

A beaker cist at Newbiggingmill Quarry, Lanarkshire

by Humphrey Welfare

SUMMARY

A cist, discovered during work in the sand quarry at Newbiggingmill, Lanarkshire, contained a female inhumation, two beakers and a flint knife. The cist stood in an oval pit; the slabs forming the sides had been carefully dressed in a manner which may be related to the series of grooved and rebated cists and to those luted with clay.

INTRODUCTION

In February 1977, during the closing stages of the preparation of the Royal Commission's *Inventory* of the prehistoric and Roman monuments of Lanarkshire, the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland received a report from Mr Peter Logan of Tilling Construction Services Ltd that a cist had been uncovered during the removal of overburden at Newbiggingmill Quarry, which lies 5.6 km ESE of Carnwath in the Lanark District of Strathclyde Region. The quarry manager, Mr J S M Stevenson, who made the initial discovery, removed from the cist two beakers, a flint knife and parts of a poorly preserved inhumation. In order to record the circumstances of the burial and the provenance of these artefacts a rescue excavation was carried out by the writer with the assistance of Mr J N Stevenson.

EXCAVATION

The cist (NGR NT 03554531) lay 250 m NW of Walstonmill, at a height of about 225 m OD, on the crest of the sinuous esker that runs as a medial spine down the floor of the broad valley of the South Medwin. This small ridge effectively divides this portion of the valley into two halves; the southern half is occupied by the river, while that to the north is dry and was utilised for a part of the course of the Dolphinton branch-line of the former Caledonian Railway.

A large sub-circular pit had been dug into the clean grey sand of the esker to receive the cist (fig 1); measuring 2.6 m from E to W by 2.2 m transversely, the pit survived to a maximum depth of 0.8 m. A thin layer of dirty orange sand, 0.1 m thick, which must have fallen in during or immediately prior to the construction of the cist, covered the bottom of the pit. The cist was aligned with its long axis E and W, measured 1.22 m by 0.56 m internally, and was about 0.7 m deep. It was built with great care using five massive slabs of Upper Old Red Sandstone; no suitable boulders occur in the sands and gravels of the esker, so these slabs must have been quarried from the hillside 500 m to the NW, where this rock outcrops, and then dragged across the valley. The largest slab, which formed the N side of the cist, measured 1.44 m in length, 0.8 m in height and had a maximum thickness of 0.23 m; it must have weighed in excess of 600 kg (about 12 cwt). The cover slab was probably even larger, but this was shattered by heavy machinery at the time of discovery and only a few small fragments, 0.2 m thick, survived on the surface to the S of the

cist. Both the S and W slabs were fractured at the same time; the former was displaced slightly out of the vertical and the upper two-thirds of the latter fell inwards.

None of the slabs bore any decoration, but the tops of the two side-slabs, each of which stood slightly higher than those forming the ends, were carefully dressed with a pecking technique so as to provide a level seating and a close fit for the cover. A hard stone or similar tool, or perhaps a rather blunt metal instrument, seems to have been used. The gaps between the slabs were filled with small stones and, as a result, the cist was free of silt when the cover was removed. When the cist was in position the pit was back-filled with small, rounded glacial boulders and some dirty brown sand. The field had been ploughed frequently within living memory without disturbance to the structure and, although the topsoil on the crest of the ridge is not deep, the cover seems to have lain no more than about 0.4 m below the surface. No weight of stone had ever appeared in the ploughsoil at this point and thus it is probable that the grave was not marked by any substantial covering mound. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the nearest beaker to Newbiggingmill was found at Wester Yardhouses, 6.3 km to the NNW, under a cairn which had an approximate diameter of only 2 m (Rankin 1874, 62; RCAMS 1978, 66, no. 113, 3). The provision of a similar small tump to mark the grave seems highly appropriate to the location chosen.

