Chapter 8: Formal inhumations

‘The inhabitants of Iron Age Britain were not a homogenous mass across space and time. Nor were their burials.’

(Hope 1999: 43)

The perception that inhumation was not a frequent practice in Iron Age Britain has so far limited attempts to examine the extent and character of this funerary treatment. Formal inhumations involving well over 100 individuals can now be assigned to the long Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland. The earliest of these burials appear to date to the last few centuries BC, and by AD 800 some form of inhumation can be recognised throughout the region. It is clear, however, that in no area and time was inhumation common enough to be classed as a majority funerary rite. The varied nature of the burial rites discussed in this chapter defies a simple explanation for the choice of this form of mortuary treatment, such as a change in population or religion. A full analysis of these formal inhumations is necessary to achieve a better understanding of why this funerary choice was made, and what it meant to those involved.

8.1: The sites

This chapter includes 36 sites, at which the buried remains of an estimated 115 individuals have been found. This represents an average of just over three individuals
per site, and larger cemeteries seem to have been rare throughout the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland.

Fig. 8.1: Sites of Iron Age formal inhumation in Atlantic Scotland
Table 8.1: Distribution of formal inhumations throughout Atlantic Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shetland</th>
<th>Orkney</th>
<th>Caithness</th>
<th>Sutherland</th>
<th>Western Isles</th>
<th>Argyll</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of sites</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of individuals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17*</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* number of individuals based on number of grave cuts

By far the largest concentration of sites of inhumation is in the Western Isles. 15 of the 36 sites are in this area, although the majority of these contain the isolated burials of only one or two individuals. By contrast, larger groups of inhumations are more common in Orkney, Caithness and Argyll. Orkney has provided two of the most extensive and best recorded Late Iron Age cemeteries, at Newark Bay and Westness, and in Caithness two less well recorded cemeteries at Ackergill and Keiss were excavated in the 19th century.

The three sites included from Argyll are all believed to represent Late Iron Age Christian churchyard cemeteries. However, no close dating evidence is available from these sites, and virtually no human remains survived within the excavated graves due to acidic soil conditions. The assignment of these burials to the very end of the Iron Age, though likely, is therefore not certain.

As with human remains on settlements, it is from Sutherland and Shetland that the least evidence is available, and this is likely to be due to lower levels of preservation and excavation within these areas. Both Sutherland and Shetland do, however, provide surprisingly early evidence of formal inhumation, and it seems likely that further
excavation in these areas would provide valuable evidence, adding to current data on the full extent of this funerary practice during the Iron Age.

8.2: Chronological patterns

No distinctive form of Iron Age inhumation burial is recognised in Scotland, and few of the burials examined in this study were accompanied by grave goods. Human remains from the majority of sites discussed in this chapter were therefore directly dated, and would otherwise not have been assigned to the long Iron Age. This information allows relatively close chronological analysis of the changing use of inhumation through the period under study. It also seems likely, however, that a great number of undated inhumations from Atlantic Scotland, particularly those discovered before the widespread application of radiocarbon dating, could also fall into this period, and that the number of Iron Age inhumations in this region and, perhaps, elsewhere in Britain, has been seriously underestimated.

8.2.1: The Early Iron Age (800-300 BC)

Not a single inhumation can be securely dated to the Early Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland, although it is possible that the two earliest known burials, Swainbost and Vallay, might just fall into the very end of this period. The increasingly common and improved AMS dating of archaeological remains may eventually alter this picture, but on the current evidence it appears that inhumation was not practised in Atlantic Scotland during the Early Iron Age.
8.2.2: The Middle Iron Age (300 BC-AD 300)

The first dated formal inhumations appear to fall into the Middle Iron Age. The two earliest, found at Swainbost and Vallay in the Western Isles, date to the very beginning of this period, and the next two cases are from north-west Sutherland, at Loch Borralie

Table 8.2: Formal burials dating to the Middle Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Remains found</th>
<th>Dating evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sands of Breckon (3)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 120-440 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich (4)</td>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 130-390 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loch Borralie (60)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 40 BC-210 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sangobeg (61)</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 170 BC-30 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Corran (63)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 70-220 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elderly male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 130-250 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barvas (66)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>Bracelet Middle Iron Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galson (74)</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 70-156 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 116-208 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 103-210 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 110-410 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 60-316 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarista (81)</td>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 97-203 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stornoway Airport (83)</td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>Pottery Middle Iron Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swainbost (84)</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 351-223 BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vallay (86)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 390-200 BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and Sangobeg. By the end of the Middle Iron Age inhumations have appeared in Shetland, and are increasingly common in the Western Isles. The site of Galson on Lewis, where at least eleven graves have been recorded, appears to be the earliest cemetery of the Iron Age (see 8.4, below). Perhaps surprisingly, however, no formal inhumations have so far been dated to the Middle Iron Age from Orkney, the north-east mainland of Scotland, or Argyll.

8.2.3: The Late Iron Age (300 AD – 800 AD)

Table 8.3: Formal burials dating to the Late Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Remains found</th>
<th>Dating evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandwick (4)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 258-687 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Ninian’s Isle (6)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 680-890 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 660-780 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 670-890 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birsay Bay (8)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 dates: cal. 377-529 AD, cal. 458-586 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 316-504 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 dates: cal. 236-416 AD, cal. 584-638 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckquoy (10)</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 250-660 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermisgarth (14)</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 240-670 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newark Bay (22)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 537-659 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 617-687 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 691-960 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site/Mediation</td>
<td>Sex/Group</td>
<td>C14 Date (cal.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 693-964 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 694-985 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skaill (26)</td>
<td>Young adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 550-680 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skara Brae (27)</td>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 430-610 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westness (30)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 560-900 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 432-642 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 540-860 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 540-670 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 600-890 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 530-780 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 560-690 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 410-650 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 430-660 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 530-780 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ackergill (33)</td>
<td>Unstratified bone</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 332-408 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Dounreay (45)</td>
<td>Cranial fragment</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 660-780 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 630-720 AD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy Park (57)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 525-725 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ardvichar (65)</td>
<td>Young adult</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 605-655 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cille Pheadair (69)</td>
<td>Adult female</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 620-780 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Druimsdale Machair (72)</td>
<td>Young adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 250-410 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galson (74)</td>
<td>Adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 130-530 AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griminish (75)</td>
<td>Young adult male</td>
<td>C14 date: cal. 260-540 AD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Northton (79)  
Adult male  
C14 date: cal. 250-540 AD

Young adult male  
C14 date: cal. 340-540 AD

Partial juvenile skeleton  
C14 date: cal. 240-410 AD

Pollochar (80)  
Adult  
C14 date: cal. 264-366 AD

The majority of known formal inhumations fall into the Late Iron Age, and this is the period in which individual burials and cemeteries first appear in Caithness, eastern Sutherland and Orkney. It seems most probable that the small cemeteries excavated at Ackergill and Keiss in Caithness date to the mid 1st millennium AD, although only one bone from Ackergill has been directly dated. In Orkney Late Iron Age burials have been found at seven sites, including two larger cemeteries at Newark Bay and Westness, both of which continued to be used as burial grounds into the Norse period. Isolated inhumation burials continue to appear throughout the Late Iron Age in the Western Isles, but there is no noticeable increase in this practice from the preceding period.

