

# A Beaker cist from Balblair, near Beauly, Inverness District

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## ABSTRACT

*An unusually small cist, containing two 'Late Northern/step 5' Beakers (one normal-sized, the other small), and with chemical traces suggesting the former presence of unburnt human remains, is described.*

## INTRODUCTION

The site lies at NGR NH 5067 4448 near the end of a fluvio-glacial gravel ridge (25 m OD), c 1 km west of the River Beauly, and located within the Balblair sand and gravel quarry operated by John Fyfe Ltd (illus 1). The site location commands fine views south across the River Beauly.

The cist was discovered on 3 November 1990 by two machine drivers, Mr F Reid and Mr F MacKenzie, who were involved in topsoil-stripping operations prior to the extension of the quarry face over an area previously covered by a small plantation. A machine bucket struck the buried cist, fragmenting the capstone and opening up a void. From this the drivers removed a pair of Beakers of Clarke's Late Northern (N3)/Lanting & van der Waals' step 5 type (Clarke 1970; Lanting & van der Waals 1972). The smaller of the two was recovered intact, whilst the larger Beaker was in a number of fragments, having been broken by the impact of the machine.

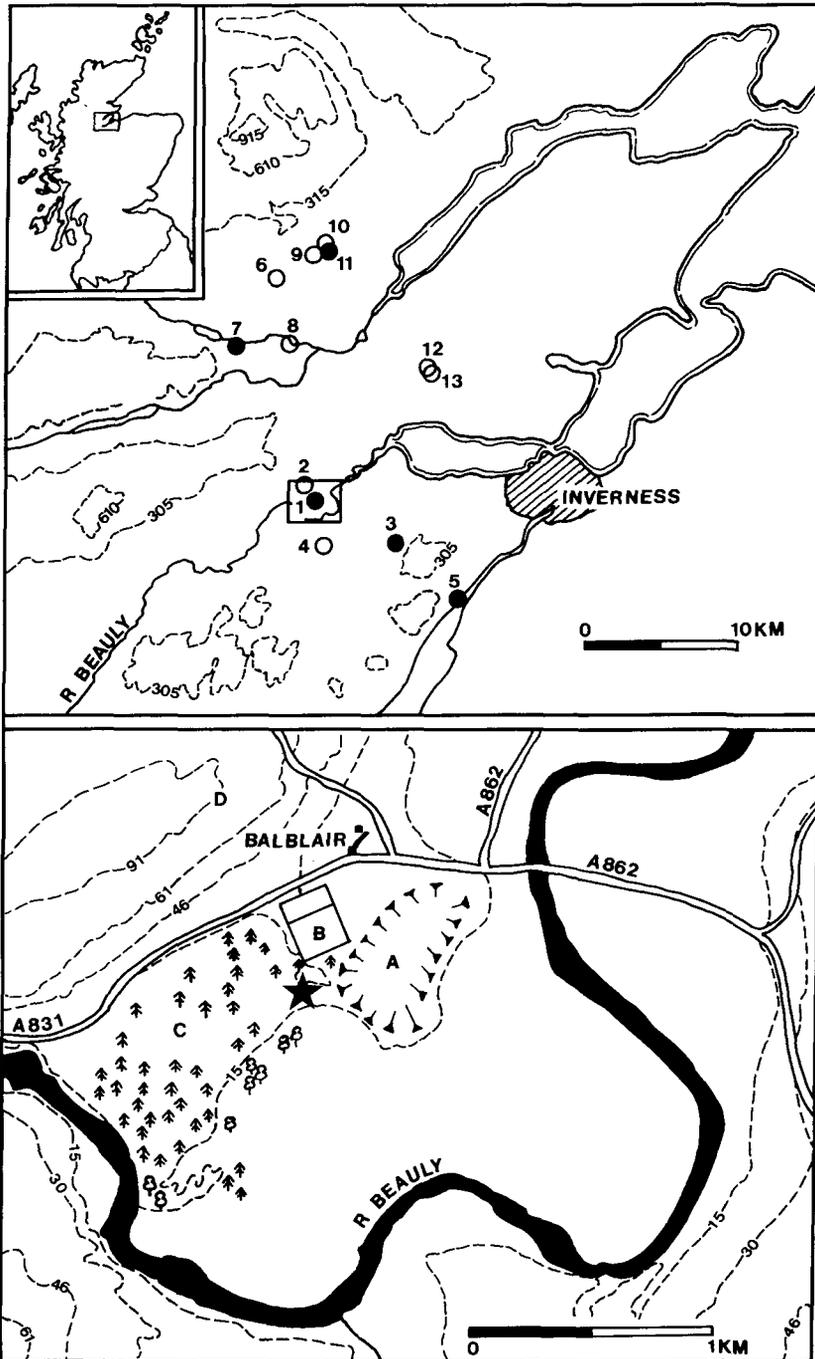
The finds were promptly reported to Inverness Museum and Art Gallery and a rescue excavation by museum staff took place over the next four days. The Beakers were declared Treasure Trove and disposed to Inverness Museum in September 1991 (registered as INVMG 1992.019.1–2).

