

# THE EXCAVATION OF A BEAKER CIST AT DORNOCH NURSERY (NH 797909).

September 1979.

Discovered during ploughing of the forestry nursery, and reported to the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments by Mr E Michie, District Officer of the Forestry Commission at Dornoch. Before excavation, the capstone had been lifted and a hole dug in the western corner of the cist. No artefacts had been discovered. The capstone was replaced as found, and that this had been done fairly accurately was confirmed by comparison of the angle of recent ploughmarks on top of the capstone to that of ploughing of the nursery.

Excavation on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1979 by Mrs K Antonio of the Scottish Ancient Monuments Laboratory, Mr P. Ashmore of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments and Mr R Gourlay of Inverness Museum. A trench measuring 3m x 2.5m was laid out about the cist, and cleared of top-soil. The hole dug by Forestry Commission workers to reveal the top of the cist was cleared of loose material and of trample. The subsoil was patchily discoloured sand of variable texture, much disturbed by small animal burrows. No features were found cut into the subsoil except for the hole containing the cist, the slabs of which were laid up against natural. A fragment of pottery was found lying on the side of the trench dug by the Forestry Commission workers.

The cist cover was a massive slab of sandstone. After cleaning the capstone was tilted off the cist by 5 men, and then dragged clear by tractor. It was not dressed and bore no carvings. The cist was made of 4 slabs abutted on one another without perceptible system. The slabs leaned slightly outwards. The side slabs were both flat topped, but it subsequently became clear that they were D-shaped so that at each bottom corner of the cist there were gaps through which sand had drifted. The south ends of both side slabs had each an indent about 0.15m long x 30cm deep; abrupt on the west slab, and less so on the east slab. A small slab was in position filling the indent on the west slab exactly; and standing in the top of the cist at a slight angle to vertical was a stone slab which could have compensated for the indent in the eastern slab.

Cist was full of fine soil and a few small stones. The hole dug by Forestry Commission workers was visible in its western corner. It was full of loose soil. Prior to the emptying of the fill of the cist, the hole was cleaned out. It reached below the bottom of the cist, but had not impinged upon any of the finds subsequently made in the cist.

The topfill of the cist was grey-brown fine sandy soil. It contained a few (2) fragments of bone, which seemed to have been eroded. However, pending specialized examination it is not certain whether they had been subjected to fire. After the top 15cm of soil had been trowelled away it became clear the bone fragments tended to be associated with animal burrows.

A barbed and tanged arrow head discovered 0.29m below the top of cist in the general fill; and shortly afterwards a rim sherd of beaker 0.35m below the top of cist; soon after the top of the beaker was revealed. The stray sherd was 0.7m away from the centre of the beaker and over 30cm above the point of the beaker whence it came. It must have been transported by animal activity because it lay nearly vertically. The burrow in which it undoubtedly lay was not visible. Another barbed and tanged arrowhead was shortly after discovered 0.43m below the top of cist.

Meantime the skull and some of the long bones of the skeleton had been discovered in extremely fragile, water-logged condition. The basal sandy fill was faintly visible at the corners of the cist. At its junction with the humic upper fill at the northern corner of cist 3 barbed and tanged arrowheads were discovered separated from each other by 20mm vertically and 15mm horizontally. The lowest lay on the undisturbed sandy base of the cist. At eastern corner of cist a strike-a-light and iron ore nodule lay touching each other surrounded by the sandy basal fill of the cist and lying on the sandy floor.

Skeleton was so rotten that cleaning was stopped. After samples had been taken from the position of the body cavity of the inhumation and after as much of the dark humic fill of the cist had been removed as possible, the bones were lifted in blocks of soil. Once the pelvis had been lifted, a brace was discovered lying on cist floor, at this point 0.54m below the top of cist. The rest of cist fill was removed. No further finds were made.

