

A Short Cist from Ascog, Rothesay, Bute, 1996

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Abstract

Two vertical stone slabs projecting from a disused sand and gravel quarry behind Craigmore Road, Rothesay, led to the discovery of a fragmentary Bronze Age short cist and the remains of a Food Vessel, although the burial itself had not survived.

Introduction

While walking in the woods behind Craigmore Road, north of the Millburn Bridge, one evening early in 1996 John Speirs noticed two stones, projecting from a gravel exposure. Later, on close inspection of the stones John and his wife, Anne, recognised sherds of prehistoric pottery. The already exposed sherds were removed. Subsequent examination of the site and excavation revealed a much-damaged short cist, in which were the remains of a root-damaged pottery vessel, from which the exposed sherds had come.

The site

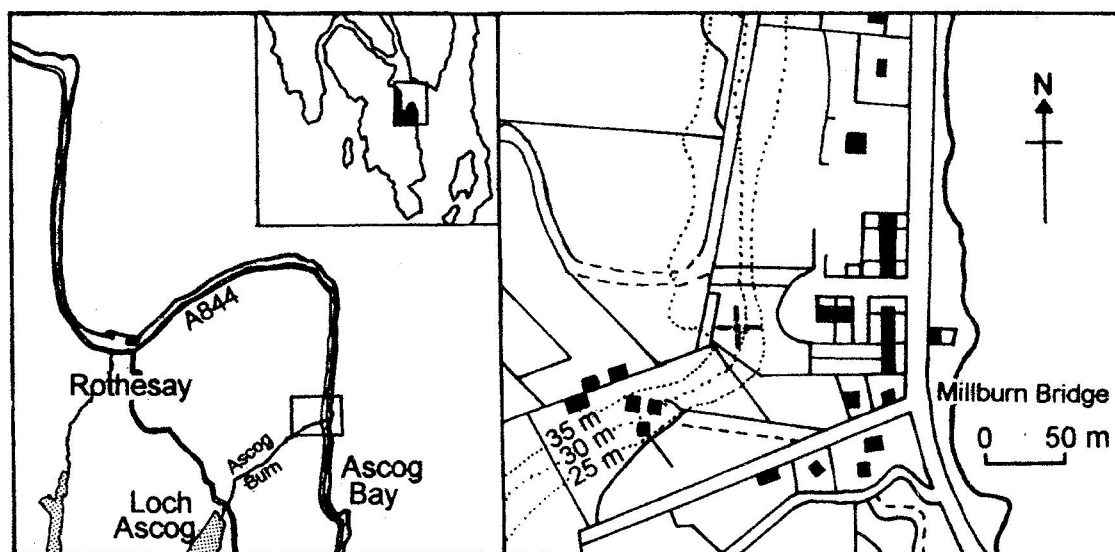


Figure 1: The location of the cist site on the 30m contour above Craigmore Road.

The cist site lies at a height of some 30m above sea-level, at NS 1050 6412 (map, Fig 1) to the north of the Ascog Burn and at the steep seaward-facing edge of an almost level terrace-like area. This is the top part of the 'raised beach cliff' which continues northwards for a considerable distance behind the houses along the shore road; many of the Craigmore Road houses are built on the raised beach deposits which are at a height of 5-10m above sea-level. The cist had been dug into the surface of the terrace and was revealed by a small sand and gravel quarry, which is no longer in use and the site is now lightly wooded (photo, Fig 2). As there is no evidence of any major erosion along the cliff edge since its formation the cist must originally have been built near this cliff edge.