## THE EXCAVATION

The cist construction pit had been dug through the natural yellow sand and pebble gravels. No investigation of the topsoil layer was possible as this had been almost completely removed by the earth-stripping machinery. The cist itself had been considerably disturbed as a result of the machine impact, due to both the shattering of the capstone and the partial collapse of two of the side slabs. Penetration of the construction pit by root systems from the felled plantation had also

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ILLUS I Site location. Key to maps: Upper map – 1, Balblair; 2, Craigsorry; 3, South Clunes; 4, Uamh Gillichuinne; 5, Lochend; 6, Croch Fionne; 7, Muirton Mains; 8, Easter Moy; 9, Keppoch House; 10, Fodderty Farm I; 11, Fodderty Farm II; 12, Carn Glas (Kilcoy III); 13, Carn Glas (Kilcoy II). Lower map – A, Balblair quarry; B, Hydro-Electric Switching Station; C, Balblair Wood; D, Craigsorry cist site. Based upon the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright



ILLUS 2 The cist after removal of most of the capstone, from the north-east

caused some mixing of the fills. After initial cleaning, the darker fill of the construction pit was clearly visible.

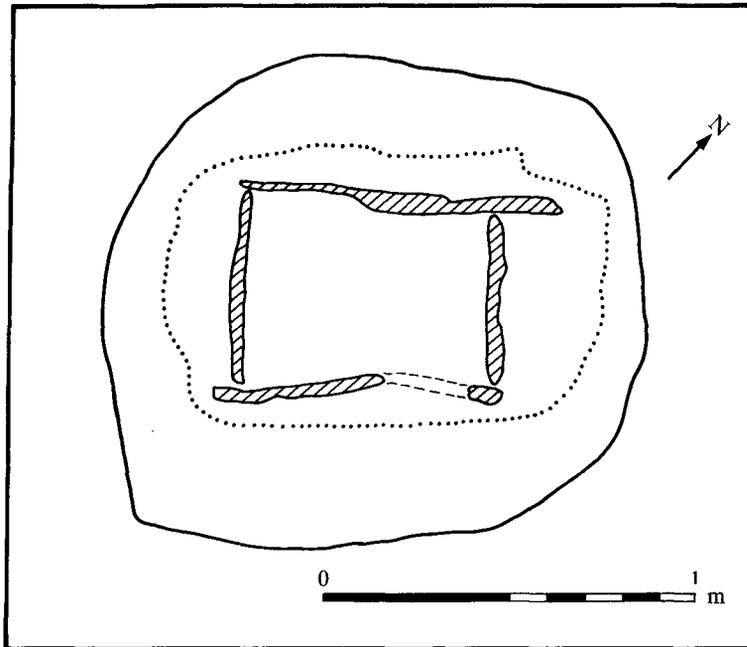
The interior of the cist was half-sectioned and the entire fill was sieved. No further finds were made, with the acidic nature of the gravels making the survival of any unburnt bone highly unlikely. It was not possible to pinpoint the former location of the two Beakers within the cist prior to their removal by the machine operators. None of the missing fragments from the larger Beaker was located during the excavation, suggesting that they had been lost after the Beakers were removed.

The lower fills of the cist were difficult to distinguish both from each other and from the natural subsoil, due to the ingress of material from outwith the cist. Beneath the obvious impact and collapse debris at a depth of 0.35 m there was an apparent silting layer c 50 mm thick, consisting of the natural yellow sands and gravels, but with a slightly higher humic content than the surrounding natural. Sealed by this layer was the probable base of the cist, marked by a spread of pebbles which might represent a partial pebble flooring (illus 2). No body stain was apparent.

