

XII

NOTES

1. A RE-WORKED FLINT AXE FROM MILFIELD, NORTHUMBERLAND

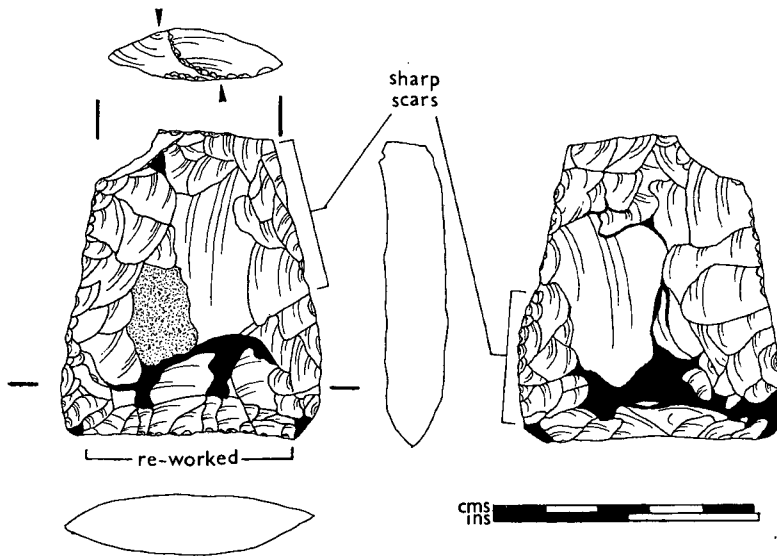


Fig. 1.

THIS POLISHED flint axe (fig. 1) was found in the gravel quarry at Milfield airfield (NT 945330) and I am indebted to Mr. R. Miket both for showing it to me and for encouraging me to publish it.

This is an axe of good dark honey-grey flint on the outer face and mostly mid-grey with white mottles on the underface. A small area of cortex remains and is a very thin light brown crust. The axe was deliberately shortened at the narrower end by two blows in opposite directions as shown in the uppermost view. The broad end was also deliberately re-worked, on the outer face only, to make a good sharp scraper edge. Half of the right margin on the outer face and the other half on the reverse have been re-dressed or chipped from use. These three re-worked areas can be distinguished easily by touch as the scar edges are fresh and unworn in contrast with the smoother feel of the remainder of the surfaces.

The re-use of fragments of flint axes was relatively frequent and indeed occurred at nearby Broomridge¹ where a chip was worked "to a graver-like point". This must have been especially common in areas into which flint must be imported because of local lack of good quality material. The present example, however, is the re-fashioning of the whole implement, under the circumstances a prodigal use of such

¹ N. Newbigin, *A.A.*⁴ s. XII, (1935) p. 157, no. 19 and plate XIX.

material. There is, however, at least another example, that at Skara Brae² where a flint axe was re-worked along the two longer sides to form a double-sided scraper. This occurred at a level post-dating the Neolithic occupation of the village with sufficient time lapse to allow some minor degree of patination before re-flaking. It is evident that at the time of re-use, an axe of flint, even with some grinding, was not so good an implement as those of tougher stone, fully ground, which were found to be so much more efficient and durable.

This axe in its original form was therefore likely to be early Neolithic, but somewhat later in its adapted function.

JOAN WEYMAN

2. A FOOD VESSEL BURIAL ON DOUR HILL, BYRNES, NORTHUMBERLAND

DURING THE COURSE OF some clearance and tree planting in June 1975 a cist burial was uncovered on the upper slopes of Dour Hill in the Redesdale forest (fig. 2, no. 1). I am indebted to the Forestry Commission for notification of the discovery and to the small group of members of this society who, at short notice, assisted with the investigation.³ Dr. Joan Weyman has kindly reported on such skeletal material as survived.

The cist lies some 250 m SSE of the crag known as Kip End and about 100 m W of the present boundary fence between the forest and the Redesdale field-firing range (NT 794021). At an altitude of *c.* 355 m (1200') the situation affords extensive views over Redesdale to the south and towards Carter Bar in the north-west.

The huge cap-stone, some 0.35 m thick, had been already dragged out of position by machines to reveal the top of the cist and part of a human skull protruding from the surface of the earth filling. During the short time available for investigation much of the surrounding area was cleaned off and the contents of the cist removed (fig. 2).

