

A beaker burial at Mains of Balnagowan, Ardersier, Inverness District

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INTRODUCTION

This cist was discovered during ploughing at Mains of Balnagowan, Cawdor Estates, Ardersier, on 9 April 1976. The cist, which was excavated on 12 and 13 April 1976 (*Discovery Excav Scot 1976*,

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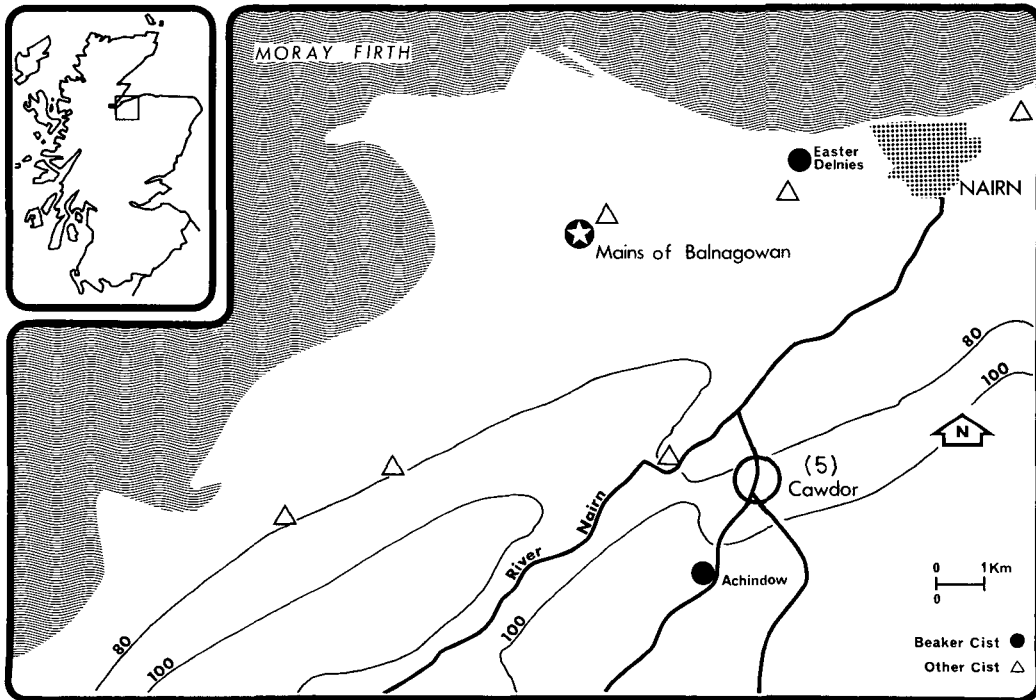
44), lay at 15 m OD, just below the worn-back crest of a natural sandy ridge and c 100 m N of a small burn (NGR NH 8109 5465). The farm lies 3 km E of Ardersier, c 7 km WSW of Nairn and 3 km S of the coast (illus 1).

On discovery, the capstone had been broken into several pieces and the ploughman had dug out the sand filling the east half of the cist down to the level of the bones, one of which he removed and broke. During the excavation the cist was completely cleared, the pit partially emptied and an area approximately 1 m back from the cist sides trowelled down to undisturbed sand (illus 2).