The quarry had cut back into the top of a deep deposit of poorly sorted sands and gravels with occasional lenses and larger runs of sand and, less commonly, runs of coarse cobbles up to about 12cm maximum length and diameter. The largest boulders in the deposit were some 40cm by 40cm

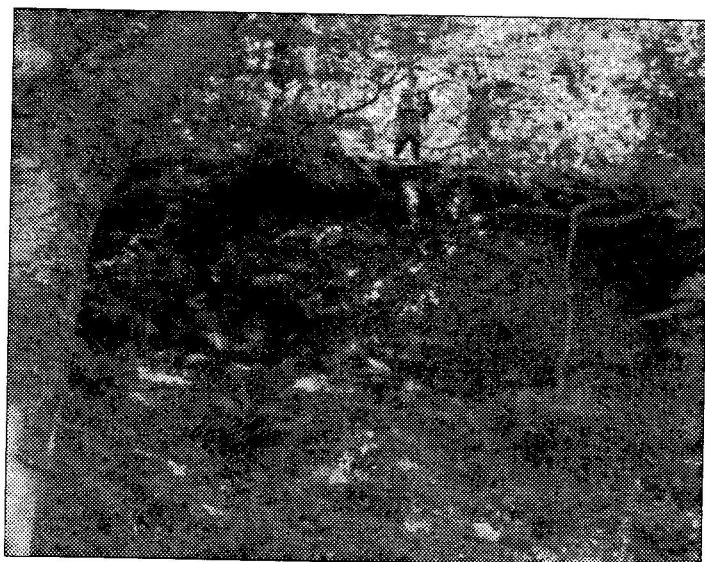


Figure 2: View of the overgrown disused quarry face, before excavation, showing the location of the projecting stones that led to the discovery.

by 25cm in size, although considerably larger boulders can be found loose on the surface of the slope below the quarry and further north along the slope, presumably derived from deposits essentially similar to those visible in the quarry. In the vicinity of the quarry and north of it for several hundred metres the deposits although not well-exposed must be at least 10m thick. Their poor sorting, the general character of their deposition, and the shape of the gravels and larger material, which have been little altered by water action, indicate deposits of glacio-fluvial origin, probably laid down near the margin of the ice which had once covered the area. The lower slopes are so overgrown that it is not possible to determine the total thickness of the sands and gravels.

The cist

The two stones that were noticed first proved to be the east and west side stones of a short cist dug into the surface of the sand and gravel terrace, their upper edges now some 30cm below the modern surface (Fig 3). The fragments of pot were removed for safety and were found to be part of a rim, with traces of impressed decoration characteristic of Food Vessel pottery, (Fig 5, below).

Permission to excavate the site was sought from the owner of the land, Mr D Bell Barker of Troon, who gave permission to excavate and later donated funds towards the work. He asked for the site to be named the Ascog Cist. Historic Scotland was also contacted and agreed to initial rescue excavation of the pot as well as to providing conservation funds from its rescue budget.

The excavation

Excavation was carried out over two days, 16 and 17 April, 1996, with members of the Butheshire Natural History Society. A trench was laid out, one metre wide by one and a half metres long, wide enough to extend beyond the cist stones and any packing stones: it extended back from the exposed quarry face some distance in order to examine the soil into which the cist had been dug (Fig 4).

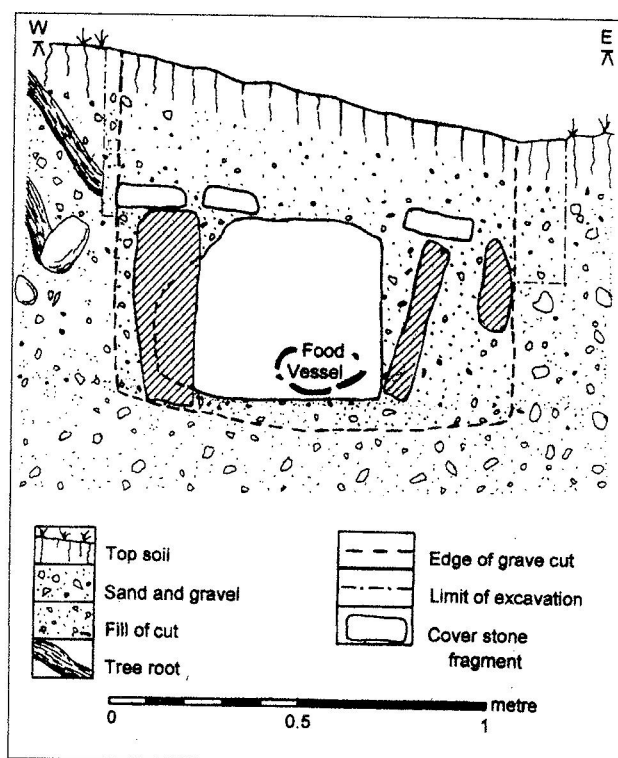


Figure 3: Section along the line W-E, showing the construction of the cist within its grave pit.

