

Chapter 6

Cremations, Conjecture and Contextual Taphonomies: Material Strategies During the 4th to 2nd Millennia BC in Scotland

Paul R J Duffy and Gavin MacGregor

ABSTRACT Models of changing mortuary and funerary practices in Northern Britain, between the 4th and 2nd millennia BC, generally emphasise progression from communality towards individualism. Such models influence concepts of poorly understood past practices such as prehistoric cremation. We would suggest understanding of such rites in prehistory are currently based on analogy and conjecture and are uncritically underpinned by the stereotype of an articulated individual on the pyre. This contrasts with wider evidence which clearly illustrates the currency of disarticulated remains in various arenas in British prehistory over time. Utilising specific recently excavated examples from Scotland this paper explores the role of contextual taphonomy in understanding the material residues of prehistoric cremation in Scotland and, based on current evidence suggests alternative ways in which such material may be understood.

The understanding of changing mortuary and funerary practices in Northern Britain, between the 4th and 2nd millennia BC, has been dominated by generalised models characterised by predominant forms of practice. Present interpretations emphasise progression from communality towards individualism (e.g. Lucas 1996; Thomas 1999; Bradley 2007): expressions of shared ancestral belonging through the reincorporation of disarticulated remains in chambered cairns slowly giving way to later reinforcement of power and status in life through individual inhumation, and later cremation, in cists, pits, barrows, cairns and mounds. Such models are based on diachronic blocks characterised by dominant practices, and problematically underpinned by the uncritical use of loaded descriptive terminologies (grave, burial, pyre, cremation). As such, the implications of the complexities of unique archaeological events are frequently lost.

Recent research arising from excavations carried out by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) complements suggestions that there are other ways in which such remains may be interpreted (cf. Fowler 2001; 2005; Brück 2006). Underpinning this is our firm contention that interpretation of the nature of practices which result in the deposition of human bone must be grounded in the specific details of contextual taphonomies: the nature and composition of the bone assemblage, the context of deposition and the evidence for potentially different stages in the transformation of human remains. As has been argued for the study of unburnt human remains (Roksandik 2002), such a perspective is potentially more illuminating about the actual nature of past practices, can assist in identifying multiple and alternative roles for human remains in social practices during the period, and for our research implies

that deeply grounded attitudes to the nature of the body and its role in mortuary and funerary rites established in the 4th millennium BC endured for several millennia after.

Understanding Pyres

Current thinking on the process of cremation in the past is restricted by limited evidence of the venues in which such events occurred. In particular, in situ prehistoric pyre sites are rarely described in British archaeological literature (McKinlay 2000). Understandings of British prehistoric pyre technology have thus, to date, been limited to analogy with later practices from Roman or Saxon periods, through reference to later contemporary written descriptions (e.g., McKinley 2006), or by ethnographic understandings of contemporary, predominantly Hindu, practices (e.g., Downes 1999, 27). Such models, we would suggest, have indirectly reinforced an implicit and unproven assumption that residues are the product of intact, articulated bodies being placed on the pyre and reduced to bone (Fig 2). Whilst this assumption undoubtedly holds true for later periods, deposits of cremated bone from prehistory in particular are more generally marked by incomplete and underweight bone assemblages, offering a generally ignored opportunity to raise interesting questions and engage in alternative discussions. The recent excavation of a Neolithic 'mortuary structure' has prompted our engagement with such discussions.