The three ‘early Christian’ burial grounds recorded in Argyll at Ardnadam, St Ninian’s and St Ronan’s are thought to date to the 7th or 8th centuries AD. The only closely dated site that could be interpreted as a Christian churchyard, however, is that of St Ninian’s in Shetland (see 8.3.4, below). In general, it appears that there was no widespread adoption of formal inhumation as a majority funerary rite in Atlantic Scotland before the end of the long Iron Age. Inhumation burials are found in small numbers from the last few centuries BC (Fig. 8.2), appearing first in the Western Isles and on the west coast of Sutherland, and the rite went on to be used more widely throughout Atlantic Scotland during the Late Iron Age, especially in Orkney.
Fig. 8.2: Simplified diagram of formal inhumations from Iron Age Atlantic Scotland -

each figure represents a directly dated individual

The appearance of formal inhumation clearly predates the appearance of Christianity in Atlantic Scotland, the adoption of inhumation in neighbouring Roman Britain and the appearance of long cist cemeteries in southern and eastern Scotland, now placed in the early 5th century AD (Grieg et al. 2000: 611). The apparently sudden introduction of formal inhumation in Orkney from 300 AD could potentially be related to events further south, given the stronger links that this region is thought to have held with the Roman world (Fitzpatrick 1989), and the churchyard cemeteries of Argyll presumably followed the introduction of Christianity in this area, but over Atlantic Scotland as a whole the factors behind the appearance of inhumation burial cannot be easily associated with any known wider historical changes.
8.3: Where are they sited?

Part of the definition of formal burials used in this study, in order to differentiate them from the placement of human remains on domestic sites, is that they were not placed directly on occupied areas, active or recently abandoned, within the landscape. This divide, though necessary for the purposes of analysis, is not absolute, and some formal inhumations have been discovered extremely close to settlements, suggesting that the relationship between the spaces of the living and the dead was a complex one throughout the Iron Age. Relationships between inhumations, the coastline and early churches are also recognisable.

8.3.1: Relationship with domestic sites

It can be difficult to differentiate archaeologically between bodies purposefully deposited on domestic sites, formal inhumations placed near to settlements, and those perhaps unintentionally buried on sites which had been used for earlier occupation. The almost ubiquitous nature of coastal settlement in some areas of Atlantic Scotland during prehistory means that none of the burial sites discussed in this chapter are separated by a great distance from evidence of earlier domestic activity, and some of them are remarkably close to what must still have been recognisably artificial structures.

At four sites, Sandwick in Shetland, Buckquoy in Orkney, and Freswick Links and Lower Dounreay in Caithness, inhumations were associated with Iron Age settlements, and these cases would appear to be the most closely linked to the bodies placed onto domestic sites discussed in the previous chapter. However, in each of these four cases
either the interval of time or the geographical distance between the occupation of the site and the burial activity is great enough to suggest a different interpretation.

At Sandwick an adult inhumation was placed above an abandoned Late Iron Age structure that was almost certainly no longer visible - midden and sand layers had accumulated over the top (Lelong and Shearer 2005: 24) - although it is possible that the presence of the earlier settlement was still remembered. At Lower Dounreay the inhumations appear to post-date the hut site they were buried over by an interval of many centuries; the earlier settlement would have left no obvious landscape trace (The Ministry of Works 1956), and there seems no reason to assume a relationship between these episodes of activity. At Freswick a cist inhumation was found around 50m from a Middle Iron Age Atlantic roundhouse, which would have formed a significant landscape feature long after its abandonment (Batey 1987), but the distance between the roundhouse and the cist makes it unlikely that a close association between the two was intended.

At Buckquoy (Fig. 8.3) a slightly different event seems to have occurred; the placement of a formal burial right next to an occupied settlement. Here, a cist burial was placed around 10m to the north west of Late Iron Age cellular structures (the nearest building to the grave is Norse). The unexpectedly early radiocarbon date obtained for the skeleton, centring around the 4th-6th centuries AD (see Appendix 3), means that this burial predated the main period of occupation at Buckquoy (Ritchie 1978: 177, 183-4). Although the burial does not infringe upon the settlement area, the proximity of the cist to the dwellings suggests that a real or desired association between this particular individual and the settlement was being demonstrated; it may even have been considered as a ‘founder’ burial.
Fig. 8.3: The Late Iron Age grave at Buckquoy (after Ritchie 1978: 177)

Inhumation burials were also located on two pre-Iron Age domestic sites; Skara Brae in Orkney and Northton in the Western Isles. Domestic occupation at the former site was negligible after the Neolithic, although some Bronze Age activity is indicated. Two cist burials were placed just to the south of the settlement during the Late Iron Age (Childe 1931: 57-60), and a cist burial in nearby Skaill Bay also dates to this period (James 1999: 773). At Northton, the main period of occupation appears to have been Neolithic, but there is evidence of Beaker activity and the extensive middens on this
site into which the Late Iron Age graves were dug appear to have been in use well into the Iron Age (Simpson et al. 2006).

The choice of these previously occupied sites for burial could be fortuitous, and the time interval between the two periods of activity is substantial. Bronze Age activity suggests, however, that they were not quickly forgotten, and the later burials may be best interpreted in terms of the symbolic re-use of earlier sites. The use of the dead to claim a link with past inhabitants of the landscape appears to have been common at many points in prehistory; in Atlantic Scotland it has been argued that Neolithic monuments may have been specifically targeted for this process of reinvention (Hingley 1996). Pearce has suggested that re-use of abandoned settlements for burial in the first millennium AD was due to a combination of practical factors (areas of convenient and known access) and the symbolic importance of these sites, which stressed ‘social, ancestral and locational connections’ (Pearce 2003: 106).

At all of the Atlantic Scottish sites except for Lower Dounreay, where the relationship between the inhumations and the earlier settlement is arguably weakest, only one or two graves are present. The numbers are too few for these sites to be viewed as a burial place for the dead in general. However, as discussed in the previous two chapters, domestic sites seem to have been the focus for ritual activity throughout their use lives in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, and it seems likely that the choice to place inhumations near to occupied sites, like the placement of whole bodies on settlements, formed part of this ritualisation process. At Buckquoy and Sandwick the single individual inhumations may have been viewed as founder and abandonment burials respectively, forming part of the living history of the settlement. In both cases, the interval of time between the foundation or abandonment of the settlement and
the burial is very short, and the physical distance between them small enough to make a deliberate relationship likely.

8.3.3: Relationship with the coast

The strongest pattern in the location of formal inhumations, though one easily overlooked, is their proximity to the sea. None of the sites included in this chapter is more than 100m from the shore. Even in the island regions of Atlantic Scotland, where settlement was largely focused on coastal areas, this association is striking. In the case of disarticulated and articulated remains on settlement sites, inland examples do occur. With burials, however, there are no exceptions.