Before excavation the side stones projected 65cm beyond the quarry face and were unsupported (photo, Fig 2). The east side stone had been broken, probably when quarrying was in progress. The west stone was of softer sandstone and had weathered, but it was not obviously broken. No trace was found of the missing south end stone of the cist in a detailed examination of the quarry face and the ground below it.

Excavation of the Food Vessel was carried out first, before completing the excavation of the cist. A tree root, some 7.5cm in diameter, growing over the edge of the west side stone, into the cist and through the pot was removed. The topsoil was then excavated, exposing sand and gravel with a densely-packed root mat from the numerous small saplings growing around and in the cist. Below this layer a number of large fragments of dark purplish-red conglomerate rock, 'pudding stone', were observed. Several pieces had sunk into the filling of the cist, but others remained *in situ* on the upper edges of the cist sides, showing them to be the remains of the cover stone.

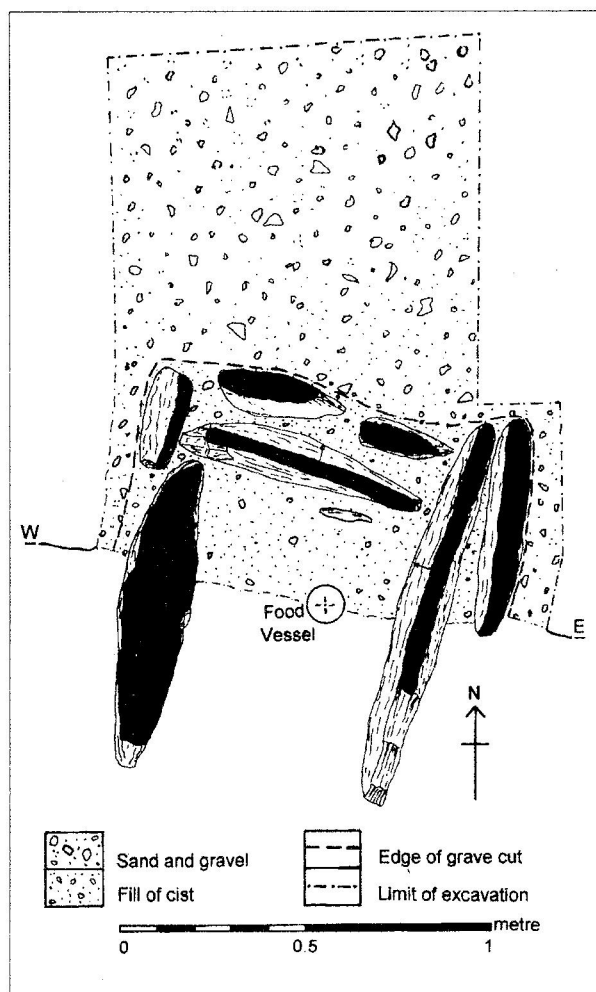


Figure 4: Plan of the excavation area, showing the position of the side and packing stones; the position of the Food Vessel is shown on the edge of the surviving north part of the cist.

by 61cm long by 8cm wide was found to be in place, with packing stones behind it, wedging it into position. The grave cut was identified on the west side, around the north and on the east (Fig 5). On the north and east large packing stones were required to fill the space between the edge of the cut and the constructed cist, but the west side-stone fitted close to the cut. The original internal dimensions of the cist would have been approximately 1 metre long by 0.5 metres wide by 0.5 metres high.

The Ascog cist, although incomplete, having lost its south end, part of the east stone and most of the cover, nevertheless could be reconstructed, since most of the stones remained *in situ* (Fig 4).

