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The excavation of two short cist burials at Broomlands, Kelso

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SUMMARY

Two stone-built short cists were excavated in Broomlands, Kelso, by AOC Archaeology Group under the Historic Scotland Call-off Contract for Human Remains. A single poorly preserved adult inhumation was recovered from one cist, along with a small intrusive disc-shaped perforated oil shale object. The inhumation was dated to 2340–2120 cal BC. The second cist contained heavily damaged and fragmentary unburnt bones from two adults. Radiocarbon dates suggest one individual, the principal interment in the cist, dates to 2030–1750 BC and the second individual was interred much later, between 930 and 800 cal BC.

KEYWORDS: cist; inhumations; Bronze Age; Kelso; spindle whorl

BACKGROUND

In July 2007 police were called to attend the scene of human remains discovered during ground breaking works at a development site in Kelso, Scottish Borders. The capstone of a cist had been displaced and skeletal remains, comprising fragmentary human bone, had been removed by an attending police officer. AOC Archaeology Group was deployed under the Historic Scotland Call-Off Contract for Human Remains to assess the discovery and record and recover remaining information.

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Additional human bone was retrieved during resulting archaeological investigation, along with a possible unfinished oil shale spindle whorl.

Further ground breaking works in the vicinity of the cist were carried out under archaeological supervision, and revealed a second stone cist. The second cist, located immediately to the north of the initial discovery, was fully excavated and contained poorly preserved skeletal remains of two individuals. It was apparent that, prior to its recent discovery, the capstone had fallen into the cist causing significant damage to the human remains. The poor condition of the bones made it impossible to ascertain if the remains represented articulated inhumations or collections of disarticulated bone. No artefacts were found in association with the second cist.

The site lay to the north of a new housing development within the area known as Broomlands on the north-east edge of Kelso in the Scottish Borders (NGR: NT 7389 3486) (Figure 1). Immediately to the south of the development area lay the A698 road aligned along the northern bank of the river Tweed.
PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY

Numerous early prehistoric features including Bronze Age cist burials are known from the Kelso area, though not from the immediate vicinity of the development site. Previously recorded features include a burial discovered during sewer-works in 1864 at The Knowes, Kelso (Turner 1868: 246). This grave consisted of a stone-built short cist, and although bone did not survive recovery of a Beaker vessel implies that a human burial had once been present. Disturbed remains of cists were also encountered in 1946 cut into a natural mound at Pinnacle Hill, Kelso. Excavation revealed a further, earlier, undisturbed cist which contained the near intact skeleton of an adult male (Calder 1947).

Immediately beyond Kelso, and particularly around the town of Springwood, several other Early Bronze Age burial sites are known including a grave which contained the disturbed remains of a young adult accompanied by a crushed Beaker, a bronze awl and five barbed-and-tanged flint arrowheads (Henshall & MacInnes 1968), a cist containing an inhumation at Floors Home Farm and another at Redden Farm, Sprouston. The Sprouston cist contained a young adult male accompanied by a Food Vessel and flint blade (Feachem 1949; Calder & Feacham 1949). The area around this cist is known locally as Horse Knowe Cairns implying that other upstanding funerary monuments may have once existed. The survival of early prehistoric round barrows in this area is demonstrated by a small earthen mound at Edenmouth which, on excavation, was found to contain a crouched inhumation and a Beaker (Douglas 1849).

Further evidence of early prehistoric activity and possible habitation of the landscape surrounding Broomlands is implied by a scatter of stray finds including a Neolithic polished stone axe, a Bronze Age battle axe and an extensive scatter of worked flint found near to Springwood Park.

EXCAVATED EVIDENCE

The cists, located approximately 2.5 m apart, were situated on a gravel-rich bank that led down to the River Tweed to the south. Cist 1 was orientated NE/SW and Cist 2 was aligned NNE/SSW.

Cist 1

The capstone, which had been removed prior to archaeological intervention, comprised a large irregular slab of grey mica-rich sandstone approximately 0.97m by 0.93m in size and 0.12m in thickness. The cist was constructed from four upright slabs, also of grey mica-rich sandstone; the long axis of the cist was orientated NE/SW in line with the construction pit. All four side slabs were in situ on discovery forming an internal space of 0.70m by 0.40m; the north-east facing short slab had been knocked during displacement of the capstone and was collapsing into the cist. The dimensions of the individual slabs are presented in Table 1. No clay luting was evident, and neither tool marks nor decoration were observed on the surfaces of the slabs.

