



PREHISTORIC BURIALS

Scotland's prehistory stretched for some 9500 years from the earliest settlers to around AD 1000. There was some written history during the last thousand years of that period, but so little that it was effectively still a prehistoric era, and we rely upon archaeology to provide details of how people treated their dead.

The earliest formal burials that we know about, and which involved any kind of grave structure, took place after about 4000 BC. Neolithic farmers had a strong tradition of building burial chambers covered by mounds. In lowland areas, timber, turf and earth were the normal building materials, whereas in the Highlands and Islands stone was more readily available. Long barrows were built of earth and turf and appear today as long low mounds, but they are complicated structures that cover the remains of timber mortuary structures and multiple burials. They are flanked by the ditches from which the mound material was dug, but these have filled in over the years. Round barrows are very similar structures and both types of burial mound are vulnerable to ploughing.



The remains of a chambered cairn near Stornoway, Western Isles. The cairn has been quarried for stones in the past, exposing the burial chamber. © Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland.

Chambered cairns are great heaps of stones covering stone-built chambers, though most today have been robbed of many of their stones. The shape of these cairns varies from round to rectangular, and there is also considerable regional variety in the design of the internal burial chambers. Such tombs were used for inhumation burials over several centuries, for they had entrances that could be sealed between funerals and reopened when necessary. Excavation often reveals traces of activities outside the cairn as well as within the chambers and passages.

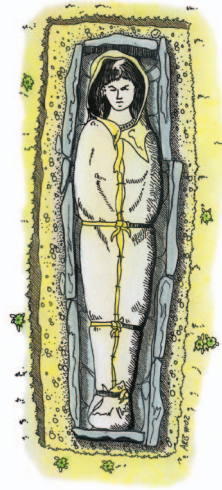
The idea of individual burial in short cists (slab-built boxes) with personal belongings appears to have found favour sometime before 2000 BC, and the rite was either inhumation or cremation. Cists are often found during ploughing or gravel-quarrying. Also, cremation burials were made simply in small pits in the ground, sometimes in a pottery vessel and sometimes with the cremated remains placed directly into the pit.



An example of a Bronze Age short cist burial. The body had been laid on one side with the legs drawn up - this is known as a crouched burial. © Dumfries and Galloway Museums Service (Dumfries Museum). Licensor www.scran.ac.uk

Such early burial sites, with their links to the ancestors, may have acted as territorial markers. Even without the help of grave-goods, burials can now be dated fairly accurately by radiocarbon analysis of a small sample of bone. In the past, burial and ritual appear to have been more closely linked with domestic life than today, and the discovery of a grave can point to the presence nearby of other remains.

After about 1000 BC, fewer people seem to have been given formal burial of any kind that leaves physical traces. Perhaps they were cremated in the open, without burial of the remains. However, from the first few centuries AD onwards, graves



A long cist is a full-length stone-filled pit. The body has been laid, wrapped in a cloth shroud, on her back on stone paving, and large slabs will be placed to cover the cist



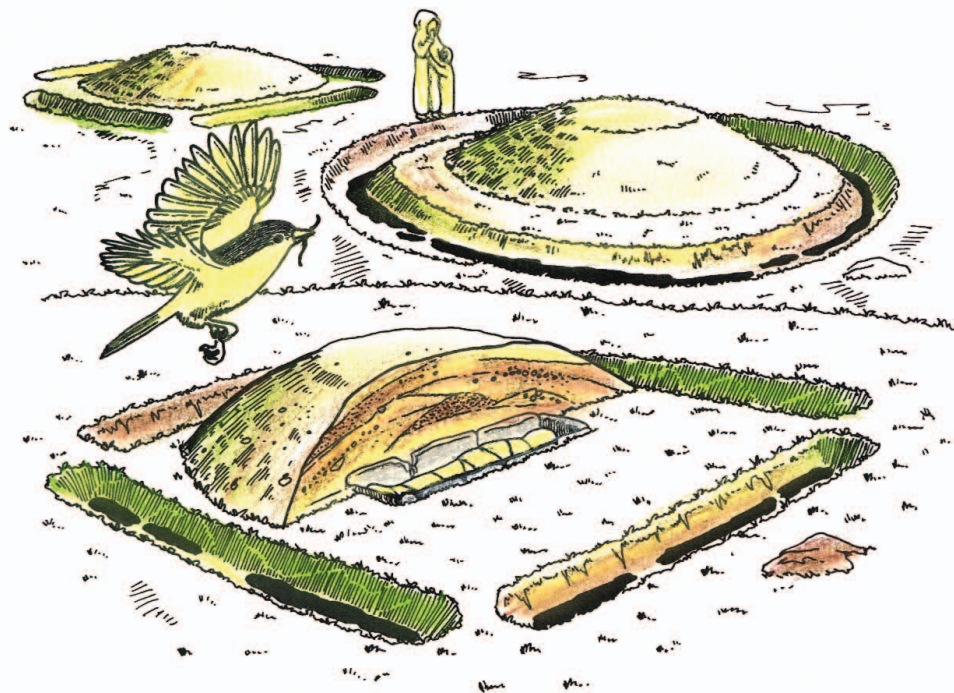
The artist has reconstructed a Bronze Age burial in a short cist. The body is fully clothed, lying on one side with legs folded to fit into the stone coffin. Beneath the head are wild flowers and herbs, there is mead in a pottery beaker and a joint of meat on a wooden platter and alongside are a bow, arrows and a dagger. All that will be left today are the bones, the pot, the bronze dagger and the flint arrowheads.