When first opened, the cist contained a flexed inhumation, two beakers and a small flint knife. The floor of the cist was found to be composed of a layer of small rock rubble 80 mm in

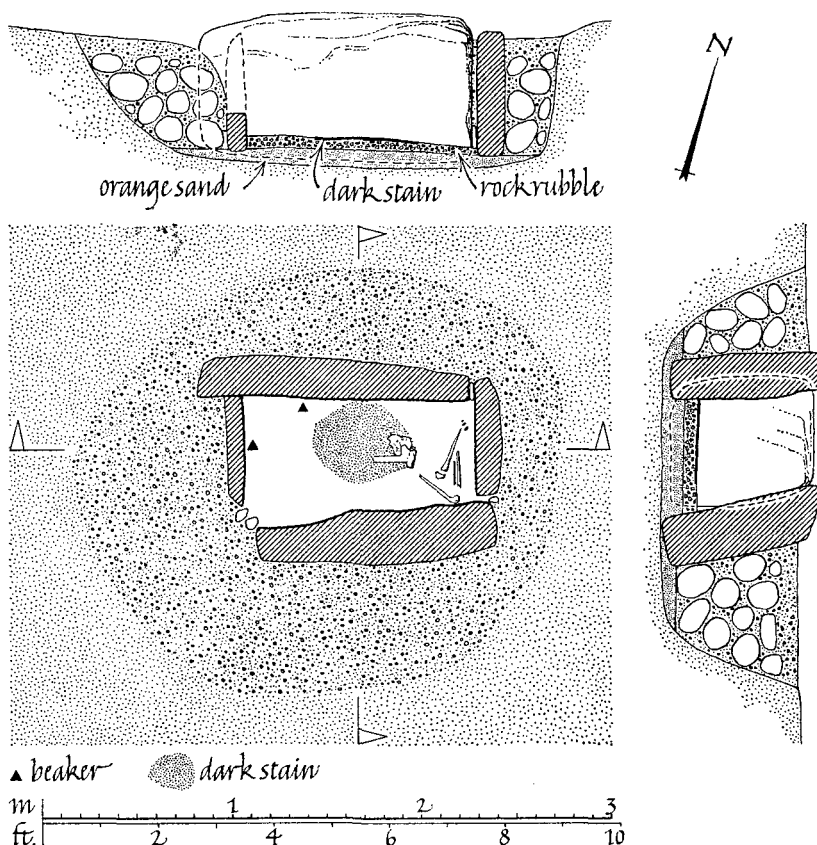


FIG 1 Newbiggingmill: plan and sections of cist

depth, and it was on this that the body had been laid – on its right side with the head to the W and facing S. The destruction of the capstone and the fall of the W slab had left what remained of the skeleton in a poor state of preservation; apart from about half-a-dozen small, displaced and unstratified fragments which were not identified at the time, the skeletal material from the grave was as follows: the cranial vault, sacrum, right hip bone, right femur (though not the proximal end), portions of the right tibia and fibula, the left patella, tibia, calcaneum and talus. The epiphyses of the femur had united, the supra-orbital ridges were not prominent, and the sciatic notch was almost a right angle, making it almost certain that this was the skeleton of a mature female. On the floor of the cist below the trunk there was a black stain which may have been an organic deposit resulting from putrefaction.

Between the N side of the cist and the assumed position of the spine a beaker (1; fig 2) was lying inverted; it was complete except for a small portion broken out of the rim at the time of discovery. A larger beaker (2) stood upright behind the skull but was badly broken by the collapse of the W slab; the flint knife was inside it.

The artefacts, part of the cranial vault and some unidentified bones were removed by the quarry manager prior to the arrival of the writer, and subsequently all the skeletal material, artefacts and soil samples from the excavation were taken to Edinburgh for examination. That evening, however, some office-cleaners, thinking the newspaper-padding around the finds-bags to be rubbish, threw it all away. A beaker (1) and the flint knife, which had been separated from the rest, were the only survivors.

The site of the cist has been removed in the course of further operations at the quarry.