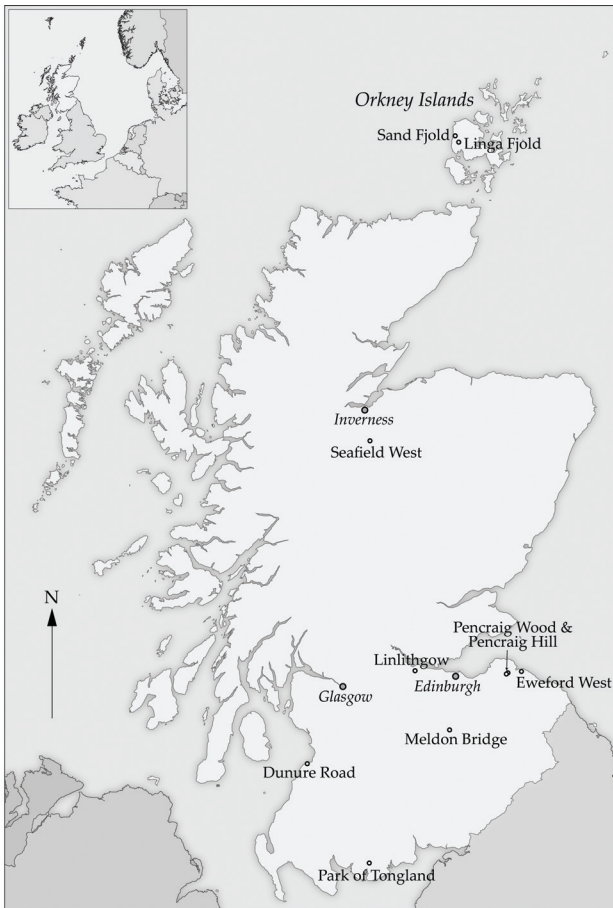


Fig 1: Location of sites in text.

Contextual Taphonomy

Pencreraig Hill, excavated in 2004, is a ceremonial site with architectural elements that are typical of British wide tradition trapezoidal shaped monuments and two or three post timber structures dating from the early to mid 4th millennium BC (MacGregor & McLellan forthcoming, Fig. 3). Such sites have been typically interpreted as mortuary structures, used for excarnation and/or ossuaries (e.g. Kinnes 1991; Scott 1992), prior to the secondary burial of the bone elsewhere. However, in contrast to examples from southern England which predominantly contained deposits of unburnt bone, those from Scotland are generally associated with cremated human remains and part of a wider northern British tradition involving ‘crematoria’ (Kinnes 1991, 84-5). Thus the potential is that, in their final phase, such structures effectively functioned as pyres, burnt down with human remains in or on them (Kinnes 1991, 101).

The site at Pencreraig Hill is, thus an unusual find in that it appears to be a rare example of a particular stage of human remains disposal. Significantly, it also comprised collapsed structural remains which critically, appeared to have been undisturbed following its collapse (MacGregor & McLellan forthcoming). This fact was established

through careful recording of the orientation of the grain of carbonised wood during excavation and identified the majority were still orientated in a limited and constant number of directions. These observations suggested that the skeletal material recovered from the pyre at Pencreraig Hill was also *in-situ* and therefore broadly representative of what had been placed upon the structure at the point of cremation. The excavation thus presented a rare opportunity for bone location to be planned in detail and subsequently subjected to GIS analysis to establish how human remains may have been organised on the pyre (Fig. 4).

Analysis of the patterning of cremated remains failed to provide any evidence that a supine articulated corpse, or series of corpses, had been placed on the structure before burning. Instead the observed patterning appeared random and disorganised, despite the apparently organised nature of the wood timbers immediately below. Such observations contrast with reported experimental pyre burnings, which suggest that the cremated skeletal material can clearly be observed in anatomical position post cremation (McKinlay 1997). Similarly, the organised nature of the timbers indicated that deposition patterns were highly unlikely to be the result of post cremation pyre raking. Consideration of the specific contextual taphonomy of the material and the distribution of the skeletal elements themselves thus led us to the conclusion that the archaeological evidence did not support our initial hypothesis that intact bodies had been burnt on the pyre. Instead, the surprising conclusion of our investigations was that the body parts must have been disarticulated prior to cremation. Intriguingly, further research revealed this disarray of material broadly mirrors the excavation of one of the few suggested Bronze Age pyre sites excavated in Scotland in modern times, at Linga Fjold, Orkney (Downes 1995; McKinlay 1997). Although regrettably not fully published yet, summary reporting indicates a ‘heap’ of disordered cremated fragments was discovered and interpreted as the result from of pyre stoking and raking. Alternative reading of this assemblage, stimulated by the results from the site of Pencreraig Hill, however, offer the intriguing possibility that further evidence could be found to support the theory that such patternings are the result not of cremation of supine articulated bodies, but of disarticulated body parts.

