V.

NOTES OF EXCAVATIONS OF TUMULI IN CAITHNESS, MADE IN THE SUMMER OF 1856. By A. HENRY RHIND, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

My excavations during the past summer included four tumuli on the estate of Sibster, in Caithness, which, individually, presented no very marked features of interest; but as some of the results have a certain connexion with several points of interest, there is an additional reason for recording them besides that which is always paramount—the importance in primeval archæology of preserving every authentic fact disclosed by actual exploration.

These four mounds, although in no case more than five feet in perpendicular height, were rather conspicuous objects along the banks of the River Wick. They were the more prominent, because, within a linear space of not more than a mile, two of them, a hundred yards apart, rose as green-swarded hillocks from a swampy strath, and the others were raised on elevated undulations bounding the river valley.

Of these last, No. I., a heap of rich black mould, upwards of fifty feet in diameter, although thoroughly examined at all points to its base, was found to contain only a layer of burnt matter interspersed with fragments of incinerated bones near the centre, and on a level with the surrounding ground. One rather remarkable circumstance, paralleled in another instance subsequently to be described, was the presence of a number of large stones, which had been laid in some untraceable arrangement about four feet above the deposit, and therefore hardly beneath the surface of the tumulus.

On turning over the earth of No. II., which was not of inferior dimensions to

[1] I ought rather to say *had*, for the stone at Deer has been broken up for building purposes since the drawing of it was printed for the Spalding Club.

the preceding, a heap of stones was disclosed as the nucleus. These surrounded the more immediate receptacle of the body, which there was reason to believe had been a cist or small vault, seven feet long. The ends stood firm, having consisted of two upright slabs; and fragmentary portions of rudely-coursed building showed that the sides had been formed in that manner. Cremation had not been an adjunct of the burial; still the action of time had not the less disintegrated the bones, except the skull, which rested about two feet from the western end, but in that hopelessly pulpy state which, in early graves, so constantly encourages, only to disappoint, the hopes of the excavator. Nearly midway between the skull and the eastern end was a shallow cup of coarse clay, five inches and a half in diameter.

It is frequently suggested to archæologists that they ought to weigh and estimate carefully whatever traditions may relate to the objects of their investigations, and although I am not of those who would look for much reliable history embalmed in such portable fashion, or for many uncorrupted memoirs of the past in so intermingled a stream, I would readily join in allowing a considerable measure of importance to those embodiments of the popular ideality. But the line can hardly be too stringently drawn between the two elements of folk lore—between the legends which illustrate ethnological characteristics of a people, and the floating memories which localize these, or otherwise attach to antiquarian remains. My own experience of the latter, as applied to early vestiges—not only in the north of Scotland—has been what is naturally, and, I believe, almost invariably the case, that they are systematically erroneous and misleading. We nevertheless find them very usually elaborately recorded in descriptions of the relics to which they relate, as if from them were to be derived a reflected light. But it might be well to bear in mind, in these days when antiquarian literature is assuming such extensive proportions, and treatises sometimes threaten to become too diffuse, that economy of space and time is an object; that traditions such as are alluded to might often well be spared; and especially that all traditions should be viewed in their proper light, and assigned their due position as psychologically rather than archæologically significant.

As a practical exemplification of the misplaced identifications so commonly imposed on ancient remains, I may be permitted to instance the case of the mound now in question. It stands on a slight eminence, overlooking a ravine which, as it happens, was the scene of one of the latest battles, on a considerable scale, if not the last, which was fought in Scotland in the prosecution of private interests. This serious fray, in which 600, or, according to another statement, 1000 men were engaged, having originated in a claim of Campbell

of Glenorchy, an ancestor of the Marquis of Breadalbane, to the earldom of Caithness, left a strong impress on patriotic or rather local feeling, the more deep because the most recent stirring incident of the kind, and because on the side of the Caithness men alone not fewer than eighty are related to have been slain.[1] It is therefore not surprising that, in the neighbourhood of this field of Altimaclach, the memories of the battle should have had an absorbing influence, and that, from the circumstances affording more than ordinarily reasonable grounds, there should here be another illustration of the manner in which events and places are, in the popular narratives, conglomerated together into the wildest anachronisms. The tumulus was not only known as "Campbell's Mount," but was asserted to cover one or more of the combatants in the fatal battle. It needs no argument now to prove that the grave contained a very different tenant from any chief or leader who fell in fight not farther in the past than the 13th of July 1680.

