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Stone cairns across eastern Africa: a critical review

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This paper collates and synthesises a wide range of reports concerning stone cairns and related structures from across eastern Africa. These features often enclose human burials and are common in many areas, but they have only ever been sporadically investigated. I attempt to arrange them into a preliminary typology and make the first steps towards a broader comparative analysis. While these features have often been referred to as monuments and in some instances ‘megaliths’ I urge caution in such labelling. We should first evaluate the social context of their construction before we equate them with concepts derived from other parts of the world. Understanding the construction of eastern African landscapes through features such as these may provide a broader context for studying some of the region’s larger and more commonly investigated monuments.

Keywords: stone cairns; memory making; eastern Africa; Pastoral Neolithic; Iron Age

Ce document réunit et fait la synthèse d’un large éventail de sources ayant trait aux cairns et structures associées à travers l’Afrique orientale. Ces structures contiennent souvent des sépultures humaines et elles sont fréquentes dans nombreuses zones, mais elles n’ont fait l’objet que d’études sporadiques. Cet article tente de les organiser en une typologie préliminaire et pose les premiers jalons d’une analyse comparative plus large. Bien que ces structures aient souvent été appelées des ‘monuments’ ou dans certains cas des ‘mégolithes’, la prudence s’impose dans l’emploi de tels termes. Nous devons évaluer le contexte social de la construction de ces structures avant de les rapporter à des concepts dérivant d’autres parties du monde. Une meilleure compréhension, à travers ces structures, de la construction des paysages d’Afrique orientale peut fournir un contexte plus large à l’étude de certains des monuments de la région qui sont plus vastes et mieux étudiés.

Introduction

Ubiquitous across Kenya, northern Tanzania, northeastern Uganda, South Sudan, southern Ethiopia and southern Somalia are a wide range of stone-built features that have often been casually referred to as ‘monuments’ and yet are often fairly small in size and rarely subjected to substantial investigation. In various configurations and widely differing degrees of regularity and scale, these features generally consist of unmortared piles of stone (cairns) occasionally combined with upright monoliths (standing stones). Many of these features are clearly related to human burial and/or memorial, while others may have had quite different functions. They seem to have

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been largely, but by no means exclusively, constructed by communities practising degrees of pastoralism and/or agriculture and with decentralised and relatively egalitarian socio-political organisations — although the selective internment of some individuals may speak against this. These features are often found in large clusters, but may also be found singularly, and they are encountered widely across a range of geographic zones. They are often noted by researchers but largely overlooked.

Although few of these features have been dated radiometrically, existing dates (Table 1) and associated typological material together suggest a broad chronological span, potentially extending from the terminal Later Stone Age (c. 5000 BP) to the Later Iron Age (c. AD 1800). Although many of these features may be spatially, temporally or culturally related to one another, others may have been built in isolation. As yet, no study has adequately synthesised the disparate body of work on such features and placed them in typological or chronological order. The main aim of this paper is therefore to review the wide range of literature relating to such features and to develop a basic typology for them. Towards the end of the paper I synthesise some commonalities and key questions with the goal of framing a future research agenda. I point to the need for caution with regard to the terminology used to describe such features and argue for a deeper focus on the processes of memory-making that seem to result in their construction.

Monuments, megaliths and processes of memory-making

A useful survey of eastern African megaliths was recently presented by Clack and Brittain (2011), but their review suggests that a wider range of features might be considered together. In addition, their use of the term ‘megalith’ may require some caution (see below). In particular, I argue here that the uncritical ascription of

Table 1. Summary of dated cairns in eastern Africa (all dates are uncalibrated and the table excludes the ‘pillar sites’ discussed by Grillo and Hildebrand elsewhere in this issue).

Site	Reference	Cairn type	Date BP	Material dated	Laboratory number
Kokurmatakore	Stiles and Munro-Hay 1981				
Cairn 2		rectilinear	960 ± 190	bone apatite	GX-7396A
Cairn 3		ring	1110 ± 155	wood	GX-7397
Cairn 3		ring	585 ± 115	bone apatite	GX-7420A
Cairn 4		simple	3460 ± 155	bone apatite	GX-7421A
Cairn 5		ring	125 ± 120	bone apatite	GX-7423A
Cairn 6		ring	510 ± 115	bone apatite	GX-7422A
Lokori-Ngamoratung'a	Lynch and Robbins 1979; Soper 1982	stone ring	1200 ± 100 2285 ± 165	bone apatite bone collagen	GX-5042A UCLA-21240
Baawa-Nakedi	Lane <i>et al.</i> 2007	kerbed	2700 ± 40	charcoal	Beta-224653
Kisima Ranch	Siirriäinen 1984	simple	76 ± 90	bone collagen	Hel-853
Rumbe Hill, Ngorongoro	Sassoon 1968	simple	2260 ± 180	bone (unspecified)	GX-1243

'monumentality' to imperfectly understood processes of material memorialisation in eastern Africa seems falsely to equate those processes with Eurasian forms of monumentality. It runs the risk of falling into what Stahl (2005: 12) and others would call the 'Trevor-Roper Trap,' whereby in an attempt to demonstrate the equivalence of Africa's cultural trajectory with that of Europe, Africa's past is uncritically forced into Eurocentric narratives of prehistory that prioritise European phenomena (such as large-scale architecture) and therefore misrepresent the African past.

Certainly 'monumentality' simplistically defined as 'large-scale architecture' is relatively rare across precolonial Sub-Saharan Africa. As such, undue focus on Africa's rare 'large' monuments and/or the elevation of relatively small-scale constructions through the *a priori* application of Eurocentric terminology such as 'monumental' or 'megalithic' may serve to obscure the ways in which status and power were enacted and/or projected in Africa, as well as the ways in which individuals or events were commemorated, incorporated into community memory and involved in the construction of indigenous landscapes.

Purely on the basis of scale, some sites/features might certainly be worthy of terms such as 'megalithic'. However, defining such features on scale alone is tricky given that eastern Africa boasts a broad continuum of scale in construction, ranging from single standing stones and small loose piles of rock through to larger more regular drystone arrangements and larger 'complexes' of cairns and pillars. At what stage or scale do potentially related traditions of memorialisation in stone become 'monumental' or 'megalithic'? In addition, many features described as monumental in eastern Africa cannot be allied to the centralised or hierarchical social forms so often associated with monumentality (Hildebrand, this issue).

The alternative, of course, is to consider monumentality as the material expression of social processes that have the polysemic potential to convey multiple contextual meanings across time — memory, event, community, person, status, power etc. — irrespective of scale. Such an approach emphasises monuments as part of an ongoing active process of inscribing meaning in the landscape through time: it is the history of 'monuments' that is perhaps as meaningful as their size and form.