Although initially surprising, wider consideration of earlier mortuary practices witnessed from inhumed remains from chambered cairns suggest that such a manipulation and incorporation of disarticulated human remains at Pencreraig Hill is entirely consistent with wider social treatment of human remains (e.g. Kinnes 1991, 103-105; see however, Lawrence 2006). This correlation in mortuary practices varies only through the specifics of mortuary rite and suggests different transformative pathways may have been underpinned by similar structuring principles.



Fig 2: Experimental Reproduction of a Prehistoric Cremation (Credit: Moira Greig).

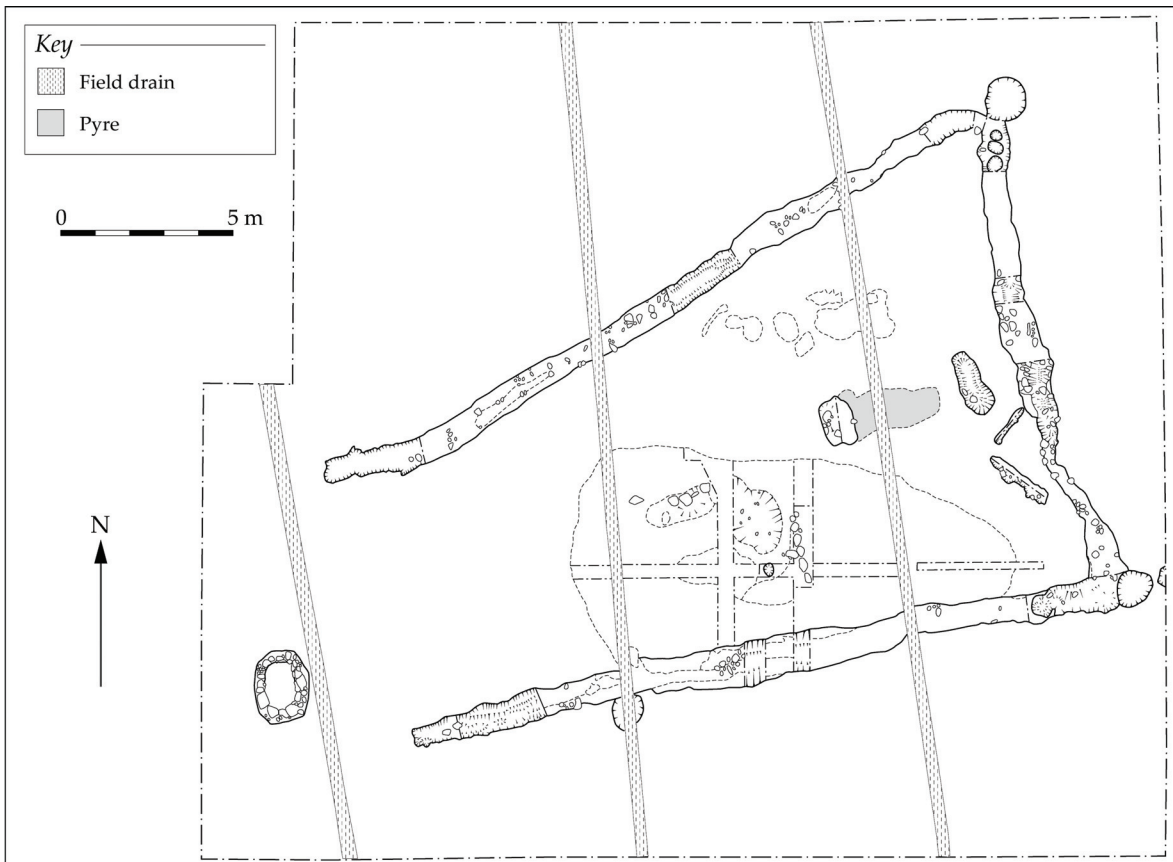


Fig. 3: Penraig Hill: Site Plan.

