A MASSIVE CIST WITH MULTIPLE BURIALS OF IRON AGE DATE AT LOCHEND, DUNBAR¹

PART I: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

by I. H. LONGWORTH, F.S.A.SCOT.

Introduction

THE site first came to light during deep ploughing in February 1962 in a field W. of the road linking Dunbar with the Spott cross-roads on the AI (Nat. Grid Ref. NT 681776). The cist lay on the southern slope of a slight eminence in the field whose subsoil consisted of well drained sands and gravel. The plough had dislodged a small capstone bringing to the surface a quantity of human bones and revealing a slight cavity in which several skulls and other bones could be seen. The discovery was brought to the attention of Mr P. Rayner who, judging it to be of importance and in need of prompt investigation, immediately informed the National Museum. Permission to investigate the cist was readily granted by Major A. J. Tweedie, Eweford, Dunbar, the owner of the land, and our warmest thanks are due to him for taking an active interest in the site, providing invaluable assistance in the removing of the main capstone, and in what would have been an extremely tedious task of 'filling-in' after the excavation had been completed. He also kindly gave the few small finds to the National Collection.

The skeletal material was submitted to Mr Don Brothwell and Miss Rosemary Powers whose exhaustive analysis, entitled 'The Iron Age people of Dunbar', forms part II of this paper.² The writer wishes to record here his very real sense of gratitude to these specialists for the immense amount of time and labour involved in making their report which is itself a major contribution to our understanding of the Iron Age in Scotland. I would also like to express my warmest thanks to my colleagues in the National Museum and in particular to its Keeper, Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, for help and criticism at all stages of the excavation and preparation of the report.

THE EXCAVATION

As the field was to be sown with potatoes in late March, it was decided to undertake an examination of the cist at once. Despite bitter weather and unexpected problems the work was completed in the three weeks February 11th to 25th and March 15th to 18th by Mr A. Fenton³ and the writer, with much valuable assistance from Mr R. B. K. Stevenson, and, at week-ends, a squad of helpers from Edinburgh. It was soon apparent that the grave itself was of some size, consisting, at least in its upper part, of roughly coursed dry-stone masonry, and that one of the capstones,

all the photographs used to illustrate this paper.

¹ The Society gratefully acknowledges a grant from the Council for British Archaeology towards the cost of producing this paper.

* see p. 104.

* Mr Fenton kindly volunteered to act as photographer on the excavation and I am indebted to him for

the central and most massive, remained in situ (Pl. XXIII, 1). After all the loose bones, including 6 skulls, had been removed from the disturbed earth in the top of the grave, the capstone was lifted. This was no mean task since the stone was some 5 ft. $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. long, 2 ft. 5 in. wide and had a maximum thickness of $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. With the aid of a tractor equipped with a mechanical fork and under Major Tweedie's own direction, the stone was speedily removed without damage to the structure or loss of life. A rectangle 20 by 15 ft. round the cist was cleared down to the level of the subsoil and the actual excavation of the grave begun.

The process of clearing the cist proved to be exacting. As the capstone lay at ground level only the upper portion of the filling could be removed by working in a prone position outside the cist. The work was slow, necessitating the isolation and cleaning up of successive layers of human bones. The majority of these lay in total confusion or only partial articulation, and as each (arbitrary) layer was exposed the bones were recorded on a scaled sketch plan, photographed and finally lifted in groups. At a depth of some 9 to 15 in. dry-stone walling gave way to upright slabs suggesting a considerable depth of deposit. A baulk was therefore left between approximately $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. and $4\frac{3}{4}$ ft. from the wide end of the grave to give a permanent record of any change in filling in section. This at once had the effect of still further limiting the amount of working space, and as the level fell it was only possible to continue by actually working within the grave itself, with some consequent damage to the bones beneath. At a depth of 27 in. the baulk was removed as no significant

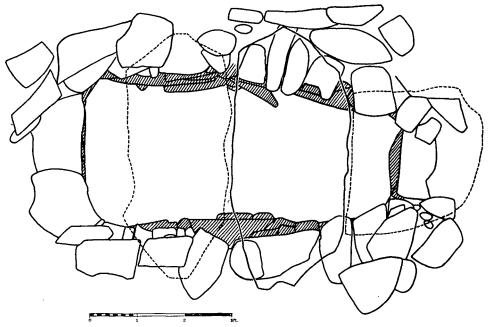


Fig. 1. Plan of excavation.

