

V.

NOTICE OF EXCAVATIONS IN CAIRNS IN STRATHNAVER, SUTHERLANDSHIRE, IN A COMMUNICATION FROM MR DONALD MACKAY, SKELPICK. BY JOHN STUART, LL.D., SECRETARY.

While engaged in collecting materials for a report to the Rhind Committee in 1866, on the remains in Caithness and Sutherland, which were likely to be suitable for examination, I had the opportunity of examining a group of remarkable chambered cairns in Strathnaver, and have made reference to them in my report. (Proceedings of the Society, vol. vii. p. 296.)

It appeared to me that it would be of importance to ascertain the structural character of the chambers and galleries in these cairns, as well as to discover if any traces of burial still remained.

The remoteness of the place makes it difficult to get the labourers necessary for such work, but Mr Mackay, the farmer of Skelpick, was so good as to undertake it.

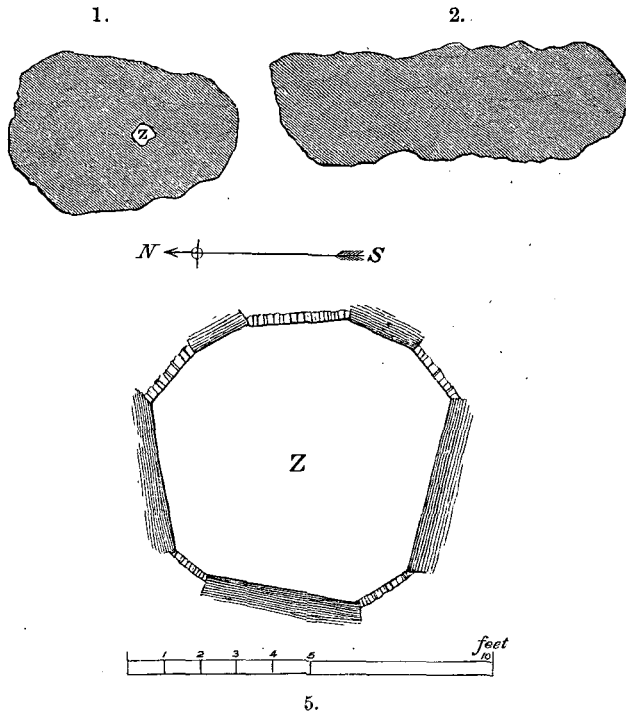
Accordingly, in the month of October 1867, that gentleman sent to me a statement with the result of various diggings which he had superintended, accompanied by sketches of the chambers so far as they had been traced. I then requested Mr Mackay to pursue his investigations somewhat farther, by clearing out the passages or galleries which led to the chambers, and by digging into the ground in both of these with the view of detecting traces of any deposits which might have been made, and then to make careful plans of the whole.

I have not yet heard from Mr Mackay, but I have reminded him of the matter, and in the meantime I submit to the Society the interim report of that gentleman, together with the sketches already made by him.

“SKELPICK, THURSO, 11th October 1867.

“DEAR SIR,—I write to inform you that, in accordance with the instructions contained in your letter of the 13th ult., I employed men to open up the several cairns in this neighbourhood visited by you last year, and regret to say that so far as we have gone we have found nothing.

I enclose you sketches and ground-plans of two of the cairns, along with explanations of the same. We also cleared out the chambers formerly opened in the round cairn to the south of this house, but found



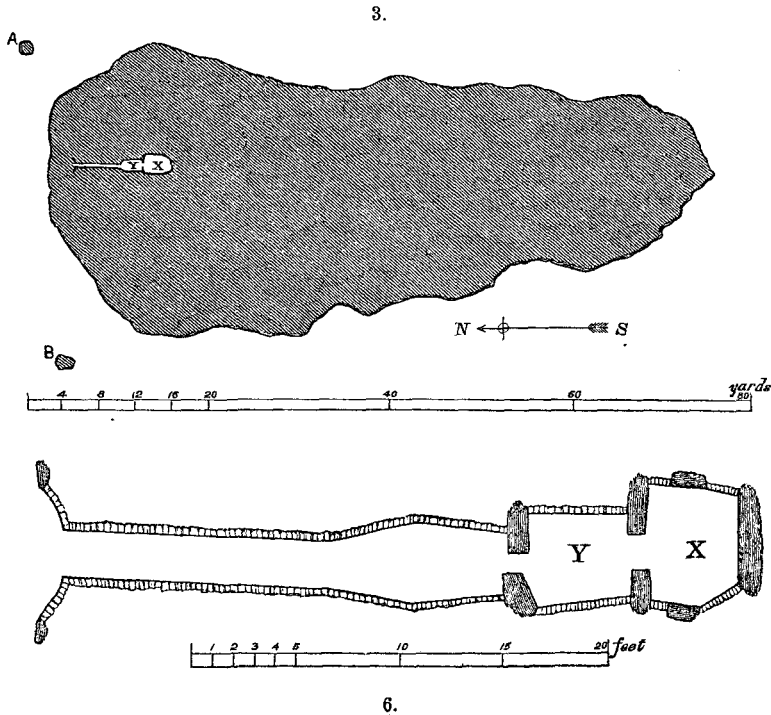
Ground-Plan of the Group of Three Cairns at Skelpick, Strathnaver,
 Figs. 1 and 2. Ground-Plans of the First and Second Cairns.
 Fig. 5. Enlarged Ground-Plan of the Chamber of First Cairn.

nothing. Having found nothing in any of them, I did not think it proper to proceed farther without first acquainting you.—Yours faithfully,

“DON. MACKAY.”