The skeleton was lying decubated upon its back; its arm bones had rolled away or become inextricably mingled with its body. It appeared that its legs had been drawn up almost to its chest. The skull lay at the south eastern end on the cist, near to the south corner; it was clear that the skeleton had been disturbed by the inflow of sand under the corners of the side slabs, and by burrowing animals.

The filling of the cist The filling of the cist was not a uniform process. Several strands of evidence allow a reconstruction of how it took place. The side stones of cist were roughly D-shaped, flat side uppermost, and sand of the sub-soil had drifted in at an early stage, causing the beaker and at least slightly disturbing the pile of arrowheads in the north corner of cist. The sandy inflow at the bottom of cist

can be visualised as forming a double saddle. Water, slightly disturbed (3) sand had drifted in between the top of the slabs and the capstones, partially filling the beaker. When the beaker fell was later excavated in the laboratory it was found to contain a sloping dirty sand fill, and above that a dark humic fill. The last influx of material was of the soil forming this dark humic fill. Perhaps the soil/subsoil interface around the cist had been lowered, or perhaps sufficient sand had collapsed into the cist to allow soil to replace it at the gap between slabs and capstone. It is not certain when animals first burrowed inside the cist; but it is certain that animal burrowing took place when the cist was filled to the top. A beaver shaped hole, as already described, had moved both horizontally and vertically. Worm holes were also abundant in the cist, although no live worms seen, perhaps because the vibrations of travelling had driven them below the sandy floor of the cist.

Thus disturbance of the contents of cist had been mechanical, from the inflow of sand and then soil, and faunal. Apart from deterioration of the bones, no normal soil change processes were detected in the cist. It is, until further study has been undertaken, a moot point whether all the fragments of bone in the upper parts of cist originated in the skeleton. Some appeared superficially to be burned burnt; but the deteriorating bone of the skeleton had in places a similar appearance. For the moment, it should be assumed all the bone fragments belong to the one body.

The Insertion of the Cist. The slabs of cist were butted head up against undisturbed sub-soil. Because of lack of time, the slabs were not removed; it is planned that further excavation to investigate the hole into which the cist was put will take place when the cist slabs are removed for reconstruction and display at Inverness Museum.

The Finds The beaker was all over corded, and similar to that from Torphichen (Clarke AOC 1499) and Alton (incomplete, Clarke AOC 651) it had no external decoration and its exterior profile was smooth. The braces was of Atkinson's type B.1. It had 2 perforations, was slightly convex sided and had rounded corners. The 5 barbed and fanged arrowheads varied in size and shape. The flint strike-a-light showed signs of heavy bruising at one end. The worn one nodule showed clear signs of having been struck repeatedly; a deep broad groove had been worn into it at one end.

Laboratory study continues. The braces will be studied under high magnification to see whether the traces of glossy areas on its convex side could have been produced by a bow string. It is hoped to irradiate the arrowheads with ultra-violet light to see whether traces of resin, perhaps used to attach arrow shafts, remain.

P.J. Ashmore - Inspector of Ancient Monuments  
Room 313, 17 Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh

October 1979.

Q. What is it?

A. A stone coffin, in which was put a crouched skeleton and things it used in everyday life and things suitable to accompany it in the afterlife.

Q. How old is it?

A. Probably 4,500 years old.

Q. Who were the people who made the burial?

A. Archaeologists call them the Beaker people, because of the fine pottery beakers found with their skeletons in cists. They seem to have come from the Netherlands and to have mixed with the Stone Age inhabitants of Scotland. Beaker people are found all over Europe, and in every European country they had their own particular customs and traditions. In Iberia they built forts and were metalworkers. Scotland is not so rich in evidence of their ways. Archaeologists have found a few settlements, mostly on coastal sites, and a few simple oval houses. But they are known mostly from their burials.

Q. Is this burial unusual?

A. Yes. It is, judging by the shape and decoration of the beaker, very early for such a rich burial. Most rich burials are later.