Phosphate and pH analyses of samples taken from the cist fills were carried out by Stephen Carter of AOC (Scotland) Ltd. The results indicated a variable distribution of phosphate and pH readings above the level of the control values; higher levels were recorded in the suggested basal layer, indicating the probable presence of decayed human remains within the cist.

### CIST CONSTRUCTION

The cist (illus 3) was oriented NE/SW and consisted of four rectilinear sandstone side-slabs, sealed by a large capstone, set within a sub-oval construction pit measuring 1.45 × 1.30 m in its maximum



ILLUS 3 Plan of the cist. Dotted line indicates former position of capstone; unbroken line indicates edge of pit

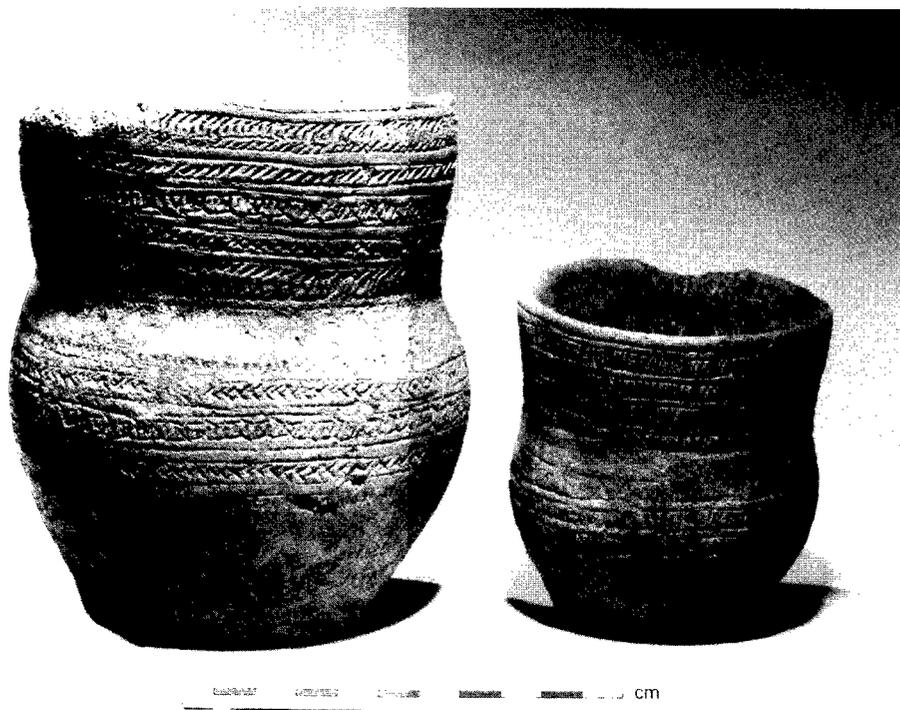
dimensions. A fragment of the capstone was thin-sectioned and identified as local sandstone. The longer side slabs of the cist overlapped the shorter slabs at either end; both had partly collapsed due to the compression caused by the weight of the machines. The capstone measured  $1.12 \times 0.75$  m and the internal dimensions of the cist were  $0.65 \times 0.45$  m (maximum). The probable floor lay 0.4 m below the top edge of the side-slabs. The bases of each of the side-slabs had been chocked up with pebbles to create a level base for the capstone, and the gap between the side-slabs and the edge of the construction pit had been filled with carefully laid pebble packing.

## THE BEAKERS

### POT 1 (ILLUS 4 & 5)

This, the larger of the two vessels, is complete but for just under half of its rim, and is in generally good condition, but has small patches of abrasion on one side of its exterior surface. It is well made, with a carefully smoothed internal surface and burnished exterior. Surface coloration is predominantly rich reddish-brown, with buff-brown patches; additional coloration has resulted from subsequent staining (see below). The fabric contains numerous but mostly small and unobtrusive grits. Mica flakes are present, but not in sufficient quantities to give the vessel a micaceous appearance.

