
3 Early Prehistoric Activity: Excavation Results

3.1 Mesolithic artefacts and features

A collection of chronologically diagnostic chipped stone artefacts indicates Mesolithic activity on the site. These items include 15 microliths, including a microburin, and probably also a number of blades (see [Section 4.1](#)). The microliths mostly occurred as residual items in three features associated with the Iron Age settlement: a porch post-hole of House 1; a pit cutting the outer enclosure boundary (M69); and a large pit in the southern sector of the outer enclosure (O48). Other items were recovered from the post-abandonment infill of House 2. A feature that could not be identified from the site records contained 55 chipped stone pieces including four microliths, and this concentration may indicate the presence of unrecognized Mesolithic features on the site.

3.2 Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts and features

Three pits (EDP, EDQ, MAA) located at the west side of the excavation area, outside the Iron Age outer enclosure, produced sherds of pottery, some of which were decorated and comparable to Late Neolithic Impressed Ware ([Cool & Cowie; Section 4.2](#)). While these pits lay in the same part of the site, only pits EDP and EDQ can now be located precisely ([illus 3](#)). This may indicate that the relatively discrete, c 8m wide, sub-circular scatter of pits located to the west of House 3 represents an area of Late Neolithic activity, possibly even a structure of some sort, albeit flimsy by comparison to the Iron Age roundhouses in the vicinity. Certainly, none of those features produced diagnostically later prehistoric artefacts.

Moreover, there is a possibility that House 4, which previously has been assumed to be an Iron Age construction (eg [Triscott 1982](#)) may be of early date. The structural characteristics of this presumed building, in as far as they can be reconstructed, are again less regular and substantial than those of the other Iron Age buildings, and do not conform to a morphologically recognizable Iron Age type. However, as there is no clear stratigraphic or dating evidence to support the reattribution of this structure to a Late Neolithic horizon, the description of this feature is contained within the Iron Age settlement section, in which context its presence had originally been understood by the excavators ([Section 7.2.3](#)). Given the problems in relating House 4 to the overall sequence of Iron Age settlement development, combined with the aforementioned problems of structural reconstruction, there is certainly a temptation definitely to remove it from an Iron Age context altogether;

however, this would be unnecessarily to transpose speculation into interpretation.

Elsewhere, a small number of bifacially retouched artefacts have been interpreted by Finlayson ([Section 4.1](#)) as related to Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age activity. These derived from two pits within the southern interior of the outer enclosure, as well as from the topsoil. Of these, Pit O104 ([illus 3](#)), a large elongate excavation 3.5m long, 1.2m wide and 0.35–0.5m deep, contained several other chipped stone pieces. In the absence of any Iron Age material from its fills, this pit could represent a Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age feature. However, it occurs in an area of the site that contained several other large pits, one (O48) notably of similar size that contained both chipped stone and diagnostically later prehistoric artefacts.

