

Excavations at Summersdale, Orkney, by F G Wainwright in July 1960

by P J Ashmore

The following account is taken from manuscript notes, sections and plans preserved in the records of the Ancient Monuments Inspectorate in Edinburgh. Drs J N G and A Ritchie have kindly let me read the preceding paper on excavations at Queenafjold in advance of publication allowing me to dispense with all but brief references to the results of excavations at comparable sites.

Local tradition was that the ten to a dozen mounds at Summersdale, in the parish of Stenness, Orkney, were the burial places of those who fell in the battle between men of Orkney led by James Sinclair and the forces of the Earl of Caithness in 1529. Further, 'Numbers of their bones, and part of their clothing have been dug up, which was black when first got, but soon fell into dust' (Statistical Account, 1795, 135). The Royal Commission recorded that stones suggesting cists were visible (RCAMS 1946, 315, no. 891) and, even before Wainwright's excavations, a prehistoric origin for the mounds seemed likely.

Figure 1 shows the plan and sections of the mound excavated by Wainwright, collated from a partial plan, partial sections, and a sketch section of the cist. Several details are missing, notably the nature of the fill above the cist, that of the slight mound above the subsidiary cremation, and the plan extent of the cairn material and the peat and clay mounded up against the cairn. The first deficiency can be remedied from Wainwright's notes and part of the last from the sections. The sequence of events at the mound seems reasonably clear, although not indisputable. A cist, 24 in by 17 in (0.6 m by 0.4 m) externally and 10 in (0.3 m) deep, was set just into the old ground surface; it was built of four slabs butted against each other as dictated by the size of the slabs used, and there is no record whether they were grouted with clay. The cist stood independently for a short time, held in place by a cairn of slabs 42 in (*c* 1 m) in diameter (p1 3a). Into the cist was put a cremation with much burnt earth, presumably from under the cremation pyre. Round and over the cist a mound of rubble and gravel was piled 14 to 15 ft (4.3–4.6 m) in diameter. Then, outside the cairn so formed, a cremation was placed; cremated material was found both above and below a slab measuring 2 ft by 2 ft 6 in (0.6 m by 0.8 m). It seems possible but unlikely that this slab was the base of a cist; unlikely because of the apparently complete lack of a surrounding support-cairn of the type found with the central cist at Summersdale or of the type found at Queenafjold. From study of the nearest, E-W, section it seems possible that the slab and cremation or cremations were sealed over by a layer of earth or clay. A capping of turves, clay and peat was put over at least the outer part of the cairn; it seems more likely from the sections that this material served to extend the cairn than that what survives is the slumped remnant of a thinner capping. It is possible that this extension was revetted outside by a turf bank, but the evidence is extremely ambiguous; elsewhere the various materials were heaped up