The rim is internally bevelled and decorated; the neck is nearly vertical and occupies around two-fifths of the vessel's height; and the belly is bulbous, ending in a pedastalled and very slightly

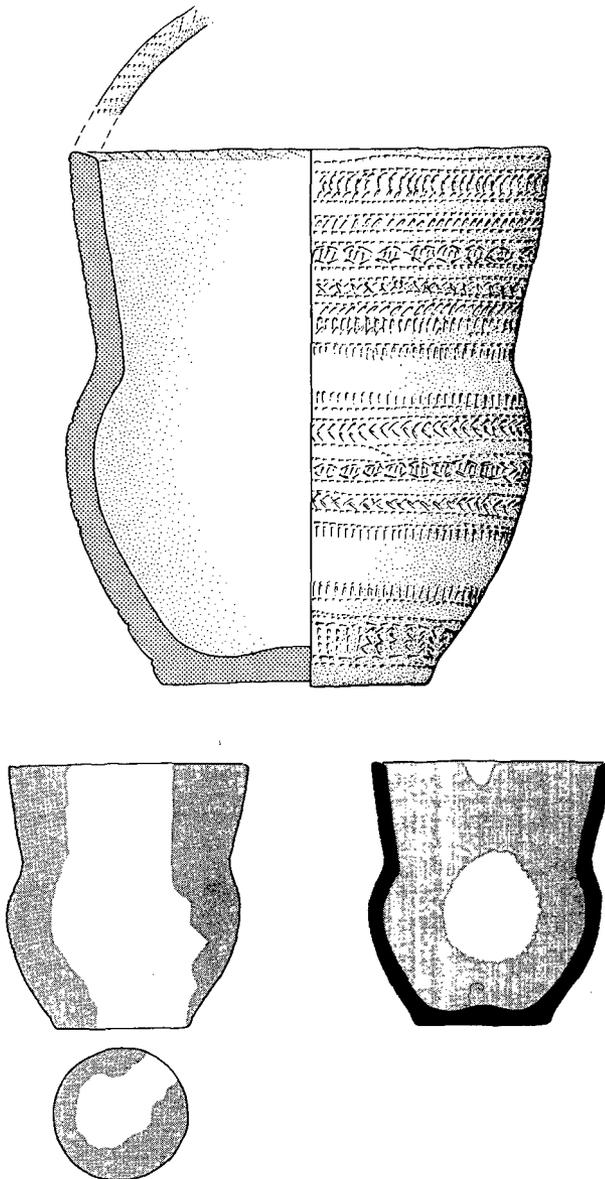


ILLUS 4 The Beakers (*National Museums of Scotland*)

concave base, with an internal omphalos. Dimensions are as follows: height 140 mm; rim diameter 124 mm; base diameter 75 mm; maximum diameter (at belly) 120 mm; wall thickness 8–9 mm.

Decoration is by fine-toothed comb impression, and the use of two combs is evident: one, slightly curving, approximately 27 mm long, and the other approximately 3 mm long. The rim bevel has short diagonal lines and running chevrons, and on the body the decoration is arranged into three zones: the neck, the upper belly and the lower belly. The zones are separated by plain areas, fringed by 'tassels'. The two upper zones comprise five and three bands respectively (bands 'a'–'h' from top downwards), each defined by two horizontal lines and separated from its neighbour by a narrow plain strip. An additional horizontal line lies at the top of the uppermost zone. Motifs comprise a running 'S' design (bands a & e), a running diagonal stroke (b), a filled lozenge or hexagon design (c & g) and a loose criss-cross design, in places no more than a running chevron (d, f & h). The lowest zone contains a single band of panelled decoration, framed by an inner zigzag line and an outer horizontal line above and below. Part of the design is obscured by abrasion, but sufficient survives to show that the panels consist of vertical straight lines and vertical and horizontal herringbone designs, the panels alternating irregularly and being of uneven widths.

A significant feature is the presence, over most of the external and internal surfaces, of a stain (illus 5). This manifests itself as darkened areas of the red-brown and buff-brown fabric (the discoloration varying in intensity from area to area), and also – particularly around its edges on the vessel's outer surface – as purplish-grey and blackish patches. Under the microscope the latter



