# FAN FOEL ROUND BARROW, MYNYDD DU

# AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT, OCTOBER 2002-MARCH 2003



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By

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# **REPORT NUMBER 2003/84**

This report has been prepared by Gwilym Hughes

**Position Director** 

Signature ..... Date .....

This report has been checked and approved by Ken Murphy on behalf of Cambria Archaeology, Dyfed Archaeological Trust Ltd.

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# Fan Foel round barrow, Mynydd Du

#### An Archaeological Assessment, October 2002-March 2003

#### Summary

A topographic survey and archaeological assessment was undertaken at a prehistoric round barrow at Fan Foel on Mynydd Du between October 2002 and March 2003. The barrow had suffered from significant natural and visitor erosion in recent years. The objective of the assessment was to inform a decision about the future preservation of the surviving remains. The assessment indicated that the core of the barrow was constructed of a peaty loam. This appears to have created a level platform onto which a circular stone 'kerb' and other cairn material had been placed. The stone 'kerb' encloses an area 11m in diameter. The north central area of the barrow is obscured by the recent construction of a walker's cairn. During the course of the assessment it was observed that material from the surviving prehistoric fabric of the barrow continues to be removed by visitors and added to this modern cairn.

# Introduction

The following report provides the details of an archaeological assessment of a round barrow on Fan Foel, Mynydd Du (SN 8215 2234). The site is scheduled as an ancient monument (SAM number Br275) and it is recorded on the regional sites and Monuments Record as PRN 32392. The barrow is on the county boundary between Carmarthenshire and Powys (Fig. 1) and was visited by Cambria Archaeology on 19 June 2002 as part of the Cadw-funded Prehistoric Funerary and Ritual Sites Assessment project. At the time of the visit in 2002 it was noted that the condition and description of the monument differed considerably from that described in the Sites and Monuments Record entry. This entry was based upon a site visit by the RCAHMW in 1973. In particular, a considerable amount of ongoing erosion was apparent on the western and southwestern sides of the monument and this appears to have been responsible for exposing a curvilinear arc of large sandstone blocks. This weathering of the monument is of concern and threatens to continue to damage the remaining fabric of the monument. In addition, loose stones have been piled up to form a modern walkers' cairn on the northeast side. There is a clear ongoing threat that the stones from the surrounding 'kerb' will continue to be used to add to this modern cairn.

Following consultation, the Archaeologist for Brecon Beacons National Park undertook an offset survey of the cairn in August 2002 as an emergency measure to record the outline of the circular 'kerb'. A site visit was subsequently made in August 2002 by members of the Cadw inspectorate and staff from the National Park and Cambria Archaeology. It was generally agreed that it would be very difficult to protect the monument from further erosion and that rescue excavation ('preservation by record') should be considered as an option. However, before a detailed proposal could be made, further information about the surviving character of the monument was required. This assessment was undertaken in two stages. A detailed photographic and topographic survey was undertaken in October 2002. This was followed by a limited programme of trial excavation in March 2003. The work was undertaken by Cambria Archaeology and funding was provided by the Brecon Beacons National Park, Welsh Water and Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments.

# Site description (Fig. 2)

The cairn is situated on a summit at 781m AOD. The most recent OS 1:25,000 map indicates that the modern county boundary runs through the centre of the monument. The recent erosion has exposed a continuous arc of stones on the western side of the site (Plates 1 and 2). This stone 'kerb' appears to continue under a thin protective cover of turf and dark soil on the southern side of the monument and appears to be visible as an intermittent arc of stones set into turf on the eastern and northern sides, forming a feature 11m in diameter. The modern walkers' cairn is located in the northeastern sector and measures approximately 4m x 2.5m in plan and 1m high. A number of other, smaller stones are set into the surface of the eroding interior of the cairn. There is a reference to finds of flint flakes and a 'string of clay beads' from a cairn on Fan Foel, although the provenance is uncertain (Grimes 1933). This suggests that the cairn may have been partly 'excavated' in the past. There are no obvious surface traces of such an earlier disturbance although an area of stone free soil in the southwest sector of the cairn requires closer inspection.

# Assessment aims and methodology

The general objective of the archaeological work was to obtain information on the surviving character of the monument. This was to allow an informed decision to be made on any future mitigation and the development of either a long-term management plan for the monument ('preservation in situ') or a programme of salvage excavation ('preservation by record').

The specific objectives of the assessment were:

- 1 to undertake a detailed photographic and topographic EDM survey of the surviving elements of the monument. The results of the topographic survey are illustrated in Figure 2.
- 2 to determine whether or not the 'kerb' continues under the turf on the southern side of the barrow. This was achieved through the excavation of a trial area (2m x 2m) on the south side of the barrow (Fig. 2, Trench 1). The turf and topsoil was removed by hand and the underlying deposits cleaned and recorded. Pollen samples were taken from under the exposed stone cairn material. Following the completion of the recording the turf and topsoil was carefully replaced.

3 – to determine whether or not part of the interior of the monument has been previously excavated. A small trial area (3.5m x 1m) was examined in the southwest sector of the barrow. The thin cover of turf was removed by hand and the surface of the underlying deposits was cleaned and recorded. Following the completion of the recording the turf and topsoil was carefully replaced.

