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A DAGGER-GRAVE AT ALLERWASH, NEWBROUGH, NORTHUMBERLAND

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ON March 1st 1972 an Early Bronze Age burial cist was excavated at Allerwash, near Newbrough, Northumberland. The cist was situated on a gravel knoll (N.G.R. NY:871673) c. 300 metres north-east of Allerwash Farm, on the north side of the South Tyne. It was discovered accidentally when, in the course of deep ploughing, the plough hit the cover-slab, breaking off a piece large enough for the interior of the cist to be seen and identified as such.

We are indebted to: Mr. Scrope of Smith-Gore Estate Agents, Corbridge, for promptly reporting the discovery and assisting in the excavation; Mrs. H. H. Clark of the Dept. of Plant Science, Newcastle University, for the analysis of the botanical remains; Mr. G. Hodgson for his examination of the bones and lastly the land-owner, Mrs. Leslie Newall, whose kindness in allowing us to excavate was matched only by her generosity in donating the finds to the Museum of Antiquities, where they are now housed. (reg. no. 1972-4).

THE CIST (fig. 2)

The cist was set in a roughly oval pit, dug to a depth of 1.1 m and 3.6 m long by 2.3 m across; it was formed of four sandstone slabs, and its internal dimensions were 1.25 m from East to West, 0.75 m from North to South and 0.8 m deep. The gap between the cist and the sides of the pit was filled with packing stones and with the gravel sub-soil thrown back, slightly dirtied. The cist was floored with small slabs of stone, averaging between 15 cm and 20 cm square. Beneath the flagging, towards the western end of the cist was a single small pit, with a fairly clean fill of loose gravel: it may best be interpreted as a temporary post-hole, used in the positioning of the side slabs of the cist. It contained one small and unidentifiable fragment of bone, which must be presumed to have come from the burial. The gaps between the side slabs of the cist were sealed at their lower ends with clay, and their upper edges were levelled, where necessary, with small stones, to receive the cover slab. This, a somewhat irregular sandstone slab measuring 1.45 m by 1.9 m, was placed asymmetrically over the chamber. It had apparently been first lined up, along the North side of the cist, and had then been swung over on its edge through 180° to cover the cist, with plenty of overlap on every side

