
6 Early Prehistoric Activity: Discussion

6.1 Mesolithic

Dryburn Bridge has produced a range of features and artefacts that considerably pre-date the use of this location as an Iron Age settlement. These indicate sporadic activity over a long time period. It is not uncommon for large-scale excavations such as this to reveal traces of earlier activity (for example the Beaker activity at St Germain's: [Alexander & Watkins 1998](#)).

The microlithic component of the chipped assemblage attests to Mesolithic activity at the site. Finlayson ([Section 4.1](#)) has proposed that Dryburn Bridge was the site of a camp. It is unfortunate, given the lack of coherent evidence for Mesolithic settlement in the Lothian plain, that little more can be said of the nature of the activities at Dryburn Bridge (G Warren, pers comm). This is because, where their provenance is known, the artefacts were found re-deposited within Iron Age or superficial contexts. The contexts of the microlithic pieces are known for the most part, and these tend to concentrate in the south part of the excavated area, although they do occur across much of the site. Our understanding of the nature of the Mesolithic presence in this area should be considerably enhanced as a result of the recent discoveries of a substantial Mesolithic post-built structure and associated artefacts at East Barns (NGR: NT 7121 7686), c 2 km north-west of Dryburn Bridge ([DES 2003](#), 56–7) and other finds made during the upgrading of the A1 road between Haddington and Dunbar in 2001–2 (G MacGregor, pers comm).

6.2 Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age

The extent of Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age activity present at Dryburn Bridge is debatable. A minimal interpretation can be put forward, based purely upon what can be confidently dated by diagnostic material remains. In this scheme, features attributable to this span would include two burial cists, pits containing pottery and other chipped stone artefacts re-deposited in later contexts.

However, many of the features excavated across the site are undatable and, while in most cases they could well relate to the Iron Age settlement, an earlier origin for at least some cannot be ruled out. Features possibly associated with Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age activity include (in decreasing order of likelihood): a cluster of pits spatially associated with those containing Impressed Ware pottery, which may represent an activity area or possibly

even the remains of a light structure; House 4; and pit O104.

The discovery of Impressed Ware pottery at Dryburn Bridge fits in with what is known of its distribution and contexts of recovery in south and east Scotland (Cool and Cowie, [Section 4.2](#); also [MacSween 1999](#), 79). As noted previously ([MacSween 1999](#)), where contexts have been established for Impressed Ware, they are normally pits (a recently published example being [Cameron's 2002](#) excavations at Dubton, Brechin). Although the specific functions of the Dryburn Bridge pits are not known, it is perhaps significant that at least one (EDP) contained sherds belonging to more than one vessel. The possible structural association mentioned above would, if accepted, provide a good context for the small assemblage from Dryburn Bridge.

The two burial cists form a distinctive feature of the site. Each cist contained two individuals, with an articulated burial overlain by the disarticulated remains of a second. Three of the skeletons were of mature adult males. These men had suffered from a range of traumatic injuries, dental problems and arthritic conditions typical of physical lifestyles and advancing years. The fourth skeleton was of a child who had suffered from an undiagnosed infectious disease.

The radiocarbon evidence indicates that both cists were in use between approximately 2300 and 2000 cal BC, during the period in which the Beaker burial tradition occurred widely across the British Isles (Sheridan in [Section 4.3](#); [Kinnes et al 1991](#)). Cist 2 at Dryburn Bridge was associated with a Beaker vessel and, although the vessel came from above and not within the burial cist, the feature can be interpreted reasonably as falling within the Beaker burial tradition. Cist 1 cannot be so readily interpreted as a Beaker tradition burial, because of the lack of a Beaker vessel from within the funerary structure.

The close similarities between the character of the funerary structures and the burial forms of the two cists indicate beyond reasonable doubt that these were conceptually linked features. Given their spatial proximity and the comparable radiocarbon dates for the human skeletal remains, there seems little reason to doubt that the two cists relate to the same community, and that they formed broadly contemporary elements of the landscape.

