

A CHAMBERED CAIRN AT ISBISTER SOUTH RONALDSHAY, ORKNEY

by P. R. RITCHIE, B.SC., F.S.A.SCOT.

THIS chambered cairn stands 450 yds. ESE. of the now unoccupied farm-house of Isbister and 660 yds. north of Ham Geo on the east coast of South Ronaldshay. The site is set back about 220 ft. from the precipitous cliffs which here bound the island. It is not shown on the Ordnance Survey map nor does it appear in the Inventory prepared by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments for Scotland.

THE SITE

The mound is covered by a thin skin of turf through which stones break. It is about 135 ft. long, 50 ft. wide and 10 ft. high at its highest point, with its long axis running north and south. The limits are difficult to define since the cairn has been much denuded except for the part in the centre of the western side.

The owner, Mr Ronald Simison of Liddel Farm, spent three days of August 1958 in carrying out partial excavations at various points on the cairn and in the chamber. Our Honorary Fellow, Dr Hugh Marwick, communicated news of the discovery to the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and the site was visited without delay. After drawing and photographing the cairn, chamber, and contents, the various excavations were filled in. Human remains already removed were boxed and brought back to Edinburgh together with all those lying on the exposed floor of the chamber. Our thanks are due to Dr Hooker of St Margaret's Hope for his assistance in removing and storing those skulls which were complete and to Mr Simison for his co-operation. Bones in the side cell were not further disturbed and stones were placed across the entrance to it to prevent back-fill from entering and causing damage.

THE EXCAVATION

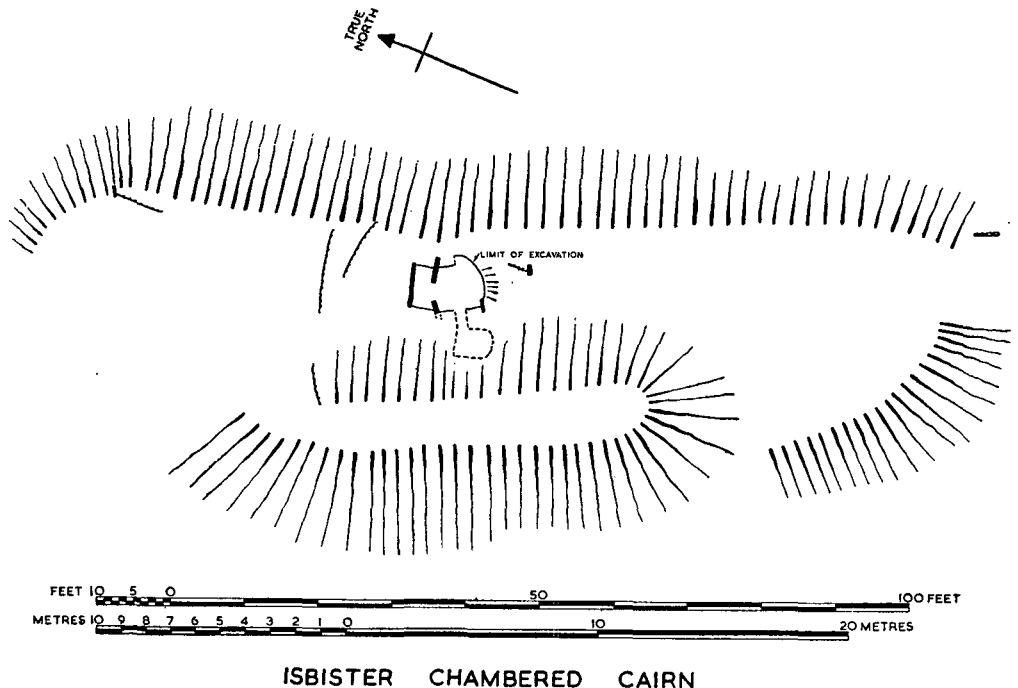
Excavation had revealed a stalled or compartmented chamber whose long axis was parallel to that of the cairn. The eastern margin of the cairn is now indistinct but the chamber is offset to the east side of the cairn as it is now preserved, and is some 18 ft. east of the highest part of the mound. The northern compartment of the chamber had been cleared to floor level by Mr Simison. The next compartment he did not completely excavate, either horizontally or vertically, although his excavation in the northern part of this segment almost reached floor level. It is likely that only a thin layer remains for investigation under the back-fill now there. The eastern side of a third segment to the south of this was slightly exposed but the excavation was only taken down a few courses on the chamber wall and no digging was done in its central part.

