

A long cist at Cnoc Aingil, Islay, Argyll

by Graham and Anna Ritchie

This cist, discovered in the sandhills on Knockangle Point on the W perimeter of Islay (Port Ellen) Aerodrome 7.5 km NW of Port Ellen (fig 7; NGR NR 318511), was first reported in 1960 (*DES 1960*, 19): 'At Knockangle Point, Mr Wilks, of Laggan Estate, reported a stone-lined grave. This was visited by Messrs T and C Crawford and R Hodgkinson, who took from it bones, a piece of flint, and a worked, rounded piece of slate.' The cist was later drawn to the attention of members of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland by the then Station Superintendent for British Airways, Mr J R Ridgway, and his assistant, Mr I G Winnard; the writers were asked to excavate the site in September 1972. Almost one-third of the cist had been destroyed but enough remained to show that it was a complex and interesting structure; it had been inserted into the highest point of the sand-dune, labelled Cnoc Aingil on the Ordnance Survey 6 inch map

(1900, ccxxx), which had built up on an outcrop of contorted rock. The dune had been partly dug away, possibly as a result of war-time activities, thus increasing the danger of erosion, and Mrs M Earl, Port Ellen, who had seen the cist some time prior to the excavation, thought that a substantial part of it was then still in position. The presence of a skull at the open, east end of the cist is also tantalisingly reported but there was no trace of it at the time of the excavation.

The cist structure was covered by a rough capping of stones and earth, though this could not be described as a formal cairn. Two horizontal levels were present in the cist-structure (fig 8): the topmost is a series of flat slabs covering a layer of sand; this sand rests on top of the main capstone of the lower compartment. The capstone, the largest remaining slab of the cist, measured 0.9 m by 0.66 m and 0.06 m in thickness and a slipped roof-slab measured 0.83 m by 0.5 m and merely 0.02 m in thickness. The back-slab was 0.9 m long, 0.38 m deep and

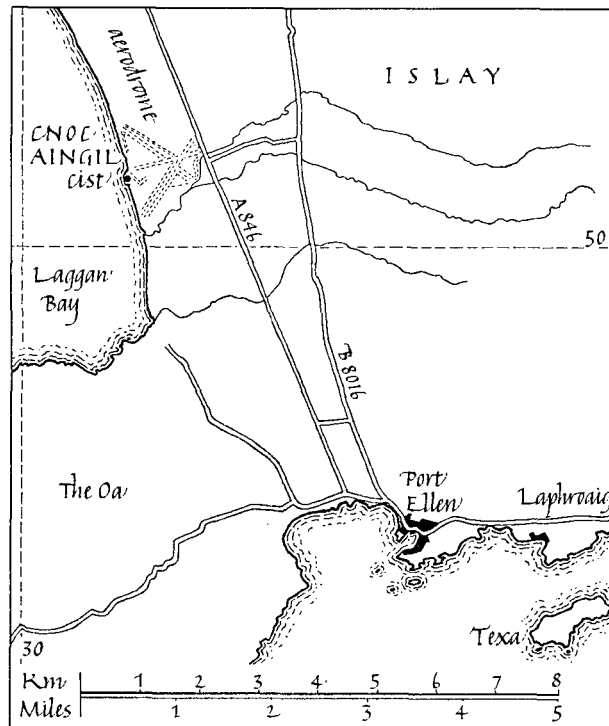


FIG 7 Location map of long cist at Cnoc Aingil, Islay

0.06 m thick. The horizontal division was made possible by employing multiple side-slabs with taller outer slabs providing the necessary height for the topmost layer of slabs and a number of lower side-slabs providing the seating for the lower level of capstones; one of these lower capstones had dropped down into the burial compartment itself and was wedged between the slumped side-slabs. Some sand had blown into the burial compartment since the cist was first exposed. The surviving length of the cist was about 1.4 m.