The upper fill comprised up to 0.10m of grey gritty sand with frequent rounded stone inclusions. It is likely that the upper fill is modern in origin representing
intrusive material introduced into the cist during the disturbance of the capstone. At the western end of the feature some of the backfill for the cist construction pit had also fallen into the interior of the cist. It was from this area within the disturbed mix of intrusive fills that a perforated oil shale disc was recovered. This object may be an unfinished spindle whorl (Hunter *intra*) and is not thought to be deliberately associated with the burial. Although much of the skeletal material had been removed prior to archaeological intervention, some additional unburnt bone was recovered during excavation. The cist floor comprised natural but firmly packed alluvial soils consisting of water rounded stones in a grey sand matrix with occasional clay lenses.

The cut for the cist (Figures 2 & 3) had been truncated on the south and east sides during ground-breaking works but was clearly defined on the opposing sides. A cobble rich deposit filled the area between the cist slabs and the edges of the oval construction pit. The pit had been cut into successive layers of cobble and sand-rich alluvial deposits.

### Cist 2

A fragment of the mica-rich sandstone capstone from Cist 2 had been dislodged and was recovered over 0.5m to the southwest of the cist. The rest of the capstone, measuring 0.80m by 0.40m and 0.08m thick, had collapsed at the north-east end of the cist some time prior to excavation. The cist side slabs were in a much poorer condition than those recorded in Cist 1. The slabs were heavily truncated with significant damage resulting in the loss of the upper edges of the stones and several had been displaced, particularly those on the south-west and south-east sides of the cists (Table 2). A large rounded cobble had been placed under each end of the long southwest facing side slab, probably in an attempt to level it during construction. The long axis of the cist was orientated NNE/SSW placing it at a slightly different alignment to Cist 1.

The skeletal remains had been compressed by the capstone and were in a very poor condition (Figure 5); only the larger, more robust long bones were recognisable on first inspection. The damage was so severe that the configuration of the bones was not clear during excavation. Initial inspection suggested a crouched inhumation with the skull at NNE end of the cist and feet to SSW, implied by the presence of two femurs lying almost parallel to the long south-west facing side slab. Fragments of skull survived at both ends of the cist, leaving doubt as to the number of individuals present. It was not possible to determine whether the bones were articulated at the time of deposition. The skeletal remains lay on a layer of firmly packed small rounded pebbles forming a purpose built floor.
The cut for the construction pit of Cist 2 was less apparent in plan (Figure 2 & 3), particularly on the southern side where it was cut into soft sand and did not include the large rounded cobble rich back-fill recorded from Cist 1.
Unburnt human skeletal remains were recovered from both cists. Those from Cist 1 had been disturbed and parts of the assemblage removed prior to excavation and the remains from Cist 2 had sustained significant damage as the result of the capstone collapsing into the cist prior to excavation. The bones were assessed by standard methods, with each bone being weighed, catalogued and the preservation assessed. A full report which includes details of the methodology can be found in the site archive.

The Human Bone

*Melissa Melikian*

Unburnt human skeletal remains were recovered from both cists. Those from Cist 1 had been disturbed and parts of the assemblage removed prior to excavation and the remains from Cist 2 had sustained significant damage as the result of the capstone collapsing into the cist prior to excavation. The bones were assessed by standard methods, with each bone being weighed, catalogued and the preservation assessed. A full report which includes details of the methodology can be found in the site archive.
Cist 1

The remains from Cist 1 consisted of small fractured fragments of unburnt human bone (518g). The extent of modern damage to the bones precluded confident identification of many of the fragments but amongst the recognisable elements were fragments of the cranium, mandible, left clavicle, vertebrae and long bones of an adult. No duplication of elements was recorded indicating that a single individual was present.

Cist 2

The bone (5.9kg) from Cist 2 originates from at least two adult individuals as determined by duplicates of the humerii, femora, patellae and tibiae. The bone from both individuals was in poor condition; many of the bones were friable with post-mortem damage and evidence of fresh breaks.

All the bones originate from adult individuals but further ageing or sexing of these remains was not possible due to their damaged condition. There was no evidence of gross pathology present on the remains of any individual.

THE SPINDLE WHORL

Fraser Hunter
(with scientific analysis by Lore Troalen)

A perforated disc, probably of oil shale, was found during the excavation of a Cist 1 (Figure 4). The disc was found in disturbed fill rather than associated with the burial, and is best seen as an incidental intrusion. This is supported by its unfinished character. Although the faces are smooth, with only a few file-marks, the object was in the course of being completed, as the circular form is still irregular and the edges bear extensive abrasion scars. While items of such black organic stone are found as grave goods in both Early Bronze Age and Iron Age burials, there are no known examples of unfinished items being included.

