
3 The Excavation

by Christopher Burgess and Mark Holmes

3.1 Aims, objectives and methods

The primary objectives of the excavation were to establish whether human remains were present within the cist, the degree of preservation of such remains and how such remains had been deposited. The secondary objectives were to establish whether there were any intimately related structures in the vicinity of the site, and to record fully and recover any human remains and associated structures or, in the event of multiple burials, to consult with Historic Scotland and the Regional Archaeologist to establish a suitable mitigation strategy.

An area *c* 3m by 2m was opened around the exposed stones. After initial cleaning, the trench was half-sectioned and excavation was undertaken in spits, until the cut of a small pit was encountered. The half section was then continued down through the fills of the pit on the south-western side and the section recorded. Once recorded, the remaining fill in the north-eastern half of the feature was excavated. Heavy rain and poor light meant that all of this initial excavation was carried out largely on the basis of texture.

The following day, significantly improved weather and drying of the peat in the excavation area allowed better identification of the archaeological deposits and revealed the feature had initially been incompletely excavated at the base of its north side. The remaining portion of the pit was subsequently excavated by Jim Crawford (Gearraidh na h'Aibhne) and Mark Elliot (Stornoway Museum).

3.2 Excavation results

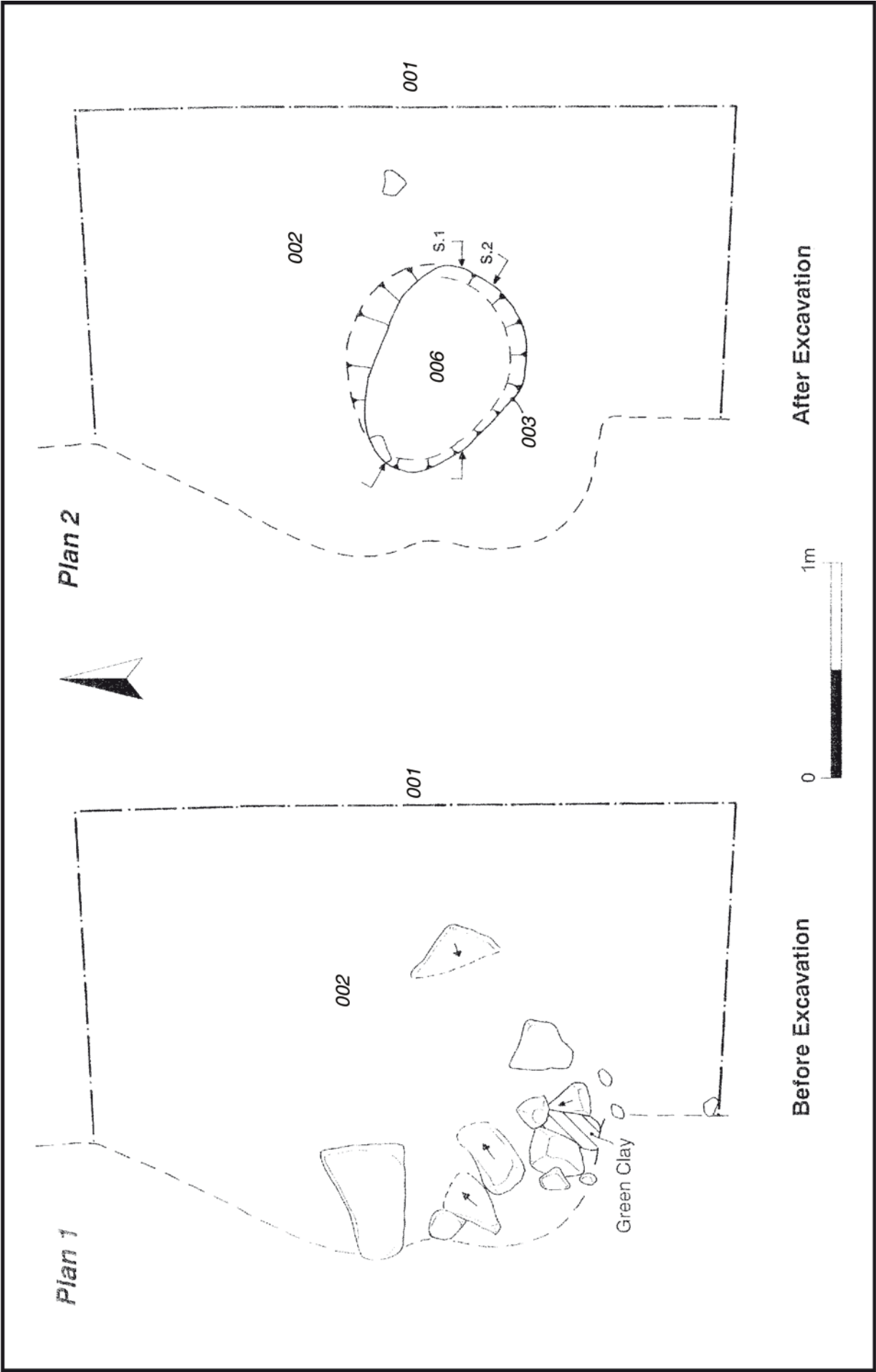
Initially, an upper layer of turf and light brown peat (001), 0.2m thick, was removed to reveal a layer of more fibrous light brown peat 0.65m thick (002). A deposit of stones, both pitched and laid flat, was exposed at this level (008). The stones varied in size from 0.15m by 0.15m by 0.10m up to 0.5m by 0.4m by

0.2m, with the majority measuring *c* 0.35m by 0.2m by 0.2m. The larger stones tended to be flat whilst the smaller stones were more rounded. Several of the stones were heavily decayed and there were patches of natural green clay between some (illus 2).

