

II.

A SHORT CIST AT WEST PULDRITE IN THE PARISH OF EVIE AND  
RENDALL, ORKNEY. BY J. M. CORRIE, F.S.A. SCOT.

During the summer months of last year, while making an archaeological survey of the Orkney Islands on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, an interesting discovery was made in a tumulus, one of a group that occurs in the Gorseness area of the parish of Evie and Rendall. The mound is situated at an elevation of a little over 100 feet above sea-level and lies quite near the northern boundary fence of the croft of West Puldrite in close proximity to a second and smaller tumulus of like construction (O.S. 6-inch map, Orkney, xcvi). Both of these mounds are composed, for the most part, of fairly rich soil and are now almost entirely covered with a coating of fine turf and heather. In the centre of the larger, which measures 40 feet in diameter by about 5 feet in height, an excavation to the depth of at least 2 feet had apparently been made at some former time, but, so far, I have been unable to glean any information in regard either to the date or the result of this investigation. When examining the tumulus it was observed that a small portion of one of the side slabs of a cist, with an apparently undisturbed cover-slab in position, was exposed by a rabbit scraping near the top of the mound at the west side.

On my return to temporary headquarters in the evening, the discovery was casually mentioned to Mr Alfred Wood, Stenaday, Finstown, a council member of the Orkney Antiquarian Society, and to one or two gentlemen who were holiday-making in the district. A desire having been expressed that an investigation should, if possible, be made and that I should supervise the work, a party, consisting of Mr A. Wood, Dr Mekie, Edinburgh University, Mr J. Mekie, of the Royal Infirmary, Edinburgh, and Master Harold Wood, Finstown, accompanied me on 27th August to West Puldrite, where permission to investigate the mound was readily granted by Mrs Spence, the proprietrix.

Very little labour was required to lay bare the fine large cover-stone of the cist. It had no more than a thin covering of soil, and we were soon able to raise it sufficiently to enable us to ascertain the contents of the grave.

The cist was found to contain the remains of three bodies, unaccompanied by grave goods of any description. The burial or burials possessed several features of interest. Two of the skeletons were in a

more decomposed condition than the third, which was fairly well preserved. All three skulls lay at the south end of the cist, the two belonging to the most decomposed remains resting on their chins and crowded together in the south-east corner, one facing the east and the other the west. The corresponding long bones of these two bodies were disposed in a heap alongside the east slab of the cist, and the much-decayed pelvis of one of them was found at the north end a few inches from the feet of the third and most complete skeleton. From the posture of the two skulls and the position of the long bones and single pelvis, it appeared clear that the remains of these two bodies had been pushed aside to make room in the grave for the third interment. The latter, as will be seen from the illustration (fig. 1), occupied at least two-thirds of the space within the grave, and the body had been deposited with great care in a contracted position. The skeleton lay on the right side, with the head, slightly inclined forward, at the south end of the cist. The knees were drawn up in line with the chest, and the heels to the thighs. All three skulls and some of the long bones of the complete skeleton were covered with what, at first sight, suggested a coarse woven material, but on examination through a strong lens this proved to be nothing more than a fibrous growth.



Fig. 1. Stone Cist at West Puldrite from the north.

The cist itself was carefully constructed of four slabs and a cover-stone of fine quality. The bottom of the grave was laid to a depth of 3 to 4 inches with a layer of fine putty-like clay of a slaty-grey colour, and the four corners of the cists where the slabs met were filled with clay luting of a somewhat lighter colour. At three corners the cist slabs were tightly wedged at the base by small stones which were covered over by the clay floor. The cist measured 4 feet 4 inches and 3 feet 11 inches internally along the east and west sides by 2 feet 10½ inches and 2 feet 7 inches across the north and south ends, and the depth was about 2 feet. The thickness of the slabs used in its construction was about 2 inches. The fine cover-stone was of almost rectangular form, with the south-east corner broken off. It measured on an average 5 feet by 3½ feet, and it fitted very closely on the trimmed

upper edges of the cist slabs. The main axis of the grave was north and south. The position on the west side of the mound might suggest that the grave was a secondary construction, but in the excavation at the centre of the tumulus there was nothing to suggest the former existence of a primary cist at that point.<sup>1</sup> The extensive use of clay as a luting is of particular interest.

It is to be regretted that we have no reliable indication as to the period of these burials. Although careful search was made both by Mr Wood and myself, no associated implements, weapons, or ornaments that would enable us to date the remains were found. We are, therefore, left to speculate upon the problem of age from the general characteristics of the interments and the condition of the bones themselves. The short cist in itself reveals nothing. Though usually regarded as specially characteristic of the Bronze Age, short cists continued in use well into the Iron Age, and from evidence obtained at the site of the Broch of Okstrow in Birsay, and Mansie's Knowes in Rousay, they are known to have survived in Orkney until post-Roman and Viking times.<sup>2</sup> In both of these cases, however, the burials were single interments and the graves were provided with an additional slab as a floor. In Orkney also short cists of an unusual two-storeyed type, containing more than one burial, have been discovered at Crantit and Newbigging, near Kirkwall, and on the farm of Backakeldy in Holm parish.<sup>3</sup> In these cases there was evidence of interment after cremation as well as of inhumation. At Isbister Mill in Rendall parish, however, another short cist of more or less usual form was found to contain the unburnt remains of two bodies, one of which partly over-lay the other and had apparently been deposited, possibly at a later time, with much less care.<sup>4</sup>

The West Puldrite discovery furnishes another example of these multiple or successive interments in a short cist, and in one case the burial took the definite form of a well-known contracted position. Moreover, the cist lay with its axis north and south. From these circumstances, and notwithstanding the absence of grave-goods, we are possibly justified in assuming that the West Puldrite interments are pre-Christian. The bones indicate a stature for the individuals in excess of the average of Bronze Age skeletons, and we shall see from Professor Low's report that there are features that suggest a Nordic influence.

<sup>1</sup> The remains of primary cists were observed in the excavated interiors of other mounds close by.

<sup>2</sup> *Arch. Scot.*, vol. v., part i., p. 76, and *Proceedings*, vol. xv. pp. 71-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xlv. pp. 215-7; vol. vi. pp. 411-8; and vol. lxii. pp. 263-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. vi. pp. 415-6.

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