Q. Who was buried?

A. The person was an archer. He was small, and sturdiness of his bones may show he was young, for Beaker people were in general not much taller than are are today. Presumably he came from a rich family.

Q. How did he die?

A. Unknown. His bones were poorly preserved, but just possibly we may be able to tell how he died when they are studied.

Q. Are there other burials nearby?

A. Quite likely. We know of a few small cemeteries of Beaker people in Scotland. But we also know of a lot of isolated burials.

Q. Where expect to find settlements near Dornoch?

A. The best chance is in eroding dunes, where scraps of pottery like those in the photograph, but smaller may be found in sand scrapes.

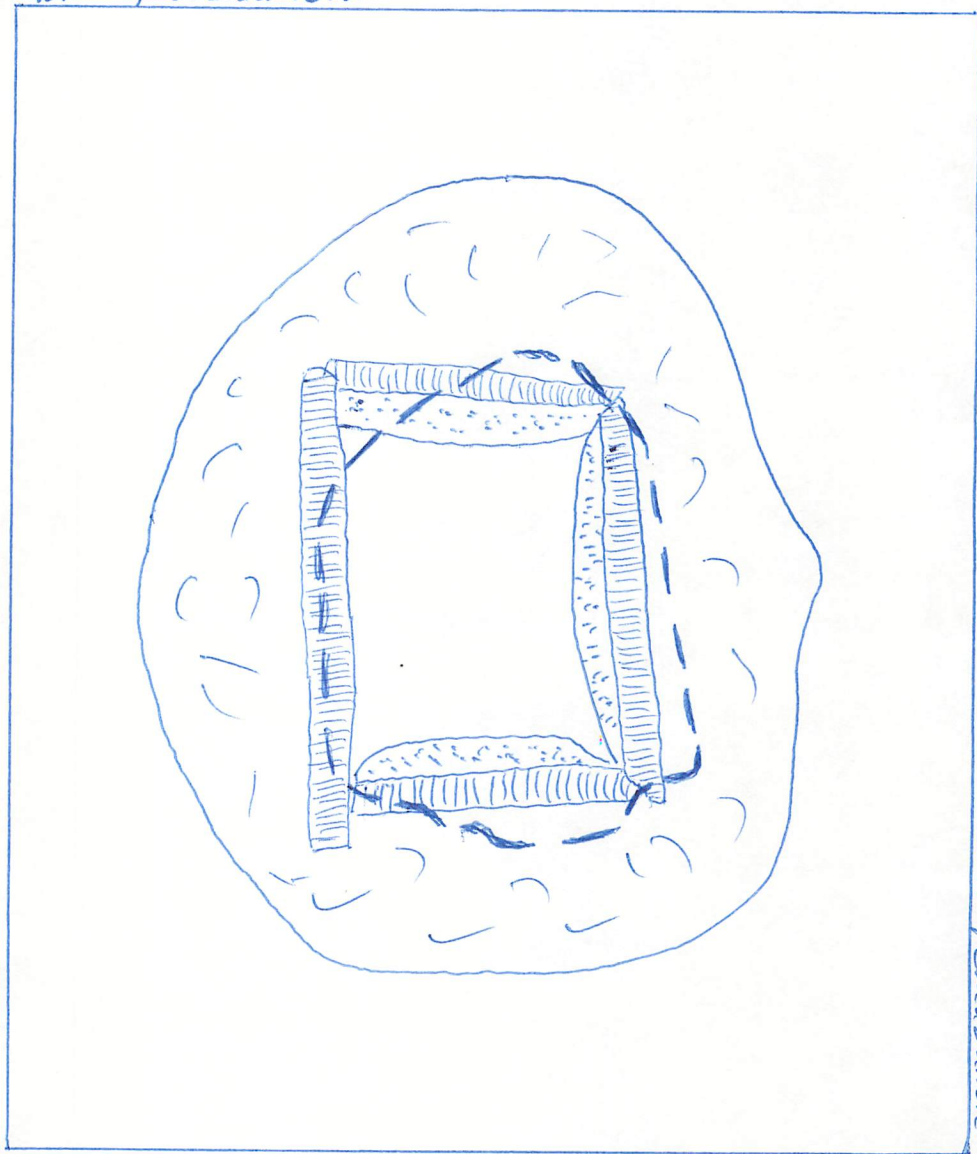
Q. Who should be told if any evidence is found?

A. Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, 17 Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh  
Inverness Museum, Castle Wynd, Inverness — the nearest museum with full staff  
National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh.

P. S. Ashmore  
Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments  
17, Atholl Crescent  
Edinburgh, (031) 229 9321

# DORNOCH NURSERY CIST





Limit of Excavation.

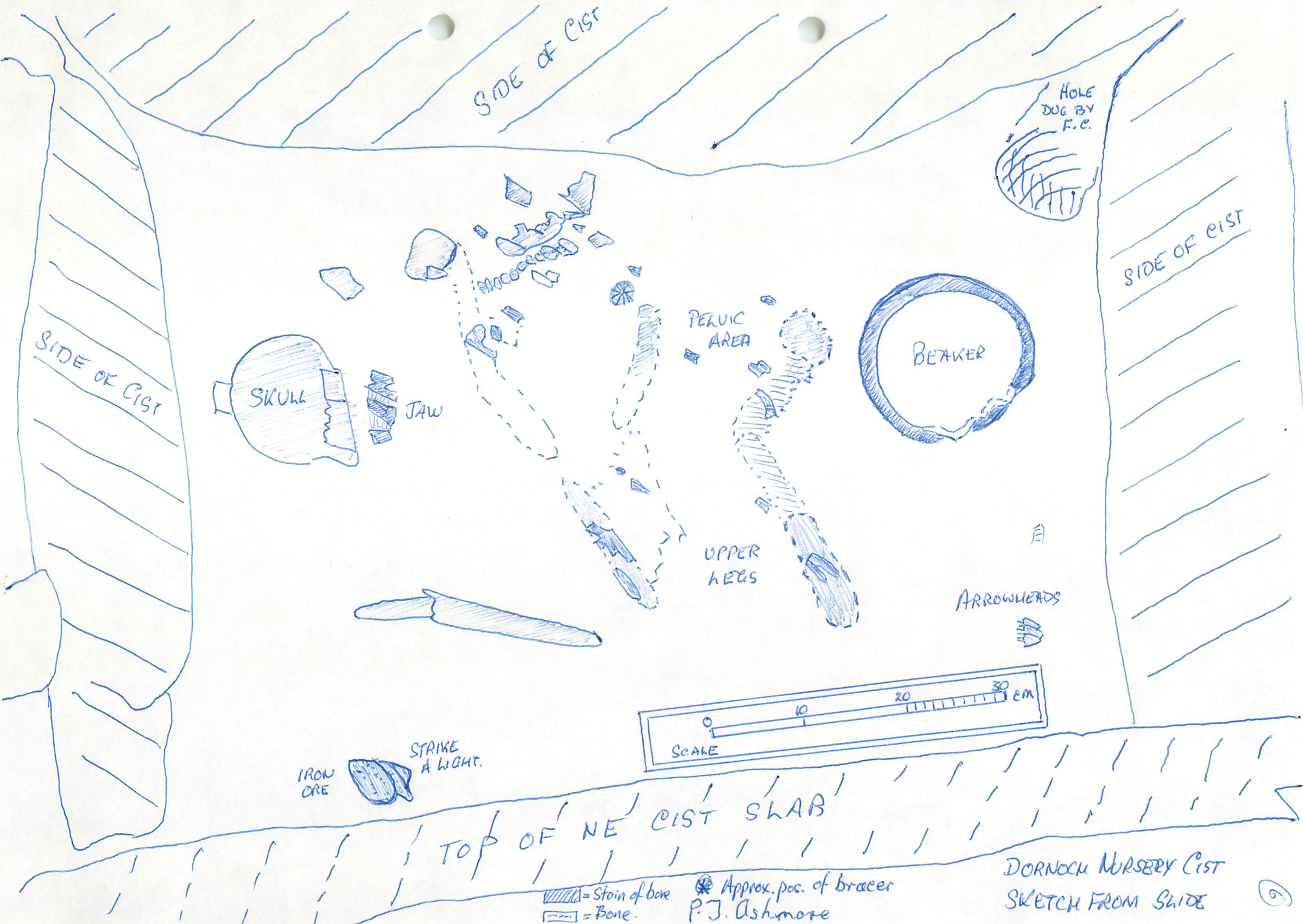


