

## II.

REMARKS ON THE ANCIENT STRUCTURES CALLED PICTS' HOUSES AND BURGHES, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BURGH OF MOUSA IN SHETLAND. BY JOHN STUART, Esq., F.S.A. Scot.

Among those fragments of the handiwork of the early inhabitants of Scotland, which have come down to us, there are perhaps none more calculated to throw light on their social state than the various habitations erected by them, which are to be found in most parts of the kingdom; while it must be added that no class of our antiquities are disappearing so rapidly. There would be less cause to regret the removal of these ancient structures if we had previously obtained any authentic plans, with measurements of them, such as would enable us to compare the curious variety of construction which on a limited scale took place. We are not, indeed, without many useful descriptions and plans of the buildings in question, preserved by Pennant and other writers, but they were made when the strict accuracy which is now required, and which is indeed indispensable for arriving at satisfactory comparisons, was not much regarded.

Perhaps the first attempt made by our rude forefathers to obtain shelter was to burrow under ground. Of the subterraneous houses which they constructed there have been discovered a very great number in all parts of the kingdom, although in the north they seem to have been most abundant. They have been frequently described in our Transactions, and generally consisted of one small apartment, with, in some cases, one or or two smaller ones branching off from the main one. They were formed of walls of stones, converging as they ascended until they were narrow enough to receive the long flagstones by which they were covered.

After a time the chambers were constructed on the surface of the ground, and the protection and shelter of the former arrangement were gained by surrounding the structures with mounds of earth or huge cairns of stones; as in that at Quanterness, near Kirkwall, described by Barry, in his *History of Orkney*, p. 98; at Wideford Hill, in the same neighbourhood, of which Mr Petrie furnished a minute account to Dr

Daniel Wilson, which will be found in his "Prehistoric Annals," p. 84; and at Kettleburn, in the county of Caithness, described by Mr Rhind in the *Archæological Journal*, vol. x. p. 212.

The apartments thus formed were generally towards the centre of the cairn or mound, and were reached by a narrow passage of varying length from the outside of the cairn. They were built on the same principle as the underground chambers,—namely, by the gradual convergence of the walls and overlapping of long slabs. The arrangements at Kettleburn included a well-built well, about 9 feet deep. It was roofed over so as to afford a basis for part of the wall which passed over it, and was reached by steps from one of the eight apartments which yet remained of this building, some parts having been removed for building-purposes.

It has at times been doubted whether these structures could have been designed for the abode of man in any stage of his progress, as the arrangements do not seem adapted to secure almost anything of what are now regarded as the mere necessities of existence. We rarely find any arrangement for giving light to the inmates of these gloomy mansions; nor should we expect that they used fires, as apertures which would permit the escape of smoke are very rarely found to form parts of their plan. At Quanterness and at Kettleburn some of the apartments seem to have reached a height of from 9 to 11 feet, but generally they were about half of that height. The passages by which the chambers are reached were about 2 feet square, and those leading from one chamber to another were of the same dimensions.

But the remains which have been found in many of these structures leave no room to doubt that they were at one time the abodes of man. At Kettleburn, heaps of ashes were observed in most of the chambers, and throughout the whole building there were plentifully strewed about bones, shells, and fish bones. Tusks of the boar and fragments of the horns of the deer also occurred. A pair of bronze tweezers, a bone comb, bits of querns, fragments of pottery, and many other articles, were likewise found, which, through the kindness of Mr Rhind, now form part of our Museum.

Four pieces of a human cranium were embedded in a heap of ashes in one of the chambers at Kettleburn, which heap likewise contained several

fragments of pottery and the bone comb already mentioned. At Quanterness, bones were also found in the apartments, very much consumed, but sufficiently entire to show that they comprised the bones of men, birds, and some domestic animals. In one of the apartments an entire human skeleton in a prone attitude was found. It is added by Barry,<sup>1</sup> that no chink or hole for the admission of air or light could be seen; that the chambers were so small that a person could hardly stand, and, in some cases, hardly sit upright; and he concludes that they could never have been the abode of human beings. But it may be doubted whether air, light, and roominess were the principal requisites in these early days, as it is certain that specimens of human habitations, nearly as deficient in all these requisites as the Picts' Houses, may yet be found. M'Culloch has described a house in North Rona, of which he says: "The very entrance seemed to have been contrived for a concealment or defence that surely could not be necessary, as no enemies were likely to be tempted to assault North Rona; but it was probably calculated to prevent the access of the winds, since it is also an Icelandic fashion. What there was of wall rose for a foot or two above the surrounding irregular surface, and the stacks of turf helped to ward off the violence of the gales. The flat roof was a solid mass of turf and straw, the latter hardly to be called thatch; and the smoke, as usual, issued out of an aperture near the side of the Troglodyte habitation. We could not perceive the entrance till it was pointed out. This was an irregular hole, about 4 feet high, surrounded by turf, and, on entering it with some precaution, we found a long tortuous passage, somewhat resembling the gallery of a mine, but without a door, which conducted us into the penetralia of this cavern."<sup>2</sup>