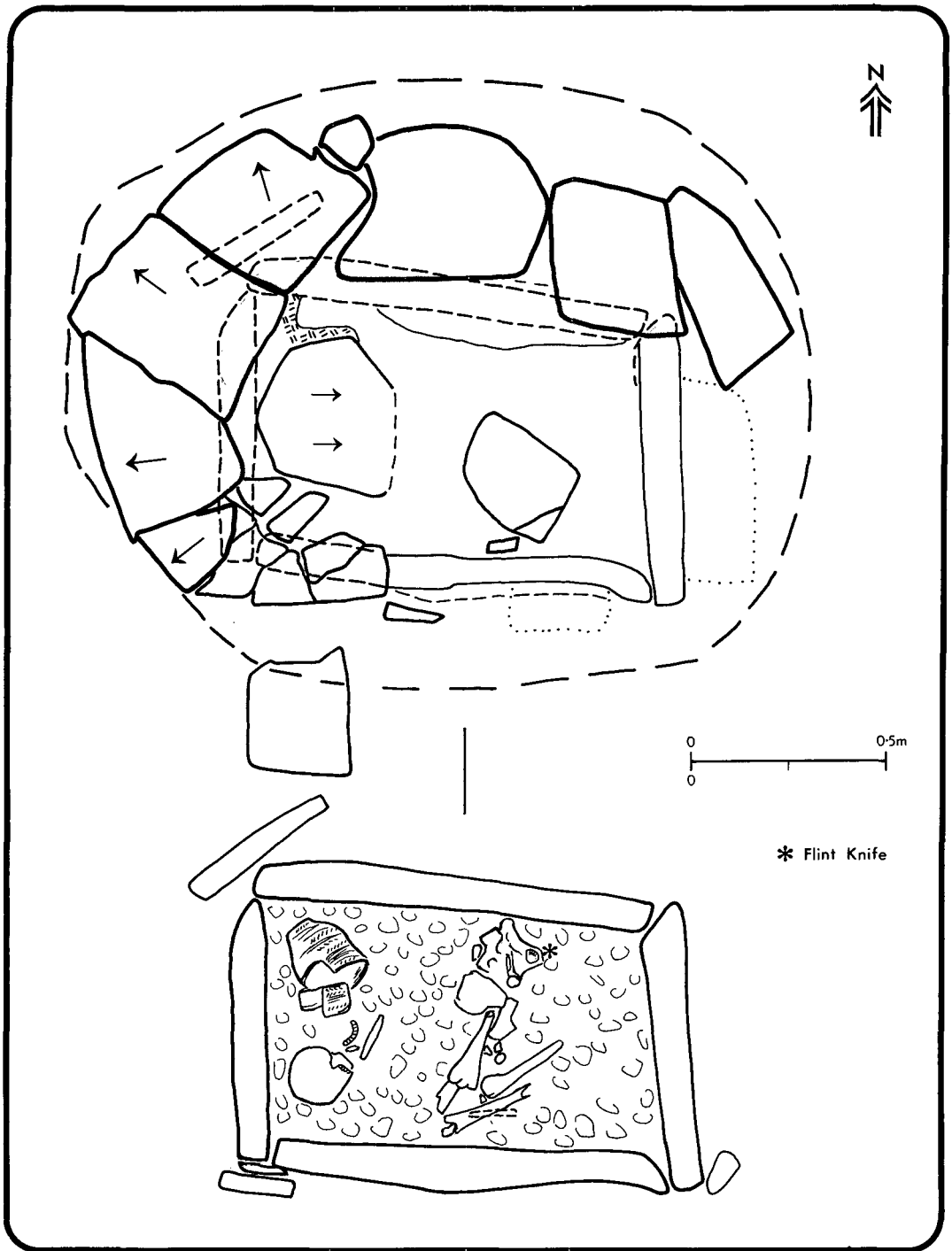
THE CIST (illus 2 & 3)

The cist measured internally 1 m E–W by 0.6 m N–S and was 0.5 m deep. It stood in a large sub-oval pit, 1.9 m by 1.55 m and 0.75 m deep (from the base of the ploughsoil), with slightly sloping sides, dug into the sand of the ridge. The cist slabs were of a yellowish fine-grained friable Upper Old Red Sandstone, with red clay galls on the bedding planes, which probably originated from the Nairn beds, some 8 km E of the grave site (Sinclair Ross, pers comm).

On the N and W, the upright slabs of the cist and the edges of the capstone itself had been overlain by five squarish slabs of stone (c 0.3×0.4 m) placed at an angle sloping down into the upper fill of the cist pit and reaching just to the pit edges. The original dimensions of the capstone could not be ascertained. The sides of the cist were formed of single slabs whose maximum dimensions were: north side, 1.03 by 0.75 by 0.08 m; south side, 1.03 m by 0.75 by 0.11 m; east end, 0.72 by 0.60 by 0.08 m; west end, 0.68 by 0.48 by 0.09 m. The slabs were irregular in shape but had been arranged so as to produce a level surface for the capstone. The side-slabs in particular would have required



ILLUS 1 Location maps and neighbouring cists



ILLUS 2 Plans of (a) capstone and major elements of the cist, (b) skeleton and grave-goods

considerable bedding down, as the north one was distinctly keeled, while the south slab had a massive sub-rectangular profile. The east end of the south side-slab and the north end of the east end-slab had been roughly shaped to fit the rectangular plan of the cist.

Small upright slabs had been placed in the cist pit at the south-east, south-west and north-west outer angles of the main slabs (illus 2), apparently to provide additional sealing of the angles. The fill of the cist pit consisted in the main of clean white to yellow silty sand with, near the foot of the cist slabs, the occasional cobble c 125 mm in diameter.