Lintelled passages opened from each side of the second compartment. That on

the east side was filled with earthy material and bones and was not investigated further. The other was not filled up and gave into a side chamber containing many human bones.

Compartment 1

The northern compartment, 3 ft. 8 in. long, 5 ft. 9 in. broad and 4 ft. 8 in. high, had a single large flag raised on end as its rear wall. The side walls were coursed horizontally in flagstone here and in the other parts of the chamber. A large triangular flag lay horizontally on the floor against the rear wall. The apex of this lay just short of the centre line of the chamber whilst its base passed under the basal course of the east wall. A pair of orthostatic flags separated this compartment from the next. Two other slabs, raised on edge lengthwise, were placed one above the other between the orthostats on their southern side. Only the lower of these is seen in the photograph (Pl. II). Mr Simison observed that no large slabs of stone came from the filling and only a few bones were found. These included thigh bones but no skulls.

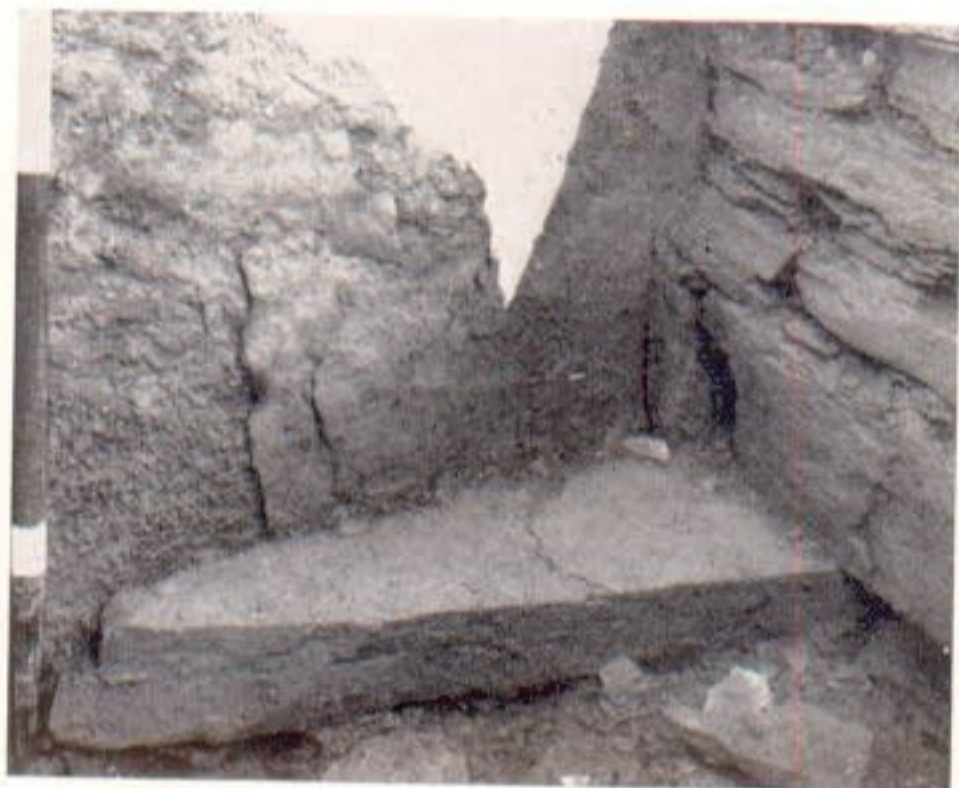


MINISTRY OF WORKS,
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FIG. 1

Compartment 2

The next compartment measured 6 ft. 3 in. long and 4 ft. 6 in. broad whilst the highest course of walling stood 5 ft. 2 in. above the floor. Another orthostat projected



