

II.

NOTICE OF EXCAVATIONS AND DISCOVERY OF CISTS, CONTAINING LARGE STONE URNS, IN STRONSAY, ORKNEY. BY GEORGE PETRIE, Esq., CORR. MEM. S.A., SCOT.

While spending a fortnight last July in the island of Stronsay, I heard that two months previous to my visit, some stone cists and urns had been discovered near a small cottage in that island. I went to the place without delay, and got all the information I could obtain from the cottar and his wife, who had both taken much interest in the discovery, and had preserved the cists and their contents from injury in the hope that I would have an opportunity of examining them.

The cottage is within a few yards of the crest of a hill which gradually slopes down towards the sea on each side. The cists and urns were found in a low artificial mound of earth and stones about fifty yards in length, which crowns the ridge above a cottage bearing the name of "Orem's¹ Fancy." The cottage is on the property of Mr Balfour of Balfour and Trenabie, to whom I communicated the discovery, and from whom I obtained permission to make any excavations I might consider necessary.

On my arrival at the place, I saw some fragments of a stone urn, which I was told had been dug up about five years ago. The urn was not in a cist, had no covering stone, and was buried in the mound about a foot below its present surface. The cottar was trenching that end of the mound when he turned up some pieces of the urn, which, according to his account, was broken when he found it. All the frag-

¹ The surname of a man, not uncommon in the north of Scotland.

ments had been lost before my arrival, with the exception of those which I labelled as No. III., and sent to the Society's Museum.

A small cist, eighteen inches long and one foot wide, was discovered at a short distance from the broken urn (No. III.) The cist was without a cover or bottom stone, rested on hard clay, and was filled with earth intermixed with ashes.

Another cist had been opened near the south-west corner of the mound. It contained a small quantity of burnt bones and ashes. At a distance of about seven yards from this last mentioned cist there was a circle formed by rolled beach stones of an oblong shape; each stone was about a foot long, and they all stood on end about a yard apart. Within this circle two small cists were found, each containing, as usual, a small quantity of bits of burnt bones, ashes, and bits of charcoal. I did not see the cists, as corn was growing over them, and the circle of stones had been destroyed; but some of the stones were lying on the mound and were pointed out to me.

My attention was next directed to the spot where a cist containing a large stone urn had been discovered in May 1869, but had been again carefully covered up and so preserved from injury. The cist was reopened on my arrival, and I examined it and the urn very minutely, measured them carefully, and made sections and sketches before the urn was shifted from its original position in the cist. The cist was 2 feet $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long on one side, 1 foot 10 inches on the other; and was 1 foot 11 inches wide at one end, and 1 foot 10 inches at the other; and was 1 foot 11 inches in depth.

The urn (*a*) stood on the bottom stone of the cist, as shown in the annexed woodcut (fig. 1, p. 350), and was covered by a piece of clay slate (*c*) rudely dressed to a circular shape.

A quantity of small pieces of burnt bones (*b*) lay in the bottom of the urn (*a*) to a depth of four or five inches. Several lumps of "cramp" or vitrified matter to which bits of bone adhered, were found among the bones, with one or two fragments of a human skull. One of the ends of the cist was carefully taken out, but the urn was so shattered, that I could only remove it piecemeal. The upper part of the urn, to an average depth of about four inches, came up in one piece, but even in that there were one or two ugly cracks. The urn evidently had been

long in the dilapidated condition in which it was found. Indeed, all urns of a similar material when discovered in Orkney are almost invariably cracked, or falling to pieces.

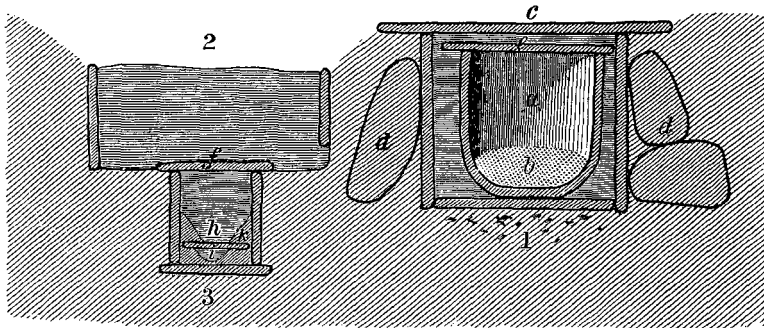
A considerable part of the mound was under cultivation, and oats were growing on it when I examined it, but the remainder was in coarse natural grass, so I set the cottar to dig in those parts of the mound which appeared most likely to contain cists or urns. At a depth of a few inches, in the first spot selected, stones were found in great abundance, and on digging them up, a large flat stone was reached, about eighteen inches below the surface of the mound. The earth having been carefully removed from the stone, it was then lifted, and the urn, whose fragments were labelled No. II., and sent to the Society's Museum, was exposed to view. It was not enclosed in a cist, but was embedded in clay. A small quantity of fragments of burnt bones was in the bottom of the urn, which preserved its form while it remained in the clay, but was so much shattered that it could only be removed in small pieces. I found that the clay which surrounded it bore unmistakable traces of fire, and was mixed with ashes and pieces of burnt stones; and a careful examination of the urn with its contents and whole surroundings, led me to conclude that the body whose remains were before me had been burnt on a mound or pile of clay and stones, which had afterwards been piled around the urn before it was finally covered up from view.