¹ The sketch plans and record photographs have been deposited in the National Museum.

change in the grave filling could be observed and the loss of this section was more than repaid by the added working space produced. The lowest burial resting on clean sand was reached at a maximum depth of 33 in. below the base of the capstone.

THE STRUCTURE

The cist proved to be a well made, complex structure, boat-shaped in plan (fig. 1 and Pl. XXIII, 2) orientated along a line 82° E. of magnetic North. The maximum internal length was 6 ft. 8 in. with an internal width of 3 ft. at the broader end tapering to 22 in. at the narrower. The sides were formed by three upright slabs of red sandstone averaging 5 in. in thickness with single upright slabs at each end (fig. 2). Above these were set two to three courses of dry-stone walling, and the irregularities of the upright slabs had been carefully filled with similar but lighter walling. Originally, the cist had probably three capstones besides the stone found in situ. The smaller capstone from the N. end of the grave, whose disturbance by the plough had led to this discovery, measured 2 ft. 8 in. by 3 ft., and 4 to 7 in. thick. A third capstone was probably another massive stone which had been dragged from the field some years before, and had been deposited in the windbreak on its W. edge. This stone, again of red sandstone, measured 5 ft. 1 in. long, 2 ft. 2 in. wide and varied from 4 to 7 in. in thickness, and when superimposed on the plan of the cist, can be seen to fit handsomely over the wider end of the grave, but leaving a gap similar to that covered by the smaller capstone at the N. end. The whole structure had been placed in a vertical sided pit, the upright slabs being used rather as shoring to the sides with the lighter dry-stone coursing bonded into the sand above, forming a remarkably stable construction. The capstones would have lain at the level of the old ground surface and the central capstone at least had been set in a carefully prepared seating in the dry-stone coursing.

The cist lay on the S. edge of a slight eminence in the field, and over the area within the original rectangle examined the plough had come down into a layer of water-worn cobbles which near the cist were of some size. The edge of this layer formed what seemed to be a segment of a circle, curving away from the cist (Pl. XXIII, 2). The absence of comparable stones not only from the area uncovered to the S. of the cist, where the subsoil was capped by only light gravel, but, according to local information, from the rest of the very large field suggested that the stones might represent the remains of a denuded cairn with the cist perhaps attendant upon it. While on the site it seemed necessary to establish the exact nature of this 'cairn'.

A trench 10 ft. wide, was driven at right angles to the line of the cist over the crest of the eminence and, after cleaning down, established a well defined edge to the stones at a distance of some 23 ft. from the cist, beyond which the subsoil was again clean gravel and sand. At this distance the tops of the stones were sufficiently below the crest of the eminence to leave a thin layer of apparently undisturbed subsoil between the top of the stone layer and the base of the plough-soil. The presence of this layer was itself suspicious but its thinness allowed for a certain degree of ambiguity in interpretation. Lateral trenches were therefore driven parallel to the line of the cist at a distance of 12 ft. from it. These quickly revealed that the

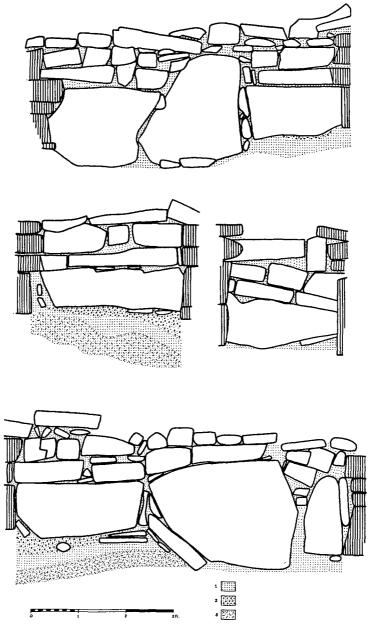


Fig. 2. Sides of cist in elevation: top W. side, centre left S. side, centre right N. side, bottom E. side. Key to Stratification: (1) sand, (2) gravel, (3) sand and shale.

