

East Kirk of St Nicholas dig - 8th to 12th May 2006 - Week 15

12 May 2006 11:58

Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

Around 200 individual skeletons have been excavated so far, ranging in date from medieval to 18th-century.

They continue to provide great interest in a number of ways - not least in terms of the history of disease in the population of Aberdeen.

One health problem which we hear a lot about today is osteoporosis, a case of which was identified on site this week. Iraia found that the vertebrae and the pelvis of the elderly female skeleton that she was uncovering were particularly fragile and crumbly. When she lifted the upper arm bone, which you can see in the photo, she noticed that the bone was unusually thin, which would be consistent with the loss of density that characterises osteoporosis.



For some reason, this same woman had been buried 'the wrong way round', that is with her feet pointing west, rather than east, the normal position for Christian burials. We don't at the

moment have any explanation for that, but it could just be the result of a simple mistake.

I think I've mentioned before that many of the bones found are 'disarticulated' ones, from skeletons which have been disturbed by later gravedigging and have become separated.

Sometimes the gravedigger has gathered the bones together and returned them to the grave on top of the later burial.

On occasion these scattered bones are themselves of importance. One such example was uncovered this week - it is a skull (pictured below) which has had its top sawn clean off, presumably for post-mortem examination, perhaps in the 18th-century.



At the east end of the dig, right next to the west wall of the 15th-century St Mary's Chapel, we are now a long way down.

You can see that illustrated in the next photo where Shane Greer is preparing to take measurements for plan drawing. A lot of the measuring on site is done by triangulating from known points on a grid and transferring that data scaled down on to a plan - and yes, we do usually draw every stone of important features.

Shane is standing on a mortar floor surface which lies between the west wall of St Mary's Chapel (to his right), the 'sleeper' walls (one of them is behind him) which supported the 15th-century roof, and another big wall, of which more later.



Shane is 6ft 2 tall, so the floor he's standing on is well below the floor level within the 15th-century church, which we think was at the top of the wall behind him.

There's been a lot of 'scholarly' debate about the lower floor level where Shane's standing and what part it played in relation to the 'upper church' above and the nearby St Mary's Chapel slightly lower down. But the real answer will come, we hope, after a bit more digging.

Shane, who works for Aberdeen City Council at Westburn Tennis Centre, is on a two-week secondment at the dig. He says he's loving it! Shane's been helping us on a voluntary basis for about three years and has studied Scottish prehistory through an online Edinburgh University course.

In the next picture you can see the remains of the other big wall which I mentioned above.

We've been having learned discussions this week about its date - is it 12th-century, 14th-century? - but we do know that it has been cut through at a later date to bury someone.

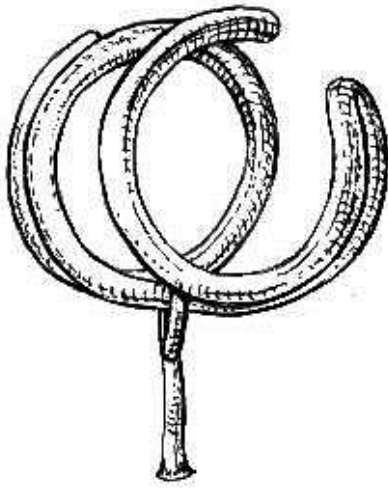
Ross is busy excavating the grave and you can see the large stones of the wall to his right and left. Digging a grave through a wall foundation of that size must have involved enormous effort, so we can perhaps assume that the woman who was buried here, or her family, must

have had influence or money.

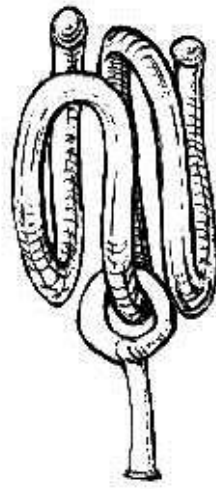


This would probably have been a desirable place to be buried, not very far from the high altar of the church. Ross found that the woman was lying at an unusual angle, slightly on one side, with her legs flexed and with one arm below her pelvis. Again, we don't yet know why.

Finally, I promised last week to show you a drawing of the little gold object, which we think is a piece of jewellery (possibly an earring?), in the hope that someone might be able to identify its function more precisely. It's on show inside the church at the moment too, so do go and have a look if you can.



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0 1cm

A horizontal scale bar consisting of three segments, used to indicate the size of the organisms. The total length is labeled as 1cm.