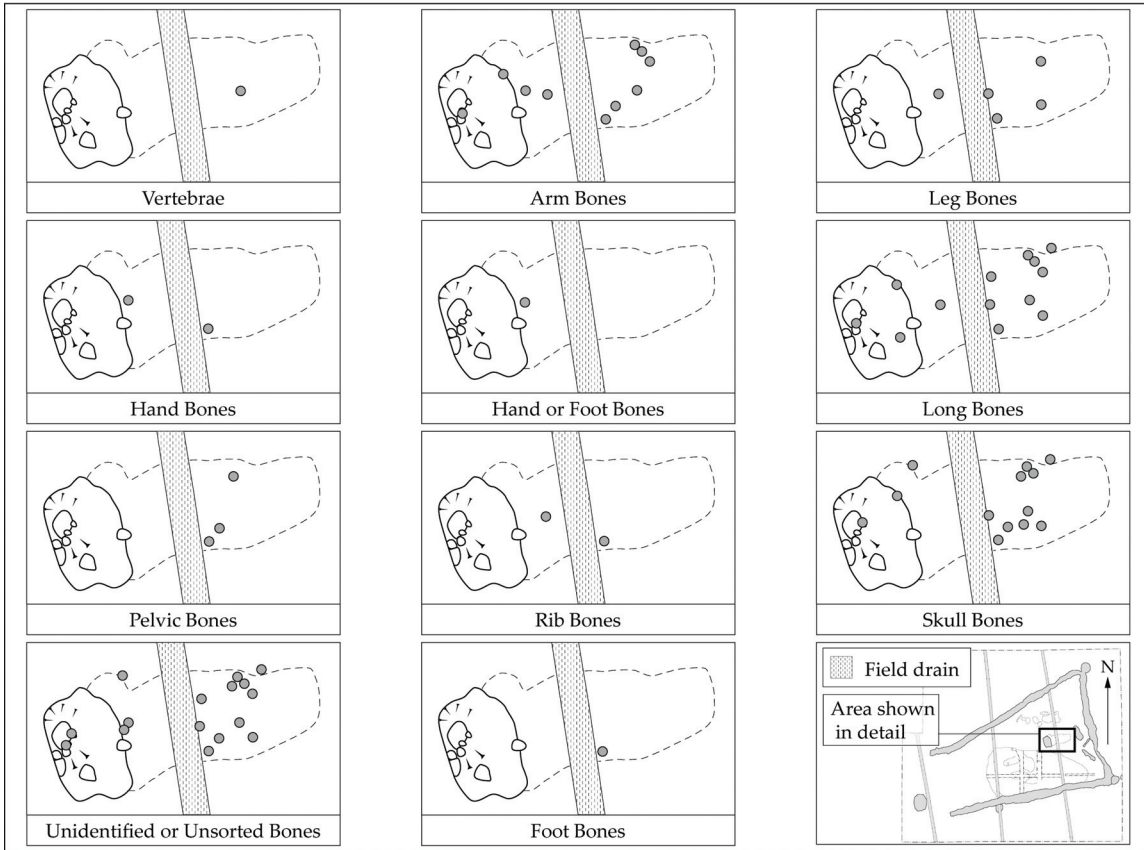


Figure 4: PenCraig Hill: Distribution of Cremated Bone on Pyre

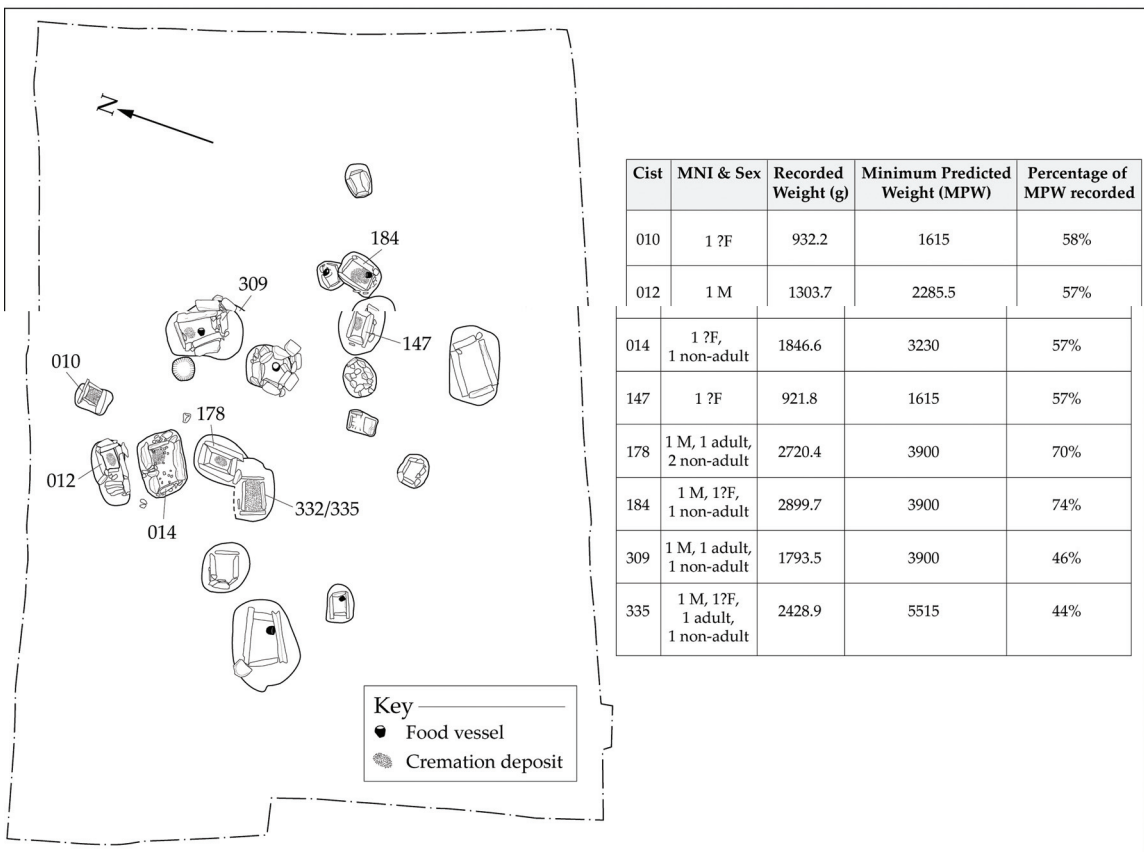


Fig. 5: Dunure Road: Cemetery Phase 1 and Table of Cremation Weights.

Wider Traditions

By the late fourth millennium BC, ceremonial sites such as Pencraig Hill were no longer used in the same manner: the timber components having been burnt down and / or sealed beneath cairns or mounds (Kinnes 1991; Scott 1992). The tradition of transformation, manipulation and deposition of *fragmentary* and *partial* bodies and body parts clearly continues, however, into the first half of the third millennium BC. For example, at the post-defined enclosure of Meldon Bridge (Speak & Burgess 1999, 26), a large pit surrounded by six stakes, dated to 2900-2100 BC, had held successive posts, a stake and an upright stone; the partial cremated remains of an eight year old child had been scattered in it. In another case, selected cremated human bone was put into a pit that was set in a circle of 11 stakes. Such traditions were not limited to the interior of such ceremonial enclosures. At Pencraig Wood, people had deposited small quantities of burnt human bone in pits during the third quarter of the third millennium BC (MacGregor & Stuart forthcoming).

The second half of the third millennium BC is traditionally seen to mark an apparent shift in practices with an increasing preference for cist inhumations. These are typically represented by the classic 'Beaker Burial' where anatomically correct crouched inhumations of individuals in cists, a form of practice which has dominated many of the models of the period. These traditions are characterised by inhumation of intact bodies, a focus which has led to social models and experimental practice that stress the ideological role of individualisation in mortuary and funerary rites (cf Thomas 1999) in all funerary practices across the period. However, increasing evidence for a wider range of mortuary and funerary practices during the period from Scotland, clearly indicates such models simplify the nature and inter-relationships of a suite of contemporary practices, and that use of fragmentary and partial body parts continues to be clearly observable in the archaeological record.

