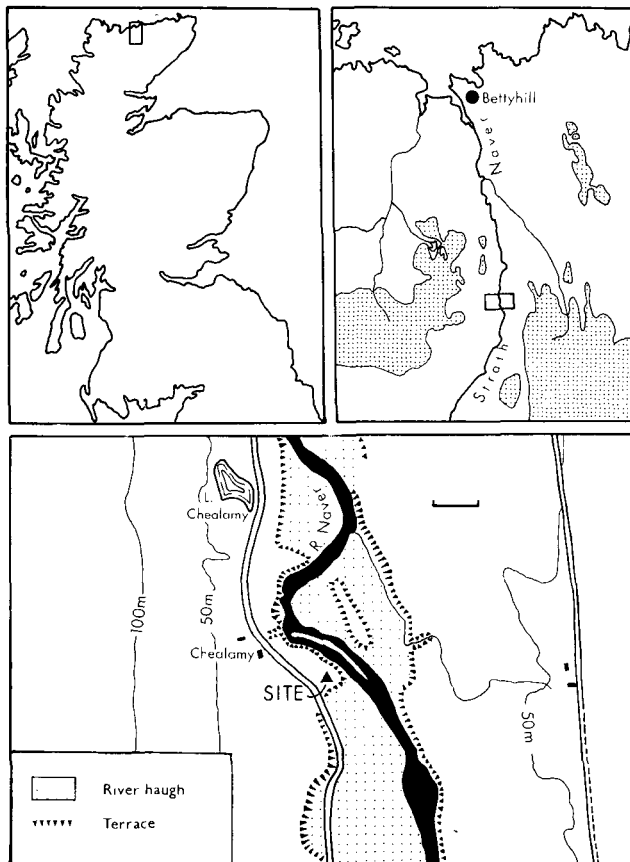


A short cist beaker inhumation from Chealamy, Strathnaver, Sutherland

Robert B Gourlay*

INTRODUCTION

The site lies at c 30 m OD on the crest of a small hog-backed gravel hillock rising from a terrace immediately above the River Naver some six miles S of Bettyhill (NGR NC 7240 5017) (illus 1). It was discovered during road-works intended to straighten and level a series of dangerous bends on the B871. A hole, dug to receive a strainer post for the realigned roadside fence, was found to contain a large boulder which effectively stopped progress, and a jackhammer was brought in to break it up. During this operation, the jackhammer broke through the obstacle to reveal a void beneath the boulder with what appeared to the road squad to be part of a pottery vessel visible within it. Work was immediately halted, and Mr Eliot Rudie, a local amateur archaeologist, stopped as he passed by fortuitously in his car. Mr Rudie confirmed that the boulder was indeed the capstone of a cist and that

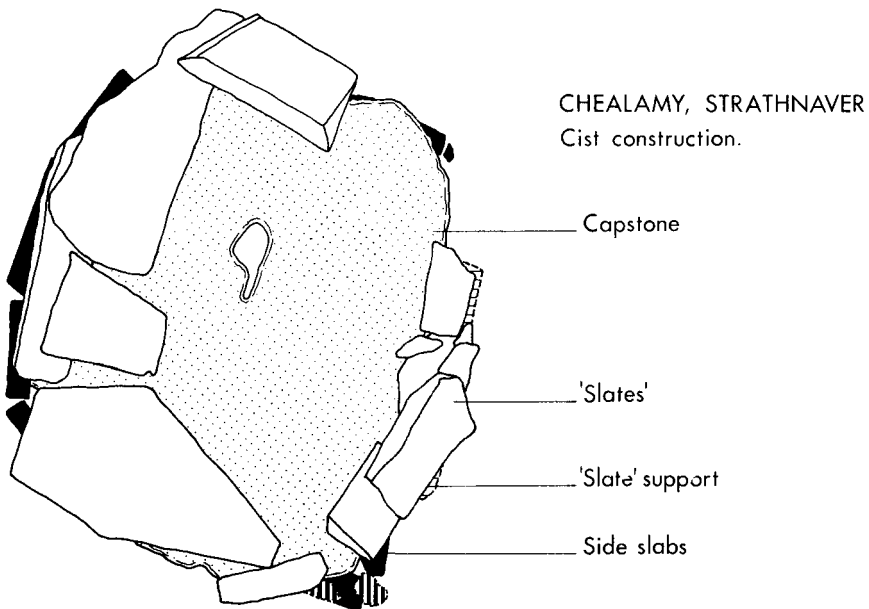
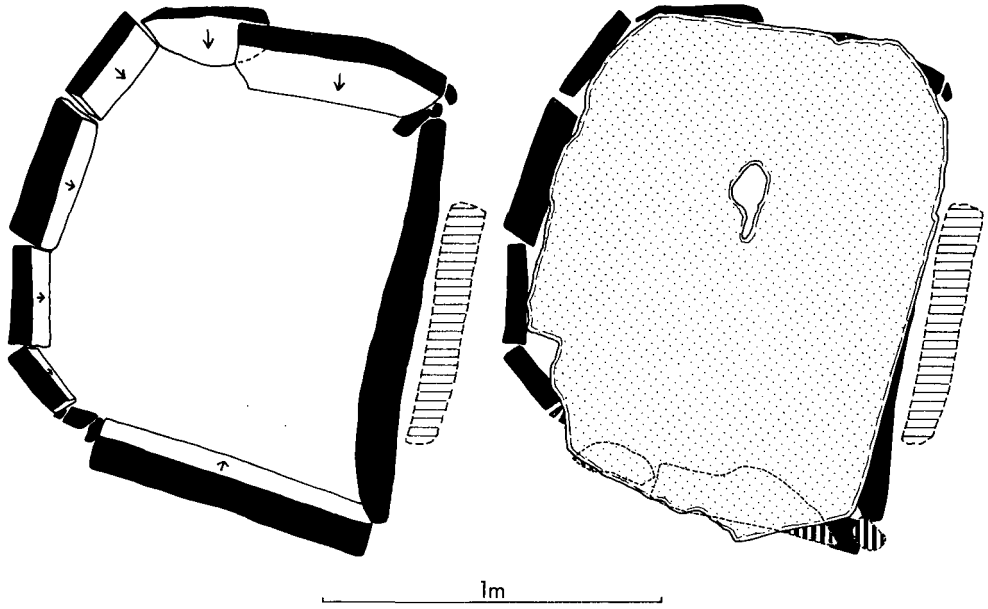