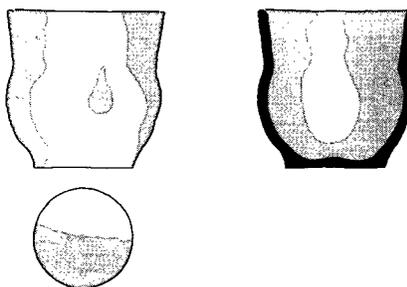
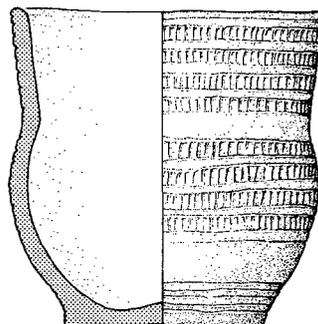
ILLUS 5 Pot 1. Top: the Beaker, half size. Bottom: extent of the stain, on the exterior (l) and interior (r) surfaces

appear as a thin, slightly granular surface coating, thickening in the hollows made by the comb impressions. On the interior surface, the stain has a distinct, splaying U-shaped boundary in one area of the rim, and a less distinct, roughly circular 'lacuna' at belly level on the same side of the pot. The edges of the 'U' continue down the outside of the pot, following its contours and leaving just under a quarter of the surface clear of stain. The edges join again on the outside of the base, where a keyhole-shaped area is stain-free. The cause of the stain will be discussed below.

#### POT 2 (ILLUS 4 & 6)

This is an unusually small Beaker, only 84 mm high. Although it differs in size and decorative technique from Pot 1, it nevertheless shares many features in common. The pot is virtually complete and in near-pristine condition, with only minor damage to the rim and slight surface abrasion on one side of the exterior. It has been well made, with carefully smoothed surfaces; surface coloration varies and, as with Pot 1, is affected by a stain covering most of the pot. The basic colours throughout are a rich reddish- to orange-brown, with buff-brown patches. The pot is of a fine, slightly sandy fabric, with numerous small and unobtrusive grits (mostly no larger than 2 mm across) and a few mica flakes.

The rim is simple and rounded; the neck rises nearly vertically from the bulbous belly and, as with Pot 1, occupies around two-fifths of the pot's height. The base has an external pedestal and an internal omphalos. The pot's height of 84 mm is matched by its rim diameter, and other dimensions are as follows: base diameter 53 mm; maximum diameter (at belly) 82 mm; wall thickness 5–7 mm.



ILLUS 6 Pot 2. Top: the Beaker, half size.  
Bottom: extent of the stain, on the exterior (l) and interior (r) surfaces

Decoration is by incision using a narrow sharp point, and is organized into three zones as on Pot 1. The two upper zones each contain four bands of a horizontal 'ladder' design, separated by narrow plain strips. A broader plain area divides the two zones from each other, and there are additional single horizontal lines at the top of the upper zone and at the bottom of the lower. The third zone consists of five horizontal lines.

As on Pot 1, a stain of varying intensity covers most of the inner and outer surfaces of the pot (illus 6). At its most intense it is blackish-brown and dark purplish-grey; elsewhere it is light grey or simply a darker version of the basic surface colours. It has seeped into the decoration and is thickest in these depressions, particularly towards the top of the pot. Its edges are dark and generally clearly defined. In the interior, the stain covers all but an irregular figure-of-eight area; the edges continue over the rim and down the outside of the pot, following its contours and joining about midway across the base. There is also a pear-shaped splash in the quarter or so of the vessel's exterior not otherwise affected by the stain.

#### COMMENTS

Both vessels can be placed within Clarke's (1970) 'Late Northern (N3)' and Lanting & van der Waals' (1972) 'step 5' class of Beaker, on the grounds of their shape and decoration. In particular, the wide variety of motifs used on Pot 1, and the presence of the running 'S' and filled hexagon/lozenge motifs, are distinguishing features of this type of Beaker. As for their position with respect to Shepherd's localized scheme for Grampian Beakers (1986), an attribution to steps 5 or 6 can be suggested.

Although no exact matches for either pot exist, local parallels can be found for individual features, such as the use of incised decoration on Pot 2, which is echoed at Mains of Balnagowan (Shepherd *et al* 1984) and Lochend (Clarke 1970, no 1667; MacDougall 1944). Furthermore, in shape and overall decorative scheme, numerous parallels can be found amongst the N3/step 5 Beakers which cluster in north-east Scotland (eg Pots 1 & 2, Nether Criggie, Kincardineshire: Kirk & McKenzie 1956).