Anyone who has visited the Western Isles will have noted how predominantly coastal the situation of graveyards is (Fig. 8.4). Modern cemeteries are often sited far from centres of occupation, in areas which are difficult to access, and, most surprisingly in this very Christian island chain, not directly associated with churches. The simplest explanation for the presence of these remote coastal cemeteries would seem to be the continuance of an earlier tradition. Although it is not suggested here that all modern graveyards in the Western Isles overlie Iron Age cemeteries, it is possible that from the earliest re-adoption of formal inhumation in this region during the Middle Iron Age the coast was seen as the appropriate location for the placement of the dead.
In the case of the west coast of the Outer Hebrides, where 14 of the 36 sites discussed in this chapter are located, the Atlantic represented the end of the known world, and the symbolic importance of the sea, a vital but dangerous link to other communities, must always have been great (Henderson 2007: 299). The association between territorial boundaries and the placement of burials has been recognised in Iron Age and early Medieval England, Scotland and Ireland due to the liminal nature of these places; the presence of ancestors on these sites may have been thought to ward off outsiders and protect the land (Reynolds 2009: 247, Forsyth 2009: 32). The shoreline would have formed an obvious boundary for coastal communities in Atlantic Scotland. It is also possible that this burial tradition grew out of an earlier archaeologically invisible treatment of the dead focused on the shore, such as the deposition of bodies or scattering of ashes into the sea.

It is worth remembering, however, that many of the burial sites included in this chapter would not have been as near to the sea during the Iron Age as they are today.
Coastal erosion is a major problem in many areas of Atlantic Scotland, particularly in Orkney and the Western Isles, and has a clearly destructive impact on the archaeology of these regions. Given this, it is interesting to note how many of the inhumations exposed by coastal erosion in Atlantic Scotland have been dated to the long Iron Age over the last decade. If even a small proportion of the huge numbers of burials that have eroded from the coastline and been lost to the sea over the last millennium were originally buried during the Iron Age, this would substantially increase our evidence for the treatment of the dead, and for the practice of inhumation, during this period.

8.3.4: Relationship with early churches

The identification of Christian burials is far from simple. It is clear that neither west-east orientation nor the absence of grave goods are exclusive to Christianity; burial orientation varies throughout prehistory, with west-east orientation a frequent choice (see 8.5.2, below), Christian grave goods are known, and a large proportion of non-Christian inhumations are unaccompanied. The clearest way of identifying inhumation burials as Christian is if they are closely associated with a church building.

Four possible sites of early Christian worship and burial are included in this study. At three of these sites, St Ronans on Iona, St Ninian’s on Bute and Ardnadam on mainland Argyll, the archaeological evidence is poor. Although grave cuts seem to have been present at Ardnadam and St Ronan’s, the level of human bone survival was extremely low, and no direct dating was possible. At Ardnadam, an early stone chapel overlay two burials, and was surrounded by further small graves that may have been intended for children, several of which seem to have been marked by cross-marked stones (Rennie 1999). At St Ronan’s, the early burials underlay an 8th-12th century church. The
presence of an even earlier religious structure can be posited - a sequence of churches built on the same site is a frequent occurrence (O’Sullivan 1994: 329, 354) - but it is also possible that the cemetery was not originally focused around a church.

Bone survival at St Ninian’s, Bute was better, and the nature and context of the burials surrounding the early chapel clearer, but this excavation was carried out in the 1950’s, the skeletal remains have largely been lost, and the designation of any of these burials as Early Christian is therefore unsure. Indeed, the excavator believed that an earlier, pre-Christian phase of burial was indicated on this site, based on the fact that two of the inhumations underlay the chapel and on the more questionable evidence that not all of the burials were oriented west-east and that one included an artefact (Aitken 1955: 72).

The only site at which an early church is associated with inhumations directly dated to the Iron Age is in the far north, in Shetland. St Ninian’s Isle is noteworthy for its spectacular location, on a small islet joined to the mainland by a tombolo (Fig. 8.5). It seems most likely that the three inhumation burials dated to the Iron Age at this site were buried during the 8th century, and would therefore seem to be the earliest identifiable Christians from Shetland. There are, however, a few problems with the interpretation of the sequence of events at this site, and the burial position of the three individuals (one crouched and semi-prone, and two north-south oriented) is not what would be regarded as traditionally Christian. It is also possible that these inhumations pre-date the earliest chapel on this site (Barrowman 2003). In this case, the siting of a chapel on St Ninian’s Isle may have been due not just to the inspiring location but also, perhaps, to the known presence of an earlier site of burial.
The number of possible sites of Late Iron Age churchyard burial in Atlantic Scotland remains, therefore, very small, and the absence of a single definite, well-recorded site of this practice makes analysis of the progress of the Christian church in converting the inhabitants of this region difficult.

The 6th-8th century Christian burials and early monastic foundation discovered at Portmahomack (Carver 2008), just outside the study area on the north-east mainland, show that the new religion certainly reached Atlantic Scotland during this period, and missionaries are thought to have been active throughout the region in the 6th and 7th centuries AD (Crawford 1987: 159). Although the sheer distance of Shetland may explain the absence of information on this area, the near silence of authors at Iona on the nearby Western Isles, north coast and Northern Isles is interesting, and suggests a lack of regular contact with and conversion progress in these areas. The apparent rarity of churchyard burial may support the idea that the rate at which Christian burial, if not Christianity itself, was adopted was slow in Atlantic Scotland before 800 AD.
8.4: Individuals to cemeteries

It is clear that on the current evidence formal inhumation cannot be viewed as a majority funerary rite during the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland. At 69% of the sites included in this chapter, only one or two isolated inhumations were found, suggesting an unusual status for these individuals, who received a quite different fate from the rest of the population after death. The presence of a few larger groups of inhumations, however, could show that formal inhumation was adopted as a general rite at least by small groups or for brief periods during the first millennium AD.

The definition of a cemetery in this study as a location where three or more inhumations have been recorded may seem generous, but even this definition allows the inclusion of only eleven sites in Atlantic Scotland over the 1600 years of the long Iron Age. Of these one is in Shetland (St Ninian’s Isle), three are in Orkney (Birsay Bay, Newark Bay and Westness), three are in Caithness (Ackergill, Keiss and Lower Dounreay), one is in the Western Isles (Galson) and three problematic examples are in Argyll (see 8.3.4, above). Unfortunately, the precision of radiocarbon dating is rarely great enough to determine whether these sites represent a very short lived burst of community burial, or the longer term inhumation of a particular sub-group.

The latter situation seems to be indicated at Newark Bay, where there is no overlap between several of the radiocarbon dates; some individuals must have been buried in the 7th century AD, and others in the 8th, 9th or 10th centuries. At Galson and Westness it is possible that all of the burials were interred in the same decade; the mid 2nd century AD at Galson and the early 8th century AD at Westness. At both sites, however, a longer-term process of burial, stretching over a century or longer, appears
much more likely (Neighbour et al. 2000: Kaland 1993). All four of the sites in the Northern Isles continued to be used as cemeteries into the Norse period, and this continuity again suggests a slow rate of burial. For the Caithness and Argyll cemeteries, unfortunately, dating information is too poor to give an impression of their longevity.

