

Y Carnethy !

“Truth is always strange, stranger than fiction” (Lord Byron)

Carnethy is a striking hill in the Pentland range just south of Edinburgh. Who were the old settlers who first dubbed it “Carnethy”? The origins of the name go back more than a thousand years to the time of the Men of the North. A time of hillforts, forging of bronze and iron, and great exploits.

In about 600 AD, give or take a few years, a warband from the Edinburgh citadel (Dinas Etn), under Mynyddawg, marched south to lead an ill-fated expedition to repel the Angles. Accompanied by warriors from as far afield as Argyll (the Irish Scots), Yorkshire (the Kingdom of Elmet) and Wales (Gwynedd and Cernyw), they converged on their adversaries on a plain in the North of England. The battle site (*cad-traeth*; *cad, cat*, ‘battle’; *traeth*, ‘tract’) lends its name to the location – Catterick, known locally, and ominously, as Scotch Corner. The warband, a meeting of friends and allies, upheld the tradition of Celtic Warriors, feasting ceremonially on sweet mead before setting out to do battle.

We do not know if the Angles more prudently deferred their festivities, but on the day the Celts were routed, apparently against fearsome odds, in a scene of great carnage. The surviving Men of the North (Gwyr y Gogledd) struggled back to Edinburgh, where the bard Aneirin compiled the tragic war-poem “Y Gododdin” (The Gododdin) and recorded their woe – one of many verses:

*O osgord vynydawc wawr dru
O drychant namen un gwr ny dyvu*

This is Old Welsh, the tongue of Dinas Etn, and the earliest surviving text in this language, composed at Edinburgh. In one translation: “But of the retinue of Mynyddawg, greatly to be deplored; Out of three hundred men, only one returned” (1). The text is not completely opaque – substitute tri-cent for drychant and the close link between Welsh, Latin and even modern French becomes apparent. The calamitous defeat at Catreath was a turning point for the northerly Celts, who ceded an immense tract of land to the Angles, allowing the fledgling Northumbrian Kingdoms to consolidate their grasp on the Eastern territories.

The language provides a first clue to “Carnethy”. Though many have attributed names in lowland Scotland to Gaelic, the Irish Scots only arrived on mainland Britain in the 6th Century; hills and rivers were named far before. During the Roman period (in Scotland, 1st to 3rd Centuries) Lothian, the county of Edinburgh, was a Welsh or Brittonic/Cumbric nation-state. The Romans knew the people as the Votadini, the Gododdin of Old Welsh lore. And these people left a plethora of names behind them, from *Aberlessic* (Aberlady, bay of stench) to *Pen-y-Coc* (Penicuik, height of the cuckoo). Lothian itself is named after the Celtic God *Lugus* or *Lleu*, variously associated with the Sun, craftsmanship, and war.

The Pentland Hills too. This name has an origin very different from that of the Pentland Firth (from Old Norse, *Pettaland*, ‘Pictland’) and instead most likely derives from Welsh *Pen* ‘head’ and *Llan* ‘church or enclosure’ – church summit. Penllan (or Penlan in anglicised form) hills are common in Wales. Pencaitland (Lothian) has a similar origin – *Pen Coed Llan*, height of the church wood (*coed*, Welsh). For those interested in placename derivations works by Watson (2), Nicolaisen (3) and Oxenham (4) are especially recommended. In the Pentland hills, some are of later anglo-scandinavian origin – Castlelaw, Black Hill, Turnhouse, Scald Law, but none have Scottish Gaelic names. In fact, though many have attempted to ascribe Gaelic origins to place-names in this part of Scotland, this is surely erroneous, for Lothian is almost entirely devoid of any typical Gaelic or “Q-Celtic” names (3) while Cumbric/Old Welsh or “P-Celtic” names are commonplace.

In the Pentland Hills, two stand names out by their early origins – Caerketton (478 m at highest point) and Carnethy (573 m); but a case could be made to include Allermuir (493 m). **Caerketton** is from *Caer* (Welsh) ‘wall, castle, fortification’, as in Caerphilly, Caernarvon, together with a personal name. Earlier names are recorded as Carkettyl and Karkettil (2), though here confusion is possible with the village of Kirkettle, a mile south of Roslin. Even so, according to Watson, Catel was not uncommon as a name among the early Welsh-speaking Britons. The location of his fort is uncertain, either at the Caerketton summit or lower down in the lee of the upland – today on a promontory downhill are the remains of a significant fortification, looking over the ski-slope at Hillend. Is this *Caercatel*, Catel’s Fort?