After they had been recorded these fragments of coverstone were removed and the interior of the cist was excavated. Only about a third of the original cist fill survived at the north of the cist (Fig 4). The fill was of orange-coloured sand and gravel, presumably the material which had been dug out when the grave pit was dug. After the cist had been completed the sand and gravel dug out to form the grave pit was replaced in the pit, but none was put onto the burial itself. In time some of this material filtered into interior of the cist, nearly filling it before the capstone collapsed and fragments from it sank onto the top of the cist fill. The cist had no base stone but the floor was on a slightly harder lens in the glacial sands and gravels of which the terrace was formed. No trace of skeletal material survived and there were no other artefacts.

Most of the cist stones, which were all slabs of sandstone, remained *in situ*. The packing stones were similar to the larger boulders noted in the sand and gravel matrix of the cliff. The east side stone, which projected back 30cm to the north edge of the grave, was 43cm high by 8cm thick by 100.7cm long and leaned outwards, perhaps pushed by the tree roots growing in the interior. Beside this was a boulder, used as a packing stone. The west side stone measured 52cm high by 20cm thick by 85cm long and had been sunk further into the subsoil than the other stones, so that it would be level with them at the top. The north end stone, a thin slab of sandstone, 49cm high

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The stones of the cist were of greyish or yellowish-pink sandstone. From their shape and surface markings the side slabs must have come from the beach. Similar sandstones occur immediately south of Ascog burn, and slabs of similar material and size can be found on the present beach in this area. However, immediately north of the burn at Montford, the rocks exposed at the shore and the slabs formed from them are markedly greyer than those of the cist. The cover slab, of which fragments only survived, was a conglomerate rock, with a dark purplish-red matrix and predominantly quartz pebbles embedded in it. Similar stone can be seen on the shore from Craigmore southwards.

Reinstatement of the cist

The excavation carried out was the minimum necessary to ascertain that neither skeletal remains nor a body stain survived and to investigate whether there were other surviving artefacts, but none was found. Although the grave cut could be seen the grave pit was not excavated because that would have greatly weakened the cist, with the high probability that it would then collapse at some time in the future. Following the minimal intervention outlined above, the cist was refilled with the soil removed during the excavation. However, as the tree roots were not replaced additional soil and small stones were required to level the surface. The soil was consolidated as much as possible and within a short period vegetation began to recolonise the site.

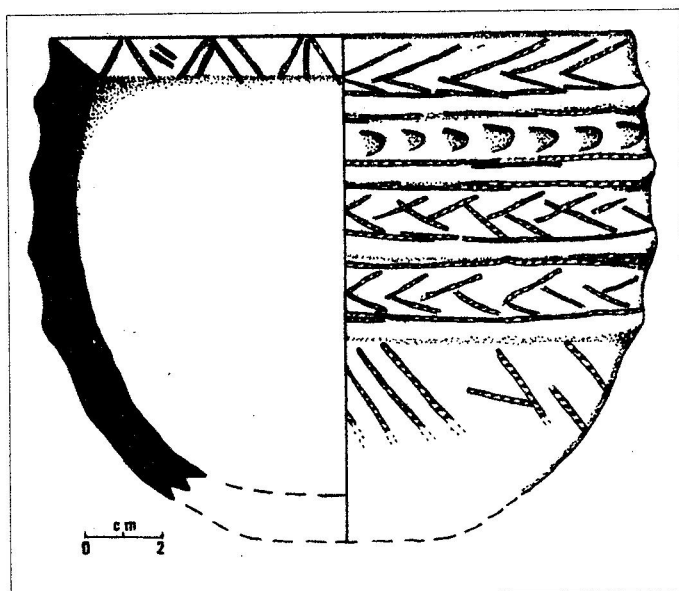


Figure 5: The Ascog food vessel is closely similar to the Irish ribbed bowl type, of which this is the first example from Bute. This reconstruction drawing details the decoration, which was all made with a comb impressed into the wet clay, with one row of impressions of a flat bone end or stick. The pot was originally about 132mm high and 152mm in diameter at the mouth.

