double-kerbed cairn appears to have been something of an Hebridean tradition. It is not clear whether the distinctions in this tradition should be given more weight than the similarities to Bronze Age burial customs in the wider context. This mixture of striking similarities and unfathomable differences is a feature of Bronze Age burial rites, which can be broadly characterized as inhumation or cremation within cairns of varying levels of ostentation.

Quartz appears to have been a near ubiquitous accessory in the construction and curation of kerbed cairns (see Section 7.10 for a discussion of the links between quartz and funerary rites). Examples of the varying use of quartz have been found at Logie Newton, Aberdeenshire where blocks were used as kerb stones and at Monzie, Perthshire, where pebbles were placed at the base of a kerb (Ritchie & MacLaren 1972). At Fowlis Wester, Perthshire, the small central cist was filled with burnt bone and quartz and the kerb itself packed with flakes of quartz (Ritchie & MacLaren 1972). It is clear that the cairn at Olcote was no exception to the rule because an abundance of quartz was recovered during the excavation (see below). Quantities of worked and unworked quartz were also recovered during the excavation of the nearby cairn at Cnoc an Tursa (Campbell & Coles 1999). However, quartz was entirely absent from a cairn at Cnip, where quartz might not have contrasted sufficiently with the near-white shell sand (Close-Brooks 1995, 268). More puzzling is the apparent absence of quartz from the kerbed cairns excavated on Vatersay (Brannigan & Foster 2000, 192–215). However, small numbers of worked flint and quartz were recovered from the excavation of these two cairns (Brannigan & Foster 2000) and it is possible that the lack of unworked quartz may simply reflect an excavation retrieval policy rather than a real absence, because quartz was found on the spoil heaps (M Macleod, pers comm).

The cairns at Olcote and Cnoc an Tursa are both colinear with the avenue at the main site at Calanais. The chambered cairn and primary stone ring at Calanais were constructed in the early 4th millennium BC (Ashmore 1995). The cairn at Olcote has been radiocarbon-dated to the mid 2nd millennium BC and, although undated, the cairn at Cnoc an Tursa is likely to be of similar age. Thus a period of over a millennium separates the construction of the main site at Calanias and the cairns which were apparently sited with reference to it. It is suggested that the colinearity of the cairns with the avenue at the main site was a conscious attempt on the part of the cairn builders to construct a link with the past, a past that was probably beyond memory and hence rooted in the realm of legend. The linear link stands in stark contrast to the deliberate destruction of the chambered tomb within the circle at Calanais (Ashmore 1995). This act, which broadly coincided with the construction of the cairns, was sealed by ploughing (Ashmore 1995) and the formation of cultivation marks appears to have preceded the construction of the cairn at Olcote (see below).

The construction of Bronze Age burial sites around Neolithic standing stone monuments and contemporary structural alterations to such monuments is commonplace in Scotland, for example at Temple Wood, Argyll (Scott 1991), Machrie Moor, Arran (Haggarty 1991) and elsewhere in the British Isles, including Stonehenge (Cleal *et al.* 1995). Several burial cairns have been discovered in the landscape around Calanais (Illus 1), chiefly by Margaret and Ron Curtis. The excavation of the cairns at Olcote and Cnoc an Tursa has provided the first proven evidence for Bronze Age funerary activity in the area. These discoveries make the ceremonial landscape at Calanais more comprehensible within the accepted limits of the development of such Neolithic sites. The problems of archaeology in the peat-bound landscape of Lewis are demonstrated by the relatively recent discovery of a stone circle at Druim Dubh (Curtis & Curtis 1996). Sites with low relief, such as kerbed cairns, are likely to remain well hidden and it seems safe to assume that yet more Bronze Age burial sites await discovery in the Calanais area.

12.2.2 Preparing the ground

The soil micromorphological analysis has demonstrated that the topsoil was stripped from the site of

the cairn prior to its construction while excavation demonstrated that cultivation marks had been preserved beneath the cairn in the north-east quadrant of the site. Barclay has suggested that prehistoric cultivation marks, which are usually recorded as ard marks, are more often the result of spade work and are the result of cutting and removing turf prior to cultivation (Barclay 1997, 142). The cultivation marks at Olcote were not dissimilar to those discovered at Rosinish (Shepherd & Tuckwell 1977), where they were not associated with a burial monument at all. However, such a process would have been necessary to remove the turf and prepare the ground for the construction of the cairn at Olcote and it is suggested that the marks here are unlikely to be agricultural traces.

The presence of cultivation marks beneath burial monuments of the Neolithic and Bronze Age has been recorded across Europe (Tarlow 1995). It has been suggested that many of these marks, such as those beneath South Street Long Barrow, have 'a strange vigorousness' (Taylor 1996, 184) and that the act of marking the soil was a deliberate ritual preparation of the ground performed prior to the erection of the cairn.

