# 10 Discussion *by PRJ Duffy*

The excavations at Ferndale have identified a complex of three cists, two of which were securely associated with a barrow and contained cremated human remains. Dates obtained from cremated bone from these cists demonstrate that the occupants of the cists died in the first quarter of the second millennium BC; as such, the mound and cists fit into an increasingly well-defined Orcadian tradition of cist burials covered by artificial mounds, although this is an apparently early example (see Table 3). The third cist differs in several important respects from the other two cists at the site, and indeed from the majority of excavated cists in Orkney. Similarities can, however, be seen with the cists in pits excavated at Crantit and Kewing (Ballin Smith, in prep). These sites can also be seen as bearing broad morphological similarities to the larger rock-cut cist at Sand Fiold (Dalland 1999).

## 10.1 The Bronze Age cists and mound

Erosion and disturbance by both human and animal agency have, in many instances, been the implicit factors in the modern motivations to excavate similar mound sites throughout the region (eg Downes 1995). In some respects, this could almost be added as a defining characteristic of published modern archaeological investigations of this type of monument. The site at Ferndale is no exception, and recovery of information and by inference the post-excavation analysis and interpretations of the site have been frustrated by the circumstances of discovery. Here the unintentional disturbance was the result of a modern JCB excavator bucket, which removed large swathes of soil. Ironically, this action promoted the identification of the anthropogenic nature of the mound and simultaneously obscured interpretation of key constructional features and stratigraphic relationships from the physical evidence. Despite the truncated nature of much of the archaeological strata on the site, however, enough evidence has survived to draw parallels with excavated examples from the region and to understand the site within the tradition of Orcadian barrows.

Numerous such mounds and groups of mounds are recorded throughout the Orkney Islands and are estimated to number in hundreds if not thousands (Downes 1994). The focus of investigation since the early 19th century (eg Traill 1876; Watt 1885), such sites are often devoid of readily datable evidence. It is only more recently that scientific investigation has begun to refine and redefine the nuances of construction use and dating beyond typological comparisons of architectural style and limited artefactual evidence (Hedges 1980; Moore & Wilson 1995). Current thought suggests two distinctive classes of cist burials are widespread: flat, short cists often inserted into a natural rise or mound; and artificial mounds with cists (Moore & Wilson 1995). Despite the problems of truncation (see below) at Ferndale, the site can clearly be seen as belonging to the latter of these groups: a 'ditchless, scrape barrow' (Hedges 1977, 141), albeit with some variation. It is not clear whether the mound is an isolated example or belongs to a barrow cemetery, such as that at Summers Dale (HY31SW 150). Three 'tumulii' are, however, present to the south-west of the site at Blubbersdale (HY32SE 14) and a single barrow is reported to the east at Castle (HY32SE 2). The barrow cemetery of Gitterpitten (HY32SE 8) also lies to the east. It is possible that further barrows remain undiscovered

**Table 3 Summary of radiocarbon dates from cists in Orkney containing cremations**

| Lab code | Site | Material | Context | Lab age BP | Reference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUERC-840 | Riff | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3570 ± 45 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-2987 | Ferndale | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3555 ± 35 | This paper |
| SUERC-2988 | Ferndale | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3550 ± 35 | This paper |
| SUERC-817 | Kewing | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3520 ± 45 | Ballin Smith *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-815 | Crantit | Cremated bone | West cist fill | 3460 ± 45 | Ballin Smith in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-844 | Gitterpitten | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3430 ± 45 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-816 | Crantit | Cremated bone | West cist fill | 3420 ± 50 | Ballin Smith in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| GU-3186 | Mousland | Birch charcoal | Cist fill | 3400 ± 100 | *Downes* 1994 |
| AA-53155 | Gitterpitten | Willow charcoal | Cist fill | 3315 ± 40 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-839 | Varme Dale | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3280 ± 45 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| SUERC-837 | Varme Dale | Cremated bone | Cist fill | 3125 ± 45 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |
| AA-53156 | Gitterpitten | Willow charcoal | Cist fill | 2995 ± 40 | Downes in *Discovery Excav Scot* 2003 |

in the immediate vicinity. More generally, it is clear that the site forms part of a wider local landscape of barrow cemeteries.

