

Burials at Winton House, Cockenzie and Port Seton, East Lothian

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ABSTRACT

Describes an Iron Age cemetery containing inhumation burials of different types.

INTRODUCTION

In 1988 six burials were discovered during construction work in the grounds of Winton House, Cockenzie and Port Seton (NGR NT 4024 7562, illus 1). The building contractors had stripped by machine an area 20 × 65 m along the north garden wall in preparation for the foundations of 16 houses. The burials were disturbed while digging the foundation trenches for the northwesternmost house. The contractors had collected the bones exposed in the trench, some of which had been lying in a stone cist partly damaged by the mechanical excavator. Excavation was arranged and sponsored by Historic Scotland.

Cleaning of the area within the foundation trench revealed seven features cut into natural. A large, L-shaped, modern pit was located roughly in the centre. The remaining six features contained variable amounts of human bone and were interpreted as burials.

THE GRAVES (illus 2)

All the graves were cut into a subsoil of ancient beach sediments rich in calcium, which accounts for the relatively good preservation of the bones. However, all the burials had been disturbed, some in the past, others by the recent construction work. The graves were all shallow, cut less than 0.5 m into the sandy subsoil, which may explain why no capstones were found. Nevertheless, sufficient survived to show variations in construction techniques and orientation of the graves. The six graves have been divided into three categories: (A) cists made from upright slabs; (B) round pits; and (C) coursed stone cist.

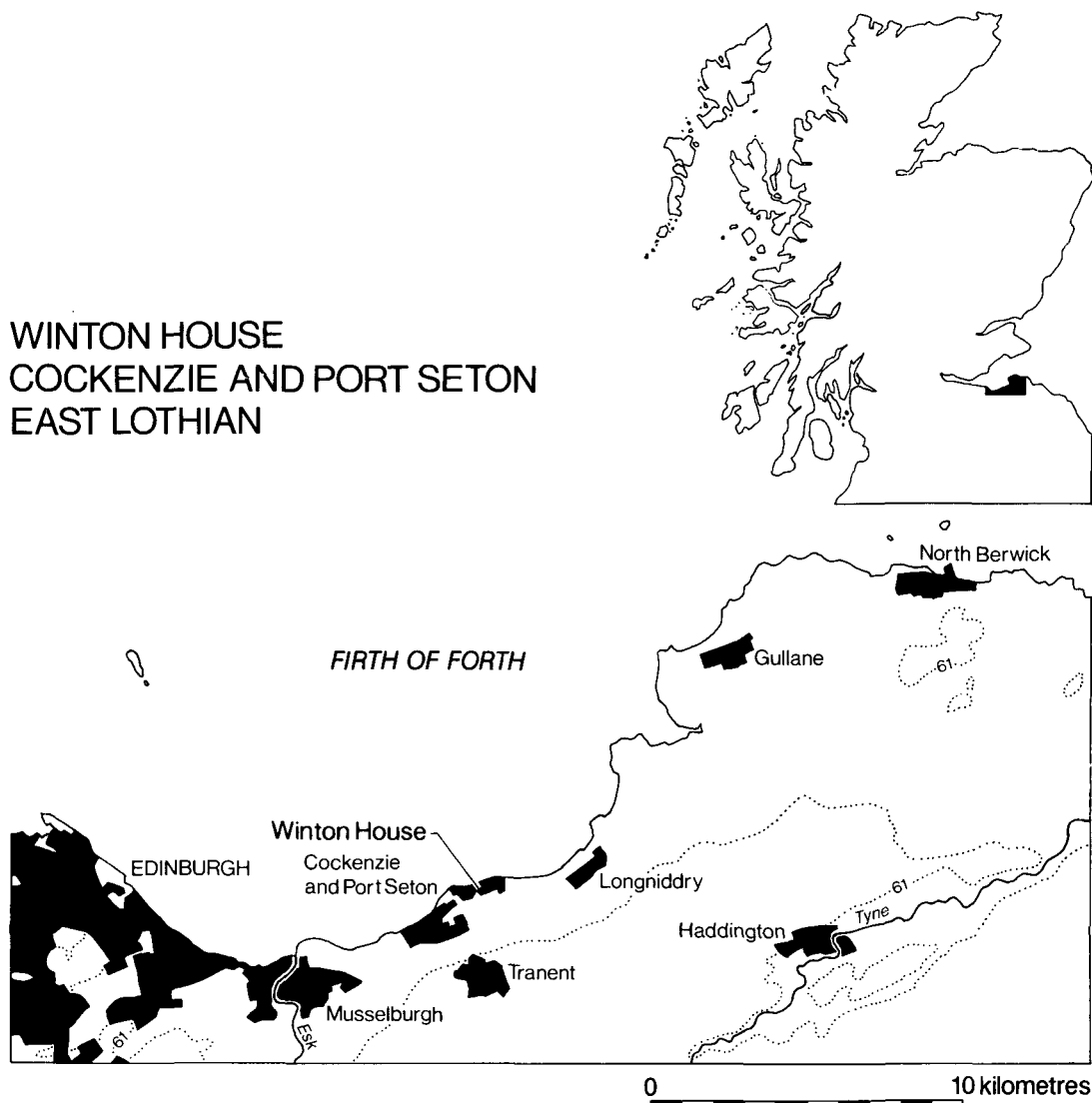
GROUP A: CISTS MADE FROM UPRIGHT SANDSTONE SLABS