ILLUS 1 Location maps

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it contained both skeletal material and an apparently intact pottery vessel before contacting the author.

Because of the importance of the find – only one other beaker is known from the Strath (Clarke 1970, 522) – and the need to investigate without impeding the road-works, it was decided to excavate the site immediately. Because of the time factor, the limited availability of assistance, and the very



ILLUS 2 Cist construction

inclement weather (the ground remained frozen throughout), the results are somewhat limited. However, an overall reading of the circumstances of burial was possible.

EXCAVATION

As the immediate topography dropped away from the site on all sides, and its apparent prominence, coupled with evidence of slight depressions elsewhere on the hummock, it was thought that other burials might lie adjacent. As more than half of the hillock itself was ultimately to be totally removed, it was decided to open a substantial area of the crest on the roadside of the new fence line, including the cist itself. The peaty topsoil was therefore removed over some 42 m² and about 20 cm of the ashy, grey subsoil over most of this area. This revealed no obvious signs of disturbance except in the vicinity of the cist, and the remainder of effort was concentrated on this.

The capstone lay some 70 cm below surface level. Because of this depth, and the frozen and intractable nature of the subsoil, an area of only 3 m by 3 m was examined. Within this area, no definable edge to the presumed pit could be seen on plan, either superficially or in the gravel subsoil. Accordingly, this material was removed as quickly as possible to reveal the capstone. This was seen not to be the uppermost part of the structure of the cist, as it had been carefully overlain by a number of small slabs around its edge, each dipping slightly away from the centre and clearly designed as 'slates' to shed ground water beyond the cist below, particularly at those points where the capstone least overhung the side-slabs, some of which were visible at this point (illus 2). The capstone itself comprised a massive slab of local schistose rock measuring 1.5 by 1.1 m.

Upon removal of the capstone, a delicate operation carried out at the weekend with the assistance of most of the road-squad in their spare time and with much of the population of Bettyhill in attendance, the contents were finally revealed. The puncturing of the covering slab by the jackhammer had caused several large flakes to detach from the underside, some weighing many pounds. Amazingly, although one had landed squarely within the neck of the rather fine beaker now revealed, none had caused the slightest damage either to the pot or to the skeletal remains. These were carefully removed and are discussed below.

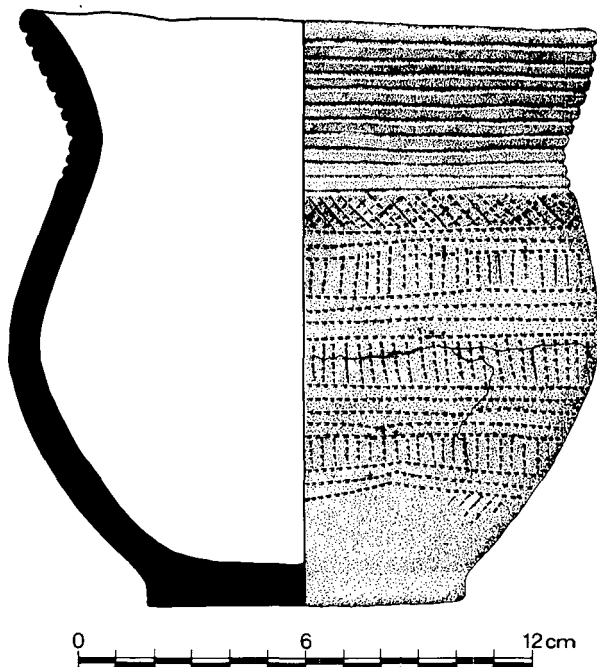
The sides of the cist, which was unfloored, consisted of eight large slabs of the same rock type as the capstone, set on edge and locked into place using their own weight and a few small chocking stones set into two opposite corners. The north and east sides consisted of single slabs, while the west end, of two slabs, and the south side, of four, combined to give the structure a distinct D-shape on plan, despite all but the north side having slumped slightly outwards at the top. The lower half of the cist had been dug into unstable, rounded small gravel which had run into the burial chamber through gaps in the slabs at their base. This probably accounts for the later slumping. A ninth slab, some 0.7 m long, had been inserted outside the cist and parallel to the large, northerly side slab, apparently to act as a rest for the 'slates' on that side. While the exact configuration of the pit into which the cist was placed could not be ascertained in the circumstances, it had clearly been dug into the crest of the hillock from the north slope, with only the cist itself in an enclosed hollow.