I would argue therefore that we must develop a more nuanced view of what defines or sets African monumentality apart from other forms of 'building', 'architecture' and material culture. In so doing we must seek to explore the broader social processes underlying the construction of this range of monumental forms. Many of the features discussed in this paper relate to human burial and may therefore be viewed as acts of memorialising or commemorating the dead. But they may also project the identity and indeed status of both individuals and groups and as such are also group or community acts of memory-making. Like some concepts of monumental architecture as 'public' architecture (see Hildebrand, this issue) these cairns might also indicate or mark 'public' spaces wherein acts of performance and socialisation (including dance, song, ritual and ceremony) are conducted; these too are acts of embodied memory-making (Connerton 1989) and should not be overlooked simply because such spaces are only partially delimited by 'built' features. In the same sense we should also consider similar acts of memory-making the material correlates of which have not survived because they were made in less durable materials or because they were never physically constructed.

Current trends in British landscape archaeology further emphasise the physical act of monument making as one of creating order in the world (Barrett and Ko

2009). Along the same lines we might consider cairn construction as a process of creating both social and natural categories through physical acts of building and inscribing in the landscape, as well as through associated acts of performance conducted between and around such features. Finally, as Clack and Brittain (2011; see also Barrett and Ko 2009) demonstrate, understandings of such features do not remain static, rather, subsequent generations reinterpret earlier features and incorporate them into new world views. Clack and Brittain (2011) further draw our attention to the value of ethnographic interaction with present-day peoples, not only to help understand archaeological features but also to understand better the relationships between communities, architecture, landscape and memory.

In the sense employed here features such as cairns therefore not only enclose the dead and memorialise individual(s), but may also serve as mnemonics for a wide range of ideas including social groups, ancestors, age-sets, communities, specific events (i.e. conflicts), regular performances (rituals, ceremonies) and sources of power/agency etc. Cairns may be contextually polysemic in the sense that they can evoke any number of memories depending on context. Such meanings can be further re-engaged and re-interpreted through time, while practical interaction with these features may further re-evoke the sense and indeed agency of such ideas and transform them, embedding new meanings and ideas.

While I return to these issues in the discussion, it is important to emphasise that this paper holds few definitive answers, but rather offers suggestions and a starting point from which to explore broader questions of eastern African monumentality. The ‘typology’ developed below should not be taken as a series of rigid given types that reflect real historical traditions; rather, the typological approach taken is merely intended to help make sense of a vast amount of information that has not previously been synthesised. Still, the paper cannot claim to be wholly comprehensive and I apologise from the start for any omissions. The data presented reflect my own experiences working in Kenya’s Central Rift Valley, Western Highlands and Southwest Turkana regions, in Karamoja, eastern Uganda, and in the Juba to Nimule region of South Sudan, but also include observations from projects conducted by or associated with the British Institute in Eastern Africa and published in this journal. Material from Laikipia and Leroghi in Central Kenya is kindly drawn from the work of Paul Lane, material from western Kenya is largely based on the work of John Sutton and information from Somalia is partially drawn from the British Institute in Eastern Africa’s photographic archive.

Introducing eastern African stone cairns

A wide range of stone cairns are found across the region. They may be constructed with precision and regularity with neat external coursing and rubble cores or they may be more simple loose piles of irregular stone. They are most commonly circular, but may also be elongated, doughnut-shaped or rectilinear. Some of these cairns may relate to agricultural activities and field clearance, such as at the abandoned agricultural site of Engaruka in northern Tanzania (Robertshaw 1986; Sutton 2004, 2000), but many others are thought to conceal burials. A number of authors (e.g. Posnansky 1968; Sutton 1973; Lane *et al.* 2007) have reported a total absence of human remains within cairns previously regarded as likely burial markers. In such cases the cairn may simply be ‘symbolic’ of burial or an active memorialisation of

past events, or what Sutton (1973) and Posnansky (1968: 187) call 'cenotaphs'. For example, although the Maasai and related groups rarely inter their dead in cairns today, oral histories recount older tradition of cairn interments for persons of status, particularly seers or *laibon*, while the collection and piling of stones in memory of fallen comrades may, to judge from interviews that I have carried out myself, have occasionally been practised before the colonial period. Moreover, as Posnansky (1968: 183) suggests, many cairns may actually have been built through time as passers-by 'added' stones to existing cairns as an act of memorial. In a number of other cases it seems likely that secondary burials were interred in cairns at a later date, occasionally disturbing the original burial (Brown 1966: 63; Lane *et al.* 2007).

The only attempt to develop a formal typology and chronology of cairns of which I am aware has been made by Lane *et al.* (2007: 43) for cairns on the Laikipia and Leroghi Plateaux in central Kenya. Lane identifies five types and suggests that 'simple' types may be more recent than 'kerbed types'. Building on Lane's typology and on a spatially broader range of reports, I identify at least eight different types of stone cairns.

Simple cairns

Roughly circular piles of stone without external elaboration are by far the most common. They regularly conceal a shallow circular burial pit, often covered by one or more large capstones upon which are roughly piled many smaller hand-sized stones. However, there are also examples where the body was placed on the original ground surface or within the cairn itself (Sutton 1973). Such cairns are 2–20 m in diameter; heights are usually little more than 1 m, but can reach several metres, including several notable examples in Kenya's Western Highlands (Sutton 1973). Simple cairns often occur in groups but may also occur singularly.

Western Kenya and the Central Rift Valley

Sutton (1973) conducted detailed examinations of a large number of simple cairns across western Kenya where they are numerous and widespread. Most were roughly circular piles of undifferentiated stones concealing a shallow central burial pit or hollow covered by a few larger capstones (Figure 1a). They were all found in large groups, the largest comprising >100 cairns. Sutton noted large groups of cairns at Keses/Lolminigai on the eastern Nandi-Uasin Gishu border and on both sides of Tinderet near Fort Ternan. He further mapped cairn groups at Kaisungurr, Moiben, Fort Ternan, and Chemartin; cairn diameters were 5–18 m and some cairns reached heights of 4 m. His excavations of two cairns at Kapkures (Fort Ternan) yielded obsidian, including blades of Elmenteitan type, pottery sherds, including a major part of an Elmenteitan vessel, and fragments of cattle bone, but no human remains. Excavation of another cairn at Chemartin revealed a rough kerb on one side and two obsidian blades of Elmenteitan type, but again no human remains. At Muringa, excavation of a cairn yielded cranial material of an adult male alongside ceramic fragments, cattle bone and stone artefacts that included an obsidian blade.