Two graves belong to this group: B2 & B6

Burial 2 comprised a stone cist aligned north/south, the north end of which had been removed by a mechanical excavator. The surviving part of the cist consisted of eight stone slabs each 0.2–0.5 m long, set on edge. The base of the cut measured 1.1 × 0.7 m and the cist was 0.5 m deep. The slabs lined the cut of the pit and additional slabs had been set inside the cist, at the south-east corner and south-west side. The south end of cist was skewed towards

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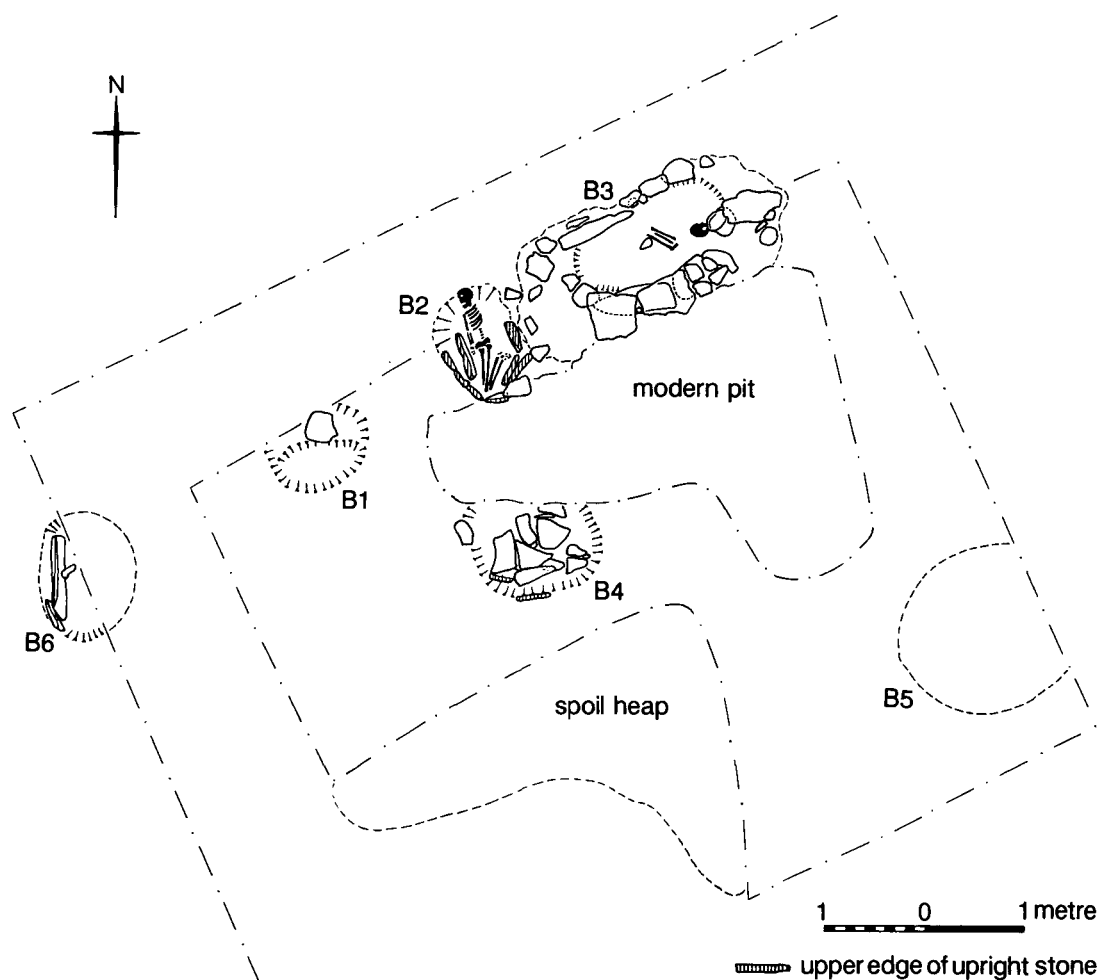
WINTON HOUSE COCKENZIE AND PORT SETON EAST LOTHIAN



