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Acharole, Beaker and Cist - Caithness



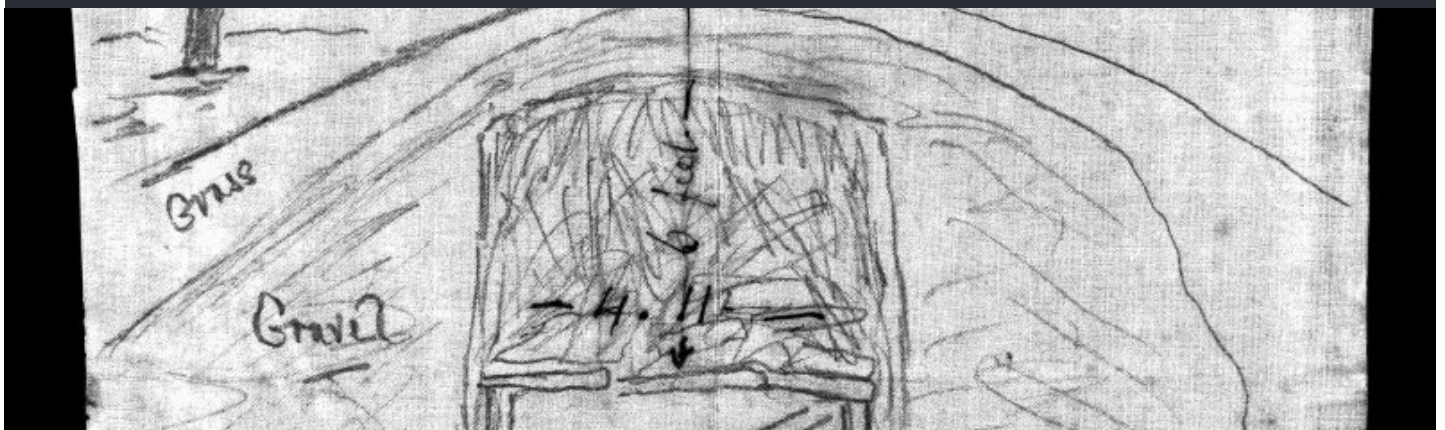


The Beaker People phenomenon and the young man from Acharole

It would be impossible to explore the Scottish Bronze Age without looking at a site associated with the Beaker people phenomenon. Beakers – a unique style of pottery vessel – have been found at archaeological sites across the whole of Europe. The distinct 'beaker' package starts appearing in the British archaeological record between 4400 and 4200 years ago. Archaeologists are currently trying to distinguish if this was a migration of people, or a passing of knowledge from mainland Europe to Britain. Either way, this was a time of great change for Scotland, with the appearance of new technology including metalworking and the construction of great monuments across the landscape.

Most often beaker pots – or fragments of them – are recovered from funerary contexts. The layout and design of burials associated with beakers appear to have a set pattern. The individual - or individuals - are buried in a short, rectangular cist lined with stones. The individuals tend to be placed in a crouched position, with their knees tucked up under their chins. Recent research by Alexandra Shepherd indicates that there were different trends for female and male burials including whether they were placed on their left or right side and whether their head was at the eastern or western end of the cist. Both genders tend to be buried facing south or south-east.

In August 1904 a man called Robert Sutherland was excavating gravel from a pit, near a standing stone, with the intention of mending a road on the hill at Acharole. He must have been very surprised when he accidentally uncovered a Bronze Age cist containing the skeletal remains of a young male, buried with a complete beaker vessel. The skull was very round and would have had a broad face – both traits common amongst the beaker people. The beaker itself was highly decorated with a mixture of bands containing vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines making a mixture of criss-cross and zigzagging patterns. Unfortunately, due to indelicate handling, the beaker broke into multiple pieces but was carefully reassembled and is now cared for by National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh. The skeletal assemblage was analysed by one of the most famous antiquarians active in Caithness at the time – Sir Francis Tress Barry – and is now stored in the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow.





John Nicolson, Achavanich and the ethics of human remains

Although there are no archaeological plans for this site, a number of beautiful watercolours were produced by John Nicolson. Nicolson was a local expert in Caithness prehistory who was well-known for his art work and who devoted his life to the exploration and understanding of the counties archaeology. His watercolours of the Acharole cist show us that the individual buried here was placed on his left hand side, with his head in the east and facing south, like many other male beaker burials in Scotland. It also shows us that the beaker was placed behind the skull, which is similar to other burials in the area. In 2007 this painting was nominated as one of Scotland's favourite archive images, as a part of the Treasured Places project. Nicolson also created fantastic paintings of the beaker itself, highlighting the decoration, size and shape.

Another beaker burial was found a few miles to the south of Acharole, in the tiny village of Achavanich, almost 85 years later. Here, a young female was buried with a beaker, three pieces of flint and a cattle shoulder bone. Similar to Acharole the beaker was positioned behind the head, but in contrast, the individual buried here – a female – was placed on her right hand side, with her head in the west and was facing south-east. Again, this is similar to other female burials from across Scotland. A research project has been set up to investigate the life and death of this individual, known as the Achavanich Beaker Burial project.

When archaeologists work with the prehistoric remains of our, most ancient, ancestors, they do so with great respect and care. It is easy to forget, but the skeletal remains recovered were once people who walked and roamed as we do: who loved, laughed and interacted with their world. In most cases, such as at Acharole and Achavanich, the remains are removed from their final resting place not as a result of a find-and-see activity but because they were discovered by accident and would otherwise be destroyed and lost, if not rescued by archaeological intervention.

Sources:

*Shepherd, A. 2012 'Stepping out together: men, women and their Beakers in time and space' in M. Allen, J. Gardiner and A. Sheridan (eds) *Is There a British Chalcolithic?: People, Place and Polity in the later 3rd Millennium, 257-80*. Oxford: Oxbow Books/Prehistoric Society Research Papers.*

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/8804/acharole-cnoc-sgadain>
<http://her.highland.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=MHG1980>
<https://achavanichbeakerburial.wordpress.com/>



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