Jean Brown (1966) excavated three similar cairns at Ilkek near Gilgil, in Kenya's Central Rift Valley. Her 'Mound A' was 5 m in diameter and 0.56 m in height with a clear stone cap over a shallow burial depression. The cairn matrix contained numerous obsidian flakes as well as lumps of white diatomite, an unidentified red



Figure 1. Examples of simple and kerbed cairns from eastern Africa: (a) large simple stone cairn (Cairn 4 at Kapkures) in western Kenya (reproduced from Sutton 1973: Plate III with kind permission of John Sutton and the British Institute in Eastern Africa); (b) an excavated simple cairn (with possible kerb) at Mili Sita, Loldaiga Ranch, Kenya; (c and d) excavated kerbed cairns at Baawa-Nakedi, Leroghi, Kenya (photographs of 1b-d kindly supplied by Paul Lane).

stone and a single bovid tooth. The human burial was almost entirely decomposed. Mound B was larger: 7 m in diameter and 1 m high. The cairn matrix included lumps of red ochre, obsidian flakes and a core and part of a stone platter. The capstones appeared to have been disturbed, suggesting a secondary interment within an existing cairn. Partially beneath the capstones were the highly fragmentary remains of an adult female, a second adult and a pre-adolescent. Mound C was also large, being some 7 m in diameter with a suggestion of an outer ring of large ‘kerbstones’ within which the body of the cairn was placed (see Type 2 below). Once again the cairn matrix contained lumps of red ochre as well as white pumice, a fragment of a stone platter and obsidian flakes (perhaps naturally occurring). The larger stones surrounding the burial cut appear to have been arranged to raise and support the capstone over the body (something also noted by Posnansky 1968), but the body itself was only evidenced by small traces of powdered bone. Nevertheless, this cairn provides some of the most extensive evidence for grave goods in the form of fragments of a burned stone platter (the missing part of which was found in the cairn matrix), two white beads of an unknown substance, a stone pestle, a hammerstone, a long obsidian blade and the possible remains of a gourd/calabash.

Brown considered these cairns to be similar to ‘Cairn E’ and the ‘cemetery’ excavated by Mary Leakey (1945) at Hyrax Hill near Nakuru in Kenya’s Central Rift Valley. Leakey’s ‘cemetery’ is a highly unusual feature that may be an extended

irregular cairn or a group of overlapping and partially collapsed simple cairns that together created a large low mound of stones. Nineteen bodies of varying age and sex were interred beneath. Grave goods were few here, but included stone platters similar to those from Ilkek. They appear to have been primarily associated with female burials, but any broader correlation of this pattern at other locations remains to be demonstrated (Brown 1966). Mound E at Hyrax Hill was a more standard simple cairn with a double internment and a stone platter, but a possible 'ring' of small standing stones set within the cairn echoes those found in some of the more elaborate cairn types reviewed below.

Cairns of a similar 'simple' construction, but potentially different origin based on skeletal evidence, were excavated by Louis Leakey at Willey's Kopje and Makalia River in the Central Rift (Leakey 1935: 112–113). Several of the bodies recovered had their lower incisors removed, perhaps suggesting a distinct cultural origin. A single iron 'toe ring' from the burial in Mound A at Willey's Kopje suggests that at least some of the cairn builders had access to iron. Other cairns have been excavated in the Central Rift Valley but were poorly recorded and thus offer scant diagnostic evidence for age or cultural affiliation (Brown 1966). Although ceramics are rare at cairn sites, Mary Leakey did recover a single ceramic vessel from an indefinite site near Naivasha. This vessel may, on further analysis, be placed within regional typologies (Brown 1966).

The simple cairns excavated in Kenya's Central Rift and Western Highlands all bear broad resemblances in construction and the nature of internment. However, they by no means fall into a single homogenous tradition and may represent a number of different cultural phases. A great deal of future work is required to clarify these issues. The following paragraphs describe similar cairns found across northern Kenya and neighbouring regions of East Africa.

Somalia

Large numbers of simple cairns (*taalo*) were noted in passing by Chittick (1976), images of which are stored in the photographic archives of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. A wide variety of more elaborate types (see below) were also documented in more detail (Figure 2).

Northeast Kenya

Christine Ogola and colleagues at the National Museums of Kenya (pers. comm.) have begun investigating one of several clusters of simple cairns in Garrissa District. One skeleton was uncovered during test excavations.

Curle (1933) assisted in excavation of a simple cairn near Mandera. It was 12 m in diameter and nearly 2 m in height with a flattish top. The centre of the cairn had larger stones and a small 'pedestal type' earthenware bowl. Curle describes the human remains as buried seated in a timber re-enforced chamber at the centre of the cairn with a copper or bronze earring 'nearby'. He briefly mentions the excavation of another similar but larger cairn, some 20 m in diameter, close to Wajir and attests to the existence of numerous smaller cairns in the region to the recent 'Galla'.

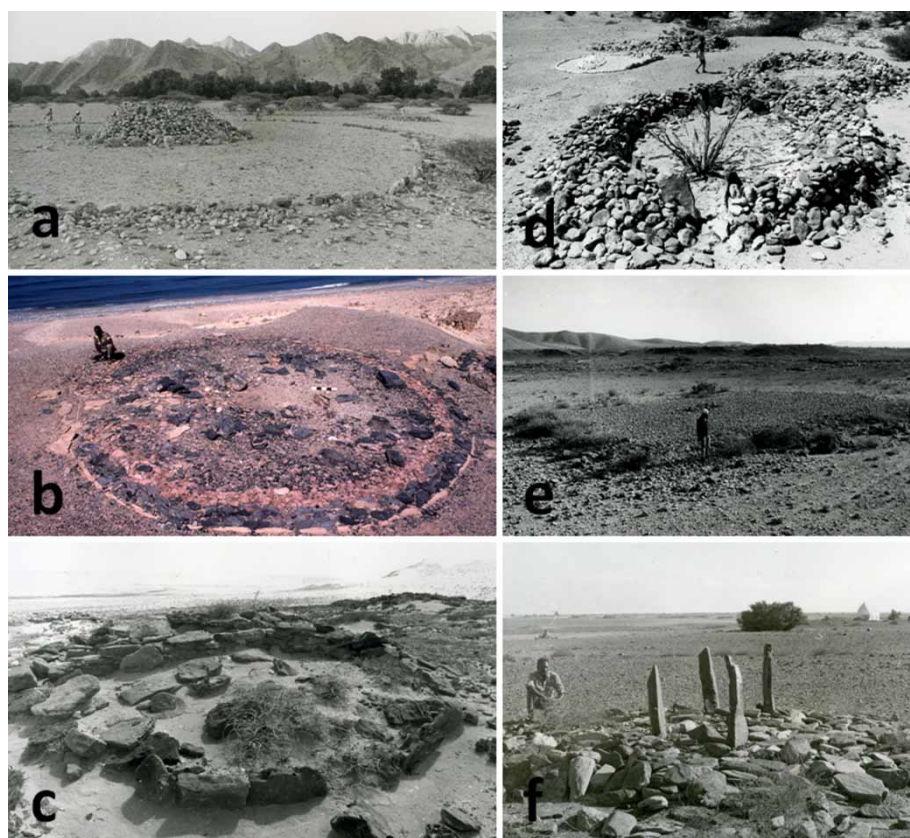


Figure 2. Cairns in the Somalia photographic archive of the British Institute in Eastern Africa: (a) simple/kerbed cairn with an additional outer ring; (b–c) kerbed cairns; (d) double ring cairn; (e) low rectilinear cairn; (f) cairn with monoliths (all reproduced with the kind permission of the British Institute in Eastern Africa; BIEA archive identifiers: a. biasom689; b. biasom1233; c. biasom754; d. biasom607; e. biasom628; f. biasom657).

East and southeast of Lake Turkana

Wright and Forman (2011) have reported large numbers of cairns from the Mt Porr Strand Plain region of South Turkana including a concentration (GeJk29) of some 39 cairns, but unfortunately give no further details.