So to **Carnethy**. The summit is scattered with a huge volume of rocks; there is no avoiding the conclusion that it is named from *carneddau* (carn-edd-au), pronounced carn-e(th)-eye, meaning ‘cairns’ in modern Welsh, as suggested a century ago by Sir John Rhys (2), the first professor of Welsh at Oxford. The *suffix* – *au* denotes the plural. Several mountains in Wales also bear the name, noting summits including Cefn Carnedd, Carnedd y Ddelw, and Carnedd Goch, as well as Garnedd Uchaf. The topogies of the Carnedd y Ddelw (5) and Carnethy (6) summits show a striking similarity (Figure). The most prominent Carneddts in Wales are of course Carnedd Llewelyn, 1064 m, and Carnedd Dafydd, 1044 m, both in the *Carneddau* (Carnethy) range of Snowdonia, only narrowly surmounted by Snowdon itself (1085 m).



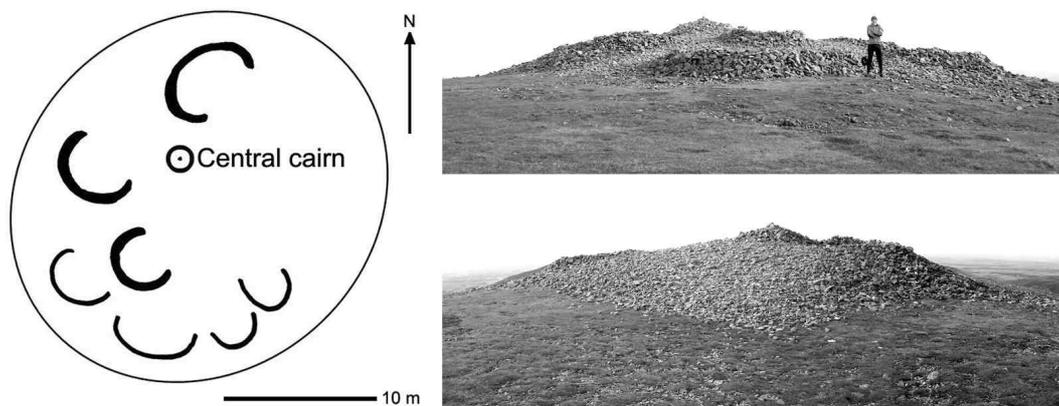
Two Carnethies, 250 miles apart.

If it were just a matter of piles of rock, that would be the end of the story, but there is rather more to the tale. The placement of the stones is not a natural feature – they were transported there by human hand. An 1849 gazetteer for Wales, under the entry for Gwastedyn (Gwastadedd-Fawr) reads

“a great part of it is occupied by a very lofty hill, on which one of the largest, if not one of the most perfect, *carneddau* in the county is found. It consists of a large pile of stones, supposed to contain between thirty and forty cartloads, thrown into nearly a square form, with a hollow in the centre” (7)

On Carnethy hill, sometime in the distant past, a band of workers, acting on instructions, filled barrow-loads of loose stones and laboured long hours to transport them, by ox-drawn cart and sheer man-power, to the summit of Carnethy. The relative steepness of the easiest approach, on the south-western flank, no doubt occasioned great toil.

The summit mound was roughly surveyed on the 29th October '06. It approximates to an oval cone, 22-25 meters in diameter, rising to a height of 1.8-1.9 m (Figure), giving a volume of 269 m³. Calculating from an average density of broken rock (1.5 kg/litre) this works out as a mite over 400 metric tonnes of stone. Transporting this material to the summit is no mean feat, and (if constructed in a single year) could have required a team of labour, with carts and winches, working full time from Spring to Autumn.



Map and photo of the Carnethy monument. Curves are superficial windbreaks built from the loose stone, probably most or all of recent origin, as may be the central cairn also. Aspects SW (above), NE (below). Thanks to Shane (2 m marker) for assistance.

Why would the Old Welsh have done this? The siting of Carneddau must I think be interpreted in the context of Celtic tradition. The Sky-God was considered as a pantheon with a sphere of influence including the sky and high places such as mountain tops, the sun and other celestial bodies, thunder and rain, fertility and death (13). Hill summits were of especial religious significance. However, the superficial piled rocks could conceal the purpose of the construction.