Within the sandy infill of the cist itself were found parts of the capstone, one of which had evidently broken and collapsed at an angle on to the central part of the burial (illus 2). The absence of much of the central portion of the body (see *infra*) may be as a result of the channelling of moisture, etc down into the cist along this sloping slab. The floor of the cist consisted of a c 100 mm thick layer of evenly sized river gravel pebbles, laid on the natural grey silty sand of the bottom of the cist pit. The concentration of light blue and grey-green pebbles of similar size (c 60 mm maximum diameter) suggested that the pebbles had been carefully selected for use in the burial. This floor, and the



ILLUS 3 The burial (scale totals 1 m)

skeleton, lay in a matrix of fine white silty sand which seemed to represent the slow infill of the cist in the centuries after its sealing.

On the pebble floor lay the crouched remains of a mature adult male skeleton, lying on its right side, oriented approximately WSE–ENE and facing SSE (illus 2 & 3). As previously indicated, most of the trunk of the body was missing: the remains consisted of an incomplete skull and mandible, lower limb bones and fragments of vertebrae (including the sacrum), ribs and upper limb bones.

(The full skeletal report is on fiche 2: G8–10.) The skull is markedly brachycephalic and the teeth show exposed dentine, especially the molars which are considerably worn. The left femur could be reconstructed to give an estimate of stature in the region of 1.62 m (5ft 4 in). The degree of muscle marking, the well developed chin, the breadth of the lumbar-sacral articulation and the size of the acetabulum and femoral head indicate that the remains are those of a male, while the fully erupted dentition with its considerable wear, together with the endocranial suture closure indicate a mature individual. There is no sign of either disease or injury.

It is notable that the body had not been oriented to the long axis of the cist (E–W), but rather at an angle (WSW–ENE). Although some slight movement of the skull during the decay process can be inferred, the explanation of this off-centred orientation may be related to the positioning of a beaker in the north-west corner of the cist, immediately behind the skull. The only other grave-good was a flake of flint, found immediately behind (ie N of) the pelvis (illus 2).

A radiocarbon determination of 1555 ± 85 bc (GU-1121) was obtained from one of the femurs of the skeleton.

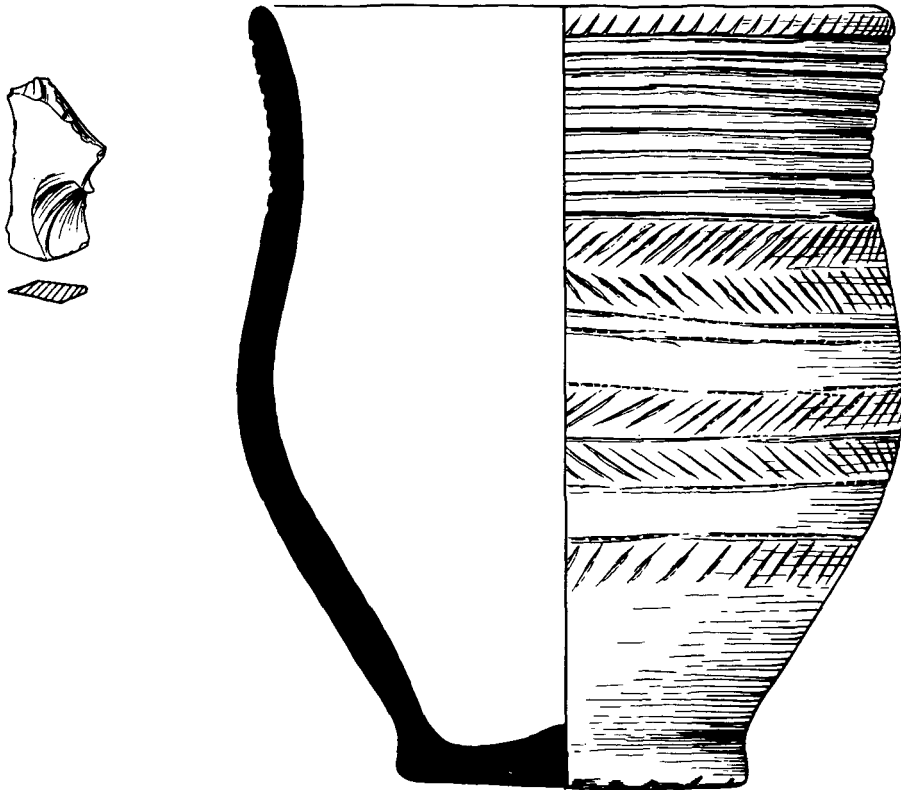
THE FINDS (illus 4: fiche 2: G11–14)

BEAKER (full description on fiche 2: G11–12)

A complete, well made and fairly highly finished beaker, 205 mm tall, in a light reddish brown fabric. It has a tall, elegant form with a high belly, concave neck and a pronounced foot. The beaker is decorated in three zones of unequal size. The uppermost zone consists of 10 broad horizontal grooves, deeply incised, which surmount a band of incised chevrons and two lines of comb impressions. On the belly is a zone of incised chevrons and beneath this a narrow fringe motif. The comb length is estimated as 35 mm. The area above the foot, amounting to approximately one quarter of the profile of the pot, is undecorated.

