
A medieval burial from Tangleha', Kincardineshire

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Summary

In May 1986, the remains of a burial, which had been revealed by coastal erosion at Tangleha', near St Cyrus, were discovered by geologists from Coventry Polytechnic. The grave was subsequently excavated by the author on behalf of Grampian Regional Council, with whom the excavation records have been deposited. A pathological examination indicated that the well-preserved skeleton was that of a young adult male and a radio-carbon assay revealed that the burial was of medieval date.

The burial

The grave was found in an eroding section of raised beach about 2m above the high water mark and some 260m south-west of Tangleha' Cottages at NO 7682 6479. The grave had been dug through a light, sandy topsoil, about 0.22m in depth, into the top of the raised-beach gravel, and measured at least 1.67m in length by 0.47m in breadth and 0.62m in depth. It contained neither grave-goods nor evidence of a coffin and was filled with a loose, brown soil in which there were numerous small pebbles.

The skeleton was fully extended and orientated east-north-east to west-south-west, with its head to the west and its hands meeting at the lower abdomen. Most of the skeleton survived in situ, but much of the upper right side had been lost to erosion prior to discovery. Several bones, including the mandible and right humerus, were recovered from the beach below the grave; the cranium, however, was missing, the western end of the grave having been destroyed by the digging of a large pit. The feet-bones were also missing, though there was room within the grave for them.

The skeleton

Examination of the skeleton, by Margaret Bruce

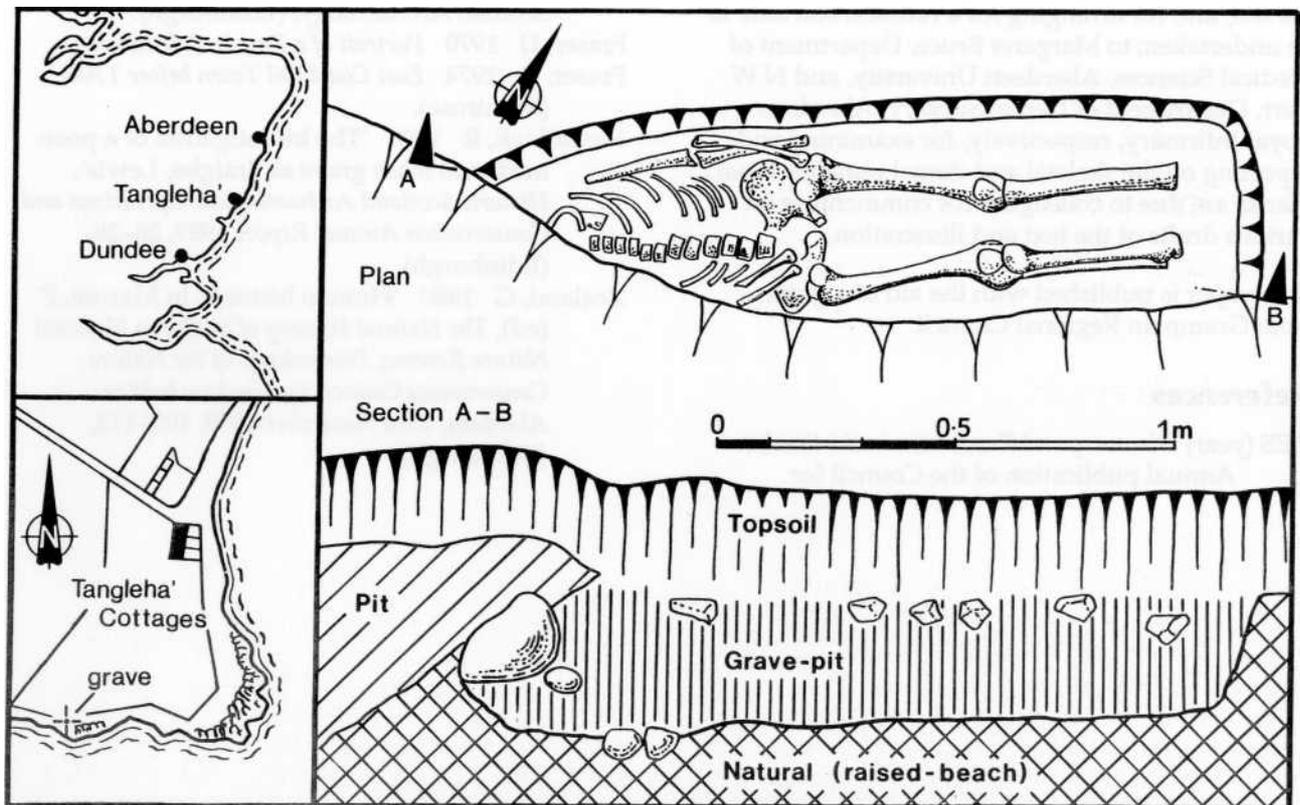
and N W Kerr, has determined that it is that of a young man who died in his late teens or early twenties. He was a fairly muscular individual, apparently free from any serious illness or disease; the molars, however, were worn and there were slight traces of gingivitis. Apart from modern breaks, the skeleton showed no evidence of injury.