Underpinning of north end of chamber



The cairn from the south



Chamber and entrance to side cell



Walling within the mound

Isbister Cairn

from the west wall to mark the southern end of this compartment but excavation of the south-east corner was not completed and no sign of another to pair with it was visible. Midway along the west wall an entrance, 1 ft. 6 in. wide and 2 ft. 3 in. high, opened into a passage 2 ft. in length. This gave access to a side cell. Opposite this entrance was another in the east wall. Here the south side of the passage was not defined by excavation and, as mentioned above, it was blocked with sediment and bones.

The uppermost material removed by the excavator was stony rubble, but from a level about 9 in. below the surface until nearly floor level this gave way to earthy fill in which bones were found throughout. The lowest layer, thickness unknown, contained some small stones. Halfway down in the earthy filling and about the middle of the compartment a bone head was found (fig. 2). The pottery fragments found afterwards on the dump probably also came from this compartment. Skulls were found in pairs in each of the northern corners and another pair was found at the north side of the entrance to the cell.

Compartment 3

A third compartment, 7 ft. 6 in. long, must exist to the south again. The upper part of the orthostat at its south-east corner projected above ground level for about 12 in. The two uppermost courses of the east wall were defined by excavation for a distance of 2 ft. 6 in.

The side cell and other structural features

The side cell which opened from the second compartment was roughly square with sides about 4 ft. 6 in. long. The south side was markedly curved. Inside, the height was estimated at about 3 ft. but floor level could not be defined exactly. The sides corbelled slightly towards the flagged roof. A large portion of flag had fallen from the centre of this.

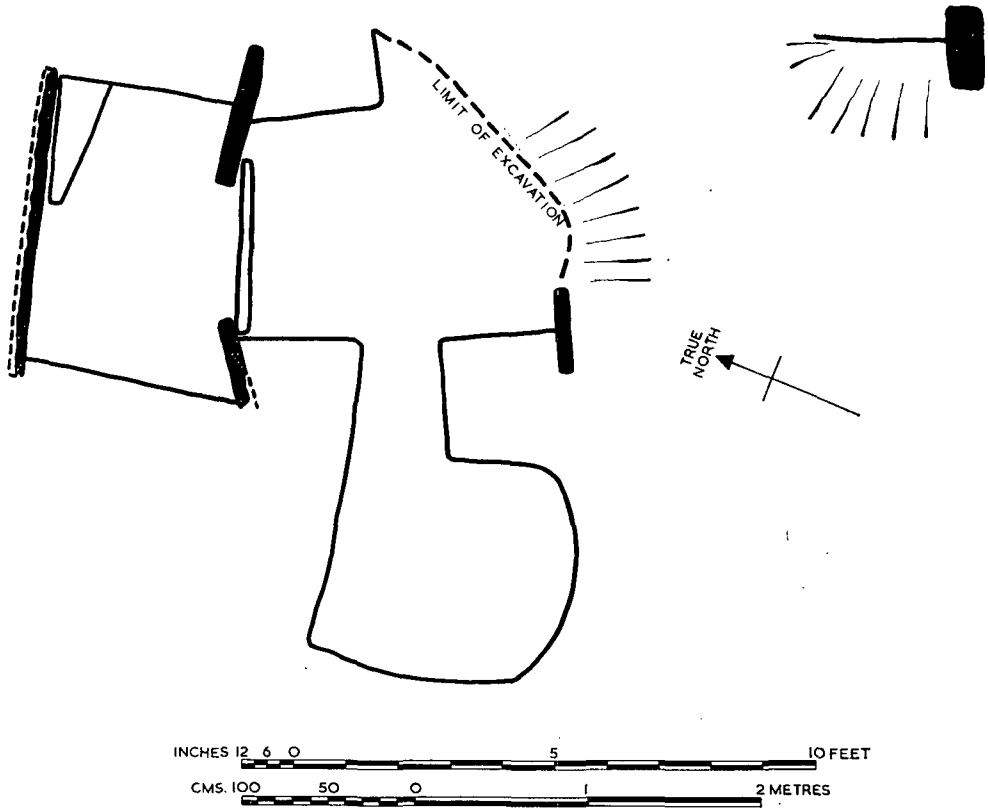
Mr Simison stated that only leg bones were found in the passage and that in the cell, as well as a mixture of human bones, all the other skulls were found. Some were together in the centre of the cell; the others were ranged round the sides. Some of those in the middle had been broken by the fallen stone.

