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# Prehistoric burials from Angus: some finds old and new

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## Introduction

**T G Cowie and J S Rideout**

Our chance discovery that we were involved in the preparation of two closely related papers for the same volume of this journal has prompted a measure of collaboration which requires a brief introductory note.

The first of these two papers provides details of 12 cists and one urn burial investigated during the 1950s by David Taylor and the late Dr F T Wainwright. Its preparation also provided an opportunity to draw attention to a significant but hitherto unpublished grave group excavated much earlier this century. This in turn shows how significant new light can be thrown on old finds as a result of the application of modern analytical techniques. The second paper provides details of four cists excavated by staff of Angus District Museums between 1986 and 1994, on which, at least latterly, a wider range of resources could be brought to bear.

As none of the sites had previously received much more than summary notice, the principal aim has been to place the sites fully on record, but such a sizeable sample has also offered possibilities for wider discussion. Taken together, for example, the range of sites provides a measure of the limitations of salvage / rescue excavation, many of which are just as applicable today when it comes to dealing with such discoveries. The descriptive portions of the original reports have therefore been presented as separate papers, reflecting their different origins, but the results of the work have been considered in a joint discussion section. The references have also been combined and are to be found at the end of the paper.

The locations of all the sites to be described are shown on Illus 1.

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## Some previously unpublished prehistoric burials from Angus

