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Bone and antler toggles of the Bronze Age

Two perforated Bronze Age toggles, produced from thin splinters of bone or antler, were found during the excavation of Eweford West cairn (see Figure 5.7). Both of them were burnt, probably having gone through the pyre, attached to the garments or shrouds of the deceased.

The first is an incomplete, flat, perforated, lozenge-shaped bone toggle (SF 42 and 43). Seven less ornate examples of similarly shaped toggles are known in Scotland. The Eweford toggle appears to be unique, in that it has the remains of thirteen perforations. The holes are laid out in three rows, two following the upper and lower edges of the toggle and a third row running along the middle. The ornate detail suggests that this was a decorative ornament, as well as a functional piece used to fasten cloth or leather. One piece came from the cairn material itself (024), where it was associated with cremated human remains, and another four fragments came from a cremation deposit made up of the remains of four people (081).

The discovery of fragments of one toggle in two different contexts is significant, because it raises questions about our conventional ideas of formal burial deposits. Were some cremated remains kept from the pyre, to be scattered on top of the cairn after it was built, perhaps as a closing rite? Was some pyre debris swept up and scattered on the cairn after the burial itself?

The second piece (SF 24) consists of two conjoining fragments of a small, incomplete, sub-rectangular plate of bone or antler with a central, circular perforation. This was found among the cremated remains of a man, a woman and an infant (064). Like the first toggle, its white, brittle condition shows that it had passed through fire, perhaps attached to a garment that covered one of the bodies. Although no exact parallels are known, three similar flat toggles with single perforations are known from throughout Scotland.

Perforated flat bone or antler toggles fall into four broad types based on shape: lozenge-shaped, sub-rectangular, oval and circular; however, some examples fall outside these categories. Looking at the group as a whole, these artefacts have a fairly wide distribution throughout Scotland. Lozenge-shaped bone toggles are found almost exclusively with a type of cinerary urn known as Cordoned Urns, as are sub-rectangular flat toggles. The majority of Bronze Age bone toggles have been found in association with cremation burials, but this is a biased picture, based on preservation conditions. Bone toggles are likely to have been common throughout this period.

Six cremation deposits associated with perforated, flat bone toggles have been radiocarbon dated and have revealed a tight sequence of dates that place their use to between 1880 and 1510 BC.

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when digging at other places. Hence, they may have been aware that they were disturbing or digging through the remains of earlier generations.

The results of the analysis of the contents of each pit are given below. Figure 5.5 shows the pits in plan and in section (in relation to the retaining stones and pyre material), while Figure 5.6 shows the sections through the pits.

Cremation deposit (064): someone collected the burnt remains (2220g) of an adult man, an adult woman and an infant and put them in this pit. Perhaps these three had shared the pyre. One of them may have been wrapped in a shroud held together by a carefully shaped, perforated bone toggle (SF 24; see Figure 5.7 and text box 5.2). The fragments of bone varied in colour from yellow to white to grey to black, which suggests that those who witnessed