The presence of two or more Beakers in a cist, although a rare occurrence, has been noted in at least 12 other cases in north-east Scotland. Most involve N2-4/step 4-6 Beakers (Clarke 1970, 451-2); additionally, at Chapelden, Aberdeenshire, the second Beaker had been smashed and sherds placed on top of the capstone (Greig *et al* 1989). Furthermore, the exceptionally small size of Pot 2, and the marked height difference between Pots 1 and 2, make the Balblair assemblage unusual but not unique. At other north-eastern Scottish sites, the smaller pots tend to be larger than Pot 2, and the size differential tends to be less marked. Elsewhere, however, closer size parallels for the Balblair pair (and indeed, more extreme examples) can be cited: for example, a secondary pit interment in a long mound on Biggar Common, Lanarkshire, produced a pair of Beakers with a height differential of 178 vs 85 mm (Sheridan forthcoming). Here, too, the second Beaker appeared to have been smashed and scattered over the top of the grave. The two Balblair Beakers raise the question, discussed below, of whether more than one individual was interred, and whether a child or baby was involved.

As for the staining of both pots, the available information does not suggest that this resulted from the spilling of their hypothetical contents: even if both had been full when deposited, the volume of material could not have been sufficient to cause the observed pattern of staining. Rather, the explanation which best fits the evidence – although not an unproblematic one – is that the pots had lain on their side in the cist, and at some point the cist flooded to a depth sufficient to fill each pot, but not completely: hence the vertical internal and external 'tide-line' seen when the pots are

placed upright. The size differential between Pots 1 and 2 means that the latter must have been resting – or floating – a couple of centimetres higher than Pot 1. The splash on the outside of Pot 2 could have resulted from a drip from the underside of the capstone. However, this interpretation begs the question of when and how the pots came to be supine (cf Small *et al* 1988, 73).

## DISCUSSION

Within the low-lying area of land around the heads of the Cromarty and Beaully Firths and the western neck of the Black Isle, some 13 cist sites are recorded (illus 1), of which only five (including the present example) have produced Beaker pottery. Most of the excavations are unpublished and many of the discoveries were made during the 19th or early 20th century. Of those burials producing Beaker pottery, that at South Clunes contained an N3/step 4 Beaker within a cist constructed of six side slabs and five capstones (Low 1934; Clarke 1970, no 1666). The excavator recorded ‘a number of rounded boulders’ around the burial: this may indicate the presence of a denuded kerb. The Lochend cist contained an N3 Beaker, and an N4 vessel was excavated at Fodderty Farm II in 1980 (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1985, 23). The 1973 excavation at Muirton Mains (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1973, 49) produced a number of small friable fragments of Beaker of uncertain type. It should be noted here that two Orkney/Cromarty chambered tombs in the area – at Carn Glas and Kilcoy South – also produced Beaker sherds, from secondary activity (RCAHMS 1979a, nos 6, 13; Woodham 1956, 86; Woodham & Woodham 1957). The types represented were Clarke’s E, FN and indeterminate, and AOC, E, FN and N2 respectively (Lanting & van der Waals’ steps 1–4).

Amongst the remaining cists (illus 1), the most interesting is that found in 1925 at Craigsorry (Callander 1925; Coles 1969,90), where a rock-cut cist measuring 2.13 × 1.22 m was uncovered on the adjacent hillslope to the Balblair find. This produced cremated bone, a flint barbed and tanged arrowhead and plano-convex knife, and fragments of a corroded copper alloy dagger. In the parish of Kiltarlity, according to the *Statistical Account of Scotland* (vol 17, 192), a ‘stone coffin’ known locally as Uamh Gillichuinne, containing ‘two urns filled with ashes’, was discovered in 1763. The site was subsequently destroyed. At Croch Fionne, three short cists and a separate cinerary urn were found at an uncertain location in a mound of sand and gravel in 1896 (HRC SMR: NH 45 NE 16). Each cist produced an inhumation but no finds. The cist at Easter Moy (Mackenzie 1908) was discovered during road repairs in 1907 and produced a Food Vessel, four flints and some charcoal. The Keppoch House cist (RCAHMS 1979b, no 105) was found in 1820 and is recorded as containing human bone. Fodderty Farm I (*ibid*, no 102) was another early 19th-century discovery which produced inhumed remains but no artefacts. Finally, at Kilcoy, a round cairn with eccentrically placed cist produced a Food Vessel (RCAHMS 1979a, no 34; Woodham 1956, ‘Kilcoy II’), while a nearby round cairn (RCAHMS 1979a, no 33; Woodham 1956, ‘Kilcoy III’) contained a robbed cist, which produced cremated bone and a quern.