More complex deposits of human bone from this period, include multiple inhumations (e.g. Stevenson 1940; Dalland 1991), inhumations with moved and removed body parts (Ritchie 1958; Close-Brooks 1979; Parker Pearson *et al* 2005), partial cremations (e.g. Jobey 1980), cremated bone associated with inhumation (e.g. Clarke and Hamilton 1999) and similar variations can be witnessed with the tradition generally characterised by articulated crouched inhumations of individuals in cists associated with Food Vessels (Sheridan 2004). Such variations are perhaps encapsulated most clearly at Linlithgow. Here a cist had deposits of partial, disarticulated and mixed, unburnt and burnt bones of at least one adult, possibly male, four children aged about nine years and one child aged about five years which were deposited at the end of the third millennium BC (Cook 2000). At Sand Fjold, Orkney a similar succession of disarticulated unburnt bones and cremated bone were

deposited in a single cist from the early third millennium BC to the early first millennium BC (Dalland 1999), potentially reinforcing the more widespread nature of such traditions in Scotland.

Exploring this hypothesis further, additional evidence worthy of consideration can perhaps be seen in the recently excavated cist cemetery at Dunure Road, Ayrshire. This late third millennium cremation ceremony (Fig. 5), typical of sites which mark an apparent shift in practice at the beginning of late third millennium BC, (Sheridan 2007), produced evidence which indicates that cremation assemblage weights are up to 40 % less than would be expected for the numbers of individuals represented within the assemblages (Fig 5) (Duffy forthcoming). This pattern has commonly been recorded elsewhere, but is generally attributed to selective collection from the pyre (McKinlay 2006), or more recently to the complete combustion and/or natural scattering (i.e. by wind action etc) of the hard tissue. (A. Sheridan, pers. comm.). Again, however, such explanations rest on an implicit assumption that complete individuals are being cremated. Yet the scarcity of excavated pyre sites, or evidence for alternative arenas of disposal for the 'outstanding' portions of such cremations significantly fails to balance this taphonomic equation. We would suggest instead that this evidence can potentially be seen to illustrate a selective, if not discriminatory, attitude towards deposition of cremated human bone, in which, as before, parts rather than the whole are stressed. It may be that alternative, archaeologically invisible forums of disposal explain the absence of this missing material (Bruck 2006; McKinlay 2006). More critically, current evidence fails to support the generally held view that this selection is exclusively a post cremation occurrence. What is salient in light of our hypothesis is that such methods and arenas of burial practice represent a visible continuation of a tradition involving the conscious selection and disposal of partial and fragmentary sets of human remains, selections which have been demonstrated to occur elsewhere prior to disposal.

As cremation rites develop into the mid Bronze Age this phenomenon potentially becomes increasingly visible. In the later second millennium features at Dunure Road, for example, collections of partial sets of human remains (exclusively skull and long bone) occurred within an isolated pit, in front of a standing stone, and within the fill of the pit for the standing stone (Duffy forthcoming). Such patterning is reflected in contemporary examples from elsewhere, such as Park of Tongland, Dumfries and Galloway (Russell-White *et al.* 1992). Such deposits appear to become more visibly selective, often consisting almost entirely of skull and long bone elements, an assemblage characteristic reminiscent of the contents of chambered cairns from some two millennia earlier. Again, this selection is uncritically assumed to occur post-cremation, but we would suggest that, on the basis of present evidence, a continuing structuring principle

focussed on use of partial sets of human remains presents an equally valid hypothesis.

Intriguingly, closer scrutiny of the assemblages of cremated bone from Eweford West (MacGregor forthcoming), Dunure Road (Duffy forthcoming) and Seafield West (Cresee & Sheridan 2003, 71), has also identified traces of linear incisions, or cut marks. Although such incisions are most frequently found on skull fragments, it is tempting to suggest these incisions could be evidence of defleshing or dismemberment of bodies, as has been suggested for Neolithic (Smith and Brickley 2004) and later Iron Age (Green 1998) examples. The possibility exists, therefore, that there was fragmentation of individuals prior to cremation and that the disproportionate amount of some individuals present in deposits could in part be due to such practices.

Different Perspectives

In considering the changing nature of mortuary and funerary practices in Scotland spanning from the fourth through second millennia BC it is easy for accounts of changing practices to focus on a sequence of typical modes of practice, each phase or step in the sequence of which is characterised by the predominant funerary rite placed in the dominant funerary arena: chambered cairn, cist, pit or urn. Such an approach sequence has traditionally uncritically subsumed diverse individual sets of archaeological data into general accepted social models: uniqueness is explored only where marked changes in predominant forms of practice are witnessed. Whilst it is clear that such traditions do exist, we suggest that a more complex historical dynamic to traditions of

mortuary and funerary practices exists during this period in Scotland, one in which the use of fragmentary and partial sets of human remains can repeatedly be identified.

