

REMARKS ON THE SAHARAN HEEL-SHAPED CAIRN

During summer 1975, the writer's attention having been drawn to Scottish heel-shaped cairns ("HSCs"), it was resolved to re-visit certain Saharan sites, as well as keeping a sharp lookout for others. As a result it has been possible to compile a short list—probably in no way representative of true total dispersion—indicative of the wide geographical distribution of constructions whose siting, orientation and overall similarity of plan enables them to be termed HSCs. Dating of the Scottish monuments, both in the Shetland Islands and on the Mainland, being as yet problematical (Henshall, 1972, 286: 1974, 162), we are no more fortunate with Saharan specimens. French nomenclature is complicated by a bewildering array of intermediate types, some of which are neither the V-shapes nor crescents shown by Monod (1948, 26) in West Sahara, nor yet the Hoggar crescents—no less than six varieties—cited by Denis (1959, 296). The latter's top centre monument (Fig. 1) is somewhat similar in plan to Ward of Symbister Ness which, in Saharan terminology, ranks as a crescent. Compare also Woisard (1955, 158).

No one has yet recognised the existence of HSCs outside Scottish territory nor has the writer been lucky enough to sight a single French or Spanish excavation report for any construction here tentatively labelled as such. The present remarks, therefore, must suffice only to record some common features of Scottish and African cairns, in the hope that ever-improving scientific techniques, especially in the realm of dating, may enable investigations to be taken further at some future date.

Saharan HSCs (and, of course, crescents, V-shapes and constructions with arms (or "monuments à bras" in French) tend to be sited on east-facing forward slopes, atop knolls and even in open flat terrain with a good view ahead. They may be placed across a col (Camps, 1974, Pl. XX, 2.) in the Western Hoggar, a seemingly rare occurrence also noted by R. Letan in the Moroccan Sahara and later shown to the writer. Whole "fields" of crescents are not uncommon, at least in Central West Mauritania, in South Central Algeria between Tamanrasset and In Guezzam, as also in the Western Air zone of Niger, to judge only by personal observations.

While Henshall remarks (1963, 148) that the orientation of Shetland cairns is notably consistent in a preference for the south-east, it appears too early to proffer a similar orientation in respect of the Sahara; it is however probable that a predominant heading of between north-east and south-east may prove to be the rule, always assuming that the numerous west-facing crescents of the far south of Algeria and Western Air (Milburn, forthcoming) do not turn out to possess similarly eccentric relations classifiable as HSCs. However, the orientation of those monuments usually considered as being archaic (Camps, 1970, 239: Mauny, 1961, 88: Milburn, 1976, 3), being composed wholly or partially of flat paving sometimes surmounted by a tumulus (French: "dallages"), is believed to lie invariably within the eastern half of the compass.

Since the list below attempts to compare the plan of each Saharan example with that of at least one named Scottish site, there are certain additional features worthy of note in passing. There can exist a larger stone or stones at the tips of Saharan crescents (with two observed cases for HSCs) whose function can only be described as architectural embellishment, unless the construction happens to stand on a steep forward slope. This should not be confused with the Saharan practice of placing three stones, in triangle pattern, at the tip of one arm only (Bessac, 1953, 1603), in North-western Africa, whose purpose is still unknown. The former custom (Fig. 2) is, however, suggestive of a tradition of the Scottish “upright stone” or “pillar stones” at the extremities of the façade (Bryce, 1940, 25, 28, 32).

Regarding mounds of stone placed before the front of Shetland facades, presumably intended to convert the HSC into a round one (Henshall, 1970, 44), it was noted that the Saharan site south of Gara Tesmad possesses a scatter of stones just in front of the centre of the facade. And a seemingly-local feature of the orientated monuments around Hassi el Khenig and Guelta Tiguelguemine, with one example also in Oued Tiguelguemine, consists of small stones piled up right on the “brow” of the construction, just behind the border of the façade and contiguous; the zone covered is often not more than about two metres square. So far it is not intended to attribute any special significance to this Saharan feature, which may well prove to be wide-spread, although apparently unpublished. One platform cairn (“PC”—thanks are due to Miss A. S. Henshall for this nomenclature) two kilometres south of Hassi el Khenig, to west of the main track, has a small stone pile six paces outside its eastern border; it is not known whether this is a later addition. Reygasse (1950, 72) reports finding a lone skull in a similar construction in Western Hoggar, describing it—as have other French authors—as a stone circle.