The demographic spread of the individuals within the cemeteries might be another clue as to whether they represent the burial of a wider community or a particular sector. Among the small groups of Late Iron Age inhumations found at St Ninian’s Isle and Birsay Bay, and the larger cemeteries of Newark Bay and Ackergill, a spread of ages and sexes are present, although juveniles are rare. At Galson no juveniles are present among the eleven recorded individuals, but males and females are equally represented. At Westness in Orkney and Keiss and Lower Dounreay in Caithness, however, females are much more common than males, making up 60% of the group at Westness (compared to 10% males), 56% of the inhumations at Keiss (compared to 22% males) and 63% of the group at Lower Dounreay (compared to 13% males).

Juveniles and infants (nine in total) are dramatically under-represented in these burial grounds, making up just 16% of those present. Females (23 individuals) are over-represented, making up 40% of the group, and males (16 individuals) account for 28% of burials. The low number of juveniles alone suggests that selection among the community was being exercised at these cemetery sites. Adults were clearly inhumed more frequently, and at certain sites females were preferentially buried. Along with the slow rate of burial suggested above, this would indicate that most of these sites of burial were used for only a restricted sector of the community. On the current evidence, however, it is not possible to state whether this sector of the community were separating themselves out on the grounds of religion, status or another factor.
8.5: The burial rite

Although early archaeological analysis of burial grounds focused almost exclusively on grave goods as a way of accessing social hierarchy, modern archaeologists have attempted to move beyond this to examine the possible significance of burial position, orientation and grave elaboration in terms of symbolism, religious belief, memory and the transmission of social messages (Parker Pearson 2005: 84-5). Among the inhumations from Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, a wide range of burial structures, positions and orientations are present. Inhumation rites were clearly not governed by universal rules, and this in itself may reveal something about the manner in which this form of funerary treatment was adopted and developed over the Iron Age.

8.5.1: Body position

It has often been stated that crouched burial seems to have been predominant in prehistoric Britain (Hope 1999: 46). However, the most common body position recorded in this study, admittedly from burials for the most part dating slightly later than those classed as prehistoric in lowland Britain, was extended, found in 83% of inhumations (Fig. 8.6). The majority of burials (68%) were supine (laid on the back) and placement on one side occurred in 24% of cases, with the right side favoured.

Prone burial, face downward, was found at seven sites, involving nearly 10% of individuals whose body position was recorded. This burial method has been the subject of considerable debate, with some authors arguing that it represents a form of disrespect or punishment for the dead, a ‘deliberate indignity’ inflicted on the body (James 1999: 773), while others suggest that it was simply one of a suite of acceptable
burial positions throughout much of prehistory (Murphy 2008: xv). The relatively common occurrence of this position is therefore interesting; if an interpretation of disrespect is accepted this could suggest that inhumation was not always a high status rite, or that it could be used in alternate ways.

Male burial position seems to vary more widely than that of women or children; nearly 35% of males were buried flexed or crouched, and 33% were placed on one side. Adult females, although overwhelmingly buried extended and supine, are well represented amongst the minority who were placed on the left side or prone, both of which occur in around 16% of female burials. Juveniles are almost always found supine and extended.

![Burial position diagram](image)

**Fig. 8.6: Burial position in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland**
Within the Northern Isles the vast majority of inhumations were extended and supine (Fig. 8.7), with prone burial the most significant minority practice. In the Western Isles a more varied set of burial positions were utilised throughout the long Iron Age, with flexed and crouched individuals making up 33% of inhumations and nearly 50% of individuals placed in a non-supine position. The mainland sites fall between these two extremes, but with a relatively high proportion of burials (30%) placed on one side. This pattern may be connected with the early appearance of inhumation in the Western Isles; in the west, Iron Age inhumation originated and maintained a varied form. On the mainland, it arrived later as a heterogeneous rite. In Orkney, in contrast, inhumation does not appear to have been adopted until the Late Iron Age (see 8.2.3), and seems to have taken a fairly standardised form.

Fig. 8.7: Variation in burial position by region
It is difficult to disentangle the influences of gender, chronology and geography on inhumation position across Iron Age Atlantic Scotland. One of the strongest factors appears to be whether an inhumation was early and located in the west, or late and in the north. Flexed and crouched burial, and placement on the right side, are largely restricted to male burials in the Western Isles and mainland before 400 AD, and the majority of female and juvenile burials are found in Orkney, extended and supine. Prone burial appears to stand out from these patterns, being present throughout Atlantic Scotland and throughout the period in which inhumation was used. This may suggest that the different, perhaps negative, meaning of this burial position was widely understood and applied.

8.5.2: Orientation

The orientation of inhumations is often discussed in terms of the expression of religious belief. A west-east orientation (the head to the west) is traditionally associated with Christianity, although other religions also favour this burial orientation, and it seems to have been widely used throughout Europe in the pre-Christian era. It has been suggested that this direction may have been particularly favoured due its association with the arc of the sun, believed to have been important in many prehistoric religions (Brown 1983).

As Fig. 8.8 shows, although there is considerable variation, there appears to be a preference in the orientation of Iron Age inhumations within Atlantic Scotland for placing the head to the west. Over 55% of inhumations were placed with the head between northwest and southwest, while only around 19% of inhumations were placed with the head between northeast and southeast.
North-south also appears to be a popular orientation, accounting (including NNE and NNW) for 20% of burials. Perhaps the least popular orientation seems to be with the head to the south. This pattern holds true for both male and female inhumations. Interestingly, although most common overall, west-east orientation appears no more frequently in the later Iron Age than among inhumations dating to before 400 AD, further decreasing the likelihood that this orientation has any link with the appearance of Christianity. In fact, the most major change appears to be the appearance of north-south orientation in the later Iron Age.

Regional variation also seems to be a factor in burial orientation. In the Northern Isles and Western Isles, which make up the majority of known inhumations, west-east orientation predominates, but on mainland sites in Caithness and Sutherland there...
appears to be no preferred orientation at all, with an extremely even range of directions utilised.

Overall, the number of inhumations for which orientation has been recorded (61) may be too small to draw firm conclusions, especially as the few larger cemeteries within the study area such as Westness in Orkney and Galson in the Western Isles, at which a single orientation predominates, may be skewing the figures. It seems fair to say, however, that a range of orientations were used during the Iron Age. A roughly west-east orientation predominated in the Northern and Western Isles, but based on the dating evidence cannot be taken as indicating that the deceased was Christian.

8.5.3: Grave elaboration

Extra funerary embellishment such as the provision of wooden or stone coffins, head stones or marker stones, cairns or above ground structures is often equated with high status, on the simple premise that the more trouble taken in preparing the grave, the greater the importance of the deceased (Parker Pearson 2005: 74). It is also possible, however, that these forms of grave elaboration held more complex symbolic or religious meanings. For example, the increasing use of coffins in the Early Medieval period may have been connected to a growing concern with the protection of the body from the ‘polluting’ earth (Thompson 2004: 197) and the use of lime plaster or gypsum in late Roman inhumations, probably also to aid in the preservation of the corpse, is often associated with Christianity (Taylor 2001: 121-122).

Wooden coffins often do not survive in archaeological contexts, although some trace of the wood stain may be recorded in good preservation conditions. No evidence for the use of wooden coffins exists from the period and area under study. Stone cists,
however, are easily recognised, and seem to have been frequently used in Atlantic Scotland. Nearly 43% of known inhumations were buried within a stone cist; this group includes both men and women, dates from the first appearance of inhumation to the very end of the Iron Age, and is spread throughout Atlantic Scotland.

