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Two Iron-Age cists from Galson, Isle of Lewis

Margaret R Ponting*
with contributions by Margaret F Bruce

ABSTRACT

Two cists, exposed in an eroding dune at Galson, Lewis (NGR NB 437 594), were excavated. Two well-preserved skeletons were recovered and a radiocarbon date was obtained from one. It is suggested that these cists form part of an Iron-Age cemetery.

INTRODUCTION

The site lies on the exposed north-west coast of the Isle of Lewis, south-west of the mouth of South Galson River (NGR NB 437 594) (illus 1). A steep sand-dune face some 80 m long and up to 6 m high extends above a rocky stone-strewn beach. Its geomorphology has been described by Baden-Powell and Elton (1937), and by the Nature Conservancy Council (NCC 1977, 29, 84, fig 24). Erosion of the steep dune face has exposed a variety of features (illus 2b, 2c), including an Iron-Age midden (Baden-Powell & Elton 1937), a chambered earth-house (Edwards 1924), graves and walls (Stevenson 1952; Wells 1952) and most recently stone structures (illus 2a) and small finds of Iron-Age and Viking dates (*Discovery Excav Scot 1984*, 43–4; *1985,* 64, 68). When human bones were seen in two of these stone structures, positive action was indicated and the human remains were removed on behalf of the Procurator Fiscal, Colin Scott Mackenzie.

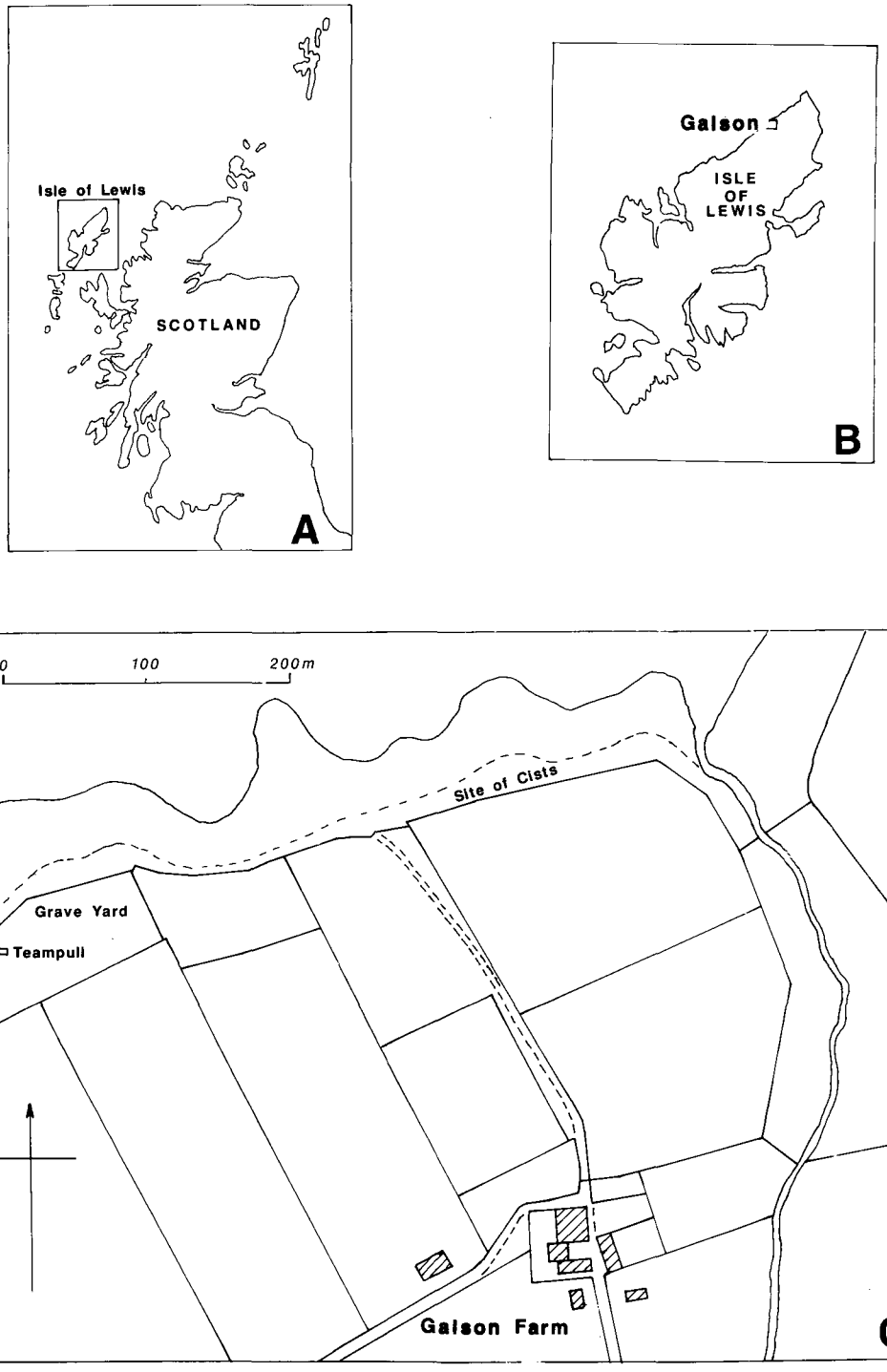
In consequence of these latest discoveries two long stone cists, 16 m apart and containing human remains, were excavated in September 1984 and April 1985. The unstable nature of the dune, not yet weathered down to a stable slope, showed in slippage of stones and sand, particularly during the first excavation, and limited the recording techniques. The first, more northerly, cist was excavated from the side, and the second through a gap in the capstones. Two other similar structures between the cists, but not in immediate danger from erosion, were not excavated.