It may perhaps be allowed to conjecture that the burghs were a farther development of the resources of the early inhabitants. The chambers, which at first were underground, and then built on the surface, but covered over with earth or stones, were at last disposed in the walls of round towers in tiers above each other. And, first, I may remark, that it appears to me a very noteworthy circumstance, that while the north-east coast of Scotland has a class of monumental stones with sculptures

<sup>1</sup> Barry's Orkney Islands, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup> Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland, vol. iii. p. 319.

not as yet known in any other part of the world, so the more northerly part of that tract of country, and the islands on the north and west, should be distinguished by the frequent occurrence of the structures which have been called burghs, and which also seem almost peculiar to our country.

Many round forts of various kinds may be pointed out in different countries, but there are some characteristic features of the Scottish burghs which distinguish them from all others with which I am acquainted. They may be said to consist of two concentric walls, distant from each other about 6 feet at the base, converging to the top, where they unite. "Within the space between the walls"—says Dr Wilson, "Annals," p. 421—"a rude staircase, or rather inclined passage, communicates round the whole, and a series of chambers or tiers of interspaces, formed by means of long stones laid across from wall to wall, so as to form flooring and ceiling, are lighted by square apertures looking into the interior area. In this way, while the lower galleries are roomy and admit of free passage, the space narrows so rapidly that the upper ones are too straitened even to admit a child."

The only variety which occurs in these structures is, that in some cases there are separate chambers on what may be called the ground floor, and also a similar arrangement above, as at Dunalishaig and Achirnakhig, described by Cordiner.<sup>1</sup> At Burrowfirth in Sandness,<sup>2</sup> and at Snaburgh in Unst, there are separate chambers in the thickness of the wall on the ground floor, and above these the double walls with galleries begin, and are continued to the top. Near the manse of Houbie, in Fetlar Island, are two ruined burghs, and contiguous to one of them were the foundations of numerous small houses now in ruins.<sup>3</sup> At Mousa, Mr Low observed similar foundations of houses about 14 feet long, and 6 or 8 broad. They were placed between the burgh and the extreme point of the rock<sup>4</sup>—in this arrangement resembling those circular foundations which are generally found in or near the hill forts in Wales, in Northumberland, and in our own county in the White Caterthun near Brechin—

<sup>1</sup> Antiquities and Scenery in Scotland, pp. 74, 118.

<sup>2</sup> Low's Tour in 1774, MS., pp. 105, 125, formerly in Dr Hibbert Ware's, now in Mr D. Laing's possession.

<sup>3</sup> Hibbert, p. 388.

<sup>4</sup> MS. Tour p. 151.

where the position of the burgh or fort afforded a much-needed protection to the humble dwellings beside them, and—as in later times, the village was always found to rise near to the strong keep of the feudal baron.

It has been suggested that the Grianan of Aileach, in the county of Donegal, “the palace of the northern Irish kings from the earliest age of historic tradition down to the commencement of the twelfth century,” has been a structure of the same character as the Scottish burghs; but an examination of the plan of this great work, given in the Ordnance Survey of Londonderry,<sup>1</sup> leads me to a different conclusion. Neither do I regard Staigue Fort, in Kerry, nor the great fortress of Dun Ængus, in Aran, in the county Galway, as of the same character as our Scottish burghs. The last has, however, some points of resemblance. “It originally consisted of four barriers of uncemented stones, the spaces between the barriers or walls varying between 640 and 28 feet, defended upon the exterior by a kind of *chevaux-de-frize* formed by large and jagged masses of limestone set in the clefts of the rock upon which the fort stands. The inner barrier, which in some parts is ten feet in thickness and twelve in height, and which in its thickness contains a chamber containing but two or three persons, is composed of three distinct walls of irregular masonry, lying close together, and apparently forming one mass.”<sup>2</sup>