FIG 2 Newbiggingmill: beaker 1 and flint knife

THE ARTEFACTS

Beaker 1 (fig 2). In a pink-buff fabric with a black granular core, the surface burnished before decoration. A seven-tine comb was used on the upper half of the vessel; the whole of the lower half was slightly rubbed before firing but it seems that a rather finer comb was employed on this area. The 'feathering' ornament on the upper chevron consists of a series of cloven oval impressions, made either by a two-tine comb or by a small bone. The flat top of the narrow rim is covered by a confused series of rough criss-cross comb-impressions. Height 112 mm, diameter of rim 115 mm, diameter of belly about 110 mm.

Beaker 2 was almost identical in form and fabric, in a buff fabric with a gritty black core; the neck was rather short and nearly cylindrical. The decoration, however, consisted of narrow decorated and undecorated zones which alternated over the whole of the exterior; the ornamented areas contained contiguous bands of jabbed horizontal herring-bone designs and three orders of horizontal comb-impressions; as on beaker 1 there were no vertical elements in the motifs used. Again, the top of the flat rim was decorated with comb-impressions. The bottom one-fifth of the vessel was plain. About 220 mm high.

Flint knife (fig 2). A flake of light grey mottled chert, 39 mm in length and 19 mm in maximum width, roughly trimmed along both sides. Some of the patina survives.

Tilling Construction Services Ltd have, through the good offices of Messrs P Logan and J S M Stevenson, kindly presented the beaker and the flint knife to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Photographs of the cist have been deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

DISCUSSION

The Carnwath-Dunsyre area appears to have been of some local importance in the late neolithic and early bronze age (RCAMS 1978, 3-4, 8-10). Nevertheless, no other beaker has been reported from the valley of the South Medwin, the nearest being from Wester Yards (for the distribution of beakers in Lanarkshire and SW Scotland, see Ritchie 1970 and RCAMS 1978). No other finds have been made at the quarry and there seems to be little doubt that this was an isolated grave. Single cists without a substantial covering mound are not uncommon in the middle and upper reaches of the Clyde and its tributaries, and in Upper Tweeddale, but such cists associated with beaker pottery appear to be rare. However, the long list of unclassified 'urns' found in Lanarkshire (RCAMS 1978, 19-21), a number of which were certainly in cists, may include some lost beakers. The rarity of this association in this part of central S Scotland is especially marked when compared with the high incidence of Northern beakers in cists over the country as a whole (Clarke 1970, 452-3). For many of these sites there is little or no information about the circumstances of their discovery, but of the 20 sites in Lanarkshire and the adjacent counties of Peeblesshire, Midlothian and West Lothian where beakers have been found, at only five – including Newbiggingmill – is there the likelihood that the pottery had been deposited in cists not covered by any substantial mound. The other four are: Boatbridge Quarry, Lanarkshire (*DES* (1971), 28; RCAMS 1978, 70, no. 124), Oliver, Peeblesshire (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 58 (1923-4), 13-14; RCAMS 1967, 62, no. 93), Juniper Green, Midlothian (*Archaeol Scot*, 4 (1831-57), Appendix, 50), and Tartraven, West Lothian (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 21 (1886-7), 199). Two beakers are reported to have been found in cists on Cakemuir Hill, Midlothian (NGR NT 404576; *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 2 (1854-7), 482), but, while the site is an ideal one for a cairn,

nothing is now visible on the ground and whether or not these cists were covered by a mound must remain unknown.

In their discussion of clay-luted cists, Henshall and Wallace (1963, 152) have noted the natural tendency for the richer graves to be the most carefully built; the care with which the Newbiggingmill cist was constructed and sealed is strikingly similar, both to luted cists and to the small series of grooved and rebated cists that has been identified in Scotland, with an outlier in the Isles of Scilly (Campbell, Scott and Piggott 1961; MacLaren 1969, 111–13 and references therein).