The cist was orientated east to west, measured 1.4 m by 0.8 m internally, and was 0.5 m deep. Whereas the west end consisted of a single large slab of local sandstone, both the east end and the south side had been constructed from three slabs and the north side from four. The bottom of the cist was paved with thinner slabs, some of which had cracked *in situ*. A pre-construction pit was larger than the cist itself, at least at ground level, and the intervening gaps had been back-filled with earth. Two of the side-slabs on the north side were leaning inwards at a pronounced angle, a displacement which must be attributed to a later intrusion, also marked by the disturbed sub-soil beyond the north side of the cist. These displaced slabs have been restored to their original position in the accompanying plan. Despite the disturbance caused by the removal of the cap-stone and this earlier intrusion there was sufficient stone in a roughly circular spread around the cist to suggest that it had been covered originally by a low cairn, although there were no kerb-stones in position. In two places beneath these stones the sub-soil had been burnt to a bright red colour, perhaps as a result of some ritual activity connected with the burial.

The cist was filled to a depth of almost 0.2 m with a sandy silt and small gravelly

² V. G. Childe and H. M. L. Paterson, *P.S.A.S.*, LXIII, (1929-30) 268.

³ Mr. and Mrs. R. Charlton, Mr. J. Day and Miss M. Mitchison.

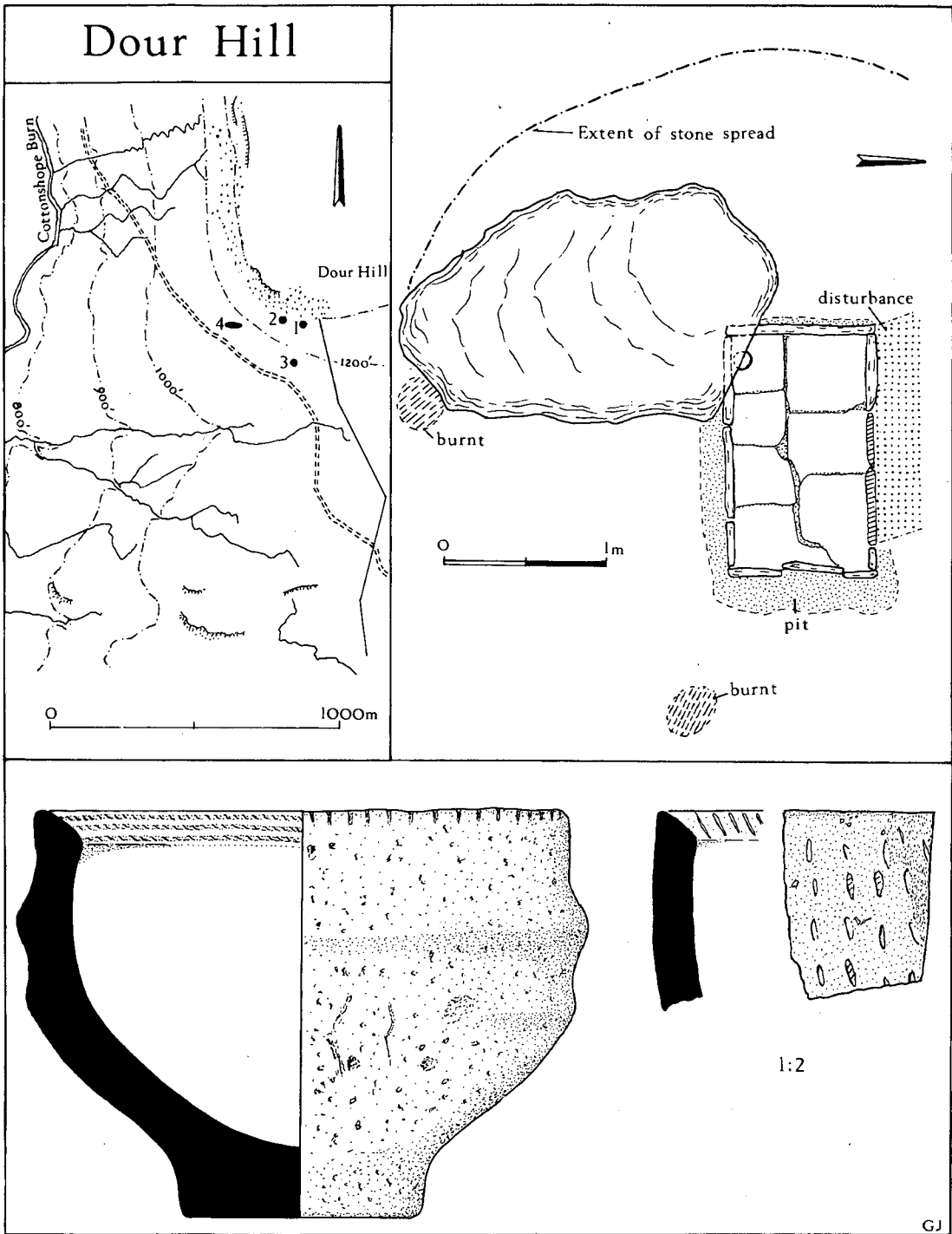


Fig. 2.

debris. Fragments of a skull and mandible were all recovered from the top 50 mm of this fill and, in addition, a single rim-herd from a Food Vessel in close proximity to the displaced side-slabs. Seven small but abraded sherds, possibly from the same vessel, were scattered about in the disturbed area beyond the north side of the cist. A second, unbroken Food Vessel, found in the south-west corner of the cist, only became visible after the upper fill had been removed. A number of teeth and part of a hazel-nut shell were the only remaining contents of the lower fill.

The complete Food Vessel is of the so-called Northern Tripartite type,⁴ the decoration in this instance being confined to the rim and consisting of cord-impressions on the internal bevel and probably finger-nail incisions on the edge. The single rim-herd on the other hand is from a globular or barrel-shaped Food Vessel, decorated rather haphazardly with small, cord-impressed maggots. At the moment it is not possible to give a more specific context, other than within the first half of the second millennium B.C., for these particular vessels. The presence of the hazel-nut shell might indicate an interment in the autumn.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that originally two complete vessels had been placed in the cist, one of them being later robbed out from beneath the capstone and broken in the process. The seemingly frustrated gropings made by earlier antiquaries beneath large cap-stones elsewhere has not gone unrecorded.⁵ As with Beakers, closed associations of more than one Food Vessel occur on a number of occasions. In this instance the report on the skeletal material would also indicate the probability of a double interment, consisting of an infant of some six to nine months and a child of perhaps eleven years of age.