Two short stretches of walling were exposed in the body of the cairn. These occurred 9 ft. and 12 ft. north of the north end of the chamber and ran transversely across the cairn's long axis. Lengths of about 8-10 ft. were exposed and in places the walls rose to a height of 3 ft. 3 in. Horizontal courses of small flags were used throughout.

With the exception of the pottery fragments and the bone head all of the small finds occurred together as a group beside the southernmost wall. They were found immediately adjacent to its northern face at the point marked on the plan (fig. 2).

Another excavation had been made 42 ft. NNE. of the north wall of the chamber. At this point a small orthostat projected through the ground for about 1 ft. 3 in. Below ground level at a depth of 1 ft. 5 in. was found a wall of one to two courses of flags stretching for 5 ft. 8 in. in a SSW. direction. On the west side of this wall

occurred a quantity of animal bones. These included small sheep and ox, an eagle and a smaller bird, perhaps a crow. Some human bones were also present.¹



ISBISTER — CHAMBER

FIG. 2

THE FINDS

Stone objects

1. A small axe of black, fine-grained material of relatively great density. $2\frac{5}{8}$ in. long, cutting edge $1\frac{7}{8}$ in. wide, $\frac{9}{16}$ in. thick. Chips are missing from both faces. The sides and butt have flat surfaces ground on them. The workmanship is excellent. (Fig. 3, 1)
2. Another small axe of greenish-brown aphanitic rock, $2\frac{9}{16}$ in. long, cutting edge $1\frac{5}{8}$ in. wide, $\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick. Sides ground as in Axe 1. The butt is broken but this is a defect of manufacture. The edges of the break are polished over. Miss Henshall has drawn my attention to the very high gloss seen on the

¹ I am indebted to Dr Clarke of the Royal Scottish Museum for these identifications.

posterior third of each face. This resembles the gloss seen on sickle flints and tempts the suggestion that it might perhaps be due to slight friction between the axe and its adhesive mountant. (fig. 3, 2)