CIST 1 (illus 3)

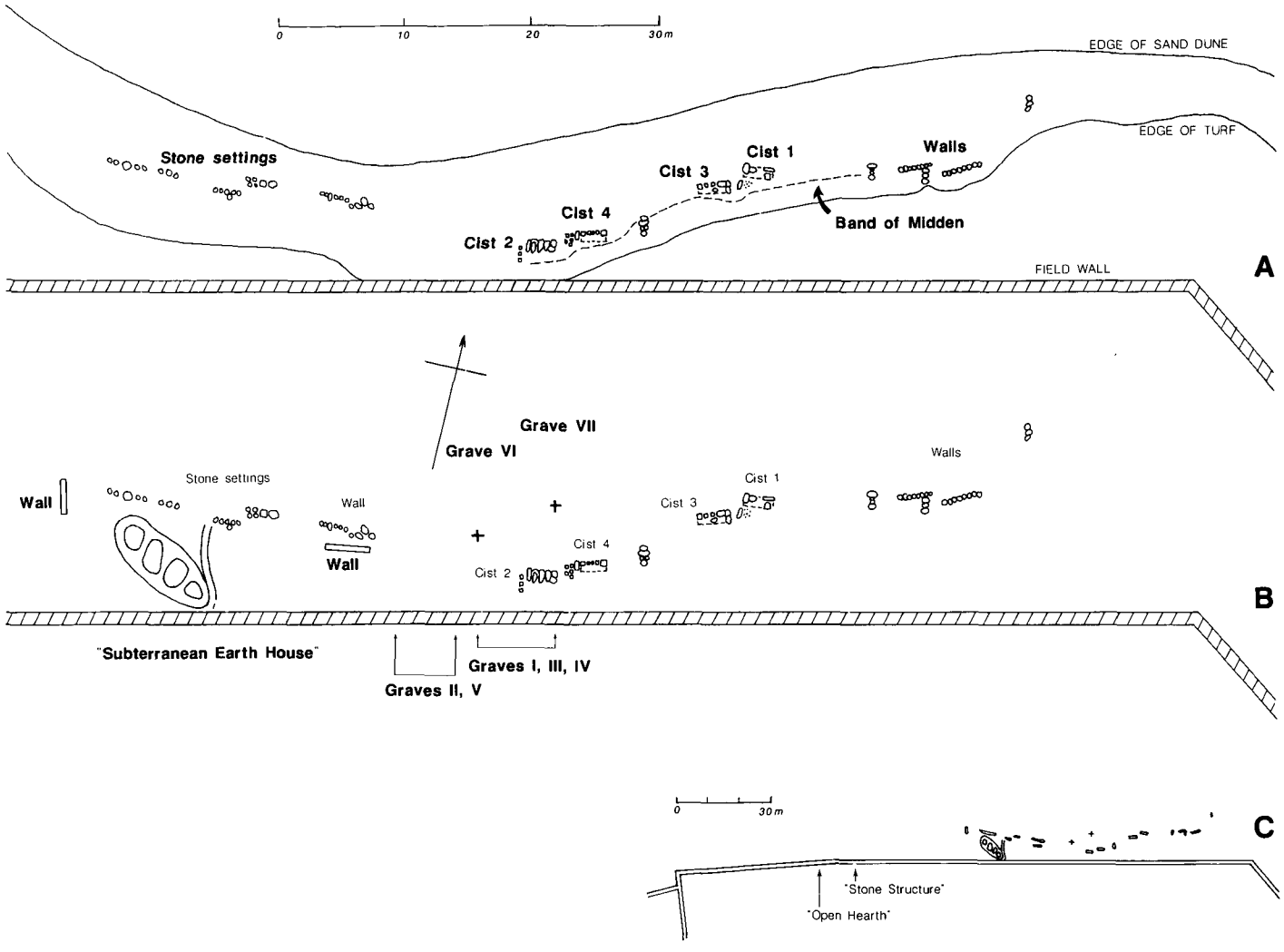
STRUCTURE

The grave measured 1·6 m long, 0·35 m wide and 0·25–0·30 m high internally. It had apparently been set in light yellow sterile sand. Unfortunately it was not possible to determine conclusively whether or not the cist had been constructed by digging a pit through midden and/or a pebble band above, or to relate the cist to a stone structure 1 m south or to the chambered earth-house excavated in 1923 (Edwards 1924).

*Now Mrs M R Curtis, Olcote, New Park, Callanish, Isle of Lewis



ILLUS 1 A, B, location of Galson; C, site of Galson cists

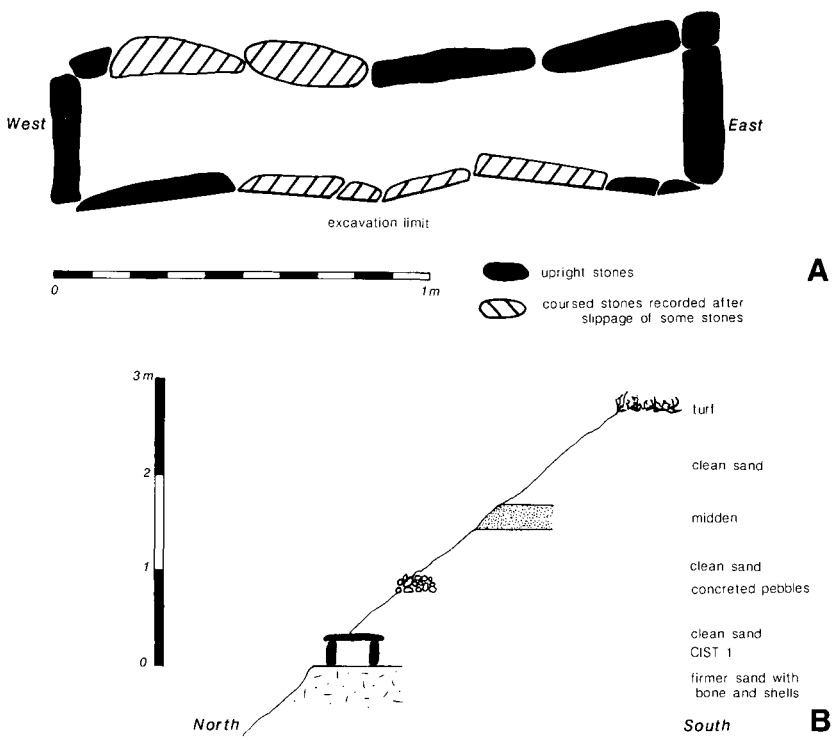


ILLUS 2 A, location of features in 1985; B,C, plan of all features recorded since 1923, showing positions of Cists 1 to 4, Graves VI and VII, subterranean earth house, walls and stone settings; also distances of open hearth, stone structure, walls and Graves I to V in relation to west corner of field wall (see Baden-Powell and Elton; Edwards and Bryce; Edwards; Stevenson; and Wells)

The grave was orientated roughly east/west with the head to the west. The ends were formed by flat upright slabs both c 0·25 m high, 0·35 m wide and 0·10 m thick. The side walls were built partly of upright slabs and partly of two or three courses of stones. On top of the cist were at least six overlapping horizontal large thin slabs, possibly deliberately split, resting on the side walls. That at the head end curved downwards where it rested on the end slab. Other smaller flat slabs lay on those spanning the grave; some lying further down the dune appeared to have fallen off recently.