ILLUS 1 Location of site

the south-west reflecting the position of the skeleton. Some bones had been removed by the building contractors but almost all of the right half of the skeleton remained *in situ*. The skeleton was that of a female aged 17–24, about 1.57 m (5 ft 2 in) tall. The body had been placed on its right side, facing west. The legs were flexed (above 30°) at the hips, and fully flexed at the knees. The skull had been displaced by the builders but the remaining bones of the right half of the body indicate that the burial had not previously been disturbed.

Burial 6 was badly disturbed by the foundation trench. The cut was oval in shape, aligned north/south, and measured 1 × 0.6 m. Only the west side of the cist survived, in the form of a stone slab, 0.8 m long, set on edge, which partly overlapped with a 0.3 m long slab at the south end. The grave contained the disturbed remains of two skeletons, an adult and a



ILLUS 2 Plan of excavated features

juvenile. The adult was a female aged 17–25 and about 1.57 m (5 ft 2 in) tall. The child was 2½–3 years old.

GROUP B: ROUND PITS

Three burials fall into this category: B1, B4 & B5.

Burial 1 had been partly removed by machine; the disturbed soil in the adjacent trench contained several bones which had probably been displaced from it. The burial pit was clearly visible in the south section of the trench but its exact outline elsewhere was indistinct owing to root disturbance.

Only the bottom 0.2 m of the cut survived to the south of the foundation trench. It measured 1 m east/west and 0.7 m north/south. More bones were found during excavation, including several displaced ribs lying on a stone slab at the bottom of the pit, implying that the base of the grave had been flagged. These displaced bones indicate that the burial had also been disturbed in antiquity. The grave contained skeletal remains of two individuals, an adult female 18–25 years old, 1.67 m (5 ft 6 in) tall, and a juvenile of about 10 years old.

Burial 4 lay 1 m south of burial 2. Its northern edge had been disturbed by the modern pit. The cut was originally slightly oval, aligned east/west and measured 1.3×1 m. The bones had been disturbed in antiquity: more than half were missing, and the remaining bones were out of position. The base and parts of the south-west side of the pit were lined with sandstone slabs. The grave contained the skeleton of a male aged 40–45 and approximately 1.83 m (6 ft) tall.

Burial 5 lay 3 m east of burial 4. Its eastern side had been removed by the foundation trench. The cut for the burial pit was circular, 1.5 m in diameter. The contents had been badly disturbed in the past; only a few human bones and some small stones were found in the centre of the pit. The bones are of an adult individual, but the age and sex could not be determined.

GROUP C: COURSED STONE CIST

Burial 3, located immediately east of burial 2, had an oval cut, aligned north-east/south-west, measuring 3×1.4 m. It contained a cist, built of at least two courses of flat stones, which formed a chamber measuring 1.4×0.7 m. The upper course(s) at the north side of the cist had been removed by the mechanical excavator but the south side survived to a depth of 0.35 m. It consisted of two courses of four sandstone slabs each between 0.4–0.8 m long and 0.1–0.15 m thick. In addition to the recent damage, the burial had been disturbed in antiquity. The stones at the east end of the cist were displaced and only an incomplete skull and bones from the left arm and leg were retrieved from the base of the cist. The skull was located at its east end, possibly indicating the original orientation of the body. It would have been flexed slightly to fit into the cist. The grave contained the remains of a female 30–40 years old.

THE CEMETERY

Although the graves showed some variety in construction techniques and alignment, none of the burial pits cut into each other, and it seems likely that they are roughly contemporary, constituting part, or all, of a cemetery. As the excavation was restricted to the area affected by the building work, the limits of the cemetery were not located. However, there was no sign of any further burials in the foundation trenches to the east and south of the site indicating that the cemetery may not have continued any further in those directions.

Only burial 6 contained sufficient material for a radiocarbon determination. It produced a date of 1870 ± 70 bp (GU-2596). From the Belfast calibration curve there is a 95% probability that the date lies within the range AD 10 to AD 340 (Pearson *et al* 1986).

DISCUSSION

The Winton House graves show striking similarities to those found at the excavations of Broxmouth Hillfort east of Dunbar (Hill 1982, 179–80.) A cemetery containing nine graves was discovered on the north side of the hillfort just outside the outer ditch and a further four graves were found within the hillfort. The graves were of varied type with a mixture of circular and oval grave pits, some stone lined and others not. None of the graves contained grave goods. The excavation located the west, east and north limits of the cemetery (Hill 1982, 179–80).

