

## A beaker cist at Upper Muirhall, Perth

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### ABSTRACT

*A short cist discovered and excavated in April 1984 had been constructed of four slabs set on bedrock. A complete Late Northern beaker with a decorated base was recovered, but little of the inhumation had survived.*

### INTRODUCTION

In early April 1984, the discovery of a large slab below the ploughsoil in a field being prepared for sowing was reported by Mr John Dow of Upper Muirhall Farm to Perth Museum and Art Gallery. The slab had been exposed by heavy rain-water washing down a drainage furrow on the slope of the field. On investigation this proved to be the undisturbed capstone of a cist; Mr Dow kindly gave permission to excavate.

The cist lay on a south-west-facing slope at an altitude of 150 m, looking downhill towards Perth 2.5 km away (NGR NO 1454 2405; illus 1). Another cist excavated some years before about 1 km downhill and to the north-west, on Muirhall Farm, contained an almost complete skeleton and a flint knife (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1970, 36).

### EXCAVATION

The capstone was an irregular slab of local sandstone 1.45 m long and tapering from 1.1 m wide at the west end to 0.47 m at the east. It was 0.1 m thick and showed no sign of having been worked, or of bearing cup or other markings.

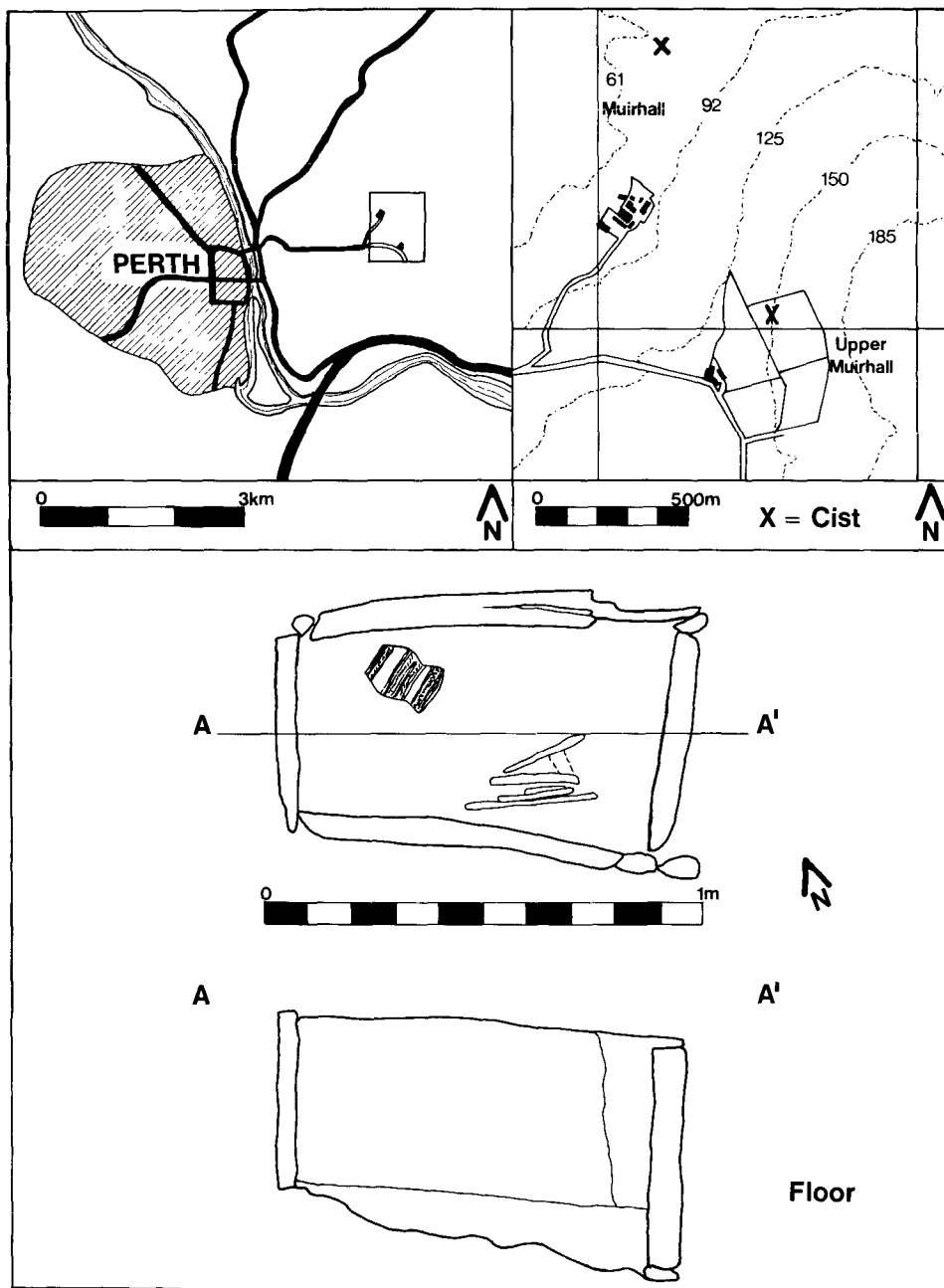
Underneath was a short cist aligned north-west/south-east and filled with the soft brown ploughsoil of the surrounding field. Initially only three of the wall slabs were visible, the fourth, short south-east, slab being 0.08 m lower. When the four wall slabs had been identified the cist measured 0.96 m in length and 0.59 m in width externally and 0.85 m by 0.46 m internally. The slabs were of local Old Red Sandstone and two, the long north-eastern slab and the short south-eastern slab, were cracked, the former badly. Three were of a similar thickness of 0.07 m, but the short north-western slab was markedly thinner at 0.04 m. The slabs did not form a sealed box and there were small packing stones at the north-north-west, north-north-east and south-south-east corners.