A further Saharan custom—that of prolonging one or both of the tips of a crescent into long thin “tails”—does not occur to date in the few cairns seen; nonetheless certain aerial photographs of parts of North-west Sahara, plus personal observation in such widely-divergent zones as Choum (Central West Mauritania) and In Guezzam (frontier of South Central Algeria with Niger) indicates a large area of dispersion of this practice. Near In Guezzam in January 1976 the writer logged a distance of around 280 paces, from the centre of one crescent to the apparent far end of its southern tail, without being able—as yet—to offer an explanation for this spectacular phenomenon.

The most succinct excavation report yet observed, which concerns a crescent rather than a HSC, is that given by Mercer (1976, 67). A crescentic tomb dug on Cape Blanc (Mauritania) by a French schoolmaster had a small entrance leading into a domed corbelled chamber: a crouched skeleton lay on the ground. For the benefit of readers outside Scotland, there is every reason to hope that further examples of HSCs will turn up on the Scottish Mainland.

I thank P. J. M. Geelan, Professor E. T. Hall, Miss A. S. Henshall, J. Mercer and Professor Th. Monod for various information and communications, all of which have proved invaluable in compiling this short resumé. Only bare outline plans of Scottish HSCs are given, based on those of Miss Henshall.

In conclusion, the following structures are offered as examples of Saharan HSCs; geographical positions taken from the Official Standard Names Gazetteer are underlined:

| <i>Site</i> | <i>Position</i> | <i>Published or observed details</i> | <i>Outline Plan comparison with Scottish HSCs</i> |
|--|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Ti-n Eddi, Adrar n'Ahnet. (Algeria) | 24 42 N <u>02 42 E.</u> | “Half-moon, 8 x 10 m, paved; central stone pile; facing E.” (Monod, 1932, 50 and fig. 7. E.) | Muckle Heog West/Ward of Silwick/Vementry. |
| Toufourine, Erg Chech. (Mali) | 24 36 59 4 N 04 39 01 3 W | “Crescent with very short arms, 12 x 9 m, facing South-east.” (Monod, 1948, 27 and fig. 35.) (Fig. 3) | As above. |
| Hassi el Khenig. (Algeria) | 26 12 N 03 24 E approx. | Flat open ground, overlooking oued. 6.8 m x 5.8 m. Façade lined by slabs on end. Small stones piled on “brow”. Faces 100°. (Fig. 4) | As above. |
| Ain Timellouka: approx. 1 km East of well. (Morocco) | 29 51 N 07 11 W approx. | Generally similar to the examples above, in flat open ground. Very delapidated. | As above. |
| Hoggar. (Algeria) | Unspecified. | One of six possible crescent-shapes shown by Denis (1959, 296, top left-hand type.) (Fig. 1) | Hill of Dale. (A second example by Denis—shown at top centre—recalls Ward of Symbister Ness.) |
| Adrar Tighatimine area. (Algeria) | 25 50 30 N 03 32 00 E approx. | Beside track, on knoll, on west side. Flat platform with delapidated stone pile at centre (suspected to be a later addition.) 12 x 5 m approx. Large stones at north end of façade, possibly disturbed by track-construction. Faces 115°. (Fig. 5) | Islesburgh (less chamber and passage.) |
| About 2 km south of Gara Tesmad, NW Tassili n'Ajjer. (Algeria) | 25 39 N <u>07 45 E.</u> | On forward slope below steep hill, overlooking a oued. Flat platform, some 84 paces between tips, paced over rough ground. 48 paces wide. | Punds Water (less chamber and passage.) |

| <i>Site</i> | <i>Position</i> | <i>Published or observed details</i> | <i>Outline Plan comparison with Scottish HSCs</i> |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|--|---|
| Guelta Tiguelguemine. (Algeria) | 26 13 N <u>03 32 E</u> | Central tumulus, 8 paces north to south and 50 cm high over platform. Faces 95°. (Fig. 6) Built over a trough at foot of a steep mound: monument is flat in relation to curving ground-surface. 19 paces x 10 paces. Tip of each arm about 50 cm wide. Larger stone at each tip. Small stones piled on "brow". Faces 90°. | Gateside (The Giant's Grave.) |

Note that the heights above ground level, of the platforms personally-observed, are in the order of 30–50 cms only.

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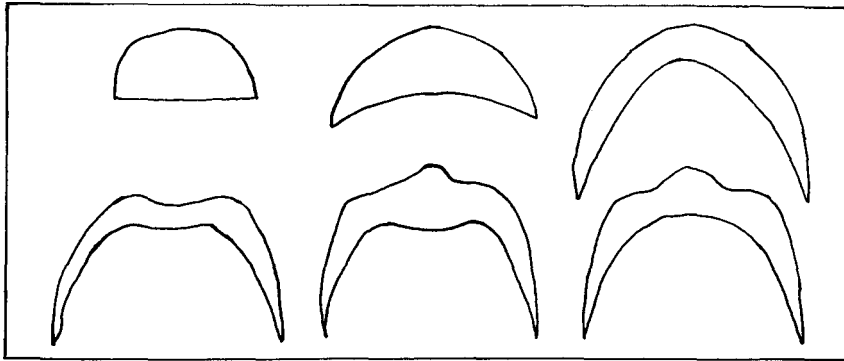


Fig. 1: Six varieties of crescents found in the Hoggar, Algeria. (After Denis).

