

Two Long Cists at the High Street, Carnoustie

by Herbert Coutts

Two long cists have been discovered at Carnoustie High Street in recent years as a result of excavations carried out by workmen (fig 5). The first (NO 564346) was brought to light in June 1963 when engineers from the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board removed the pavement stones in front of McArthur's chemist shop, for the purpose of connecting a service line to the

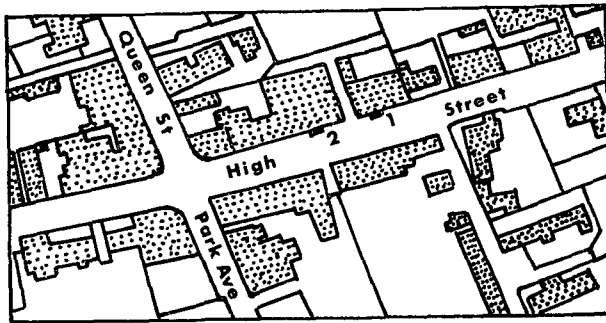


FIG 5 Location of long cists

main cable. The picks wielded by the workmen penetrated the cover-slabs of the cist which lay 0.46 m below the pavement surface. Unfortunately, the cist was partly dismantled, and some of the skeletal remains removed, before Dundee Museum was informed of the discovery.

Orientated ENE-WSW, the cist lay parallel to the High Street. Its sides, ends and lid were made up of thin grey sandstone slabs, but the floor consisted of the sand and gravel subsoil into which the cist-pit had been dug. Slightly wedge-shaped, it measured 1.8 m in length and 0.4 m in maximum width. The skeleton was found in an extended supine position with the skull at the SW end. An anatomical examination showed that it was of an adult male between 25 and 30 years of age (see Appendix).

The second long cist (NO 564345) was uncovered by workmen in February 1967 when they lifted the pavement stones in front of a YMCA hall which was undergoing conversion into a supermarket. This was situated about 73 m WSW of the first cist. In this case the cist was completely destroyed and the skeletal remains were removed from the ground before Dundee Museum staff were summoned to investigate the find.

On the basis of the site foreman's description, it would appear that the cist was constructed of sand-stone slabs in the usual manner, but the floor was not paved and there was no trace of cover-slabs. It lay in a layer of sand and gravel at the same depth below the ground surface as the first cist. The long axis was aligned E-W, and the skull was found at the W end of the cist. An anatomical examination has revealed that the skeleton was probably of an adult female, between 40 and 50 years old (see Appendix).

It seems likely that both graves belonged to a long cist cemetery, parts of which were exposed on several occasions last century due to excavations in the neighbourhood of Carnoustie Cross.¹

REFERENCE

1. *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, XII (1876-8), 611-13.

APPENDIX

Report on the skeletal remains

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The remains from each cist consisted of uncremated human bones from single individuals.

Remains from Cist No. 1

The skeleton was in a fairly good state of preservation and only a few bones were completely absent. The skull and major long bones, however, had to be reconstructed although the amount of fragmentation was not great.

From an examination of the skull sutures and the sacrum, the age was estimated to be between 25 and 30 years. There were many indications that the sex was male. The femora and right humerus were the only long bones which allowed an estimate of height to be made. Using Pearson's formulae, a height of 163.9 cm (5 ft 4½ in) was obtained. The individual was probably right-handed.

A fairly complete examination of the skull was possible, but as the facial skeleton required reconstruction, some of the measurements such as the facial angle could only be regarded as estimates. However, the skull was obviously dolichocephalic (cephalic index 72.3) and the cranial capacity was calculated to be 1706 cc. Other indices will not be reported here.

The teeth were only slightly worn, consistent with the estimated age of the individual. There was no evidence of disease apart from a small aperture in the anterior part of the right parietal bone. The margins of this deficiency were under-cut on the inside and the smooth edges suggested that it was of ante-mortem origin. It was not possible to decide whether this was due to disease or trauma.

Remains from Cist No. 2

The skeleton was incomplete, and the majority of the bones present, including the skull, were fragmented with parts missing. It was, therefore, difficult to estimate age and sex and impossible to determine handedness and skull form. From an examination of the sutures in the fragment of skull vault the age was judged to be between forty and fifty, more probably at the lower end of this range. The sex was judged to be female because of the presence of sharp superior orbital margins, a pre-auricular sulcus on the hip bone, slender limb bones with prominent muscular markings and a femoral angle of 115°. Since none of the long bones was complete it was impossible to make an exact estimate of stature, but by reconstructing the missing distal end of the radius an approximate minimum height of 162.8 cm (5 ft 4 in) was obtained. Evidence of disease and of wear and tear was found in osteoarthritic lipping of the vertebrae, osteoarthritis around the fovea of the femur, ossification of the anterior sacro-iliac ligament and of the tendon of obturator externus. The lower incisors had been lost before death and the other teeth present showed considerable wear. The lesser trochanter of the right femur was missing and there was evidence of bony reaction round the defect. However, an X-ray examination carried out by Dr F Fletcher of the Department of Radiology, Dundee Royal Infirmary, showed no callus formation nor evidence of any specific disease. The cause of the condition must therefore remain in doubt. The possibilities include tuberculosis and reaction to a foreign body.