

Two cists east of Forfar

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1984 two short cists were discovered and excavated by the author on behalf of Angus District Museums. One at Murton Farm was small and contained the remains of an adult

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cremation accompanied by a flint knife. The other, on Mains of Balgavies Farm, was larger than average and contained a very poorly preserved adult inhumation.

EXCAVATION AT MURTON (illus 1)

The cist at Murton Farm lay on a prominent rise at the east end of Loch Fithie 310 m north-north-west of Murton standing at NGR NO 4936 5145. The dislodged sandstone capping-stone measured 0.87 by 0.76 by 0.10 m thick and had lain only 0.15 m below the surface of the field. The sides of the cist were formed by sandstone slabs, measuring 0.55 by 0.40–0.55 by 0.33 m deep internally. The cist was aligned north-east/south-west; the floor of the grave was the bright orange natural gravel.

As with other short cists in Angus and elsewhere, the builders required the upper surfaces of the sides of the cist to be as even as possible. With this in mind they used thin horizontal slabs of sandstone on top of the north-west side slab. A single, much thicker block of sandstone was used to solve a similar problem on the south-west side. The ill-fitting south-west slab suggests that gaps between the side slabs were unimportant as no effort seems to have been made to fill them.

Because of the inclement weather excavation of the area surrounding the top of the grave ceased at the top of the horizontal slabs covering the side slabs. On the north-east side, however, it was possible to see that the edge of the pit dug for the cist was only 0.06 m from the rear of the side slab, indicating a steep-sided excavation.

The cist contained the remains of a cremation in a 0.10 m-thick deposit of soil and small stones and a flint knife or scraper (illus 1). The cremation was examined by Dr I H M Smart of the Medical Sciences Institute, Dundee University and his results are summarized as follows.

Because of the lack of any duplicate bones, it was felt that only one individual was represented; because of the total lack of epiphyses on any of the mature bones and the lack of fusion of the external sutures of the cranium, an age of about 25–30 years for the individual at the time of death is indicated. No arthritis or other diseases were apparent and though the sex of the individual was not ascertained, considering the slight nature of the mature bones, a female is probably represented.

