A short cist at Mordington Mains, Berwickshire, Borders region

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In October 1981 a cist and an adjacent pit were discovered just S of Mordington Mains (NT 94855647; see fig 1); situated on the S side of the low hills (c 200 m OD) which lie between the Eye Water and the Tweed. They occupy a position which commands sweeping views to the S across Tweeddale to the Cheviots.

The cist was discovered during deep ploughing by Mr Billy Smith, the son of the present tenant, Mr Dudley Smith. Its capstone(s) was shattered and largely removed by the plough though a small segment in the SE corner survived *in situ* (fig 2). The infill of the cist had been dug out by its discoverers before the author's examination but a column thereof survived beneath the capstone fragment in the SW corner together with a thin strip along the S side.

A 5 m square was opened around the cist, biased to the W because a single large slab had been turned up by the plough just W of the cist and apparently separate from it. A feature which had the appearance of a palisade slot was located on the E edge of the square but this proved to be a geological phenomenon when sectioned. The edge of a pit was noted in the SW corner of the square and the W edge of the square was cut back a further 1 m to reveal its full extent.

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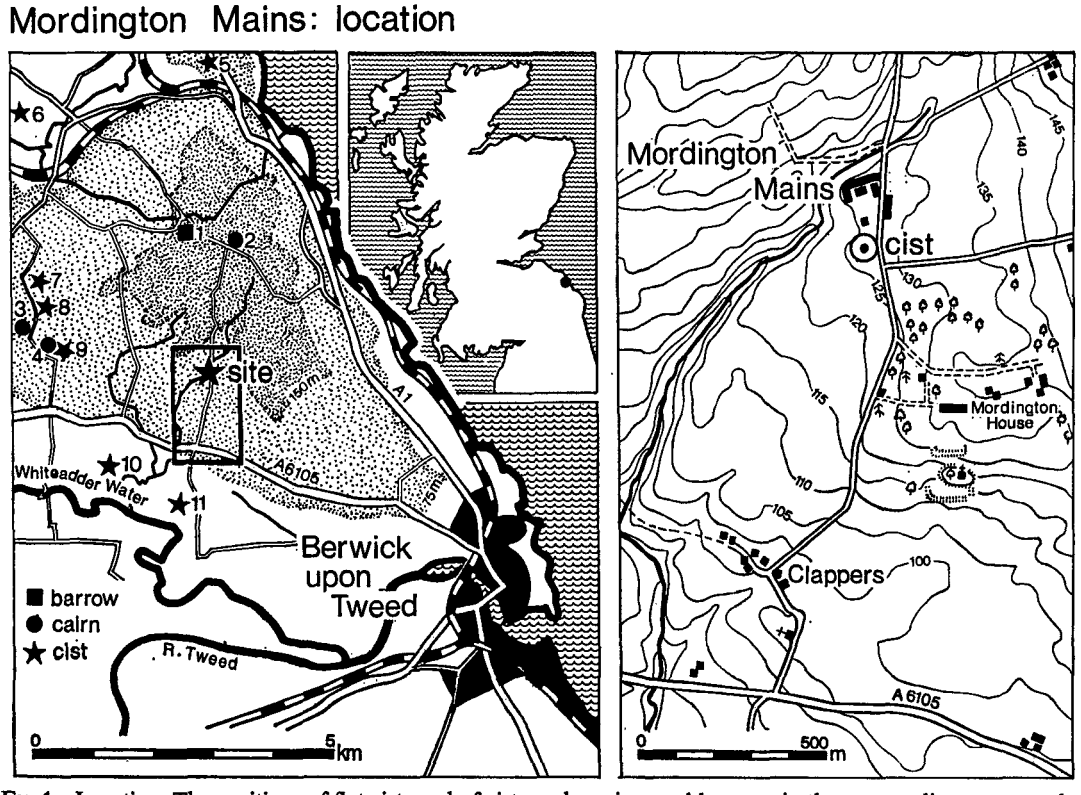
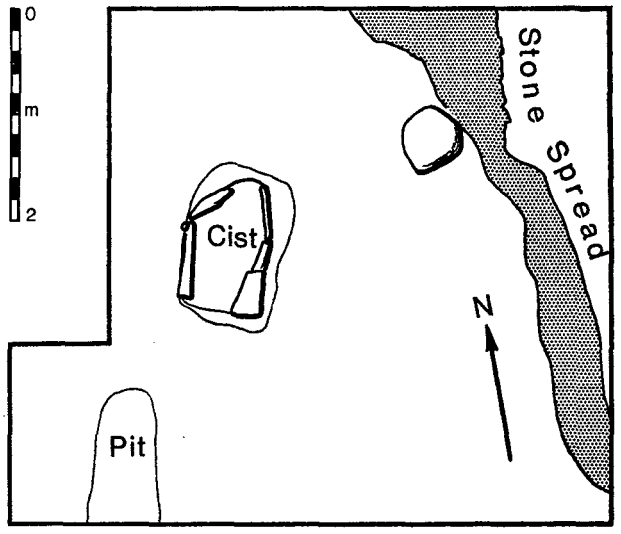


