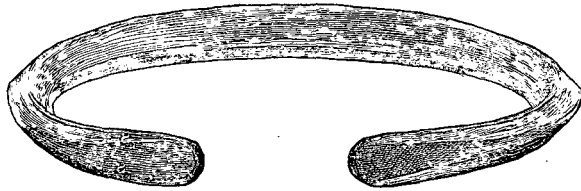


## III.

NOTICE OF THE DISCOVERY OF EIGHT SILVER RINGS OR ANCIENT WRIST OR ANKLE RINGS, IN CISTS NEAR RATTAR, DUNNET, CAITHNESS. BY MR ROBERT CAMPBELL, OF THE PAROCHIAL SCHOOL, DUNNET.

An idea of the form of these rings may be conveyed by supposing a square bar of silver, about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch on the side, cut in lengths of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches, and weighing about two ounces, to be bent, not on the flat, but on the angle, till the two extremities, which are a little flattened and rounded, approach within little more than an inch of each other. They are nearly the same size, weight, and shape, and they have no ornamental markings. One of them is shown, of the full size, in the accompanying woodcut.



Silver Armlet (one of seven) found in a Cist at Burn of Rattar, Caithness.

The locality in which they were discovered is situated immediately above the sea beach, about 100 yards to the east of the Burn of Rattar, at an ancient ruin, on a green level plat, projecting to the sea in a semi-circular form, and elevated a few feet above high water, from which a sloping ridge of slaty rock runs out a considerable distance. The ruin is locally known by the term "Kirk o' Banks," and the rocky ledge as the "Kirk o' Taing." There are other ancient remains on this green. The four walls of an oblong rectangular building of undressed and uncemented stone on the extreme north-east of the above plat are distinctly visible, though mostly grown over with grass, and an elevated heap across the enclosed area gives it the appearance of having been divided into two unequal apartments. About sixty years ago the walls stood some 6 or 7 feet high. The building, which stands east and west,

was 36 feet long by 15 feet wide outside. Around this, the foundation of a rude stone wall or dyke, enclosing a nearly square area, which lies more to the south than the other three sides, is also distinctly traceable all round. A drain, about 18 inches wide and the same in depth, the sides sloping to a few inches at the bottom, was being cut nearly parallel to the wall of the chapel, and led to the discovery of the rings.

The soil consists of a darkish sandy mould mixed with sea and land shells, and abounding with broken slaty stones, as if they were the rubbish of a building, and of the same nature as the adjacent rock. Any larger stones occurring were mostly rotten, and crumbled into fragments by a stroke of the pick. On either side of the drain, the edges of stones of a larger and stronger kind, set vertically in the ground, appear above the grass in several places. These have not been touched. The tract along this drain has long been used as a cart road, leading to the beach for sea-weed, and the soil may have been much abraded in consequence, but it is still about the general level of the green. Traces of human bones were frequently met with in the course of this excavation.

In cutting the drain, the workmen came upon several pieces of slaty stones, some on edge and others flat, about a foot below the surface, with traces of bones, that crumbled into dust, in casting out which they observed one of these rings, which they mistook for a coffin handle, and threw it aside. There was no trace of an urn or anything enclosing it, nor empty space. The ring found alone differs from the others in having a wider opening and appearing rather larger.

They came upon several larger stones, some of them arranged as the sides of a cist, but the space within was a jumble of small stones, earth, &c. A slab some 2 feet by  $1\frac{1}{2}$  feet covered the whole, the top of which was some 6 inches below the surface of the ground. On striking the pick in among the small stones after the slab was removed, seven rings came up, one being broken by the force of the stroke. This made the men examine them more closely, and without paying much attention to the evident traces of bones, &c., or disposition of the remains, the whole was shovelled out. The rings were shown to some neighbours, by whom I was informed of the circumstance, and a blacksmith by melting a small portion of the broken one made out that they were pure silver. Immediately on being informed, I communicated with the men and secured

the safety of the relics, by informing Mr Brims, the fiscal at Thurso, who took possession of them for the Crown. (Five of the rings have been deposited in the Society's Museum by the Queen's Remembrancer.)

