

A disturbed inhumation from Stain, Keiss, Caithness

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During the course of the Caithness Coastal Survey in 1981 in the parish of Wick, a site noted previously by Laing (1866, 10-19), to the S of Keiss Harbour (NGR ND 3440 6056), was examined for modern damage (WIC 114; Batey, forthcoming). According to Laing, the site, a raised sand

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ridge running for approximately half a mile roughly parallel to the coastline, had a number of cist burials placed at regular intervals along the top of the ridge. Each had a stone cairn above the burial and this in turn was covered by sand. Laing himself examined eight cists in 1864, and later two further ones were found in the same area, one by Anderson (Laing 1866, 18). In 1866, Laing examined a further two skeletons, one lacking a cist (Laing 1868, 59–60). He concluded that his original estimate of 60–70 graves along the ridge was an overestimation, because areas had been examined which had produced no traces of cists or skeletons. Others had been discovered originally at the southern end of the ridge, during the construction of the road to the beach (Laing 1866, 12). The most notable of the graves examined was the ‘Chief’s Cist’, termed the circular cairn by Ashmore (1980, 349), the only one to be recorded as kerbed. A series of ‘crude stone implements’ was recovered, mostly non-artefactual, and a single ‘deer horn handle’ (Laing 1866, 16–19, *illus.*).

In 1981, two deep field drains running roughly E–W through this ridge had been recut; the northern one, at a point approximately 50 m SW of Stain Cottage, towards the northern extremity of the sand ridge, showed traces of scattered femur and human rib fragments. Initially it was suspected that a second body was represented by long bones found 2 m inland along the ditch, but on investigation these were revealed to be part of the same skeleton. Fragments of bone were recovered from the ditch upcast 5 m NE of the ditch edge, also probably from the same inhumation.

The area of excavation was limited to 1.5 by 1.5 m immediately behind the bulk of the revealed skeletal material at the ditch edge; the skeleton was itself actually cut through by the

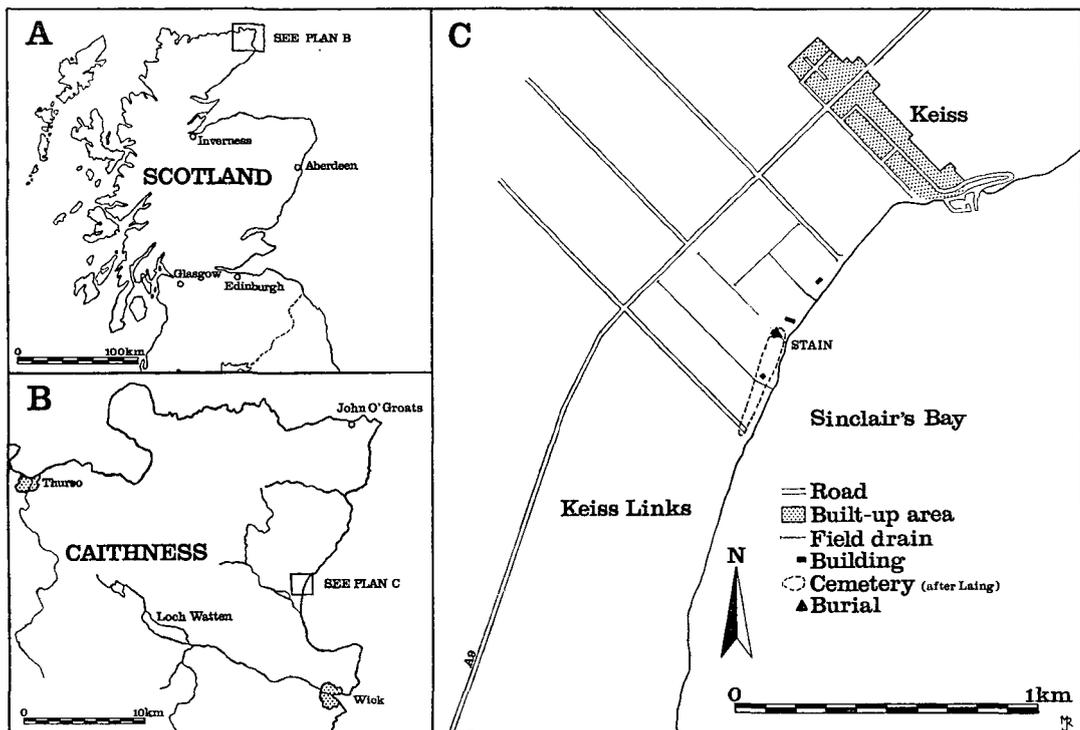


FIG 1

ditch. Despite the fragmentary nature of the deposit, it was possible to see that the head end of the body had been to the NW and the feet to the SE. The entire deposit was disturbed, both in recent times, and also in antiquity, and the only articulated bones remaining in position were the right arm and hand, overlying the right femur. The body seemed to lie on its back with the right hand placed on the right hip. This articulated portion of the skeleton lay in a small hollow in the natural subsoil, which could never have been intended to take the complete skeleton; a few centimetres to the SW, a small rectangular hollow contained fragments of mandible and rib. These features are the only remaining indicators of a cut for the deposition of the body which, due to the very disturbed nature of the deposit, it was not possible to trace elsewhere. At the time of excavation, a light orange sand overlying the gravel seemed to suggest the original presence of an overlying sand mound, now badly reduced, sealing the grave deposit. This would not be inconsistent with Ashmore's analysis of potentially similar graves where mounds have been noted (Ashmore 1980, 351), but no extension to such wide-ranging conclusions can be added from such partial evidence as this presented here.

The skeletal remains were examined by Dr Archibald Young, formerly of the Department of Anatomy, Glasgow University, and the fragmentary dentition by Dr Dorothy Lunt, of the Glasgow Dental School. The single fragment of right mandible had two teeth *in situ*, a second premolar and a first permanent molar, both showing extreme wear and caries. The bones represented a single inhumation although incomplete, and lacked anything of particular pathological interest. All indications are that the remains represent an adult, probably aged over 45 years and probably female. A full report is lodged with the National Monuments Record of Scotland in Edinburgh.

The only artefact to be recovered from the grave was a simple undecorated copper alloy finger-ring on the disarticulated third finger of the left hand (Find no 181); it is, however, not especially period-diagnostic and its significance lies in the fact that prior to 1981 no metal finds were recorded from any of the Keiss graves. Other differences may be noted when trying to compare this later grave with those found by Laing: the nature of the deposition is rather different, lacking both cist and cairn and also in being of a slightly differing alignment, NW-SE as opposed to N-S or NE-SW. The position of the part of the body remaining was noted only once by Laing as lying on the back (Laing 1866, 12), although it has to be stressed that if his estimate of the number of graves present in the mound is even remotely accurate, he only examined approximately 10% of the whole. Further to this, it is also conceivable that the cemetery was in use for a long period and that graves at the extreme northern end of the ridge could easily be of a different period with different traditions in burial.

It is likely then, on balance, that the disturbed nature of the grave and the fact that it was totally sealed (thus excluding the possibility that it was a relatively recent reburial) indicate that the body had been removed from its initial resting place and reburied. It is, however, difficult to make any further comment on the significance or date of the deposition.

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