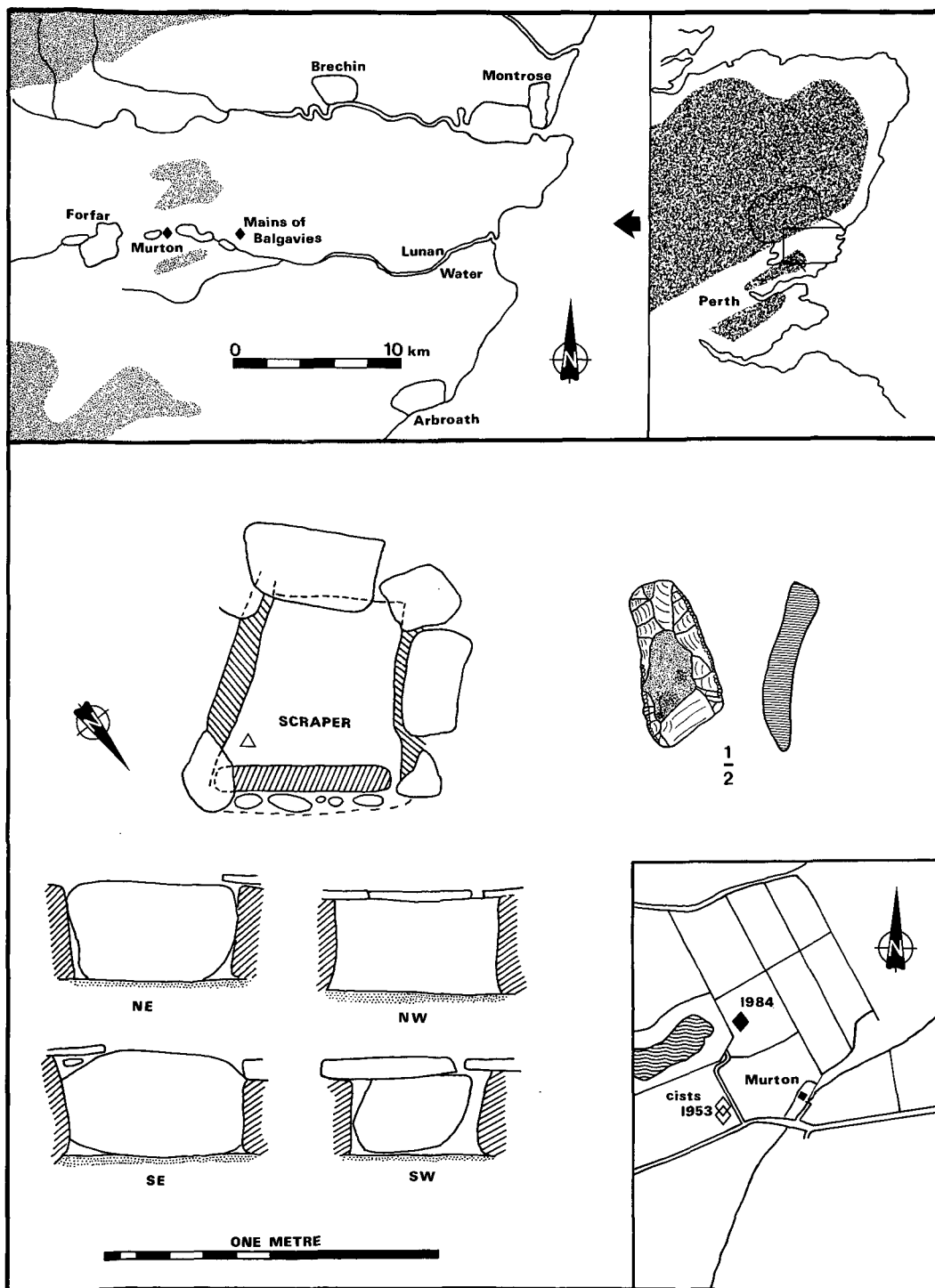
FLINT KNIFE

The knife was found within the cremation deposit but displayed no sign of burning, suggesting that it had been deposited with the cooling remains. The knife, of mottled honey-coloured flint, measures 51 by 25 by 9 mm and consists of a primary flake with secondary work around most of its circumference. The two long edges have both received delicate retouching.