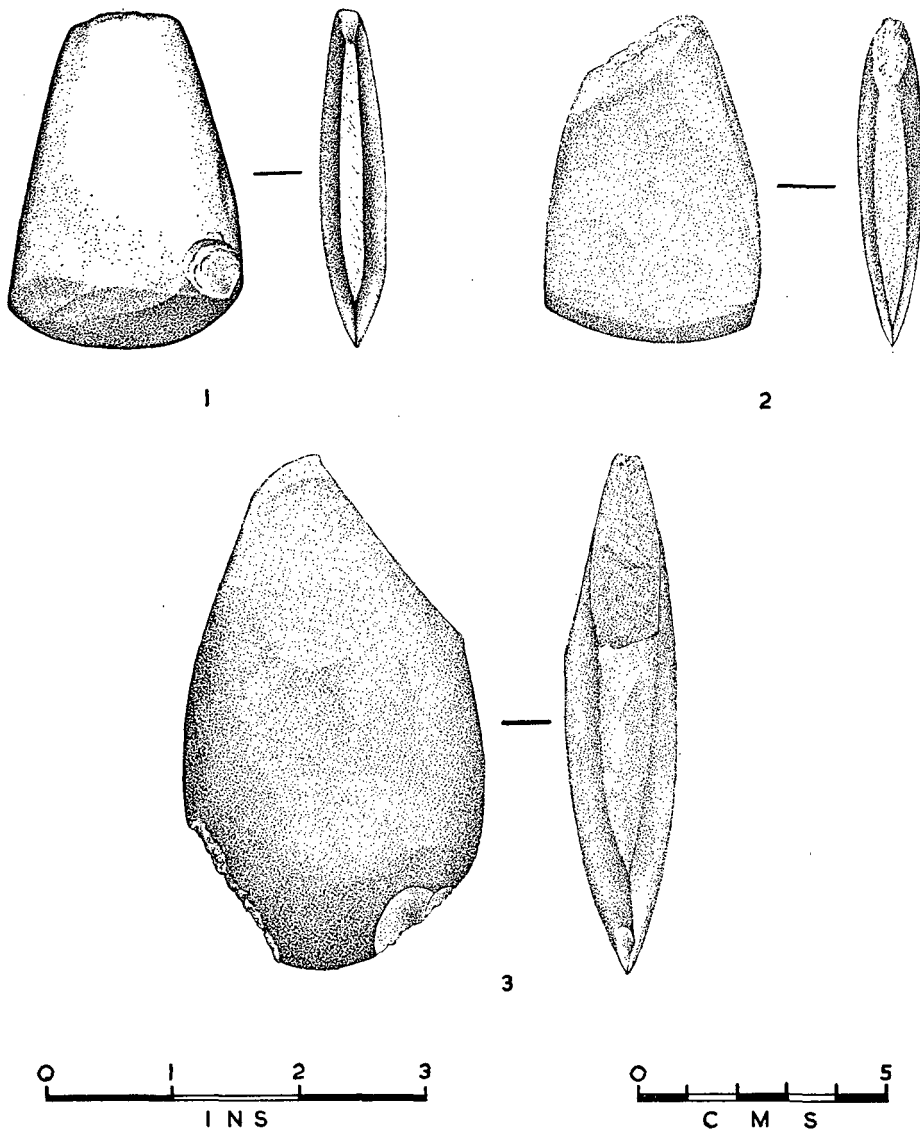


FIG. 3

3. A larger axe of greenish-brown rock. On a broken surface frequent black phenocrysts are seen. $4\frac{1}{16}$ in. long. Both cutting edge and butt have been broken. Again the sides are ground. (fig. 3, 3)

4. A macehead fashioned from a coarse-grained basic rock. No attempt has been made to render texture in the drawing. $3\frac{1}{8}$ in. long. Cylindrical in transverse section. In longitudinal section one surface is convex whilst the other is substantially straight. Both ends are expanded. The cylindrical perforation is $\frac{5}{8}$ in. in diameter. (fig. 4, 4)