Of the three cists excavated on site, two (cists 004 and 010) contained cremated bone and were associated with remnant mound material (context 014). The stratigraphic relationship between these two cists could not be discerned from excavation, and only the base slab and a small part of the northern side of the latter cist remained, precluding any discussion as to architectural differences in construction. One important difference was, however, noted: cist 004 had a number of packing stones surrounding the flat cist uprights, whilst the sides of cist 010 appeared to have sat flush against the mound material. A partial clay lining was also present in cist 004, sealing the base slab to the sides. The original observed differences in cist construction had led to the preliminary interpretation of cist 010 as the primary burial on site, with cist 004 a later construction placed in a cut (021) excavated into the mound body and packed with stones.

In considering the phasing of the site, it is of value to consider the wider evidence for phasing on similar sites. It is apparent from excavated examples that construction of this type of monument was a ritual process focused primarily on the cist burial, followed by a phase of covering the cist and its contents with mound material. Evidence from several sites shows the primary cist would have been constructed as a freestanding structure on the ground surface or in a shallow scoop, its position maintained by rough corbelling or support slabs. Often a kerb of stones was constructed at around the same time, delineating the area of focus. Earth, gravel and stones would then be piled over the cist to create the artificial mound (see for example Ashmore 1974). In cases where secondary cists exist, this later phase is generally carried out in the same way, with the cist constructed first and coverage by mound material second (see for example Downes 1995).

Utilizing these parallels, it is clear that cist 004, with its stone packing around it, is highly reminiscent of primary cist constructions found at other sites and almost certainly represents the primary focus of the mound construction. Given the short distance between the two cists (only 0.6m), and the machine truncation of the mound deposits, it is not certain whether the mound creation was phased or a single event. It may be that both cists were covered at the same time, an unusual construction process in Orcadian barrows. Alternatively, some of the mound material may have been removed to allow the construction and secondary covering of this cist. The radiocarbon dates from the cremated human remains do, however, suggest that the construction of both cists was broadly contemporary and is likely to have happened within a generation. The precise nature of the construction phasing aside, it is probable that cist 010 is a secondary cist burial within the mound body, a feature readily paralleled at Trumland (Craw 1934), Linga Fold 5, Linga Fold 8 (Downes 1995) and Linga Fold 9 (Moore & Wilson 1995).

These specific actions at artificial mound sites contrast interestingly with the other dominant type of Orcadian cist burial where flat, short cists are inserted into the existing ground surface by means of a cut that is subsequently backfilled, such as at Lower Ellibister (Hedges 1980). Other commentators have noted the conscious transformation of landscape as a result of the creation of artificial mounds (see Downes 1994), but little consideration has been given to the psychological distinction between covering the dead with a monumental construction and the insertion of the dead into a pre-existing feature, be it artificial or natural. Whether this represents a chronological shift, social distinction or otherwise can only be explored through more detailed research, but it is of interest to note here that the variation exists.

Given the identification of cist 004 as the primary cist burial of this phase, the worked stone (Illus 5) from the supporting stones becomes intriguing. The use of the stone cannot be discounted as an entirely unconscious addition to the cist support. The incised and pecked decoration is similar to that seen at a variety of Neolithic sites in Orkney, suggesting the piece is of this date or earlier. The motif of reused Neolithic material in Bronze Age tombs is one that is familiar from a number of Orcadian sites, most notably Mousland (Downes 1995), where the leaf-shaped arrowhead found in the topsoil at Ferndale also finds ready parallel. Given this wider tradition, the presence of an unrolled arrowhead and stone displaying parallels with Neolithic art within the Ferndale barrow is an interesting and perhaps not entirely coincidental feature.