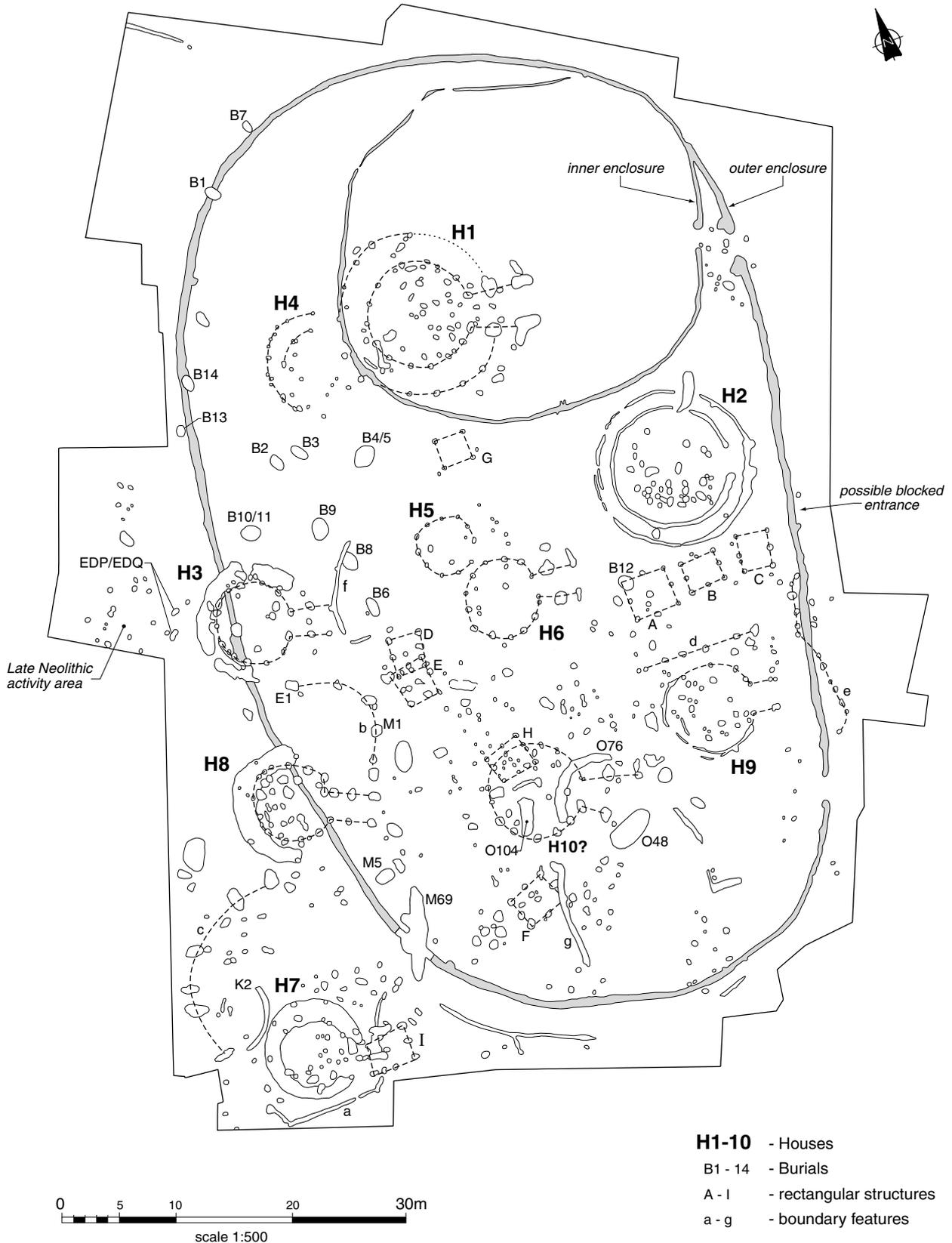
3.3 Cist burials

Two exceptionally deep Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age burial cists were identified c 10m apart, and represent further evidence of pre-Iron Age activity. Although both cists lay within the circuit of the Iron Age outer enclosure boundary ([illus 3](#)), they had not been disturbed by subsequent activity on site, perhaps suggesting that their presence was recognized and respected during the occupation of the Iron Age settlement.

3.3.1 Cist 1 (*Burials 4 and 5*) ([illus 4](#); [illus 5](#); [illus 6](#))

This feature was initially assumed to represent a small stone-filled pit, and it was not until the capstones had been encountered that the larger pit containing the cist was recognized. This discrepancy was caused by the nature of the backfill of the construction pit surrounding the stones, which was almost indistinguishable from the surrounding gravel subsoil. The smaller feature which was initially sectioned was interpreted by the excavators as a possible post-setting, or marker, over the cist ([illus 4](#)). The capstones were encountered c 0.4m below the present day surface of the subsoil. Although the capstones were found to have collapsed, the excavators believed that this disturbance had occurred during site clearance rather than in antiquity.