The fill was a consistent brown soil with occasional natural agate fragments derived from the local volcanic bedrock. None had been worked. At a depth of about 0.4 m the soil became sandier across the cist, and this continued down to bedrock. At the north-west end the underlying bedrock

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ILLUS 1 Location map and cist plan and profile

was at a depth of only 0.42 m, but this sloped steadily downwards to 0.62 m at the south-east. As all the skeletal material recovered came from a depth of less than 0.42 m, it would appear that the sandier fill formed the original level flooring of the cist. The south end of the short south-eastern slab was raised-up from the bedrock by a small stone wedged-in to level it.

CONTENTS

HUMAN REMAINS

Little of the inhumation had survived. A group of six separate but unidentifiable bone fragments remained in the south-eastern end of the cist. These proved to be only an upper surface, however, with little underneath, and crumbled when lifted. Twenty-nine teeth were recovered individually from the south-western area of the cist, but no bone. The teeth were spread across, and at various depths, within this area; they did not form a concentrated group.

The teeth are in varying states of preservation. The dentine and cementum of the roots have in nearly all cases been destroyed and in most cases the dentine of the crown has also been lost, but in a few teeth some coronal dentine has survived. The enamel of the crowns has remained in reasonably good condition, though a few crowns show some slight *post-mortem* erosion.

The teeth are all permanent and have all formed part of the same dentition. Only the maxillary right canine and second molar and the mandibular right canine are not present. Examination using a stereomicroscope shows that all the teeth except the third molars have very early wear facets, ie the second permanent molars had erupted into function before death. The individual should therefore have been more than 12 years old. The third molar crowns are incompletely formed and the enamel is not yet mature. This stage should be reached at about 12 to 15 years of age. The most probable age of this individual would therefore be between 13 and 15 years. Had the roots of the teeth survived they might have provided further evidence of age.

The teeth are large and well-formed and there is no sign of hypoplasia. Nor is there any evidence of dental caries.