As in the case of building materials, the use of stone cists rather than wooden coffins may have had sound a practical reason; the lack of easily available timber. The construction of cists clearly required an extra effort on the part of those burying the dead, but the sheer frequency of this form of grave furniture in Atlantic Scotland, and indeed Scotland as a whole in the mid first millennium AD (Harding 2004: 230) means that it is unlikely to have been associated with an elite.

An alternative explanation is that these grave containers were used to symbolically, as well as practically, separate and protect the corpse from the surrounding ground. This explanation is particularly tempting when looking at the Iron Age inhumations discussed in this chapter, as one of the major ways in which inhumation burial must have differed from other contemporary funerary rites was in the preservation of the intact body. This would have marked a radical change from the destruction of the body in cremation or excarnation, and the fragmentation and disarticulation of human remains for deposition within domestic sites. Inhumation may have been chosen as a means of preserving the remains of particular individuals within the landscape, and the use of stone cists as an additional form of protection for the corpse would seem appropriate in this respect.
More visible within the landscape than cists are cairns, built up around the body to form an obvious mound. Cairns are considerably less common than stone cists; 21 individuals were buried within cairns in Atlantic Scotland, either individually or in small groups. Men and women are both represented, as are juveniles. The majority of these cairn burials are found in Caithness and Sutherland; examples have also been found at two sites in Orkney and two in Shetland, but this form of grave elaboration appears to have been rare in the Western Isles (Fig. 8.9), from which only one case is known. Kerbed cairn burial has previously been argued to represent a mid first millennium ‘Pictish’ rite (Close-Brooks 1984), although burial cairns clearly came into use earlier than this, and continued to be constructed until the end of the long Iron Age.

Fig. 8.9: The distribution of Iron Age cairn burials in Atlantic Scotland
The construction of a cairn clearly requires effort, and could therefore be interpreted as a sign of high status, especially given the less frequent use of this form of elaboration. A cairn could also provide the corpse with additional protection. Above all, however, a cairn stands out in the landscape, and it seems most reasonable to suggest that cairns must have been designed to make a visible statement, perhaps associated with claims to land rights, or the demonstration of status.

One final form of grave elaboration found in Atlantic Scotland is the use of white quartz pebbles, first noted over a century ago (Mitchell 1884). White quartz pebbles have been recorded within inhumation burials at seven sites. Mitchell originally suggested that the use of white pebbles in burials was simply due to their attractive appearance, although he admitted it was also possible that white stones held a symbolic significance in pre-Christian times, perhaps associated with innocence or purity (Mitchell 1884: 289-290). More recently, Lelong and Batey have suggested that the pebbles arranged in the grave at Sangobeg may have been chosen due to their ‘magical properties’ (Brady et al. 2007: 77), Fowler has suggested that the white stones held associations with water, milk or bone (Fowler 2009) and Williams believes that they were chosen for inclusion simply due to their ‘striking appearance’ (Williams 2007: 149). A mixture of aesthetic and symbolic concerns may be the most likely explanation of why these stones were utilised in burials in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland.

8.5.4: Grave goods

The term ‘grave goods’ refers to items placed into the grave with the dead body. These artefacts may not necessarily have belonged to the dead or have been intended to be used by them in the next life – they may have been made specifically for this
event, or represent attempts by the mourners to project their own status or other social messages (Parker Pearson 2005: 83-4). Artefacts placed into a burial are effectively destroyed, which may have had an impact upon the living (Hope 1999: 47). In some cultures it is not considered socially acceptable or hygienic for the belongings of the deceased to be used by others (Parker Pearson 1993: 207). Alternatively, this sacrifice of goods may have been judged to bring a positive benefit to the dead in the afterlife, or to reflect well on the living.

Just 15 graves, 13% of the total recorded from Atlantic Scotland, were accompanied by artefacts. These inhumations are widespread geographically and chronologically, with roughly equal numbers falling into the Middle Iron Age and the Late Iron Age. The grave goods provided include pottery (6 cases), personal jewellery (6 cases) and tools or weaponry of iron (3 cases) or stone (3 cases). Only two inhumations were accompanied by multiple items. The burial excavated at Galson in 1993 included a decorated pot which had been placed over the head, an iron brooch, and a bone pin (Neighbour et al. 2000: 562-7). The inhumation found at Sandwick in 2005 was accompanied by a steatite bead, an ornament of copper and bone rings, and a polished schist disc (Lelong and Shearer 2005: 14) (Fig. 8.10).

![Fig. 8.10: The Sandwick 2005 inhumation (Lelong and Shearer 2005: 14)](image-url)
Of the six graves which included pottery, four contained flexed or crouched adult males, and two contained juveniles. Flexed and crouched burial has been recorded in only eight cases in Atlantic Scotland (see 8.5.1), and the fact that half of these were accompanied by pottery seems significant, suggesting a relationship between this set of rites. Among the six burials which included jewellery, five are adult females, buried in an extended position. Jewellery may therefore have been particularly associated with female burials, perhaps supporting the idea that these were high status women, or that this was the image being projected by those who buried them.

A further two graves contained animal bones or teeth, most probably included deliberately. The inclusion of food in graves, in the form of joints of meat, is not uncommon in Britain during the long Iron Age, for example among the Arras burials of Yorkshire (Parker Pearson 1999). The inclusion of such perishable goods is unlikely to have been a demonstration of great wealth on the part of the mourners, although the destruction of food may have been a powerful social statement. The inclusion of joints of meat and other foodstuffs in graves is therefore usually discussed in terms of the symbolic provisioning of the dead for the next life.

In neither of the cases of inclusion of animal remains in graves from Atlantic Scotland, however, does this explanation appear to be applicable. At the Sands of Breckon the only animal bones included were sheep or goat metatarsals and phalanges, and the grave excavated at A’ Ceadach Ruadh in 1993 included only cattle teeth. If these animal remains were not included as a form of food for the dead, an alternative explanation may be that the remains were amuletic. There seems little reason to doubt that animals were involved in the cosmologies of Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, and the inclusion of token animal remains in burials may reflect this.
8.5.5: Disarticulated human remains

One type of added material occasionally found in graves, but which does not fall easily under the term ‘grave good’, is human bone. Multiple burials within a single grave were absent in this study (though some graves did share a cairn), but four inhumations were accompanied by partially articulated or disarticulated human bones from additional individuals. These four are spread throughout Atlantic Scotland; the grave excavated in 1926 at the Sands of Breckon, skeleton 1 from Skara Brae, grave 3 from Northton, and the burial at Griminish. Added to this group should probably be the perforated cranial fragment recovered at Lower Dounreay, which may have originally accompanied one of the burials at this site.

The inclusion of bones from extra individuals is relatively rare, or at least rarely reported, among British inhumations. Where this occurs, it is often assumed that any such bones have been disturbed from nearby burials, but the isolated nature of the Sands of Breckon, Skara Brae and Griminish burials, and the fact that all these individuals were enclosed within stone cists, makes this explanation unlikely. The Iron Age was a period in which human remains were clearly being recovered, circulated, and deposited by the living on domestic sites (see Chapter 6) and it seems probable that the same processes lie behind the placement of human remains into graves.