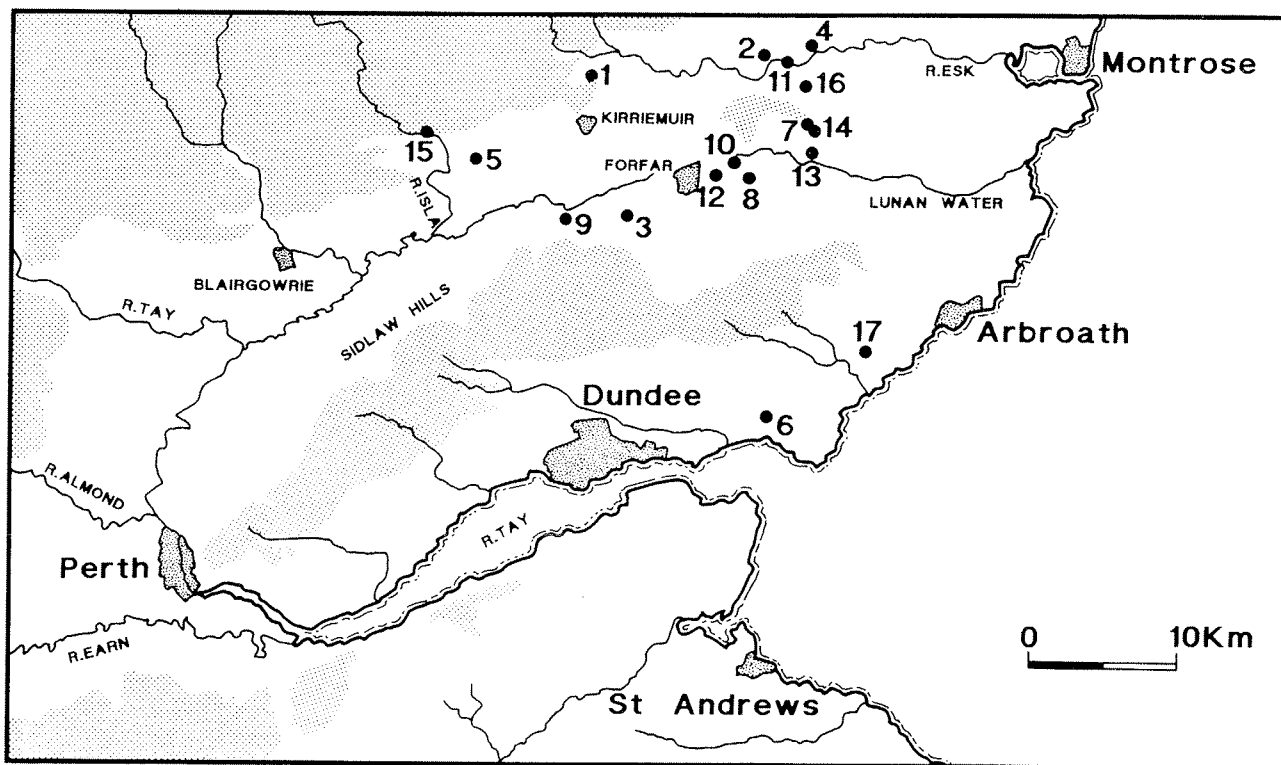
**D B Taylor**

**in collaboration with T G Cowie, M Goodfellow, J A Sheridan, and A Zealand, and incorporating edited reports by D R Dow, J D B MacDougall, and L H Wells**

## Introduction

During the 1950s, the development of more powerful tractors and ploughing at greater depths than hitherto resulted in an increase in the discovery of cist burials. A number of these were investigated by the late Dr F T Wainwright (Illus 2) and the author, but apart from a brief mention in the relev-

ant issues of *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, these sites have remained largely unpublished. This paper attempts to rectify the situation, using field books and other notes made at the time to publish details of a total of 12 cists and also one urn burial. However, it is necessary to draw atten-



Illus 1. Location of sites described in this paper:

- |                                |                                      |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. East Kinwhirrie, Kirriemuir | 10. Loch Fithie, Forfar              |
| 2. Noranbank, Tannadice        | 11. Barnyards, Tannadice             |
| 3. Douglastown, Kinnettles     | 12. Myreside, Forfar                 |
| 4. Mains of Careston, Careston | 13. Hare Cairn, Pitkenney, Aberlemno |
| 5. Meikle Kenny, Kingoldrum    | 14. Mains of Melgund, Aberlemno      |
| 6. Balhungie, Monikie          | 15. East Campsie, Lintrathen         |
| 7. Mains of Melgund, Aberlemno | 16. Balgavies, Aberlemno             |
| 8. Murton, Forfar              | 17. West Scryne, Panbride            |
| 9. Newhouse of Glamis, Glamis  |                                      |

tion to some of the limitations of the evidence. In a number of cases, the original finder had examined his discovery with more enthusiasm than judgement before reporting it; furthermore, while specialist reports on the human remains were sought, sadly these were not always forthcoming, and in one or two instances, finds can unfortunately now no longer be located.

The opportunity has also been taken to draw wider attention to a significant group of material from excavations undertaken earlier this century at Bell Hillock, East Kinwhirrie near Kirriemuir.

The various sites are ordered by the date of their investigation (the location map, Illus 1, has been numbered accordingly). Throughout this paper, the original imperial measurements have been converted to their metric equivalents. Only the main conclusions of the various human bone reports have been summarised: the full reports have been lodged in the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS). The descriptions of

the extant finds have been prepared by Mr Trevor Cowie, with the exception of the report on the jet ornaments from East Kinwhirrie, which has kindly been contributed by Dr Alison Sheridan. In most cases, comment on individual sites and finds has been kept to a minimum in favour of a more general overview incorporated into the joint concluding discussion.

### 1. East Kinwhirrie, Kirriemuir, Angus (NO 388 582)

The site

The burial mound known as 'Bell Hillock' is situated SE of the farm of East Kinwhirrie and 100m N of the cottage called Redhall. The mound was first opened by a Mr Wilkie of Auchlishie some years before 1863 when an 'urn' and a 'spearhead' were found, though both of these are now lost (*Original Name Book (Forfar)*, 59 (1843), 44). In July and August 1919, the mound was investigated by the



