

8.5 Early Burials on the Tarbat Peninsula (by Nicola Toop, drawing on research by Graham Robins)

Human remains have been encountered in many locations on the peninsula and its environs, but the absence of artefacts or scientific dating makes attribution to a precise period problematic. The expected burial rites are urned cremations, short cists containing cremations or crouched burial (generally assigned to the Bronze Age) or long cists, which are generally dated to the later Iron Age, 400-700 AD (see below). Burial types are sometimes too readily assumed from casual encounters with fragments of pottery or slabs of stone, and indeed it is no simple matter if the observation in question was made while digging a drain with a mechanical excavator. With these caveats in mind, the map of sighted burials (III 4.26) distinguishes between *certain* (archaeologically recorded, certain identification); *possible* (archaeologically recorded but with insufficient remains to make a secure identification, or a description sufficient to allow an informed identification); and *uncertain* (ambiguous descriptions, or poorly located accounts).

There are three main clusters of burial that can be identified on the peninsula: on the west coast at Portmahomack/Balnabruach, a second on the east at the Seaboard Villages, in particular Balintore, and third on the south in the area of Nigg and the north Sutor. This distribution may owe something to building development in these areas, but it is probably not wholly unrepresentative since extensive ploughing would have resulted in the discovery of more slabbed graves had they been there in any quantity.

Portmahomack/Balnabruach group

Balnabruach, just 600m from St Colman's Church, is the site of a concentration of cist burials dating to the first millennium AD (p00). In 1992 a watching brief on the course of a pipeline by GUARD identified a shell midden, a Bronze Age short stone cist containing a body, probably male 17-25 (Burial A), and a long cist with an extended skeleton N-S with another E-W above it (Burials B and C). The first was a female in her late 30s, the second probably male, aged 16-25 (Report by D Low, Highland Council).

The records and material from this watching brief were revisited in the course of the Tarbat project, from which analysis we can give the following revised account, thanks to material and information obtained from Daphne Lorimer (OLA 8.5). Burial A (NH 9100 8410) was encountered in isolation, represented by the disturbed human remains of a young male adult associated with slabs, which were interpreted by the archaeological contractor as the remains

of a probable short cist. These were radiocarbon dated to 410-230 cal BC (p000), placing them in the middle Iron Age. Approximately 150m to the west, between two houses (NH 9084 8408), a sequence of burials was identified, comprising at least six individuals, excavated as three distinct burials (B, C, D). The earliest, (Burial B) represented a female in her late 30s, oriented south-north, and included the intrusive arm bones of a younger, taller individual, also probably female (Burial Bi). This early burial was overlain by a second burial (Burial C), oriented west-east and apparently contained within a long cist, only the massive capstone of which was visible in section. Burial C laid on a bed of gravel, clearly defined in section, and the remains were subsequently identified as those of a young male. Although the excavators suggested that the juxtaposition of Burials B and C/D may have been fortuitous, the burials returned close radiocarbon dates (Burial B: AD 240-420; Burial C: AD 260-530), and it is more likely that these reflect deliberate interment in the same location. Further remains were encountered during excavation of Burial C, and termed Burial D. Osteological analysis identified these as the remains of a minimum of three individuals: D was a young adult female, Di a female aged 30-34 and Dii a mature adult, possibly male.

Less substantial data can be used to expand evidence for burial along this area of coastline. To the south of Balnabruach, a 'cist' was found during land reclamation 160m west of Castle Corbet in 1865 (NH 900 832; RCAHMS site 94). It contained a cremation and small 'urn'. To the north of the village, at Chapel Hill, burials were discovered before 1845 'deposited within rough flags of freestone'. Suggestions have been made that these would have been associated with a chapel alleged to have stood at the site (NH 916 845; NH98SW 6; *NSA* xiv 460; *OPS* 1851-5,ii, 434; Davidson 1946, 27). However, an earlier date for the burials might be suggested by the fuller description; 'several chests of freestone flags were dug up a few years ago...each chest contained an entire skeleton...and from the position of the bones it appeared that the bodies had been doubled' (Sinclair in *NSA* 1791-99; vol xvii inv, ross, crom 461). The 'doubling' of bodies may refer to crouched burials. The burials all occur in the coastal zone, between sea level and c.15m AOD.

Balintore group

The second concentration of burials lies on the east coast, in the area now known as the Seaboard Villages (Robins 1998). A number of the reported burials occur in association with two landscape features: *Bruchal Mhor*, a sand hill also known in local folklore as 'Ghost's Hillock', and *Slochd Geal*, the 'White Pit', the location of which is not clear but which is positioned by locals near Harbour View. Both landscape features were removed in the late 1930s to make way for housing. In 1935, two cists containing crouched burials were

discovered on the northeast side of the *Bruchal Mhor* at NH 8619 7552 (reported by a local informant in 1972). Two years later, excavation of foundations on the southwest side of the *Bruchal Mhor* also revealed an inhumation, reported to have been in a 'stone coffin' which possibly refers to a cist (information given 1972)(NH 8617 7549). The levelling of the mound in 1937 to make way for housing was said to have revealed a number of human bones, including an inhumation 'surrounded by stone slabs' with 'flints or sharp stones found with it' (not securely located). During building in 1938-9, 'skulls and other bones were found' (Davidson 1946, 26). A report by a local informant stated that a team from Aberdeen University excavated the site and revealed 13 extended skeletons, but as yet no information has been forthcoming to substantiate this. A sinuous form is depicted on the Ordnance Survey editions of the 1890s and early 1900s, which may represent this mound.