FIG 1 Location. The positions of flat cists and of cists under cairns and barrows in the surrounding area are also noted. These are 1, Habchester; 2, Lamberton Moor; 3, Hagg Wood, Moorpark 1; 4, Hagg Wood, Moorpark 2; 5, Fairnieside; 6, Ayton Law; 7, Whiterig; 8, Housefield, Moorpark; 9, Grunewald; 10, Foulden Newton; 11, Edrington Mains. (Based on RCAMS 1980, 7–17)



Mordington Mains: site plan

FIG 2 Site plan

THE CIST

Two large flat slabs formed the E wall of the cist while the bulk of the W wall was formed by a single slab. The NE corner contained a split boulder which constituted the major stone component of the N end. The S end was not stone lined. The cist measured 1·15 m long and 0·60 m wide internally, and was 0·33 m deep measured from the bottom of the surving capstone to the average floor level. The floor was not paved and had been dug into in the S half by the cist's discoverers.

Although the surviving floor was quite level it was clear that the centre of the W edge had originally been dug some 15 cm deeper than the average level to accommodate the irregular shape of the W side slab. The cist stones were held in position by a deposit of reddish-brown silty loam packed behind them, ie between the stones and the sides of the pit in which the cist sits. This packing material was markedly different in colour and texture from the infill of the cist, which was a dark brown stoney soil. A single sherd of pottery, measuring 5 cm by 3 cm by 1·4 cm thick and devoid of distinguishing features, was found immediately beneath the capstone fragment, lying in the top of the infill soil.

The phosphate levels of this infill were measured qualitatively (Shackley 1975, 68) at vertical intervals of 2 cms down the face of the surviving column. The lowest 8 cm of the column displayed strong positive reactions indicating levels of phosphate far higher than, for example, the modern plough soil.

THE PIT

Measured at the level of the top of the subsoil beneath the 36 cm average depth of plough soil the pit was 0·70 m wide at its widest point in the 1·38 m of its length which was exposed. It averaged 0·44 m deep and had steeply sloping sides with a flat bottom some 0·4 m wide. Small

stones lay along the W side of the pit forming a rough layer. Apart from these the fill of the pit was remarkably uniform dark reddish-brown sandy loam. Two small waste flakes of flint and two corroded crumbs of pottery were found in this infill.

The phosphate levels of the pit fill were also measured at 2 cm vertical intervals, and again the lowest 6–8 cm were rich in phosphates and yielded more positive reactions than those from the basal levels of the cist.

INTERPRETATION

It seems reasonable to infer that both the cist and the pit once held bodies. It is perhaps necessary to point out that the high phosphate levels do not prove that bodies, or rather bones, had decayed in the cist and pit since other materials could have supplied the same concentrations. However, the high phosphate levels are consistent with the inference and their absence would have proved that bodies had not decayed in these features.

The infill of the cist was a stoney soil which cannot have entered between the cist stones since it is neither graded nor in general sufficiently finely textured. Furthermore, the single sherd of pottery found immediately beneath the capstone fragment could not have arrived at that position by any natural process of 'washing in'. It must therefore be argued that the cist was deliberately filled with soil after a body (or bodies) had been deposited in it. The infill of the cist which survived *in situ* occurred mainly beneath the fragment of cover slab but a thin vertical slice was preserved along the S end of the cist. This slice of infill material, on excavation, peeled away from the packing material of the cist socket leaving a clean vertical face (fig 3). Had the act of inhumation and infilling followed immediately upon the act of digging out the socket it is inconceivable that the packing could have been inserted in the S end as a distinct layer separate from the bulk of the infill. It must be concluded that the inhumation and the infilling represent a re-use of the cist during which the original contents and very probably a stone from the S end were removed to make space for an inhumation. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the pot sherd included in the infill is derived from a vessel which accompanied the original burial.

The backfilling of the cist is clearly at odds with the normal rite of cist burial and effectively renders the cist itself redundant since a simple pit would have sufficed. It may well be that the secondary use of the cist is broadly contemporary with the use of the nearby pit for burial. It may be speculated that the cist, discovered accidently in the process of digging a pit grave, was cleared out and modified for re-use as a simple pit grave. It was decided not to reveal and excavate the full extent of the pit for a variety of reasons, amongst which must number pressure of time and the virtual sterility of the fill. However it is clear from the excavated portion that if it did once contain an inhumation, that inhumation cannot have been flexed. The general proportions of the pit suggest that it can only have contained an extended inhumation and the modification of the cist may also have been undertaken to allow for the insertion of an extended inhumation, albeit a rather small body.

DISCUSSION

The re-use of cists is well attested (see McAdam 1974). Often successive burials are separated by stone slabs, as at Dunchragaig (Greenwell 1866, 347) or at Traigh Bhan (Ritchie & Stevenson, this volume, p 550). In the latter example radiocarbon dating has shown a significant span of years between the original and secondary interments.