The mound No. III. had an irregular diameter of sixty or seventy feet, and along the top of it, barely protruding through the sward, were two rows, fourteen feet apart, of large stones fixed on edge, while several others of similar appearance lay scattered about more or less overgrown by the turf, and suggesting that they had originally been set up in like manner to complete whatever had been the design. The further trenching of the whole tumulus showed that this erection must have been superficial with reference to the deposit; for while none of the stones penetrated to a greater depth than two feet and a half in the mould, of which alone the whole heap was formed, a layer, near the centre, of burnt earth mingled with charred wood and incinerated bones, the sole evidence of sepulture, was fully two feet deeper.

No. IV. occupied an area considerably smaller—not more than 35 feet in diameter; and its construction proved to have been effected by a quantity of earth raised over a heap of stones about half the bulk of the whole mound. All these stones were small, rough cubes, not unlike, but two or three times as large, as the broken metal for a Macadamised road; and in the great majority of instances they presented the dull red appearance, and friable tendency to fracture indicative of their having been subjected to the action of fire. A few pieces of charcoal occurring among them, as well as traces of burnt bones, confirmed the evidence afforded by the characteristics which they themselves exhibited. Memorials of precisely the same simple style as this are familiar types, and are also sufficiently common in Caithness, where they are sometimes found composed solely of the moderate heap of small fire-marked stones without the external covering of earth.

[1] M'Farlane MS., Advocates' Library.

It is scarcely necessary to notice, in so cursory a manner, that these four tumuli, in the simplicity of the interments, without the not unusual accompaniments of primeval burials, find many coincidences, particularly in the north, and add to a large aggregate of facts of a like nature. A careful survey of these has for some time seemed to me an inquiry of decided importance, which would probably involve a necessity for material modification of the current classifications, and limit the applicability of the psychological deductions which have commonly attributed to primeval ages certain feelings on the subject of futurity, without sufficient reference to the special divergences indicated by observed data, which, to say the least, will hardly verify the exactness of such a universal scheme of primeval religion. I cannot obtrude this subject here, especially as I hope shortly to develop, in a more appropriate and extended form, some of the views to which a consideration of this matter is calculated to lead.

Archæologists are familiar with the desire of fellow-labourers who deal also with the past, but in wider cycles, with the stage rather than the actors, to aid their inductions regarding the history of the former by authentic illustrations from traces of the presence of the latter. Grand although the whole scope of geology undoubtedly is, there is perhaps no investigation which it professes to undertake more immediately or universally interesting than that which relates to the state of the earth's surface at the epoch of man's occupancy, and the changes which may have occurred since that event. With regard to our own island, there are scattered about within the province of the antiquary many more facts than have hitherto been discussed in their geological connexion, which with advantage might be concentrated in one focus. Among these would be classed the circumstances under which the two last of the tumuli I have been describing were situated. Raised along the bank, a few yards from the margin, of a river, with their bases, at least in one case, not more than three feet above the ordinary level of the water, they, along with a third in their immediate vicinity, became for days, sometimes for weeks together, absolute islands during the winter and even summer floods. It is true the channel of the stream has been altered in late years, and made to pass in closer proximity to them; but, as this change was effected merely to straighten a boundary, the level of the new channel scarcely if at all differs from the old, except perhaps in being deeper, while the nature of the flat strath is such that it may be assumed to have been covered by the overflow, to at least an equal extent, when the river meandered through it in tortuous windings before being guided into its present more direct course. Then, as now, the greater part of this swampy tract was, I have been assured, equally submerged when the floods came down, as indeed could hardly fail to have been the case. But supposing that this alteration of

the channel has had the effect of throwing more water around the tumuli, and that the amount of inundation now is, while it lasts, greater than in former times from the extensive thorough drainage discharging more suddenly and simultaneously into the bed of the river the products of heavy rains, still all deductions on these accounts would be totally inadequate to bring the facts in harmony with an hypothesis that, in this locality, any change in the nature of an elevation of the land had occurred, at all events, since the formation of those graves; while, on the other hand, the supposition of a depression, to which the circumstances in question would of themselves more directly lead, is apparently not less forbidden by other natural phenomena, and by other correlative antiquarian remains. In short, it is difficult to perceive how any change in the level of land and water can have occurred in this district since the funeral rites were performed for the ancient dead, whose dust was hoarded beneath these simple mounds.

March 9, 1857.

COSMO INNES, Esq., Vice-President, in the Chair.

Upon the usual ballot, ALEXANDER SINCLAIR, Esq., was elected a Fellow, and A. W. BUIST, Esq., a Corresponding Member of the Society.

The Donations to the Museum and Library were laid on the table, and included—

A Cinerary Urn 8 inches in height, 5½ across the mouth, and 3¼ across the bottom (it is figured in Mr George Logan's notice of its discovery); and

An Iron Axe Head, 7 inches in length by 2½ inches in breadth across the face; recently dug up at the Windygoul, during the formation of the new carriage drive through the Queen's Park to Duddingston. By the FIRST COMMISSIONER of H. M. WORKS and PUBLIC BUILDINGS.