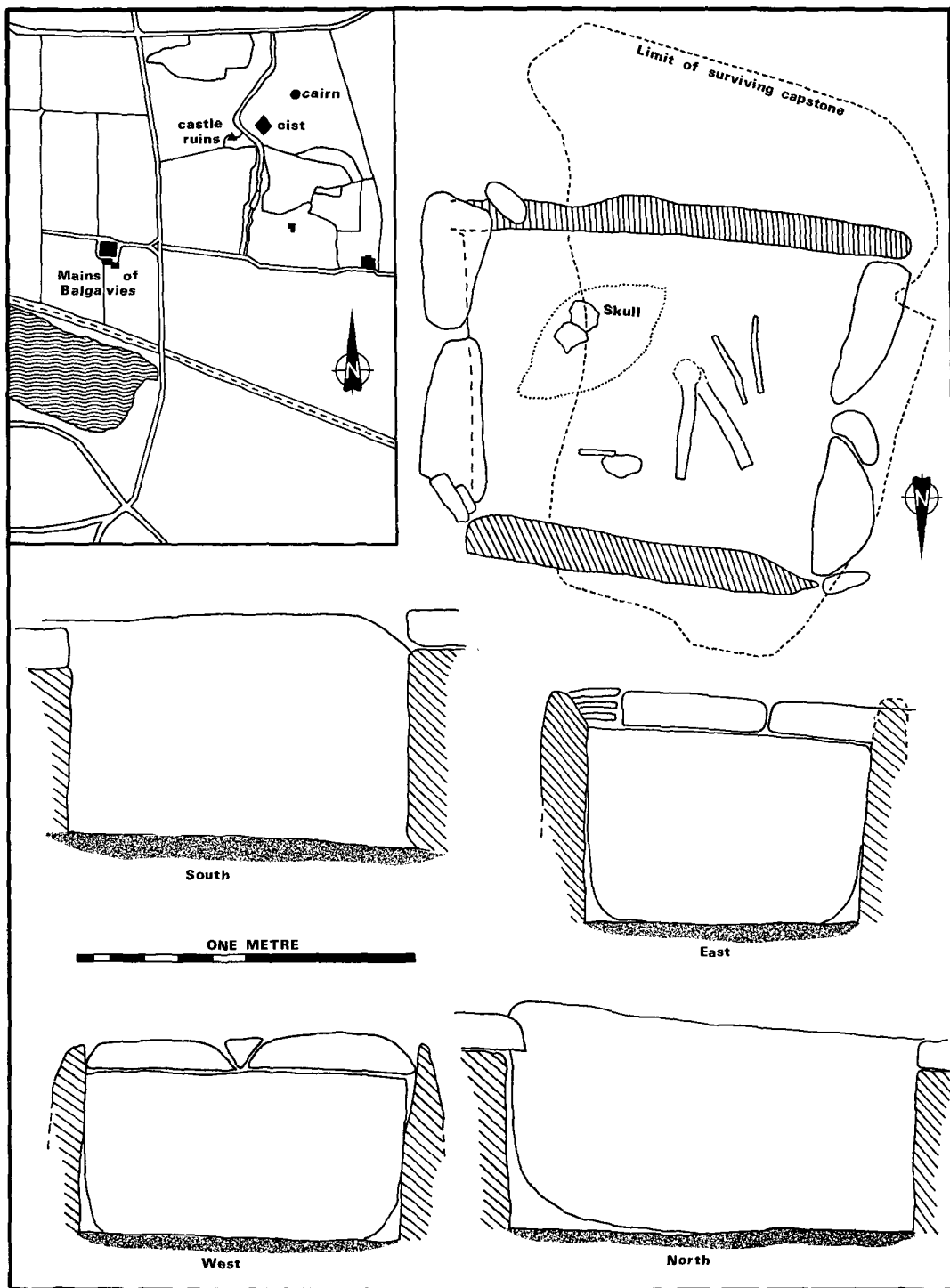
DENTITION REPORT

Dorothy A Lunt

There are five fragments of cremated bone which derive from the alveolar processes of the jaws. One is a small portion of the right maxilla with parts of the sockets of both premolars and of all three permanent molars. The other four fragments are all from the cortical plate of the mandible. Two portions of the lingual cortical plate can be fitted together precisely and carry parts of the sockets for the teeth from the mandibular left canine to the mandibular right first molar. The other two fragments also fit exactly to produce another piece of mandibular cortical plate with remains of sockets. This is rather more difficult to identify. Only one socket can be identified with certainty as that of the first permanent molar. The appearance of the bone fragment suggests that it is the lingual cortical plate with sockets from mandibular right central incisor to second molar. But if this is the case then two individuals must be represented. The only other possibility is that this is the buccal cortical plate from the left side, from central incisor to second molar. If this is the case there has been gross distortion of the specimen, sufficient to turn the normal markedly convex contour of the bone into a deeply concave surface. Such gross distortion seems improbable.



ILLUS 1 Location map and plan of Murton cist



ILLUS 2 Cist at Mains of Balgavies

There are altogether 25 fragments of cremated teeth, mainly of the roots. As usually happens with cremated material, the enamel of the crowns (and often the whole crown itself) has been destroyed; thus the fine morphological detail of the tooth has been lost and few can be precisely identified. One exception, where the enamel has survived, is part of the crown of a maxillary second premolar probably from the right side.

Roots of six permanent mandibular molars are present, but cannot be individually identified with certainty. There are roots of four permanent maxillary molars, one of which can be identified as the maxillary right first permanent molar because it fits the appropriate socket in the fragment of right maxilla. The remaining tooth fragments are derived from incisors, canines and premolars.

The apices of some of the root fragments have been broken off, but those which are present seem to have fully formed apical foramina. On the assumption that if all the teeth have come from a single individual then at least two third molars must be present, this would suggest that the individual was over 20. If more than one individual is represented then one does not know precisely which molars are present and no comment can be made concerning age.

EXCAVATION AT MAINS OF BALGAVIES (illus 2)

Ploughing in April 1984 on Mains of Balgavies resulted in the breaking and partial dislodging of a large capstone covering a short cist. The grave lay on the crest of a slight gravel ridge at NGR NO 5405 5165 about 580 m north-east of Mains of Balgavies steading and 150 m south-west of a probable round cairn at NO 5417 5173. The section of broken sandstone capping stone measured 1.70 m by 1.00 m by 0.25 m thick. The portion which remained *in situ* over the cist measured 1.75 m north-south by 1.09 m, giving approximate total measurements of 1.75 m north-south by 2.00 m east-west. It was clear from the outset that not only did the cist contain the remains of an inhumation but that disturbance had resulted in falling debris damaging the contents.

Removal of the foreign material from within the cist revealed the remains of an inhumation in very poor condition. The head lay towards the south-east corner and faced west with the back towards the north-east corner and pelvis facing the north side slab. Because of the very poor condition of the damp bones it was decided that only the large fragments of skull and sections of the long bones would be retained for examination and that the remainder would be redeposited in the cist after the excavation was completed. Little can be said about the bone remains except that the complete fusing of the external sutures on the cranium probably indicates that the bones belonged to an adult almost certainly over the age of 25 years at time of death.

The four sides of the cist were constructed of large sandstone slabs giving internal measurements of 1.17 E-W by 0.91 m by 0.74 m deep. Because the two end slabs were shorter than the two side slabs they were surmounted by slabs laid horizontally. The west end had two such slabs up to 0.12 m thick whilst the east end also had two slabs up to 0.11 m thick. A gap at the top north-east corner of the cist was filled with three thin sandstone slabs. This contrasts with the rounded boulder which filled the gap in the middle of the west side; both reflect the attention paid to the top of the cist by the builders.

The floor of the grave consisted of carefully laid rounded pebbles measuring up to 100 mm long but averaging about 70 mm in diameter. This layer, which was almost certainly derived from the excavated gravel of the original excavation, lay on natural boulder clay. The pebbles possibly prevented the complete destruction of the skeleton.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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