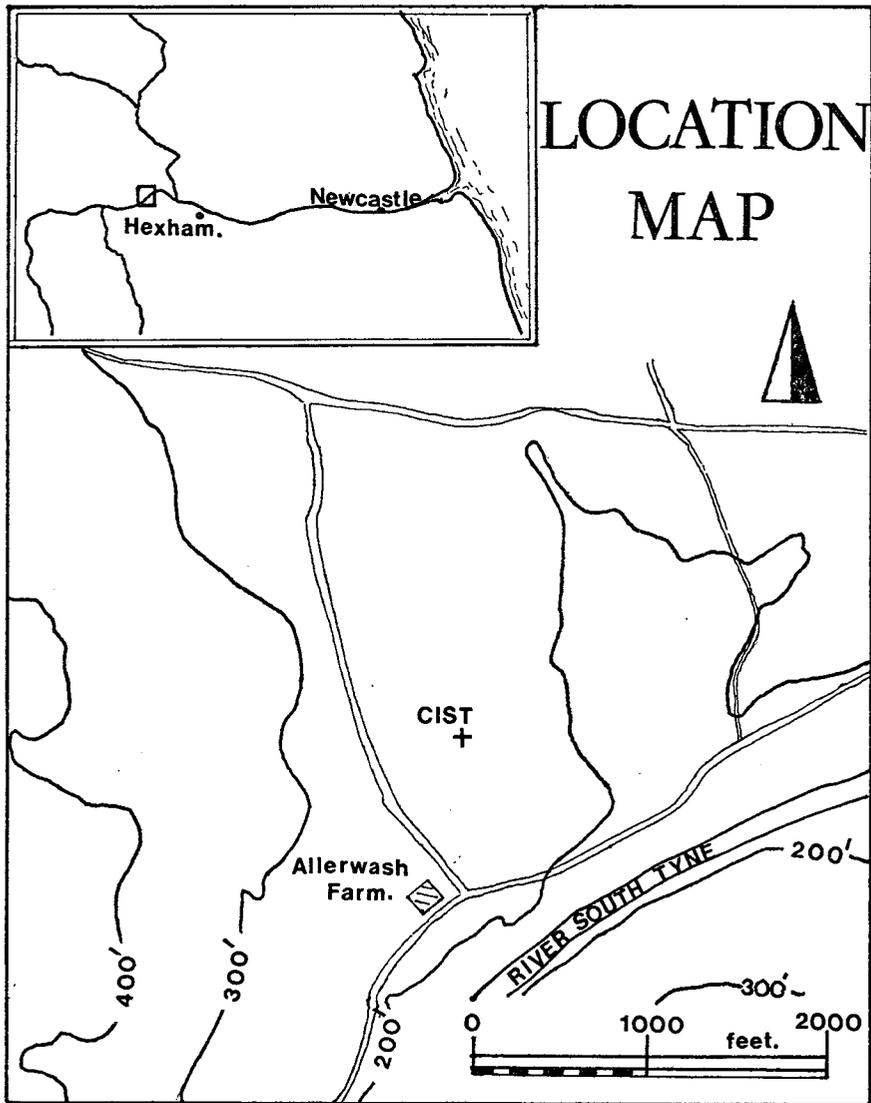


Fig. 1

except the North. All five slabs forming the cist were quite plain and devoid of ornament. It is most unlikely that there was ever a covering mound over the cist, for there was no undulation in the ground, nor was there any discernible difference, in colour or texture, between the topsoil over the cist and that of the rest of the field. The area around this cist was carefully examined, and then probed, for traces of further burials, but without result, so it may reasonably be assumed that this was an isolated burial.

