

## VI.—REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF TWO BRONZE AGE BURIALS AT BENTHALL, NORTHUMBERLAND.

BY GILBERT ASKEW.

[Read on 31st March 1937.]

The two burials which are the subject of this report are situated in the hamlet of Benthall, about half a mile south-east of the village of Beadnell, and at no great distance from the present coast line. They were accidentally discovered in 1934, in the course of preparing a foundation for a wooden hut which was to be built on the east side of the road which runs from Beadnell through Benthall to Beadnell harbour. (Fig. 1.) To enable the hut to be set back a proper distance from the road the turf bank had to be cut into, and the two cists were thus exposed.

The discovery was reported at the time to Mr. H. B. Herbert, editing secretary of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, who obtained permission from the landowner, Mr. J. M. Craster of Craster, to have the site excavated. Mr. Herbert was, however, unwilling to proceed with the work unless he could have help from someone with a practical knowledge of excavation. He therefore asked Mr. Percy Hedley to join in the work. Mr. Hedley was unable to do so, but recommended the present writer, who in conjunction with Mr. Herbert carried out the excavation on October 16th, 1936.

The site is in the parish of Bamburgh, in which a number of similar burials have previously been discovered.

One is recorded<sup>1</sup> as having been found in "the yard of the Blue Bell Inn," North Sunderland, on May 30th, 1862, a stone cist, similar in size and orientation to those which form the subject of the present paper, containing the remains of a young girl and three "urns."

A more important find was made, in May 1905, during the construction of a reservoir for the North Sunderland waterworks. Six cists were unearthed, four of which contained skeletal remains and vessels of pottery.<sup>2</sup> A seventh burial, on the north side of one of the cists, under a slab of stone, proved to be a skeleton which had been exhumed and reburied: this will be referred to below. An eighth burial in the same area, which produced a fairly complete skeleton and a vessel of the beaker type, was found on the 13th October, 1905.<sup>3</sup>

The two cists under consideration are contained in a mound which appears to consist of water-worn boulders, pebbles and sand, overlaid by a thin layer of soil and a covering of coarse turf. The mound has an artificial appearance, but it is not easy to draw a definite line between what may have been built and what may be natural formation; further excavation only would show this, and more burials might be discovered, as the two excavated appear to be close to the margin of the mound. The latter is of very irregular shape, having probably suffered much alteration since it was built.

No other monuments of similar age appear to be in the vicinity, even the traces of the "camp" on Ebb's Nook (shown on MacLauchlan's map<sup>4</sup>) being very uncertain. There has been much building of cottages and bungalows in Benthall during the last few years, and no finds have been reported. In bronze-age times, it has been calculated, the shore line was many hundreds of yards to the eastward.

The close proximity of the cists to the wooden hut

<sup>1</sup> *History of Northumberland*, vol. 1, Bamburgh, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. N/c*, 3rd ser., II, 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> *History of Northumberland*, vol. 1, p. 320.