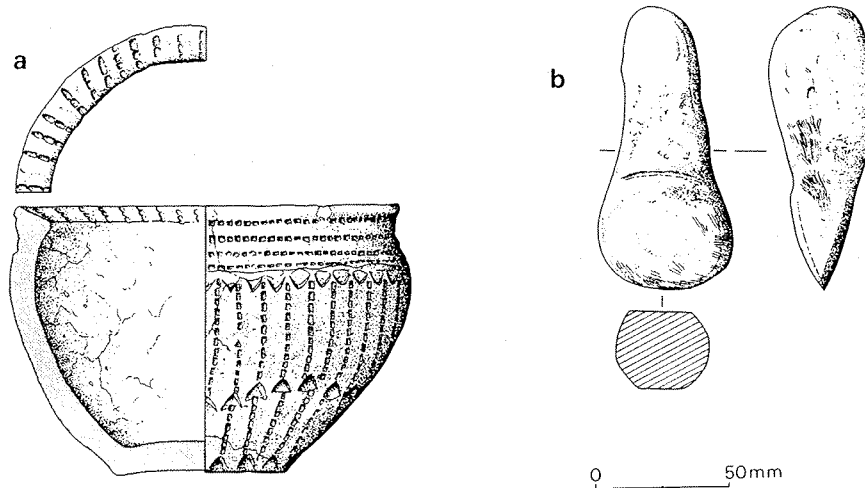
*Illus 2. Dr F T Wainwright (RCAHMS).*

Rev T Fenton-Fyfe, Vicar of West Cornforth, Durham, and a native of Kirriemuir. He left notes which augment the few published details of the excavation (*J Brit Archaeol Assoc*, 25 (1919), 268-9). His daughter, Mrs G H Christie, kindly lent them to the author and they form the basis of the following account.

At the time of the investigation in 1919, the mound was described as cone-shaped, and measured about 17m in diameter by about 5m in height. An outer covering of soil, 0.1-0.4m thick, masked a core of boulders of varying sizes, the largest being mainly at the base of the mound and grouped round a cist. The southern part of the cairn had been removed previously. The cist, measuring 1.0m by 0.61m by 0.55m, was said to have been 'of the usual type' with an unpaved floor, oriented E-W and with clay-luted corners. It

had been filled with soil to a depth of over 0.3m: this was said to have been burned and was mixed with fine ash. No bones were discovered but on top of the burned soil and ash lay a Food Vessel and a number of barrel-shaped beads and spacer plates. What were interpreted as three roughly worked stone implements were also found, but in fact only one of these is now considered to have been artificially modified. The extant finds were formerly in Sunderland Museum but are all now in the collections of Dundee Museum and Art Gallery (hereafter DUNMG). A number of other supposedly shaped stones and what was described as part of a fossil shell were also found; as these can no longer be located, their possible significance is uncertain.

Further excavations in 1961 revealed another cist 7.5m E of that found in 1919. It contained the



Illus 3. Bell Hillock, East Kinwhirrie: a. Food Vessel, b. worked stone object.

unaccompanied cremated remains of a woman aged 30–40 years (*Discovery Excav Scot* 1961, 4). When recorded in the early 1980s, the mound still survived as a grass-covered cairn 25m in diameter and 2m in height (Coutts 1970, 15 no 28; RCAHMS 1983, 7).

It may also be noted that, shortly before the 1919 excavations, Mr Peter Bruce found an Early Bronze Age decorated flanged axe while ploughing near the mound. The axe, of Arretton type, was subsequently donated to the National Museum (Muir Haddow et al 1957, 223; Coles 1969, 80; Schmidt and Burgess 1981, 72, no 408). Such axes are relatively rare in Scotland and its presence so close to a prominent funerary monument invites interpretation in terms of deliberate deposition rather than casual loss or discard (T Cowie, pers comm).