edge of the stony layer was decidedly irregular in shape and further extensions merely confirmed this. If these stones did represent a 'cairn', clearly this had been extensively damaged by the plough. The general linear appearance of the stones lying along the top of the ridge looked unpromising and it was decided to establish the nature of the layer by sinking the original cross trench to a depth of 4 ft. The section thus obtained showed that the stones were filling a pocket in a layered deposit of sand and gravel with dipping strata (fig. 3). The general appearance of the deposit and the water-worn character of the stones themselves suggest that the whole forms

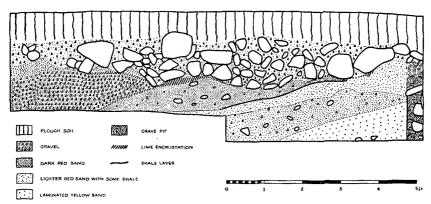


Fig. 3. Section through supposed 'cairn' material

part of an ancient, indeed periglacial, water-course.¹ The 'cairn' was in fact the area covered by a deposit of cobbles brought down perhaps on a raft of ice, which had acted as a protection for the underlying sands, leaving the area as a slight eminence in the field. This had probably led to the placing of the cist there. The edge to this stony layer, which had looked so deceptively like a cairn boundary, was almost certainly enriched by the deliberate heaping of larger stones against the cist on that side, and it seems possible that the grave could have been 'marked' by a small covering of stones of which these are the only remains. Though nearly 540 sq. ft. were examined round the 'cairn' in addition to the 300 sq. ft. of the initial rectangle, no further traces of human activity were recovered.

THE BURIALS²

When discovered, the cist was packed almost to the base of the remaining central capstone with human bones (now known to represent at least 21 individuals), lying in a filling of brown sandy humus. Towards the bottom of this deposit at the centre of the cist, stones became more numerous. The presence of stones of fair size suggests that part of this lower filling was deliberate. As already stated the bones for the most part lay in a confused state with the greatest density concentrated in the area

¹ Tr. Roy. Soc. Edin. (1907-8), 1 ff. - The Glaciation of East Lothian.

² In this section and elsewhere, individual skeletons are referred to by the system of capital letters adopted by Brothwell and Powers in their accompanying paper (p. 184).

beneath the central capstones and at the narrower end of the grave. Almost all were in a state of total or partial disarticulation and the interments had clearly either been made in an advanced state of decomposition (and then possibly on a few occasions), or had been extensively distorted in the course of a succession of burials.

Of the alternatives the latter seems to be the more probable. If most of the bodies had been interred en masse in a state of advanced decay, a greater degree of articulation could still be expected due to the long survival value of ligaments, or, if decay passed beyond even this stage, then a more ordered arrangement for the skulls and long bones in the grave. Both these features were noticeably absent apart from the presence of one-third of the total number of skulls in the disturbed surface layer at the narrow end. The case for successive interments looks more promising. It was noted that of the three capstones associated with the cist two were massive but the third and a hypothetical fourth were relatively small. The third is known to have been displaced by the plough from the narrower end of the cist and it is hardly coincidental that the relative density of bones is greater at this end. The smaller end-capstones would be the ones most easily moved for subsequent interments, and if during the later use of the grave successive interments had been made from one end only, two features could be expected: that the burials at the opposite end would be relatively undisturbed and that there would be a concentration of disturbed burials at the reception end coupled with an attempt to make room for each fresh burial by pushing some of the bones further into the grave. It is precisely these features which are present. The only burials which were seen to be in articulation were those in the broader half of the cist, while the concentration of bones extending beneath the largest capstone, where they filled the 'baulk' left during excavation (Pl. XXIII, 3), could be explained as the attempt to make room for further burials at the narrower end. On this hypothesis one would have expected to find the final burials topmost at the narrow end and still in articulation. Unfortunately, it was just this end which had been disturbed by the plough before investigation. The presence, however, of large portions of six skulls and 10 (+) femurs in the disturbed earth lends credence to this theory.

Considering the dimensions of the cist, it is a puzzling feature that no evidence was found to suggest that the grave had been designed for the reception of extended inhumations. On the contrary, what evidence there was suggested quite a different rite. The remains from the primary burial have been identified by Brothwell and Powers¹ as those of a female aged 40 or over (skeleton U). They were found in an advanced state of decay on the floor of the cist, surviving, save for the legs and fragments of the skull, as a 'shadow' in the clean sand, lying in a sharply contracted position on the right side, diagonally across the wider end of the grave, the head near the SW. corner (Pl. XXIV, 1). This burial in fact takes up little more than half the available floor space of the cist, yet no trace of any accompanying burial was recovered from the narrow end of the grave. If the evidence be taken at its face value, the cist must surely have been built as a true burial vault which would, like

a Neolithic Collective tomb, gradually be filled by successive interments. In view of the sharply contracted state of at least two of the bodies and the confused state of the remaining bones, one is tempted to think that the friends and relations were more concerned with available space than with any belief that each departed life should return to the womb of Mother Earth in an embryonic posture.