Ethnography suggests that the idea of the dead fertilizing the landscape is powerful and widespread. Although there are societies, such as the Mambai of East Timor (Metcalf & Huntington 1991, 105–7), where the fertilizing power of the dead is viewed very literally indeed (the Mambai believe that the bodies of the dead turn into black earth which provides food), generally this idea is metaphorical rather than literal: the potentially dangerous loose soul is transferred to regeneration and growth (van Gennep 1960). Patzold described a rite in India that involved marking out a burial plot with rope, ploughing the plot with a wooden plough, saying a prayer to beseech continued fertility and finally ploughing along the line of the rope (Patzold 1960). The cremated remains of the deceased would then be placed in an urn in the centre of the burial plot. At the end of the ceremony the ground was watered and sown with seed and finally earth heaped upon it. Thus, the ploughing represented a means of preparing the ground for the planting of the dead (Taylor 1996, 184), with attendant implications for future fertility and agricultural output.

While it seems that the cultivation marks at Olcote were the result of the prosaic act of removing topsoil and turf to provide a level subsoil surface for the construction of the cairn, it is suggested that an element of ritual was also attached to the process. Credence is lent to this notion when the destruction of the chambered cairn at the Calanais standing stones is considered (Ashmore 1995). The process of demolition culminated in the ploughing of the site, an action perhaps serving a ritual function (Ashmore 1995), which occurred in broadly the same period as the construction of the cairn at Olcote.

12.2.3 Construction of the cairn

The body of the cairn was formed of ash from burnt, peaty turves and peaty soil. Soil micromorphology and magnetic susceptibility analysis (Illus 19) demonstrated that the peaty turves were not burnt on site but were imported for incorporation into the funerary monument. Clues as to the importance of depositing such material are provided by: the layers of vegetation, principally heather (see above), which were deliberately laid between the ash layers; the deposition of smashed sherds of a single vessel within the ash spreads; and the presence of pits within the ash layers, the pits having been dug while the ash was being laid. The fills of the pits provided no clue as to their function although they could have contained organic ritual offerings that did not survive the effects of the acid soil.

Soil micromorphology also provided evidence for the import of soil to a similar cairn at Mousland, Orkney (Downes 1994). The excavator suggests that the ash was from a funeral pyre and that the cremation ceremony took place away from the place of burial. However, burning peaty turves would not have produced the high temperature suggested for the Olcote cremation. Thus, the ash which formed the body of the cairn does not appear to have come from the cremation pyre, but from some other activity. The burnt peaty turves could have been removed from the site of the cairn during the preparation of the ground and provided the fuel for a ceremonial feast. Although the ash was possibly derived from domestic activities, it appears to have been deposited within the body of the cairn in a prescribed manner, layers of heather being interleaved with layers of ash and small hollows in the ash being sealed by further deposits of ash. One of the hollows (167) contained sherds from a single pot. Thus, while the origins of the ash are uncertain, the manner in which it was laid down suggests that its deposition was of ceremonial importance.

The cremated remains were placed within a cist, defined by three orthostats, in the centre of the cairn. A vessel within the cist had been disturbed, probably by the insertion of drains through the cairn and through stone-robbing, and around one third of it was missing. It is suspected that this vessel may have originally covered the cremated remains. A cut (122) indicates that the central cist was constructed following the formation of the low mound that confined by the outer kerb. It is impossible to be precise about the length of time between the construction of the cairn and the insertion of the cist. However, the central position of the cist suggests that the cairn was constructed as a burial monument for the individual(s) within that cist and thus the length of time between the two events was unlikely to have been great (the cremation burial rite is discussed at greater length in Section 12.2.4). A round kerb, built of slabs laid flat, surrounded the low mound. An inner kerb, of uncertain morphology, was laid on top of the mound. The inner kerb was

apparently very slight along most of its length and laid only on the surface of the soil that formed the body of the cairn. Much of the stone had been robbed from the cairn and much of the remaining stone had been disturbed. Consequently, the exact shape of the inner kerb is not certain, but is most likely to have been designed as a penannular feature (Illus 11), particularly if the presence of a putative satellite inhumation cist is accepted. This putative cist was placed roughly symmetrically between the open arms of the penannular model for the inner kerb. Except for this possible satellite cist, there was no evidence for appreciable stratigraphic depth within the monument. In particular, there was no stratigraphic link between the inner and outer kerbs. It is suggested that, as both features focused on the central cremation cist, the kerbs should be viewed as contemporary. If so, the cairn at Olcote belongs to an Hebridean variation of a more widespread burial tradition, incorporating two kerbs rather than the more typical single kerb (see above).