The nature of the burial form merits consideration in more detail. There is more than one possible trajectory by which the final burial layout recovered by excavation in each cist could have been reached, and these are significant in terms of understanding whether the cists were repeatedly reused or each

contained the outcomes of a single burial event. Three hypotheses can be constructed to explain the burial form within each cist:

- 1 The disarticulated skeletons represent the primary burials within each cist. These remains were disturbed and re-deposited over the remains of secondary articulated burials within each cist. This hypothesis requires two separate acts of burial activity.
- 2 Each cist contains two skeletons, reflecting a single burial event. This implies that in each case a corpse was interred along with the de-fleshed and disarticulated remains of a second individual.
- 3 The disarticulated remains represent secondary burials within each cist. This hypothesis also requires two burial events.

The osteoarchaeological evidence indicates that the disarticulated remains appear to represent those of individuals who had been de-fleshed elsewhere after their deaths, before partial skeletal remains were incorporated into the cists (cf [Metcalf & Huntington 1991](#)). The selective nature of the disarticulated remains of Burials 4 and 11, in particular the absence of small bones, indicates that they were introduced into each cist as partial skeletons. There is no reason to regard the absence of small bones as a preservation bias. The potential circumstance of the disarticulated remains representing those of disturbed primary inhumations removed whole from the cists before partial remains of those skeletons were reinterred over the secondary burials is an alternative, if more complex and less satisfactory, explanation.

Combined with the osteoarchaeological evidence, the occurrence of the same burial form in adjacent cists at Dryburn Bridge suggests that the cists were not opportunistically reused for secondary burials, with the disordered remains of primary burials deposited back over the secondary inhumations. This reinforces the idea that the burial form reflects a meaningful pattern of careful, structured deposition. To invoke an explanation of essentially opportunistic reuse would run contrary to the widespread archaeological and anthropological evidence to suggest that the form and rites of burial were closely controlled and ritualized in prehistory, and that human remains were carefully curated (eg [Parker Pearson 1999b](#)). Thus hypothesis 1 cannot be sustained without special pleading.

Roberts has noted ([Section 4.4](#)) that either exposure/excarnation or burial/exhumation processes could have led to the loss of certain skeletal elements of Burials 4 and 11 through a variety of potential processes. Equally, however, those disarticulated elements introduced to the cists may reflect deliberate selection through ritual considerations it is now all but impossible to establish.

There was no certain archaeological evidence at the site for other graves or mortuary structures

or enclosures that might have formed the loci for the de-fleshing of those skeletons (4 and 11) subsequently transferred to the burial cists. It is just possible that the four-post arrangement only c 5m east of Cist 1 ([illus 3](#) and [illus 47, G](#)) was not an element of the Iron Age settlement ([Section 7.5](#)), but rather of a raised timber excarnation platform. Others ([Barclay & Russell-White 1993](#), 178–82) have considered the archaeological evidence for the excarnation rite and excarnation platforms, in the context of the Balfarg/Balbirnie excavations. The dialogue within that report between Hogg and Barclay ([Barclay & Russell-White 1993](#), 169–75) as regards the form of the excarnation structures present within two enclosures at that site is instructive, as it centred on whether four- or six-post foundations were present (as proposed by Hogg) or a series of two-post erections (preferred by Barclay). The plough-truncated remains of such a morphologically simple and undatable structure at Dryburn Bridge are interpretable in countless ways ([Section 7.5](#)), but the possibility of a pre-settlement origin and a use associated with the exposure of corpses should not be ruled out.

