

A long cist at Sandside, Graemsay, Orkney

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INTRODUCTION

In October, 1977 Mrs Seatter of Sandside, Graemsay noticed what turned out to be the top of a human skull protruding from an eroding sand shore-line at NGR HY 2656 0605. She informed the Museums Officer, Bryce Wilson who notified the North of Scotland Archaeological Services. In view of the immediate threat to the burial the SDD gave funds for its excavation and for the subsequent publication; the former was undertaken by M Whittall over three days in November of the same year.

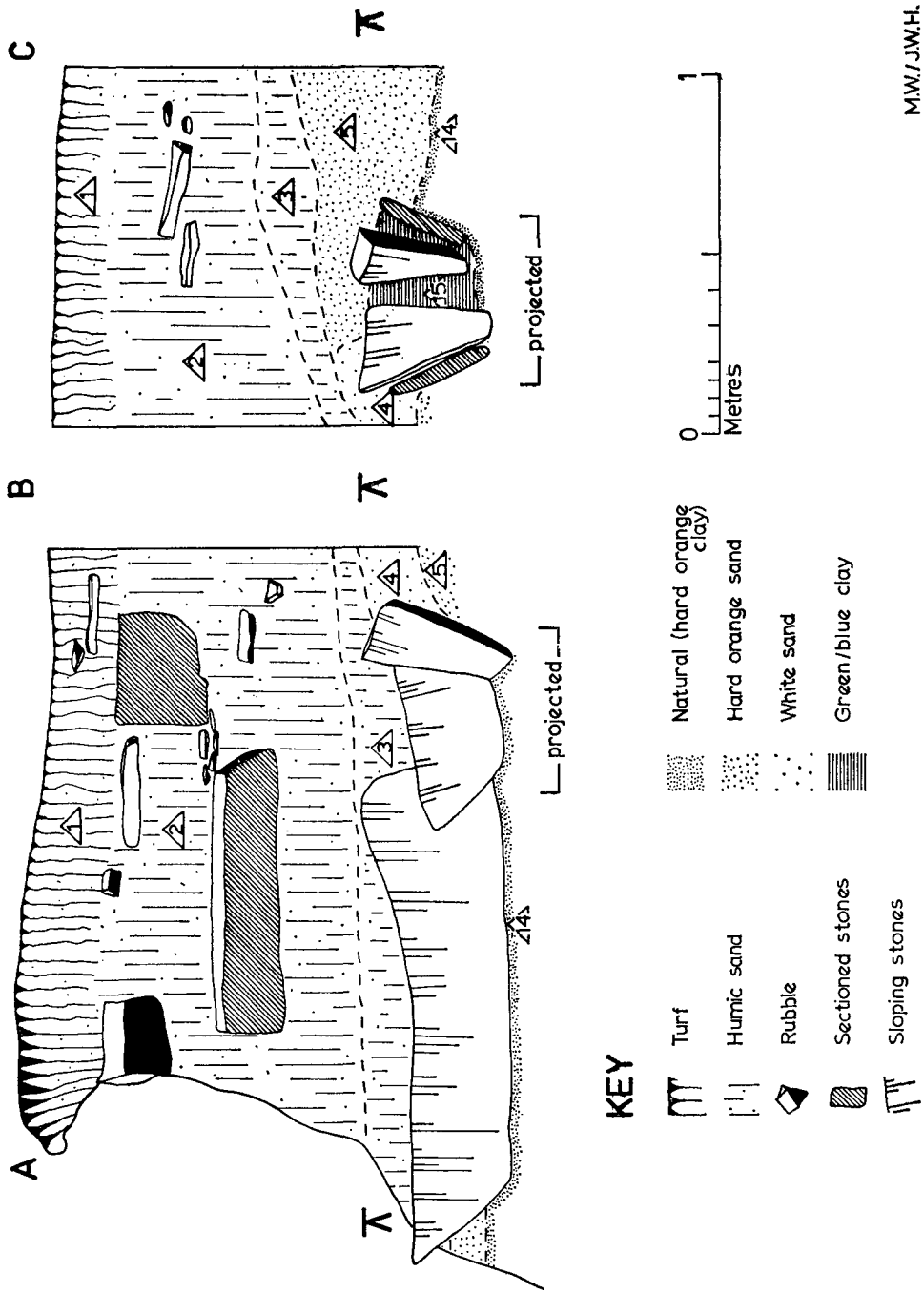
THE EXCAVATION

On the present ground surface above the burial were the remains of modern buildings; that extant was said to have been a smithy although it was also known as the site of a school. The area immediately over the grave was covered with rubble in sandy soil; this, the inclement weather, and the short time allocation, made it necessary for a box trench 2 m by 1 m to be cut to the cist disregarding any hole that may originally have been dug through the superencumbent layers to receive it.

