

I.

REPORT ON THE DISCOVERY OF TWO SHORT CISTS CONTAINING CREMATED HUMAN REMAINS AT HUNDATOWN, ORKNEY. BY WILLIAM KIRKNESS, F.S.A.Scot.

In 1858 a group of three cists was found at Isbister, in the parish of Rendall, Orkney.¹ The first to be exposed was 5 feet 8 inches long, 2 feet 3 inches wide, and 2 feet 10 inches deep. It was of the double type, that is, with one grave superimposed on the other, and contained in the lower chamber two skeletons in a doubled-up position, the upper chamber being empty. The second was discovered about 5 feet distant from the first. It measured 3 feet in length, 1 foot 10 inches in width, and 3 feet in depth. It contained the remains of a single skeleton in a doubled-up position and some burnt bones. The third, which measured about 18 inches

¹ *Proc. S.A. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 411.

square, was found 5 or 6 feet from the south-east end of the two cists just described.

Another series of similar graves is described in the same paper. They were discovered at Newbigging, now included in the farm of Crantit, in the parish of St Ola, Orkney. The first cist of this series was found in May 1855. It contained a small urn in which was found a quantity of fragments of burnt bones and ashes. Another cist, containing a human skeleton, had been discovered some years previously near the spot where this cist was found. The third was brought to light later in 1855. It was covered with a bowl-shaped mound about 30 feet in diameter at the base and 5 to 6 feet in height. The mound was composed of clay, and the cist was of the double type, the lower cavity measuring 4 feet 8 inches in length, 3 feet 1 inch in width, and 2 feet 2 inches in depth. The depth of the top portion was 1 foot 1 inch. Two doubled-up skeletons were found in it; one placed at either end. George Petrie, who wrote the report, says that the internal arrangements of this cist and the one at Isbister are so alike that the plan of one might serve for the other. In October 1909 another double cist was discovered 484 yards east-south-east of the last described burial.¹ The cist measurements were 3 feet 1 inch in length and 2 feet 2 inches in width, while the depth of the upper compartment was 2 feet, and of the lower 1 foot 9 inches. A doubled-up skeleton, which proved to be that of a young person, was found in the lower half. It will be noted that the sizes of this grave are similar to the second discovered at Isbister. While Petrie gives the depth of the Isbister grave as 3 feet and does not say that it was of the double variety, he tells that he was not present when the grave was first opened. In February 1924 another cist (fig. 1) was unearthed 35 yards from the one just described.² This cist was 4 feet long, 2 feet 2 inches wide, and 2 feet 2 inches deep. In the bottom calcined bones were found.

Last summer I was asked to visit a site on the farm of Hundatown, Grimston, Harray, Orkney, where a short cist had just been found. The discovery was made by Mr John Gray on the 29th July at a spot 140 yards north-east of the farm buildings. On examination this grave, the

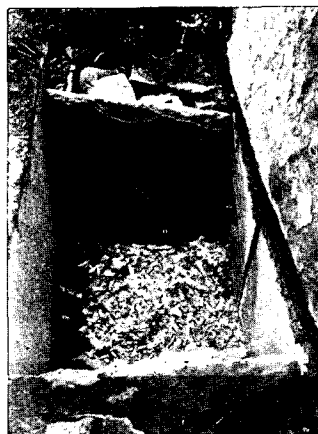


Fig. 1. Short Cist containing burnt Human Bones at Crantit, Orkney.

¹ *Proc. S.A. Scot.*, vol. xlv. p. 120.

² *Proc. Orkney Antiquarian Society*, vol. ii. p. 48.

longer axis of which lay east and west, was seen to be 2 feet 6 inches long inside, 1 foot 8½ inches wide, and 1 foot 9 inches deep. The sides and ends consisted of single slabs measuring from 1 inch to 1½ inch thick and apparently dressed on their edges. The bottom was formed of two slabs, one measuring 2 feet 4 inches long and the other 5½ inches. A single slab, 3 feet 3½ inches long, 2 feet 9½ inches broad, and from 2 inches to 2½ inches thick, formed the top. At either end of this cover a stone, measuring 1 foot 8 inches long, 5¼ inches broad, and 4½ inches thick, had been placed, and on these were laid two stones which extended the whole length of the grave. They formed a second cover, leaving a space of 4½ inches between them and the cover-stone below. The bottom of the lower compartment was covered with calcined human bones. We may assume that this is a variety of the double cist. Mr Gray told me that some 25 feet west of this grave another burial had been found twenty years ago, and that it contained a doubled-up skeleton. He suggested the possibility of there being another in the vicinity, because, on filling up some rat holes, they were soon reopened by these vermin dragging the material down, apparently to a hollow space below.

It would appear that in this series of graves at Hundatown we have another group similar to those found at Crantit and Isbister. Mr Gray also mentioned a field on his farm where he had found several small graves about 18 inches long and about 1 foot wide, containing a small heap of burnt bones in one corner. Petrie tells of the discovery of one such grave at Isbister.

It is unfortunate that no relics have been found with the human remains in these graves by which we could have determined their period with certainty. One is reported to have contained a small urn, but we have no information regarding its type, and consequently we do not know its age. From the accounts that some of the graves contained bodies placed in a crouching position, and that others contained uncremated human remains, also that some of the cists resembled those of the Bronze Age, it is quite probable that they may belong to this time. No double graves comparable to those at Isbister, Crantit, and Hundatown, belonging to the Bronze Age or any other period, however, have been recorded from the mainland of Scotland. Amongst the graves found at Ackergill,¹ which are believed to belong to the tenth century, there was one which was superimposed on another, but it is not a good parallel to the Orkney graves, as it lay at an acute angle across one end of the lower burial, which suggests that this position was quite fortuitous and not planned like those in Orkney.

¹ *Proc. S.A. Scot.*, vol. lx, p. 166.