The Food Vessel

The Food Vessel (Fig 5) from Ascog was coil-built of a particularly friable local sandy-clay, with numerous quartz grains and some extremely large schist grits, up to 10mm or 12mm, which are clearly visible in the broken edges and on the internal surfaces. The outside was well-covered with a fine clay slip, which masked most of the largest grits, but many of them were visible through the inner coating of slip. The pot had been fired to a pinkish-red colour, on the outer and inner surfaces. The core was less well-fired and varied from reddish tones, through brown to black. Like other Food Vessels the Ascog pot had not been kiln-fired, but had been dried out and then fired in a small pit, the uneven draught resulting in unequal firing and the variation in the colour of the core noted above. Again, as with other Food Vessels, the Ascog pot had been made by hand, was fairly thick and coil-built, with breaks occurring at the weak points where the coils overlap.

The original dimensions of the Food

Vessel are uncertain, partly because it had to be rebuilt from so many fragments and because the base is missing, although one sherd seemed to show a small angle change as if it could have been turning towards the flat base. The pot measures 152mm at the mouth, 164mm maximum across the body and its base could have been 50mm in diameter. The walls varied in thickness from 10mm to 12mm. The maximum surviving height is about 110mm, and the full height could have been perhaps 132mm. Because it was so fragile and required conservation and consolidation before being reconstructed for display in the Museum, the pot was sent to AOC Ltd (Clydesdale, 1996, 1-2). The Food Vessel is now in Bute Museum (Accession Number BtM A98-11).

Discussion

Cists like the one from Ascog represent a tradition of single burial, for one individual, either an inhumation, as at Mount Stuart (Bryce, 1903, 63-4) or a cremation, as at Scalpsie (Bryce, 1903, 55). Acid soil conditions have destroyed many inhumation burials and so cists have often been recorded as empty, as at Ascog. Several cists may occur together, as at Auchentirrie, where three cists were found, without a covering cairn, (Bryce, 1903, 57- 63) and a single cist may be set into the fabric of an earlier, chambered cairn, as at Hilton (Marshall 1976, 15).

The cists and cairns recorded on Bute have almost all been found on or near the shore or on high ground, overlooking the shore, as at Ascog or East of Albany Road. Neolithic chambered tombs or later, Bronze Age cairns, built on such locations have often been interpreted by archaeologists as landmarks. These have been considered especially important for guiding travellers approaching from the sea. Another interpretation, also generally accepted, is that these tombs were significant as family or tribal foci, to which people would travel at certain times for special ceremonies.

However, individual cists, without a cairn, have not been considered as monuments in the landscape, yet that is what they may have been. Certainly each cist was a small, below ground structure, perhaps not easily visible from even a short distance. Nevertheless, each cist required a group of people, friends or family, to expend considerable time, first to assemble the stones and then to build, often including a carefully-levelled capstone, before the burial could take place. A wooden post erected as a marker for a cist such as Ascog would have been seen easily from the sea, but it would have been an impermanent structure and, in fact, no such features have been found near cists. However, the distribution of these monuments around the coast of Bute must be significant for our understanding of the early settlement of the island.