It thus can be accepted reasonably that the stratigraphic relationships between the skeletons within each cist reflect the true order in which the bodies first entered them. However, the archaeological evidence as to whether one or two burial events is represented in each cist is less definitive (hypotheses 2 and 3). There is some possible evidence for reworking of the burial structures that might support multiple burial events. The breakage of one of the capstones of Cist 1 could have occurred during an attempt to re-open the burial chamber, with some fragments used to reseal it and with the remainder discarded in the backfill of the pit. Contrastingly, no evidence was detected for a re-cut within the upper backfill material. The south-west wall slab and small slab inserted at the north-east corner of Cist 1 are unusual and may reflect re-arrangement of the cist, particularly given its strange off-centre position within the base of the construction pit. However, none of this provides positive evidence for reworking of the cist, and Beaker burial cists with asymmetrical walls are known elsewhere (eg Balblair, Beaulieu: [Hanley & Sheridan 1994](#), 132, [illus 3](#)).

For Cist 2, the evidence of sequence is more ambiguous still. Here, the excavators interpreted the stones overlying the cist cover around the periphery of the pit as rough paving. However, the attitude of these stones was distinctive, for the most part with one side lying flush with the edge of the grave pit and with narrower, and in several cases pointed, edges facing towards the centre of the pit. This suggests that they might alternatively be interpreted as collapsed or pulled over upright stones that had formerly lined the upper edge of the construction pit, possibly even defining a two-tier burial chamber which was dismantled and filled in immediately before the final closure of the burial chamber. The positioning of the Beaker vessel above

the cist and the slabs is noteworthy. It seems to have been deposited immediately before the final infilling of the construction pit. Beakers are well known as the intact contents of cist burials, and there are other contexts where they appear to have been smashed over burials (Sheridan 1997) although, as noted by Sheridan (Section 4.3), the particular context of the Dryburn Bridge Beaker is highly unusual. However, all the above could be explained within a single burial event, and as with Cist 1 no evidence for re-cutting was detected in the upper pit backfill to suggest re-opening of the cist.

Ultimately, the simplest and most likely explanation for the burial form is that it represents in each cist a single burial event (hypothesis 2). This interpretation is consistent with all the available structural, stratigraphic and radiocarbon dating evidence, and indicates the close similarity of the burial form in the cists as structured and meaningful. Hypothesis 3 lacks certain supporting evidence for reworking of the burial structures.

The burial rite in the Dryburn Bridge cists thus comprised the interment of an articulated corpse accompanied by the partial and disarticulated remains of a second individual. This raises wider issues as to the potential relationships of those buried. The presence of multiple bodies within a single burial structure could be explained as a reflection of familial relationships (cf Petersen 1973). The fact that three of the four individuals were adult males, with the other being a juvenile of unknown gender, may be significant in terms of social relations over the period represented by the skeletons. Although the sample is far too small to be statistically significant, it does appear to reflect the general trend for Beaker cist graves to be associated (at least in eastern Scotland) with the burial of males, particularly mature adults aged 35 and over (Bruce, in Shepherd 1986, 17–18).

The two cist burials at Dryburn Bridge can be added to the dense scatter of such discoveries in the immediate vicinity. Four separate discoveries of Beaker burials have been made within a kilometre of the site, three to the south-east and east, towards Skateraw (1, Stevenson 1940; Clarke 1970, nos 1647–8; 2, DES 1958, 39; 3, Close-Brooks *et al* 1979), and one to the north-west at East Barns (PSAS 1901). Other findspots within 3 km of Dryburn Bridge comprise West Pinkerton (Stevenson 1939), Thornton (Childe & Lowe 1939; Clarke 1970, no 1635) and Thurston Mains (Stevenson 1940; Clark 1970, no 1636). Within this local context, the Dryburn Bridge cists are unusual in the depth to which they had been sunk. One exception may have been Skateraw 3, where road make-up rendered it impossible to assess the real depth of subsoil (Close-Brooks *et al* 1979, 1).