The disc was probably intended as a spindle whorl. The careful and well-finished perforation indicates this was its final form, rather than being the initial stages of a bigger perforation for a ring or ring-pendant. This suggests a likely role as a whorl, which typically have cylindrical perforations (for discussion of the problems of identification, see Callander 1916: 230–2). Its mass of 23.1g (which would reduce with more working) would be quite practical for a whorl.

Such finds are impossible to date typologically with any precision, but a broadly later prehistoric / early historic date would be likely. The source of the raw material is unclear. Unfinished items generally (although not exclusively) imply use of reasonably local raw materials, especially for items like whorls which could readily be made from other stones or bone. The Kelso area sits on Carboniferous Limestone deposits, which would not normally be expected to produce such materials; these are typical of the later, Coal Measures sequence. However, thin coals have been noted in the Limestone series (Greig 1971: 63–4), and this is a possible local source; only fieldwork in the area could confirm this. The working assumption is that a local source was used.
Catalogue

Irregular disc, the faces smooth with occasional fine abrasion scars. The edges are irregular from knife-cut facets across their width; these were in the process of being rounded off by abrasion when the disc was abandoned. Near-central drilled perforation, the ends flared. One surface has adhering deposits from the grave fill. Material: dark, with laminar cracking. Identification is tricky with no fracture surfaces to examine. X-ray fluorescence results indicate the material is relatively inorganic, with a high but not very high iron level; this and the cracking indicate an oil shale. Diam: 43.5×45mm; H: 11mm; perforation Diam: min 7.5mm, max 11mm.

The Radiocarbon Dates

Radiocarbon determinations presented in Table 3 were obtained from fragments of human bone selected from each of the three individuals identified during osteological examination. The dates returned for two individuals, (3785±35 BP, 2340–2120 cal BC at 2 sigma (GU-16434); 3555±50 BP, 2030–1750 cal BC at 2 sigma (GU-16436)), one from each of the cists, indicates that the initial phase of burial can be dated to the Chalcolithic (c.2450/2400–2200-2150) /early Bronze Age (c.2200/2150-c.1500), as anticipated from the mode of burial represented. Unexpectedly, the unburnt bone from a second individual within Cist 2 has returned a date of 2720±35 BP, 930–800 cal BC at 2 sigma (GU-16435) implying a second phase of deposition within the cist during the late Bronze Age.
**Fig 5** Cist 2 with *in situ* human remains

**Table 3** Radiocarbon determinations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Laboratory code</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Uncal BP</th>
<th>Calibrated 2 sigma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelso</td>
<td>SUERC- (GU-16434)</td>
<td>Bone: Adult Human (cranium &amp; mandible fragments)</td>
<td>103 (cist 1)</td>
<td>3785±35</td>
<td>2340 - 2120 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SUERC- (GU-16436)</td>
<td>Bone: Adult Human (left femur)</td>
<td>118 (cist 2)</td>
<td>3555±50</td>
<td>2030–1750 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SUERC- (GU-16435)</td>
<td>Bone: Adult Human (left femur)</td>
<td>118 (cist 2)</td>
<td>2720±35</td>
<td>930–800 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Scatters of burials of Bronze Age date are known in and around the Kelso area but the Broomlands cists are amongst the first to benefit from a comprehensive programme of radiocarbon dating and modern osteological analysis. In most respects the two unaccompanied short cist burials investigated are typical of Chalcolithic/early Bronze Age burial traditions in Scotland in terms of their location in the landscape, the method of the construction of the cists and the unburnt human remains that they both were found to contain.

The recovery of skeletal elements of more than one individual within a Cist, such as that within Cist 2, is not uncommon (Richie & Stevenson 1982, 552) and multiple inhumation burials are becoming a more frequently recognised facet of Chalcolithic/early Bronze Age inhumation burials in Scotland and beyond than hitherto recognised (Gibson 2004). What sets this discovery apart from the current models of early Bronze Age cist burials is that independent dating of the human remains within the cist demonstrates that the grave was revisited over a millennia after the principal burial for the interment of further human remains from a second adult individual.

The modern disturbance to both cists and the skeletal remains within them prior to excavation was severe, particularly to Cist 1, and necessarily places limits on the inferences that can be made about burial rites represented. The human remains from Cist 1 were so badly disturbed that it was impossible to establish during excavation and subsequent osteological examination whether a full articulated body had ever been present within the cist. Similarly, the damage caused by the collapsed capstone of Cist 2 made it difficult in the field to determine whether the cist contained one or more individuals and the presence of a second individual was only later confirmed by specialist analysis of the bone. The extent of the damage was such that the opportunity to clarify the stratigraphic relationship between the two interments and confirm the condition of the human remains at the time of deposition has been irrevocably lost.