As in the case of our sculptured stone monuments, so it was long the fashion to ascribe our burghs to the Scandinavians; but this theory, unlikely in itself, has been entirely repudiated by modern Danish antiquaries who have had the means of comparing these structures with those of Scandinavia, and of whom one, not the least competent (Mr J. J. A. Worsaae), declares that “they have no resemblance whatever to the old fortresses in the Scandinavian north, and are to be regarded as of Pictish or Celtic origin.”<sup>3</sup>

It has been already remarked, that the burghs are confined to the more northerly parts of Scotland and the adjacent islands. Our infor-

<sup>1</sup> Ordnance Survey, Ireland, county of Londonderry, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Wakeman's Handbook of Irish Antiquities, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> The Danes and Northmen, p. 233.

mation, however, is not sufficiently accurate to pronounce conclusively on this point; for the accounts which occur of ruined forts of a circular shape in other parts of the country, are too vague to admit of any comparison being instituted. Thus, we are told, that in the parish of Fortingall, in Perthshire, there were circular forts, of which the ruins of fourteen or fifteen are still distinctly traceable. The diameter of the circles within walls (which are generally eight feet thick) is sometimes sixty feet. That they were real habitations there can be little doubt; for it is quite evident that in some of them there were several halls or apartments, extending from the wall, which served as a common gable, towards the centre.<sup>1</sup>

But if we should believe that the burghs are not to be found except in the localities to which they are generally supposed to be confined, there must have been something peculiar in the circumstances of the inhabitants to have given rise to these peculiar erections; and if we recollect the incessant and sudden attacks to which they were for long exposed by the Norse rovers, we may conceive that the burghs were found suitable places of refuge for the people and their cattle, while their enemies were threatening an invasion; for, as Dr Wilson has observed ("Annals," p. 429), it was improbable that the Northmen would abandon their vessels and lay siege to the burghs, which were very numerous, and not likely to yield to the sudden dash with which these hardy rovers so frequently carried everything before them, if the inhabitants had once been able to make good their retreat within their lofty walls. Accordingly, the burghs appear to have been mere places of refuge, with no external opening or other arrangement for enabling their occupants to act on the offensive.

We are not without historical evidence of the occupation of Mousa. In the fourteenth century, Margaret, the mother of Earl Harold, having listened to the addresses of Earl Erland, contrary to the wishes of her son, the lovers fled to the burgh of Mousa, which they garrisoned and provisioned. It was then besieged by Harold; but it would appear from the notice of the event in Torfæus ("Rerum Orcad. Hist." p. 131), that his principal hope of success was from cutting off supplies, and starving

<sup>1</sup> New Stat. Account, Perthshire, p. 550.

the garrison. His other affairs would not permit of the time requisite for this, and a reconciliation took place between the parties. It afforded similar shelter to a loving couple in the tenth century, when Björn Brynjulfson, a distinguished Norwegian king and merchant, having carried off Thora Roaldsdatter, and finding that her father would not permit him to marry her, he sailed westward, and at last landing on Mousa, took up their temporary abode in the burgh. Here he celebrated his marriage, and remained over the winter; but finding that King Harold had designs against him, he again put to sea, and landed in Iceland.<sup>1</sup> It would appear from these events that Mousa was only occasionally occupied, as it was open to receive these roving lovers whenever their fortunes drove them to require a retreat. This would seem to support the opinion that the burghs were principally used as places of refuge from the storm of Scandinavian invasions, and that, after the Norwegian settlement in the country, they were not required for their original purpose.

I have said that these ancient memorials are rapidly disappearing before the advancing agricultural improvements, and other less justifiable causes, which are everywhere occurring. The burgh of Cullswick is described by Hibbert, in 1822, as only rising a few feet above ground; while, within the memory of man, it was above twenty-three feet in height; but since that time the demands of improvement have become much more rapid and inexorable.

When all these circumstances are considered, it will be regarded as a matter for congratulation that one of the most perfect specimens of the burghs is yet standing on the island of Mousa, one of the Shetland group. I am sorry to add that its present condition is far from satisfactory, while, fortunately, it is not irremediable.

It will be in the recollection of members that, at the April meeting of last Session, a letter from Sir Henry Dryden to the Secretary was read, in which he called attention to the decayed state of the tower, and added, that while a small outlay at present might preserve the fabric, it would, if neglected, probably become a mere ruin. In consequence of this letter, and an opinion expressed by Sir Henry, that a moderate sum

<sup>1</sup> Worsaae, p. 236.