One of the fortuitous results of a short visit to an area which has not been subject to recent field-survey, chiefly because of its more than liberal covering of trees, was the discovery of two possible additional burial cairns (fig. 2, nos. 2 and 3) and the opportunity to inspect the reputed long cairn of Dour Hill, some 200 m to the west (fig. 2, no. 4). The latter, together with the better-known long cairn on Bellshiel Law, about 2 km to the east-south-east, were described by Thomas Arkle and recorded by the redoubtable Dr. Hardy almost a century ago.⁶ Because of the rarity of such monuments, the Ancient Monuments Committee of this Society submitted the Dour Hill cairn for scheduling as long ago as 1931 (no. 169).⁷ The process was never completed, perhaps because other authorities thought it to be a natural feature even though it may have had a round cairn on top.⁸ In its present much denuded and overgrown state only a very brave observer would pronounce upon its validity now; whether it be a long cairn, three smaller round cairns, as Arkle had indirectly hinted, or a natural formation. Nevertheless, it may be regretted that it was not scheduled, even if in some doubt, at a time when this countryside was open moorland. Redesdale may not be rich in prehistoric antiquities, as has been sug-

⁴ To follow only one possible typology, C. Burgess, in *British Prehistory* (ed. Renfrew, C.), 182-3.

⁵ e.g. J. R. Mortimer, *Forty Years Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds*, 272.

⁶ *History Berwick. Nat. Club*, IX (1881), 473.

⁷ *P.S.A.N.*⁴, V (1931-2), 182 and 358, includes descriptions.

⁸ N. Newbiggin, *Excavation of a Long Cairn on Bellshiel Law*, *Arch. Ael.*⁴ XIII (1936), 308.

gested,⁹ at least in terms of the more spectacular, but it is proving to have its northern quota of the persistent, as the present survey of the neighbouring field-firing range is beginning to show.¹⁰

REPORT ON THE SKELETAL REMAINS

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The few bony remains showed no evidence of cremation. From the top fill of the cist the fragments were all from skull vault and mandible. The former included a large portion of a left parietal bone and some small fragments. These were all thin and the articular margins, where present, were very immature and the parietal bone dimensionally small. The mandible was represented by the anterior area with part of the alveolar margin decayed. It contained the lower part of very small sockets for four incisors and the follicular spaces for two canines. These were presumed from their size to be for the deciduous teeth although a radiograph showed no evidence of successional teeth within the bone. In view of the proximity of this fragment to the parietal bone, taken together they would indicate a child of 6-9 months of age.