# **Trial excavation results** (Fig. 3)

**Trench 1** – The turf and topsoil comprised a black, humic peaty loam (001). At the northern end of the trench the topsoil was 0.35m thick and at the southern end it was 0.12m thick. This overlay elements of the stone cairn or kerb (002) that comprised medium to large sandstone blocks. This in turn overlay a relatively stone-free, dark brown, silty loam (003). Test probing with a cane suggested that this deposit was up to 0.43m thick. Pollen samples were taken from this deposit where it was sealed by cairn stones. Further samples were taken from a small sondage that was excavated in the northeastern sector of the trench (Plate 3). A preliminary examination of the pollen samples by Astrid Caseldine (University of Lampeter) indicates the presence of grass and heather pollen in all the samples along with hazel pollen (20% total land pollen or more). The evidence suggests an open environment in the immediate area of the pollen deposition sites/cairn but with some hazel woodland in the region (the proximity of this is unclear at present). The presence of Plantago lanceolata and Potentilla pollen suggests grazing activity. The results appear to be broadly in keeping with those from Waun-Fignen-Felen (Smith and Cloutman 1988).

**Trench 2** – The overlying topsoil and turf was no more than 0.1m thick. This overlay a dark-brown to black silty loam and peat (004) with lenses of yellow-brown silty clay giving a mottled or mixed appearance (Plate 4). This deposit was relatively stone-free, although a few cairn stones were exposed in the southwestern end of the trench in the area near to the ring kerb. Probing this deposit with a cane suggested that it was approximately 0.45m thick.

# Discussion

The presence of cairn material under the turf and topsoil in Trench 1 strongly suggested the continuation of the ring kerb in the southeastern sector of the barrow. The absence of any disturbance in the underlying peaty loam suggested that the barrow had not suffered from any previous disturbance in the areas examined. However, this does not demonstrate that robbing has not taken place elsewhere in the barrow.

The peaty loam appears to have been deliberately deposited (perhaps in the form of turf) to create a level platform. This material appeared to be up to 0.45m deep on the south side of the barrow. However, the general profile of the barrow when viewed from the west (Plate 5) suggests that the depth of this material might be rather deeper on the north side, perhaps up to 1m. The ring kerb and associated cairn material appears to been placed onto this barrow platform effectively forming a capping. Comparable barrows

with primary mounds of turf and peat and stone capping have been were recorded elsewhere, most notably at both Pen-y-fan and Corn-du on the Brecon Beacons (Gibson 1997). In fact the ring kerb at Fan Foel is not dissimilar from the kerbs set within the turf barrow at Corn-du. However, the kerbstones at Corn Du appeared to have been set upright into the mound and this is not obviously the case at Fan Foel. Both the barrows at Pen-y-fan and Corn-du were associated with central, rectangular stone cists. The stone cist at Pen-y-fan appears to have originally contained a copper-alloy associated cremation although bronze items were also found from secondary contexts. Although there was no obvious surface evidence for a comparable stone cist at Fan Foel, it is possible that one may be partly obscured by the walkers' cairn. As at Pen-y-fan and Corn Du there is clearly a high potential for the survival of a buried soil or land surface under the peaty loam at Fan Foel. This would have significant potential for an understanding of the barrow in its contemporary environment.

There can be no doubt that the barrow continues to be under considerable threat. Ongoing erosion, both from weathering and from visitors, is continuing to cause damage to the surviving fabric of the barrow and the ring kerb. In fact it was observed that several of the kerbstones on the north side of the barrow had been removed during the course of the assessment. These were recorded during the initial survey in August 2002 and were missing by the time of the assessment undertaken in March 2003 (Fig. 2). It has since been reported that further stones have been moved (reported by Duncan Schlee in May 2003). A similar threat was the impetus for the full excavation of the cairns on Pen-y-fan and Corn-du in the early 1990s. At these sites two options were initially considered. The first option involved covering both surviving mounds with Terram matting or pea gravel and then consolidating the mounds with loose, local stone. However, this option was rejected on the basis that it would be logistically difficult to achieve, it would mask the archaeology creating 'false' monuments and could not be regarded as a final solution but rather as the first stage in an on-going process of expensive consolidation. The preferred option was to totally excavate both sites allowing the preservation by record of the surviving data. Both these options are currently available for consideration for the barrow at Fan Foel.

# Acknowledgements

The fieldwork was undertaken by Gwilym Hughes, Richard Ramsay, Duncan Schlee and Hubert Wilson (all of Cambria Archaeology) and by Peter Dorling (BBNP). The palaeoenvironmental sampling was supervised by Astrid Caseldine (University of Lampeter). The illustrations in this report are by Hubert Wilson and the report was edited by Ken Murphy.

# References

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Plate 1 – The barrow at Fan Foel looking northeast. Erosion scars are visible in the foreground



Plate 2 – The barrow at Fan Foel looking north showing detail of the stone 'kerb'



Plate 3 – Palaeoenvironmental sampling of Trench 1



Plate 4 – Trench 2



Plate 5 - View of the barrow from the west