

## A cist from Kentraw, Islay

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### ABSTRACT

*Describes the discovery of a clay-luted cist containing the remains of at least four inhumations, possibly buried successively. A C14 date provides a terminus ante quem for one of the burials which was accompanied by a vase food vessel and a miniature vessel.*

In September 1986 during the excavation of a silage pit in a gravel mound 80 m north-north-west of Kentraw, Islay, a cist was discovered (NGR NR 2671 6293) (illus 1). The initial find was made by Mr Ian MacPherson, Conisby, the JCB driver, and subsequent excavation by Mr MacPherson, Mr R Hodgkinson and Mrs M Perrons of the Museum of Islay Life, Port Charlotte, recovered inhumed bones, a food vessel and a miniature vessel.

Traditionally the grass-covered gravel mound has been known as the 'Fairy Hill', but there is nothing to suggest that it is anything other than a natural hillock. Aligned north-east and south-west, the cist measured 1.27 m by 0.56 m and 0.56 m in depth; it was composed of four slabs and a massive capstone (1.52 m by 0.85 m and about 0.15 m in thickness), and the floor was a layer of small pebbles about 50 mm in thickness. The inner angles of the cist had been carefully sealed with clay. At the south-west end of the cist the right half of a skull and mandible covered with a 'grey-white matter' remained intact with a miniature vessel nearby; closer to the centre of the cist there was a food vessel. Two poorly-preserved long bones were noted (illus 2), but could not be recovered. At the north-east end further long bones were laid parallel to the end-slab, and between them and the centre there was a deposit also described as 'grey-white matter'. Only the skull and mandible from the south-west end and the collection of bones from the north-east end were preserved and these have been studied by Miss Harman and Dr Lunt. The only other find was a small worked flint. The floor deposits were taken to Edinburgh and were wet-sieved using a 3 mm mesh basket, without additional discoveries being made. Study of the teeth indicates that the remains of at least four and possibly as many as six people are represented in varying states of incompleteness (Specimens A–F; see detailed report in fiche 1: EI-8). The best preserved specimens are the right half of the skull and mandible of Individual A, an adult, possibly female, aged between 20 and 30 years. The other persons also appear to have been young adults.

The most complete left femur, the pair of complete tibia and the right humerus were sent to the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory of the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre, East Kilbride, to provide material for a radiocarbon determination; analysis of collagen from these bones produced a radiocarbon determination of  $1560 \pm 50$  bc (GU-2189). It is clear that several people were buried in the cist, perhaps in succession, the bones of earlier interments being piled at one end to make room for subsequent burials after decomposition. It is likely that the long bones at the centre of

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ILLUS 1 Kentraw, Islay, cist and capstone



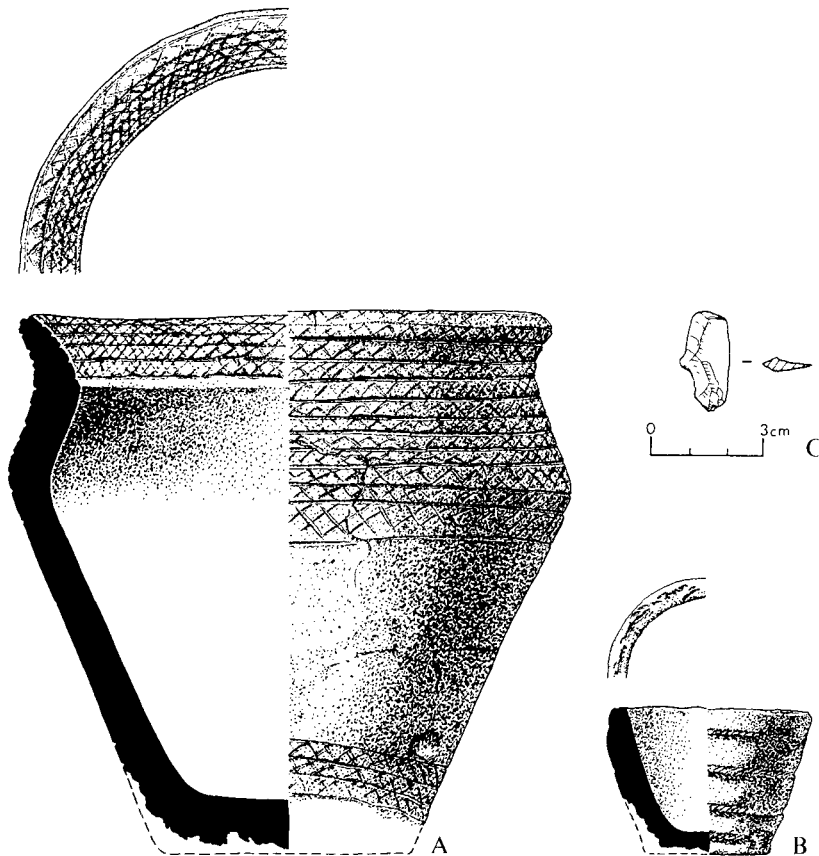
ILLUS 2 Kentraw, Islay; interior of cist