The base of the skull had originally been seen some 1.4 m below the present ground surface. Excavation showed that, near the sea, up to 0.9 m of this consisted of building rubble in sandy soil (fig 1) (L1 & L2); this seemed to be of recent deposition and in part may have been a ruined wall. Below this was relatively stone free, loose sandy soil, L3, to a depth of 0.2 m. The relationship of this to the cist was not proven but as some of the side slabs came to within a centimetre of its surface it is likely to be contemporary; its top is not necessarily the original ground surface, however, as it may have been eroded. Removal of L3 revealed the cover-stones of the cist in part; in the N two-thirds of the trench generally was hard orange sand, L4, and, in the S portion, less compacted white sand, L5. Where these layers masked the cist they must have been backfill for the latter was cut through them where they were undisturbed.

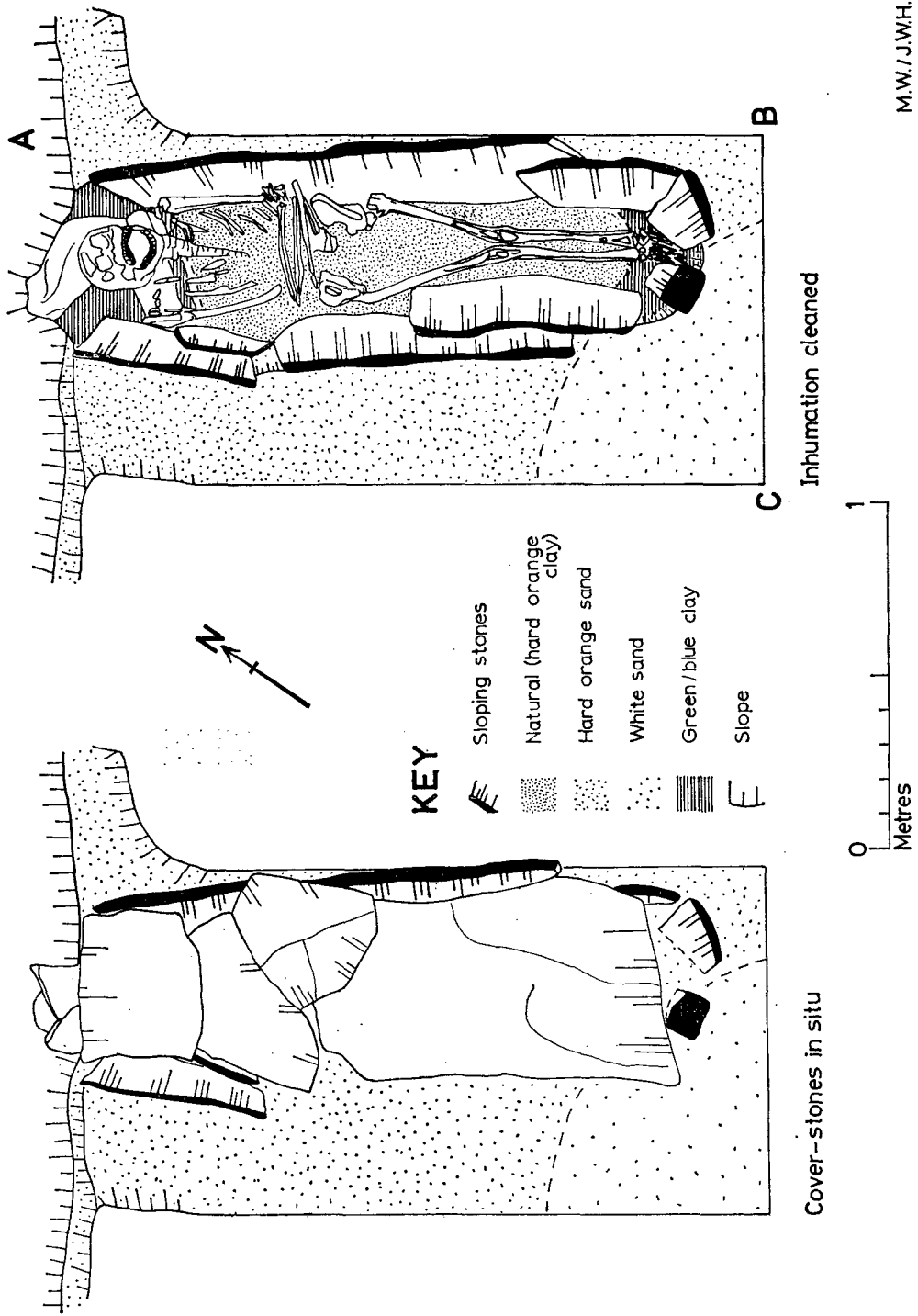
The cover-stones (L6-L9) were four in number, irregular, and had generally slumped within the cist, particularly at the N end (fig 2). The orientation of the feature could be seen to be NNW-