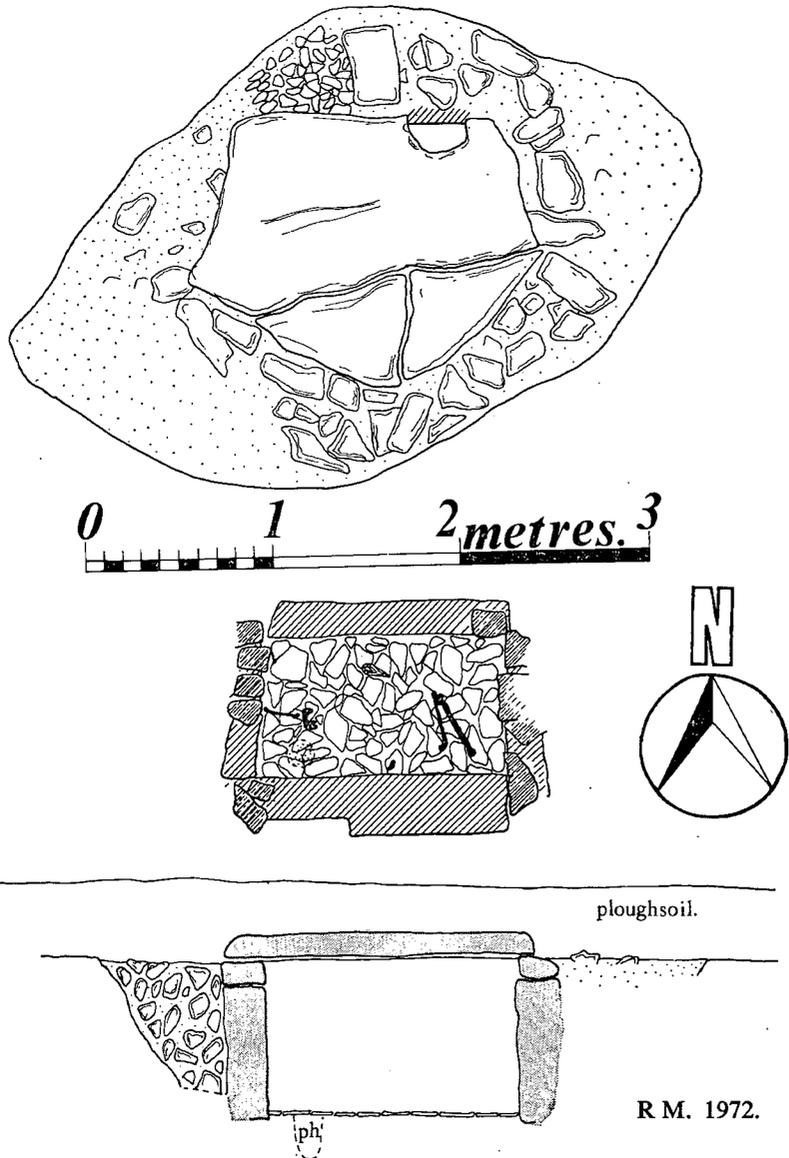


Fig. 2. The cist at Allerwash: plan showing coverstone and pit; plan showing open cist and contents; section

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THE BURIAL

The cist contained a single inhumation, probably that of a young adult female about 1.5 m tall. At the time of excavation the bones appeared to be remains of a much-decayed skeleton in a flexed, rather than a crouched, position, with its head to the West, and facing North, but with the feet detached and some way from their expected position. As will be seen from the report on the bones,¹ however, only the pelvis and lower limbs were represented. There were a number of bone fragments which could not be identified, except negatively, in that they were not from the spine, ribs, shoulder-blades, or head: there were not even any teeth present. The bones which, when excavated, were taken to be parts of the skull and fore-arm, and were in the appropriate places in the cist, were in fact part of the pelvis, part of a tibia (identified by Mrs. W. Burdett) and a small unidentifiable fragment of a long bone.

These remains were accompanied by a flat, 3-riveted, bronze dagger of the Early Bronze Age (see below). The butt of the dagger was covered by a small stone slab, measuring 20 cm by 15 cm by 10 cm, which had once had a second bronze object on top of it, for its upper side, as well as its lower, was deeply stained with verdigris: of this second bronze object, however, there was no further trace. Covering the floor of the cist, and both the dagger and the skeletal remains, was a thin layer of earth and stone, some of which had presumably seeped into the cist in the course of time: however, some of the stones were large enough to render this an insufficient explanation, and it must be assumed that some earth and stone was thrown onto the contents of the grave before the cover slab was put in position.

The body was also accompanied² by a quantity of microscopic fragments of charcoal and shale or coal. These had presumably found their way into the cist by accident at the time of the burial—there was far too small a quantity for a deliberate deposition. The identification of rushes among the plant remains makes it possible to suggest that the body may have been laid on a bed of rushes. Such plants are most unlikely ever to have been growing within about 100 m of the cist, and are therefore unlikely to have been accidentally introduced. The small animal whose remains were found among the botanical material was probably an intruder, which could have burrowed its way into the cist at any time subsequent to the burial: its bones, although few were found, were in a much better state of preservation than those of the human.

THE DAGGER (fig. 3)

The dagger is essentially triangular in outline, straight sided, with a roughly semi-circular butt. The tip of the blade is missing—possibly by as much as

¹ See below, p. 94.

² See below, p. 95.

4 cm if it were originally pointed and not rounded off—and what remains measures 18.6 cm in length. The blade is flat, averaging 5 mm in thickness, and its edges have a distinctly laminated appearance, which suggests that the blade has been hammered to shape from a roughly moulded block of bronze. The butt carries three evenly spaced large rivets, which have expanded heads, and show traces of having once been domed. The edge of the handle is indicated on both faces of the dagger by a faint and rather lop-sided “omega” mark. The handle itself was of wood, for traces of wood remain around the rivets, and a small fragment was recovered, but was unfortunately too decayed to allow of identification.