The bottom of the urn (No. II.) was so thin that a piece had apparently fallen out before the bones had been placed in it, and a lozenge-shaped stone, grooved around the edges, had been fitted into the hole where I found it when I lifted the urn.

The next excavation was made close to cist (fig. 1). A few inches below the surface a cist (fig. 2) was found filled with earth, but without a covering stone. It had the appearance of having been previously opened; but remembering that in former excavations I had found the bottom stone of one cist serving as a cover to another below it, I scooped out the earth till I reached the lower edge of one of the side stones, when I discovered a flat stone (*f*) lying across the bottom of the cist. I lifted the stone, and found it to be the cover of a small cist (fig. 3) in which there was nothing but some red clay (*k*) in the bottom, and a bowl-shaped cavity (*h*) in the clay. An inch or two of the surface of a flat stone was visible

at the bottom of the cavity, and this naturally suggested the idea that the stone so seen was the bottom stone of the cist, and that the cist had never been used for interment. On second thoughts I cleared out the clay, and then discovered that the stone on which it rested was a circular disc of clay slate, tolerably well dressed, and of a diameter nearly equal to the width of the cist. On lifting this circular piece of slate, I found that it covered a small quantity of burnt bones lying in another cavity (*i*) in some clay which had been laid on the true bottom stone of the cist.

The accompanying figure shows the relative positions of the cists (figs. 1, 2, and 3), with their contents and internal arrangements.



Cists and Large Stone Urn Found at "Orem's Fancy," Stronsay.

I felt a special interest in the excavations in the mound at "Orem's Fancy," as about eighteen years ago a large block of stone lying on the mound attracted my attention. A friend who was with me lent a helping hand in an endeavour to lift the stone, but we were unable to move it, and we therefore dug away the earth from its lower side, and then tilted over the stone into the excavation. At a depth of a few inches beneath the large stone, I found a small cist filled with dry peat moss, in which lay a small piece of rock crystal (probably an amulet or charm), but nothing else. The piece of crystal is still in my possession. The small cist had been constructed on the covering stone of a larger cist which contained some fragments of burnt bones and ashes. Before leaving the spot I filled up the cist with earth. During my late excavations,

I recognised the mound as the same in which eighteen years ago I had found the two cists just described, and after a careful examination, I came to the conclusion that the cist (fig. 2) is the larger and lower of the two then discovered. If this supposition is correct, as I believe it is, the arrangement of the cist is very curious and interesting. First a small cist (fig. 3) had been constructed, 1 foot 1 inch long, $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, and $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. On the bottom stone of this cist a quantity of clay had been laid, and a bowl-shaped cavity (*i*) made in the centre of the clay. The cavity had been nearly filled with burnt bones and then covered by a piece of clay slate dressed into a circular form. More clay (*h*) had then been placed in the cist to the depth of about a couple of inches, and another cavity (*h*) formed in it, leaving an inch or two of the centre of the circular piece of slate exposed. There was no deposit of bones or ashes in this upper division of the cist, and on lifting the cover, my impression was that the cist (apparently empty) had never been used for sepulchral purposes. It was only when I lifted the circular stone, which was a sort of false bottom, that the bones were exposed to view. The cist (fig. 2) had been constructed above the cist (fig. 3) and was much larger, being 2 feet 7 inches in length, 1 foot 9 inches in width, and about a foot in depth. It contained some burnt bones and ashes as I had ascertained eighteen years ago, as already stated, and on its cover had been placed the small cist in which I found the bit of rock crystal. This upper cist was of the same dimensions with the lowest. The cist (fig. 1) containing the largest urn was so close to the cist (fig. 2), that I am inclined to think the former was also covered by the large block of stone to which I have referred.

I expect that more cists, and perhaps urns also, will be discovered at "Orem's Fancy" if the mound be trenched over.

The largest urn (*a*, in fig. 1) was of an oval form at the mouth, which was 1 foot $8\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter in one direction, and 1 foot 6 inches in the other. It measured 1 foot 5 inches in depth and 1 foot 3 inches across the bottom—all outside measurement.

The smaller urn (not figured), also of an oval form, measured on outside 1 foot 7 inches across the mouth, by 1 foot 3 inches; and was 1 foot 3 inches in depth, and about $10\frac{3}{4}$ inches across the outside of the bottom.