Limit of Excavation.

GRID N.

0 1 2 metres

-  TOP OF SLAB
-  SIDE OF SLAB
-  FORESTRY COMMISSION TRENCH
-  EDGE OF CAPSTONE.



SIDE OF CIST

HOLE DUG BY F.C.

SIDE OF CIST

SIDE OF CIST

SKULL

JAW

PERVIC AREA

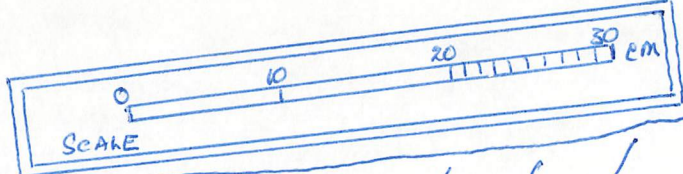
BRAECER

UPPER LEGS

ARROWHEADS

IRON ORE

STRIKE A LIGHT.



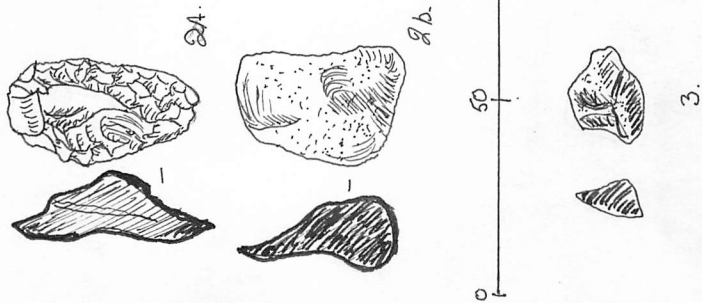
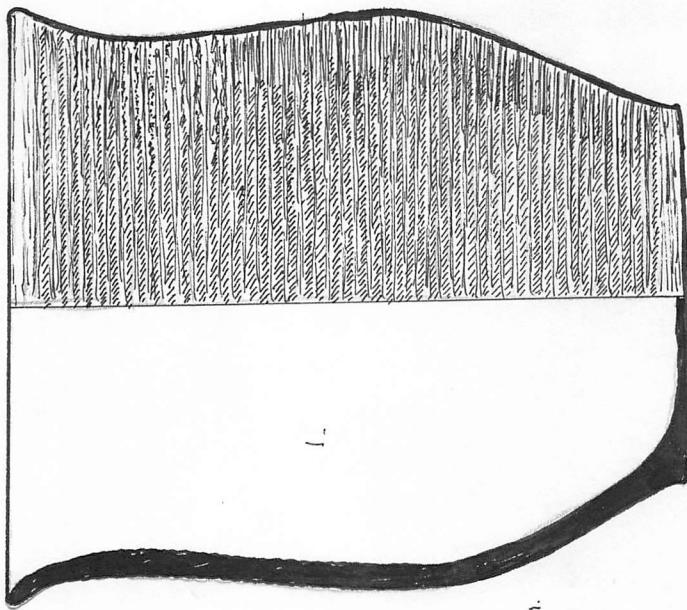
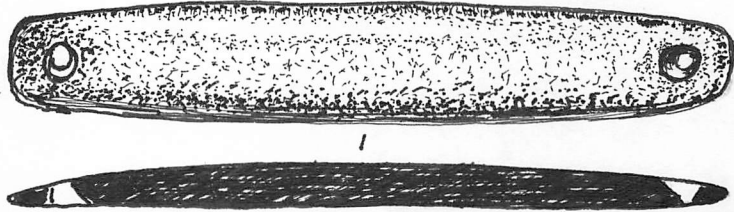
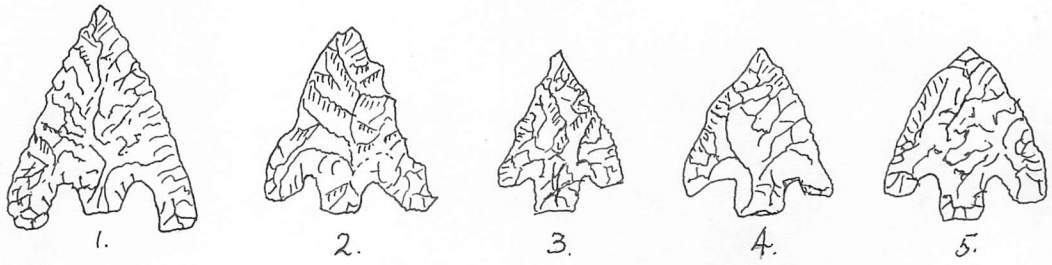
TOP OF NE CIST SLAB