In terms of how we model past social practice in Scottish prehistory, our hypothesis suggests that a range and complexity of rites took place throughout the third millennium BC and implies a range of material strategies within which human remains were deployed. Consequently, rather than explaining every deposit of cremated human remains from the second millennium BC in Scotland as the selected residues or inefficient raking and collection of the remnants of whole body cremations, it may be more useful to recognise that a variety of different social practices are potentially evidenced which result in superficially similar, but critically different physical residues. Such signs could indicate that partial remains, potentially of multiple individuals, were placed on pyres. Consequently, understandings of human bone deposition of multiple individuals in many arenas may require reconceptualisation.

In this light we would reiterate a call for more critical application of terminology, as well as more careful scrutiny of contextual taphonomy. The term pyre, for example, currently prejudges the character of practices: specifically a presupposition that it is always intact bodies which are cremated. Pyres, however, are most simply are a mortuary technology, deploying a fuel (typically manifest as a wooden pyre structure) to cremate human remains. As demonstrated at Pencraig Hill, critical analysis of the material residues of such actions can identify evidential signatures that can refute rather than reinforce such general hypothesis.

References

- BRADLEY, R 2007. *The Prehistory of Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BRÜCK, J 2006. 'Death, Exchange and Reproduction in the British Bronze Age' *European J Archaeology*, 9(1), pp 73-101.
- CLARKE, C M & HAMILTON, J 1999. 'Excavation of a cist burial on Doons Law, Leetside Farm, Whitsome, Berwickshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 129, pp189-201.
- CLOSE-BROOKS, J 1979. 'A beaker cist at Skateraw, East Lothian', *Trans E Lothian Antiq Fld Natur Soc* 16, (1979), pp1-6.
- COOK, M 2000. 'An Early Bronze Age multiple burial cist from Mill Road Industrial Estate, Linlithgow, West Lothian', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 130 (2000), pp77-91.
- CRESSEY, M AND SHERIDAN, A 2003. 'The excavation of a Bronze Age cemetery at Seafield West, near Inverness, Highland', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 133 (2003), pp47-84.
- DALLAND, M 1991. 'A short cist at Grainfoot, Longniddry, East Lothian', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 121, pp111-15.
- DALLAND, M 1999 'Sand Field: the excavation of an exceptional cist in Orkney' *Proc Prehist Soc*, 65, 373-413.
- DOWNES, J 1999 'Cremation: a spectacle and a journey', *The Loved Body's Corruption*, Downes, J and Pollard, T (eds), Cruithne Press: Glasgow, pp19-29.
- DOWNES, J. 1995 *Linga Fiold: The Excavation of a Bronze Age Cemetery on Mainland Orkney*. Unpublished DSR, Glasgow.