Identification of teeth present

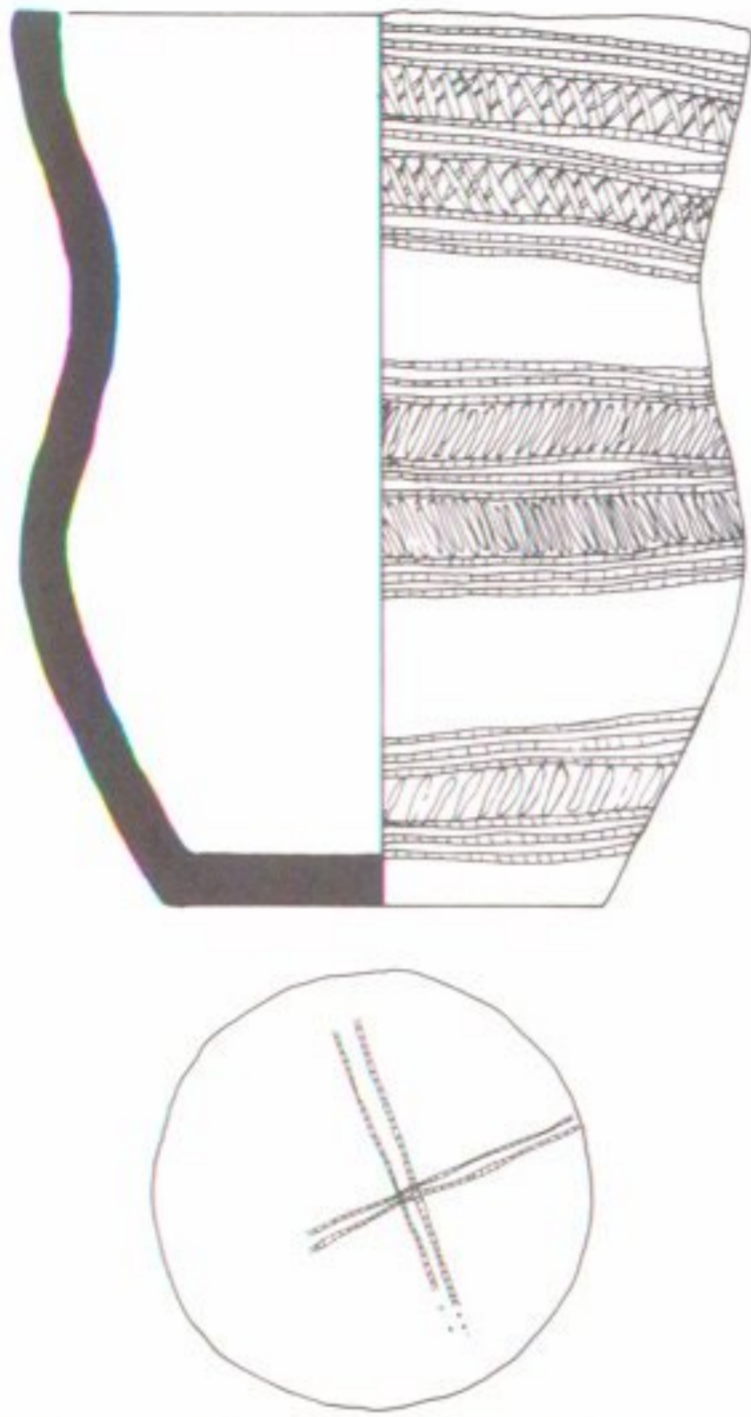
Erupted	$\frac{654\ 21}{7654\ 21}$	$\frac{1234567}{1234567}$
Unerupted	$\frac{8}{8}$	$\frac{8}{8}$

THE BEAKER

The only artefact recovered from the cist was a complete Late Northern/step 5 beaker which was found in the north-west corner, lying on its side and aligned north-north-west/south-south-east, its mouth pointing inwards towards the remaining bone (illus 1). When cleaned it was found to have a dark, semi-circular, stain on the inside of the belly from which a sample for analysis was taken by Mr G J Barclay.

