

V.

NOTES OF THE DISCOVERY OF STONE CISTS AT LESMURDIE, BANFFSHIRE, CONTAINING PRIMITIVE URNS, &c., ALONG WITH HUMAN REMAINS. BY ALEXANDER ROBERTSON, Esq., ELGIN, F.G.S., &c.¹

During a visit to my friend Captain Stewart, at Lesmurdie, in the autumn of 1849, I was shewn a nearly perfect urn of coarse earthenware, which had then recently been found in a stone cist on the property. Mr John Taylor, the owner of the relic, informed me that the sepulchre had been accidentally discovered in digging a sand-pit, and that on gaining access to the chamber it proved to be full of earth and sand, in excavating which he had detected the urn and some half-decayed bones. He also stated that, not far from the same spot, his father had witnessed many years before the opening of another cist, the interior of which was quite free from earth. Its only contents were a skeleton in a bent position and an urn, and its floor was described as having been formed of small variously-shaped stones nicely fitted together. Mr Taylor further expressed his belief that more antiquities of the same kind might yet be met with in the neighbourhood, as in certain places the ploughshare occasionally encountered large stones, which the generally fine-grained nature both of the soil and subsoil led him to think were foreign to them.

Captain Stewart fully sympathized with my anxiety to make some further explorations, but the fields where the cists were supposed to be were then under crop, and this of course prevented any effectual search being made for them on that occasion. The same obstacle presented itself during several subsequent visits to the locality; but in the course of the year 1851 we were more fortunate, having succeeded in exposing three cists for the first time, as well as had an opportunity of inspecting two others which had been previously examined. All the relics found, that were of any interest, have been already presented to the Society by Captain Stewart and myself, and I have now the honour of communicating a notice of the observations made during their disinterment.

On the 21st May 1851, I accompanied Captain Stewart to Lesmurdie, and we were not sorry to learn, from Mr Taylor senior that the plough was then at work in the field where he had seen the cist before mentioned. The tenant of the farm, to whom we trusted for information as to the probable situation of the sepulchres, was from home; but, on going to the field, his son pointed out a

¹ The three urns here alluded to were presented to the Society's Museum by Captain Stewart of Lesmurdie and Mr Robertson last session. *Vide* Proceedings, p. 67 (*ante*).

stone which the plough had struck upon a day or two before, and which, he felt pretty sure, was an indication of the existence of what we were in search of. (Cist A.) After removing a quantity of earth mixed with stones of various sizes, an irregularly-shaped slab of mica-slate was exposed at a depth of about one foot eight inches from the surface of the ground. It lay horizontally, and measured about four-and-a-half feet in length by two-and-a-half in breadth. On raising the somewhat ponderous mass, we saw the upper edges of the side stones of the chamber, which appeared to be completely filled with firmly packed dark-brown earth, similar to the soil of the field, and shewing two runs of a mole on its surface. In removing this earth, it was found to be only superficial, the greater part of the cavity being occupied by a yellow micaceous sand containing a few pebbles, and identical in character with the arenaceous deposit out of which the tomb was excavated. The vertical walls of the cist were arranged in a nearly rectangular form, and composed of five slabs of mica-slate, two having been used for one of the longer sides. Its direction was nearly north-east by south-west, and it measured internally about three feet two inches in length, two feet in breadth, and one foot eight inches in depth. All the joinings of the various stones were carefully plastered with loam, evidently as a precaution against the intrusion of rain-water. The floor was paved with small stones, but the greater part of it was inadvertently broken up before we were aware of its nature. On

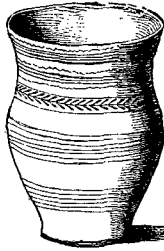


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

searching among the sand we found portions of bones,—in so decayed a state, however, as to be readily reduced to a sort of dryish paste on compressing them between the finger and thumb. From their condition it was evident that they must entirely disappear with the lapse of time; and although at first somewhat annoyed that none of them should be fit for preservation, I was in some measure consoled at finding a satisfactory explanation of the total absence of osseous remains, as well as of all traces of incremation, in several cairns which I had explored on the Brown Muir, near Elgin. Portions of what appeared to have

been teeth were met with at the south-west end of the chamber, and near them a rudely but profusely ornamented urn lying on its side, and filled with the same materials as the lower part of the cist was. This urn is now in the Museum of the Society, and is figured here (see woodcut, Fig. 2).