It seems most probable that some examples of the dressing of the upper edges of side-slabs were not noted by early antiquaries, and its occurrence here suggests that the practice may have been more widespread than is at first apparent. The closest parallel is the luted cist with a rebated cover and dressed side-slabs at East Drums, Angus (NGR NO 598579; *DES* (1964), 1; Coutts 1967; 1971, 46–7 and cover) in which a Northern beaker, a flint scraper, two retouched flakes and four unworked flints were probably associated with a crouched inhumation. Apart from the well-known series of grooved and rebated cists, mentioned above, there are a number of reports, usually all too imprecise, of cist-slabs that have been ‘dressed’ or ‘smoothed’; at three sites, however, tooling is specifically mentioned. The second cist found at The Dog’s Knowe near Lunanhead in Angus contained an inhumation, a food vessel and a flint knife; the N side-slab of this cist was described as being ‘hammer-dressed’ (Galloway 1878, 291–3). The NW side-slab of cist 1 at Achinchanter near Dornoch in Sutherland had been carefully trimmed *in situ* – as must have happened also at Newbiggingmill – and the end-stones had been chipped to give a level seating for the cover. This cist contained an unaccompanied inhumation but the other cist, immediately adjacent, held an inhumation with a food vessel and a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead (Davidson 1940). Canon Greenwell, however, who must have seen more cists than most men, could recall only one upon which there were signs of tooling; the cover of the larger of two cists in a cairn on Bewick Moor, Northumberland, had a groove pecked around its narrow end; this groove, Greenwell suggested (1868, 202; 1877, 418), might have had a rope passed around it when the cover-slab was dragged up the side of the hill.

The most common orientation for skeletons associated with Northern beakers appears to be along the E-W axis, with a preference for the head to be at the E end (Clarke 1970, 455–6), rather than at the W end, as at Newbiggingmill. This burial adds one more to the small, but significant, number of instances in NE England and S Scotland in which female beaker-inhumations were laid out in this particular way (Lanting and van der Waals 1972, 41; Ritchie and Shepherd 1973, 27). The samples taken of the dark stain on the floor of the cist were lost, but there was no charcoal or other burnt material visible, and it was in all probability a result of putrefaction.

Beaker 1 belongs in Clarke’s (1970) Late Northern British beaker group (N3), but beaker 2, while it cannot now be classified with any certainty, would fit more happily in his Developed Northern group (N2). The comparatively long neck of beaker 1 might imply that it should be seen as one of the long-necked variants (N3L), although this elongation of the neck may only be a result of the proportions undergoing a slight change as a part of the process of miniaturisation. A N2L beaker with a N3 beaker were found together in cist 1 at Broomend, Aberdeenshire (Clarke 1970, nos 1433–4), but the association of a N3L and a N2, which may have been present at Newbiggingmill, appears to be unique. In a sealed context such as this, distinctions of this kind begin to lose their meaning and in the circumstances caution forbids further comment. In the classification proposed by Lanting and van der Waals (1972) both vessels would fall into step 4 (cf Ritchie and Shepherd 1973), and in the simpler approach adopted by Case (1977) into the

transition between the Middle and Late Phases. In the same paper Case notes (1977, 81) that, apart from the beaker itself, a second beaker was the most frequent association with women, whereas with children – the possible presence of a child's body at Newbiggingmill is mentioned below – a flint flake was the most common artefact; flint flake knives, the provision of which Clarke saw as a Northern trait, did not normally accompany female burials (1970, 448-9).

Mr Stevenson reported that, when he first examined the cist, the larger beaker (2) was standing upright behind the skull, a position recorded in about half the graves associated with Northern beakers (Clarke 1970, 455). The smaller vessel (1) was found between the N side of the cist and the putative position of the spine; this is an unusual arrangement, which, when taken with the reduced proportions of the pot, the association of the larger beaker and the age and sex of the inhumation recovered, leads inevitably to speculation that there may also have been a young or newborn child in the grave; this relationship has been noted elsewhere (Clarke 1970, 449). It is also of interest that beaker 1 should have been placed upside-down in the cist; there is no possibility of the grave having been disturbed, even by rodents, before its discovery and there was no cremated bone present, either of which circumstances might have been explanation enough. There seem to be no records of any beakers in Scottish cists having been found inverted, although two cists in Bute contained inverted food vessels – at Kildavanan, associated with an inhumation (Marshall 1955), and at Scalpsie with a cremation, a jet bead, a bronze pin or awl, a flint knife and some spalls (Bryce 1904, 52-7).

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