A Pair of Ornamented Antique Two-pronged Forks, with Tortoise-shell Handles, inlaid with Silver, and styled Penny-Wedding Forks. By WILLIAM DOUGLAS, Esq., R.S.A.

Three Glazed Floor Tiles, 5½ inches square, of different coloured patterns, from Shaftsbury Abbey, Dorsetshire. By J. T. IRVING, Esq., London.

Elephant's Tusk, with Burmese Sacred Figures carved on it in high relief, apparently of great antiquity. By JAMES JOHNSTON, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, Vol. I. Part I., 8vo, for July 1856. By the SOCIETY.

A Granite Grain-Rubber, a flat, oblong, slightly concave Stone; with round-topped Sandstone-Rubber or Bruiser; a primitive implement for crushing or grinding corn, found near Wick. By A. HENRY RHIND, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge, Vol. VIII., 4to. Washington 1856. By the SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, U.S.A.

Surnames. 8vo. Boston, 1858. By B. HOMER DIXON, Esq. By the AUTHOR.

Historical Summary of the Post-Office in Scotland, compiled by T. B. LANG, Esq., Comptroller, Sorting Department, General Post-Office, Edinburgh. 8vo. Pp. 18. Edinburgh, 1856. By F. ABBOTT, Esq., F.S.A. Scot., Secretary to the General Post-Office for Scotland.

Mr STUART, Secretary, reported that, in furtherance of the resolution of last meeting, he had addressed the following communication to the Lord-Clerk-Register, the Marquis of Dalhousie, on the subject of Notaries' Protocol Books:—

Draft Letter to the Marquis of Dalhousie.

My Lord,—I have been directed by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to represent to your Lordship, as Lord-Clerk-Register, the following circumstances connected with a class of records, called Notaries' Protocols.

From a period as early as about the middle of the Fifteenth Century, Notaries were required to record their acts in draft, in their Books of Protocol, which thus contain a variety of transactions, both ecclesiastical and secular, public and private, not elsewhere preserved.

Besides such Protocols as are already in the General Register House, a great many are also to be found in the custody of public and private bodies in various parts of Scotland. These are little known, and not easy of access, while they yet contain valuable materials for the Genealogist, the Topographer, and the Historian.

The Society of Antiquaries entertains a high opinion of the value of these Records, if collected in a central and accessible Repository like the General Register House, and has been led to understand that many private custodiers will not be unwilling to part with them for such a public purpose, if any expression of your Lordship's willingness to receive these Records into the General Register House were made public.

The Society, therefore, desires me to draw your Lordship's attention to the subject, and to state, that if your Lordship is inclined to make such public announcement as is above indicated, the Society will be ready to co-operate in the attainment of this object, by using its influence with the present custodiers of these Records for their transmission to the General Register House. I have the honour to be, &c.

He had since received from the Deputy-Clerk-Register, the following communication:—

H. M. General Register House,
5th March 1857.

Sir,—I have submitted to the consideration of the Lord-Clerk-Register your letter of the 2d instant, addressed to him by desire of the Society of Antiquaries.

I am directed to state, that Lord Dalhousie is ready to accept the custody of such additions as may be offered to the class of Records termed Notaries' Protocols, which are already in the General Register House, and to provide for their security, as well as to render them accessible to the public, under the usual regulations.

I am to state, however, that his Lordship, as the head of a great department,

is not prepared to address the public in the form of solicitation, nor to interfere openly with the collection of such Records, unless he can do so of right, and with authority. If, however, the Antiquarian Society can, by their influence, induce individuals or public bodies to surrender voluntarily into the hands of the Lord-Clerk-Register such Protocols as they may possess, the safe custody of them shall be provided for in the General Register House. I remain, Sir, your most obedient servant, W. P. DUNDAS.

JOHN STUART, Esq.,
Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries.

It was resolved that a circular should therefore be addressed, in name of the Society, to the custodiers of these protocols, suggesting the desirableness of having them transmitted to H. M. General Register House, Edinburgh, where they would be safely preserved, and made readily accessible in all time coming; and the Fellows of the Society were requested to furnish the Secretaries with the names of those custodiers of Protocol Books known to them. A committee was appointed for carrying out the arrangement.

Mr STUART also reported that the sanction of the Lords of the Treasury, and of the Board of Manufactures, had now been received for giving the use of certain articles in the Society's Museum to the Art Treasures Exhibition intended to be held at Manchester; whereupon the Society agreed that these articles, as selected by the Executive Committee of the Exhibition, should now be permitted to be sent for exhibition.

The communications read were as follows:—