At Northton, the original explanation of the presence of additional human remains within grave 3 was that these were disturbed from nearby burials (Murphy et al. 2004: 185), but radiocarbon dating of the partial juvenile remains that make up skeleton 3b has shown these to be potentially several decades earlier than the primary skeleton 3a (see Appendix 3). The state of these skeletal remains, which reveal gnaw marks and cut marks, also suggest an interim period between the deaths of the two individuals, and it
seems most likely that skeleton 3b was disarticulated upon deposition. Bones from two other individuals were also included in this grave; a juvenile mandible and maxilla fragment (3c) and fragments of an adult humerus and pelvis (3d). These parts of the skeleton bear strong articulations to the skull and torso respectively, and would not normally be expected to be accidentally moved from one grave to another.

At Sands of Breckon the extra bones consisted of a skull fragment (foetal), a mandible (elderly) and a few extra vertebrae and rib fragments (adult); again, multiple individuals were clearly involved. At Skara Brae, extra adult finger and hand bones were present. At Griminish, a few juvenile bones were recovered, including finger bones and vertebrae. The repeated presence of juvenile bones in graves at three of these sites may be significant.

Finally, the perforated cranial fragment from Lower Dounreay raises the possibility that these human remains could represent trophies. It is believed that this cranial fragment was perforated for suspension, either within the home or on the person (see 6.7.1), and given the context in which it was found the latter explanation may seem more likely - radiocarbon dating of this fragment has shown it to be roughly contemporary with the burials at this site. The Dounreay example is the only modified human bone known to have been included in an inhumation, but is useful in suggesting the possible meanings which human remains may have held, and the reasons why they may have been buried with particular individuals.

8.5.6: Associations with Pictish symbol stones

The interpretation of the class 1 Pictish symbol stones, known for their apparently abstract symbolism and stylistic representations of objects and animals, is a subject
that has excited a great deal of debate over the last century. It appears that these stones were designed to stand upright and form visible features in the landscape (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 167), and one recurring suggestion is that these stones were funerary markers, and that the symbols incised on them could refer to the name of the deceased and their lineage (e.g. Cummins 1995: 125-137). Given the common use of inscribed stones for funerary markers right up to the present day, this remains a perfectly reasonable suggestion, and symbol stones have been found at or near a few sites of Late Iron Age inhumation (Ashmore 1980: 352).

This hypothesis has been criticised, however, on the grounds that proven associations between symbol stones and burials are rare, and that many described instances are the result of stones being moved (Clarke 2007: 26-7). Clearly, any understanding of the relationship between symbol stones and the memorialisation of the dead relies on proven close associations between symbol stones and human remains. Within Atlantic Scotland, there are four sites where class 1 symbol stones have been recovered along with formal inhumations; Ackergill and Keiss in Caithness, and Dunrobin Castle and Dairy Park in Sutherland, all on the north-east mainland.

At Ackergill and Keiss the proposed association is between groups of burials and a single standing stone, which according to the mortuary commemoration theory would represent the social identity of the group. At Ackergill the symbol stone apparently stood on the top of the cairn (Edwards 1926: 179). The association at Keiss seems less secure, with the carved stone being re-used in a structure built on top of the mound (Laing 1866: 33). At Dairy Park, a single female inhumation buried in a cist was covered by a kerbed cairn, on top of which a symbol stone (Fig. 8.11) was found recumbent, with the symbols facing down (Close-Brooks 1980: 328).
The find spots of the symbol stones at Dairy Park and Ackergill suggested to the excavators that the symbol stones were placed to mark the graves, and Late Iron Age dates obtained for the human remains at these sites (see Appendix 3) are not inconsistent with the proposed dating range of the symbol stones.

Interestingly, the inhumations involved at Ackergill, Keiss and Dairy Park were all cairn burials. As discussed above (8.5.3), the use of cairns was more common in Caithness and Sutherland than elsewhere in Atlantic Scotland, and was probably designed to make a strong statement in the landscape. The erection of symbol stones at cairn sites may have been part of the social message that was being broadcast. Clarke has argued that the use of Pictish stones can be seen ‘as the reaffirmation, or concrete expression, of established social memories through the use and display of symbols’ (Clarke 2007: 36). If this is correct, cairn burials with associated standing stones may have formed part of a local funerary tradition designed to stress the independent identity of groups in this area during a period of the Late Iron Age, before the spread of orthodox Christian burial and final disuse of the Pictish symbol stones.
In the final case, Dunrobin Castle, a slightly different practice is apparent, with the symbol stone actually forming part of the capstone of the burial cist (Ross 1854: 297). The association between human remains and a symbol stone here seems unmistakable, but the fact that the decorations on this stone would not have been visible is interesting. This use of a symbol stone as part of cist is so far without parallel, and seems more likely to represent re-use of a previously standing stone. The inhumation was, however, placed less than a kilometre from the Dairy Park cairn, and the two graves may be close in date.

8.6: The selection of people

The greater completeness of most of the formally buried individuals from Atlantic Scotland compared to the disarticulated material discussed in Chapter 6 makes this a group from which much more osteological data can be drawn. A close estimate of age could be made with 72% of inhumations (compared to 11% of disarticulated individuals) and sex estimation was possible with 73% of adult inhumations (compared to 30% of disarticulated adults). In addition, much more complete recording of stature, dental health and pathology was possible.

8.6.1: Age

The age graph produced from known inhumation burials in Atlantic Scotland (Fig. 8.12) bears little relationship to the age-at-death spread which might be expected from an Iron Age population; children are infrequent, and the majority of individuals
appear to have died between the ages of 20 and 50 years. This age-at-death data resembles that of modern developed countries, rather than that of developing countries with a high rate of infant mortality and low average lifespan to which prehistoric Europe is generally expected to conform (Acsádi and Nemeskéri 1970: 173).

It therefore seems clear that the rite of formal inhumation was not applied evenly across this society, but was predominantly afforded to adult individuals. This might suggest a link with achieved status, rather than inherited status.

However, this would assume that the inhumation rite can be linked with high status. If, instead, this funerary treatment represents an attempt to make a more complex statement about the dead or the living, it may be more accurate to say that adults were felt most suitable for this purpose, although juveniles were not entirely excluded.
8.6.2: Sex

The predominance of females amongst formal inhumations was mentioned in Chapter 5; 40 individuals have been recorded as female or probably female, compared to only 25 male or probably male (Fig. 8.13). It appears that women received inhumation burial more often than men. Atlantic Scotland may not be unusual in this respect; women also appear dominant in the long cist cemeteries of southern Scotland in the Late Iron Age (Williams 2007), and in Irish burials of this period (O’Brien 2009: 145). O’Brien has noted that prehistoric Irish burial mounds generally appear to have been associated with women in the early medieval period, suggesting that certain female figures did hold a special importance in death (O’Brien 2009: 145).
Fig. 8.13: Sex distribution of inhumations (where recordable)

If inhumation can be associated with high status, this would suggest an interesting social structure in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, with women able to access this form of funerary treatment more easily than men. Some scholars believe that ‘Pictish’ society in Late Iron Age Scotland may have been matrilineal, with women (from powerful families at least) wielding significant influence. The textual basis of this theory has been heavily criticised (e.g. Ross 1999; Fraser 2009), but there remains no reason to assume an inferior status for women in Late Iron Age society.