Similarly, Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981: 151) note hundreds of simple cairns across East Turkana and state that they are still constructed by the Gabbra, Boran and Rendille today (see also Parkinson 1935). They investigated one simple cairn (Cairn 4) at Kokurmatakore, which was 6.5 m in diameter and 1.1 m high. The cairn matrix yielded microlithic flakes (including seven obsidian artefacts), fragmentary human teeth and bone (unrelated to the main burial), fragmentary animal bone (one fragment identified to sheep/goat), part of a stone quern and one piece of glass. The cairn contained one middle aged male skeleton and produced a date on bone apatite of 3460 ± 155 BP (GX-7421A). They suggest that this cairn should be associated with the early Pastoral Neolithic, thus making it considerably older than other types of cairns at Kokurmatakore and dated examples of other cairns presented here (Table 1).

West and southwest of Lake Turkana

Tens of simple cairns exist in the immediate vicinity of the Lokori-Ngamoratung'a burial site (see below; personal observation; Soper and Lynch 1977). However, interest in them has been somewhat overshadowed by the more elaborate stone rings found at the main burial site (see below). Further north, simple cairns abound around Kalokol and Lothagam and in intervening areas between the lake and volcanic ridge systems (Elisabeth Hildebrand, pers. comm. 2013), but research has tended to focus on adjacent pillar sites (Hildebrand *et al.* 2011; Grillo and Hildebrand 2013).

Eastern Uganda

In Karamoja, limited survey suggests cairns are less numerous than in the Turkana Basin, although a small number were located around the foot of a small hill 30 km southwest of Moroto (Davies 2009b). Wayland (1931) also notes cairns in Karamoja, but gives little further detail.

South Sudan

Recent surveys documented tens of simple cairns along the Juba to Nimule stretch of the Nile (Davies 2009a, 2012). Many of these may relate to field clearance: they are often found in conjunction with field terraces and granary bases indicative of agricultural settlements. However, four or five simple cairns found in conjunction with more elaborate forms and standing stones may have had a quite different purpose and will be briefly discussed below (Davies 2009a, 2012).

Central and southern Kenya

In Laikipia and Leroghi, Paul Lane (Lane *et al.* 2007) has investigated a variety of cairn types, many of which fall into the simple or 'kerbed' categories laid forth here. At Mili Sita on Loldaiga Ranch more than ten simple cairns are found in a group and one was excavated, yielding the partial remains of a young adult female (Figure 1b).

Siiriäinen (1984) excavated a simple cairn, 3.5 m in diameter, on Kisima Ranch in Laikipia. This cairn had the partial remains of a juvenile between 12 and 15 years old and traces of an indeterminate second burial; bone collagen dated to 760 ± 90 BP (Hel-853).

Merrick Posnansky (1968) excavated five cairns near Olorgesailie. They were 5–6 m in diameter and 0.75–1 m in height. None provided clear evidence of actual burials, although Cairns 1 and 4 had shallow grave cuts and Cairn 1 had a capstone. Cairns 2 and 5 lacked evidence for burial, and Cairn 3 definitely had no burial. Cairn 5 had a possible ring of larger kerbstones. Fragmentary remains of domestic cattle and caprines in the matrix of Cairn 1 demonstrated that some of the cairn builders had domestic livestock, but no other artefacts were found.

Northern Tanzania

Fosbrooke (1957) casually notes the presence of numerous cairns across northern Tanzania, as does Soper (1967). More specifically, Sassoon (1968) notes the amateur

excavation of some seven cairns at Narok Soit Hill on the eastern side of Ngorongoro Crater between 1908 and 1918; these excavations appear to have uncovered numerous human burials alongside stone bowls and other artefacts. Mary Leakey visited Ngorongoro in 1941 and excavated a cairn on Endonyo Olkaria Hill that had been subjected to repeated interments. It contained eight or nine skeletons and a range of artefacts including stone bowls, bone beads, shell pendants, ivory lip plugs and ochre-stained soil (Sassoon 1968). From a cluster of eleven cairns on Rumbi Hill at Ngorongoro, Sassoon (1968) excavated one cairn measuring 10×12 m across and 0.8 m high. Approximately six fragmentary human bodies were uncovered alongside eleven stone bowls, worked obsidian, seven yellow chalcedony disks/beads/pendants, a possible nose plug and red ochre staining. A bone sample produced a date of 2260 ± 180 BP (GX-1243).

Kerbed cairns

Kerbed cairns are often hard to distinguish from simple cairns and the two types overlap (Figure 1c–d). The defining characteristic of kerbed cairns is the intentional construction of a ring of larger than average stones prior to construction of the body of the cairn. This ring then encloses or supports the body of the cairn, helping to prevent its collapse. Sometimes, the external ring may be constructed of relatively small stones and therefore is difficult to discriminate from the body of the cairn. Often, however, it is clearly defined by either larger rounded stones or by flat stones set on their side on or within the original ground surface. Although the original excavation reports are inconclusive, a number of the cairns discussed above may actually fall into the former class with insubstantial kerbs, including Brown's (1966) Mound C at Ilkek and Posnansky's (1968) Mound 5 near Olorgesailie; without further data these mounds are difficult to classify.

Central Kenya

The most elaborate examples of the kerbed type to be investigated are found on the Leroghi Plateau (Lane *et al.* 2007). For example the cairn-field at Nakedi near Baawa contained 41 cairns, many of which had recently been disturbed. Lane *et al.* mapped these and recovered surface remains from at least 18 human individuals. They also excavated a single complete kerbed cairn 3.6 m in diameter with an outer rim of kerb slabs varying between 0.35 and 0.7 m in length placed on end around the base (Figure 1c–d). This excavation uncovered the remains of a human adult and a few sherds of pottery (possibly of Akira ware) and produced an AMS date on charcoal of 2700 ± 40 BP (Beta-224653). Lane *et al.* (2007: 43) excavated three more kerbed cairns at Ol Keju and Simba Hills cairn-fields on Mugi Ranch, but none of these produced human remains.

Somalia

Photographic archives of the British Institute in Eastern Africa contain records of numerous kerbed cairns observed during Neville Chittick's (1976) expeditions to Somalia (see also Lewis 1961). They show a variety of elaborate kerbed types: some have multiple courses of kerbing, others a separate ring of kerbstones set apart from

the base of the cairn (Figure 2a–c). Some kerbs appear to have been constructed from a colour of stone that contrasts with the rest of the cairn, such as a group of cairns with ‘white aprons’ noted by Chittick (1976: 122) near Ras Hafun.

Although distinguishing kerbed versus simple cairns requires close investigation, it is likely that many more examples of the kerbed type exist across the region. It is also possible that many of the ‘stone ring’ types discussed below are elaborations of the ‘kerbed’ type in which the kerb has been substantially emphasised by creating a ring of standing stones toward or at the edge of the body of the cairn.

Elongated and ring (doughnut-shaped) cairns

Less common than simple round types are piles of stones that have various elongated, linear and complete or partially complete ring forms. Where these cairns curve to form a ring the central area is ‘hollow’ and devoid of stones (rather like a ring doughnut).