Only in the broader, W. half of the cist could anything definite be recovered of the positions of these successive burials. Lying over the feet and pelvis of the primary burial lay the skeleton of a small middle-aged female (T), head toward the E. When excavated the upper part of the body lay on its back in approximate articulation, but the skull was missing and the mandible was facing over the left shoulder (Pl. XXIV, 2). The pelvis remained in position and the legs were doubled up at a slight angle to the axis of the spine. It seems probable that she had been laid on her side in a contracted position but had been slightly disturbed when still in articulation by a later interment, perhaps P. The two females O and P were probably the earliest burials in the E. half of the cist 27 to 31 in. below the base of the central capstone, or perhaps it was Q of which only the articulated left shoulder and arm were recognisable. Remains of P's left foot were found in articulation close to the N. wall (in the middle of where the baulk was kept during excavation), while the skull was near to the SE. corner, and the other disturbed bones lay between. I was also at a fairly low level (-23 in.). To this stage, but to which individual has not been ascertained, belongs a cervical vertebra with a wound suggesting decapitation (found with bones of P and I) (see below, p. 197).

The larger stones and the earth round them seem to have been thrown into the centre and W. end of the cist about this time after I and perhaps I and K had been interred (some earth probably accompanied each burial). This operation, if not some earlier one, disturbed the primary burial, and parts of its skull and bones of the left hand lay like a cap a few inches away from the head of the latest interment at the W. end, R (Pl. XXIV, 3). This lay at a distinctly higher level than the burials so far considered - 14 to 18 in., and was an adult male body placed transversely on its left side up against the wall of the broader end with its head in the SW. corner. It was in a fully contracted position with the knees brought up to the chest. Since these remains were undisturbed by any further burials at that end, the capstones above them are likely to have been placed finally in position at this burial. What may have been the immediately prior interment, L, had its right foot in articulation close to the N. wall a few inches behind R's back, and its other bones were widely scattered across the centre of the cist, some high up. This skeleton's skull and jaw, the skulls of T and J, most of the remains of H possibly contemporary with J, and the heads of several subsequent burials (N, A, B) seem to have been removed at some stage in antiquity. Of these later interments arm-bones of F, O and M got scattered above and close behind R's skull. At the same level as other bones of those three individuals there were found, mainly in the baulk, but also through the E. end, bones of the only child in the grave, V aged about 4. The remaining individuals distinguished by Brothwell and Powers are from high levels in the E. half and centre of the cist, and their bones were found by the excavators in complete confusion. There must have been however, from the finders' accounts, a concentration of skulls at the surface of the deposit including those of C, D, E, F, G and M.

ASSOCIATED FINDS AND DATE

In the absence of any associated pottery it was supposed throughout the excavation that the cist was of Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date because of the communal nature of the tomb and a slight structural resemblance to the Soldier's Grave near the Nympsfield Long Barrow, Gloucestershire. Two fragments of what appeared to be an iron nail, found near the head of the upper articulated skeleton R at the broad end of the cist, only 12 in. below the level of the base of the capstone, though recorded, were presumed at the time to have come down some small burrow. Two pieces of another 'nail' and a small rusty lump were, however, found at approximately the same level — and so significantly below the upper bones — within the baulk when this was removed.

Later examination of these fragments led to their being cleaned, whence they emerged as, respectively, part of a small penannular brooch, over half of another, and part of a third ornament. It is not possible to be certain as to which burial level these ornaments should really be attributed. As already noted, part of the skull of the primary burial U lay close to that of the latest skeleton to be interred at

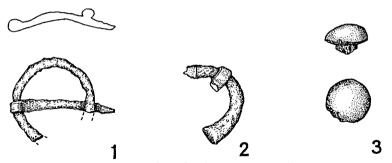


Fig. 4. Iron ornaments from the cist: 1-2, Penannular brooches; 3, (?) Dress-fastener. (Scale about $\frac{2}{3}$)

the western end, R, and the brooch a couple of inches above may have belonged to one or to neither.

