

III.

NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF A CHAMBERED CAIRN IN THE PARISH OF FARR, SUTHERLANDSHIRE. BY CATHEL KERR, M.A.

Having been brought up in the parish of Farr, Sutherlandshire, I have been familiar from my boyhood with the objects of antiquarian interest in the district. Amongst these are two groups of cairns in the seaside part of the parish. The Skelpick group has already been described in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, vol. xviii., p. 228. There is another group of four cairns to the eastward side of the parish church.

Rising from the road, and separating it from the township of Swordly, there is a considerable hill. Three of the cairns are on the top of the ridge, and the fourth is on the side of the hill, halfway between the top and the road. Two of the cairns are small and two are larger. A large one and a small one are so situated that there is a strong probability that they were purposely joined together. Northwards from this one, on the Farr end of the ridge, the remaining small cairn is situated.

Before reading Dr Anderson's account of his excavations among the Caithness cairns, in the *Rhind Lectures* for 1882, it was a question with me what purpose those cairns had served. Tradition was silent in regard to them. Their name, Carn Chaoile, did not help. Amongst the people of Farr there were various conjectures as to their purpose. Some called them the houses of the Fomorians, others said they were watch-towers. Though they commanded a very wide view of the north

of Sutherlandshire, yet their appearance made the last conjecture one far from accounting for their purpose.

During a short holiday in Farr a week or two ago, I found that the smaller cairn—of the two that are beside each other—had been broken into, and stones removed from it for building purposes. It had been opened from the top, and there was abundant evidence around the cairn that large slabs of stone had been removed from the interior. A little observation showed that there was the appearance of an internal chamber.

In case the work of demolishing it should be pursued further, I thought it best to employ some young fellows from the place to open up the chamber. A few hours' work served my purpose, and enabled me to take the rough sketches and measurements which I now send.

The smaller cairn is about 150 feet in circumference, and about 9 or 10 feet in height, and between it and the larger there is what seems to me to be a neck of stones joining the two cairns. The larger cairn is about 220 feet in circumference, and 15 or 16 in height. Most of the neck joining the two cairns is covered over with turf; but a very slight observation reveals the fact that underneath it the mass of stones is continuous. The apparent depth of stones is from 3 to 4 feet. It is most unlikely that this neck could have been formed by stones rolling from the top of the cairns.

The chamber, when opened, proved to be tripartite. The entrance is from the west or north-west side, between two upright stones, with a large heavy slab thrown across them. The passage is only 3 or 4 feet long, and about 3 feet high, and nearly the same in width. This leads into a small chamber measuring 6 feet by 3 feet. In front of it, on the north side, a large upright slab projects, and helps to form part of the end of the inner chamber and a division between the two on the south side. In all likelihood the stone corresponding to that one has been removed, so that there is nothing to mark the division between the chambers on that side. The larger chamber measures 6 feet 4 inches by 7 feet 9 inches. The sides are made up of large upright slabs and masonry, built up between the slabs. The corners are all rounded, and there is the appearance of vaulting by the stones overlapping one another. The height of this chamber at present is about 5

feet. The end of the chamber is made up by two upright stones, with nearly 2 feet of an entrance between them leading into the innermost chamber. This chamber is a very irregular oblong; indeed the ends are rounded. On an average it is 5 feet 9 inches long, by 33 inches wide, and 3 or 4 feet in height. It had the appearance of being covered over with slabs, some of which stood on edge inside; but of this I am not very sure, as the roofing of all the chambers had been interfered with.

Inside there lay on the floor a large quantity of broken stones and black earth. Underneath there was what seemed a mixture of ashes and earth, with numerous pieces of charred wood, but no charred bones as far as I could see. Underneath that layer there was ordinary gravel. I found some fragments of bones in the innermost part, and some in the larger chamber. They do not appear to me to be of very great antiquity. A small vitrified mass was found in the floor. As my time was very limited, I had no means of ascertaining if the cairn had anything of the external characteristics of the Caithness group described by Dr Anderson as "Horned Cairns."