
8 Discussion by Gavin MacGregor

The archaeological evaluation established that the find spot of the skull (now seen to be part of Skeleton 2) was a cairn (Illus 4), with several phases to its construction and use, containing inhumations orientated east to west (Section 3.2). The earliest identifiable phase of activity involved the construction of a low primary cairn (context 007/008). This was followed by the burial of Skeleton 1 on this cairn, which was then sealed by a layer of clean sand (005). Later, Skeleton 2 was buried in an irregular grave cut through the sand layer 005. The relatively clean and uniform nature of sand layer 005 would suggest that this sequence of events took place over a short timespan. Both burials were, however, ultimately sealed by a larger cairn (002). It is probable that further burials are present within the remainder of the cairn, which extended outside the excavation trench. Radiocarbon dating on Skeleton 1 (Section 7) indicates that the burial mound was probably in use during the first quarter of the first millennium AD.

It is probable that the individuals buried at Borrallie lived in nearby settlements on the headland, where examples of hut circles and a possible dun are present, which probably date to the Iron Age (Reid *et al* 1967; Lelong and MacGregor *forthcoming*). Analysis of both skeletons has shown their general state of ill health (Section 4.4). It is difficult to generalise from just the two individuals from the Borrallie mound, but this suggests that the population of the area may have been under stress at the time, perhaps through factors such as population pressure or several seasons of poor harvests.

Of particular note about the individuals buried was the absence or incompleteness of several major limbs. Roberts has discussed above the possibility that this may relate to dogs initially having gnawed the bones and suggested that a tradition of spring burial may have resulted in the exposure of the bodies to dogs (Section 4.5). The possibility has also to be considered that this may have been the result of deliberate excarnation before burial (cf Armit 1997, 96; Bristow 1998, 158; Carr and Knüsel 1997).

The tradition of extended inhumations within sub-rectangular cairns is a recognised funerary practice in the north of Britain during the first millennium AD (Ashmore 1981; Close-Brooks 1984). Many of these burials are generally considered to be Pictish in date, but the results of the excavation at Loch Borrallie indicates that the tradition commenced in the Iron Age.

The form of monument and burial rite at Loch Borrallie can be compared with that at Gullane, East Lothian (Ewart and Curle 1908). The monument at Gullane comprised an irregular oval measuring c 6 m by 4 m. The mound sealed a minimum of six

skeletons that were not in cists and at least one skeleton was orientated east to west. A spiral ring of bronze and an iron knife or dagger were found accompanying the burials. In contrast, many of the burials in other sub-rectangular cairns were within cists e.g. at Ackergill, Caithness (Edwards 1926) and Dunrobin, Sutherland (Close-Brooks 1981) or graves e.g. at Sandwick, Shetland (Bigelow 1980) and generally appear to be of a single phase. It is possible, therefore, that Loch Borrallie and Gullane stand for a form of cemetery mound dating to the late first millennium BC or early first millennium AD that represents the precursor to later, sub-rectangular cairns containing single graves or cists.

It is of note that the ring-headed pin found at Loch Borrallie (Section 5) was almost certainly a deliberate deposit with one of the burials. Its close proximity to Skeleton 1 may suggest that it relates to this burial, but as it was recovered during the excavation of the clean sand (005) above the primary cairn it may have been carried downwards from the later Skeleton 2 through burrowing.

The variety of Iron Age burial traditions suggests, however, that different people within society were accorded different burial rites, perhaps relating to status, gender or age groups. Many of the variations in burial rite may not, therefore, represent chronological distinctions but rather differences in social practices. Just as there are differences in the form of burial rite, there are also distinctions in how that burial rite was performed as indicated by choices in grave goods that accompanied burials. In broad terms, we could conceive of three main classes of burial as suggested by their grave goods: those that are **accompanied by personal ornaments** (examples in Section 5), those that also have **weapons** (Hunter *forthcoming*; e.g. the double inhumation in a cist accompanied by a sword and spears at Camelon [Breeze, Close-Brooks and Ritchie 1976] or the single inhumation in a cist accompanied by a sword at Marshall, Alloa [Paul Duffy, *pers comm*]) and those burials that are **unaccompanied**. Consequently, the variability in burial rite and selection of grave goods presents a potentially complex system of signification that may relate to the role or status of the individuals.

There is increasing evidence for the variety of ways in which human remains were treated after death in the Iron Age, including cremations in re-used cists (Ritchie and Thornber 1988), single inhumations in graves and cists, multiple inhumations (Longworth *et al* 1967; Crone 1992), possible bog bodies (Cowie *et al* 2002), cave burials (Armit 1997, 91) and the incorporation of human remains in 'domestic' contexts (e.g. Armit 1997, 98–99). In each case, the extended

nature of funerary and mortuary rites, which may include exposure or excarnation of the body as suggested by the Borralie burials, is a factor that requires to be considered during their interpretation (e.g. [Pearce 1997](#)). Consequently, the results of the

excavation of the burial mound at Loch Borralie provide a useful addition to the range of mortuary and funerary rites which were in practice during the Iron Age in Scotland.