The slabs covering the grave were themselves covered by a layer of clean sand 0·4 m thick, which was in turn buried by a 0·2 m-thick layer of small rounded beach pebbles cemented together with natural calcium carbonate washed in from shell sand. This pebble layer extended only for the length of the grave and terminated in two courses of a small headwall slightly south of the head end of the grave and between it and the structure 1 m to the south. Above this lay clean sand c 0·5 m thick, in turn surmounted by a continuous dark band of midden material 0·25 m thick. While beach erosion had advanced to the point where this midden layer was not vertically over the grave, it did without any doubt lie over the headwall mentioned above. There was a layer of clean sand with occasional stones approximately 1 m thick over the midden band, topped by turf at field wall level. When constructed the cist was probably covered by sand and then the pebbles.

No definite constructed base to the grave was found. At about the level of the bottom of the walls and below the skeleton, the sand was firmer and damper, and contained a few shells (winkles,



ILLUS 3 A, Cist 1; B, schematic section of Cist 1 and sand dune

mussels, limpets), concretions, burnt bone, bone fragments and pieces of shattered stone. This may represent the floor of the grave and was possibly an old ground surface on which the cist was built. The sterile sand which had totally covered the skeleton in early August and had been disturbed by rabbits during the next month had probably entered the cist during dune erosion comparatively recently, trickling down the dune and into the cist.

SKELETAL REMAINS

A full report on the skeletal material, by Dr Margaret Bruce, appears on fiche 3:F3–13.

The extended skeleton of an adult female lay supine, mostly covered by loose sterile sand, with the head to the west. The left arm was by the side, with the hand below pelvis level. The long bones of the right arm lay on the chest and the incomplete right hand was by the pelvis, slightly higher than the complete left hand. Rabbit disturbance was probably the cause of the arrangement of the right arm bones. Movement of the end stone of the cist had disturbed the bones of the feet and ankles, with most of them displaced towards the knees. It is uncertain whether or not the ankles were crossed, but the left shin bones were not parallel to the right shin bones, but closer at the ankle end. Not all the bones of the feet were recovered, the others probably lying behind the end of the cist. The first left upper premolar was the only tooth not in its socket and was found in sterile loose sand below the skull, suggesting that this sand had entered comparatively recently.

Almost all the bones of the skeleton were recovered. They were remarkably well preserved, probably due to the presence of dry alkaline shell sand around the cist. The skeletal remains were provisionally examined by Dr J H MacRae and by Dr Barbara Noddle, University College Cardiff, Department of Anatomy and examined in detail by Dr Margaret F Bruce of Aberdeen University, Department of Anatomy, per Dr Robert Dickie, before being re-interred at Sandwick cemetery, Stornoway.

The remains are of an adult female who was probably in her mid-twenties when she died. She was of average height (estimated at 163–169 cm) and of modern build. The areas of muscle attachment on the bones indicated that she was of a moderate or even robust physique and there is evidence to suggest that squatting was a posture frequently adopted. With respect to features, her face was narrow, with a prominent but narrow nose and protruding upper front teeth.

No cause of death could be determined but several features indicated previous illnesses. There was poor development of dental enamel suggestive of childhood illnesses, and evidence of prolapsed intervertebral discs (slipped discs) in the thoracic and lumbar spines. She had given birth to at least one child, as there were signs of damage to the pelvis from birth trauma, even though the pelvis was of a good size for childbirth.

The condition of the teeth (other than the enamel hypoplasia referred to above) was good, with little wear of the grinding surfaces. There was no evidence of nutritional deficiencies in the skeleton.

One unusual feature was the presence of double skull foramina, the small holes through which nerves and blood vessels pass. In this skeleton, small bars of bone had formed across many of the foramina, converting them into double foramina. Although this feature is of no significance to the individual during life, double foramina seem to have a genetic basis. If further skeletal remains were found, an incidence of double foramina could be calculated and might help to determine the origins of, and relationships within, the population.