South Sudan

A number of cairns identified in South Sudan (Davies 2009a 2012) took straight elongated forms often with one end considerably larger and approaching the form of a simple cairn and the other end tapered, giving the overall impression of a stretched tear-drop shape. However, many of these tapering elongated cairns may relate to agricultural clearance as often the tapered end extended into a low field terrace of loose stones. This was most notable at Site Y04 near Muggie, midway between Juba and Nimule. At the same site, however, a much larger L-shaped elongated cairn was encountered in an area surrounded by other large simple cairns, a cairn with an embedded standing stone and some 17 standing stone monoliths. This L-shaped cairn measured some 22 m by 7 m with a highpoint of 0.7 m above the ground surface, making it considerably larger than the other elongated cairns encountered.

Northeastern Kenya

Doughnut-shaped cairns appear to be found across northern Kenya and neighbouring regions. The best documented of these are those discussed by Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) at Kalach, Maikona, Koronli, Karole and Kokurmatakore in East Turkana (Figure 3a–b). At Kakumatakore are some 55 simple cairns, nine rings and three platforms (see below). Stiles and Munro-Hay investigated one double interlinked ring cairn in detail. The larger ring (Cairn 3) measured 17 m in diameter and the smaller (Cairn 6) 8–9 m (Figure 3a). The walls of the ring were approximately 0.5 m high and 2 m wide at the base, narrowing to 1 m at the top of the ring. They were faced with large cobbles of lava with the interior composed of smaller rubble. Within each ring was a pile of stones in the form of a small simple cairn covering a single body lacking upper and lower incisors, wrapped in an animal skin. The attached Cairn 6 seems to have been constructed as an addition to Cairn 3 and again contained a single burial with removed incisors below a small central mound of stones. A third ring cairn (Cairn 5; Figure 3b) was 19 m in diameter; it had

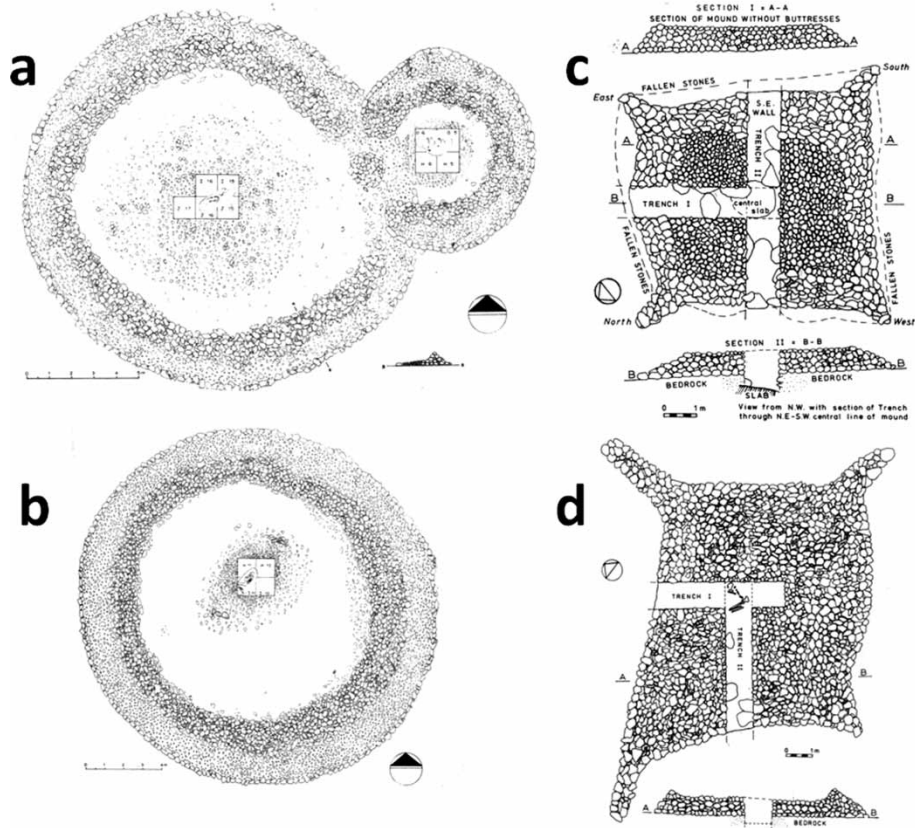


Figure 3. Cairns excavated by Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) at Kokurmatakore, northern Kenya: (a) double ring cairn (Cairns 3 and 6); (b) single ring cairn (Cairn 5); (c) rectilinear cairn (Cairn 1); (d) rectilinear cairn (Cairn 2) (all reproduced from Stiles and Munro-Hay 1981: 155–161 with kind permission of the British Institute in Eastern Africa). NB — the plans are not to scale.

a much smaller pile of stones in the centre that covered another contracted burial with removed incisors. All of the skeletons were young adult males in late teens to mid twenties. Uncalibrated radiocarbon dates on wood and bone apatite produced dates of 1110 ± 155 BP (GX-7397) for Cairn 3, 125 ± 120 BP (GX-7423A) for Cairn 5, and 510 ± 115 BP (GX-74232A) for Cairn 6.

Somalia and West Turkana

Again, many cairns of this type are recorded in the British Institute in Eastern Africa's Somalia photographic archive (Figure 2d). A few potentially different 'ring' features are found in West Turkana: the most notable of these are nine ring features that occur together with six simple cairns east of the main platform at Lothagam North Pillar Site and a stone ring extending around the Kalokol Pillar site (GcJh5). (Hildebrand *et al.* 2011).

Rectilinear cairns*Northeastern Kenya*

Another distinct type known from Northeastern Kenya and neighbouring Somalia consists of packed piles of unmortared stones laid in a solid rectangular shape. Two of these (Cairns 1 and 2) were investigated by Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) at Kokurmatakore. In each case the corners of the cairn tapered into buttresses and the top of the cairn was flat and level. Each cairn was nearly square, but no two sides were exactly the same length. Cairn 1 was approximately 5.3 m by 4.7 m in size and around 0.6 m high (Figure 3c). A fragmentary body was recovered from above a large central slab stone and a few microlithic flakes were found in the matrix. Cairn 2 was larger, 9 m by 7 m and 0.7 m high (Figure 3d); one middle-aged adult was recovered from a relatively high position in the cairn, just 15 cm below the platform surface. A date on bone apatite was registered at 960 ± 190 BP (GX-7396A).

Somalia

Chittick (1976: 130–132) records a rectilinear platform cairn measuring some 20 m by 20 m near Alula in Somalia and states that many similar structures were encountered. This cairn further incorporated a number of standing stones both around its edge and in various configurations on two sides. Chittick (1984) mentions further rectangular ‘platforms’ amongst a large cairn field at Butyaalo Creek in northern Somalia and ‘enclosed platform’ cairns in the northeast of the country (Chittick 1976: 131), but gives little further detail.

