

## III.

NOTICE OF THE DISCOVERY OF TWO STONE COFFINS AT  
PITKERRO, WITH NOTES ON THE CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE  
OF STONE CISTS. BY ALEXANDER HUTCHESON, F.S.A. Scot.

On 5th December 1902, while workmen were digging a drain from a new lodge at the south entrance gateway to Pitkerro House, near Broughty Ferry, the property of Lieut.-Col. Douglas Dick, a stone coffin was uncovered. It lay at a distance of 15 yards north from the public road to Kingennie, and about 140 yards east from the lodge. I got early intimation of it, and lost no time in visiting the place, which I did within a few hours after the discovery was made. Unhappily, the workmen had by that time cleared out the contents with a spade; otherwise the coffin was undisturbed.

The coffin, hereinafter referred to as No. 1, was of the full-length tapered type, formed of thin slabs of stone set on edge, three stones to the length of each side; the ends, each of a single stone; the stone which formed the foot being slightly sloped outwards as in the modern coffin of wood. It measured internally on floor 5 feet 7½ inches long, 18 inches wide at head, 16 inches wide at centre, whence it tapered more rapidly to a width of 8 inches at foot. In this respect it differed from, and doubtless took precedence of, the common form of this type of coffin, which is widest at shoulders and tapered to both ends like the modern wood coffin. The coffin was 12 inches deep internally. It had 14 inches of soil above it, of which 6 inches were vegetable soil, so that it was entirely sunk in the subsoil, a yellowish clay. Apparently the sides had been first set in the soil (a feature which apparently existed through the various types, and characteristic of the next example to be noticed), then the sole, formed of several pieces of similar thin pavement, had been put in. The covers, doubtless of similar slabs, were amissing, having probably been removed or broken in ploughing, which may have led to an investigation being made at that time. This seemed evident from what fragments of bones there were being all broken up and mixed

with the earth which filled the coffin,<sup>1</sup> which lay in a line slightly south of west and north of east and with the head towards the west. It would therefore seem to be assignable to Christian times, but there is here no tradition of a church or burying-ground.

The other coffin, No. 2, a more remarkable one, was seen by me on 13th September 1906, but had been discovered a day or two before. Unfortunately for the interests of antiquarian research, like the previous example, it had been cleared of its contents before my visit.

It was also of the full-length type, 5 feet 10 inches long internally, 12 inches deep, and of a uniform width of 15 inches. It lay almost due east and west.

Human bones were got in it, as evinced by a jaw-bone (which, however, when I saw it, had lost the teeth), a bit of a skull, and a quantity of other bones in a more or less fragmentary condition, betokening a burial by inhumation. I made a careful search amongst the earth said to have been taken out of the coffin,<sup>2</sup> but failed to find any other relics of the burial.

I come now to deal with two very remarkable features of this coffin. First, the slabs forming the sides were each of a single stone of the full length of the coffin, very thin, not more than  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches in thickness, of sufficient depth everywhere to tail down into the subsoil below the sole of the coffin, one of the sides, that on the north, being 22 inches at its greatest width. Both of the side slabs were perfectly smooth and straight on the inner sides and along the top edge, indeed so much so as at first to suggest artificial polishing; but, after careful examination, I came to the conclusion that the apparent polish and level surface were due to natural cleavage of a favourable example of the grey pavement stone of the district. The ends, as usual, were each of a single stone, large enough to tail downwards, like the sides, into the subsoil, and wide enough to project at each end beyond the side slabs. The foot slab

<sup>1</sup> This was mentioned by the workmen.

<sup>2</sup> The contents had been shovelled over the bank and fell amongst the loose material which sloped away below, so that search was almost hopeless.

was not sloped. Second, the bottom of the coffin was formed of two slabs, laid close at the joining, but here another remarkable feature was disclosed. The constructors, apparently unable to find a stone of the necessary uniform width to fill exactly the space between the side slabs—and these, as I have said, projected downwards into the subsoil—had resorted to a pinching-off process along one edge to adjust the stone to the position it was designed to occupy ; but the cutting, if it can be correctly so described, exhibited no tool-marks, only such pinching-off as could be accomplished in a rude way by repeated strokes with another bit of stone held in the hand as a tool, but even this, rude as it is, is the first and only instance I have come across of an apparently intentional artificial reduction of a stone in any composite stone cist or coffin.