Amongst the lower fill were three teeth and two fragments of dental enamel. These consisted of *a*) a pair of mandibular first permanent molars with fully developed roots but large root pulp canals and no apparent wear, and *b*) a mandibular second permanent molar with roots only half-developed and no occlusal wear. This tooth was most probably unerupted. Of the two fragments of dental enamel, one may have been from a first deciduous molar about to be shed. All these taken together would suggest a child of 11 years of age.

The cist therefore probably contained the inhumed body of an 11 year old child and an infant of 6-9 months. There was no evidence as to sex.

G. JOBEY

3. A MERELS BOARD IN ROMAN BRITAIN

A MINOR board game is recorded by Ovid in *Ars Amatoria III*, lines 365-6: *Parva tabella capit ternos utrimque lapillos, in qua vicisse est continuasse suos.*

The game was old in Ovid's day, for boards have been found incised in the roofing slabs of the temple at Kurna in Egypt. No Roman name for it seems to have survived, but in France it is known as Marelle, and in England Merels, or Three Mens Morris. Each player has three pieces which are entered on any point on the board in alternate turns of play, each player trying to form a row along one of the eight marked lines. When all the pieces have been positioned, the game proceeds by alternate moves, a piece moving one point along any line through the point on which it stands to a neighbouring empty point.

⁹ H. Burl, Excavation of the Three Kings Stone Circle, Northumberland, *Arch. Ael.*⁴ L (1972), 11.

¹⁰ Information Mr. J. Day. (Now published in dupli-

cated format, A Survey of the Ministry of Defence Training Area, Otterburn).

According to H. J. R. Murray, the game reached Britain after the Norman Conquest and was well established by A.D. 1300. Diagrams have been found cut into the cloister seats of several cathedrals, including Canterbury, Gloucester, Norwich, Salisbury and Westminster Abbey, silent witnesses of long hours spent within their walls by generations of monks. In the outside world the game was popular among shepherds tending sheep on the hills, but during the last century fell from favour.

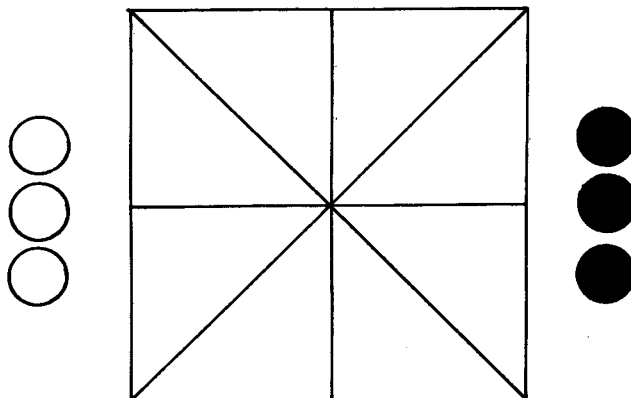


Fig. 3. Diagram of merels game: a stone at Corbridge is inscribed as the square.

A recent discovery at Corstopitum suggests that the game reached Britain in Roman and not Norman times. Among a pile of stones stored at the edge of the site was one inscribed as the square in fig. 1. Its provenance is unknown, and it appears to have been excavated before 1930, possibly even before the First World War, but it is certain that it came from the Roman site. The longer sides of the rectangle are some 9", and there seems to be little doubt that it was used for a Merels game. Similar boards have been found in other parts of the Roman Empire, and there is no reason why this sandstone block should not have served the same purpose.

When the stone was shown to a local stonemason, Mr. Frank Young, he recognised the game and gave it two names: *Tic Tac Toc*, onomatopoeic of the clicking of the pieces in play, and *Blue Staggers*. Could it be that this Northumbrian term is a corruption developed over the centuries of the original Roman name?

The author wishes to thank Dr. D. J. Smith for his interest and help in the preparation of this paper. It is hoped that the merels board will soon be on exhibition in the Corstopitum (Corbridge) site museum.

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