The radiocarbon assay of a bone sample from the skeleton provided the following date: (GU-2408) 700±70 BP (AD 1180-1320). The date is expressed at the ± one sigma level of confidence in conventional years BP (before AD 1950) and is uncalibrated with respect to dendrochronological age.

Discussion

The circumstances surrounding the death and burial of the Tangleha' individual, at probably some time in the late-twelfth to early-fourteenth centuries, remain something of a mystery. Although there is some evidence, in the form of grave-orientation (ENE-WSW), and the attitude of the body (head to west and hands meeting on lap) that the body received a Christian burial, there is nothing to suggest that it was interred in a formal cemetery. Single burials close to the sea are relatively common around the coast of Britain, but the majority are either undateable or have not been dated. However, a single grave recently identified at Kinghorn, Fife has been dated on association with pottery to the medieval period (DES 1993, 23). There are no records of earlier discoveries of human remains in the Tangleha' area, and, unless the grave marks the edge of an hitherto unsuspected graveyard, the burial should probably be considered as an isolated interment.

It is often presumed that burials found outside recognised burial-grounds, on shore-edge locations, were probably those of persons who had drowned, and it seems reasonable to infer that this



is the case at Tangleha. If he had been a local man, then it is more likely that he would have been granted a full Christian burial within consecrated ground, probably at the parish church of Ecclesgreig about 1.6km along the coast to the south-west. Sea-trade between the east coast of Scotland and Europe, including the Baltic ports, in the medieval period is well attested (Fraser 1974, 45-6), and the body of a stranger would not have been given the same consideration. Doubt would have existed in the minds of the finders about whether the individual was a baptised Christian, and thus deserving of burial in a Christian burial-ground. The body may have been regarded as 'unshriner'; that is, deemed to have died without having confessed and without having received the last rites. A body whose soul had not been absolved of sin could not be buried in consecrated ground, and would, therefore, probably be interred at some convenient spot close to the where it had been washed ashore.

In this respect, the burial bears similarities to the early eighteenth-century mass grave of probable victims of drowning at Braighe, Lewis (McCullagh 1990). Here, too, the grave was located just above the high water mark relatively close to consecrated ground, the remains of St Columba's Church and burial-ground being situated some 430m to the E. However, this is not to say that due respect was not paid to the Tangleha' individual, for care was evidently taken in laying and arranging the body within the grave.

The lack of any feet-bones is puzzling; there was ample room for them in the grave-pit, and the calcareous nature of the soil, which preserved even the smallest of the hand-bones, should have ensured their survival. It is possible, however, that the lack of feet may be associated with the length of time that the body was in the water prior to being recovered.

The large pit which had been cut through the western end of the grave contained the concreted remains of lime-burning waste, and its use may be associated with a small kiln or clamp, the remains of which are situated at the base of the raised-beach some 10m east of the grave. Small-scale limestone quarrying for agricultural purposes was being undertaken in Angus and Kincardineshire by various members of the Scott family from about the end of the seventeenth century (Fraser 1970; Zealand 1980, 109), and the Tangleha' pit is likely to date to the period before production was centred on much larger kilns from around the middle of the eighteenth century.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Ian Shepherd, then Grampian Regional Archaeologist, and Trevor Sprott, Director of Planning for Grampian Region, for inviting me to undertake the excavation; to Professor David Smith and his colleagues at the Department of Geography, Coventry University (formerly Polytechnic), for finding and reporting

the site, and for arranging for a radiocarbon date to be undertaken; to Margaret Bruce, Department of Medical Sciences, Aberdeen University, and N W Kerr, Department of Dental Surgery, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, respectively, for examining and reporting on the skeletal and dental remains. Final thanks are due to colleagues for commenting on various drafts of the text and illustration.

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Grampian Regional Council.

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Abstract

In 1986, the remains of an inhumation, which had been revealed by coastal erosion at Tangleh', near St Cyrus, Kincardineshire, was excavated. A pathological examination indicated that the well-preserved skeleton was that of a young adult male, and a radio-carbon assay of a bone sample from the skeleton revealed that the burial was of late 12th to early 14th century date.

Key words: Kincardineshire, medieval, burial, inhumation