12.2.4 Who was buried at Olcote?

Single burials within Bronze Age cairns contrast with the communal burials of the Neolithic and seem to reflect an increasing individualization of society (Parker Pearson 1993; Bradley 1998). The complex morphology of the cairn and its apparently deliberate relationship with the avenue at Calanias suggest that the burial at Olcote was of some importance. Whether that importance was attached to the individual(s) buried there, or whether the act of burial was important and the individual(s) were merely elements of a wider agenda is fundamental to our full understanding of this monument. This remains unresolved. Questions can be asked and parallels suggested, some of which might appear outlandish.

Inevitably, we have to ask who was buried at Olcote. The cremated remains were of either one or two individuals. It was not possible to establish the sex or cause of death of the incumbent(s). However, it has been possible to ascertain the age at death, either a single 14- to 16-year-old or two individuals, one of whom was over 18 and another represented by only a single tooth from an individual who could have been 3–5, 8–10 or 14–16 years old. It is considered most likely that two individuals were represented within the cremation. Who were these people? Did they include the young son or daughter of an important person? Were they siblings who died at the same time by accident or illness? Did the nature of their deaths indicate that special treatment of their remains was required to appease their souls after death and ensure the continued fortunes of those left behind? Was one of the individuals a slave, put to death following the departure of their young master/mistress? The presence of two or more individuals in a single urn or burial is not uncommon in the Bronze Age: analysis of the skeletal material recovered from excavations in the Brenig Valley in North Wales revealed that one urn held the bones of two individuals, while a large burial pit contained three individuals who must have been buried at the same time (Lynch 1993, 152).

Downes has highlighted the complexity of the cremation ceremony in Bali (Downes 1999), which involves the corpse being buried for a time, before cremation. A prescribed route from burial location to cremation site to final interment is followed. Similarly, Parker Pearson begins his book, *The Archaeology of Death and Burial*, with a cautionary tale summarizing an eyewitness account of the rites involved in the cremation of an important Viking in Russia, including the removal of the man's corpse from a temporary grave, reclothing the corpse and the sacrifice of slave girls and animals (Parker Pearson 1999, 1–3). This account reminds us that the site of a cremation burial is likely to be the final point on a long literal and metaphorical journey. Recent work on a Bronze Age burial mound in the Iki-Burul region of the Kalmyk Republic (on the steppes between the Don and the Volga) has revealed a startlingly long wait from the preparation of the burial plot to final interment. Pollen analysis demonstrated that the grave was dug in early spring, while the burial was not performed until the beginning of summer, when a 15-year-old girl was interred with a pillow of blooming grasses beneath her head. The excavator suggests that the girl was sacrificed. A low barrow was constructed over the grave immediately following the burial and heightened later, during the winter (N Shishlina, pers comm). Thus, although we know little beyond the age of the cremated individual(s) and the nature of their final resting place at Olcote, it must be acknowledged that this was likely to have been only the final act in a potentially long and ritually prescribed ceremony which could have lasted days, weeks or even months.

Analysis of the plant macrofossils from contexts within the Olcote cairn revealed the presence of bilberry, cowberry and crop plants, all of which are gathered in late summer/early autumn (harvest time). It is, of course, possible that the individual(s) buried at the cairn died at harvest time. However, it is also possible that the deaths occurred earlier in the year (if the cremated remains were of two individuals, not necessarily at the same time), and that the corpse(s) were retained in temporary graves until the prescribed time for burial (Downes 1999). There are numerous rituals recorded in ethnographic and historical studies for harvest time and the possibility that this monument was connected with harvest rituals must be addressed. The timing of the burial at Olcote, coupled with the suggested ritual attached to the preparation of the ground prior to the construction of the cairn, suggests that a link was understood between the dead and continuing agricultural fertility. Although it might seem fanciful, the possibility of sacrifice must at least be considered. Indeed, it is suspected that the adolescent girl buried in the

cairn in the Kalmyk Republic was sacrificed (see also Tarlow 1995 and Jones-Bley 2000). Fraser provides instances where human sacrifice is linked to agricultural fertility, including an example from Mexico where a chosen sacrificial victim, who resembled the corn goddess, Chicomecohualt, was covered in corn and beheaded, her blood being scattered on the fields to ensure future fertility (Fraser 1911, 589). In India a suttee sacrifice, whereby the wife of a deceased man voluntarily sacrifices herself on her husband's cremation pyre, was reported by *The Times* as recently as 12 August 2002. The suttee sacrifice is regarded as a cause for celebration: the widow is regarded as a goddess following her death (see Jones-Bley 2000 for a wide-ranging literary and archaeological overview of animal and human sacrifice, including suttee).