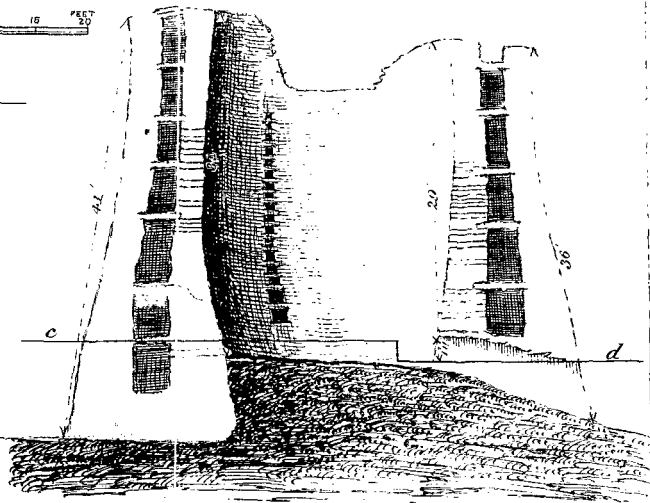
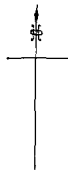
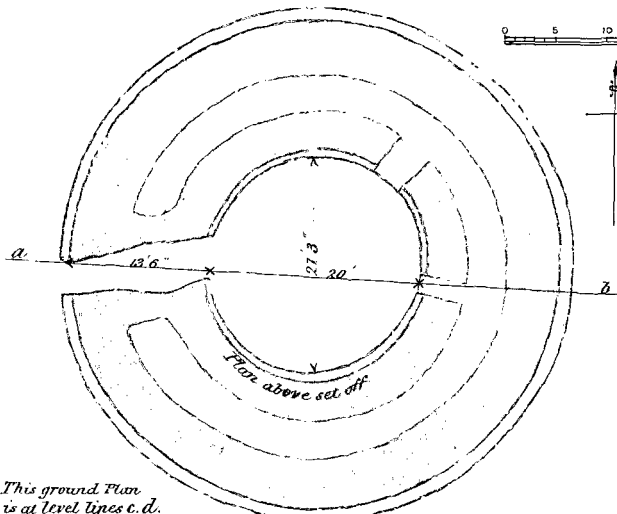
would be sufficient to carry out the proposed repairs, some of the Members agreed to aid in the undertaking, and with what had been subscribed by Sir Henry, and Mr Bruce, the proprietor of Mousa, the sum required was made up.

The Secretary then communicated with Mr Bruce on the subject, and found that gentleman ready to permit the operations to be carried on, as well as to subscribe towards the work. It was, however, judged to be prudent to get the report of a practical mason before commencing operations; and Mr Balfour of Balfour and Trenaby, at the request of Mr Laing, despatched Mr James Barron, who has had considerable experience in the architectural restoration of the Cathedral of St Magnus, to inspect and report on the state of Mousa, and the extent of the operations necessary for its safety. Accordingly, in the autumn of last year, Mr Barron, after the necessary inspection, in a letter to Mr Balfour, dated 30th August last, reported that "he had found the Tower in a very decayed state. From its being built without mortar of any kind, parts of the building are bulging out in several parts, each to the extent of about six square feet, and which will fall in course of a very short time, and, of course, weaken the rest of the building. The top of the wall will require to be levelled up, two parts of it having fallen down, measuring about nine feet in length by five feet in height. The inside being filled up with rubbish, would require to be cleared out to a depth of at least three feet. I consider that £45 would be required to put the place into anything like an ordinary repair to save the fabric from tumbling down in the course of a few years."

I have therefore ventured again to bring the subject before the Society, in the hope that they will sanction an appeal to the public for the additional funds necessary to secure an end the desirableness of which they have already recognised.

Mousa is not interesting merely to the proprietor of the ground on which it stands, or to the inhabitants of the Shetland Islands. It is as an authentic fact in the early history of the country that it claims to be regarded; and it would be a cause of bitter regret hereafter to all who are interested in the history of human progress, if it should be permitted to be blotted out from its records.





*This ground Plan is at level lines c. d. of Vertical Section*

*H. Dryden del.*

GROUND PLAN

VERTICAL SECTION ON LINE *a b* OF GROUND PLAN.

*Printed and Published by James Ballantyne, Edinburgh.*

BURGH OF MOUSA, SHETLAND.

[Mr Stuart's paper was illustrated by drawings made by Sir Henry Dryden, Bart., in 1852, now in the collection of the Society (see Plate XXIII.); and Professor Simpson exhibited sketches of the burghs in Glenelg, and stereoscopic views of the great fort of Dun Angus, on the coast of Galway, in Ireland.]