Analysis of the British Institute in Eastern Africa’s (BIEA) photographic archive from Chittick’s expeditions suggests that rectilinear platform cairns were numerous in Somalia (see Figure 2e). Certainly, rectilinear cairns are widespread and require significant further investigation. A number were encountered by the recent BIEA-National Museums of Kenya research project ‘Belief and Belonging in Northeast Kenya’ around Mt Marsabit, but were not investigated further. In the cases recounted by Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) and by Chittick (1976) these rectilinear cairns give the impression of creating a raised platform: whether these rectilinear cairns might be usefully considered ‘platforms’ would seem worth further consideration.

Faced cairns*Northern Tanzania*

An important but far from homogenous classification are what I would term ‘faced’ cairns. There are at least two distinct types of these that may have no common origin. The first consist of large loose piles of small stones and rubble faced by neat stone revetment in several courses so as to contain or encase the loose core. To my knowledge such cairns are not common and are primarily known from Engaruka in northern Tanzania and related sites in the immediate vicinity (Robertshaw 1986; Sutton 2000, 2004) (Figure 4a), although a number of similar structures appear in the BIEA’s Somalia photographic archive. The Engaruka cairns are likely to be agricultural clearance features, although their scale and the care of workmanship evident in their construction have often begged the question of alternative uses. A



Figure 4. Faced cairns, platforms and ring cairns from eastern Africa: (a) Engaruka, northern Tanzania; (b) in the Juba-Nimule region of South Sudan; (c) stone platform at Dirikoro, Omo Valley, Ethiopia; (d) stone ring cairn at Lokori-Ngamoratung'a, Southwest Turkana (all photographs by Matthew Davies, except for Figure 4c, which is reproduced from Clack and Brittain 2010a with kind permission of Tim Clack).

number of these cairns have been excavated, including by Louis Leakey, Hamo Sassoon (1966) and Peter Robertshaw (1986). None contained burials of any kind.

South Sudan

Hundreds of large sub-rectangular cairns encountered in various clusters on recent surveys of the South Sudan are also similar to those at Engaruka (Davies 2009a, 2012). Neat external stone coursing surrounds a rubble core. Often, they have a flat top and a lower ring of large flat stones set upright around the base (Figure 4b). These cairns seem to occur in groups alongside 'agricultural' features such as small field terraces and granary bases and they may therefore be field clearance features. However, the workmanship with which they appear to have been constructed as well as the form — especially their flat-topped platform appearance — suggests alternative or additional functions. Unfortunately, none of these features have yet been excavated to provide clarification.

Platforms, pavements and surfaces

Given the lack of excavation undertaken and the resulting doubts over the function of many cairn features, both the rectilinear and faced cairns discussed above might also be reconsidered as raised platforms or raised surfaces. The flat tops of the rectilinear cairns excavated by Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) discussed above give this

impression, while the flat tops of many of the faced cairns encountered in South Sudan (Davies 2009a, 2012) may have acted as a base for superstructures or unknown activities.

Southern Ethiopia (Omo Valley)

More clearly ‘platform-’, ‘pavement-’ or ‘surface’-like are the circular stone arrangements identified by Clack and Brittain (2010a, 2010b, 2011) at Dirikoro in the Omo Valley (Figure 5c). These features comprise neatly lain single stone courses laid in a series of concentric rings, producing a continuous circular stone surface or pavement. The fourteen circles investigated so far vary from 2.5 m to 12.5 m in diameter and each has an interesting gulley projecting from the centre to one edge of the circle. Limited cleaning and excavation of one circle identified the remains of burnt animal bone and microlithic flakes between the stones and the presence of both a small central and small external hollow that the investigators speculate may have contained a standing stone stele. Clack and Brittain view these arrangements as some form of ‘ritual’ surface on which various activities, potentially slaughter/sacrifice, were conducted.

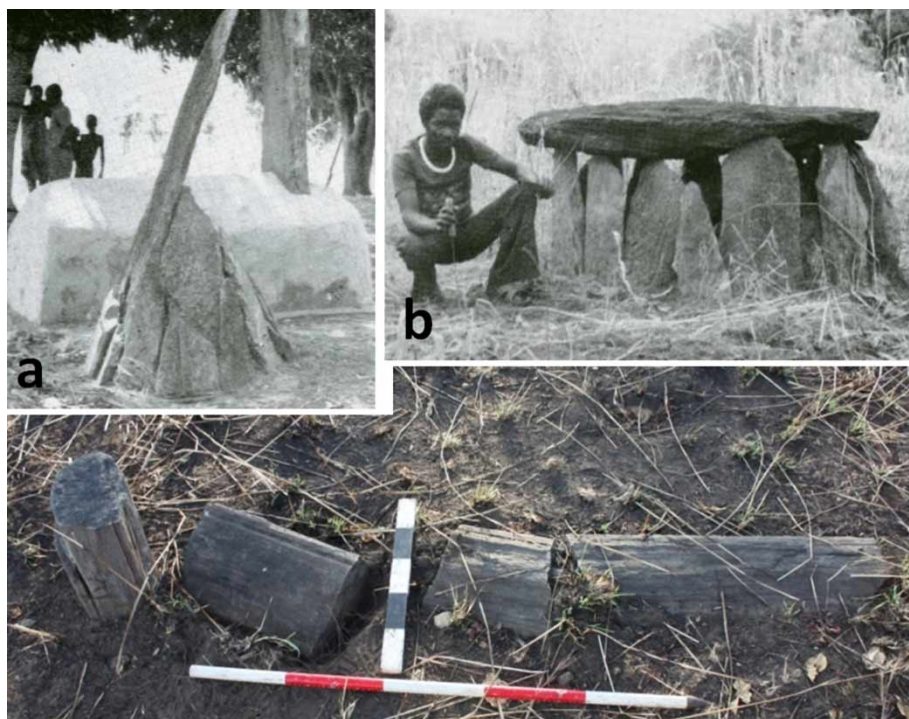


Figure 5. Examples of monolithic ‘grave markers’ in South Sudan: (a–b) Moru grave markers reproduced from Plates III and IV, *Azania* 16 [1981] with kind permission of the British Institute in Eastern Africa; (c) a monolith in the Juba-Nimule region (photograph Matthew Davies).

Turkana Basin (Kenya)

There is no indication that the Dirikoro features are associated with burial and possible relations to other cairn and standing-stone sites such as Lokori-Ngamoratung'a and the Kalokol and the Jarigole pillar sites (Clack and Brittain 2011) should be treated with due caution. Nevertheless, Hildebrand *et al.* (2011) do describe 'platforms' of pebble-rich sediments at sites in the Kalokol and Lothagam areas of West Turkana. These are associated with stone pillars and are discussed in greater detail by Grillo and Hildebrand elsewhere in this issue. In addition, Hildebrand (pers. comm.) has located a different platform structure within the Losedok Hills with a circular plan and quartz fragments scattered across the platform. This structure is yet to be investigated. Similar, but quantitatively distinct, is the low platform found at Jarigole in East Turkana (Nelson 1995).

