

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

The cist was excavated in September 1979 after it had been brought to the attention of the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments by Mr E Michie, District Officer of the Forestry Commission at Dornoch. The cist had been discovered during ploughing of the forestry nursery. Before the 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 plough marks on top of the capstone to that of ploughing of the nursery.

Excavation was undertaken on 12 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 cleaned of top soil (figure 1). The hole dug by Forestry Commission workers to reveal the top of the cist was cleaned of loose material and of trample. The sub-soil was patchy discoloured sand of variable texture, much disturbed by small animal burrows. No features were discovered cut into the sub-soil, except for the hole containing the cist, the slabs of which were hard up against natural. A fragment of pottery was found lying on the side of the trench dug by Forestry Commission workers.

The cist cover was a massive slab of sandstone. After preliminary 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 (fig. 2). 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 0.15cm long x 30mm 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 topfill of the cist at a slight angle to vertical was a stone slab which could have compensated for the indent in the eastern slab.

The 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 fragments of bone, which seemed to have been cremated. However, pending specialist 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 that the bone fragments tended to be associated with animal burrows.

A barbed and tanged arrow head (5) was discovered 0.29m below the top of the cist in the general fill; and shortly afterwards a rim sherd of beaker (6) 0.35m below the top of the cist; soon afterwards the top of the beaker was revealed. The stray sherd (6) was 0.2m away from the centre of the beaker and over 30mm above the part 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 (15) was shortly afterwards discovered 0.43cm below the top of the cist. (Figure 2).