

A BRONZE AGE DECORATED CIST FROM POOL FARM, WEST HARPTREE: NEW ANALYSES

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Pool Farm barrow was one of a small group of Bronze Age barrows that once existed along the northern heights of the Mendip ridge, in close proximity to the Priddy Circles. The area immediately to the south of the barrow once had a dense concentration of mounds, probably in the hundreds, although many are now removed or truncated by farming activities or antiquarian pursuits. The Pool Farm barrow, at ST 5375 5417, was scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1927. Shortly afterwards the farmer requested permission to remove it on the grounds that it 'interfered with his farming'. Approval for destruction of the barrow was given subject to it being excavated by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. This work was directed by The Very Revd Ethelbert Horne of Downside Abbey, assisted by W.E.V. Young and W.J. Wedlake. Work began on 29 September 1930 and lasted a fortnight. A report on the excavation appeared in the *Proceedings* of the Society for 1930.

In 1930 the barrow was approximately 30m in diameter and a little over 1m in height. These dimensions had been affected by ploughing, diameter had increased and height decreased. Young, in an unpublished account of the excavations held by Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, estimated that the barrow was originally about 54 ft (16.5m) in diameter. The excavation consisted of a 70 ft (21m) long trench running from the southern side of the barrow to its centre. The southern end of the trench was 5 ft (1.5m) in width, but for most of its length the trench was 10 ft (3m) wide. On the north side of the barrow a smaller second trench was cut primarily to confirm the apparent absence of a surrounding ditch. Finds were few and all unstratified: 6 flint flakes, a double-ended flint scraper and a few sherds of, probably, post-medieval pottery. The whereabouts of these finds is unknown.

In the centre of the barrow was a large stone cist with external dimensions of c. 1.7 by 1.4 by 0.8m high. The floor was composed of 53 stones laid in a manner resembling modern-day crazy paving on what was believed to be the contemporary ground surface. Cremated bone was found lying on the stone floor adjacent to the south western side of the cist, and was deposited in the Somerset County Museum (accession number TTNCM A.934).

In 1931 the barrow was wholly removed by Clutton District Council for use in road widening, and no further archaeological features were noted. The cist was left *in situ*. The intention was to erect a rail around it to protect it from damage by farm stock, but this was never done and the cist is today in a very poor condition (Fig. 1).

Following the discovery of carvings at Stonehenge in 1953 L.V. Grinsell began to examine other megaliths and he and C.S. Taylor discovered the Pool Farm carvings in 1956 (Grinsell 1957). The original excavator had failed to notice them, as had the normally observant Dr Arthur Bulleid who undertook the site planning in 1930. Shortly after recognition of the carvings the slab was transferred to Bristol City Museum, and was replaced on site by a concrete replica



Fig. 1 The surviving remains of the Pool Farm cist

in 1958 (Grinsell 1961). This replica slab is the only element of the cist standing today; the other slabs lie in disarray around the remnants of the stone floor.

In 1956 the stones comprising the cist were identified as Dolomitic Conglomerate (cover slab), Carboniferous Limestone (north-west slab), Liassic chert (south-east slab) and sandstone (the south western and north eastern slabs) deriving, therefore, from a number of sources. The carved slab (south-western) was re-examined for the purposes of the present paper. Roger Clark, Curator of Geology, Bristol City Museum, reported that the stone is almost certainly from the Harptree Beds, which consist of siliceous limestones and calcareous shelly sandstones; these outcrop on the northern slope of the Mendip plateau between East Harptree and Oakhill. The slab has abundant traces of decalcified bivalve molluscs, mostly corbulids and/or nuculids. The stone is local, perhaps coming from within a kilometre or so of the barrow.

The purpose of the present paper is 1) to present new analyses of the cremated bone, 2) to report on radiocarbon dates for the cremated bones, and 3) to provide a new record of the carvings.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE CREMATED BONES (HG)

Professor E. Fawcett, FRS, examined the cremation shortly after its discovery in 1930 and noted that it was possible that two individuals were present (Horne 1930, 90). The material now consists of 811 fragments of bone 5–62mm in length, all affected to varying degrees by fire or high temperatures. An additional 2 fragments (23g) of adult long bone were submitted for AMS dating prior to this analysis. Details of the analysis are not published here but form part of the archive held by the Somerset County Museum.

Unfortunately no elements that gave conclusive evidence as to sex were preserved. Several of the cranial fragments retained parts of the cranial sutures which allowed for very tentative age estimation of the adult remains (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994). The bones were also sorted into three categories depending on how they had been affected by the firing process: charred, whitened or cracked.