The Balblair cist is, in many respects, a typical example of the step 5/6 Beaker burials which are concentrated in north-east Scotland (Shepherd 1986). Shepherd notes that short cists in this area often lie in raised locations on natural gravels (*ibid*, 13), and in this regard the Balblair cist is comparable with such local sites as Mains of Balnagowan, Darnaway (Wedderburn 1975), South Clunes and Craigsorry, as well as with other Beaker burials within the broad north-eastern grouping such as Chapelden (Greig *et al*, 1989), Nether Criggie (Kirk & McKenzie 1956), Newhills (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1977, 4; 1980, 9–10; 1984, 13–14), Catterline (Small *et al* 1988) and Keabog (Shepherd & Bruce 1987). Regarding orientation, Balblair again appears characteristic of the north-eastern group, with the local sites of Craigsorry, South Clunes and Lochend sharing the same broad NE/SW orientation, also apparent at sites such as Chapelden and Nether Criggie.

Similarly, north-eastern parallels for the pebble flooring can be found at Balnagowan and Chapelden.

However, the Balblair cist is unusually small: in the north-eastern group, the average size is approximately  $1 \times 0.5$  m. This, together with the presence of two Beakers and the small size of one of them, raises the question of whether more than one individual was interred, and whether a child or baby was involved. The cist's size suggests that two complete adult interments are unlikely, although the burial of an adult and a child is not impossible, as the  $0.6 \times 0.45$  m cist from Boatbridge Quarry, Lanarkshire, demonstrates (Clarke *et al* 1984). A single child interment in a similarly sized cist ( $0.66 \times 0.43$  m) is known from Catterline (Small *et al* 1988).

The many similarities between the two Balblair vessels suggest that they could have been deposited in a single episode – or at the very least, that they belong to the same ceramic tradition; the cist itself offered no evidence to indicate whether more than one deposition event had been involved. In discussing multiple Beaker interments in general, Clarke observed that 'most of the female graves with several vessels are with a young or newborn child', but added that not all multiple Beaker interments were female; in four cases, 'two Beakers accompany double male burials' (1970, 449). A review of the available British evidence for both multiple and 'miniature' Beaker associations reveals a complex picture, as follows:

- adult-plus-child/baby with one large plus one small Beaker, eg Wilsford G1, Wiltshire (adult female); Broomend of Crichtie 2, Aberdeenshire (adult male: Clarke 1970, 439, 442)
- (female) adult-plus-newborn baby with three smaller than average Beakers: Nether Criggie, Kincardineshire (Kirk & McKenzie 1956)
- adult female with one large plus one small Beaker, eg Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire (Clarke 1970, 438)
- adult female with two large plus one not-so-large Beaker: Keir Belhevie, Aberdeenshire (*ibid*, 443; Shepherd 1986, 29)
- adult male and child with 'normal' sized Beaker: Hillhead, Aberdeenshire (plus pebble, flint flake and fir cone: Clarke 1970, 438; Shepherd 1986, 29)
- child with smaller-than-average Beaker, eg Nunraw, East Lothian (Clarke 1970, 442)
- child with 'full-sized' Beaker, eg Catterline, Kincardineshire (albeit in a smaller-than-average cist; child aged 6–7: Small *et al* 1988).

It is, of course, possible that the excavators of the single adult females with multiple Beakers failed to spot the bones of a baby or a young child. A case could be made, on the evidence cited above, that the combination of a small cist, multiple Beakers and presence of a smaller-than average Beaker at Balblair could suggest the *possible* interment of an adult with a baby or a young child. Furthermore, Alexandra Shepherd's observation (in Greig *et al* 1989) that in north-eastern Scotland, step 5 Beakers regularly accompany females could be taken as an indication of a possible female occupant of the cist. However, any interpretation must be tempered by the facts that: (a) the available evidence from elsewhere does not provide a consistent, unequivocal picture; and (b) only a very few interments of children or babies in cists are known, with Scotland producing fewer than 10 (Small *et al* 1988). Bruce (*in* Shepherd 1986) has noted that in one case, at Auchlin, Aberdeenshire, a double child interment was not accompanied by grave goods.

Finally, as for the date of the Balblair cist, the results of the recent British Museum Beaker dating programme (Kinnes *et al* 1991) are not overly enlightening. The calibrated radiocarbon dates for human bone associated with N3 Beakers from Scotland (five dates) and England (one date) range between 2460–1675 BC (at two sigma) – a period within which, it appears, all other Beaker types were also in use in Britain. Whether dating of additional material changes this picture remains to be seen; unfortunately, the Balblair material offers no scope for absolute dating.

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