What do the radiocarbon dates tell us? Taken at face value, the dates obtained for the human remains indicate a Chalcolithic/early Bronze Age date for the principal interments within Cist 1 and Cist 2. The burial within Cist 1 appears to be the earliest of the inhumations (2340-2120 cal BC), predating that of the principal interment within Cist 2 by a minimum of two hundred years (2030-1750 cal BC). This earlier inhumation (Cist 1) is one of a growing suite of Chalcolithic period burials known from Scotland, many of which have benefited from the systematic radiocarbon dating programmes undertaken by National Museums of Scotland (Sheridan 2007) and University of Aberdeen’s Beakers and Bodies Project (Curtis et al 2007; Curtis & Wilkin 2012). Although unaccompanied by surviving grave goods, the Cist 1 burial at Broomlands is broadly contemporary with early Beaker-associated burials such as those from Tavelty Farm, Kintore and Manar, Inverurie, both Aberdeenshire (Sheridan 2007; Curtis & Wilkin 2012: 255–6).

Although there is no overlap between the dates of both principal burials at Broomlands, they can both be seen to be part of the same burial tradition. This gap in the sequence of burial between the occupant of Cist 1 and the principal interment within Cist 2, demonstrated by the radiocarbon dates, is bolstered by the
slight disparity in alignment of the cists, implying that they were constructed as separate episodes. The siting of the cists in such close proximity to one another also suggests that Cist 1 was marked in some way but no evidence to confirm this survived. Other differences, such as the deliberately laid pebble floor of Cist 2 may simply be a reflection of differences in individual choices rather than having any chronological implications. Another similar deliberately laid floor was recorded from the lower cist at Pinnaclehill, Kelso (Calder 1947: 9, fig 2). Here two stone slabs had been laid horizontally to create a paved floor surface on to which a crouched adult inhumation was placed.

When the remains of several individuals are found within a single grave it is not always possible to determine whether they represent a sequence of interments or whether the individuals were buried together in a single event. One of two cists from Pinnaclehill was found to contain incomplete disarticulated human bone from a second individual within a short cist containing an articulated crouched adult male inhumation (Calder 1947). At the time of excavation it was believed that these disarticulated remains had infiltrated the cist shortly prior to investigation as the result of recent disturbance to a second cist situated a short distance to the north-east of the first. The discovery at Broomlands, however, introduces the possibility that these additional skeletal remains may not have been a modern intrusion as suggested at the time of discovery. Instead, they may represent a subsequent phase of burial or the deliberate contemporary interment of disarticulated human remains in conjunction with an articulated inhumation burial, similar to those known from Dryburn Bridge, East Lothian (Dunwell 2007: 6 & 8). A similar suggestion could be made for the three ‘extra’ long bones of a juvenile noted in the corner of a short cist containing a crouched adult inhumation at Menslaws, near Denholm (Henshall & Wallace 1961: 32). Very clear instances of a secondary phase of burial, possibly involving disarticulated remains, within early Bronze Age cists are known from Traigh Bhan, Islay, Argyll (Ritchie & Stevenson 1982), West Pinkerton, East Lothian (Stevenson 1939) and Balbie Farm, Burntisland, Fife (Piggott 1948), to name a few. Yet, the timespan of the burial events in these other instances are not known. The exceptional facet of the Broomlands burial is that the radiocarbon dates demonstrate a gap of over a millennia between the interments in Cist 2; a sequence of burial rarely demonstrable in the archaeological record, not least due to the general rarity of burials of late Bronze Age date in Scotland. The implications of this practice are that in order for the Broomlands cist to have been accessed and opened for the insertion of the remains of the second individual, its position would have to have been known by the community suggesting that it was marked in some way. No grave marker was recognised during excavation, nor were there any traces of the former presence of an earthen mound covering the graves but it is possible that a round barrow was once in existence. At Pinnacle Hill a posthole was noted immediately adjacent to the north-east end slab of the lower cist, perhaps acting as a post to mark the position of the grave (Calder 1947: 9, fig 2). Similar putative grave markers were noted in association with both cists at Dryburn Bridge (Dunwell 2007: 6 & 8, illus 4). Alternatively, the number of large rounded boulders within the backfill of Cist 1 could suggest that this grave at least was formerly protected by a small stone cairn.
The late Bronze Age date for the second individual in Cist 2 was unexpected. Assumptions are generally that cremation was the normative funerary rite during this period but the individual at Broomlands is an example of a small but expanding body of evidence that suggests that inhumation persisted (Brück 2008: 27). Although the evidence for late Bronze Age reuse of earlier graves is exceptionally rare, it is not unprecedented. A rock-cut cist at Sand Field, Orkney, was found to contain the remains of multiple individuals consisting of both unburnt, articulated human remains and deposits of cremated bone (Dalland 1999). The substantial cist appears to have been purposely constructed to enable the interior to be easily accessed for the future interment of additional burials. A programme of radiocarbon dating of the individuals present was conducted and the assays obtained demonstrated that the interments ranged in date from 2900-2500 cal BC to 1000-800 cal BC (ibid: 404–7).