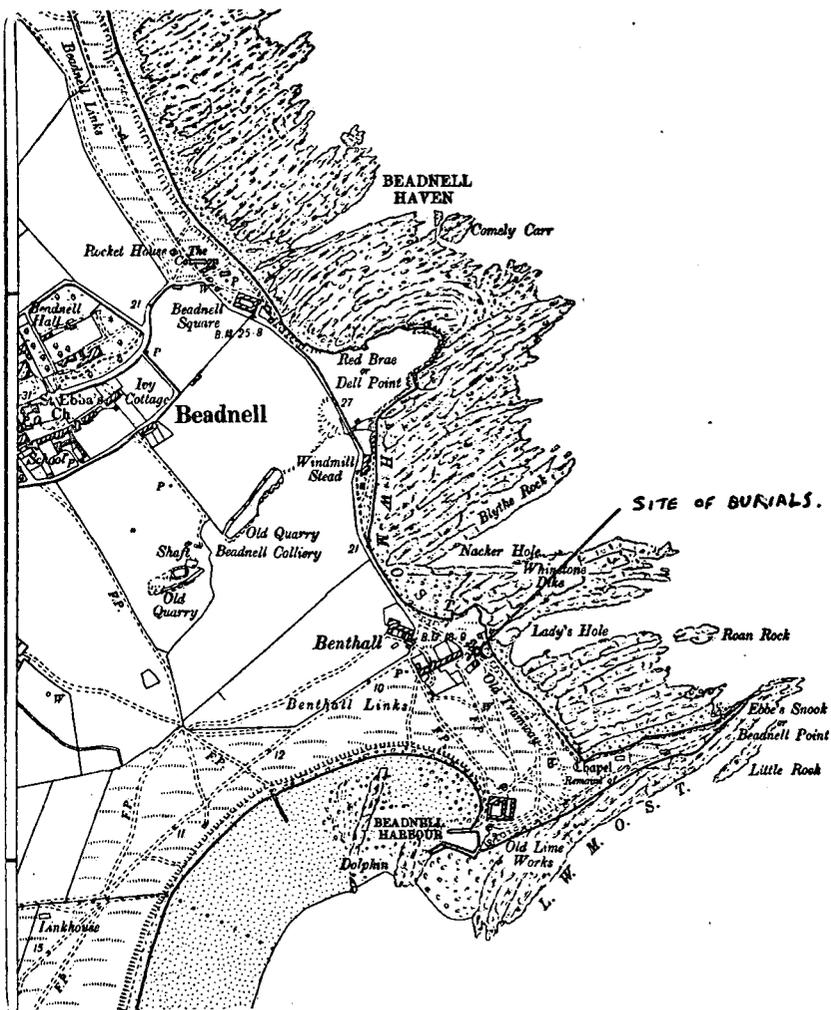


FIG. I.

Reproduced from the Ordnance Survey Map with the sanction of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.

made the work of excavation somewhat complicated, and was also a hindrance to satisfactory photography. Cist no. 1 is practically touching the north-east corner of the hut, whilst cist no. 2, eleven feet to the southwards, is very close to the hut's east wall. In these circumstances it was impossible to clear the earth and sand away from outside the cists down to the original ground level, as the excavators would have liked to have done, so only the removal of the contents was attempted. This was made as complete as possible, all the earth and sand from the cists being passed through a sieve.

*Cist no. 1* (plate IV, no. 1).

This had suffered more than no. 2 when originally discovered, having then been opened and some of the bones taken out. The writer was assured by one of the local fishermen that all had been returned, but the disturbance made it very difficult to judge the position of the body when interred.

When completely uncovered the cist appeared to be sealed by two large slabs of sandstone, the northerly one being roughly rectangular, 2 feet 7 inches long by 1 foot 9 inches wide. The second stone was somewhat elliptical with a straight side which abutted on the other slab, and was 4 feet long by 2 feet 3 inches wide. When the stones were lifted it was discovered that it was the latter stone which actually covered the cist, the other serving no apparent purpose. Having in mind the instance of the North Sunderland burial which had been found beneath a slab on the north side of one of the cists, referred to above, the material which had underlain the northerly slab was examined, but there was no trace of a secondary burial. As has been said, however, it was impossible to excavate down to the original ground level, and such excavation, if it could be carried out, might produce further results.

The cist itself was strongly though roughly built of

sandstone slabs set on edge, and proved to have a flagged floor. Its internal dimensions were 3 feet long by 1 foot 9 inches wide by 1 foot 6 inches deep, the long axis lying west-north-west and east-south-east.

A large quantity of loose sand and earth had penetrated into the cist at the time of its first disturbance, and the bones found in it were so disarranged as to give no indication of the original position of the body. The few teeth that were found all came from one small area towards the westerly end of the cist, and almost on the flagged floor, so that it may be supposed that the head must have lain at this end. There was no trace of pottery or other grave-goods.

*Cist no. 2* (plate IV, nos. 2 and 3).