At least two individuals are represented. One is an adult of undetermined gender. The age at death was probably between 30–40 years, based on the fusion of the cranial sutures. A majority of the material in the collection represents this individual. Elements of a large proportion of the skeleton can be identified, including several joint surfaces, for example the mandibular fossa of the temporal bone, sternal ends of ribs, some vertebral body fragments, parts of distal and proximal humerus, carpals, phalanges and tarsals, as well as a few unidentified articular surfaces. None of these shows any degenerative changes, supporting the age suggested by the cranial suture closure.

The second individual is a juvenile, represented by fragments of cranial vault, ribs, femur and unidentified long bone fragments. None of these elements is preserved well enough to give a clear indicator as to the age at death, but the general size of the fragments indicates that the range is likely to be between 3–8 years of age. No pathological changes were recorded on any of the bone fragments in the Pool Farm cremation. It is worth noting that there are no teeth present in the cremation, which is surprising as tooth enamel is the part of the skeleton which is most likely to survive. The fact that a portion of the alveolar bone of the adult mandible is present suggests that the teeth may have been removed or lost, perhaps during transfer from pyre to burial.

All the bone fragments showed changes associated with high temperatures or direct contact with fire. The majority of the bone showed the characteristic warping and cracking that proximity to high temperatures causes (59.6%). A much smaller proportion (27%) had whitened, suggesting exposure to more extreme temperatures. Only 13.4% of the bone was charred, indicative of direct contact with fire. It is worth noting that of the identifiable bone it was mainly the adult long bone that was charred and whitened, indicating that the cremation pyre was constructed in such a way that only the limbs were exposed directly to the flames, with the torso possibly protected for a longer period of time by soft tissue.

2. RADIOCARBON DATING AND CIST STRATIGRAPHY

As noted above, two fragments of long bone were submitted for AMS dating, with the following results:

¹⁴ C age (BP)	Lab. No.	calibrated date range (95% confidence)
3547±37		
OxA-11149	1980–1765 cal BC	
3493±38	OxA-11150	1920–1735 cal BC

These clearly indicate that the cremations, and therefore the cist, and the carvings, are of the early Bronze Age in conventional terms. A reading of the original excavation report, and the undoubted experience and skill of the excavators, give no indication of secondary insertions or disturbances of the observed stratigraphy. One point against this confidence is that both Horne and Bulleid failed to notice the carvings on the inner surface of the south western slab of the cist, against which the cremated bone lay. The reasons for the failure to notice carvings are threefold. 1) no evidence from England existed in 1930 to allow them to suspect, or look for, carvings on burial cist slabs; 2) the slab in question is extremely rough and the carvings, although deep, are not easily seen; 3) the slab face was in shadow for most of the day apart from early morning, and if the cremations were found and removed at the end of a day's work, the carved surface would have been in deep shadow, unless the whole site was in a characteristic mist.

The stone floor of the cist, upon which the cremated bone lay, in part submerged the south-western slab, i.e. several of the carvings were below floor level and were not found by Grinsell until the slab was removed to Bristol City Museum. There exists a note from W.J. Wedlake (Somerset Record Office) recording that about half of the western slab was buried beneath the floor. Fig. 3, A-B marks the approximate level at which the slab was buried. However, Horne lifted the stones from the floor and excavated beneath them, before replacing them; this was the logical moment for discovery of the carvings had he been observant and had the conditions been right.

3. THE CARVINGS

Upon removal to Bristol City Museum, and for purposes of display, the carved slab was cleaned and the identifiable carvings eventually painted red. Grinsell recorded six footprints, one oblong



Fig. 2 Detail of part of the slab to show the rough surface of the shelly sandstone and character of carving

and ten cupmarks in his 1957 paper. In 1978 M. Pitts noticed an additional footprint on the slab, which indeed can be discerned on Grinsell's photograph of 1957 (Pitts 1978). In preparation for the present paper, visits were made to the Museum and rubbings were made of the slab, followed by assessment of the results, comparing individual rubbings with the actual carved surfaces; this was necessary as the stone is so rough and uneven.