If, however, the inhumation rite reflects complex strategies by the living rather than the status of the dead, then the predominance of women should be interpreted in terms of social role. It has been suggested that funerary treatment is often the preserve of women in society, who hold the role of ‘custodians of social memory’; Williams has suggested that this may be particularly true of Pictish Scotland, where women frequently appear to have received elaborate burial (Williams 2007: 159-161). In this view, the preferential inhumation of women would not reflect their greater status in this society, but their greater religious or symbolic power in death.

8.6.3: Pathology

In terms of dental health, the individuals accorded formal inhumation do not appear to represent an unusual group. Rates of dental caries were comparable to those amongst the disarticulated material, and much less high than among the whole individuals deposited on domestic or ritual sites. Rates of dental hypoplasia, which is
indicative of childhood stress or malnutrition, were slightly but not significantly higher among the inhumed individuals than among the disarticulated material.

Healed fractures were recorded on seven inhumations, but only one definite example of inter-personal violence is present amongst the inhumed individuals: the peri-mortem sword cut to the cranium of Newark Bay 69/33 (Fig. 8.14). A violent death clearly did not exclude this individual from inhumation in the cemetery, and overall the evidence for interpersonal violence is lower among inhumations than for the human remains found on domestic sites - among which, it must be remembered, such evidence may be more easily missed.

The possible facial mutilation of the female Barvas skeleton (see 5.8.3) indicates a different process, perhaps a form of socially sanctioned punishment. As with the Skaill Bay inhumation, the prone burial of this skeleton may suggest an inverted or negative ritual process. As mentioned in Chapter 5, three individuals who were formally buried suffered from congenital conditions that would have impacted upon their health and appearance; of these three only the Skaill Bay individual survived into early adulthood. It seems fair to assume that none of these individuals would have had a chance to contribute to their society in terms of physical work. However, all received formal inhumation, which suggests that physical achievement was not a prerequisite for this funerary rite. This decision could instead have been due to these individuals having a special, not necessarily high, social status. Together with the mutilated Barvas burial, these inhumations of physically deformed individuals may suggest that certain individuals were singled out for this funerary process due to their unusual appearance and place in society, as has been argued may be the case with a number of bog bodies who exhibit obvious disabilities (Taylor 2003: 162).
8.7: Between death and deposition

Inhumation is often discussed as a simple, primary funerary rite, with little consideration given to the activities that would have preceded the burial (primary treatment of the corpse, the funeral ceremony etc.). The possibility that inhumation did not mark the final stage in mortuary treatment, and that the grave could be reopened and modified is also rarely discussed. Evidence for these processes is, however, available to archaeologists, and is demonstrated among the formal burials of Iron Age Atlantic Scotland (Fig. 8.15). These elements of the mortuary process may have been as important to past peoples as the inhumation event itself, and it is in these areas, potentially, that links could be sought with other forms of funerary behaviour being practised.
Evidence for a long transitional period between death and deposition may be sought in the state of individual bones, and in particular evidence of gnaw marks and weathering. It was mentioned in Chapter 5 that the human remains from inhumations in general are, surprisingly, no better preserved in terms of surface condition than the disarticulated human remains found on settlement sites. A significant number were heavily degraded, although this may be due to recent erosion and weathering rather than ancient exposure. Gnaw marks were also recorded on individuals from four inhumation sites: Westness and Newark Bay in Orkney, Loch Borralie in Sutherland and Northton in the Western Isles. Gnaw marks cannot be explained as modern damage; the bones must have been accessible to scavengers while still carrying some flesh. Possible defleshing cut marks were also found on Northton 3b and one skeleton from Newark Bay, again suggesting a more complex funerary process.
Additional evidence of a protracted mortuary process preceding inhumation might be sought in the absence of parts of the skeleton, particularly the smaller and more weakly attached elements such as the phalanges of the hands and feet, which could be lost if the body remained unburied long enough to become partially disarticulated. The smaller bones of the body are indeed under-represented in inhumations in Atlantic Scotland (Fig. 8.16). Although this general pattern of bone preservation is found in inhumations of most periods due to the poorer rates of survival, recognition and recovery of the small skeletal elements (Waldron 1994: 54), the variation between...
recovery rates of the large and small bones in the material from Atlantic Scotland does appear particularly large. It is possible that this is due to unusually poor archaeological recovery methods or preservation conditions. Alternatively, the greater absence of these smaller bones could indicate that they were not always included in inhumations, lost in the interval between death and deposition.

These clues suggest that in some cases there was a substantial interim period between death and burial, during which it was possible and perhaps even desirable for the body to be affected by the elements, scavengers or human interference. A lengthy interval before inhumation could have been socially required, to allow time for the proper funerary procedures. The primary treatment of the corpse and funerary activities that took place during this interval may have been very different from those that preceded the exposure, cremation or sea burial of other individuals in this period, but it is also possible that there were strong similarities in the funerary processes preceding the choice of two (or more) final depositional options. The inhumations recovered from Iron Age Atlantic Scotland may simply represent individuals removed from the normal funerary process, and accorded unusual final burial treatment.

Human interest in graves does not usually end immediately upon the deposition of the deceased, and archaeologists are becoming more aware of post-inhumation activities involving burial sites, inspired by social memory and the continuing influence of the dead on the world of the living. Burial cairns, for example, may have been raised long after initial inhumation, and graves may also have been reopened. At Cille Pheadair in South Uist the body of a woman, placed inside a stone cist, seems to have been disturbed after burial, with the torso turned onto its side and the sternum missing (Mulville et al. 2003: 27) (Fig. 8.17).
Although the sternum is not a bone that survives well archaeologically, this skeleton was well preserved and the ribs were clearly still in articulation on each side. For the thorax to collapse into this position naturally, with the sternum in place, would be unlikely. Instead, this deformation seems to have been caused by the deliberate opening up of the ribcage when the grave was reopened, perhaps to allow access to the inner organs, resulting in the removal or destruction of the sternum. Owl pellets recovered from the grave also suggest that it lay open for a significant period of time (Parker Pearson et al. 2004: 119).

A second potential case of an inhumation being disturbed for the purposeful removal of human remains is that of the skeleton nicknamed ‘Rosemary’ found on St
Ninian’s Isle in Shetland. The left arm bones of this individual between the shoulder and the hand were missing, although the scapula and clavicle, and hand and finger bones, survived in situ. It seems extremely unlikely that the relatively large humerus, ulna and radius would not have survived while these smaller bones did, and the unusual position of this skeleton, semi-prone, with the body crouched on one side and the head twisted at an angle (Barrowman in press), also suggests post-inhumation intervention. The most likely explanation for the absence of these bones would seem to be their purposeful removal after death, burial and natural decomposition; no sign of active dismemberment was found on the skeleton.

These two examples of the disturbance of graves provide one of the strongest links between this form of funerary behaviour and the use of human remains on settlement sites. It seems entirely likely that human remains were being removed to join in the more general practice of the circulation and deposition of human bones within this society. It is possible that this was done either with the consent or against the wishes of those who carried out the inhumation; the latter possibility would indicate conflicting attitudes to the correct treatment of the dead within Late Iron Age communities in Atlantic Scotland.