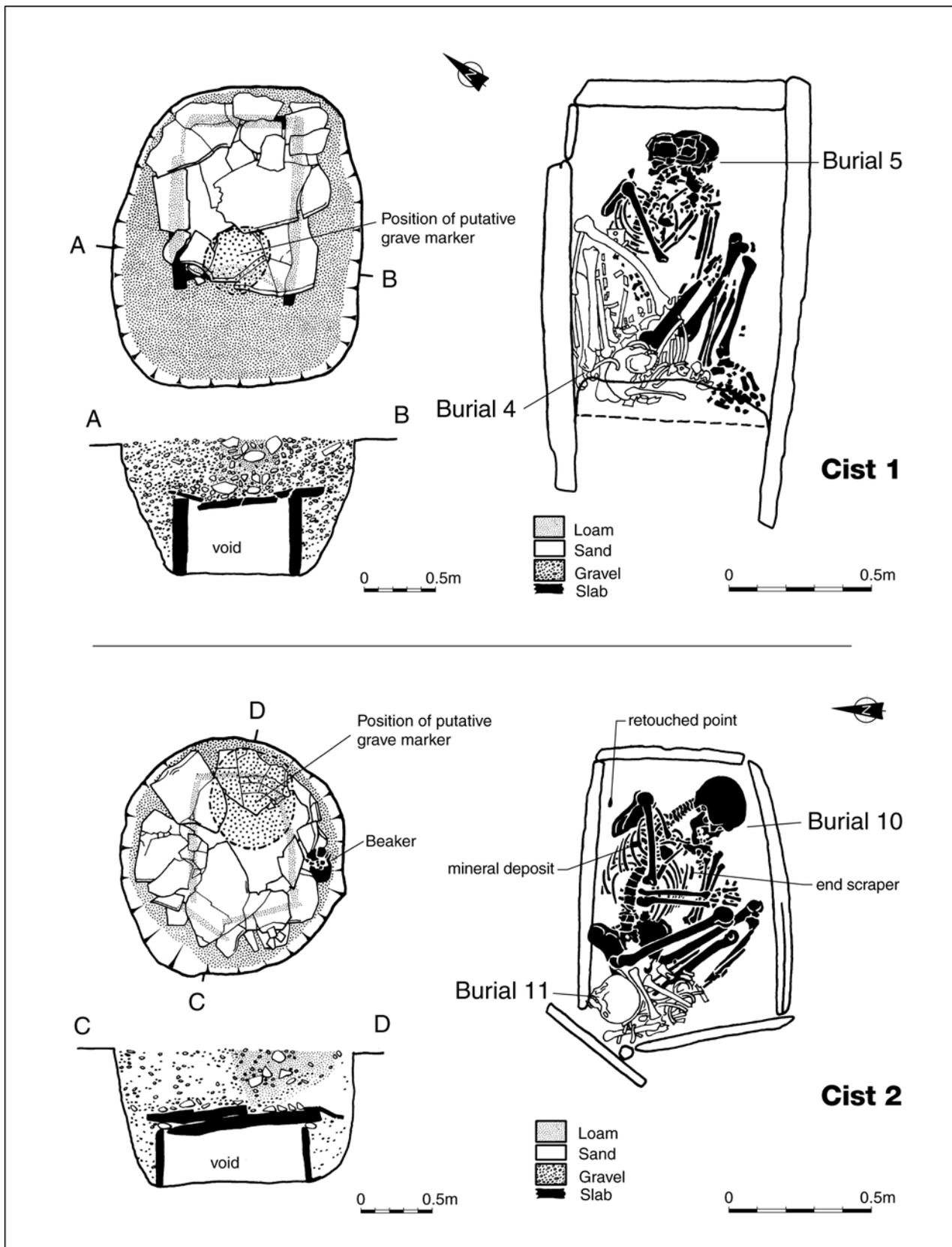
Two capstones covered the major part of the cist, with the gaps between them spanned by smaller fragments of stone ([illus 5](#)). The excavators recorded these fragments as the shattered remnants of a



Illus 3 Site plan; with principal excavated structures and features highlighted

larger stone, which originally may have been a third covering slab. Further fragments of this broken slab were encountered in the backfill of the pit above the capstones.

The cist walls were largely formed by four upright slabs standing c 0.6m high and c 0.1m thick. A smaller stone, 0.2m long, filled a gap between the north-west and north-east side slabs, at the north



Illus 4 Cists 1 and 2; plans and sections

corner of the cist. Moreover, the south-west wall slab appeared slighter than the other main upright slabs, and it did not lie flush with the south-west ends of

the north-west and south-east walls, almost as if the south-west stone were a secondary insertion shortening the cist. These surviving wall slabs defined



Illus 5 Cist 1; showing disturbed capstones; from south-west



Illus 6 Cist 1; showing Burials 4 and 5; from north-east

a rectangular area measuring *c* 1.1m north-east/south-west by 0.75m north-west/south-east. All the slabs used in the construction were of calcareous sandstone, possibly derived from outcrops on the shore about 1km to the east.

