
8 Discussion

8.1 *The burial*

The Pabay Mor flexed inhumation of a mature male (50–59 years), aligned roughly north–south, was buried in the Mid Bronze Age (1450–1290 cal BC) into a grave, as reflected by a rectangular-shaped area of dark brown to black silty sand (Context 001). A large stone had been set at the western edge of the burial, perhaps as a marker, and a small, plain barrel-shaped pot was placed directly next to the marker stone, although it is unclear whether it was smashed during or post-deposition. A polished stone and pumice polisher found adjacent to the mandible and upper spine of the body may also have been deposited at the time of burial.

The grave did not appear to be related to the remains of a burial mound or cist structure, although it is not impossible that the marker stone once formed part of a larger mortuary feature, which has since eroded from the cliff.

The burial had been recently disturbed, and was only partially articulated, with the lower limbs being better preserved than the upper body. It was covered by re-deposited sandy topsoil (Context 002), which contained disarticulated human remains. A fragment of an infant mandible was recovered from the disarticulated remains above the burial and suggests the presence of a second individual nearby. Human remains, including two skulls, found by the landowner from the eroding cliff line and beach in the vicinity of the site in 1998 suggest that there were once further burials present at the site, possibly associated with the Pabay Mor inhumation.

8.2 *The burial context*

The burial at Pabay Mor adds to growing knowledge of Bronze Age burial archaeology from the Western Isles. Bronze Age burials have been recorded from the islands (eg [Megaw & Simpson 1961](#)) but until recently detailed information was often scant and dating evidence imprecise. Recent work on Lewis, and further south in South Uist and Barra ([Branigan and Foster 2000](#), 192–215; [Close-Brooks 1995](#); [Dunwell et al 1995](#); [Neighbour 2005](#); [Parker Pearson et al 2005](#); [Parker Pearson et al 2007](#); [Cook forthcoming](#)), has begun to change this.

The use of contemporary inhumation and cremation practices is a feature of the Bronze Age and is evidenced, perhaps significantly, at Cnip on the Bhaltois peninsula, which overlooks Pabay Mor ([Armit 1994](#), 74–5) and is the closest dated comparison to the Pabay Mor burial. The Cnip Bronze Age cist inhumation was excavated in 1992 ([Dunwell](#)

[et al 1995](#)), and lay only 5m from a previously excavated cairn from the same period ([Close-Brooks 1995](#)). The remains within the cist were of a mature male (35–40 years) orientated roughly east–west and in a flexed position. A coarse plain vessel (almost intact) was positioned adjacent to the head and was the only artefact recovered from the grave ([Dunwell et al 1995](#), 279). The radiocarbon date (1856–1520 BC) establishes this inhumation to be earlier than the Pabay Mor burial (1450–1290 BC) but potentially contemporary with the inverted urn cremation found within the Cnip cairn (1890–1530 BC (GU-1174)). Further south in the Western Isles examples of both inhumation and cremation within separate short cists below a mound were found at Sithean an Altair in Vallay ([Megaw & Simpson 1961](#), 76). In the Bronze Age, inhumation was clearly not replaced by cremation but was a practice that continued in tandem with it, and the Mid Bronze Age Pabay Mor inhumation fits well with this picture.

The reason for the presence of the infant jaw bone in the Pabay Mor burial is unclear. It is possible that it represents all that remains of a child buried with the adult, although this cannot be confirmed as the infant bone was found amongst disarticulated material recovered from the disturbed soil above the burial. It is known that further human remains were also recovered from the beach below the grave in 1998, but whether they originated from this grave or another is also unfortunately now unknown. The presence of more than one individual in a cist is a feature of many Bronze Age burials. At the south end of the Western Isles chain, at Allasdale, Barra, four cists, containing the inhumed remains of 13 individuals, were recently excavated and dated to 1880–1490 BC (GU-14153 & GU-14152) ([Cook, forthcoming](#)). Although the dates are earlier than at Pabay Mor, the presence of more than one individual in three of the cists and of children, adults and both sexes, is striking and may have similarities with the Pabay site.

The most obvious difference between the burial at Pabay Mor and other Bronze Age burials excavated in the Western Isles is the lack of cist structure associated with the Pabay Mor inhumation. At Cnip, the cist inhumation may have been covered with a mound, as suggested by the presence of the partial remains of a likely kerb to the south of the feature ([Dunwell et al 1995](#), 282). The Pabay Mor burial was in contrast essentially a grave with a marker stone, although it is possible that further stones associated with the burial were already lost to the sea prior to the excavations, or that kerb stones may have been present below the sand in the area outwith the excavation trench.

The Pabay Mor adult male is also broadly contemporary with recently excavated evidence for human remains in a domestic context, found from below the floors of houses at the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age settlement at Cladh Hallan on South Uist. Homes here were built over foundation pits containing composite burials of articulated remains, apparently deposited several hundred years after their death, which may have been subject to mummification (Parker Pearson et al 2005; 2007). Over the years at Allasdale several artefacts, including hammer stones, bone tools and pottery, have also been recovered from the immediate vicinity of the burials, implying that there was once domestic settlement in close proximity to the graves. However, at Allasdale, as at Pabay Mor and Cnip, plain pots were also found within the burials, and the recovery of the polished stone and pumice polisher from Pabay Mor, is more suggestive of deliberate inclusions placed with the burial, rather than nearby

domestic settlement. But without further detailed investigation, or possibly monitoring of the erosion, the presence of a nearby domestic settlement cannot be ruled out.

The remains recovered from the burial on Pabay Mor add to our overall knowledge of burial practices in the Western Isles, where, as elsewhere, a 'mixture of striking similarities and unfathomable differences is a feature of Bronze Age burial rites' (Neighbour 2005, 61). The Pabay Mor Mid Bronze Age adult male inhumation was marked with a large stone and buried with a pot, polished stone and pumice polisher, and possibly at least one accompanying individual as represented by an infant jaw bone and other disarticulated material recovered from the area prior to the excavation. The excavation and analysis of this burial, whilst small in scale, contributes to a growing body of evidence relating to mortuary and funerary practices in the Western Isles during the second millennium BC.