the cist (illus 2) were associated with the skull and the two vessels; the bones at the south-west end appear to be the remains of an earlier deposition. Thus the date should be regarded as a *terminus ante quem* for a subsequent burial which was associated with the two pottery vessels. This is not the only example of multiple interments in a short cist to have been found on Islay. Excavation of Cist 1 at Traigh Bhan, for example, produced similar evidence (Ritchie & Stevenson 1982). A further feature of interest was noted on the south-east side slab, for there was a reddish stain associated with 'vegetable matter', which to the naked eye gave every appearance of being hair. An examination of this, kindly undertaken through a high-powered microscope by Mike Baxter of the Forensic Laboratories of the Lothian and Borders Police, confirmed that it was naturally occurring vegetable matter.

## THE FINDS

### POTTERY (illus 3, A and B, illus 4-5)

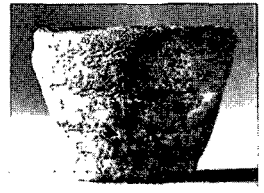
The food vessel is a bipartite vase (145 mm in height, 140 mm in rim diameter and 65 mm in base diameter), its fabric varying in colour from light reddish brown to dark grey brown, with a carefully smoothed outer surface decorated in two bands; the top third features cross-hatching between incised



ILLUS 3 Kentraw, Islay; pottery (scale 1:2) and flint



ILLUS 4 Kentraw, Islay; food vessel



ILLUS 5 Kentraw, Islay; miniature vessel

lines, and a narrow band at the base is similarly decorated. The decoration continued from the upper part of the vessel over the rounded rim. The pot has fractured along the lines of weakness between the constructional coils. The miniature vessel (40 mm in height, 53 mm in rim diameter and 33 mm in base diameter) is reddish brown and is decorated with four lines of plaited cord on the outer surface, and a single line along the flattish rim. The vessel extends the geographical distribution of this general class, further examples of which are illustrated by Sir Lindsay Scott (1951, 81, fig 2).

#### FLINT

The flint blade has kindly been described and drawn (illus 3, C) by Miss Sinead McCartan: a pale grey and white irregular inner blade; corticated and patinated with a blunt distal end and edge damage on the left lateral. The blade measures 26 mm in length, 12 mm in breadth and is 3 mm thick.

The pottery and flint are preserved in the Museum of Islay Life, Port Charlotte. The burial from Kentraw is thus an interesting addition to the comparatively small number of cists from Islay (RCAMS 1984, 56–61), both on account of the apparent complexity of the remains that it contained and because of the associated pottery. The vessels add to the local range of contemporary decoration represented, for example, at Ardnave, Islay, and the radiocarbon date compares well with the analyses from that site (Ritchie & Welfare 1983, 317).

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The preparation of this short report would not have been possible without the assistance of Mrs Margaret Perrons and Mr R Hodkinson, who undertook the rescue excavation and made their notes

and photographs available for study, and of Mr N S Newton, who transported the material to Edinburgh. A complete photographic record is preserved in the Museum of Islay Life (IMT-86-115). The conservation of the food vessel and the miniature vessel, undertaken in the laboratories of the Royal Museum of Scotland, by Colin McGregor, was made possible by a grant from the Scottish Museums Council. The assistance of Dr Alison Sheridan and Mr Trevor Cowie, Department of Archaeology, Royal Museum of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh, in describing the food vessel and the miniature vessel, and of Miss Sinead McCartan, formerly of the Artifact Research Unit, Royal Museum of Scotland, over the flint is gratefully acknowledged. The pottery has been drawn by Mr J N Stevenson and photographed by Mr A G Lamb of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. The radiocarbon determination was provided by Historic Buildings and Monuments: Scottish Development Department, through the good offices of Dr Noel Fojut, and was processed at the Scottish Universities Research and Reactor Centre under Dr G Cook. The assistance of Miss Mary Harman and of Dr Dorothy A Lunt, Glasgow Dental Hospital and School, is gratefully acknowledged.

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