Most of the platforms described at Lothagam, Kalokol, and Jarigole seem different from those at Dirikoro and the rectilinear cairns of East Turkana in occurring with a range of other features, most notably stone pillars. Chittick (1984) briefly mentions 'disk' monuments at Butyaalo Creek, northern Somalia, alongside the rectangular platforms mentioned above, but gives no further details. Chittick also recorded cairns with a circular 'pavement' or 'apron' near Hafun, but without a plan it is difficult to assign a precise classification.

Stone ring cairns*West Turkana*

Stone rings are perhaps the most elaborate of the various cairn types. They are best known from the large Lokori-Ngamoratung'a burial site in Southwest Turkana (Soper and Lynch 1977; Lynch and Robbins 1978, 1979; Soper 1982; Russell 2012; Figure 4d), but may be much more widespread. To the best of my knowledge it is only at the Lokori site that such features have been properly excavated, but there are interesting parallels in the well known 'ring' burials found further north and along the Nile Valley (Welsby 2007).

The Lokori cairns are often misleadingly described simply as continuous or abutting rings of standing stones, but Soper's (Soper and Lynch 1977) excavations at the site and his section drawings show them rather to be neatly laid central piles of stone encased by rings of upright standing stones. The central 'cairn' and the ring of standing stones are placed on the original ground surface where they cover a single grave pit. The main Lokori site itself consists of 167 of these stone ring cairns, 1–4 m in diameter, laid in close proximity. A second smaller site lies to the north and holds 15 similar cairns. Robert Soper excavated three cairns, while Mark Lynch's more extensive work excavated 35; each excavation produced a single burial with variable sex and age and lacking grave goods. Lynch and Robbins (1978, 1979) give two divergent radiocarbon dates on bone of 1200 ± 140 BP (GX-5402A) and 2285 ± 165 BP (UCLA-21240), but favour the latter on speculative grounds. The standing kerb stones at the main Lokori site are notable for their large size (many over 0.5 m in height) and the numerous geometric petroglyphs inscribed upon them, although the meaning of these engravings is debated (Russell 2012).

Archaeoastronomical associations and links between the Lokori site and other rather different 'pillar' sites (namely Kalokol) are speculative, as are some of Lynch's

attempts to read social structure and ethnolinguistic affiliation from the burials (Soper 1982; Russell 2012). That said, the Lokori site holds great potential for exploring a late Holocene community in detail. Russell's (2012) recent attempts to place the site in a broader ethnohistorical and social context are commendable, although the Lokori site may be an atypical example of much more widespread smaller scale traditions. For example, similar stone ring cairns also exist further to the north around the Lothagam North site where there are nine examples (Elisabeth Hildebrand, pers. comm.).

Central Kenya

Lane *et al.* (2007) note the presence of stone rings similar to those at Lokori on the Leroghi and Laikipia Plateaux. Moreover, the Lokori stone ring cairns may actually be very similar in construction to the kerbed cairns excavated by Lane on Leroghi and Laikipia, with the primary difference being the presence of a distinct stone mound within the centre of kerbed cairns but a flat level surface (often covered by infill) in the centre of stone rings. Certainly, the kerbed and stone ring variants may have blurred typological boundaries.

The Mound E cairn excavated by Mary Leakey (1945) at Hyrax Hill and mentioned above may also have been a variant of a stone ring having a series of standing stones around the edge around a shallow central stone mound. However, the standing stones here clearly do not abut one another as do the ring stones at Lokori. Moreover, in Leakey's plans the 'standing stones' do not appear to be very significant monolith, suggesting that this may be more of a simple or kerbed cairn.

Somalia

The BIEA Somalia photographic archive records a large number of circular and oval stone rings; many resemble those found at Lokori and on Leroghi and Laikipia. Several archive images display large mounded central cairns surrounded by discontinuous rings of standing stones a variation that may be more or less like the Lokori variants and might be better referred to as cairns with monoliths as below. The BIEA archaeological expeditions to South Sudan in 1977–81 also encountered some similar features, although these were not explored further (Mack and Robertshaw 1982).

Cairns with monoliths

Some of the cairns featured in the BIEA Somalia photographic archive display mounded cairns with monoliths positioned upright around the edge (Figure 2f). Whether these should be considered variant 'ring' cairns or cairns with monoliths is unclear. More rarely, a single monolith is set upright into the centre of a mounded cairn; a few examples of this have been found in Leroghi and Laikipia (Lane *et al.* 2007), but none appear in the BIEA's Somalia photographic archive. A single example with two small standing stones was also encountered in South Sudan at the Y04 site discussed above (Davies 2009a, 2012).

Limitations of space preclude further examination of the rather different but better known large 'pillar' sites of the Turkana basin (Kalokol, Lothagam, Jarigole),

not least because they are well dealt with in detail by Grillo and Hildebrand elsewhere in this issue (2013; see also Kamau 1991; Nelson 1995; Hildebrand *et al.* 2011; Hildebrand and Grillo 2012) and because the *c.* 4000 BP dates for the pillar sites are earlier than the ages postulated for most other cairn features. However, it is important to point out that there seem to be both numerous convergences and disjunctures between the cairns discussed here and the combinations of features (stone cairns, platforms, rings and monoliths) found at the pillar sites. For example, while the Lokori site is often discussed alongside the pillar sites, there are clear architectural differences between the stone ring cairns found here and the platforms and pillars found elsewhere, yet a small number of fallen stones at Lokori do seem similar to the pillars found at sites to the north and east (personal observation) and might be considered further.

Convergences with even broader ethnographic traditions of erecting monoliths should also be noted. Pillar or post graves are common throughout southern Ethiopia (Hallpike 1972) and South Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1935; cf. Mack and Robertshaw 1982; Figure 5a–b). Recent surveys in South Sudan recorded a range of independent standing stones (Davies 2012; Figure 5c). Russell (2012) and Clack and Brittain (2011) review contemporary practices of erecting monoliths that may be used as a starting point for further work in this direction.

Discussion

Although this paper is rather heavy on diverse references and short on detail and comparative analysis, I hope that it raises a number of pertinent points for discussion. Among these are the following topics.

Cairns and funerary traditions

This broad body of literature should provide an excellent basis for a comparative study of architectural forms relating to monumentality, death and burial across hinterland eastern Africa. Indeed, very few studies (exceptions being Lane *et al.* 2007 and Hildebrand *et al.* 2011) have come close to developing a funerary archaeology, but the potential for doing so is large. Moreover, I would argue that the archaeology of much of eastern Africa, and indeed the continent, would benefit from a greater focus on funerary archaeology because so much of our understanding of past human societies in other parts of the world (particularly Europe) is based on extensive excavations of burials and cemeteries. The lack of such research in hinterland eastern Africa is notable, perhaps because large burial sites are rare and interments are often spread across the landscape within smaller scale cairns and unmarked graves. Nevertheless, the data presented here suggest that significant potential does exist and that the application of more modern scientific techniques, including dietary isotopes and DNA analysis, might be particularly informative.