Miss A. S. Henshall has very kindly drawn the finds and written the following note on them:

- 1. Penannular iron brooch, broken at both ends, diam. 1.25 in. The pin, 1.7 in. long but broken at the tip, is slightly but deliberately arched in the centre (fig. 4, 1).
- 2. Penannular iron brooch, one end and the pin broken, diam. about 1.3 in. The remaining terminal is slightly expanded and almost straight across the end (fig. 4, 2).
- 3. Iron stud, diam. 0.7 in., the domed head 0.33 in. high, the shank broken. The upper surface of the head, mainly around the sides, has remains of red enamel.

There are also slight traces of gilding, small flecks only remaining, the rest having crumbled away with the corrosion of the surface of the stud. For a short distance along the edge a number of small vertical ribs can be detected, giving the effect of milling. This may have been keying to hold the enamel. These vestiges of enrichment are too slight to even guess the original form of the decoration (fig. 4, 3).

The penannular brooches are of types belonging to the Early Iron Age. The first brooch, lacking the terminals of the hoop, cannot be discussed in detail, but its size and proportions are similar to many brooches of the period. The second brooch is smaller but heavier, and one terminal remains. Brooches with straightended terminals without mouldings belong to Mrs Fowler's type Aa in her recent classification, whether the hoop is the same thickness all round, or whether it expands towards the terminals, as in this specimen. Mrs Fowler has listed type Aa brooches, made of both iron and bronze.² The type has a long life. Brooches dating to the second century B.C. were found amongst the East Yorkshire La Tène burials.3 A very close parallel, and one of the geographically closest Aa brooches, is the iron one from the hill-fort, The Laws at Monifieth, Angus.4 The context of this find is not known, but the site is complex and produced both a crook ring-headed pin and projecting-head ring-headed pin. Another close parallel to the Dunbar brooch, also of iron, is that from the fort at Wandlebury, Cambridgeshire, probably belonging to the first century A.D.5

There are two other Scottish burials, besides that at Lochend, where the bodies have been accompanied by iron penannular brooches. A short cist at Moredun. Midlothian, contained two skeletons, and also a La Tène fibula and projectinghead ring-headed pin, both of iron. A second-century A.D. date has been suggested for this burial.⁷ The other site is a long cist, containing only a single body and a brooch at Craigie, Dundee.8 In neither case is the classification of the brooch certain, for both are greatly corroded, but the Craigie brooch is much larger than the Lochend brooch. There is also one instance of a burial with a bronze penannular brooch (type A1) at Luffness, East Lothian.9

No satisfactory parallel for the domed stud can be offered or for its apparent combination of enamel and gilding. It might possibly be part of a dress-fastener. broken at the angle of the shank, but no dress-fasteners of this absolutely plain form are known.

DISCUSSION

No precise parallels for the cist can be found amongst the structures which have so far yielded probable Iron Age burials in Scotland. In the combination of orthostat and dry-stone walling, the nearest approximation is perhaps Cist No. 2 at Golspie, Sutherland, 10 but this is a relatively small grave, containing only a single

¹ P.P.S., XXVI (1960), 150.

² Stead, I. M., The La Tène Cultures of Eastern Yorkshire (1965), 48-9; the earlier dating of these brooches on the continent was discussed by Rowlett, Antiquity, XL (1966), 133-6.

⁴ *P.S.A.S.*, III (1857–60), 440–54; XVII (1882–3), 300–2.
⁵ *C.A.S.*, L (1956), 24.
⁷ *P.P.S.*, XXI (1955), 288.

⁹ Ibid., LXXX (1945-6), 152.