appear more frequently in the archaeological record, usually as inhumations in long cists, grave-pits or even in wooden coffins, especially after the widespread introduction of Christianity from the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Formal cemeteries are found with large numbers of graves aligned approximately east-west. These are usually discovered by accident or from aerial photographs because the graves have long since lost any markers, such as headstones, that they may once have had. Coastal erosion often reveals long cists, as does ploughing, but bones may not survive if soil conditions are acidic.

Among the Picts in eastern, northern and western Scotland, from the 4th to 8th centuries AD, some graves were covered by low round or square earthen mounds or stone cairns, usually in small groups. They are












rarely visible now except from the air, but wind erosion of sand dunes may expose them. There appear to have been wide regional differences in burial traditions throughout prehistory, and some discoveries are unique. Properly recorded, all finds add to our understanding of the past. Examination of human bones can provide information about diet, stature, health and life expectancy, and even the soil from beneath a burial mound can yield clues about

contemporary vegetation and early farming methods. If you come across a burial, it is important to report it as soon as possible to your local constabulary and to your local museum or regional archaeologist. Try not to disturb it in any way, otherwise valuable information may be lost. There is of course a sanctity to any human burial, and Historic Scotland's policy is to encourage sensitive treatment of human remains.



This is an artist's impression of a Pictish cemetery of round and square barrows (earthen mounds surrounded by ditches). In the foreground, the mound is cut away to show the slab-built long cist with a shrouded body. Over the centuries, the mounds will become flatter and the ditches will fill in with soil, and, if the site is ploughed, the cemetery will be flattened altogether and will be visible only from the air. But the cists, placed well below ground level, will survive.

TIME-LINE

End of the last Ice Age Wildlife colonises land Mesolithic hunting settlers		12,500	
		8500	Flint scatters Shell mounds, rock shelters
Neolithic farming settlers		4000	Chambered tombs and houses Cupmarked rocks
		3000	Stone circles, henges, and standing stones
Metal technology (gold, copper)		2000	Burial mounds and short cists Hut-circles
Climate deteriorating Fortifications begin		1000	Burnt mounds Hillforts
Iron-working technology		500	Crannogs
		200	Duns, brochs, wheelhouses, and earth-houses
		BC ▲	
		▼ AD	
Roman army in Scotland		79	
Waning of Roman influence		200	Roman camps, forts and roads, Antonine Wall
		400	
Introduction of Christianity Picts, Gaels, Britons and Anglians		600	Long cist graves
Start of the Viking Age		800	Early Christian and Pictish carved stones, chapels
Emergence of Scottish nation		1000	Pagan Viking graves and settlements
		1100	
First burghs		1200	Stone-built churches
		1500	Mottes, abbeys, stone-built castles
Reformation of the Church		1600	Tower-houses
Agricultural improvements & Industrial Revolution		1800	Deserted villages and farms
		1900	Coal mines and heavy industries
Two World Wars		2000	Gun batteries and airfields

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH:

This burial mound is under threat from two directions: from the ploughing which is encroaching too close and from the roots of the trees that are disturbing the archaeological layers within the mound.

The mound, a great pile of stones, was probably much higher when it was built some 5000 years ago, and it would have acted as a visible reminder of the ancestors, and of the right of the local community to farm the land around.

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Historic Scotland is an agency within the Scottish Government and is responsible for administering the legislation that protects ancient monuments (buildings, ruins, archaeological sites and landscapes). It provides general advice on the conservation and protection of Scotland's heritage.

Historic Scotland's Education Service encourages the use of the historic environment as a learning and teaching resource.

Over 300 historic properties are looked after by Historic Scotland and are open to the public for enjoyment and education. For further information, including free leaflets, telephone 0131 668 8600.

Our data service website contains details of scheduled monuments and has GIS datasets available to download:
<http://data.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

The following leaflets are available from Historic Scotland:

Scheduled ancient monuments: a guide for owners, occupiers and land managers

Managing Scotland's archaeological heritage

Grants for Ancient Monuments: a guide to grants available for the preservation, maintenance and management of ancient monuments

Archaeology on farm and croft (produced jointly with Archaeology Scotland)

Scotland's listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers

The carved stones of Scotland: a guide to helping in their protection

Metal detecting - yes or no? Metal detecting, scheduled ancient monuments and the law

A leaflet on *Treasure Trove in Scotland* is available from the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh

A number of *Historic Scotland Technical Advice Notes*, on topics such as the use of lime mortars, the conservation of thatching and stonecleaning, are available. Catalogue from and orders to:

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This information leaflet is one of a series produced by Historic Scotland.

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Illustrations drawn by Alan Braby
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(2011).*