CIST B.—On the following day we returned to the ground, and found that our active assistants had already exposed the roof of a second cist, some of the stones of which had been come upon in digging a pit for storing potatoes. The grave in this case was larger than that just described. Its lid was formed of two massive pieces of mica-slate; over the junction of these was another slab, and on each side of it a smaller one. Through the chink of the lid we saw that the chamber was not full, and almost ventured to hope that, on raising it, we might behold the skeleton and its accompaniments in the same state as those which Mr Taylor senior had told us of. But we were disappointed, as about three-fourths of the cavity were found to be occupied by a mass of earth and sand, which reached the roof on the south-eastern side, and sloping downwards to the opposite one, left the rim of an urn exposed to view at the northern angle of the chamber. The lid of the cist was about two-and-a-half feet from the surface of the ground, and the longer axis of the chamber lay nearly NNE. by SSW. Four slabs of mica-slate formed its sides, the longer pair measuring three feet eight inches *horizontally*, one of the others two feet four inches, and the remaining one two feet. All the joinings of these stones were daubed with loam, as in the previous example. The depth of the chamber was two feet, and its floor was neatly paved with small flattish waterworn stones, such as are found along the margin of the adjoining river Deveron. From the careful way in which the variously-shaped pieces of the pavement had been adapted to each other, and imbedded in the same kind of loam as was used for closing the crevices of the cist, it became evident that considerable pains had been bestowed on the execution of this part of the work. The skull, which is now preserved in the Society's Museum, was found at the NNE. end of the chamber, lying on its left side (into which position it must have fallen when its ordinary attachments to the rest of the skeleton gave way), and with the lower jaw still in its place. It at first appeared to be in a perfect state of preservation, but on raising it a softened portion of the lower side remained behind. The upper side of the skull, where the earth only came in contact with one surface of the bone (and where, therefore, the moisture was less), was but little changed from its natural condition. The teeth, incisors as well as molars, were much worn, but all were sound; and although some of them now happen to be amissing, the whole were in their sockets when disinterred. A tibia and part of a humerus, both of the right side, were the only other bones that were found in a state for removal,

and they are of little interest, further than shewing, contrary to the vulgar opinion, that the stature of these ancient inhabitants of Scotland did not surpass that of their modern representatives.

The urn, Fig. 3, stood upright on the right hand side of the skeleton. Its height is $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches, and both in shape and style of ornamentation it strongly resembles one from Ratho, preserved in the Museum of the Society, although the latter contained ashes and human bones.

After securing the relics that have been mentioned, and when about to leave the cist as fully explored, Mr W. Taylor discovered, in a little mass of sand that had been left near the spot on which the urn stood, three chips of flint and some minute fragments of a dark brown oxide of iron: the latter exhibiting a peculiar fibrous structure on their surfaces were also presented with the urns to the Society's collection. The flints were cemented together by a ferruginous concretion of sand, the greater part of which was thoughtlessly destroyed in attempting to free the stones from the extraneous matter. A small remnant of the agglutinated sand is still however attached to the surfaces of the flints; but as I shall have occasion to refer more particularly to these traces of iron before concluding this paper, I postpone any further notice of them at present.

We next proceeded to re-open the cist which Mr Taylor senior had described to us, and as it was very near the surface,—so near indeed as to prevent the tillage of the soil above it,—the lid was speedily raised. The direction of the sepulchre was nearly the same as those of the others, and it lay almost in a straight line between them, at the distance of three yards from the first, and of five yards from the second. It had been opened more than once, and was full of earth, among which we found fragments of a large urn and some bones. Of the skull, nearly the whole of the frontal and a portion of the right parietal bones, together with the anterior part of the lower jaw, were met with. The cranium is of unusual thickness, and the incisors do not exhibit those flatly-worn surfaces so usually observable in teeth from cists. The upper portion of the right femur is of the usual size, but the humerus of the same side is diminutive.

Cist D.—On the 18th of August of the same year, Captain Stewart observed the edge of a flat stone projecting from a bank, where it had been exposed owing to the earth which originally covered it having been carried away during a flood of the rivulet below. The chamber in this instance was found to be larger than any of the others that we had seen, very rudely constructed, and filled with earth, the surface of which was marked by several mole runs. The direction of the cist was about north-east by north by south-west by south, and it

measured four feet four inches in length. Its greatest breadth was two feet four inches. The north-east end was composed of two slabs, of nearly equal size, and the north-west side also of two, but not joined in a straight line. At the south-west end four rough stones were laid one upon another, and five others were similarly employed to connect these with the south-east side, which was, as usual, made of a single slab. At the north-east end we found an urn ornamented like the others, but displaying less skill on the part of its artificer, which is shewn in Fig. 1 of woodcut. The vessel stood just at the junction of the two slabs already mentioned, and had been shattered by the shifting of one of them. The floor of this cist differed from the others in being unpaved. After a very careful search, no traces of bones could be discovered; and as the position of the urn shews that the trunk of the corpse could not have rested at the north-east end of the chamber, and it is not likely that it would have been placed against the rough stones at the other extremity, I am disposed to look upon the cist as a cenotaph, constructed in honour of the manes of some one whose body could not be recovered for the performance of the usual rites of sepulture. A few yards from this last sepulchre, and between it and the others, we found the remains of a fifth one; but beyond an addition to the number discovered, and shewing apparently that the arrangement of the graves was intended to be rectilinear, it presented nothing worthy of notice.