The ruin is generally spoken of as an ancient church and churchyard. There is a man nearly 105 years old in the neighbourhood, formerly a farm servant at Rattar, still possessing all his faculties, who remembers several interments being made in the place, but not in this part of the enclosure—in particular, the crew of a boat who were lost on the coast; and as at that time unchristened infants were not admitted to the parish churchyard, they were frequently buried here and at several other old church foundations through the parish. A number of other old people confirm this statement; several such graves are shown marked by rough flat stones from the beach. It is, however, particularly to be observed, that no modern interment is known to have been made at the *back* of the ruin, where the rings were found, there being a decided dislike to burying behind a church in the place; even in the parish churchyard none will bury at the back or north side of the church, while, strange to say, all the cist graves appear to be on the north side. This disposition I particularly noticed at the chambered cairn or mound of "Hattle," at Castlehill also.

Since writing the foregoing, I am informed by several parties that they remember seeing the walls about 5 feet high, that the place was reputed to be an ancient chapel, and that it was divided into two unequal apartments by a middle wall. The door was very low.

If I might venture an opinion of the nature and origin of this and similar structures on the Caithness and Sutherland coast, of which there were seven in Dunnet and seven or eight in Canisbay, I should be inclined to connect them with the first introduction of Christianity into the north by the missionaries of St Columba. "Kilcomb," or St Columba's Church, on "Island Comb," or "Island Naoinh" (pronounced Naeveé), Saints' Island, as it is called by the natives, at Skerray, in the parish of Tongue, is the same kind of structure.

*Other Ancient Remains in the Neighbourhood.*—About a furlong to the east of "Kirk o' Banks, where the coast consists of precipitous rocks cut into deep "goes or creeks," on the top of a peninsular rock, between two of these "goes," there is a remarkable mound called the "Hillock of Haugy Goe," about 40 feet diameter, covering the whole area of the

summit, to all appearance the remains of a brough, with a visible *entrance over the western edge of the precipice.*

All round the outside of the mound the edges of the stones appear as of a rude wall tapering inwards, overlaid with earth and generally covered with grass. On the land side it is low and hollow, as if the soil and wall at that side had been removed, and the roof fallen in. Nearer the land several large slabs set vertically in the ground appear a few inches above the turf.

A detached stack-like rock stands about fifty paces nearer the sea, which surrounds it at high water, of the same height as the shore, the perpendicular and precipitous sides of which can only be scaled at one point. The soil on the top has been scooped out in the middle into two basin-like hollows, with a high sloping rim all round the outer edges. This rock is called the "Castle Foot."

About 100 yards to the west of "Kirk o' Banks," close to the "Burn of Rattar," there is what appears to have been a brough or extensive cairn, the soil and stones of which have been mostly removed.

Still farther west along the shore, but farther removed from the sea, in a field called the "Cairns Park," there are, within a few yards of each other, three mounds of the same ancient type. One of these, when viewed from the east, is shaped like an inverted boat. It lies north and south, and is some 30 paces long. It has a flatter and more irregular appearance from the other side, which is to the rising ground. Large stones on edge appear in several places, and some blocks lying flat, where the soil has been partly removed. A few paces westward, a smaller and conical mound stands, showing some rude building, as of an internal chamber, where the sheep and cattle have rubbed away the soil.

About 100 yards to the west of this the remains of a brough are seen. A great part of the soil and stones have been removed, but the entrance, formed of large slabs, part of a rude stair in the wall, and the general outline, can still be traced. What is most remarkable about all these structures, is the number of large stones set on edge. The adjacent shore supplied these in abundance, and of any size and shape wanted. Similar remains exist at Ham, in the links of Dunnet, at Castlehill, Thurdistoft, and Reaster, at Murkle, Sibmister, Hill of Olig, and in fact all over Caithness.

Should the present accidental discovery turn the attention of men of science to the investigation in a more systematic manner, of the extensive materials for antiquarian research abounding in this county, it will fully answer the purpose of the writer.