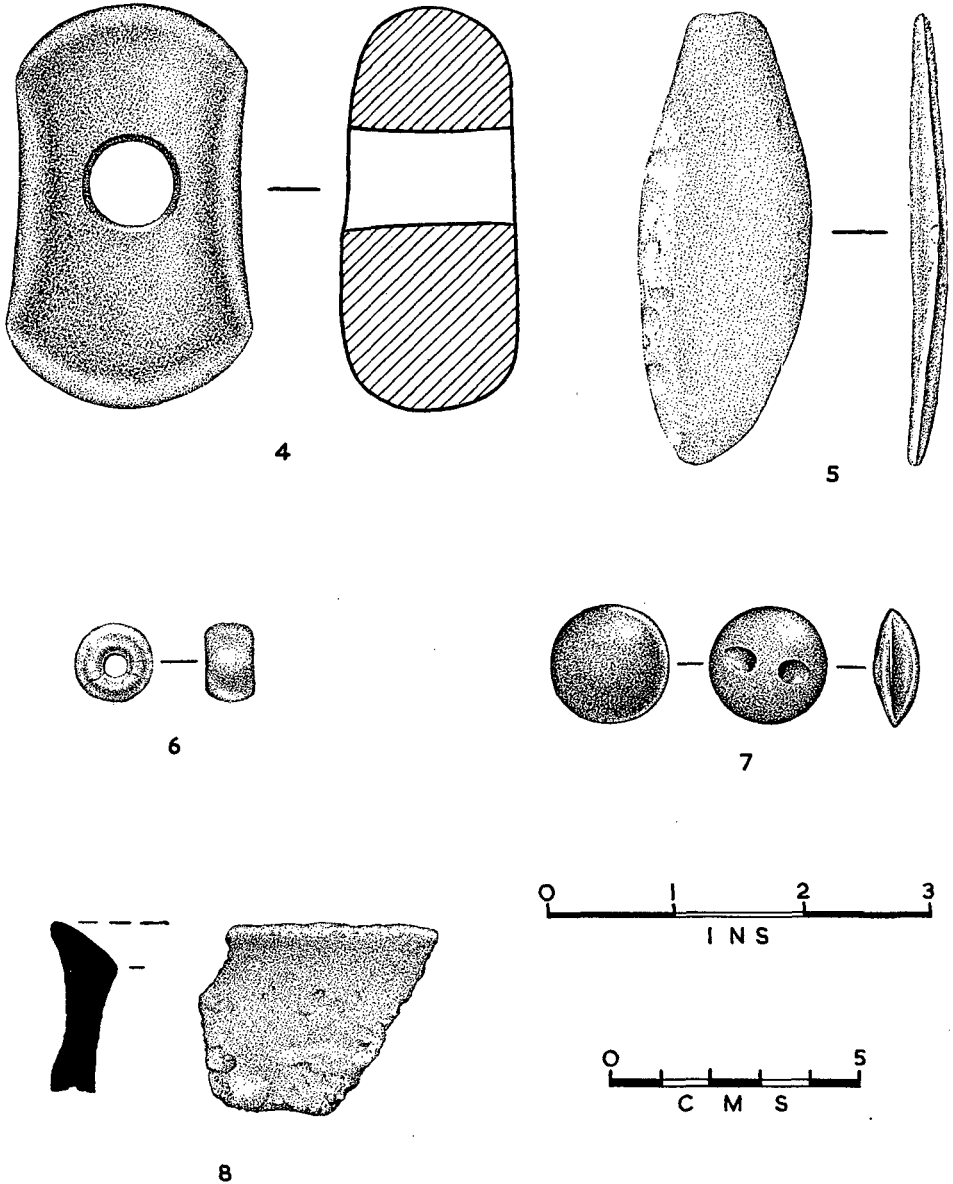


FIG. 4

5. A polished knife of pale orange stone with red inclusions, probably chert, $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, $1\frac{5}{16}$ in. wide. The flake scars of manufacture have not been completely obliterated by grinding. (fig. 4, 5)

All of the above were found together (see plan and p. 27).

Other objects

6. Bone bead, cylindrical, $\frac{5}{8}$ in. diameter, $\frac{3}{8}$ in. thick with $\frac{3}{16}$ in. cylindrical perforation. Found in the filling of Compartment 2. (fig. 4, 6)
7. V-bored button of jet. $\frac{15}{16}$ in. diameter, $\frac{3}{8}$ in. thick. Bi-convex. Very highly polished. Found beside Nos. 1-5. (fig. 4, 7)
8. Pottery. A rim fragment of orange-buff ware with $\frac{1}{16}$ in. grit used as tempering material. Three other fragments of similar ware were found. All of these came from the excavator's spoil-heap. From its position the rim fragment is likely to have occurred towards the bottom of the filling of Compartment 2. (fig. 4, 8)

The human remains

It has not been possible to obtain a full report on these. Mr Simison has kindly presented the bones to the Department of Anatomy in the University of Edinburgh where they are now in the collection of early Scottish skeletal material.