At Mill Road, Linlithgow, a large stone built cist was found to contain the unburnt remains of an adult and at least four children as well as a small quantity of cremated bone from a further young child (Cook 2000). The construction of the cist appears to have allowed one side-slab to be removed and replaced enabling successive remains to be added to the cist after the principal interment. It is thought that the later interments may have been in the form of disarticulated white bone rather than articulated bodies due to the arrangement of the bones at the time of discovery. At Mill Road, it was not possible to establish the sequence of interments or the duration of time that burial took place over, demonstrating clearly the advantage of obtaining radiocarbon dates for each individual, where the condition of the human remains allow.

The motivations of the community conducting the later burial at Broomlands and their choice to revisit the site of an earlier grave are not well understood. The practice observed here is so rarely paralleled in a late Bronze Age context that interpreting the social and cosmological factors underpinning this funerary rite remains necessarily speculative. Although clearly a deliberate practice rather than a case of modern intrusion it is unclear whether the second phase of burial was undertaken to create or reinforce a link with a particular individual, perhaps a known ancestor of the decedents family, or to forge a symbolic bond between the more recently deceased and anonymous yet powerful ancestral remains. Both scenarios would be entirely consistent with the overarching cosmological picture emerging for early Beaker-using communities in Britain which address aspects of social memory, commemoration of the ancestors and emphasise genealogical traditions (Needham 2012, 19). The Broomlands burial is a rare but significant discovery which suggests that aspects of this Early Beaker cosmology continued to exist into the later Bronze Age. Unfortunately, due to the condition of the skeletal remains, it has not been possible to investigate whether any skeletal elements from the principal interment were removed at the time of the subsequent interment; a practice which has been noted elsewhere and has been interpreted as the circulation of human remains within Bronze Age society in the form of ancestral tokens or relics (Brück 2006).

The perforated oil shale spindle whorl also adds to the complexity of this site. The object was recovered from the fill of Cist 1 which had unfortunately been disturbed prior to archaeological intervention and therefore cannot be
considered a secure stratigraphic context. Given that the artefact is thought to be of later prehistoric provenance it may have entered the grave during disturbance contemporary with the re-opening of Cist 2. Equally, it could also have been a surface find that had fallen into the grave during more recent disturbance.

No further cists or traces of disturbed graves were observed in the immediate vicinity of the cists within the development area suggesting that these two cists represent a pair of isolated burials rather than a surviving portion of a more extensive cemetery. Although small earthen round barrows are known within the wider landscape, such as that at Edenmouth (Douglas 1849), no traces of an overlying mound or stone cairn were noted in conjunction with the Broomlands cists. But, inevitably, the severe truncation of the soils and the removal of any trace of the old land surface surrounding the cist place any discussion of the wider significance of the situation of the burials into the realm of speculation.

**CONCLUSION**

The burials at Broomlands, Kelso, although limited in the inferences that can be made due to the extent of damage prior to excavation, contribute to the emerging picture of the complexity of burial practices during the early and late Bronze Age in Scotland.

Burials involving multiple individuals, particularly sequential interments, are being identified with increasing frequency due to the standardisation of osteological examination of prehistoric remains from archaeological excavations, and the application of radiocarbon dating. The recognition of the remains of two adult individuals within one of the Broomlands cists is a useful addition to the growing numbers of multiple interment burials in Scotland. The evidence for the re-opening and re-visiting of Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age cist burials and insertion or extraction of human remains is becoming more frequently recognised but is still poorly understood in terms of the social implications of such a practice. What makes the Broomlands multiple burial exceptional is the disparity in dates between two individuals which demonstrates the cist was re-opened a millennia after the principal burial was interred to allow further human remains to be inserted. Without independent dating of skeletal elements from each of the individuals identified during osteological examination, this burial practice would have gone undetected. The rarity of such burial practices may well be a reflection of archaeological recognition and the Broomlands burial highlights the importance of obtaining radiocarbon dates for each individual where sufficient bone is available.

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