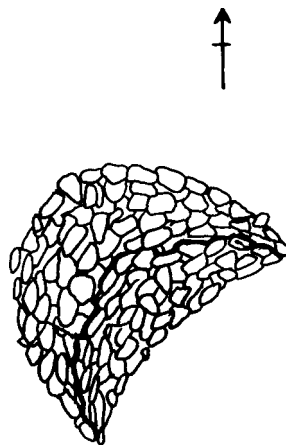


Fig. 3: HSC at Toufourine. (After Monod).



Fig. 2: Crescent of South Algeria with large stone at tip of south arm. Photo Milburn.



Fig. 4: HSC at Hassi el Khenig. Photo Milburn.



Fig. 5: Heel-shaped platform at Adrar Tighatimine. Note tumular addition. Photo Milburn.



Fig. 6: HSC south of Gara Tesmad. Photo Milburn.



Fig. 7: HSC at Guelta Tiguelguemine. Note small stones piled on "brow". Photo Milburn.

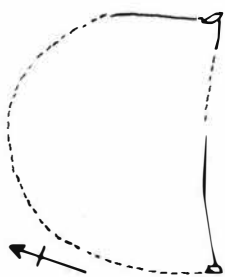


Fig. 8: Muckle Heog West.

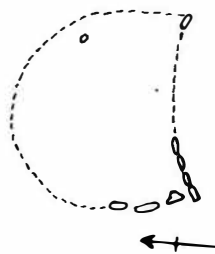


Fig. 9: Ward of Silwick.

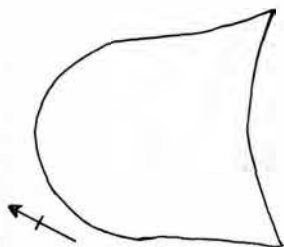


Fig. 10: Vementry (less chamber).

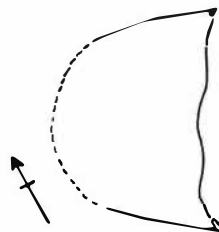


Fig. 11: Hill of Dale.

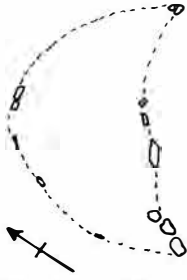


Fig. 12: Ward of Symbister Ness.

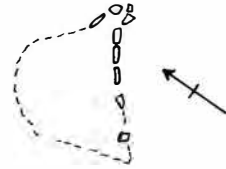


Fig. 13: Islesburgh (less chamber and passage).

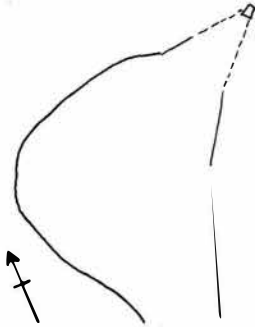


Fig. 14: Punds Water (less chamber and passage).

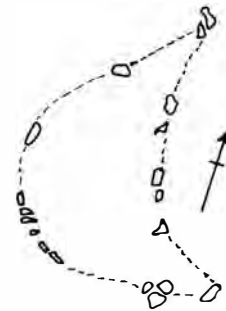


Fig. 15: Gateside.



Fig. 16: Small crescents, facing both west and east, near in Guezzam. Photo Milburn.