▨ = Stain of bone  
 --- = Bone.

⊙ Approx. pos. of braecer  
 P.J. Ashmore

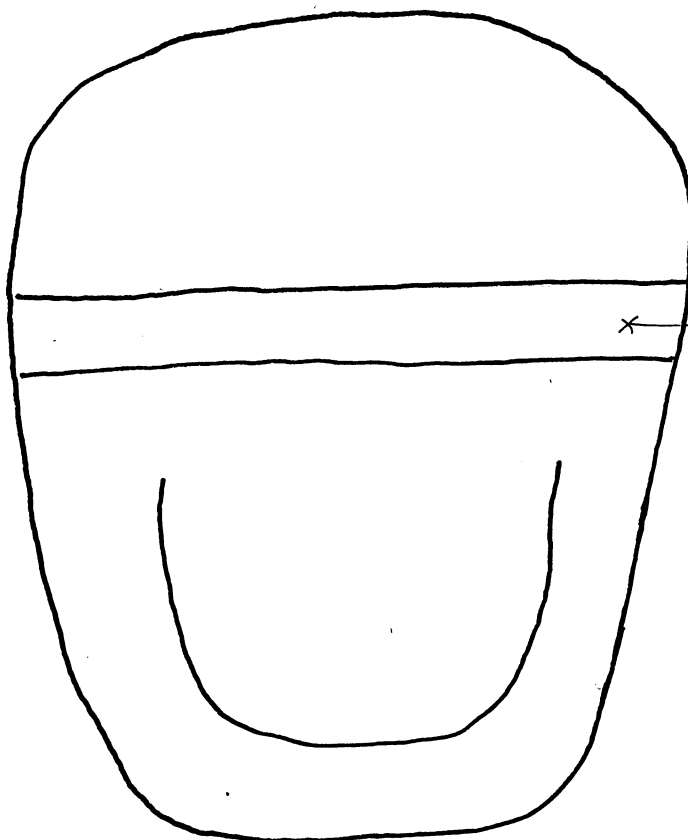
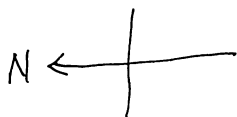
DORNOCH NURSERY CIST  
 SKETCH FROM SLIDE

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THE (POSSIBLE) GRAVE OF EARL SIGURD.

ON THE GROUNDS OF SYDERA FARM, DORNOCH



The trench dug by the Home Guard during W.W. 2.

The configuration as seen from an aerial photograph in the possession of Mr. Jos. Bell.