Mr Anderson added the following remarks on this communication :—

The Kirk o' Banks, in connection with which these silver relics were found, appears, from Mr Campbell's description of its ruins, to be of considerable antiquity. The smallness of its size, 36 feet by 15 feet, its being built with undressed and uncemented stones, and its having no traditionary dedication, are all indications of antiquity. On the other hand, the fact of its having a nave and chancel forbid the supposition of its belonging to the very earliest period of ecclesiastical buildings in Scotland. The oldest chapel known in Caithness with nave and chancel is that at Lybster, in Reay, of which Mr Muir says: "The diversified shapes and sizes of the stones, and the primitive form and smallness of the entrances to the nave and chancel, would suggest extreme earliness of date; whilst, on the other hand, the refined character of the ground-plan would indicate a period not more remote than the twelfth century." Judging from the sketch given by Mr Campbell, the ground-plan of Kirk o' Banks is more primitive and less refined than that of Lybster.

Some indication of the probable date of this deposit may, however, be found in the rings themselves. They agree in form, size, and weight with those found in the great hoard discovered on the opposite side of the Pentland Firth, at Skaill in Orkney, in 1858, which has been supposed to be referred to in one of the Runic inscriptions of Maeshowe as "a great treasure buried out north-west." That hoard is dated by the Cufic coins which formed part of the treasure. It is evident that it could not have been deposited earlier than the date of the latest coin, which is one struck at Bagdad in the year 945.

It is recorded in the Saga of King Hakon Hakonson, that when he passed southwards on his way to Largs, in the year 1263, he levied a tribute of rings from Caithness. The Saga says: "He sent men over to Caithness to bring contributions; the Caithnessians submitted to the tax, and King Haco appointed collectors to receive it." There is then in-

corporated in the narrative a stanza of one of the Skaldic songs, which represents the king as imposing tribute,—“the ransom of their lives on the dwellers of the Ness,” and adds that “all its tribes were terrified by the steel-clad exactor of rings.” In another strophe given in the same Saga, the conquered Scots are described as “the forlorn wearers of rings,” and they are spoken of as “hand-rings,” so that it may be inferred that such ornaments were not out of use so late as the middle of the thirteenth century.

The fact of these rings being found in cists points to one of two conclusions, either that they were buried with the occupants of the cists, or placed there subsequently for concealment, the grave-ground being selected for better security. The cists appear from Mr Campbell’s description to have been short ones, but we do not yet know when burial in short cists ceased.

It is related in the 15th chapter of the “Orkneyinga Saga,” that a bloody sea-fight took place in the year 1046, off this part of the Caithness coast, when Earl Thorfinn, who then lived at Gills, within sight of Kirk o’ Banks, opposed the landing of his nephew, Ronald Brusison, who came from Orkney to invade Caithness, with thirty ships. Thorfinn had sixty ships, but they were much smaller, and after a long and bloody fight he was obliged to draw to land. Before he resumed the battle, in which he was ultimately successful, the Saga states, that besides his wounded he landed seventy corpses, which would of course be buried there. The locality of the fight is said, in the Saga, to have been off Raudabiorg, which can only mean Red Headland or Red Borg. It is only in the neighbourhood of Dunnet Head that the red beds of the Old Red Sandstone appear, and it is also in this immediate neighbourhood that we find the only modern name answering to Raudabiorg, viz., Rattar Borg, now marked on the maps as Brough of Rattar. Here or hereabout, then, we must look for the burying-place of those who fell in the fight of Raudabiorg. Thorfinn and his men were Christians, and if the Kirk o’ Banks were then in existence the probability is that the dead would be buried in its consecrated ground. This, however, is merely conjectural, and must be taken for what it is worth.

The boat-like mound mentioned by Mr Campbell must either be one of the long cairns of which we have several curious examples in other

parts of Caithness, or it must be one of the singular Norse burial-mounds, called ship-graves, no well-authenticated instance of which has yet been found, or at least recorded, in Scotland, though they occur in great numbers in Norway, and may be said to be peculiar to the Viking period of Norwegian history.

The hillock of Haugy Goe seems from the description to be one of the chambered cairns, divided into compartments by upright slabs, which are so common in Caithness. The Norse name applied to the goe or creek, "Haugy Goe," or the creek of the Haug or Burial Cairn, appears to indicate that the cairn is pre-Norse, and that the creek was named from its cairn being already a conspicuous land-mark when the Norsemen began to frequent the Pentland Firth.