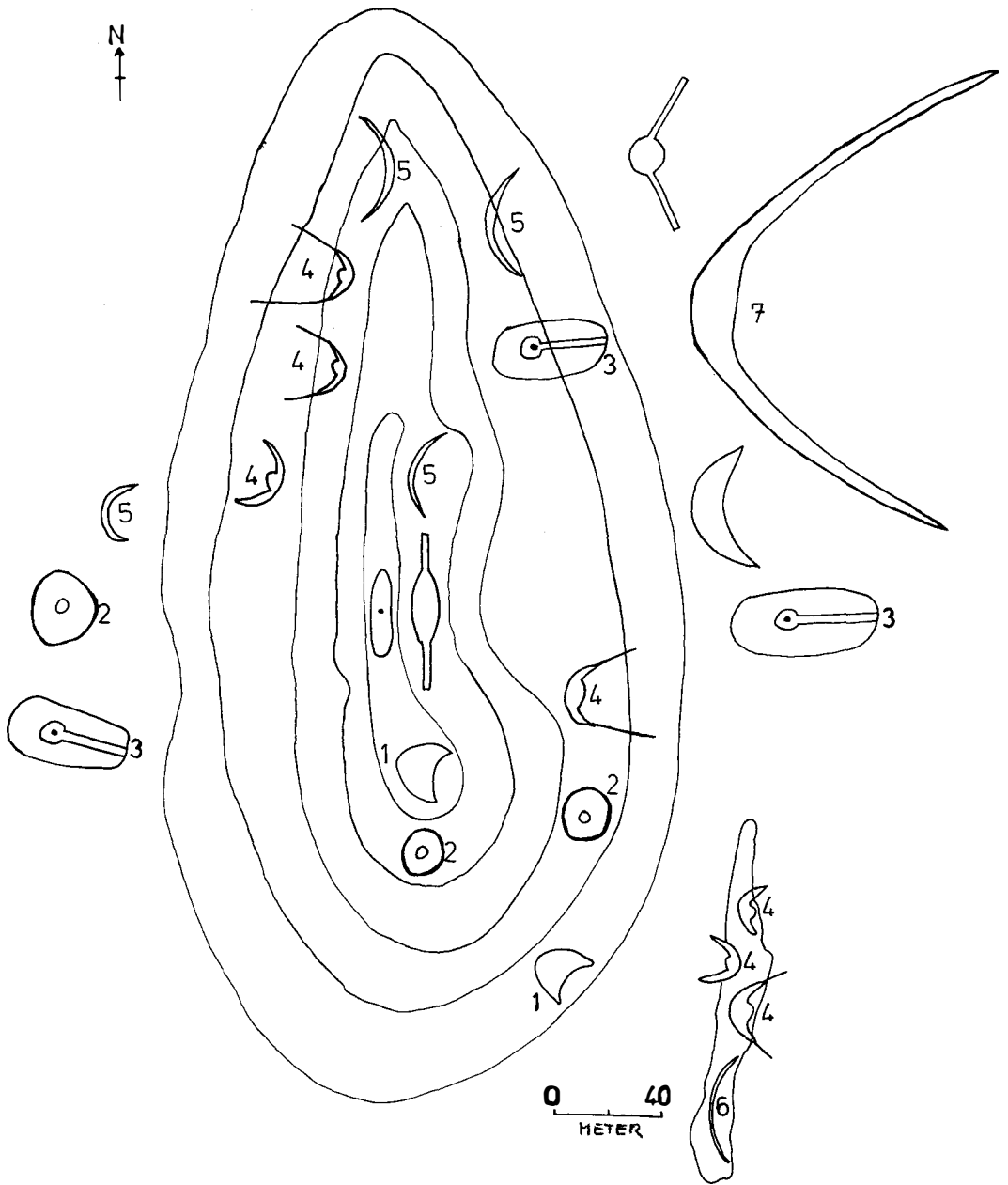


Fig. 17: Apparent likely position of various monuments in relation to high ground: –

1. HSCs.
2. Tumulus on a platform (“tumulus sur plateforme”). (sometimes sited close together).
3. Keyhole tomb (“monument en trou de serrure”).
4. South Algerian crescents (facing west as well as east).
5. Aïr crescents (facing west as well as east).
6. Central West Mauritanian crescents.
7. Giant crescents and “V-shapes” of West Sahara.

un-numbered. Various crescents, “V-shapes” and “monuments à bras”.

● IN SALAH

- Hassi el Khenig
- Guelta Tiguelguemine
- Adrar Tighatimine

● Gara Tesmad

● Arak

Tassili N'Ajjer

Adrar
N'Ahnet

DJANET ●

← Toufourine, MALI
700 kms approx.

H o g g a r

● Tamanrasset

A L G E R I A

N I G E R

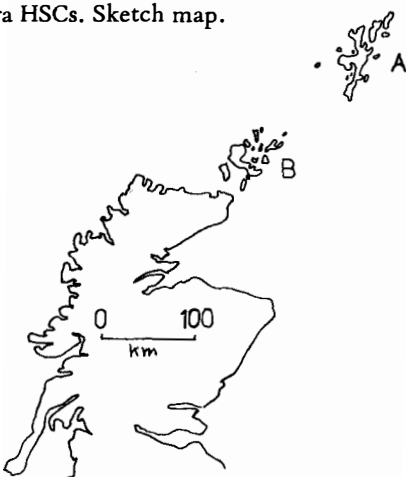
Western Air

40 kms

● IFEROUANE

● ARLIT

Sahara HSCs. Sketch map.



Northern Scotland showing A. Shetland. B. Orkney.