

A BRONZE AGE BEAKER FROM ACHAVANICH, CAITHNESS

The Site

During the extraction of rock for road improvements at Craig-na-Feich, Achavanich, Caithness in February 1987, Mr William Ganson noticed a skull apparently peering out from a hole in the rock directly underneath the bucket of his digger. The Police were contacted, and in turn the archaeologist was called in. What in fact had been discovered was the remains of a 4,000-year-old stone coffin or 'cist' of early Bronze Age type containing human and other remains. The cist was carefully excavated, and its contents removed for examination by a number of different specialists.

The Beaker

The main object buried with the body was an earthenware vessel commonly known as a 'Beaker'. The Achavanich Beaker is typical of its type and shaped and decorated in a style often found in the North of Scotland. Lavishly decorated, these pots appear to have been made especially for burial, and probably held food or drink to sustain the dead person on his or her journey to the 'afterlife'. The decorations were applied with various instruments - this one using the teeth of a bone comb, with the teeth marks still clearly visible.

The contents of the Beaker - no more than a slight smear on the inside - were analysed by palaeobotanist Dr Brian Moffat in Edinburgh. His preliminary results suggest that the vessel originally held a mixture of the following:

- (a) Prepared cereal - a coarse mixture of barley and oats with much chaff and stem. Judging from the still visible 'pour-mark' on the inside, it was a thin porridge or gruel.
- (b) Honey - probably wild, it contains pollen from flowers which grew in a variety of habitats such as moorland, woodland, meadowland and pasture, scrubland, watersides, and even by the sea.
- (c) Added flowers and fruits - presumably for extra flavouring. These included meadowsweet, bramble, and wood sage.
- (d) The sap of birch and alder trees.

Dr Moffat Concludes from this that 'There are here multiple bases for fermentation, and the outcome of collecting them would be an "alcoholic hotchpotch".' This then, could have been the earliest known alcohol from Caithness!

The Flints

Also found with the body were three small pieces of flint which have been struck from a larger stone to make tools. Two are simple flakes, while the third is a tiny 'thumb-nail' scraper. Flint is a rare material in Scotland, and these would have been valuable possessions - although even today flint can be found as small pebbles on the beaches of Caithness, brought up from the bed of the North Sea by the glaciers of the last Ice Age. Flint produces extremely sharp cutting edges when properly worked or 'knapped' and, very importantly, could be used to make fire when struck against a piece of ironstone.

The Bones

The bones were examined by Miss Mary Harman, who diagnoses the skeleton as that of a young woman of between 18 and 22 years of age. She had no evidence of disease, and had excellent teeth with no caries. Her age is based partly on the fact that her upper wisdom teeth had not yet developed. Neither had one of the premolars on the left side - its space still occupied by a milk tooth. Her skull was exceptionally broad and short - the common shape amongst 'Beaker' people. She was buried in the normal way for this period, lying on her side with her knees drawn tightly up under her chin - perhaps tied in that position at the time of burial.

Summary

Many burials of this kind have been found throughout Britain and beyond, but only a few are known from Caithness. Usually unmarked by a covering barrow or cairn, they are frequently found, as was this one, purely by accident. The unusual feature in this case was that the cist had been placed into a hole cut into solid rock instead of a simple hole dug into earth.

Acknowledgements

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Robert B Gourlay
Archaeologist
Dept Libraries & Leisure Services
Highland Regional Council
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