#### The finds

*Food Vessel* (DUNMG: 1974.1058(1)). Food Vessel (Illus 3, a), complete apart from three small nicks out of the rim; upright rim with internal bevel; below the rim, the body swells to a rounded shoulder from which the walls curve to meet the base; the base itself is very slightly concave. The vessel appears to have sagged during construction. Fabric: hard fine clay matrix with small (<6mm) stone grits, visible on surface just below rim and on interior. Colour: the exterior is rather variegated, ranging from light reddish-brown and light red to brown and grey; the interior is a grey / light grey. Decoration: the internal bevel is ornamented with broad comb impressions applied transversely; around the exterior of the rim, there are four rows of horizontal rectangular-toothed comb impressions, and below this, rows of vertical comb impressions alternate with jabbed triangular impressions. The base is plain. There is a dark grey stain on the internal surface and base; some spalling of the internal surface, associated with a

whitish deposit, may reflect heat damage (possibly at the time of burial?). Dimensions: height: 98–102mm; rim diameter: 136–138mm; base diameter: 68mm.

#### *Jet spacer plate necklace and bracelet* (DUNMG: 1974.1058(2–3))

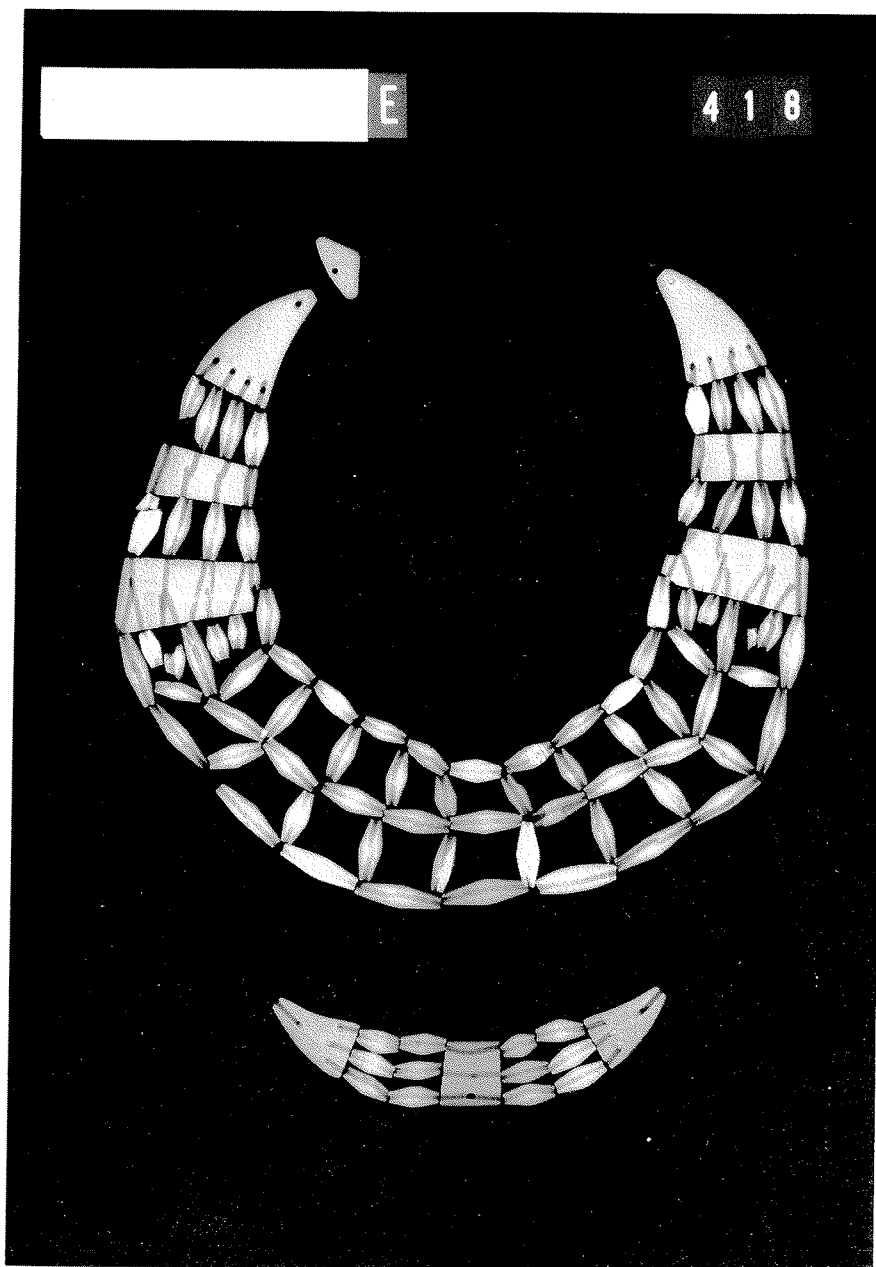
*Dr Alison Sheridan*

The necklace consists of 76 out of an estimated original 110 fusiform (barrel-shaped) beads, together with four trapezoidal spacer plates, two triangular end plates and a triangular fastener. It had been strung, prior to its arrival in Dundee Museum, according to the fashion popular for most of the 20th century – with the beads from the front of the necklace cross-strung in a network pattern (see the X-ray image, Illus 4). It was re-strung, in what is now believed to be the correct manner, by National Museums of Scotland (NMS) staff in 1994 (Illus 5a). During this process, it was discovered that two fragments, formerly assumed to be separate beads, belonged to a single bead. It was also noted that the tight cross-stringing had damaged the ends of some beads; this damage was distinct from the beads' original wear marks. Maximum diameter of necklace: c 230mm.

The bracelet consists of 12 small fusiform beads, a rectangular spacer plate and two triangular terminal plates; by analogy with other spacer plate bracelets, it may originally have had more beads. Length of bracelet: c 135mm.