THE BEAKER

Dimensions: height, 151–157 mm; diameter (rim), 152–157 mm; diameter (waist), 135–140 mm; diameter (belly), 154–162 mm; diameter (base), 82 mm; thickness, c 8 mm.

Decoration: Decoration falls into three zones: neck, belly and base, with the latter undecorated and the belly subdivided into four elements separated by horizontal grooving.

Zone A (neck) Comprises 11 horizontal grooves extending from immediately below the rim to slightly below the waist.



ILLUS 3 The beaker (scale 1:2)

Zone B (belly) Subdivided as follows: 1, Crosshatch, 11–12 mm in depth; 2, Three horizontal bands of comb-impressed lines, 10 mm; 3, Short, vertical comb-impressed lines, c 12 mm; 4, Four horizontal comb-impressed lines; 5, Repeat of (3); 6, Five horizontal comb-impressed lines; 7, Repeat of (3) and (5); 8, Repeat of (2); 9, Begun at one point but discontinued, a narrow zone of angled (slashes?). Five only survive. The vertical zones (3, 5 and 7) overlap into the zones above them in many places. This may be due to the apparently very long comb used, as demonstrated by the series of 'waves' evident in the execution of (7). Comb length would appear to be approximately 87 mm.

Zone C (base) Undecorated (with exception of unfinished B9).

The form and decoration, in particular the emphasis on the neck through the choice of motif and zonation, place this beaker early, if not primary in the series from the Highlands: a particularly close parallel is the pot from Mains of Balnagowan, Ardersier, which is discussed in the preceding note (Ian Shepherd, pers comm).

THE SKELETAL REMAINS

Mary Harman

Only the lower half of the body remained: the fifth lumbar vertebra and the sacrum, the pelvis, both femora and the tibiae, and the right fibula and part of the astragalus. The bones are in fair condition, though the left (lower) side is rather poor with eroded surfaces and splintery shafts. The large size of the bones and the confrontation of the pelvis indicate that the skeleton is that of a man, and evidence of very slight osteo-arthritis between the final lumbar vertebra and the sacrum suggests that he was probably over 25 or 30 years old. None of the long bones is complete and it is not possible to make a reasonable estimate of the height.

There is nothing in the appearance of the bones to explain the absence of trunk and feet: no evidence of cuts can be seen on the vertebrae, ilia or lower legs, though preservation is such that had the trunk been removed neatly any cuts on the bones might not be visible now. The pelvic area is, however, sufficiently

well preserved to preclude decay as a reasonable explanation: total decay stopping abruptly between the fourth and fifth lumbar vertebrae seems unlikely, although conditions within a cist can be very variable. No tooth crowns, normally very resistant to post-mortem decay, were found.

DISCUSSION

The cist occupied a prominent position within the immediate locality, and it is still possible that it formed part of a small cemetery, as one or two amorphous, shallow depressions remain on the unaffected portion of the hillock summit, and a large slab noticed during bulldozing of the rest may have come from another such structure set slightly below the crest. The author was not able to be present when this work was carried out, but no other material was reported. The cist from which the Strathnaver beaker (NMAS: EG66) derives was located at Woodyknowe set into the side of another gravel mound at NC 699 453 by Eliot Rudie. One side slab remains *in situ*.

The fragmentary state of the human remains suggests, as the interior gravel of the cist base seemed uniform, that these were all that was originally interred. With the exception of the (intact) beaker, no other remains were recovered.

NOTE

The stones of the cist, with the exception of the 'slates' which were lost, were removed and reconstructed according to the site plans immediately adjacent to the door of the museum in the church at Farr, Bettyhill. The beaker is on display within the museum. The human remains have been placed for safekeeping, pending possible radiocarbon assay, in Inverness Museum (983.153).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCE

Clarke, D L 1970 *Beaker pottery of Great Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge.