

A cist burial adjacent to the Bronze Age cairn at Cnip, Uig, Isle of Lewis

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with contributions by M F Bruce & N W Kerr

ABSTRACT

A Bronze Age cist inhumation lying c 5m from a multi-phase cairn on Cnip headland was excavated in 1992, following its exposure as a result of erosion of the machair. The flexed skeleton of a mature adult male, which was accompanied by an undiagnostic plain pottery vessel, showed significant facial trauma. A radiocarbon determination indicates that the burial took place in the middle of the second millennium BC, at broadly the same time as an inurned cremation was inserted into the adjacent cairn. This evidence appears to reflect a more widespread pattern of heterogeneity in funerary traditions, although attempts at regional synthesis in the Western Isles are hampered by the preponderance in the data set of sites with scant records which were discovered long ago. More recent work has started to overcome this problem. The project was sponsored by Historic Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

During the years since the excavation of the Bronze Age cairn on Cnip (Kneep) headland, overlooking Tràigh na Berie on the Bhaltos (Valtos) peninsula in the west of the Isle of Lewis (Close-Brooks, this volume), erosion of the machair has progressed up the southern slopes of the hill, creating a number of substantial and unsightly deflation hollows. Continuing archaeological interest has been stimulated by the discovery of exposed human bones in these eroding areas on four occasions, in July 1979, May and November 1991 and summer 1994. These discoveries have led to the excavation of five Viking Age burials, apparently components of an extensive cemetery dating to the ninth–tenth century AD, which was situated on the same part of the headland as the Bronze Age cairn (Welander *et al* 1987; Dunwell *et al*, this volume). In winter 1991–2 a cluster of stones, apparently containing upright slabs, was identified by Mr and Mrs G R Curtis c 5 m west of the preserved remains of the Bronze Age cairn, and suspected to be the eroded remains of a short cist (NGR: NB 099364; for relative positions see Dunwell *et al*, this volume, illus 1).

The opportunity was taken to investigate the site in April 1992, during a programme of landscape survey of the Bhaltos peninsula (Armit 1994) and the excavation of three Viking Age graves (Dunwell *et al* this volume), sponsored by Historic Scotland. Most of the deposits around

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ILLUS 1 The cist prior to excavation, from north, showing possible capping material, preserved area of contemporary ground surface in foreground, and part of kerb in background

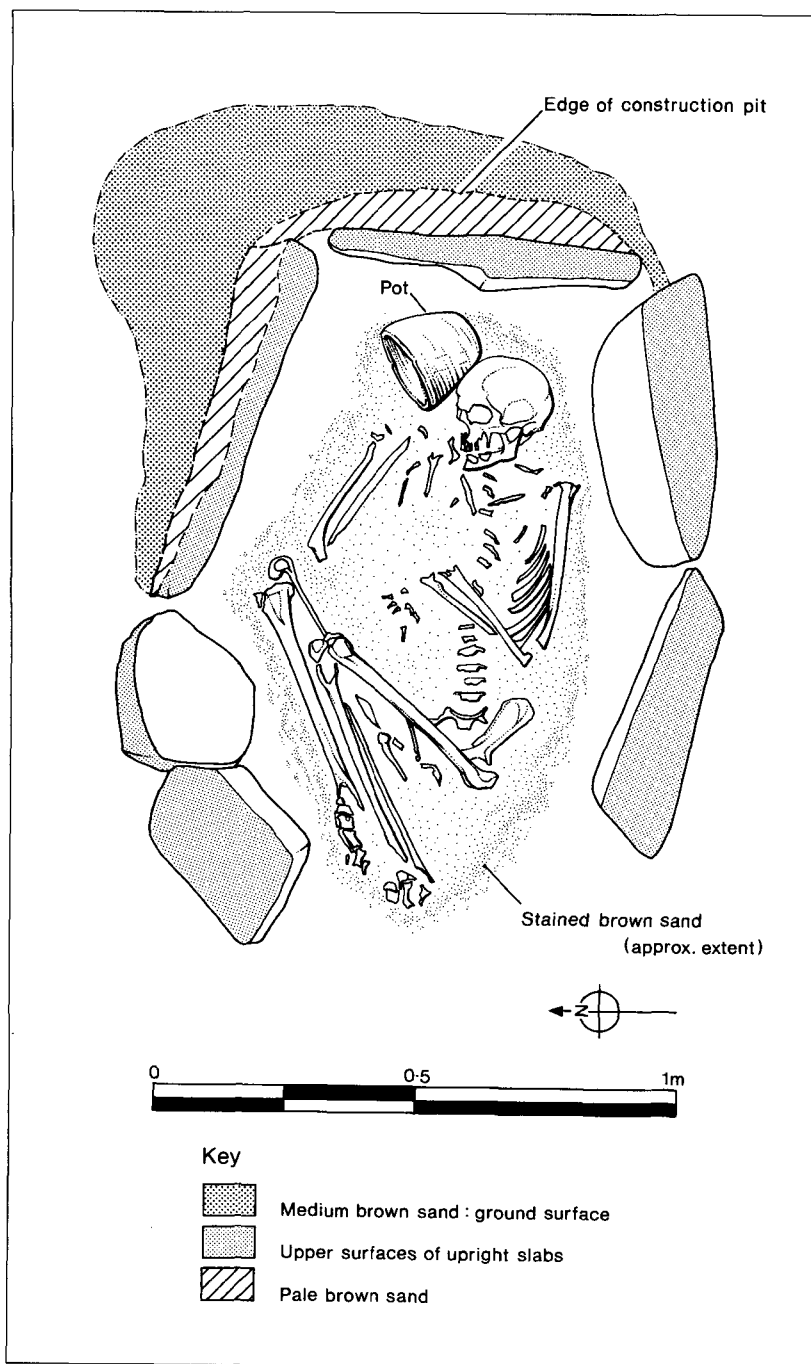
the putative cist had been scoured by the wind, and it was considered that its fragile upstanding remains were unlikely to withstand the extremes of Hebridean weather for much longer (illus 1). A campfire had recently been lit within the cluster of stones, and the possibility of further contamination and disturbance provided additional impetus for its examination.

EXCAVATION

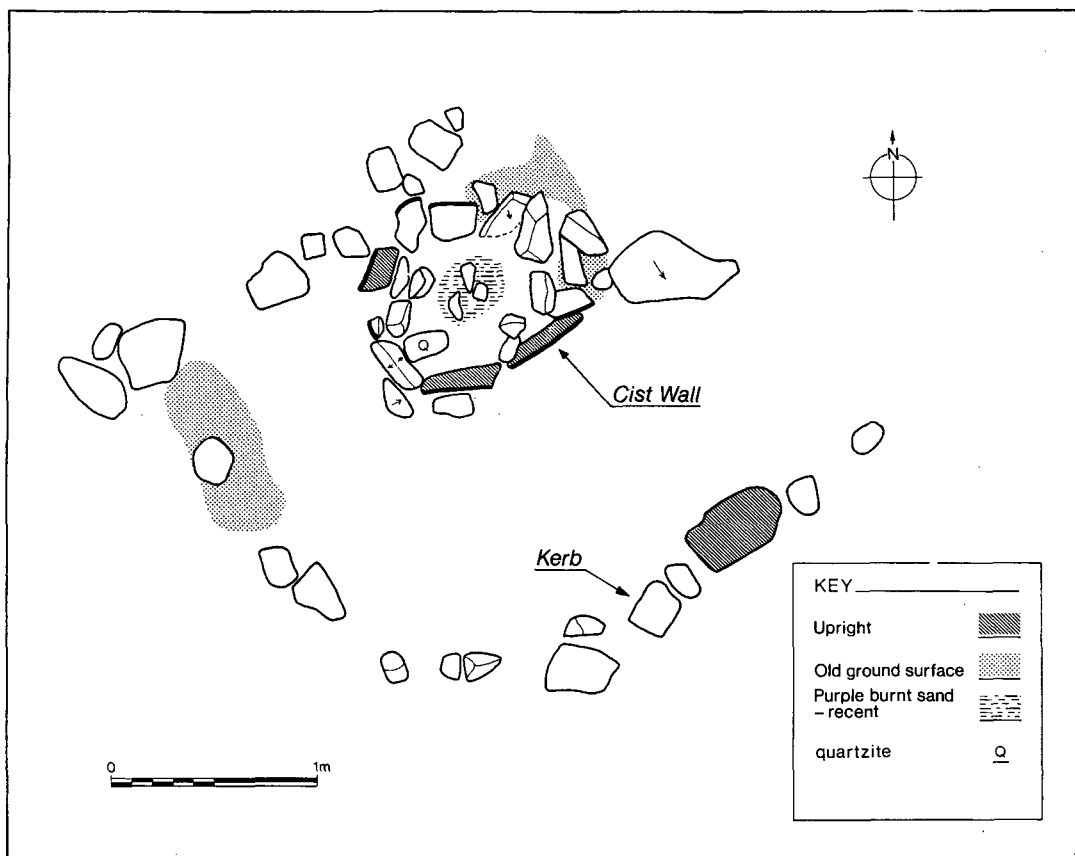
Andrew Dunwell & Tim Neighbour

CIST CONSTRUCTION AND ASSOCIATED FEATURES

Excavation confirmed the feature to be the preserved remains of a short cist. The cist comprised a sub-rectangular arrangement of six upright slabs with an average height of 0.4 m. Its internal dimensions were c 1.2 m east/west by 0.7 m on average (illus 2). No trace survived of the western side of the cist, presumably once formed by a single slab. It could not be established whether the removal of this walling occurred recently, following the current exposure of the site, or in antiquity. The cist lacked a stone floor and the burial had been laid directly on the undisturbed sand sub-surface. The burial was sealed beneath a deposit of fine yellow-white sand which filled the cist to its uppermost surviving level. This deposit had presumably either been deliberately introduced at the time of burial or had subsequently trickled in through the gaps in the walls and capping of the cist.



ILLUS 2 Plan of cist burial



ILLUS 3 Plan of cist, showing possible capping material and kerb

The nature of the former capping of the cist is not clear. An arrangement of cobbles, which lay above the north and east cist walls (illus 3), may represent the remnants of a corbelled vault comparable to that of the secondary cist recorded within the adjacent cairn (see Close-Brooks, this volume). There are, however, problems with such an interpretation. The cobbles rested mostly upon a thin layer of the upper sand fill of the cist, effectively separating them from the side walls. If the cobbles are the remains of the capping, they were not *in situ* on excavation. Furthermore, the recent use of the exposed surface of the cist as the base for a fire might indicate that the cobble arrangement is an entirely modern feature. This latter hypothesis allows for the possibility that the cist was closed in a perhaps more conventional manner by a capstone, which was removed at an unknown date.

Although very few deposits survived around the remains of the cist, sufficient was present to indicate that the cist walls originally lay beneath the contemporary ground surface. Immediately to the north of the cist a patch of medium brown sand, probably a fragment of the old ground surface, surviving to no more than 0.05 m deep, had clearly been cut through (illus 1 & 2). Where the cut for the construction pit of the cist was preserved on the north and east sides, a thin deposit of pale brown sand was sealed between it and the upright slabs. This deposit probably represents no more

than the result of disturbance caused during the excavation of the construction pit. The patch of the old ground surface cut by the construction pit sealed a deposit of golden sand up to 0.1 m deep, below which lay white windblown sand.

An arc of stones of varying size was revealed, running in a loosely concentric fashion c 1.2 m–1.5 m to the south and west of the cist (illus 3). This intriguing feature was associated in places with patches of the old ground surface through which the cist had been inserted, a possible indication of the contemporaneity of the cist and the arc of stones. This stratigraphic interpretation is not incontrovertible, however, as the stones may have been displaced downwards with the deflation of surrounding sand deposits. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that the cist and stone arrangement were broadly contemporary and represent associated features. The most convincing explanation for the stone feature is that it represents the remains of a kerb which edged a burial mound, c 4 m across, which had been cast up over the cist. The absence of additional stone suggests that such a mound is likely to have been composed of sand or sandy soil.

THE BURIAL

The cist contained the tightly flexed inhumation of an adult male oriented approximately east/west, with the head to the east and facing north (illus 2). The skeletal remains were undisturbed apart from the ankles and feet, which were jumbled and had evidently been disturbed when the western cist wall was removed. The only artefact present with the burial was a nearly intact pottery vessel, which lay on its side beside the skull.

The sand matrix enveloping the skeleton was generally stained to a medium brown colour. Immediately beside the bones a distinct red streaking was apparent within this sand, and sealed beneath the pelvis was a small patch of fine, black sand. It is likely that the extensive brown stain was derived from the decay of soft body parts and/or organic material, such as textile or hide, within which the corpse was interred. The origin of the red streaking and black sand sealed beneath the pelvis is less clear. The latter may have been the degraded remains of an organic substance deliberately buried with the body: trial analysis indicated that no pollen survived within this deposit.

SKELETAL ANALYSIS

Margaret Bruce & Neill Kerr

The remains are those of an adult male aged between 35–40 years at death, of short stature (1.63 m, 5 ft 4 in) and with characteristically platymeric (flattened) femora and platycnemic (flattened) tibiae. Of particular interest is the evidence of healed but extensive facial trauma to the right side of the face, resulting in fractures of the cheek bone, mandibular joint and adjacent parts of the lower jaw. This injury is of a type caused by a severe blow with a blunt object. Infection of the mandible subsequent to the injury resulted in the further complication of limited jaw movement. No doubt this in turn led the individual to favour a softer and more cariogenic diet, with the consequence of increased dental caries and abscesses. There was age-related and/or activity-related degenerative change in the lower back and left shoulder. These latter and other factors suggest that the individual engaged in strenuous physical activity. There was no evidence of metabolic or deficiency disease or of the immediate cause of death.

A detailed report on the human remains by Margaret Bruce, including analysis of dentition by Neill Kerr, is included on fiche.

RADIOCARBON DATE

The left femur and left tibia of the skeleton were submitted to the Scottish Universities Research & Reactor Centre (SURRC) for radiocarbon analysis. The dates were calibrated by SURRC using the University of Washington, Quaternary Isotope Laboratory, Radiocarbon Dating Program, 1987, using the 20-year atmospheric calibration curve. The following determination was received:

Sample no	GU-3488
Uncalibrated date	3360 ± 50 (= 1410 BC ± 50)
Calibrated dates	1-sigma (68% prob) cal BC 1737–1613
	2-sigma (95% prob) cal BC 1856–1520

The most striking feature of this date is its significant overlap with the uncalibrated date of 3410 ± 55 (= 1460 BC ± 55) for the inurned cremation within the second structural phase of the adjacent cairn (sample GU-1174).

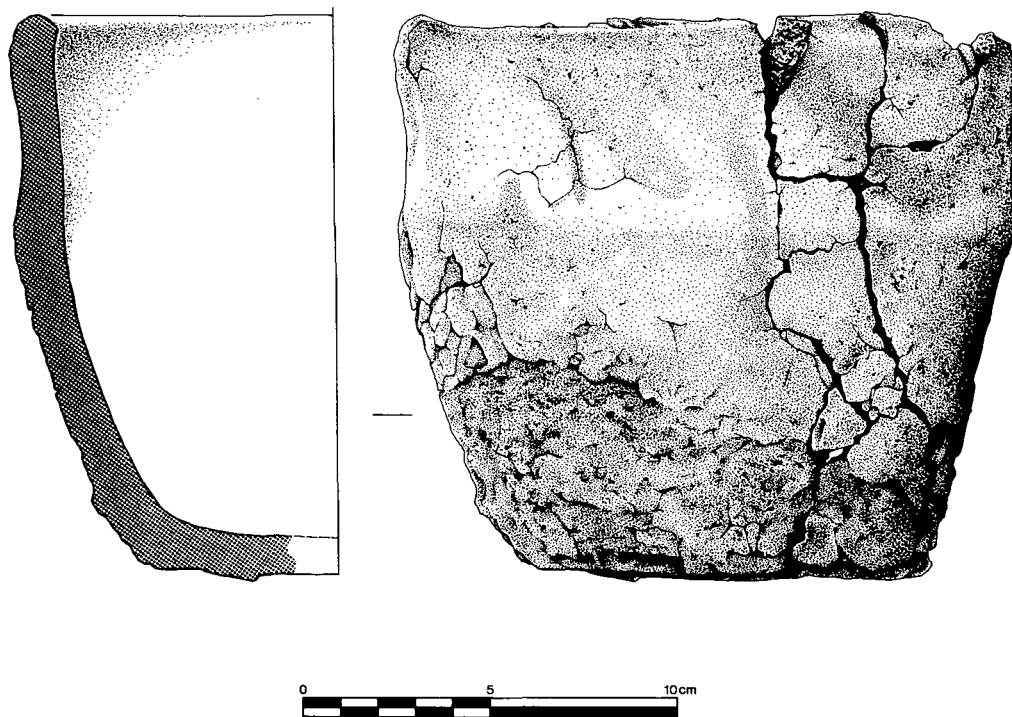
THE POTTERY VESSEL (ILLUS 4)

Trevor Cowie

The pot is a coarse plain vessel of simple bipartite form with an upright, slightly flattened rim; in places, manipulation of the clay has resulted in a slight external bevel but this appears to have been accidental rather than a deliberate design feature. The mouth is markedly oval. The upper portion is roughly cylindrical, varying from slightly concave to straight-sided; below the poorly defined shoulder the lower walls taper slightly, and again rather unevenly, to a proportionately broad flat base. The fabric is very coarse, with abundant stone grits up to 10 mm in length; these inclusions have been smoothed over on the external surface, but not in the interior. The colour varies from light brown (7.5YR 6/4) to very dark grey (7.5YR N4/). Dimensions: height 147 mm; diameter of rim 125–150 mm; diameter of base: 100 mm.

The oval shape, and the generally sagging profile, suggest careless or inexpert manufacture. Also, despite conservation treatment, the walls of the vessel do not meet snugly at the vertical cracks which run from rim to base. While some distortion may have occurred as a result of burial, it is possible that the pot has 'sprung' as a result of heat action (eg during firing or in use), damage that may be partly due to the poor quality of manufacture. Large areas of the lower body lack their external surface, and it is very likely that this spalling may also have been the result of heat action.

Burials definitely of Bronze Age date are relatively rare in the Western Isles and, of these, few have ceramic associations. In their survey of possible short cists in the Outer Isles, Megaw & Simpson (1961, 66) referred to only two burials associated with pottery. A short cist discovered in 1925 in the parish of Lochs, Lewis, is said to have contained an inhumation and 'two small fragments of an urn which, from the thickness and character of the ware, and the designs impressed on it with the well-known toothed stamp of the early Bronze Age, must have been of the beaker type' (Callander 1928, 25; the probable findspot is near Shiltenish (NGR: NB 296194)). Paradoxically, in a region relatively well-known for its domestic Beaker sites (eg Northton, Harris: Simpson 1976; Rosinish, Benbecula: Shepherd 1976), no other single burials have been found definitely associated with Beakers as accessory vessels. The other burial noted by Megaw & Simpson was one of a number reported from Port na Long, North Uist; a cist c 2' [0.6 m] long contained a squat barrel-shaped vessel, undecorated apart from some incisions on the base and a single impression on the exterior (Megaw & Simpson 1961, 67, fig 3A, list no 7; Beveridge 1911, 268). Megaw & Simpson drew comparisons with the form of steatite vessels found in Bronze Age graves in the Northern Isles, but it must be admitted that the date and local affinities of this vessel are uncertain.



ILLUS 4 The pottery vessel

Turning to more recently discovered graves, pottery vessels appear to have accompanied inhumation burials in the corbelled burial chamber excavated by Crawford (1977) at Rosinish, while a further small vessel was found inside one of two 'satellite' or offertory cists (Cist W). The unusual collared vessels form a distinctive local group which the excavator found difficult to match closely among the wider traditions of Bronze Age funerary pottery, and it was suggested that the forms might have evolved from a local Beaker tradition under the influence of collared urns (Crawford 1977, 102–3). The corbelled cist in the cairn at Cnip itself contained a plain cinerary urn; although the vessel lacks features which typify such urns, a general relationship to Enlarged Food Vessel Urns seems likely (Close-Brooks, this volume). Mention may also be made of the discovery of sherds of a probable Food Vessel with a burial excavated at Barvas, Lewis (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1987, 62), while sherds with many of the features of Food Vessels are also known from settlement sites at Dalmore, Lewis (Ponting & Ponting 1984), and from Ensay in the Sound of Harris (unpublished surface collections). The currently limited and possibly unrepresentative range of funerary pottery from the Western Isles thus displays considerable heterogeneity and none of the vessels mentioned invites close comparison with the pot from Cnip.

The full repertoire of plain pottery in use on broadly contemporary domestic sites is not yet available in published form. Partly as a result of ease of recognition at the field survey stage, attention tends to have been focused on the more distinctive decorated material, but plain vessels of varying size are a feature of domestic Beaker (eg Northton, Harris: Simpson 1976, 224–5, fig 12.2 and Gibson 1982, 214–17; Rosinish: Shepherd 1976, 212, fig 11.3) and Food Vessel assemblages (eg Kilellan, Islay: Burgess 1976). Work in progress on groups of pottery from Dalmore (Ponting & Ponting 1984)

and Barvas (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1979, 47; 1987, 62) may also throw more light on this problem, as plain vessels form a significant component of both. However, in this as in so many other respects, the assemblage from the Udal, North Uist, doubtless holds the key to an understanding of the development of plain wares in the Western Isles in the second millennium BC (Crawford nd, 7–8).

DISCUSSION

The same process of erosion which led to the re-exposure and discovery of the cist was also responsible for scouring the deposits around it. As a result, the original form of certain components of the burial is not clear, particularly the possible presence of a mound cast over the cist and the nature of the cist capping material. Unfortunately, the nature of the elements of the burial which did not survive cannot simply be inferred by reference to previous discoveries of cist burials of broadly Bronze Age date in the Western Isles. Of those sites recorded, many were found long ago and records are scant. However, a marked heterogeneity is apparent in the form of the burial structure, and inhumations and cremations, both single and multiple, are all recorded. Few such sites have yet been located in Lewis and Harris compared to the Uists, but this may reflect no more than a fieldwork bias. The concentration of discoveries in North Uist is due largely to the work of Beveridge in the early part of this century (1911). In Lewis, recent fieldwork by Mr and Mrs G R Curtis in the Breasclete area (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1991, 76) and on Great Bernera (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1992, 86) has started to reveal a number of kerbed and/or kerb cairns which help to fill out the distribution of presumably Bronze Age funerary monuments.

It is likely that the arc of stones to the south of the cist represents part of a kerb to a sand mound built over it. To avoid confusion, this proposed structure is perhaps better described as a 'kerbed mound' than as a 'kerb cairn', which describes a distinct form of structure such as that excavated within the adjacent cairn (Close-Brooks, this volume). Such a burial structure would not be without parallels in the Western Isles; sand mounds were recorded in the early part of this century over short cists at Boreray and Sithean an Altair, North Uist (Megaw & Simpson 1961, 76, and references therein), and more recently a kerbed mound of sand was identified above the corbelled chamber of a multiple inhumation excavated at Rosinish, Benbecula (Crawford 1977). In order to stabilize such a mound of sand or sandy soil and to avoid rapid erosion by the elements, it must have been necessary to cap the mound, for example with a layer of turf. The estimated diameter of 4 m for the kerb at Cnip would indicate a burial structure with dimensions not substantially smaller than the maximal extent of the adjacent cairn. In the absence of close chronological control over the sequence of burial and further knowledge of the extent and layout of the burial ground, it would be inappropriate to envisage the cist necessarily as a satellite to the cairn.

The cist may have been closed either by a capstone or by a corbelled vault. Comparative analysis provides no support either way, as both of these techniques are recorded at other cist sites in the Western Isles, although corbelled vaults less frequently. Examples of the latter have been recorded at Rosinish, in association with a multiple inhumation and a kerbed mound of sand (Crawford 1977); with a crouched inhumation from the upper Beaker level at Northton, Harris (Simpson 1976, 224); and with a secondary cremation in the Cnip cairn (Close-Brooks, this volume). A further example, described as being very similar to that at Rosinish, has been recorded at the Udal, North Uist (Crawford 1977, 97; Crawford & Switsur 1977, 129).

The combined contextual, structural and dating evidence from the cist and adjacent cairn provides some indication of the chronological relationship between the two, although, in the absence of direct stratigraphic relationships, not a definitive link. Although heavily eroded and surviving only in patches, the medium brown sand cut through by the cist was undoubtedly the same as the 'chocolate' brown

cultivated soil which lay beneath the D-shaped cairn and was cut through by the primary disturbed rectangular cist central to that cairn; no similar deposits were identified at this level within the long sequences of sand deposits exposed by erosion around the edges of the deflation hollow. In terms of structural characteristics and burial rite alone, the 1992 cist burial is more comparable to the primary cist containing an inhumation within the adjacent cairn than the secondary corbelled cist containing a cinerary urn which was inserted through it. However, the radiocarbon determinations from the two excavations strongly suggest that the latter is broadly contemporary with the 1992 cist burial.

The inferred contemporaneity of the cremation and inhumation rite within the Cnip cemetery should not be regarded as exceptional, but more as a reflection of the attested heterogeneity of funerary traditions across the British Isles in the second millennium BC (eg Burgess 1980, 295–352; Stevenson 1992, 287, with particular reference to Scotland). In the context of the Western Isles, the lack of secure dates and distinctive ceramic associations for most of the previously discovered Bronze Age burial sites presents a significant problem for interpretation of the regional development of burial form and rite. Besides the two examples from Cnip, only one further radiocarbon determination has been obtained – a crouched inhumation in a cist at the centre of one of three kerb cairns at the Udal has been dated to 1480bc ± 85 (Crawford & Switsur 1977, 129; sample Q-1458). This date is roughly contemporary with those from Cnip, and it is noteworthy that a kerb cairn formed the latest structural phase within the Cnip cairn, although the time gap between this and the preceding corbelled cist has not been dated (Close-Brooks this volume).

While the vessel from Cnip defies straightforward classification in terms of well-known Bronze Age pottery types, the approximate east/west orientation of the body conforms, in general terms, to one of the predominant contemporary patterns of burial orientation, and the positioning of the pot in the region of the head is also in keeping with what appears to have been the most common practice (Tuckwell 1975; Greig *et al* 1989, 79–80). The Cnip burial was laid on its right side, with the head to the east and facing north; although it would be unwise to infer much from the evidence in view of the absence of adequate comparative data from the Western Isles, it may be noted that this particular arrangement reverses the most widespread pattern among burials with Beakers in eastern Yorkshire (Tuckwell 1975) and north-east Scotland (Greig *et al* 1989). In the former region Tuckwell's analysis revealed that, of those burials with a line of sight to the north, a high proportion were associated with Food Vessels (*ibid*, 102).

Despite uncertainties arising from its eroded condition, this cist provides a significant addition to the inventory of Bronze Age funerary sites from the region. However, there is no reason to suppose that the potential prehistoric interest of Cnip headland has been exhausted with this discovery, for continuing erosion of the machair could result in the exposure of any further burials that may lie in the vicinity of the excavated remains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The site records have been deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS). The pottery vessel was conserved at the Ancient Monuments Conservation Laboratory (Lab. No. 920627)

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