The skeletal remains within the cist were covered only by a thin layer of sand and gravel that had fallen in as a result of the modern disturbance, and the rest of the cist remained void. There was no laid floor to the cist. Two burials were present – a well-preserved, crouched inhumation (Burial 5) with the remains of a disarticulated and incomplete skeleton (Burial 4) lying over the pelvis and abdomen of the former (*illus 6*). Burial 5 lay on its left side, with the head placed to the north-east and facing south-east. Both hands had been drawn up to the mouth and the legs were drawn up towards the chest, but the position was not tightly contracted. The skull had been smashed by the collapse of one of the capstones and the lower vertebrae and the pelvic area had been almost completely destroyed by post-mortem decay. Burial 4 comprised an apparently disordered collection of most of the large bones of one individual. The near absence of small bones is of interest as, because the preservation of bone was good, this appears not to be simply a result of post-depositional bias but the result of selective introduction of skeletal material into the cist. The skeletal remains of Burial 4 overlay

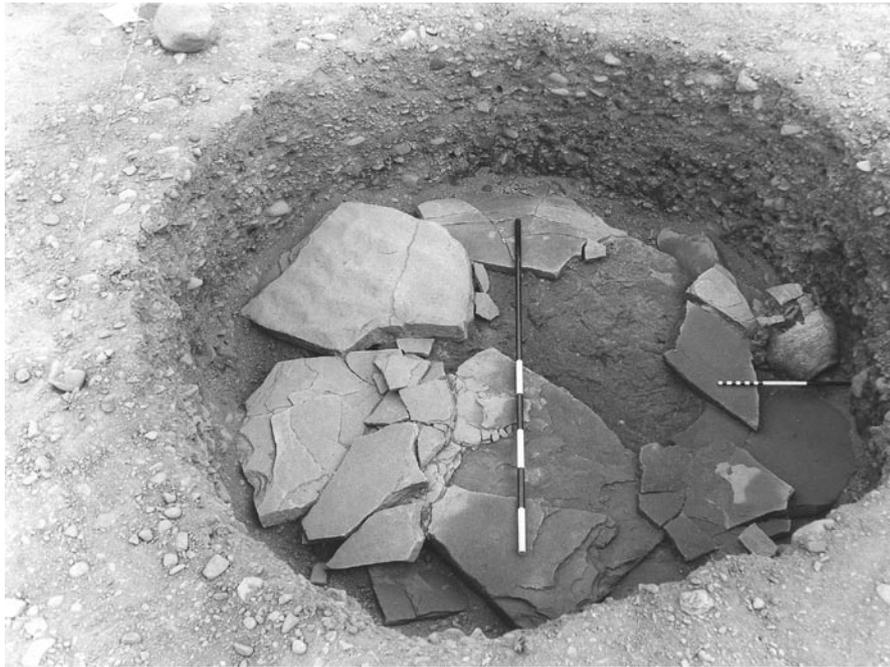
that part of Burial 5 which demonstrated poor bone preservation, a situation presumed to relate in some way to taphonomic factors. Both individuals were mature adult males (*Section 4.4.3*).

The construction pit, when fully excavated, measured approximately 2m north-east/south-west by 1.7m with a sub-rectangular surface plan, steeply sloping sides and a slightly rounded base, the deepest point of which was about 1m below the surface of the subsoil. The side slabs of the cist rested directly on the base of the pit, although noticeably off-centre to the north-east. The sand and gravel fill above and around the cist was uniform, and no doubt derived from the material quarried when the pit was excavated.

No artefacts were recovered from the cist or grave pit, but the radiocarbon dates from Burials 4 and 5 (*Section 5*) preclude this being an Iron Age deposit.

3.3.2 Cist 2 (Burials 10 and 11) (*illus 4; illus 7; illus 8*)

As with Cist 1 the true dimensions of the construction pit were not immediately recognized and, again, it was not until the capstones had been encountered that the nature of what was being excavated became clear. Similarly the excavators interpreted the small



Illus 7 Cist 2; showing capstone overlain by flat slabs; and Beaker vessel; from west

pit initially investigated on the surface of the construction pit backfill as a marker (discussed further in [Section 6.3](#)).