The cover was broken and partially removed before my visit, and I had no means of knowing whether it had been in one slab or more, but the portion that remained, equal to about half the length, was in one piece and projected well beyond the sides, and with rough edges.

This is the highest type of composite full-length coffin I have met with in a fairly large experience and observation of all the recorded Scottish types, the sides being composed each of a single slab of uniform thickness, and with a close-fitting sole pinched off at edges to suit it to its place, all evidently carefully selected with practically smooth faces towards the interior and straight upper edges. I cannot think it possible to produce anything better from such materials ; and I desire to express my indebtedness to Col. Douglas Dick for sending me notice of the discovery of this cist, and accompanying me to point out the site.

The cist was found 2 feet 3 inches below the surface in the highest part of an irregular, longitudinal mound of stony clay, which was being excavated for road-making purposes, about 300 yards to the northwards of Pitkerro House, and led to the discovery of the cist.

Several fairly large boulders, in no recognisable order, lie on the surface of the mound a short distance to the eastward ; but as they are grouped within a small area, and in the near neighbourhood of the cist, it seems to suggest the desirability of a further examination of the mound.

The place-name, Pitkerro, suggests a Celtic origin, and there is a place called Kerro-stone, a little to the north, but nothing could be learned of any standing-stone to give colour to that name.

In a review of the chronological sequence of stone cists, one is at a loss where to place this example. It seems to demand a type for itself, of which it is so far the sole instance. The parallel sides and perpendicular footstone would place it earlier than coffin No. 1 noticed in this paper, which again, as I have remarked, would seem to take precedence of the type of coffins widest in the middle and tapering to both ends, which last form is clearly ascribable to Christian times. The available information is as yet very scanty, scarcely any observer thinking it worth while giving such details as are here desiderated.

Before proceeding further in this inquiry, I would refer to a recent discovery at Leuchars, Fifeshire, dealt with earlier in the present session in a paper to the Society by Mr William Reid, F.S.A. Scot. There a number of stone coffins were found in ground assignable to a Christian settlement, presumably of pre-Norman times.

The coffins were placed close together, were orientated, full-length, parallel-sided, several stones to the length, vertical footstone, and not paved in the bottom. Their chief peculiarity was their uncommon width, 2 feet 10 inches to 3 feet, associating them, except in the feature of orientation, with the known full-length burials of pagan times in Scotland, and differentiating them from the tapered cists of later times not more than half their width.

How are we to account for this great width of the Leuchars coffins? Fortunately, quite recently, in Orkney, a discovery has been made which seems to supply the answer, in a burial suggesting the transition from the short to the long cist. In the end of August 1907; as Mr James Mackenzie was digging for stones at the quarry of Howe, Herston, he came upon a stone coffin with human remains—almost a complete skeleton, with skull and teeth.

The cist consisted of two large flagstones at each side, two on the top, and one at each end, while the bottom was rock. The length of

this stone box was 6 feet; the width and height were the same,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet; while it was found about 4 feet below the surface. The body seems to have been placed not longways but crossways in the coffin, as if half doubled up.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps impossible to discriminate between pagan and Christian burial. Dr Joseph Anderson, in an exhaustive paper published in the *Proceedings* so long ago as 1876,<sup>2</sup> has dealt with the evidences of pagan burial in Christian times.

The doubled-up form of burial may have been practised in Christian as well as in pagan times.<sup>3</sup> That it was more a characteristic of pagan burial we must, however, believe. And, if we are to receive the evidence of the Orkney cist, which there seems no reason to set aside, it may point to a time when the long stone coffin had become an established fashion, but yet retained the width and depth of the short cist, and so was capable of receiving a doubled-up interment. This seems to be not an extravagant suggestion. The changes in burial customs would take place very slowly, and with many recessions to former usages. Kemble, dealing with this line of thought, remarks, "I find no great difficulty in the supposition that here and there a professed Christian may have been dispatched on his long journey *more paganorum*, simply because no Christian priest happened to be by to prevent it." He further mentions the discovery of two graves at Winster, Derbyshire, which, from the grave-goods enclosed, were to be attributed to the period from the fifth to the eighth century A.D., each containing a skeleton lying on its right side with the knees drawn up and the head pointing to north-east. (*Horæ Ferales*, pp. 99, 104-105.)

The Leuchars cists might therefore represent a step lower down in the scale, as preserving the extreme width, but not the depth, of the Orkney example, pointing to a period when the doubled-up burial had been finally abandoned, so far as concerned the full-length cist.

