

10. LONG CIST AT LEUCHARS, FIFE.

During May 1948 the St Andrews University Archæological Society, acting on information received from Mr Forsyth, the local schoolmaster, excavated a cist which lay on the west side of Leuchars school playground. While the playground itself was being constructed in 1908, 34 other such cists were uncovered in

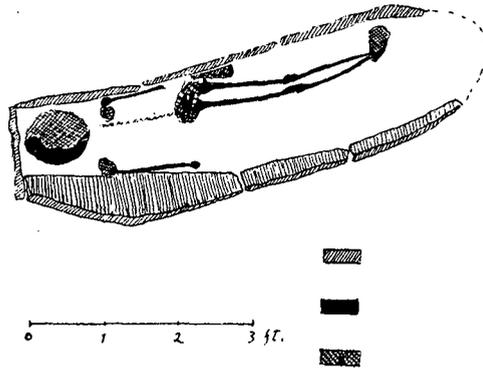


Fig. 2. Long cist at Leuchars, Fife.

the presence of Wm. Reid, who states¹ that they were laid out in long rows, head to feet, and usually consisted of between four and six side-slabs, a slab at the head and another at the feet, and covering slabs. There were no slabs under the skeleton. The long axis of the cists lay approximately east-west, the head being placed at the west end. The cists were about 6 feet long on the average, and most of the enclosed skeletons were of people between 5 feet 3 inches and 5 feet 4½ inches tall.

In the case of the cist excavated by us, the skeleton was found embedded in a matrix of earth which had filtered in, and when this was removed, was found to

¹ Reid, *P.S.A.S.*, 1908.

be lying slightly on its left side, so that the skull faced north. Reid mentions three in which it was turned to the south. The total length of the skeleton as it lay in the grave was 4 feet 9 inches, though the fact that the teeth were ground flat would not seem to indicate that it was the skeleton of a child. The skull had been crushed by the covering slab which had fallen in on it, and some of the rest of the skeleton had crumbled away (fig. 2).

The cist itself consisted of six slabs, three along each side, a slab at the head, and the covering-stones, which had been to some extent damaged by the traffic which had passed over them. There was no end slab at the feet. The whole construction had been canted slightly to the south (down the slope of the hill on which it lies). The fact that the site had been preserved at all is no doubt due to the presence of a layer of earth, about 2 feet thick, which covered it until about 1715.¹

On the site where the school stands to-day there were, up to the sixteenth century, the ruins of the Culdee chapel of St Bonac, which appears to have been in use from the ninth to the twelfth century, when it was replaced by the present church. As this type of burial was used from the fifth century until the Poor Law finally made it necessary for the parish to supply a wooden coffin for the burial of paupers,² and as the east-west orientation indicates Christian burial rites, it seems very probable that the cists are contemporary with the chapel, and that the site would not be used very long after the new church had come into use.

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