⁶ *P.S.A.S.*, xxxviii (1903-4), 427-45. ⁸ *P.S.A.S.*, xxxvii (1902-3),233-5. ¹⁰ *P.S.A.S.*, xc (1956-7), 234-7.

contracted inhumation, and the date is by no means certain. A long stone cist of more comparable dimensions was excavated many years ago at Craigie, Stannergate, Dundee, constructed of multiple orthostats, but no mention is made here of dry-stone walling. Again only a single inhumation was found and this seems to have been extended, orientated E. and W., and accompanied by the iron penannular brooch discussed by Miss Henshall. An almost circular cist less than 4 ft, across but 3 ft. deep made purely of coursed dry-stone walling was examined at the turn of the century at Gullane, E. Lothian.² The report does not record the position of the three skeletons within the cist but the accompanying drawing seems to show two tightly contracted. Along the outside of the top of the cist, but below the edge of the low cairn covering it, were four skulls placed in a row above a collection of bones. At Moredun, near Gilmerton, Midlothian, the short cist made of four slabs contained two crouched inhumations interred one above the other.

Single interments within shallow, two- or three-coursed cists were either flexed (Burnmouth, nr Berwick, with knife and bronze spoons)4 or probably contracted (Camelon, Stirlingshire, with sword).5

If any conclusions can be drawn from the rather scrappy information provided by these earlier and in general surprisingly rare occurrences, it is that no single pattern of burial rite or grave form was observed by the native Early Iron Age or Romano-British population of the early centuries A.D. Cist burial is recurrent but no single tradition of construction was employed. Both drystone walling and simple orthostats were used, at times separately but on other occasions in conjunction as at Lochend and Golspie. Though both long and short cists occur, the long cist, as the Lochend evidence suggests, need not necessarily be taken to imply an intention to inter extended bodies; the size of the grave may be more an expression of the intention to practise collective burial. While cist burials of varying form are well documented, this was not the exclusive practice, for 5 or 6 contracted inhumations, likely to be of similar date, were found beneath two cairns at Gullane⁷ showing no attempt to utilise the available stone to form protective structures for the bodies.

The presence of only one child amongst the burials in the Lochend cist, as stressed in the accompanying paper by Brothwell and Powers,8 might well suggest that a difference in burial rite was generally accorded to children by at least some

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<sup>1</sup> P.S.A.S., xxxvii (1902-3), 233-40.
                                                        <sup>2</sup> P.S.A.S., XXXVI (1901–2), 654–8.

<sup>4</sup> P.S.A.S., LVIII (1923–4), 143–60.
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⁶ The other recorded and datable instances are: orthodox short cists at Sundayswells, Aberdeenshire pre-Roman (P.S.A.S., LXXX (1945-7), 148), Dolphinton, Lanarkshire (P.S.A.S., LV (1920-1), 45), Airlie, Angus (P.S.A.S., xx (1885-6), 136): orthodox long cist of slabs on edge, Torwoodlee, Selkirkshire (P.S.A.S., Axxxv (1950-1), 248); long cist of numerous small stones Blackness, W. Lothian – date of bracelet uncertain (P.S.A.S., Lix (1924-5), 116-19): cists of uncertain type at Carriestane, Cumbernauld, Dunbartonshire (P.S.A.S., v (1862-4), 127), Luffness, E. Lothian (P.S.A.S., LXXX (1945-6), 152 and R.C.A.M. East Lothian, p. 31), Westray, Orkney (P.S.A.S., xx (1885-6), 139). Kingoldrum, Angus is too confused an account to be considered seriously (P.S.A.S., xx (1885-6), 139 and Anderson, J., Scotland in Early Christian Times, 1, 175-7).

7 P.S.A.S., XLII (1907-8), 332-41. The cremation, protected by boulders at Sandhead, Luce Bay, Wigtownshire, seems Roman rather than native (P.S.A.S., LXVI (1931-2), 375-6).

The Merlsford, Fife, record of cairns is very confused (Wilson, D., Prehistoric Annals (1863) II, 149-50). The List in this and the previous footnote has been compiled with the help of notes from Mr R. B. K. Stevenson and Mr P. R. Ritchie.

Stevenson and Mr P. R. Ritchie. 8 See infra p. 185.

groups in the Scottish Iron Age. The significance of this point will only become clear when a far greater wealth of comparative data has been recorded.

APPENDIX I

Cist at the Hopes, Cockburnspath, Berwickshire

by R. B. K. STEVENSON, M.A., F.S.A.SCOT.