Some interesting points regarding funerary traditions have emerged already. In a number of cases white and red stones or minerals have been mentioned as being contained within cairns or having been used systematically in cairn construction. Patterns of the age and sex of interment and the orientation of the body seem unclear, but almost all bodies appear to have been placed in a foetal position. Grave goods are few, but do occur in regional patterns, such as the placing of stone platters

in graves in the Central Rift Valley. Faunal remains and stone artefacts also often occur within the cairn matrix, but intentional deposition is nowhere clear. That these artefacts might attest to activities or even ‘performances’ conducted either during or after cairn construction is highly speculative, but should not be ruled out. Evidence for intentional ‘sacrifice’ with regard to the Dirikoro stone platforms in the Omo Valley (Clack and Brittain 2011) seems strong, but evidence for such practices elsewhere is ambiguous at best and the Dirikoro features also lack association with burials. The absence of burial in many cairns is another interesting feature and raises questions concerning the relationship between physical burial and memorial (see below).

Chronology, distribution and tentative cultural traditions

Many of the cairn types discussed here occur in clusters and the different overlapping distributions of types, as well as an extensive dating strategy, would give some indication of regional and chronological variation and therefore allow for differing combinations of tradition/practice to be distinguished. However, a major issue with all of the studies mentioned is chronology because few secure dates exist. Initial dating of the West Turkana pillar sites (Hildebrand *et al.* 2011), followed by a larger array of dates for pillar sites including Jarigole (Hildebrand and Grillo 2012), is an important move in the right direction, while Lane *et al.*’s (2007) date from central Kenya is reliable; however, the remaining dates in Table 1 should be treated with caution on the basis of method and/or inconsistency¹. Nevertheless, for the sake of future hypothesis testing some tentative regional patterns may be observed.

Stone rings and kerbed cairns, such as at Baawa and Lokori-Ngamoratung’a, appear to be distributed in north-central Kenya and to the west of Lake Turkana and the older date from Lokori combined with the Baawa date suggests that these features may be some 2000 or more years in age. Ring (doughnut) and rectilinear cairns appear to be confined to the east of Lake Turkana and Somalia (and likely adjacent parts of Ethiopia) and might tentatively be dated to the last millennium. Simple cairns are found across the region and likely span a wide temporal range including into the second half of the last millennium. However, those excavated in the central and southern Rift Valley of Kenya and northern Tanzania seem to form a unique category displaying regular evidence of multiple interments alongside grave goods — most notably stone bowls, but also beads/pendants, potentially obsidian flakes and red ochre staining. Sassoon’s date from Ngorongoro, alongside similar dates for stone bowls found in other contexts, suggests that these cairns may be around 2000–3000 years old. In other excavated contexts (notably rockshelters) stone bowls are associated with Nderit (formerly Gumban A) ceramics. These patterns found in the Rift contrast with Sutton’s excavated cairns in western Kenya, which lack stone bowls but are associated with occasional Elmenteitan ceramics and obsidian blades. This tentatively suggests two distinct traditions of simple cairn construction (identified on the basis of material associations) and centred on Western Kenya and the southern Kenyan Rift/northern Tanzania respectively, with overlapping ranges in the Central Rift Valley. Attention might also be usefully directed northwards into South Sudan and the Nile Valley where numerous apparently similar features are better understood (Welsby 2007).

Society and economy

Hildebrand and Grillo (2012; Grillo and Hildebrand 2013) point out the uniqueness of many of these monuments with regard to their construction by seemingly decentralised and likely nomadic pastoralists. The analysis of such monuments should contribute to better understandings of the nature of decentralised social complexity and labour mobilisation in eastern Africa (cf. Davies in press; Grillo and Hildebrand 2013). However, only Lane *et al.* (2007) and Russell (2012) (and to an extent Lynch and Robbins 1979 and Sutton 1973) have delved into the oral histories of peoples potentially related to these features. These brief forays suggest that much more can be learnt from such work, at least in regards to cairns of recent construction. A major area of inadequacy is that the settlement sites that must have accompanied these features are yet to confidently identified so it remains difficult to ascertain the social and economic structure of the communities who constructed these features.

Landscapes, temporality and social processes

Lane *et al.* (2007) have begun considering cairns in the broader landscape and have noted some regularity of the spatial distribution of cairns along false crests in Laikipia: a much broader landscape approach is sure to prove beneficial. More interestingly, the absence of human remains in some cairns indicates that some features may act as memorials or cenotaphs as much as actual burials. Suggestions (Posnansky 1968; Sutton 1973; Lane *et al.* 2007) that some cairns may have been constructed (or modified) over several years or longer by the regular addition of stones raise the possibility that some cairns were part of an ongoing process of modifying and inscribing the landscape, perhaps by people whose intentions or ideas changed through time. Secondary and tertiary interments similarly attest to some continuity of ideas or practice through time. Whether these subsequent burials relate directly (by community or even kin) to the initial burial or whether they represent different traditions making specific links to an imagined past is not yet clear, but skeletal morphology, genetics, dating and even dietary isotopes might all be brought to bear on such issues.

Both secondary interments and gradual cairn construction beg the question of whether such features transcend simple burials or interments and are also implicated in active processes of memory-making in the landscape. Who is buried or why might be less important than the processes of cairn construction, maintenance, renovation, visitation and commemoration that can embed meaning or value in the landscape to all who pass (potentially irrespective of ethnolinguistic affiliation). Moreover, in the sense of Barrett and Ko (2009) commenting on the Neolithic of Britain, monuments in the landscape may not be created so much according to a set cognitive structure (cairns being symbols of that structure), but rather the *process* of monument construction may act to *create* meaning/structure and thus a sense of being or dwelling in the world (cairns would therefore be part of the process of creating order rather than symbolic of existing order; see also Thomas, this issue). Such an understanding prioritises the active process of monument construction over the end result and recognises this as an ongoing process, whereby constructing new features

and observing and interacting with existing features through time creates new meanings and worldviews across generations.

Clack and Brittain (2011) demonstrate this ongoing interaction between humans and their material past in their discussion of the Dirikoro stone pavements. Moreover, they importantly point out that archaeologists become actively involved in this process when they themselves begin research into such features and stimulate new interpretations. Clack and Brittain are appropriately concerned with the way in which archaeological investigations provoke reactions and thoughts from the local people but there is scope here also for a critical appraisal of how we as archaeologists also create our own scholarly myths about sites and features. We all tend to be guilty of loading our papers with rhetoric that aims to sensationalise our findings; arrangements of stones all too easily become ‘megaliths’ akin to those of Europe. While we should champion the past achievements of African communities, we need to be careful not to equate such achievements with those of other periods and places and instead attempt to understand African phenomena in African terms.

Conclusion

While the material evidence is extensive, this paper has demonstrated that we know very little about ‘monumentality’ in hinterland eastern Africa! I would argue that our limited attentions have thus far been drawn toward the larger sites and features and that we have struggled to escape Eurocentric understandings of ‘monumentality’. My aim in this paper has been to point towards the broader range of small-scale features that abound across the region, but have yet to be properly studied. It is my contention that within such features we may actually find keys to understanding more general ideas and practices of memorialisation, which in turn will help us to understand better both the larger monumental sites and acts of memory inscribed in the broader landscape.

Note

1. The two dates from Lokori-Ngamoratung’a are divergent and neither can be confidently accepted.

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