The remains of an inhumation burial were discovered in the lowest level of the cist but the bones had been considerably disturbed and only two, the left and right lunate (wrist) bones, remained *in situ* at distances of 0.5 m and 0.6 m from the W end-slab. The scanty remains were examined by Dr A Young, Department of Anatomy, University of Glasgow, who identified the

dorsal portion of a first thoracic vertebra and two other vertebral fragments, several rib fragments, including a portion of the shaft of a left rib, left radius and right ulna, right humerus (fitting the ulna), left and right lunate carpal bones, right scaphoid capitate and trapezoid carpal bones and possibly an iliac bone. The lower end of the left radius suggests an age at death of about 20–21 years. To judge by the position of the wrist bones, the body must have been buried in a

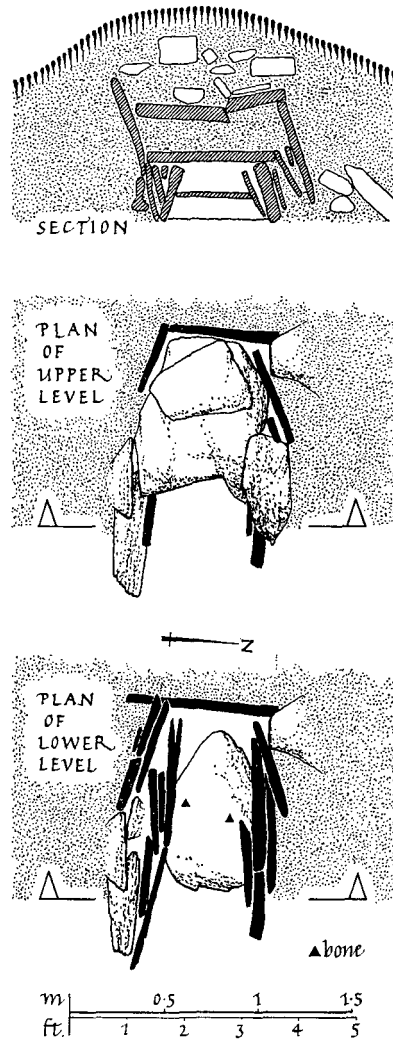


FIG 8 Sections of long cist at Cnoc Aingil, Islay

flexed attitude with the legs slightly drawn up. If this were not the case, the individual buried must have been of a most unusually small stature for whom the cist would have been unnecessarily long.

Apart from the bones, no other objects were found during the excavation. The flint and pot-lid recovered when the cist was first discovered may have been grave-goods, but they may equally well have been incidental to the burial. The pot-lid may originally have been incorporated into

the multiple construction of the side-walls, or it may have been used as a head-rest for the body. Whatever their true provenance, neither the flint nor the pot-lid are of any help in dating the burial. At best, if accepted as grave-goods, they might imply that the burial was pagan rather than Christian.

The formation of the sand-dunes in this area is also undatable and the level at which the cist was built cannot therefore be used as dating evidence. The best clue to the date of the cist lies in its unusual double-storey construction. The closest parallel for this method of construction was found at Ackergill in Caithness, where grave 10 yielded an extended inhumation burial set in the lower compartment of a two-storey long cist (Edwards 1927, 199-200, figs 2 and 5). The upper compartment was filled with sand and there were no grave-goods. The long-cist cemetery at Ackergill is not itself securely dated but may, in broad terms, be placed in an early Christian context somewhere in the middle centuries of the first millennium AD. It is proposed that the Cnoc Aingil long cist should be viewed within the same broad category.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The excavation was conducted on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and this account is published by courtesy of the Commissioners. Mr J R Ridgway and Mr I G Winnard provided every assistance during the excavation which was undertaken with the kind permission of Mrs A Graham and of Laggan Estates Ltd. The writers are indebted to Mr I G Scott, Mr J N Stevenson and Mr I G Parker for preparing the drawings, and to Dr A Young for his report on the anatomical remains. The sketch-map and plan are Crown Copyright, Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, Scotland.

REFERENCE

Edwards, A J H 1927 'Excavation of graves at Ackergill . . .', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 61 (1926-7), 196-209.

*The Society is indebted to the Civil Service Department
for a grant towards the cost of this paper*