Also found near the butt end of the dagger were two minute fragments of bronze strip, which may be best interpreted as the mounting for a sheath, of which, however, no other trace was found.

The Allerwash dagger thus belongs to the same series³ as that from Reaverhill Farm, Barrasford, whose affinities have been discussed by Burgess,⁴ and

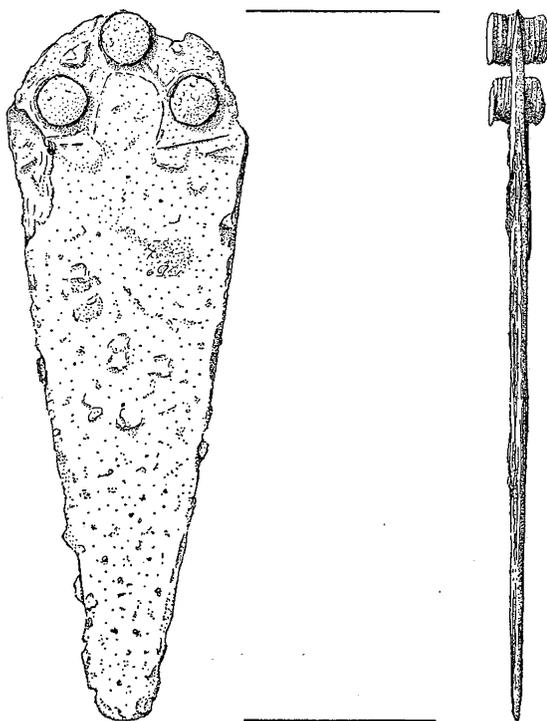


Fig. 3. ($\times \frac{1}{2}$)

³ S. Piggott, "Abercromby and After: the Beaker Cultures of Britain Re-examined", in I. LL. Foster and L. Alcock, *Culture and Environment* (London, 1963) 53-92.

⁴ *A.A.A.*, XLIII (1965), 68-75

which belong to the Early Bronze Age, currently dated to c. 1700-1400 B.C. Pottery is rarely associated with such daggers: only four instances have been recorded, and all are representative of the tail-end of the beaker tradition.⁵ Technologically the dagger is less sophisticated, and therefore possibly earlier in the series, than the Reaverhill dagger. Whereas the latter has a triple-reeded midrib and bevelled, possibly hollow-ground, edges, the Allerwash dagger has no midrib, and has plain edges: in the case of the Reaverhill dagger the use of a bivalve mould was suggested, whereas the Allerwash dagger would appear to have been cast in a single-piece mould and hammered to shape.

DISCUSSION

The Allerwash dagger-grave is unusual in that the bones are probably those of a young woman. In no other case has it been suggested that a bronze dagger accompanied a female burial, and where identification of the skeleton has been possible it has invariably proved to be male.

A second unusual, though not unique,⁶ feature is the disarticulated and fragmentary nature of the skeleton. Only the lower half of the skeleton was deposited, and at a time when it was already in a skeletal condition. This must suggest that it, and presumably the dagger also, was brought from some other repository for ritual burial in the cist. Furthermore, it would seem that those who performed the final burial would have preferred to have a complete skeleton, for the available bones were so arranged as to give the impression of a crouched or flexed burial; part of the pelvis and tibia were made to serve as head and arms, and the remaining bones arranged to give an impression of the legs. The collection for burial of bones, which were already devoid of flesh, is well attested in the Neolithic long-barrow and chambered-tomb graves of the third and four millennia B.C., where it is often suggested that bodies were exposed, in the open or in a mortuary house, until only the skeleton was left.⁷ The lack of some of the bones at Allerwash also has its counterpart in Neolithic burials, though no precisely similar case presents itself. Here, there seem to be two reasonable explanations for the absence of the upper half of the body: one is that the body was previously buried elsewhere and inexpertly exhumed; the other, that half the body was deliberately abstracted, for burial or for ritual use elsewhere. On the other hand, the crouched position, even though apparent rather than real, must derive from Beaker burial traditions; and this is supported by its being a single rather than multiple burial.