- DUFFY, P Forthcoming 'Monuments of the Third and Second Millennium BC: Excavations at Dunure Road, Ayrshire, in 2005' *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*
- FOWLER, C 2001. 'Personhood and Social Relations in the British Neolithic with a study from the Isle of Man' *J Material Culture* 6(2), pp137-163.
- FOWLER, C 2005. 'Identity Politics: Personhood, Kinship, Gender and Power in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain' in Casella, E & Fowler, C (eds), *The Archaeology of Plural and Changing Identities: beyond identification*, pp 109-134.
- GREEN, M. 1998. Humans as Ritual Victims in the Later Prehistory of Western Europe. *Oxford J Archaeol* 17(2), 169-189.
- JOBEY, G 1980. 'Green Knowe unenclosed platform settlement and Harehope cairn, Peeblesshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 110 (1980), pp 72-113.
- KINNES, I 1991. *Non-Megalithic Long Barrows and Related Monuments in Britain*. London.
- LAWRENCE, D 'Neolithic mortuary practice in Orkney' *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 136 (2006), pp 47-60.
- LUCAS, G 1996 'Of Death and Debt. A History of the Body in Neolithic and Bronze Age Yorkshire', *Journal of European Archaeology* 4, pp99-118.
- MACGREGOR, G & MCLELLAN, K Forthcoming 'A burning desire to build: Eweford West and Pencraig Hill, c 3950-3380 BC', *Ancient Lothian Lands: the archaeology of the A1*, Lelong, O & MacGregor, G (eds), Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph: Edinburgh.
- MACGREGOR, G & STUART, E Forthcoming 'Everything in its place: Eweford West, Overhailes, Pencraig Wood and Eweford Cottages, 3300-1700 BC', *Ancient Lothian Lands: the archaeology of the A1*, Lelong, O & MacGregor, G (eds), Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph: Edinburgh.
- MACGREGOR, G Forthcoming 'The Uses of Bones and Beads: Excavations at Eweford West and Pencraig Wood', *Ancient Lothian Lands: the archaeology of the A1*, Lelong, O & MacGregor, G (eds), Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Monograph: Edinburgh.
- MCKINLAY, J I 2000. 'Putting cremated human remains into context' in Roskams, S (ed) *Interpreting stratigraphy: site evaluation, recording procedures and stratigraphic analysis: papers presented to the Interpreting Stratigraphy conferences 1993-1997*. Oxford: Archaeopress, pp135-140.
- MCKINLAY, J I 2006. 'Cremation the cheap option?' in Gowland, R and Knusel, C (eds) *Social Archaeology of Funerary Remains*, 81-88. Oxbow: Oxford.
- MCKINLEY, J I 1997. 'Bronze Age 'Barrows' and Funerary Rites and Rituals of Cremation', *Proc Preh Soc* 63, pp129-146.
- PARKER PEARSON, M, CHAMBERLAIN, A, CRAIG, O, MARSHALL, P, MULVILLE, J, SMITH, H, CHENERY, C, COLLINS, M, COOK, G, CRAIG, G, EVANS, J, HILLER, J, MONGOMERY, J, SCHWENNIGER, J-L, TAYLOR, G & WESS, T 2005. 'Evidence for mummification in Bronze Age Britain', *Antiquity* 79 (2005), pp529-46.
- RITCHIE, P R 1958. 'Skateraw, East Lothian', *Discovery Excavat Scot*, 1958, p39.
- ROKSANDIK, M 2002. 'Position of skeletal remains as a key to understanding mortuary behaviour' in Haglund, W and Sorg, M (eds). *Advances in Forensic Taphonomy*, Boca Raton: CRC Press, pp99-117.
- RUSSELL-WHITE, C J, LOWE, C E & MCCULLAGH, R P J 1992. 'Excavations at three Early Bronze Age Monuments in Scotland', *Proc Preh Soc* 58, pp285-325.
- SCOTT, J G 1992. 'Mortuary structures and megaliths', *Vessels for the Ancestors*, Sharples, N & Sheridan, A (eds), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp104-19.
- SHERIDAN, A 2004 'Scottish Food Vessel Chronology Revisited', *From Sickles to Circles : Britain at the time of Stonehenge*, Gibson, A & Sheridan, A (eds), Stroud: Tempus, pp 243-69.
- SHERIDAN, A 2007 'Dating the Scottish Bronze Age: 'There is clearly much that the material can still tell us', *Beyond Stonehenge: Essays on the Bronze Age in Honour of Colin Burgess*, Burgess, C, Topping, P & Lynch, F (eds), Oxbow Books: Oxford, 162-185.
- SMITH, M AND BRICKLEY, M 2004. 'Analysis and interpretation of flint toolmarks found on bones from West Tump long barrow, Gloucestershire' *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* 14(1), 18-33
- SPEAK, S & BURGESS, C 1999. 'Meldon Bridge: a centre of the third millennium BC in Peebleshire', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 129, (1999), pp1-118.
- STEVENSON, R B K 1940. 'Short cists in the Parish of Innerwick, East Lothian', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 74, (1939-40), pp141.
- THOMAS, J 1999. 'Death, Identity and the Body in Neolithic Britain' *J Roy anthrop Inst* 6, pp 653-668.