Another cist with dry-stone walling was found on 8th August 1962 some 9 miles away, at the Hopes Sandpit, Cockburnspath (NT 771705) and kindly reported by Mr W. Hood. The site was the top of a spur a mile from the sea, at over 350 ft. which dropped steeply to the Cockburnspath Burn to the NW. The cist, straight-sided and rectangular, was 58 to 59 in. long and 28 to 30 in. wide, the long axis at 160° E. of N. magnetic. The walls, 28 to 30 in. high, were of about 5 courses, the stones of the lowest course being the largest, around 12 in. square. The top course on the SW. long side corbelled in slightly. There were two main coverstones, laid lengthwise, one of yellow sandstone with one very pocked (natural) surface, one 69 by 12 and $5\frac{1}{2}$ in. thick, the other similar, 63 by 16 and 7 in. thick; it seems that across the gap between them had been laid several smoother stones about 21 by 28 in., 14 by 14 in. and 11 by 11 in.

No grave goods were found with the single crouched skeleton which had lain on its right side, head to the N. Because of the resemblance of the cist to that at Lochend, this skeleton was also submitted to Mr D. R. Brothwell.¹

¹ See infra p. 198.



 View of cist showing its general boat-shaped appearance and position on the edge of supposed 'cairn' material

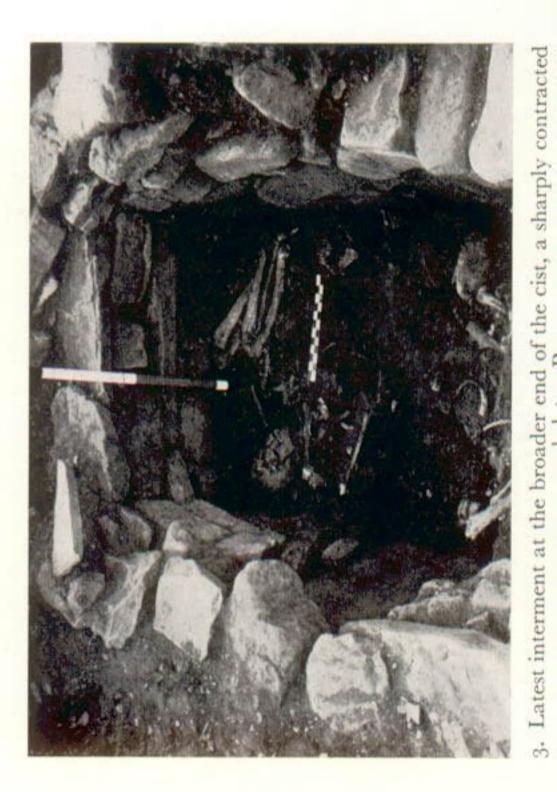


1. Cist showing large capstone in situ

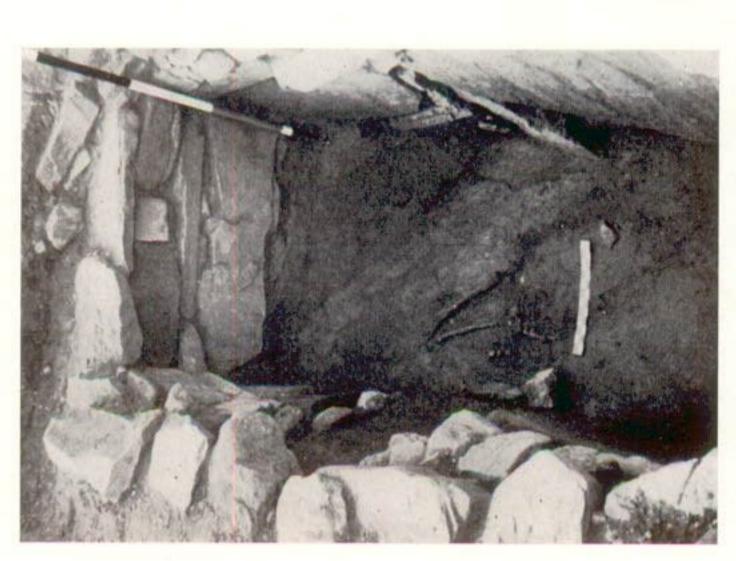


3. General view of the cist in course of excavation with baulk showing concentration of bones still in position.

Longworth: Dunbar



2. Remains of upper part of skeleton T in the foreground and mass of disturbed burials on the far side of the cist



1. The floor of the cist showing remains of primary contracted inhumation U; most of skull, vertebrae and pelvis surviving only as a 'shadow' in the clean sand

Longworth: Dunbar