Even this small group displays a wide range of burial form. Skateraw 1 and 3, East Barns and Thornton all contained single inhumations, whereas West Pinkerton and Thurston Mains contained two bodies. Those inhumed comprise men and women,

as well as a child at Thornton. It was suggested that the body within the Skateraw 2 cist had been decomposing at the time of its interment, because the arms were detached and had been placed on the wrong side of the body (DES 1958, 39). While they do occur less commonly than single burials, Beaker burials displaying double inhumations are not rare in Scotland: for example discoveries in north east Scotland at Hillhead of Fechil (Clarke 1970, no 1451; Shepherd 1986, 29, 36) and Broomend of Crichtie (Chalmers 1870; Davidson 1870; Clarke 1970, nos 1433–7). Of those close to Dryburn Bridge, Thurston Mains (Stevenson 1940) contained the remains of two articulated adult females, identified by the excavator as apparently interred at the same time. (Those skeletons have recently been dated by radiocarbon methods to within the same age ranges as the Dryburn Bridge burials (illus 14) and, whilst the determinations returned are not identical their combination does not fail a chi-squared test, suggesting that they are not statistically significantly different and could relate to the same burial event.) By contrast, the form of West Pinkerton (Stevenson 1939) grave offers remarkable similarities to the Dryburn Bridge discoveries, containing the remains of two mature males, one articulated and the second disarticulated. Stevenson suggested that the burials had been deposited on two separate occasions, with the disarticulated remains being those of a disturbed primary inhumation. This explanation reflects a hypothesis specifically rejected for the Dryburn Bridge cists although in the absence of a published report on the West Pinkerton Thurston Mains skeletal remains it is not known if the disarticulated remains were of a whole or partial skeleton. The skeletal remains from West Pinkerton would merit revisiting through osteoarchaeological examination and radiocarbon dating.

The wide variety of burial form represented by Beaker burials, even in the vicinity of Dryburn Bridge, suggests that particular burial forms and rites may have been context-specific, and determined by any number of unknowable factors such as the status or role of the individuals in life or the particular circumstances of death. West Pinkerton and Dryburn Bridge together appear to demonstrate that this particular burial form was at least locally significant in both time and space.

6.3 Continuity and memory?

It seems likely that the activities represented by the Impressed Ware pottery pre-date the burial cists, although their date ranges do overlap. Based upon the radiocarbon dating evidence for comparable material from Meldon Bridge 07919156829 and other sites discussed by Cowie (Cowie 1993a; Cowie 1993b), a Late Neolithic date focusing upon the early third millennium cal BC would seem appropriate for the Impressed Ware pottery. The dates obtained

from the human remains in the cists concentrate upon the period 2300–2000 cal BC at 2-sigma.

The latest pre-settlement activity, represented by the burial cists, probably took place over a millennium before the establishment of the Iron Age settlement (although an absolute date for the foundation of the latter was not established). Although there is conclusively no case for claiming direct continuity between the settlement and this earlier activity, the fact cannot be passed over that, as far as we can tell, the positions of the Early Bronze Age burial cists appear to have been respected during the lifetime of the Iron Age settlement, and indeed appear to have formed a focal point for a cemetery zone within the settlement (Section 7.6). Unless the juxtaposition is entirely coincidental, it appears that the Early Bronze Age burial cists were interpretable to the occupants of the Iron Age settlement. This presumes that their positions were in some way marked above the ground. The possibility that the construction pits of the cists were signalled by

upright timbers or stones with their final closure has been mentioned above. If so, it seems clear that a timber marker would not have been visible a millennium later unless it had been repeatedly replaced (for which there is no supporting archaeological evidence). Alternatively, it is possible that the positions of the cists had been marked by boulders, cairns or barrows, and that these remained visible when the Iron Age settlement was founded. It is noteworthy that a cist cemetery recently discovered at Holly Road, Leven, Fife contained a cist, of similar form to the Dryburn Bridge examples, which was sealed beneath a large marker boulder (Cist J: Lewis & Terry 2004, 28–30). If any such features had been present at Dryburn Bridge they must have been removed subsequently, either by levelling, robbing, clearance or plough-truncation (or a combination of factors). Despite the uncertainty as to how the cist burials remained visible above ground, the conceptual link between them and the Iron Age cemetery seems unlikely to be fortuitous.