The partial or complete disarticulation of skeletal remains has in the past been interpreted

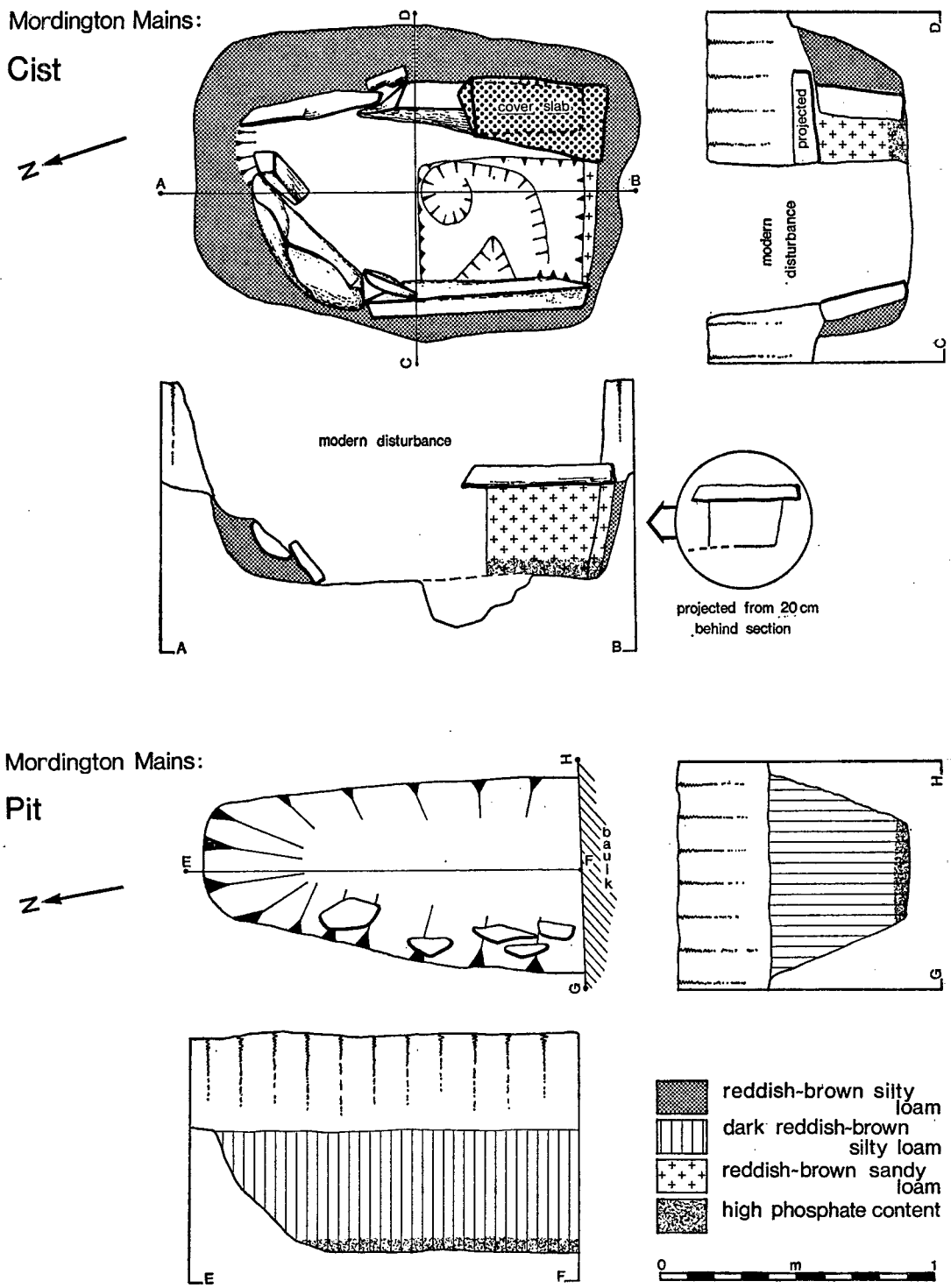


FIG 3 Plans and sections of the cist and pit

as evidence for disturbance or re-use of the cist. However, there is ample evidence for the continuance of the practice of depositing excarnated remains in cists from the Neolithic period (as in Sumburgh Airport cist, Hedges 1980, 18) through the Bronze Age (see Petersen *et al*, 1974, 48, for a summary of the evidence) and into the Iron Age (Longworth 1966, 180). Thus the disarticulation of the skeleton alone is not sufficient evidence to demonstrate re-use of the cist.

It may be surmised that the position of cists was often marked in some way, perhaps with small stones such as those erected by the cremation pits at the Knowes of Quoyscottie (Hedges 1977, 134). These markers are so small that they would have been totally removed in ploughing, and even their sockets obliterated. Similarly, small mounds would also be removed in ploughing leaving no record of their existence.

The presumed change of rite at Mordington Mains suggests that the re-use of the cist was separated by a considerable period from its initial excavation. It is, however, not possible to determine whether a marker or mound indicated its position and therefore led to its re-use or if the digging of the adjacent pit led to the discovery of the imperceptible cist.

A detailed soil report on the soils of this site by Mr I Mate has been lodged, with the site record, in the NMRS.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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