Reasonably complete skulls number sixteen whilst broken pieces show that fourteen other individuals must be represented. Mandibles, where present, were separated from their crania before examination was possible. It is doubtful if pairing of these can now be managed. The post-cranial material is of a very mixed character. Bones of the lower limb and pelvis predominate with relatively few bones from the upper limb. This discrepancy is not due to circumstances of preservation. With the exception of breakage during excavation and by subsequent sight-seers all are in good condition. Absence of individual bones cannot be ascribed to fragility and decomposition.

At least thirty individuals, ranging in age from the very young to those in middle age were buried in the chamber. The remains of several children were noted. Where sex could be suggested all were males.

A few animal bones were amongst the collection from the chamber.

DISCUSSION

The subdivision of the main chamber by paired orthostats projecting inwards from the walls places this tomb clearly in Type (ii) of Piggott's Orkney-Cromarty group.¹ With its long covering mound it must be included in the Camster derivative series like the well-known example at Midhowe.

Unlike the latter however it has a side cell branching from the main chamber. In this respect it more closely resembles Unstan although that monument was housed under a round cairn. The size of the chamber is difficult to estimate, but present surface indications suggest no more than four bays since there should presumably be

¹ Piggott, S., *Neolithic Communities of the British Isles*, 234.

yet another unexcavated compartment south of the orthostat which terminates the walling of Compartment 3.

The position of the entrance passage is not known. The entrance opening from the east wall of Compartment 2 may possibly be the end of the entrance passage but, if so, there is no surface indication of its outer end. On the other hand this may be the entrance to another side cell. In this case it may be expected that the roof has given way since the space is now blocked.

The nature of the roofing of the chamber is not known. From the excavator's description it seems that the chamber must have been filled with earth to a high level. He noted human bones throughout this filling. Had the roof been removed from a chamber only partly filled there should have been a much greater influx of cairn material. As it is, only the top 9 in. appear to have been of this nature.

Within the chamber there must have been some segregation of bones. No other explanation seems possible for the greatly inflated ratio of lower limb bones to upper limb bones. The 'nest' of skulls in the side cell must be explained in the same way. Complete burials corresponding to the skulls could hardly be placed within the confines of the cell walls at any one time.

What is quite clear is that this series of human remains is the most complete yet to be found in a neolithic context in Scotland. Added to this is the possibility of extending the collection by careful excavation of the remainder of the chamber. The nearest parallel seems to be Midhowe – another Camster derivative tomb. Here¹ the remains of twenty-five individuals were found but in a much more fragmentary condition so that it was only possible to report on the characters of four skulls. For more extensive series it is necessary to go south to tombs such as Pant y Saer, Tinkinswood, Belas Knap and West Kennet.

The encircling walls within the cairn material recall other examples in Orkney. We need look no further than Unstan and Midhowe for parallels. The coursing is horizontal and nothing was seen of the herring-bone pattern which was evident at Midhowe, Yarso and Blackhammer. But this again is to be expected since at these sites only the outer walls were so treated, the inner walls being horizontally coursed as at Isbister.

The stone tools fit well in the context of such an Orcadian tomb. The only point calling for attention is the undoubtedly excellent finish of the articles, with the one exception of the broken axehead. A ritual or votive act seems to be the likely explanation for a cache such as this. The rather unexpected find of a V-bored button with these stone tools prompts the suggestion that they were placed beside the wall in a bag which has now perished.

No other example of a V-bored button has come from a tomb of this type. In Scotland as a whole, whilst jet beads have been found (e.g. Cairn Holy) no other case of a V-bored button is known and it is necessary to go to Ireland, to tombs of the Boyne group, to find associations with chambered cairns. Piggott has pointed out that in neither Irish case are the buttons certainly primary.

¹ P.S.A.S., LXVIII (1933-4), 320-50.