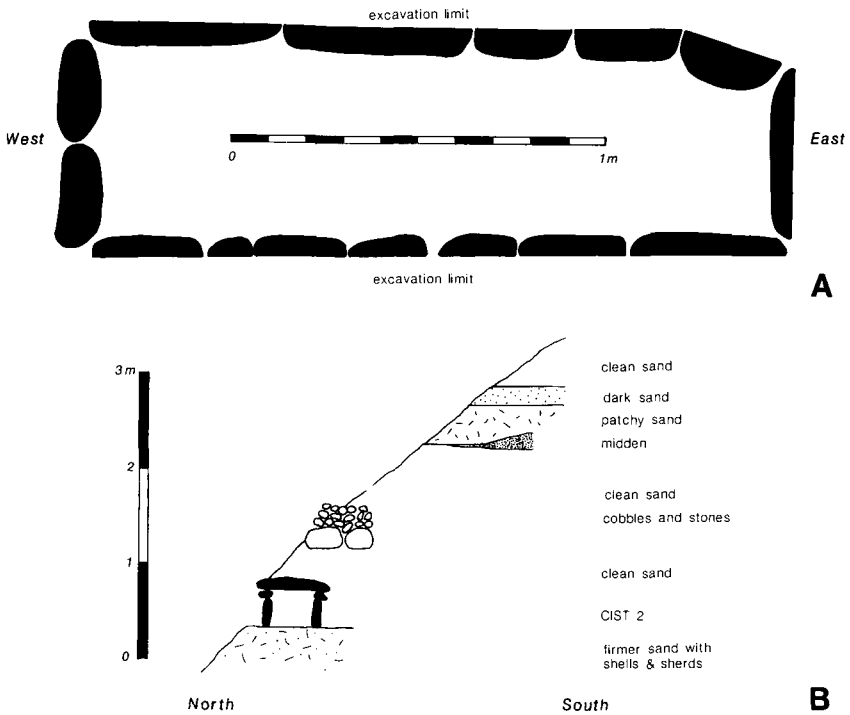
GRAVE GOODS

No grave goods were found.

CIST 2 (illus 4)

STRUCTURE

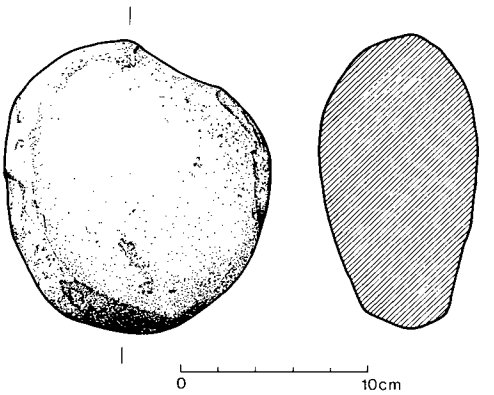
The grave was orientated roughly east/west and was 1·7 m long and 0·51 m high internally. The end walls were constructed of flat upright slabs, two at the head, west, end, and one at the foot, east, end. The side walls were constructed of upright slabs with a single course of horizontal slabs above. Covering the cist were five large capstones spanning the grave with several smaller ones covering the gaps.



ILLUS 4 A, Cist 2; B schematic section of Cist 2 and sand dune

No definite constructed base to the grave was found. The skeleton lay on a firmer layer of darker sand containing shells and potsherds, which extended beyond the limits of the grave at the head end and appeared to be a level surface on which the cist was built. A worked stone was found on this surface at the outer north-west corner of the cist.

The cist was covered by a layer of clean sand 0·35 m thick over which was a layer of beach stones up to 0·4 m thick (the flatter ones laid horizontally) with a band of cobbles up to 0·10 m in size and up to three deep on top and 0·2 m thick. Among the cobbles was a flattened ovoid stone measuring 0·15 m by 0·14 m by 0·08 m and battered around its perimeter (illus 5). Above the cobbles was a continuous layer of clean yellow sand 0·7 m thick, then a patchy browner sand layer containing bone fragments and a few limpets 0·4 m thick. Elsewhere between these two layers was a band of firm dark sand 0·20 m thick containing midden material, but although it faded out above the grave area, no sign of a cut for a pit was found. Above the patchy sand was a black firm coarse sand 0·4 m thick, covered by clean sand and turf.



ILLUS 5 Flattened ovoid stone battered around perimeter.

THE SKELETAL REMAINS

A full report on the skeletal material by Dr Margaret Bruce appears on fiche 3:F14–G14.

The extended skeleton of an adult male with the head to the west lay almost supine, butted against the north wall of the grave. The right arm was by the side, but the left forearm lay across the chest. The legs lay diagonally so that the foot bones lay centrally to the east end of the grave. The reason for this asymmetrical position of the skeleton is not apparent.

All the bones of the skeleton, which were in remarkably good condition, were recovered except the hyoid. The only displaced bone was the larynx, which lay in the north-east corner by the feet. The skeletal remains were provisionally examined by Dr Robert Dickie and in detail by Dr Margaret Bruce. A radiocarbon determination of 1710±70 bp (GU 2115) was obtained from the leg bones of the skeleton. The remaining bones were re-interred at Sandwick cemetery, Stornoway.