In formal terms, this beaker belongs in Clarke's Northern/North Rhine group (1970, 119) or in step 4 of the scheme of Lanting and Van der Waals (1972, 39). The critical features are the vessel's sinuous, high-bellied profile and, in particular, the use of the grooved motif to separate the neck from the body in the decorative scheme.

The geographically closest parallel is the N/NR beaker from Cawdor itself, approximately 6 km E of Balnagowan, which, although with a different profile, does demonstrate the separation of the neck from the body by means of decoration, in this case by broad lines of toothcomb impressions (Clarke 1970, fig 311; Walker 1966, 100). Other qualified north-east Scottish parallels are the pots from Ruthven, Aberdeenshire (Clarke 1970, fig 277) and Lesmurdie, Banffshire (*ibid*, fig 270). However, the three closest parallels come from further afield and have important implications for the dating and connections of the beaker phenomenon in the north. The beaker from Chealamy, Sutherland (Gourlay, this volume) provides a strikingly close parallel that is mirrored in details of the construction of its accompanying cist (see *infra*), while two late Barbed Wire-related beakers from the Netherlands are also remarkably similar (Lanting 1973, 248, fig 16). A note on these Lower Rhine basin links and details of the role of grooving on British beakers are on fiche 2: G13–14.



ILLUS 4 Beaker and flint flake (scale 1:2)

It should be emphasized that the N/NR group was the least satisfactory of Clarke's classification, a point demonstrated by Lanting and Van der Waals (1972, 31). However, the important conclusion to stress is that the pot from Mains of Balnagowan and its close parallel from Chealamy, Sutherland occupy a primary position in the sequence of beakers in northern Scotland, representing as they do the first appearance of toothcomb decoration in these latitudes (Lanting & Van der Waals 1972, 40). As such, they belong in Lanting and Van der Waals' step 4 and in Case's Middle Phase of beaker development in Britain (1984, 42, fig 3). The associated C14 date fits well into the range now known for the continental (Barbed Wire) affinities of the pots (Van der Waals 1984, 7) and suggests continuing inter-group contact throughout the beaker period on both sides of the North Sea.

FLINT FLAKE

A secondary flake of pale honey-coloured flint struck from a ? triangular pebble core whose cortex remains on both ends. It is 48 mm long; its thickness varies and it has a skewed profile. It was possibly a core-preparation flake.

LOCATION OF FINDS

The beaker, flint flake and skeleton have been placed in the care of the earl of Cawdor, Cawdor Castle.

CONCLUSIONS

The discovery of this cist brings to approximately 26 the total recorded from the coastal plain between Inverness and Nairn (RCAMS 1978, 9–10; 1979, 13–14; Walker 1966, 100). Of these, only seven definitely contained beakers (illus 1): in all, 13 beakers have been recorded from eight sites. Comment on the cist itself may be confined to noting the specially collected pebble floor, paralleled in the Mains of Scotstoun, Bridge of Don, Aberdeen, beaker cist (*Discovery Excav Scot 1975*, 5) and the small constructional detail of the placing of angled stones over the edges of the capstone and the tops of the side slabs which is precisely similar to the ‘slates’ recorded at the Chealamy, Sutherland cist whose beaker provides the only directly comparable British parallel (*supra* and Gourlay, this volume). The importance of patterns of orientation and line of sight in early Bronze Age burials has been demonstrated. The orientation of this body is unusual for its sex: only one of the male beaker burials in Yorkshire was similarly oriented (Tuckwell 1975, 118–19). Various explanations are possible but the Scottish sample of well recorded cists is too small to be useful. The principal importance of this cist, however, lies in its beaker which can be placed near the head of beaker development in the area of Scotland N and W of the Spey. Whether it is a representative of a distinct ‘Moray Firth colony’ of beakers, as proposed by Clarke (1970, 122–3, 126), must remain for the moment an open question, although the strong connections with the Lower Rhine basin certainly demonstrate a more than passing interest between the two areas.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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