This was sealed by a large sandstone slab of a shape resembling the head of a felling-axe, the extreme length being 3 feet 8 inches and the width at the smaller end 2 feet 6 inches and at the larger (south) end 3 feet 4 inches. On this being raised, a cist 2 feet 10 inches by 1 foot 9 inches wide was disclosed: it proved to be 2 feet deep and to have a floor of pebbles bedded, apparently, in clay. The north side was formed of one slab set on edge, the others of single slabs similarly set which had not been high enough to make a level bed for the covering stone and so had been brought up to the required height by smaller slabs laid flat. Although the covering slab had not previously been moved, the western end of the cist had been broken into when the ground was first cut away (probably by the levelling-up pieces being knocked out), and a considerable amount of sand and earth had entered. The photographs show the burial before the cover-stone had been lifted, and after this had been done: the intrusive filling can be clearly seen, and the limit of the cist proper is marked by a match-stick which shows plainly in the photograph. The long axis of the cist is almost exactly east and west; its original contents were further hidden by

a quantity of damp sand mixed with earth, all rather dirty, and this was carefully removed by trowelling. Towards the bottom of the cist the bones began to show themselves, and in this case it was possible to ascertain the original position of the body. It had been placed on the right side, head to the westerly end and the back close to the north wall: the legs were drawn up in the usual crouching position. The bones were in a much worse condition than those in cist no. 1, probably owing to the damp state of the surrounding sand.

An unusual feature of this cist was that it had a recess or aumbry at the south-east corner. This was probably not intentional, and may be accounted for by the fact that the south slab is some seven inches too short to reach the east wall, so that the south side had been completed by building up outside this and so forming a small recess, about four inches deep, which is roofed over by the smaller slabs that, laid flat, were used to level up the top of the south wall.

The remains of a food-vessel were found partly within this recess. Although great care was taken, only about half the vessel was recoverable, the rest having been destroyed by time and damp. The vessel had collapsed, the fissure of the recovered portion showing that it had broken at one of the points where the strips of clay used in its construction had been luted together. This kind of breakage in a food-vessel has previously been noted by Dr. J. Graham Callander in a report on two short cists found on Kilspindie golf course, Aberlady, East Lothian.<sup>5</sup>

The food-vessel belongs to Abercromby's type 1a, and that shown on plate xxxvii of *Bronze Age Pottery*, no. 149, is almost an exact parallel. The same free-hand herring-bone decoration is used, which ceases a short distance below the groove, the lower part of the vessel being plain. The groove, which is shallow, is interrupted by very slight imperforate stops, only two of which remain; there were

<sup>5</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. LXIV, 1929-1930.



1



2



3

Fig. 1. CIST No. 1. BEFORE OPENING.

Figs. 2-3. CIST No. 2. BEFORE AND AFTER OPENING.



probably four in the complete vessel. The fabric is coarse, and small pieces of grit appear in the clay.

The skeletal remains were submitted to the staff of the Newcastle College of Medicine for examination, and the following report received :

*Cist no. 1.*

Bones small and slender, possibly male: no complete bones.

Portions of both femora, one tibia, one humerus, one radius, one ulna, two thoracic vertebræ, one clavicle, one scapula, one hip-bone, one patella and one temporal bone.

Also fragments of metacarpal and metatarsal bones and many unidentifiable fragments.

*Cist no. 2.*

Preservation not so good: probably female. No complete bones, one fragment not human.

Parts of two femora, two radii, one humerus, one fibula, one ulna, five vertebræ and sacrum.

In conclusion, the excavators thank Mr. J. M. Craster for his kindness in allowing the work to be undertaken, Mr. Scott Allhusen for his welcome help with the measurements and clearance of the cists as well as with the actual digging, and Mr. Ian A. Richmond and the staff of the College of Medicine for the report on the bones. Mr. A. J. H. Edwards, of the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh, must also be thanked for his assistance in the reconstruction of the food-vessel.