These skeletal remains are from an adult male, aged 35–40, 171±4 cm in height. The face is long and there is evidence of good muscle development of the lower limbs. The bones are well mineralized and show no evidence of dietary deficiency. There are no signs of growth arrest during development due to prolonged ill-health.

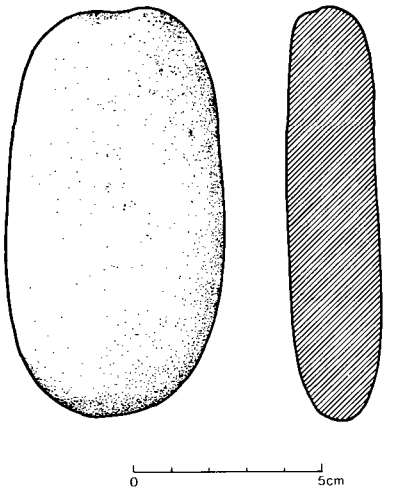
A healed avulsion fracture of the left anterior superior iliac spine is the only sign of skeletal injury. However, two spinal conditions (Schmorl's nodes and spondylolysis) strongly suggest that this individual would have suffered back pain. With regard to dentition, all the teeth show heavy calculus (tartar) deposits and very considerable attrition of their biting surfaces (due to mastication of tough food and/or the presence of shell or grit contaminants of food). Abscess formation is present in the upper jaw, and one molar had been lost some time before death.

There are several minor skeletal abnormalities of no clinical significance: tiny benign bone tumours (osteomata) of the skull, Wormian bones at the lamboid suture, a left cervical rib, a bifid xiphisternum, failure of fusion of the lateral extremities of the scalpular spines, and a third trochanter on both femora.

GRAVE GOODS

A flattened ovoid stone 0·106 m long, 0·026 m thick and 0·057 m wide (illus 6) lay immediately outside the north-west corner of the cist at floor level. Its two principal surfaces showed some signs of rubbing, and one end was distinguished by a small dimple.

A dark red sausage-shaped stone of subtriangular cross-section 0·107 m long and up to 0·045 m across and with one polished face lay between and at right angles to the shins at floor level.

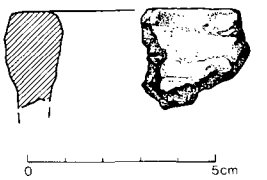


ILLUS 6 Flattened ovoid stone with rubbed faces

Assorted material (table 1) which had been placed in the grave at the time of burial lay around and amongst the bones, especially in the chest area, consisted mainly of marine shells with small quantities of bone, burnt and unburnt, cramp or natural concretion, tiny pebbles and sherds which included a flat rim sherd (illus 7). Pupal cases were also present. Under the circumstances it was not possible to obtain a specialist report.

TABLE 1

Patella	limpet	578	apices + fragments
Mytilus	mussel	119	hinges + fragments
Littorina	periwinkle	20	
Patina pellucida	blue rayed limpet	1	
Acmaea virginea	tortoiseshell limpet	1	
Trivia	cowrie	1	
Ostrea?	oyster	1	? + fragments
Rissoa		1	
		1	
	sea urchin	8	fragments
	unidentified	3	
	crab	8	
	crab/lobster claws	2	vertebrae
	fish	83	fragments including mouse? pelvis
	mammalian bone	14	burnt fragments
Potsherds		20	including a rim
Cramp/natural concretions		6	pieces
pumice?		17	pieces
White unidentified lump		1	
Stone: – tiny pebbles up to 1 mm & shattered fragments		280	
pupal cases		12	ends (many blew away)



ILLUS 7 Sherd with flat rim

DISCUSSION

The two stone cists were of similar construction and orientation with heads to the west. They were built in pits cut through loose windblown sand down to a firmer occupation surface which served as the floor on which the bodies were placed. The clean loose sand, with no bedding planes, retained no evidence of the pits. The capstones were covered with the sand and the graves marked at ground level by cobbles. The northerly grave cobbles may have had a surrounding perimeter wall. Graves at Ackergill (Edwards & Bryce 1926; 1927) also had a pebble covering and deeply set cists. With the radiocarbon dating for one burial, these graves may be considered to be part of an Iron-Age cemetery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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