The characters of the construction pit and cist were similar to those recorded for Cist 1. The grave pit was sub-circular in surface plan, with near-vertical sides and a level base ([illus 4](#)). It measured *c* 1.6m across at the subsoil surface level, and reached a depth of *c* 0.95m below that level. The upright wall slabs of the cist were again placed directly on the base of the construction pit, but were of smaller dimensions than those of Cist 1, being only *c* 0.04–0.06m thick and standing *c* 0.4m high. The wall slabs defined a sub-rectangular area measuring 0.95m east/west by 0.65m north/south. Four large slabs defined the sides of the cist although, as a result of either poor or deliberate design, a fifth upright had been placed obliquely across the north-west corner to plug a sizeable gap left between the north and west uprights. The remainder of the base of the construction pit, outside the cist walls, was filled with gravel barely distinguishable from the natural subsoil cut through by the pit.

The cist was not provided with a laid floor. As in this case the capping material had not collapsed, the cist remained almost completely void apart from a small amount of material that had filtered down from above. The cist was covered for the most part by a roughly triangular slab, the gaps left at the corners being closed by smaller slabs. The area between the tops of the cist walls and the edge of the pit at that level was defined by a layer of flat slabs, most of which had fragmented after deposition ([illus 7](#)).

At the southern edge of the pit, and immediately overlying the peripheral slabs, was a Beaker pot

laid on its side ([illus 7](#)). The weight of backfill above this vessel had flattened and distorted it somewhat but it remained surprisingly intact with only a small portion of the rim being detached. There were no deposits within the Beaker other than clean gravel derived from the backfill. Pollen analysis of a scraping from the base of the vessel produced only one grain of *Compositae* pollen (Sjoerd Bohncke, pers comm to J Triscott).

The capstone, peripheral slabs and Beaker lay *c* 0.4m below the subsoil surface, and were sealed beneath a deposit of sand and gravel, which appears to represent the deliberate backfilling of the construction pit using subsoil. The postulated grave marker had been subsequently inserted into the upper part of this backfill. This upper backfill was indistinguishable from the material surrounding the cist walls at the base of the pit, reflecting primarily that unmodified subsoil had been used in both cases. There was no surviving trace of a burial, either inhumed or cremated, in the upper part of the grave pit, either associated with the Beaker or in the backfill material above this.

Within the cist itself the remains of two individuals were present ([illus 8](#)), one articulated and crouched (Burial 10) and the other disarticulated and incomplete (Burial 11). Burial 10 comprised an adult male, while Burial 11 was the remains of a 6- to 8-year-old child ([Section 4.4.3](#)). Bone preservation was more complete than in Cist 1, however a small hole in the skull of Burial 10 had been caused by water seepage: once exposed during the archaeological excavation this hole became considerably larger. The lower leg bones of Burial 10 were less well-preserved, where they had been overlain by Burial 11.



Illus 8 Cist 2; showing Burials 10 and 11; from west

Burial 10 lay on its left side, with its head to the east and facing south. The right arm lay across the body, flexed at the elbow, so that the hand rested between the knees. The left arm was tightly flexed at the elbow with its hand drawn up to the mouth. As with Burial 5 the body was not tightly contracted. The disarticulated remains of Burial 11 lay partly over the feet and lower legs of Burial 10, and partly in the gap between its pelvis and the walls of the cist. As with Burial 4, the bones present were mainly the larger ones, such as long bones, skull and pelvis; smaller bones were under-represented. The irregular and slightly bulging north-west corner of the cist, described above, may have been deliberately constructed in anticipation of the deposition of the second inhumation in this area.

Cleaning around the skeletal remains of Burial 10 revealed a bilaterally retouched point made on a blade lying by the right shoulder while an end scraper lay amongst the ribs, apparently having fallen through the chest during decay (*illus 4*). In addition, on the uppermost two right ribs, a greenish white deposit was present, seemingly containing some fibrous material. This deposit deteriorated rapidly on exposure, and although it was removed as a unit with the ribs it did not survive intact. It seems likely that this was a mineral deposit altered by water dripping from the capstone. If this were the case, then it is possible that it could have formed around some copper alloy object already in that position, such as a pin or an awl.