<sup>1</sup> *Saga-book of the Viking Club*, April 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xi. pp. 363-88.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix to the Preface, Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, vol. ii. p. lx.

I cannot help thinking this great width of the Leuchars cist is a very remarkable and noteworthy feature, pointing to a very early form of cist, and I am inclined to consider these Leuchars cists as one of the earliest forms of Scottish Christian burial yet recorded.

The effect of the foregoing considerations is to suggest that, as the doubled-up form of burial came to be disused, a step in the change of form of the coffin would be a reduction in the width.

In a former paper I attempted a chronological sequence of types.<sup>1</sup> I would now propose to substitute the following, based on the considerations raised in the present paper and extended to include all the recorded types of undressed stone cists.

*First.*—The short cist, rudely rectangular, usually one stone to each of the four sides set on edge in the ground, cover usually in one stone, no sole, or of pebbles only. Used either for cremation or inhumation—when the latter, body in doubled-up position.

*Second.*—Long cist, roughly parallel-sided, several stones to length of side set on edge in the ground, long enough to contain the body in an extended position (but sometimes wide enough and deep enough to receive alternatively a doubled-up interment), having several similar stones for cover, paved in bottom with pebbles, or the bare earth may be left.

*Third.*—Enclosure by slabs of stone set on edge for full-length interment by inhumation, but with no stone cover or sole. (Pagan influence of Iron Age.)

*Fourth.*—Similar to second, and retaining width, but not depth; possibly contemporaneous with third, and used only for full-length interments. (Leuchars cists.)

*Fifth.*—Narrow, full-length, parallel-sided, one stone to length of each side set on edge in ground, cover and sole of similar slabs not, however, necessarily in one stone, upright footstone. (Pitkerro cist No. 2, sole example as yet.)

*Sixth.*—Narrow, full-length, parallel-sided, several stones to length of each side, several similar stones as cover and sole, upright footstone.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xxxvii. p. 239.

*Seventh.*—Narrow, full-length, widest at top, tapered to foot, several stones to length of each side, footstone sloped, sole and cover of similar small slabs. (Type of Pitkerro cist No. 1.)

*Eighth.*—Narrow, full-length, widest at shoulders, tapered to both ends, several stones in length of sides, similar stones for cover and sole, sloped footstone.

This last is, so far, the latest form of composite stone coffin. But it is not contended here that a close sequence existed in the types outlined in the above list. The full-length form, we have seen, was used for pagan burial, but the determination of their period would depend upon the evidence. The determining feature of Christian burial is the occurrence in groups of associated cists orientated in plan, but orientation is not in itself sufficient to indicate Christian burial. As a governing principle it existed in pagan times, but an isolated orientated burial-cist, even with the feet to the east, may be a mere coincidence. In point of fact, the prehistoric burial-cist lies in all directions, even when associated in groups. To this neglect of system, doubtless, urn-burial, from its not being answerable to any such order, contributed. It is not difficult to understand how orientation came to dominate Christian burial. The practice, which took early rise, of burying the dead in the interiors of churches, would lead to a parallelism of the interments with the walls of the buildings, which would be extended to dominate extra-mural interment. Long intervals would separate the different types. In the downward progress there would be different lines of descent in different centres, with all through, here and there, recurrences to antecedent types. The Pitkerro cist No. 2, which is placed in type Fifth, may be assignable to a much earlier period. The sloping footstone of type Seventh marks a great advance in adaptation to new needs, and the want of it in the Pitkerro cist may throw that example back to the period between types Second and Third. Had the contents been seen undisturbed, they might have helped to assign it to its true temporal plane. This simply serves to emphasise the importance, when a discovery like this is made, of preserving the contents intact until they can be seen by some one competent to conduct a search.

Such discoveries are usually made unexpectedly, and the workmen, having had no instructions to restrain them from a search, stimulated thereto, moreover, by the hope of lighting on buried treasure, either clear the whole thing away by pick and shovel, or, if they do leave it to be seen by their employer or overseer, turn over the contents so thoroughly as to effectually destroy all evidences which would be of value in any subsequent expert examination. But were landed proprietors and others to give such particular instructions to their ground officers and work-people generally as would ensure the protection of any antiquity which might be come upon from the moment of its discovery, it could not fail in a very short time to result in many valuable discoveries, and aid in the elucidation of many problems that as yet wait for solution. It is to be hoped that this hint may be acted on by those favourably situated to give effect to it, under whose notice it may come.