The Broxmouth graves are of similar character to 14 graves found at Dryburn Bridge, approx 3 km south-east of Broxmouth, which were found during the excavation of a palisade and circular houses (Triscott 1982, 117).

Both the Broxmouth and Dryburn graves groups are radiocarbon dated. The six

Dryburn dates seem to fall into two main groups; three dates are most likely to predate 400 BC (1000–375 BC at 1σ); while two postdate 400 BC (359 BC–AD 225 at 1σ). The sixth date overlaps these two groups. The seven Broxmouth dates are roughly contemporary with the later Dryburn dates, that is, from the third century BC to the first century AD.

The dates from Broxmouth suggest that, despite the variations in grave types, the cemetery was probably in use for less than 400 years. The single date from the Winton House cemetery is slightly later than either the Broxmouth cemetery or the Dryburn post-palisade graves. There is a 68% probability that the Winton House date is 70–290 years younger than the latest Broxmouth date. However, the similarities between the Broxmouth and Winton House cemeteries indicate that they both derive from the same burial tradition which, based on the available dates, spans from the middle of the first millennium BC to the end of the third century AD.

APPENDIX 1

THE HUMAN BONES

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A more detailed description of the human remains appears in fiche 4:A4–B8.

The skeletal material from Winton House came from five, or possibly six, cist burials and were in poor, fragmented condition. The remains consisted of one complete and two broken adult skulls, fragments of juvenile crania, a few vertebrae and several ribs, while long bones were mostly represented by the outer cortex of the shaft. Unstratified bone scatter was identified with particular skeletons wherever possible; the skeletons comprised six adults. B4 was a male about 45 at the time of death; B1, B2 and B7 were three females between 17 and 25; B3 was a female between 30 and 40; and B5 was a skeleton of indeterminate age and sex. Two juveniles were also present, both of whom were buried with adults: a child aged about 10 in B1 was buried with a female aged 18–25 years and a child of approximately 30–36 months was found with a female of 17–25 years in burial B6.

The latter two burials were disturbed so it was not possible to ascertain if the two burials in each were simultaneous or successive. The most common type of adult and child burial is that of mother and newly born child (Ritchie & Stevenson 1982, 552) but adults and older children, as at Winton House, have also been noted. At Ardiffery, Aberdeenshire, an 8–10-year-old was buried with an adult male of 20–25 years (Harman 1977, 90).

The skeletons were gracile and the bone dimensions small. The length of broken long bones had to be estimated from segments (Steel 1970) which increased the degree of probable error in estimating stature from the formula of Trotter & Gleser (Brothwell 1981). Height, however, appeared normal, ranging from 5 ft 1 in (1.55 m) to 5 ft 4 in (1.62 m) in the females and approximately 6 ft (1.83 m) in the one male.

Few non-metrical variations were detectable but a strongly marked pre-auricular sulcus was noted on B2 together with a depression which might indicate one or more pregnancies (Kelly 1979) or, alternatively, could have been caused by pressure from squatting or obesity, since the articular relationship between the female sacrum and ilium is looser in females than in males (Andersen *in* Iscan 1988). A medial squatting facet, not necessarily owing to squatting, was noted on one female tibia and all available femora, with the exception of the male, exhibited platymeria or antero-posterior flattening. This is common in ancient

populations and may indicate activity over rough terrain. Both femora from skeleton B2 showed flanges on the lateral aspects of the shafts just below the lesser tuberosity, a structure noted by MacLaughlin & Bruce (1985) in Bronze Age skeletons.

The measurements from the male cranium (B4) were not characteristic of the Scottish short cist crania given by Reid & Morant (1928), but pathological thickening of its parietal bone and of the right femur and left tibia indicated possible Paget's disease or *Osteitis Deformans* – a chronic bone disease which rarely appears before the age of 40. It occurs more frequently in men than in women and can affect one or more bones in the body but never the whole skeleton (Ortner & Putschar 1985).

There was possible evidence of mild chronic sclerosing osteomyelitis following trauma in female skeleton B7. The same generalized disfiguration was seen in the right humerus, radius and ulna fragments in bone scatter Find 9 with a possible cloaca opening in the ulna masked by post-mortem damage. Slight calculus in the teeth was noted in one female with some periodontal disease while one molar only, from the male skeleton, exhibited caries. In the child of 24–36 months, however, there was marked hypoplasia of an unerupted upper right first permanent molar and, possibly, in the upper right primary molar which indicated some metabolic disturbance in the latter half of the first year of life.

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