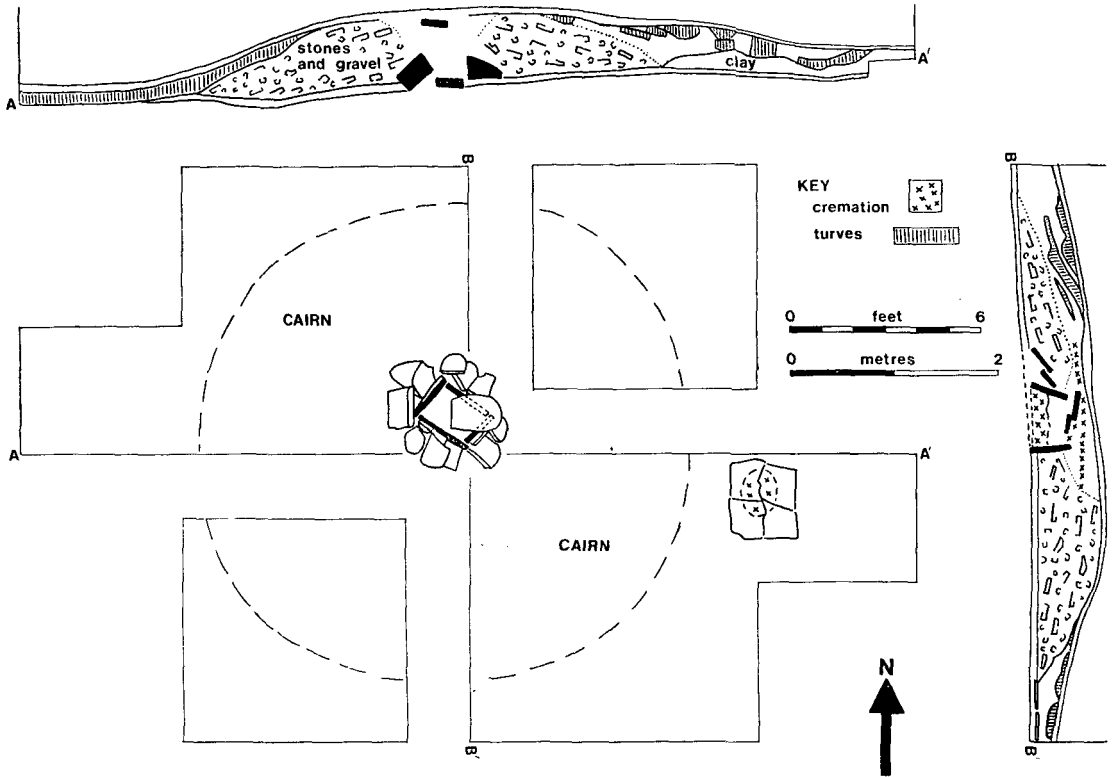


FIG 1 Plan and sections

indiscriminately and they presumably represent the result of digging close by the mound on what is now the Moss of Bigswell after peat had started to form thereon.

Subsequently an inhumation was inserted in or on top of the cist. Parts of it were found in the upper part of the cist and parts sandwiched between the slabs above the cist. It seems clear from this, and from the burnt earth and cremation fragments scattered over an area 5 ft 6 in to 6 ft (c 1.7 m) in radius in the earth above the slabs over the cist, that the next activity was disturbance of the cist in search of treasure or information; the cist being partially emptied and the soil, bones and cremation fragments tossed back pellmell. It is possible that the inhumation and subsequent disturbance can be related to early accounts; the inhumation by this interpretation would belong with the battle of Summersdale, and the disturbance with accounts of discoveries of inhumations and rotten clothing.

In summary, a cremation in a cist covered by a cairn was followed by another cremation and enlargement of the mound with turf, clay and peat. An inhumation was later inserted and then it and the upper portions of the cremation were disturbed by diggings.

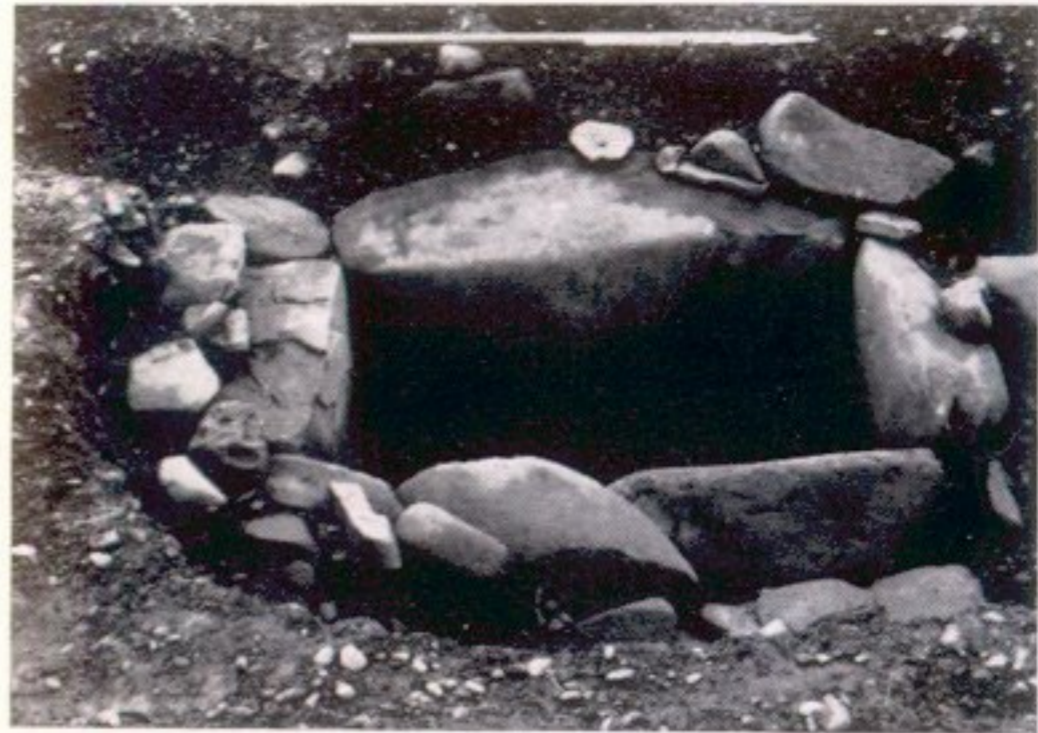
REFERENCE

RCAMS 1946 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh.

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a Summersdale cist (scale in ft)



b Horsbrugh Castle Farm, cist from E (1 m scale)



c The Broch of Burrian, North Ronaldsay, from the E