There were no superficial eminences, neither barrows nor cairns, to indicate the position of any of the cists. On the contrary, indeed, the ground seems to have been carefully levelled over them, with a view probably to prevent their detection and the risk of the disinterment of the deceased.

In direction the sepulchres varied only a few degrees, and they may be generally described as lying north-east by south-west. They differed considerably in size, but, with one exception (Cist D, where some of the side walls were formed of stones laid one upon another, and there was no pavement), their structure was similar. There cannot be a doubt that, as in the instance so often referred to as having been observed by Mr Taylor senior, the bodies, along with the urns, &c., had been originally deposited in empty chambers, the sand and earth found in the other cists having been introduced subsequently, partly carried along with the percolating atmospheric waters, and partly cast in by the workings of moles. In the only two cases in which we found osseous relics, the head had, in the one, been placed at the north-east, and in the other apparently at the south-west end of the chamber, so that there seems to have been no uniformity of practice in this respect.

The contents of the urns were most carefully examined, and were found to consist of nothing but the same micaceous sand as occupied the lower parts of

the chambers. There was not the slightest discoloration of the sand at the bottom of the vessels, and this would certainly not have happened, had they been deposited with any solid provisions in them. Even supposing that mice or other vermin had devoured the food, there would still have been evidence of the fact in the stains resulting from the excrements, which such creatures invariably leave behind them ; and, as nothing of the kind existed, it may be concluded, either that the urns had been empty when interred, which is very unlikely, or that they had contained water or other beverage for the use of the departed.

In describing the second Cist B, I mentioned the occurrence of chips of flint held together by a ferruginous concretion of sand, and of fragments of oxide of iron, with a fibrous surface in contact with them. Mr W. Taylor, who found these relics, was, happily, quite unbiassed by any knowledge of the Copenhagen theory of periods, and persisted in his investigations after I felt perfectly satisfied that we had seen all that could be worthy of inspection. There was no appearance of iron in the sand of any other part of the cist, although I scrupulously examined it immediately after the flints were found ; and, notwithstanding that such tombs are usually supposed to belong to the stone period, I have no hesitation, from the appearances which came under my notice, in expressing a conviction that the flints were originally accompanied by a steel (iron?) and tinder ; the decomposition of the former having supplied the latter with its oxide of iron, as well as furnished a cement to the sand which enveloped the whole.

There can be little doubt that sepulchres of very various dates, and containing the remains of people of very different races and creeds are included by antiquaries under the general denomination of primæval cists. Those to which this paper refers may, I think, be characterized as follows :—Cist without any superficial mound, either of the nature of barrow or cairn ; the chamber about three feet or a little more in length, and containing a single unburnt skeleton, and an urn, either empty (when the cavity happens to be so likewise), or shewing, by the character of its contents that it had not, when first deposited, held any solid matter ; with or without chips of flint and traces of iron in their vicinity ; with or without ornaments of jet, or other similar mineral ; but without weapons.

Cists of this very peculiar class have been found in considerable numbers in dry, generally somewhat elevated, spots, all along the eastern coast of Scotland, and they have also occurred, although apparently in fewer numbers, on its western side. They are far from rare in some parts of Germany, and, indeed, the figure of one at Rossleben, in Prussian Saxony, in Prof. Kruse's *Deutsche Alterthümer* (B. ii. Heft. 2, Tab. I. fig 5) might, except that the floor, like the

other sides, is formed of slabs of stone, and that the urn is different, very well serve as an illustration of some of those at Lesmurdie. Similar cists appear to have been found in England, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, and in various others of the northern states of Europe; but there is too often such a want of precision in the published accounts of these antiquities, that it seems premature to attempt to found any ethnological generalizations upon them, although they may, I think, be pretty safely regarded as Teutonic. As to the absolute, or even the comparative, date of the mode of sepulture referred to, little can be said; but its era must, at all events, be advanced from the so-called Stone Period to the so-called Iron Period. Whether it was practised during the earlier or the more advanced ages of the latter is also quite uncertain; it seems, however, very unlikely, from the elaborate character of the work expended on the cists, and the infinite variety of the ornaments sculptured on the urns, that such a custom could either have been invented, or carried into execution, by a very rude and uncultivated people. My own impression is, that the antiquity of these sepulchres has been very much over-estimated.

(The skull found in cist B is rather well formed, large, full, and rounded; broader posteriorly, rather flattened at the junction of the occipital and the parietal bones; but these last are unsymmetrical, the left parietal bone projecting more backwards than the right.)