EXPLANATIONS OF PLANS OF CAIRNS.

Group of three Cairns (see the plans, pp. 520, 521).—This group of



with enlarged Ground-Plans of their Chambers.

Fig. 3. Ground-Plan of the Third Cairn and its Chamber.

Fig. 6. Enlarged Ground-Plan of the Chambers YX in Third Cairn.

A and B are Standing Stones in front of the Cairn.

cairns is situated near the road leading to Skelpick, a little south of the shepherd's house. It consists of three cairns (figs. 1, 2, and 3) in succes-

sion, as shown in the plan on pp. 520, 521. No. 1 was first opened at Z, where a chamber was found about 8 feet deep, some of the stones forming the side being of that height. No entrance was found to it, or if there had

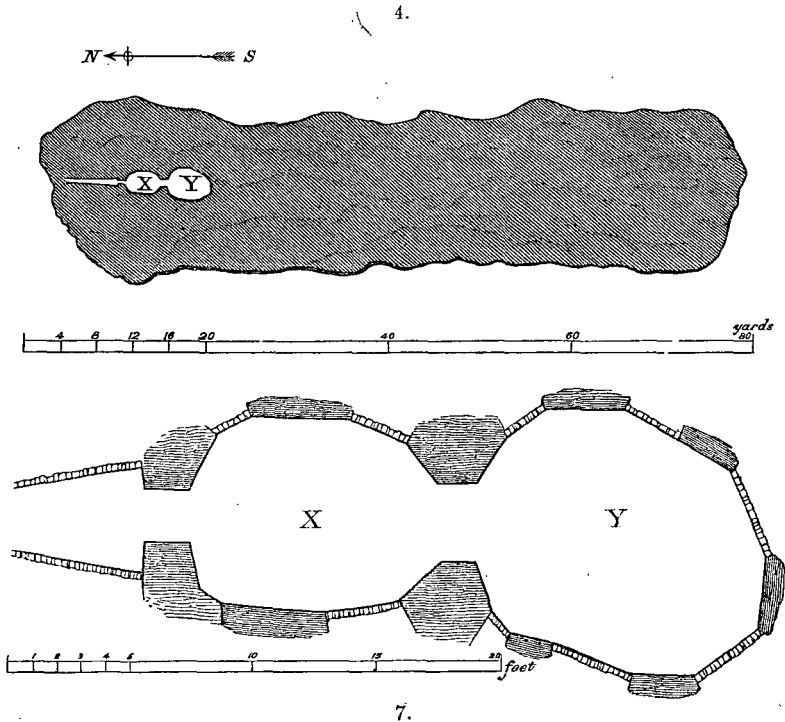


Fig. 4. Ground-Plan of Long Cairn at Skelpick.

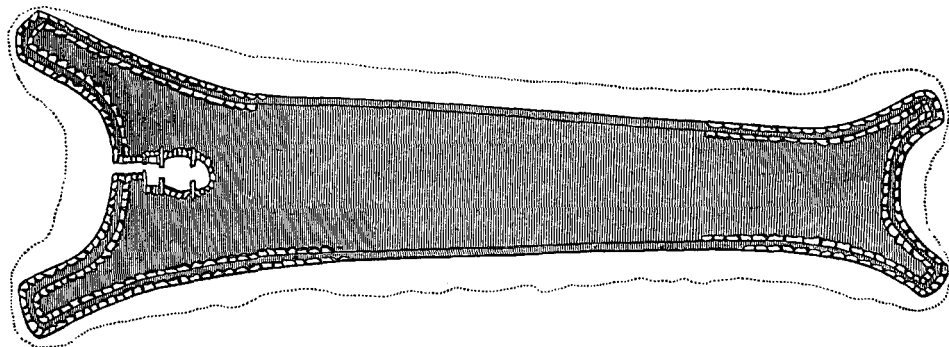
Fig. 7. Enlarged Plan of its Chambers, X, Y.

ever been one, it had fallen in. The southernmost cairn, No. 3, was then opened at the end next the standing stones A, B, and the mouth of the entrance passage, about 2 feet square, was found, which on being followed

up for about 21 feet, led to the chamber Y (fig. 6, p. 521), and thence to X. The height of these chambers is 6 feet 9 inches, and the other dimensions are shown in the plan, in which it is also shown where the wall is composed of single stones, and where it is built.

Cairn No. 4 (see figs. 4, 7, p. 522).—This cairn is situated across the burn of Skelpick on the way up to the broch or dun. The chamber Y had previously been opened by Captain Horsburgh about 13 years ago, and the chamber X has now been opened, in front of which there seems to be the entrance; but as it has fallen in, it could not be followed beyond a few feet. The chambers (X, Y) are about 8 feet high, and are much larger than those in No. 3, the lintel over the opening leading from the one to the other being 9 feet long, 3 feet 6 inches high, and one foot 6 inches thick. As shown in the plans, the cairns as yet have only been excavated for a short distance, beginning at the north end.

[Judging from the form of these cairns, the situation of their chambers, and the crescentic expansion at the entrance (see fig. 6, p. 521), they appear to be a variety of the Chambered Long Cairns, with "Horns," which are as yet known only in Caithness. See the previous paper by Mr Joseph Anderson, on "The Horned Cairns of Caithness," in the Proceedings, vol. vii. p. 480, from which the annexed ground-plan, showing their peculiar form, is taken.]



Ground-Plan of Chambered Long Cairn, with "Horns," at Yarhouse, Caithness, 190 feet long.