A small group of burials has been reported on Bank Street, to the northeast of Balintore. Excavation of a well in 1932 identified a small stone-lined grave with skull and bones 'all bunched up' (recorded in 1961); the description might suggest a short cist with crouched inhumation (NH 8639 7570). A short distance to the west, excavation of a sewer in c.1950 contacted a cist containing bones, again recorded as a short cist (NH 8626 7563). Less certain is the report of human bones uncovered in 1919 between these two locations, during extensions to the rear of No. 4, Bank Street, with local reports of a large slab discovered in the same area before the bones were found (NH 8630 7568). At the same site, groundworks in c.1972 encountered further human remains (NH 8630 7568)(reported and sent to Inverness Museum 1996). More secure evidence is provided by an account of a burial encountered in 1976, situated further inland than the Bank Street cluster (Wedderburn & Grime 1976). Here, a short cist was identified, measuring 0.92m by 0.45m containing the remains of two individuals – a primary adult inhumation and a secondary child. Six vertical slabs formed the cist, containing the earlier, primary adult burial; a layer of collapsed slabs may have formed an early lid, over which the remains of a child were interred, possibly covered by a secondary lid.

Extended inhumations associated with slabs are also represented in Balintore, and were recorded archaeologically in 1982 to the east of the settlement (NH 8660 7580). Two extended burials, orientated SW-NE were identified during excavation of a sewer, covered with flat slabs. A third skull was also recovered. All three individuals were identified as female. Two west-east orientated burials were encountered 10m apart during service trenching in 1995 close to the Bank Street; both were recorded by the Highland Council Archaeologist and no slabs were mentioned (NH 7567 8629). To the southwest of the village,

records of human remains, with no further evidence for burial rite, occurred during works for the church hall (NH 8608 7538).

At Shandwick, a local informant described the find of a short cist containing a single crouched inhumation during excavation of a service trench in 1945 (recorded in 1972)(NH 8558 7465). The burial was apparently left *in situ*, and the informant believed there to be a further four or five examples in the vicinity, represented by large horizontal slabs. The burial is likely to be that referred to in an account of 1961 which recorded a find of 1954 as a 'stone coffin' containing a 'skull and other human bones', at almost the same grid reference (NH 8555 7465) (RCAHMS 1975, no 111). There is a local tradition of a burial ground around the cross slab. The name of the stone *Clach a Charridh* has been translated as 'stone of the grave plots', and the historic Ordnance Survey marks a 'Burying ground' at the site (NH 8556 7473). Despite these references, this remains unsubstantiated. At the site of the medieval chapel at Shandwick, a possible burial ground is represented by finds of human remains in an area now represented by the edge of a quarry (NH 8582 7453). Bones were discovered at the site during 1939-1945, when stone from the chapel was used to build the RNAS Airfield at Loans of Rarichie. However, the remains were thrown away. Excavation of a silage pit in the early 1970s encountered several burials that were subsequently reburied. The survival of remains at the site was confirmed in 1996, when a site visit noted a bone in a vertical section above the quarry, and two uprights interpreted as possible grave markers (NH98SW 1).

South of Shandwick, at Easter Rarichie Farm, a further cist burial was reported beneath a large sandstone slab measuring 1.5m x 1m x 0.3m, found during ploughing. No bone or associated artefacts were reported, but a hint of a burial ground is provided by a field listed by Watson as '*Ron a'chlaidh*', or graveyard field. Watson (1996, 57) states that 'the plough...formerly used to strike the gravestones, but these are now removed', suggesting a more extensive burial ground. Further up the coast is Cnoc Dubh, Ballone where there was a reference to 'stone coffins' in 1904 (NH98SW 2; Canmore 16643); this might refer to later sarcophagi, or cists, but without further information this cannot be known (Watson 1904, 48).

Nigg Group

A third focus for burial on the peninsula is hinted at by records of possible cremation burials and cists at Nigg, although none has been verified archaeologically. At Balnabraich, Nigg, a cist was reported to have been found under the west gable of the cottage in 1922 (NH 794 698); four other cists were apparently opened at the same time in the vicinity of a hollow known as *Poll na Marie* (information provided 1972). In 1945, two 'clay vases' were

recovered during excavation of a service trench in the bank surrounding the house (NH 7945 6987). Each was 6" to 8" tall and had faint scratch marks. Together, the evidence suggests a possible Bronze Age cemetery focussed at Nigg. A focus may have been provided by a standing stone: a 'rude undressed stone' is said to have stood in Nigg churchyard in 1835 (RCAHMS no. 120, NH 804 717). The new statistical account for 1845 reported the discovery of two crude burial urns, found c. 1820-1823 in "a bank of blown sand directly under the northern Sutor". The sand, partially removed by storms, overlaid a deposit of animal bones. One urn was filled with ashes and half-burned bones, the other with bits of a black bituminous-looking stone resembling jet, which had been made into beads and "little flat parallelograms perforated edgewise, with four holes apiece" (NSA 1845; Miller 1835). Visiting in 1972, the OS placed the site at NH 800 691. This has echoes of a burial of the Beaker period.

The chapel at Hilton of Cadboll was recently subject to archaeological investigation, but the earliest of the few burials that were excavated and radiocarbon dated were AD 680-900 (SUERC-9141, GU-13807) and AD 680-890 (SUERC-9142, GU-13808), equivalent to Period 2 at Portmahomack. The role of 8th century Hilton (and Nigg and Shandwick) in relation to the Portmahomack monastery will be considered in the next chapter (Chapter 5.10. p000).