Following half-sectioning of the trench, the cut of the pit was observed in plan (003). The cut was oval in shape and aligned on a north-west/south-east axis. On the surface it was 1m long by 0.65m wide. It had nearly vertical upper sides and was 0.85m deep. In the bottom third of the pit, the sides curved outward very slightly so that its base was marginally larger than its mouth, giving it a bell-shaped profile.

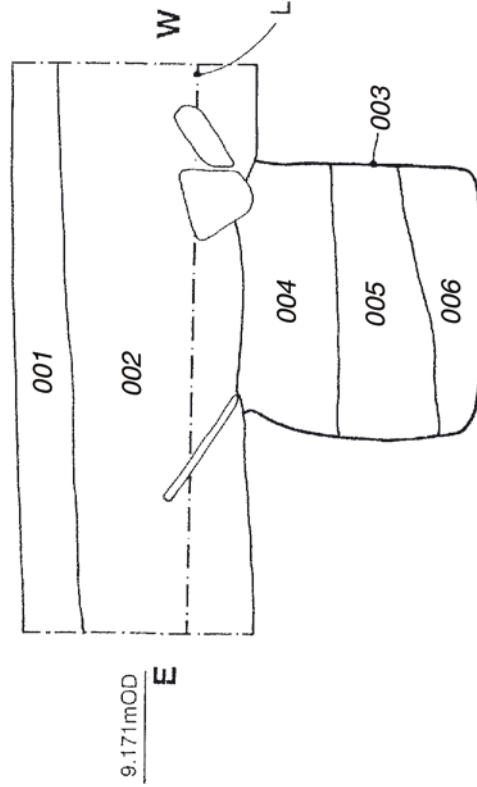
The upper fill (004) of the pit comprised a very moist, light brown peat. It contained abundant fibrous straw-like material. Underlying this was a black peat (005) containing what appeared to be occasional *curins* (small chunks of dried peat) and frequent small pieces of wood, which occurred most noticeably at its interface with the upper peaty fill (004). Within both the upper peaty fill (004) and the black peat (005), numerous fragments of wood were recovered (illus 3). Most of the wood was not in situ and therefore it was not possible to tell for certain if the vertical members were regularly spaced. From the surviving pieces, however, the impression during excavation was of an interwoven wicker 'basket', held in place by larger stakes, some of which were observed to be vertically embedded in the cut (003).

At the base of the pit was another deposit of black peat (006), similar in character to context 005 but containing frequent *curins* and occasional wood fragments. This fill sat upon the natural light green, gritty, compact clay. A further layer of stones, initially thought either to be natural boulders or bedrock, were identified during the second day of excavation as in fact lying in the bottom of the pit. Removal of these stones revealed further wood twigs, indicating that the stones probably lay in the bottom of the wickerwork liner.

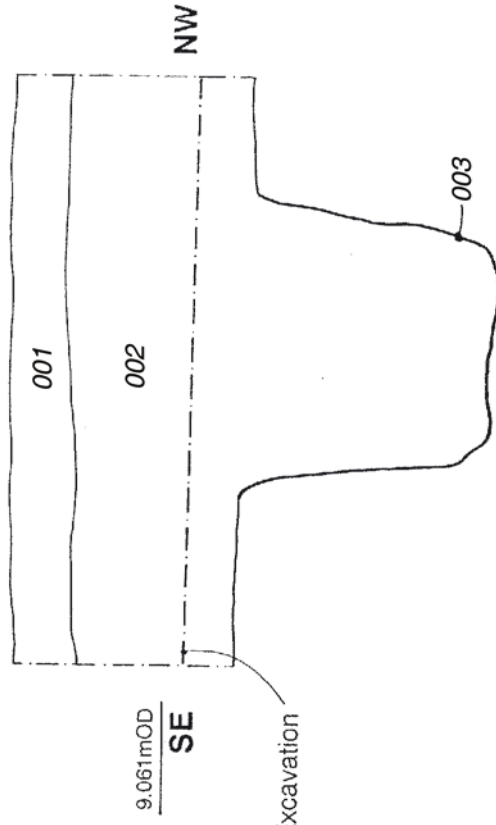


Illus 2 Pre- and post-excavation plan of feature

Section 1



Section 2



Illus 3 Sections of feature