Contained within the cists were quantities of cremated human bone. Analysis of the remains demonstrated that cist 004 contained the remains of three individuals: an older adult male, a young adult female and an infant of around 15 months. The male individual had been suffering from a well-developed and undoubtedly painful dental abscess and a bone infection of the femur. The female was suffering from mild iron deficiency anaemia. Cist 010 held the more poorly preserved remains of an adult of unidentified sex. Comparison with assemblages from similar sites is frustrated by limited published skeletal data and the absence of any synthesis of cremated skeletal material from Orcadian cists. The preponderance of non-adults in many of the human remains assemblages from barrows has been noted previously (Hedges 1977), but evidence from Queenafjold (Ritchie & Ritchie 1974) and the unpublished material from the Knowes of Trotty (Julie Roberts, pers comm) suggests that that this is a trend, rather than a defining characteristic. The human remains assemblage from Ferndale must thus await the analysis and publication of further material before its significance can be addressed in any meaningful context.

## 10.2 The rock-cut cist

To the west of the Bronze Age cists lay a further cist (003), quite dissimilar in form and appearance to those discussed above. The cist was positioned in a large, rock-cut pit and contrasted with the simpler 'cist in mound' construction of the other cists. This pit was significantly larger than would be required for functional access for construction, and contrasts with the majority of flat cists excavated on Orkney. These are generally only large enough to take the cist, and are cut into subsoil, as exemplified at Lower Ellibister (Hedges 1980) and Midskaill (Moore & Wilson 1995). More significantly, the cist was flanked on its western side by two parallel rows of dry-stone walling, between 0.5 and 0.75m in length and up to three courses in height. This walling appears to have formed a rough stance or passage at the western side of the cist, and would seem to be an overelaboration if intended to be purely for cist support. In further contrast, the cist contained an inhumation rather than a cremation; observations in excavation suggest that these remains may also have been disarticulated. No evidence of superstructure or burial marker was found.

The differences in this cist morphology are striking, and it is a matter of regret that no stratigraphic relationship between the artificial mound and the cist was preserved. The lack of date from the poorly preserved remains is similarly frustrating. It seems unlikely, however, that the cist is a secondary burial as part of the mound, given the care taken in its construction, the burial rite utilized and its subterranean position. Nor, considering wider Orcadian parallels (see above), can it be considered a primary burial of the mound construction phase. Given this, we are left with the possibility that the cist relates to a different phase of burial activity, and may even have acted as an initial reason for the location of the artificial mound and the associated cists in the area.

In examining potential parallels to help clarify the chronological relationship between these two potential site phases, it is of note that few Orcadian cists have morphological and architectural resonance with that found at Ferndale. Five main morphological features mark the cist as different from the other two on site:

- the large rock-cut pit
- the subterranean cist
- the dry-stone construction within the pit
- the inhumed burial
- the lack of superstructure marking the burial.

Parallels with these features can be found from the south-east cist at Crantit (Ballin Smith, in prep) where a large pit was excavated through subsoil to contain a subterranean cist supported by dry-stone walls. Within the cist, the remains of a badly decayed inhumation were present. No date was obtained from the poorly preserved inhumation.

At Kewing, Rendall (Ballin Smith, in prep), a similar, larger pit was partially excavated into bedrock to contain a wholly subterranean cist supported with dry-stone masonry. In this instance, however, the burial contained within was a cremation. The site was dated from cremated bone to 3520 ± 45 BP, which is broadly contemporary with the cremations from Ferndale (see Table 3). The suggestion of the excavator that this cist may have been designed for the deposition of additional burials is, however, intriguing. Given the poorly preserved nature of the inhumations from Ferndale and Crantit, it may be that the Kewing tomb was originally designed to receive a since-decayed inhumation burial and that the dated cremation is a later deposit.

One further parallel exists from Orkney that combines several of the distinctive elements described above. The site of Sand Fiold was a large, rock-cut pit containing a subterranean cist supported by elements of dry-stone walling (Dalland 1999). The cist had been reused for interment several times and contained a number of burials, dated from 4100 ± 50 BP to 3530 ± 40 BP, although these dates and the excavation data did not allow a final statement to be made as to the chronology of the site. Although significantly larger, and of superior construction to the examples described above, it is of potential significance that Sand Fiold shares particular characteristics with Ferndale, Crantit south-east and Kewing that distinguishes them from the more readily identifiable flat cist and 'cist in mound' style of cist burial in Orkney.