The whole surface of the slab appears to have been ground down to make some sort of uniform canvas for carving, and a second more successful smoothing was initiated in one corner of the slab, but then abandoned with only one image carved upon it. The composition of the stone, as noted above, is calcareous shelly sandstone, and a multiplicity of shell imprints makes the surface very irregular (Fig. 2). The result of the recent work has been to refine the identifications of the known carvings, and to record two additional cupmarks and, tentatively, a possible abandoned attempt to carve another footprint. This carving, at the base of the slab, is very shallow and may be only the remnant of surface preparation prior to the carving of the images. All the carved surfaces appear to be fresh, not eroded, hence it seems likely that the carvings were made just before the construction of the cist; however, the red paint obscures most of this line of evidence. The illustration (Fig. 3) is also considered to represent in more accurate detail the actual shape of the carvings, and to show where the carvers had corrected

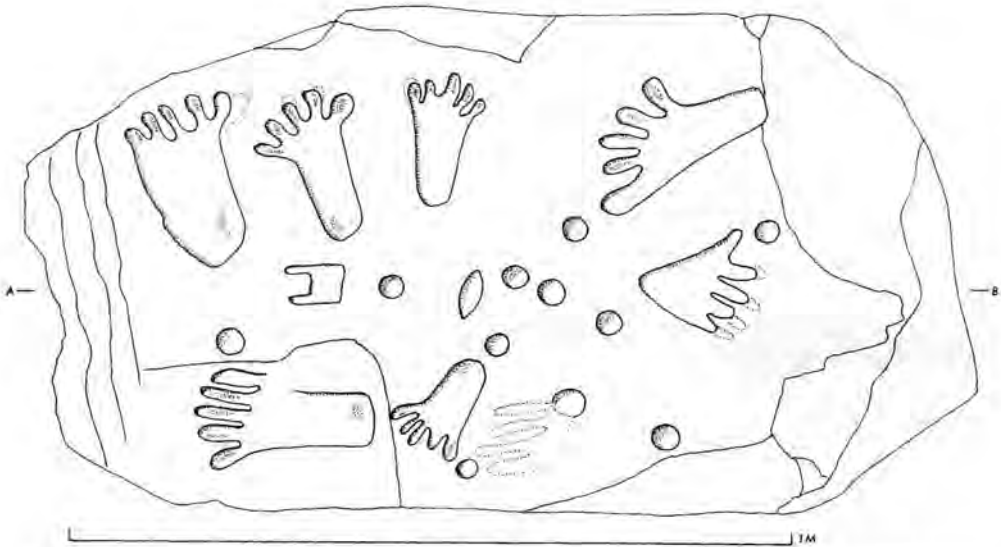


Fig. 3 The Pool Farm cist slab with outlines of the carvings. Small areas more deeply carved within the images are hatched. The cremations lay on the cist floor at the level marked A-B

their own work; this is evident on four of the footprints, and the abandoned (newly-discovered) footprint may represent another change of mind.

The footprints carved on the slab are of two sizes, one large and one small. It is tempting to suggest that this is a reflection of the two individuals buried in the cist, an adult and a child. The toes of most of the footprints are quite long, and the shape of the foot is either long and narrow, or widely splayed; the latter category, of smaller footprints, looks rather like handprints apart from the rather stubby fingers; on balance, all are probably footprints. The footprints are aligned in a variety of directions, mostly pointing outwards from the slab centre, where a concentration of cupmarks lies.

In the 1957 report, Grinsell pointed to a number of carved stones from other monuments in Britain and western Europe. The list of decorated stones has been enlarged since then, of course,

and P.V. Glob in particular recorded a number of isolated as well as tomb-related carvings from Denmark (1969). The British evidence for carvings associated with burial monuments is quite widely spread, as a number of authorities have indicated (e.g. Simpson and Thawley 1972, Stevenson 1997, Bradley 1997, Beckensall 1999), and evidence also exists in Ireland (e.g. O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996). However, the bulk of this evidence is of more standard cup-and-ring carvings, and the number of carvings of footprints from Britain and Ireland is rather low, and add little to the Pool Farm evidence. The footprints from Danish boulder monuments (Glob 1969) and from Swedish rock outcrop sites (e.g. Coles 1990) are very numerous, and quite often the footprints occur as pairs, left and right, standing still, but occasionally separated as if striding down the rock, left-right-left-right. The Pool Farm slab looks quite haphazard in comparison, but its dating is now more precise than a majority of the continental examples, and it demonstrates that even a site as knocked-about and dispersed as Pool Farm can yield useful evidence. Whether mourners or the deceased, or both, were commemorated on the slab remains unresolved. Without Grinsell's persistence we would probably have little knowledge of the site and it is a bit of a miracle that the cist slabs were not broken up when the barrow itself was used as road makeup soon after it had become a legally protected ancient monument.

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