Thus the Allerwash burial displays elements of both Neolithic and Beaker burial traditions, and seems to belong to a time when the Beaker tradition had

⁵ D. L. Clarke, *Beaker Pottery of Great Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1970), I, 260-261.

⁶ See, for example, P. Ashbee, *The Bronze*

Age Round Barrow in Britain (London, 1960), 79.

⁷ See, for example, P. Ashbee, *The Earthen Long Barrow in Britain* (London, 1970), 63-64.

been weakened almost to extinction, while the earlier Neolithic rituals were enjoying a resurgence of popularity. This would accord with the dating and expected cultural affinities of the dagger, as set out by Piggott.⁸

Unfortunately, the double process implied by the burial necessitates a long gap between the death of the individual—whose property the dagger presumably, but not necessarily, was—and the final deposition in the cist.

This, in turn, makes the dating of the burial even more doubtful than it might have been, and suggests that this dagger grave should be considered alongside the dagger cremations, where a two-stage burial rite must also have taken place: it is far easier to cremate a skeleton than a complete body. Moreover, in no other dagger inhumation has it been suggested that the body was incomplete or disarticulated when deposited.

Even allowing a broad range of date for the Allerwash cist, the valley of the South Tyne has produced few burials of comparable date. This is in marked contrast to the North Tyne, where there are a large number of Early Bronze Age burials between Bellingham and Hexham.⁹

The beaker from the "west end of Plenmellor Common"¹⁰ may well be roughly contemporary, as, like those four found in Scotland in association with daggers of the Allerwash type,¹¹ it represents the final phase of beaker pottery in the North. Unfortunately the circumstances of its discovery are unknown, except that it was found "in association with other urns". The earliest British beaker form is represented in the Kirkhaugh burial, with its All-Over Corded Beaker, flint implement, and gold ear-ring.¹² At West Wharmley, on the southern side of the river and immediately opposite Allerwash, was a burial consisting of an inhumation (position unknown) in a cist,¹³ the accompanying vessel was a beaker of developed North British type,¹⁴ which should be chronologically intermediate between the Kirkhaugh and Allerwash burials. The only other known burials of the South Tyne Valley were found at Low Morralee Farm, Haydon Bridge, during the digging of the railway cutting.¹⁵ The circumstances of burial are vague, but the two graves were within six feet of each other. One consisted of an inhumation accompanied by a small bronze knife such as seems to have been in use throughout the Early Bronze Age. However its lentoid section, and the fact that two of its three rivets were in notches rather than rivet-holes, would suggest that it falls late in the period. The second burial from Low Morralee is unquestionably late: it consisted of an urn containing calcined bones and two other vessels, one of which is an Aldbourne cup such as is usually associated with the later phase of the Wessex Culture.

⁸ S. Piggott, "Abercromby and After: the Beaker Cultures of Britain Re-examined", in I. L. L. Foster and L. Alcock, *Culture and Environment* (London, 1963), 53-92.

⁹ *A.A.*⁴, XLIII (1965), 68-75.

¹⁰ J. Tait, *Beakers from Northumberland* (Newcastle, 1965), No. 87: not in D. L. Clarke, *Beaker Pottery of Great Britain and Ireland*.

¹¹ A. S. Henshall, "Scottish Dagger Graves", in J. M. Coles and D. D. A. Simpson, *Studies in Ancient Europe* (Leicester, 1968), 173-195.

¹² *A.A.*⁴, XIII (1936), 207-217: Tait, No. 31: Clarke No. 651.

¹³ *P.S.A.N.*⁴, III (1927), 28, 187-189.