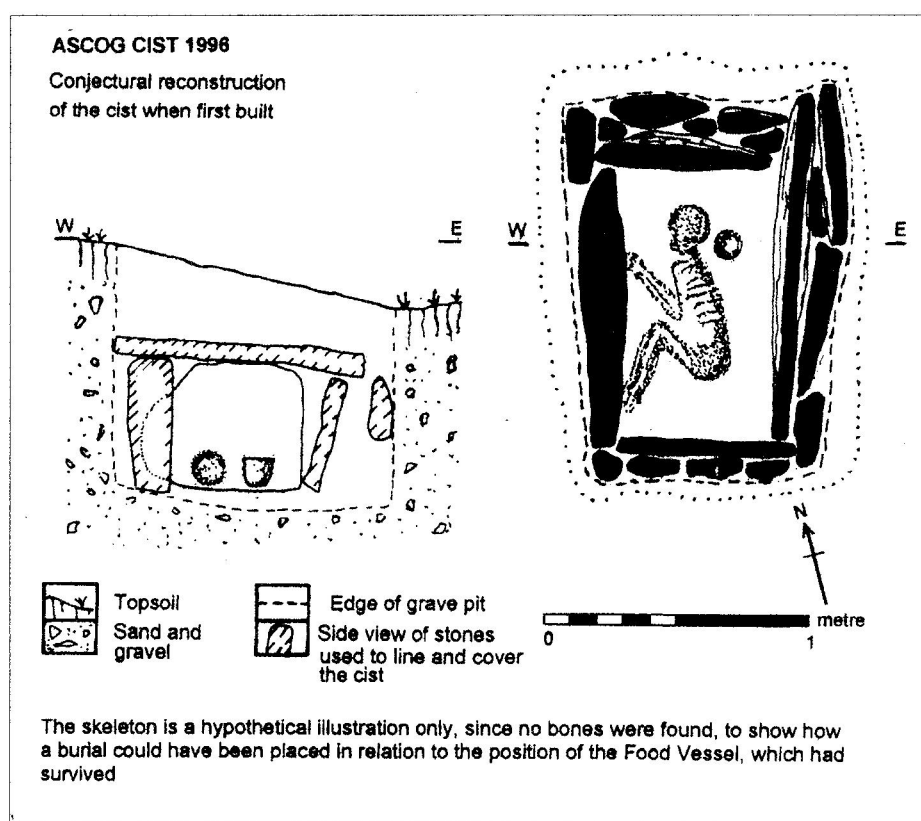


Figure 6: A conjectural reconstruction of the cist and its burial.

Short cist burials were often accompanied by grave goods, some of which like bunches of flowers or food are difficult to identify, except in laboratory studies, but the most commonly found artefacts are pots, Beakers, Food Vessels or Urns, all of which were roughly contemporary. On Bute by far the most numerous items from cists are Food Vessels, including those from Mount

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Stuart, Scalpsie, East of Albany Road, Little Kilmory and Kildavanan, as well as the one from Ascog, and many of these can be seen in the Society's Museum.

Food Vessel is a descriptive term now used for small vases or bowls, found as funerary pots, and which show many traits derived from Neolithic wares. The Ascog Food Vessel is closely similar to the Irish ridged bowl type of Food Vessel, especially those with narrow ridges, which remain undecorated. Another common characteristic is that the decoration frequently is strongly horizontal and stamped into the clay, often with a square-toothed comb. Food Vessel rims are normally sharply bevelled inwards and decorated with motifs similar to those on the body of the pot. The Ascog example exhibits many of these traits, as the illustration indicates (Fig 5). Apart from the row of impressions, made by an oval or round stamp, all the chevrons and bands of decoration were made with a square-toothed comb, which was 1.5 to 2 cm in length, pressed into the clay. A longer stamp, perhaps 3cm long was impressed using a rocking motion, to form irregular rows, with individual sections running over or under the adjacent segments. A similar stamp had been used to make the decoration on the lowest part of the body, but was unevenly applied, so that the toolmarks are barely discernible in places, and in others are very deep.

The Ascog Food Vessel, was found lying on its side but was likely to have been upright originally, and placed some 30cm from the north end and 20cm from the east side of the cist. In this location it could have been behind the head of a left-facing burial, with the head to the north. Several other body positions would be possible and many variations in vessel position have been found in other excavated short cists. Using the slender evidence available, however, it seems possible that the burial in the Ascog cist could have been placed, in a crouched position, with the Food Vessel behind the head, as shown in the conjectural reconstruction, (Fig 6). The date of the Ascog burial cannot be determined precisely, but the form of the cist and the presence of the Food Vessel suggest that it should belong to the period from 2100 to 1900BC, some 4,000 years ago, when many pottery forms, including Food Vessels, were developed in new ways at the start of the Bronze Age. Burgess, (1974, 182-4) provides a useful, short summary of these types of pottery and their associations.

Acknowledgements

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