

Burial from Westbank of Roseisle, Duffus, Moray

ELGNM 1989.29

Moray HER: NJ16NW0051

NRHE (Canmore): NJ16NW65 / numlink: 16208

1985:

The short cist at West Bank of Roseisle was discovered in 1985. Following its excavation, preliminary research carried out at Marischal Museum, Aberdeen. Radiocarbon dating was not done at that time, and the skeleton was given a date of Early Bronze Age (EBA), circa 2500 BC, by context. In 1989, it was agreed the cist should be reconstructed in Elgin Museum as part of the award-winning refurbishment of the Rear Gallery displays.

“Beakers and Bodies”:

Thus, things remained for nearly twenty years. In 2007, the Museum was approached by Neil Curtis, Curator of the Marischal Museum, University of Aberdeen, to see if we would agree for Roseisle man to be included in the Leverhulme funded project “Beakers and Bodies”. The plan was to study all the known Bronze Age burials in the North East of Scotland whether or not associated with grave goods.

Neil Wilkin and Meg Hutchinson, anatomist, duly came through to Elgin, and after considerable discussion, the left femur was selected to have two 1.2 cm cores drilled for analyses. The intention was that holes on the underside would not be visible in future. Neil also took many photos and measurements of all the Beaker vessels in the Museum.

What was learned from the research carried out through “Beakers and Bodies”?

1. It was confirmed that the skeleton was that of a 45 year old man, and therefore older than about 80% of adults granted a formal burial in NE Scotland in the EBA. He could have been old enough to know grandchildren.
2. He is still considered the tallest known Bronze Age man in Scotland.
2. The burial is dated (by AMS C14) to about 2000 BC. More specifically, to 2130 – 1910 cal BC at 95% confidence. This is about 500 years more recent than his date by simple context.

3. Dr Mandy Jay carried out stable isotope analysis on the bone samples. The ratios of carbon and nitrogen indicate that Roseisle man had a diet predominately from terrestrial resources, despite the proximity of Roseisle to the sea to the north and the Loch of Spynie to the south. This choice of diet is now known to be normal practice for committed farmers, and indeed communities practising single burial during this period in Scotland.

4. Roseisle man was apparently buried without pottery grave goods, although in the EBA, communities around the Moray Firth had access to a considerable range of social and cultural contacts; these would have included various kinds of rites and material culture, including Beakers, Food Vessels and bronze and “jet” artefacts. Roseisle man’s burial may reflect a lack of allegiance to any particular culture – or the grave could have been robbed before the first scientific assessment.

An alternative explanation is based on the find of a burnt flint core near his shoulder, and evidence of burning, out-with the cist; a burnt flint was found to the east of the cist beside a small heap of burnt boulders. Is this evidence of a transitional, hybrid rite, as aspects of new cremation practices merged into the older inhumation rite?

Sources:

Personal communications from Neil Wilkin, former researcher, Aberdeen University, now Curator, Bronze Age collection, British Museum, London

Wilkin, Neil *Soul of the Age? New light on Roseisle’s “big man” and the Early Bronze Age funerary practices of the Moray Firth region* in Beakers Bones and Birnie: archaeological works in progress associated with Elgin Museum Conference 2009

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