The beaker is 170 mm tall, with a short, slightly cupped neck well separated from the body. The belly, which is relatively high, is of almost equal diameter to the rim, these measuring 138 mm and 140 mm respectively. The diameter of the base is 85 mm. The pot is of a coarse buff-to-pink fabric and has a flat undecorated rim. The decoration is in three broad zones consisting of bands of horizontal comb impressions, crosses and angled incisions of irregular size and depth. In addition there are four lines of fainter comb impressions on the base. These run in two almost parallel lines which cross at approximately right angles (illus 2 & 3).

This beaker's relatively high-bellied profile, everted neck and horizontally banded decoration fused into three broad zones place it in Clarke's Late Northern (N3) group (1970) and into step 5 of the scheme of Lanting and Van der Waals (1972). Beakers in Perthshire are notable for their rarity of discovery and heterogeneity of form, so there are few pots within the county with which to compare Upper Muirhall. The geographically closest parallel (for form, although not for details of decoration) is the Late Northern beaker from Tippermallo, Methven (Clarke 1970, fig 609, no 1744), while the N3



ILLUS 2 The beaker (scale 1:3)



ILLUS 3 Close-up of decorated base of beaker (scale 2:3)

pot from Tillyochie, Kinross, is closely similar in all but zone fusion (*ibid*, fig 586, no 1693). Searching further afield, the Developed Northern/step 5 beaker from Boharm, Banffshire (*ibid*, fig 475, no 1575) is a good parallel both in form and decoration. Such characteristics, while placing Upper Muirhall in Case's Late phase of beaker development, have their roots in the Middle style (1977, 82).

The most interesting feature of the Upper Muirhall beaker is its decorated base. Only a very small proportion of beakers are thus decorated: five mainstream beakers with basal decoration are illustrated in Clarke (1970, figs 71, 191, 696, 875, 1021). None is closely similar to Upper Muirhall: the geographically closest parallel, the base of the N3/step 6 pot from Eckford, Roxburgh (*ibid*, fig 696) is quite different. Perhaps closest in intention, although a distant link, is the base of the Wessex-Middle Rhine/step 2 beaker from Stanton Harcourt, Oxon (*ibid*, 86, fig 191) which consists of five radiating groups of toothcomb lines.

Illustration 3 suggests an interesting, if fanciful, similarity to the gold sundiscs or 'button caps' of steps 2 and 3: cf Clarke 1970, figs 141-2, 191. A more secure and productive source for comparison are the decorated bases on handled beakers, which as a class exhibit a higher proportion than the beaker corpus as a whole decorated in this fashion (eg Clarke 1970, figs 1053, 1057, 1061, 1063, 1065). The handled beaker from Aldro barrow 116, east Yorkshire has a similar, if more elaborated basal decoration to Upper Muirhall (*ibid*, fig 1065). It is therefore significant that three of the four Scottish parallels for such a vessel as Aldro come from east central Scotland, within 30 miles of Perth: Balfarg in Fife, Balmuick in Perthshire and Mains of Craichie, Angus (Mercer 1981, 133-6; Clarke *et al* 1985, 116-18; Coutts 1971, 46, fig 83a). These vessels have Wessex connections (most vividly in the similarity evident between the pottery vessel from Balmuick and the gold cup from Rillaton, Cornwall) which ultimately relate to a tradition of high-status handled metal vessels found on the continent. The pottery versions express power and prestige 'in terms of long established local traditions' (Clarke *et al* 1985, 118). It is thus in this context that the beaker from Upper Muirhall may be seen to be an important addition to the Perthshire corpus.

## ARCHIVE

The finds and archive have been donated to Perth Museum and Art Gallery; Accession number 1984. 641.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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