Carnethies are not just piles of stones, they are ceremonial monuments, often burial or sepulchral (from *sepulcrum*, Latin, 'tomb') mounds. Excavation of *carneddau* elsewhere has uncovered hidden burial chambers known as 'cist-vaens' containing either intact skeletons or, often, cremated remains, and sometimes with culinary artefacts perhaps providing nourishment for the journey to the after-life. The surmounting loose stones serve, one might suppose, to mark the site while affording protection against despoilation. The gazetteer reads, in the entry for Llanvrynach:

"In a field designated Cae Gwyn was an immense heap of loose stones, under which, on their removal in 1808, was found a cistvaen, formed of four stones, placed on their edges, and supporting a fifth in an horizontal position: human bones were discovered both within and on the lid of the cistvaen, which is supposed to be coeval with the appearance of the Romans in Britain, if not of an earlier date" (8).

An entry for the county of Brecknock reads:

The scene of the sanguinary conflict between the Saxons and the Britons, in the year 728, near the south-eastern extremity of the county, is marked by two large heaps of stones, called *carneddau*, one of which, on being opened, was found to contain a *cist-vaen*, or sepulchral stone-chest (9).

The term cist-vaen derives from early Celtic *cist*, 'chest', and *maen*, 'stone' (as in *menhir*), describing a stone-flanked rectangular pit.



Cist-vaen (opened) near Langcombe on Dartmoor (10).

Cist-vaens are common features of bronze- and iron-age ritual. On top of Cairnpapple, a hill some miles to the west of the Pentlands, a similar burial chamber has been uncovered. Possibly also at Tinto (also Tintock, Tynto), the tinted or fiery hill (*tan*, Welsh, ‘fire’; *tanllyd*, Welsh and *teinnteach*, Gaelic ‘fiery’), named perhaps from its distinctive red flanks or from use as a beacon. 20 miles SW of the Pentlands, and also a site of hill-running endeavours, the Tinto summit rock pile rivals or surpasses that of Carnethy hill. A local children’s rhyme (11) is curiously reminiscent of a cist-vaen at the summit:

*"On Tintock tap there is a mist; And in that mist there is a kist,
And in that kist there is a caup; And in that caup there is a drap,
Take up the caup and drink the drap; And set the caup on Tintock tap."*



The Carnedd on Tinto Hill (12)

Does a cist-vaen underlie the summit cairn of Carnethy? This is not known, and though we need to keep an open mind, Historic Scotland does list Carnethy Hill as a scheduled monument under the category of “Prehistoric Ritual And Funerary”. For the curious, ground penetrating radar will be needed (and permission from Historic Scotland). Certainly the word *carn* points to early burials - *carn* denotes ‘flesh’, as in carnivore and carnage (*caro, carnis*, Latin, ‘flesh’). One is reminded of the Greco-Egyptian stone coffin known as the sarcophagus (*sarka*, Greek, ‘flesh’; *phagein*, ‘to eat’), and perhaps also of an entry in the Welsh or Cambrian Annals for AD 727 referring to a hill *Montis Carno* (Latin), or ‘height of flesh’. A case can be made that the word *cairn* (formerly *carn*) originally referred to the burial site, and modern usage evolved from the practice of covering summit burial chambers with loose stones. It is not known if such cairns were generally tombs for eminent leaders or sacrificial monuments: one traditional method of conferring sacredness was through sacrifice (*sacrificium*, from *sacer*, Latin, ‘sacred’; *facere*, ‘to make’). Even without firm evidence of a burial chamber, Carnethy summit is undoubtedly an early monument of religious, ceremonial or ritual importance, befitting the church heights of the *Pen-Llan* (Pentlands).

When was the Carnethy cairn constructed? Dating is difficult. It is not known if the name is contemporary with the construction of the monument, neither is it known when the early Celtic language arrived in these lands. Another local ceremonial hill, Cairnpapple, dates from around 2000 BC, but the large cairn on that hill (now sadly removed) was more recent, perhaps 1000 BC. And cist-vaens are recorded into the middle of the first millennium AD. A best guess would be that the Carnethy monument was constructed in the late pre-Roman period, possibly around 1000-500 BC, and that the men and women who bestowed the Old Welsh name of the hill were fully aware of the significance of the summit mound.

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15. Thanks to Gwynneth Owen, a native Welsh speaker, who has been hugely helpful, and to all the club members who made insightful comments.

Postscript.

On the Irish hills of Sheebeg and Shemore, the same that have given such inspiration to harpists following the tradition of Turlough O'Carolan, burial sites have been found. A six meters high cairn with a diameter of 20 meters on the hilltop: "The carn on Shebeg has been excavated; it is 5 feet 6 inches long, 3 feet wide and 4 feet in height. It could only be entered by a person lying at full stretch. Two human skeletons, one male and one female, both facing towards the former royal seat of Tara, were found. One set of teeth believed to have been those of the woman were found to be in a perfect state of preservation."

From: <http://www.contemplator.com/carolan/sheebeg.html>