Non-destructive compositional analysis by Mary Davis (formerly of NMS) using X-ray fluorescence spectrometry revealed that all of the components of the necklace and bracelet are of Whitby jet. Additional detailed examination of the objects revealed that they had probably not been worn for very long before burial, and confirmed that they had been made, as a set, by a skilled jet worker.

Four methods had been used to perforate the plates (Illus 4 and 5b): i) transverse boring, for the necklace fastener and terminal plate tops; ii) elbow



*Illus 4. Bell Hillock, East Kinwhirrie: X-ray of the jet necklace and bracelet, as originally strung (NMS).*

boring, for the lower edge of the necklace terminal plates and for the bracelet terminal plates; iii) through boring, for the upper pair of necklace spacers and the bracelet spacer; and iv) Y-boring, for the lower pair of necklace spacers. The difficulties of achieving (iv) neatly are revealed in the X-ray. The beads, like the spacer plates, had been bored from both ends; occasional mis-bores, where the surface has been ruptured, were noted.

The plates and beads had been polished to a moderate to high sheen, and all plates except the fastener decorated with a carefully executed linear pointillé design, its lines being incised lightly before marking by the awl. Some of the surfaces are now disfigured by criss-cross or concentric cracks – a feature of ancient jet.

Although the file marks from manufacturing

are still visible on the perforated ends of the spacer plates, most of the perforations are surrounded by hollows caused by the rubbing of beads against them; and some of the beads have abraded ends (Illus 5b). This shows that the jewellery had seen some wear; but the absence of replacement parts made from other necklaces or local materials – a feature noted on some other spacer plate necklaces – indicates that the jewellery was still relatively new when buried.

The presence of a spacer plate necklace of imported Whitby jet is an indicator of high status; inclusion of one or two bracelets, and burial when relatively new, underlines yet further the status of the deceased. The East Kinwhirrie material forms part of an east / central Scottish cluster of spacer plate jewellery; its nearest parallel, in terms of



*Illus 5a. Bell Hillock, East Kinwhirrie: jet spacer plate necklace and bracelet showing revised reconstruction.*

elaborateness, material integrity and degree of wear, is from nearby Pitreuchie (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 41 (1906-07), 65-6; Coutts 1971, 52, no 104 and pl 3).

*Worked stone* (DUNMG: 1974.1058(4)). Worked pebble of igneous stone (Illus 3, b), somewhat pear shaped in plan, tapering in profile; broader end ground and polished to form axe-like cutting edge;