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MW/JWH.

FIG 1 Sandstone, Graemsay; sections



M.W./J.W.H.

FIG 2 Sandside, Graemsay; plans

SSE, the skull having been noted at the former. Under the cover-stones was a sandy fill, L10, which entirely concealed the burial. Removal of this revealed an extended inhumation, L11, in a cist which was barely large enough for it (fig 2); there were no grave goods of any sort. The most prominent features of the skeleton, as uncovered, were its gaping mandibles; the arms being folded across the lower abdomen and lacking one hand; and the legs being very close together from the knees down with the feet crossed. Subsequent examination of the bones by Mary Harman (appendix 1) showed the burial to have been of a man approximately 1.72 m tall and between forty and forty-five years old at the time of death; she attributes the absence of some bones to natural agencies.

The cist within which the body had been laid was at least 2 m long at its top and 0.65 m wide; at its base it was considerably smaller (fig 2). The sides were simply made of a number of sloping flagstones forming, in effect, a grave slab-lined to a height of c 0.35 m. The floor was not lined and consisted of the natural orange boulder clay the grave had been dug into, L14, but at the N end were two stones (L12 & L13) on which the head had been rested and these were bedded in a distinctly deposited layer of green/blue clay (L15). This same material was found at the feet end of the grave.

CONCLUSION

No other burials were noted in the rough section provided by coastal erosion and it may be that this was a solitary, and possibly anomalous, one. The radiocarbon date of 1085 ± 55 AD (Appendix 2) spans the time when the Isles were becoming Christian (Anderson 1873) perhaps explaining, on the one hand, the similarity of the grave to earlier pagan ones (eg Robertson 1969, pl 33) and, on the other, the lack of grave goods.

APPENDIX 1

The human remains
Mary Harman

The skeleton is largely complete although preservation of the bones is variable. Some are in quite good condition while the absence of others – the toes and the right hand – is probably due to total decay. There is the alternative that small rodents may account for this and certainly the left fibula shaft shows considerable gnawing.

The relevant features of the pelvic girdle, and on the skull, brow ridges and a low nuchal crest indicate that the skeleton is that of a man. Wear on the teeth suggests an age of between forty and forty-five years; the dentition is in excellent condition, all the teeth being present with no indication of caries or abscessing, though there is some retraction of the alveolus and a moderate deposit of calculus on the teeth. The height, calculated from the maximum length of the femur and the fibula, using the regression formula of Trotter and Gleser given by Brothwell (1963, 102) is $1.71 \text{ m} \pm 8 \text{ mm}$. There may be very slight evidence of osteo-arthritis on the lower thoracic and lower lumbar vertebrae but the poor preservation prevents positive identification. It is not uncommonly found in persons of this age from early populations. There are at least two wormian bones in the lamboid suture of the skull.

The bones remaining after C14 assay have been deposited in the Royal Scottish Museum.

APPENDIX 2

Radiocarbon date

based on information from Dr M J Stenhouse, Department of Chemistry, Glasgow University

One radiocarbon determination was undertaken using collagen from the skeleton in the cist.
GU-1067 Bone (*homo sapiens*) 865 ± 55 years bp $13\text{C} = -17.6\%$.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Brothwell, D R 1963 *Digging up Bones*. London.
Robertson, W N 1969 'A Viking grave found at the Broch of Gurness, Aikerness, Orkney', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 101 (1968-9), 289-90.

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