¹⁴ Tait, No. 59: Clarke, No. 710.

¹⁵ *P.S.A.N.*³, X, 29-31.

Thus the presently available evidence suggests that the early bronze age population in the South Tyne Valley was small and scattered, but that it persisted throughout the period.

REPORT ON THE HUMAN BONES FROM ALLERWASH

G. W. I. Hodgson, M.Sc.

The bones apparently come from one individual, probably a *young* female adult of less than five feet one inches in height. The bones are from the pelvic girdle and hind limbs only and consist of:

1. A fragment of the right side of the pelvis.
2. The proximal end and a portion of the shank of a right femur.
3. The distal end of a left femur and the detached head of a left femur.
4. A left and a right calcaneum.
5. A left and a right astragalus.
6. A left navicular bone.
7. A right first metatarsal.

The bones were eroded but there were *no* visible signs of disease or of physical injury.

ANALYSIS OF MATERIAL FROM BRONZE AGE BURIAL AT ALLERWASH

Helena H. Clark

Three samples of material from the grave were provided for examination. These contained organic material of both animal and vegetable origin but unfortunately in such a poor state of preservation that an exact determination of its nature was almost impossible. An additional obstacle to identification was the extreme friability of much of the plant material. Even the most careful handling often resulted in its complete disintegration with the consequent loss of any diagnostic characters which might have survived. In spite of this, however, sufficient information has been assembled to make one wish that a more complete analysis could have been made.

Sample A. Earth from around the skeleton

In this sample, which was very dark in colour, the following components could be recognised:

- (a) A black, amorphous shale-like material which split easily into thin layers. It had every appearance of a poor quality coal and was present in considerable quantity.
- (b) Small fragments of unidentifiable wood charcoal.

(c) Several pieces of a grey porous substance in which the irregularly scattered gas vesicles suggested that it had originated from the melting and subsequent partial carbonisation of some organic material. Its appearance suggests an animal rather than a plant source.

Sample B. Dark earth from near and around dagger

From this sample organic remains of both plant and animal origins were obtained viz:

(a) Parts of the skeleton of some small vertebrate animal. From the single vertebra present it could be deduced that its maximum length was some 15 cm. Any more exact identification would be guesswork.

(b) Bone fragments which from the somewhat darker colour and poorer state of preservation seemed to be from a different source.

(c) Seeds and fruits from at least four species of plants. These were of a dull greyish-brown in colour and lacked all surface markings. They ranged in length from 0.5 to 2.5 mm and all but one were impossible to identify. The exception was the single tiny elliptical seed of a rush (*Juncus* sp.). The occurrence of the remains of stems and leaves of plants of the same genus in Sample C confirmed the presence of rushes in the cist.

(d) Curved, uncarbonised fragments of what, at first sight, appeared to be tree bark. These proved to be very puzzling. The outer (Convex) surface was closely covered with a reticulum of branched fibres each with the diameter of a human hair. Whereas the substrate was mid-brown in colour, the fibres were black and shining. Many ideas as to their nature have been considered and eventually rejected. The fact that the fibres are branched suggests that they are vegetable rather than animal in origin but further than that one cannot go with certainty. All of this material was flecked with the blue-green of copper salts indicating, no doubt, contact with the bronze dagger.

Sample C. Wood sample

Although carbonised wood was present, this sample contained a variety of ingredients as listed below:

(a) Material identical in every respect with (d) of Sample B as described above.

(b) Several pieces of a grey porous substance similar to that described for Sample (A) (c).

(c) Small pieces of wood charcoal of which one, characterised by the ring-porous structure of the wood and the broad compound medullary rays, was undoubtedly oak (*Quercus* sp.).

(d) Decayed, uncarbonised wood in too poor a condition for identification.

(e) The flattened stems and leaves of rushes (*Juncus* sp.) in which the parallel vascular bundles could clearly be seen. The association of these with the single rush seed is significant.