8.8: The meaning of inhumation in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland

Though many texts have been devoted to discussing the social and symbolic meaning of funerary rites such as excarnation, cremation and mummification, the same is not true of inhumation, which is often viewed as the ‘default’ way of dealing
with the dead, requiring no further explanation. In areas such as Iron Age Atlantic Scotland, however, where inhumation appears so rarely and varies so widely, archaeologists must attempt to answer the question of why it was re-adopted at all, and why in such a piecemeal fashion.

One factor that does not appear to be behind the increase in formal inhumation during the first millennium AD is the appearance of Christianity. The majority of burials pre-date the introduction of the new religion, and many later examples do not appear to be Christian in nature. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a single definitively Christian inhumation dating to the Late Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland, though Argyll provides three likely sites of this practice. This should not be surprising, as even in late Roman Britain, with its comparative wealth of burial evidence, the burials of Christians are rarely identifiable; ‘distinctions of faith did not produce distinctions in death’ (Hope 1999: 60).

In the Western Isles sporadic, individual inhumation along the west coast appears to have been utilised from the last few centuries BC. A group of flexed or crouched male inhumations, placed on the right side and often accompanied by pottery, can perhaps be recognised as a distinct group, but women and children also received this rite, and burial position, orientation, and grave elaboration varied widely. Galson in Lewis represents the only known example of a larger cemetery; the burials at this site have produced Middle Iron Age dates, and the absence of a later cemetery in this region appears particularly significant. No increase in the use of inhumation is recognisable towards the end of the long Iron Age, and no Christian burial grounds can be recognised. It seems that alternative funerary treatments must have dominated in this area throughout the period under study.
Very early inhumations are now known from two sites in Sutherland, but these are found over on the west coast, facing the Western Isles, and are probably best interpreted as part of this early inhumation tradition. A particularly characteristic group of burials, however, appear on the north-east mainland of Caithness and Sutherland from the mid-first millennium AD, involving both individuals and small cemeteries. Cairn burials at four sites appear to have been associated with Pictish symbol stones. This burial tradition may well be related to the contemporary long cist cemeteries of lowland Scotland, some of which involved cairn inhumation and were marked by Pictish symbol stones (Greig et al. 2000: 588), and this very visible form of burial seems to have been designed to demonstrate the identity and connection to the landscape of those chosen for inhumation.

A few larger cemeteries of extended burials, as well as more isolated inhumations, are found in Orkney during the last few centuries of the Iron Age, and several of these burial sites continued to be used into the Norse period. The sudden introduction of inhumation into this region during the Late Iron Age, in a relatively standardised form, seems to represent a very different process from that seen elsewhere in Atlantic Scotland, even in Shetland where earlier burials are found. Clearly some groups were adopting inhumation as their main funerary rite in this period, but the numbers remain small, and the dominance of women in cemeteries in this area suggests that a particular sub-group of the community, rather than the group as a whole, were choosing, or being chosen for, inhumation.

The predominance of adult women in inhumations during the long Iron Age can be argued to have been due either to higher status in life (a theory that might be supported by the presence of jewellery in five female burials) or greater symbolic
power in death, perhaps as the source of regeneration within society or as the guardians of social memory (Williams 2007: 161). Throughout the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland, in contrast, juvenile burials are rare. Juveniles appear to have received differential funerary treatment in many prehistoric and historic societies and it is notable that juveniles are dramatically under-represented in the long cist cemeteries found in lowland Scotland towards the end of the long Iron Age (e.g. Grieg et al. 2000: 606). Though juvenile inhumations are found in Atlantic Scotland, it seems that this was an unusual choice, contrasting with the frequent use of disarticulated juvenile remains on settlements during the long Iron Age.

There are several cases of formal inhumations being placed near to settlements, and it seems likely these are closely related to the placement of disarticulated and articulated remains on settlement sites, with these burials adding to the symbolic power of these places. The importance of a sense of place may also be reflected in the focus on a coastal location for inhumation in Atlantic Scotland. This apparently universal aspect of burial location may suggest a cosmology connecting the living, the dead, the land and the sea; the sea undoubtedly held great practical and symbolic importance for these communities, and formed a natural and obvious boundary. Claims to the sea should perhaps also be considered as a motivating force for the permanent memorialisation of the dead, in the same manner as claims to the land.

There is some evidence that primary funerary treatment preceding inhumation could be lengthy, and in this area similarities to or links with the fate of the majority of the unburied dead could be sought. The main link with the use of disarticulated human remains might seem to be the reopening of the graves at Cille Pheadair and St Ninian’s Isle, apparently for the removal of human remains, but the presence of disarticulated
human remains in some inhumations suggests that buried individuals were utilising this tradition, as well as on occasion being used to supply it.

The use of stone cists appears throughout the area under study, and seems to hint at the importance of the preservation of the intact body. Inhumation clearly marked a move away from earlier methods of corpse disposal, with the bodies of the deceased preserved whole, which makes it seem unlikely that disturbance of the corpse and removal of human remains could have been intended by those who carried out these inhumations. We have little evidence for widespread agreement on the correct treatment of the dead throughout the Iron Age in Atlantic Scotland, and this disturbance and use of the remains of inhumed individuals may suggest occasional active conflict over this issue.

Whether certain individuals were choosing the inhumation rite, or being used for it, remains uncertain. To modern western sensibilities, formal inhumation seems intrinsically more desirable and respectful than exposure or the removal of disarticulated human remains from a body, but these views should not be projected onto the past. Inhumation burial does not necessarily require greater effort, or indicate greater status, than alternative funerary treatments such as sending bodies out to sea and cremation. The elaboration of some graves with cairns, quartz pebbles and even symbol stones, does seem to show a significant effort being expended to mark the graves of particular individuals. Equally, however, many graves were isolated, uncisted, and unelaborated, with apparently casual body positioning or even prone burial, all of which are difficult to equate with high status. It is possible that inhumation burial, despite its very varied nature, represented a religious rather than a social choice for the inhabitants of Atlantic Scotland, but in the absence of the
motivating factor of Christianity it is unclear why this choice may have been made; too little is known of the religious beliefs of the inhabitants of this region.

Alternatively, this permanent placement of the dead within the landscape may have been a decision made primarily by the living. It would be unhelpful to entirely dissociate the inhumations discussed in this chapter from the alternative funerary treatments and uses of human remains clearly co-existing in Iron Age Atlantic Scotland. If it is assumed that disarticulated human remains were being actively used by these communities as part of their daily religious lives, it must be considered that the same is true of those who were given formal inhumation.

The way in which the dead were being used, however, may have been quite different. The potential power of the inhumation rite involves two factors, individualisation and permanence: the intact individual is preserved in a certain place in the landscape. In both of these senses inhumation may represent a breaking away from earlier traditions of the disarticulation of the human body after death, and the subsuming of the physical individual body into the spiritual community of the dead. The preservation of the intact bodies of certain individuals at specific places within the landscape of Atlantic Scotland may have been designed to achieve a different type of benefit for the living community; perhaps one founded on individual personalities, to do with claims to the land, or rights of access to the past.