

## III.

NOTE OF THE DISCOVERY OF SEPULCHRAL URNS IN FAIR ISLE,  
WITH LETTER FROM JOHN BRUCE, Esq., Yr. OF SUMBURGH, SHET-  
LAND. By JOHN ALEXANDER SMITH, M.D., V.P.S.A. Scot.

On a recent visit to Edinburgh Mr Bruce brought with him the broken fragments of a large clay urn and a small somewhat bowl-shaped vessel or urn formed of steatite, which were found on his property of Fair Isle.

At my request, Mr Bruce now desires me to present these sepulchral urns in his name, for preservation, to the Museum of the Society. And, in answer to my inquiries, I have received from him the following detailed account of their discovery :—

“During the winter 1873-74 I employed a number of men to construct a road between the two landing-places of North and South Haven, in Fair Isle (as shown in the rough map exhibited). While so employed, the workmen had to lower the surface on the banks of a small stream running down to Fuiniquoy Mill, on the east side of the island, and level a small mound about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet high by 8 feet broad at base. Within this mound were found the two urns, the large one in the middle (I am not informed at what depth), and the smaller one a little on one side of it. The large urn was standing erect, closely covered by a flat stone, and containing a small quantity of greyish powder, supposed to be bone ash. The mound was composed of small stones (broken 4 to 6 inches) and earth. The road having been formed before I visited the spot, I cannot say what kind of soil was mixed with the stones forming the mound, but in draining and other operations I have frequently broken up similar mounds of broken stones, generally, to all appearance, bearing marks of fire, and being mixed with a blackish-looking soil of great richness, which I have always supposed to be animal remains of some sort.

“On one side, and adjoining the mound to the west, was a flat space of ground, and at the distance of 6 inches to 1 foot below the surface were found a number of flat stones, and below each stone a carefully-rounded hole about 6 inches deep by 10 inches broad, very smooth in the inside, and lined with about an inch thick of a soft black-looking

adhesive substance, resembling a mixture of peat moss and clay. Each hole contained a small quantity of a white substance resembling bone ash. The nearest hole would be about 8 feet from the base of the mound. The only hole I saw had about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch of water in it. These holes were about ten or twelve in number. I regret that none of the flat stone covers were preserved, but I believe no marks were found on any of them. The soil at this spot is a shallow mixture of clay, sand, and gravel on rock, and at one time must have been covered with more or less of peat moss. No remains of any building are found near this, and I heard of no peculiar name for this spot, or any tradition about it. As far as I know, no similar remains have been found in the island, but there are several mounds in various parts of the island called "Trows knolls," about which there is more or less of local superstition. At some of these places the hill folk, or fairies, are supposed to conduct their nightly revels, and these places may probably contain objects of antiquarian interest.

"If you will pay us a visit in summer, I will be happy to have some of these places opened under your directions, if this could induce you to give us the pleasure of your society for a few weeks."

The clay urn appears to have been of considerable size, as far as you can judge from the fragments that have been sent, and are now ex-

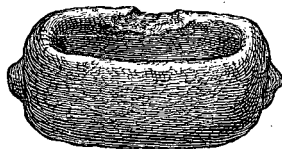


Urn of Steatite, found in Fair Isle  
(4 inches high).

hibited. It measures across the partially-broken bottom of the urn 8 inches long by  $6\frac{1}{2}$  or 7 inches in breadth, and the broken portions of its sides show a height of upwards of 12 inches. It is formed of a

coarse yellowish clay, and has been irregularly oval in shape, having been apparently formed simply by the hand. The smaller steatite urn or vessel, for it has probably been, in the first instance, a vessel for domestic use; is fortunately nearly perfect, being slightly chipped only on one side of its mouth. It is also rather oval in form, and the mouth measures  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length by 5 inches across. The vessel bulges out a little below the mouth, and contracts again towards its base. It is 4 inches in total height, and its cavity is hollowed to a depth of 3 inches, its sides being nearly half an inch in thickness. It is formed by being cut out of a solid piece of steatitic rock. The lip or mouth is ornamented by a small groove or bevelled band cut around its outer margin. (Its character is well shown in the preceding sketch.)

This rude vessel of steatite is of much interest, being an addition (differing as it does both in shape and size) to the curious small series of vessels for domestic use formed of steatite now preserved in the Museum of the Society. (For comparison I annex two figures of these vessels; one of an oval pot or vessel of steatite with handles, found at Brough,



Oval Vessel of Steatite, found at Brough, Shetland  
(12 inches high).

Shetland; the other a large urn or vessel formed also of steatite, which contained burnt bones and was found in a tumulus near the great circle of standing-stones at Stennis, Orkney.) These vessels have nearly all been found in graves, and contained the incinerated remain of the dead. With regard to the small rounded pits described by Mr Bruce as being sunk in flat ground adjoining the mound on the west, and some ten or twelve in number grouped together, each containing what appeared to be burnt ashes; it is probable they may have been also interments of the inurned ashes of the dead after cremation, like the remains found in the urns of the adjoining mound. From the moist character of the low ground near the stream where this group

of apparently small pits lined with a kind of soft clay were found, it is not improbable that they were also the remains of other vessels or urns; but that the superabundant moisture in the lower ground may have gradually decomposed them, and thus reduced them to the soft and pasty condition described by Mr Bruce; he mentions, indeed, that one he examined still contained a quantity of water.

We know very little of the antiquities of Fair Isle, the Fridarey of the Norsemen, and therefore value all the more any details with which we are favoured. This tumulus is situated about the middle of the island, and near the southern border of its northern half, which is used as the common pasture ground of the islanders; the southern portion being the more cultivated part of the island. It is also towards the eastern side of the island, on the bank of a stream which runs down to supply the Fuiniquoy Mill, the name of which shows as a part of it the old Norse word "Quoy" (a small enclosure), and therefore the former occupation by the Norsemen; and towards the west side of the island from this sepulchral mound, there is one of these mounds to which Mr Bruce refers as still styled the "Trow's Knoll;" "Trow" or "Troll" being also the Norse term for a giant, or supernatural being.

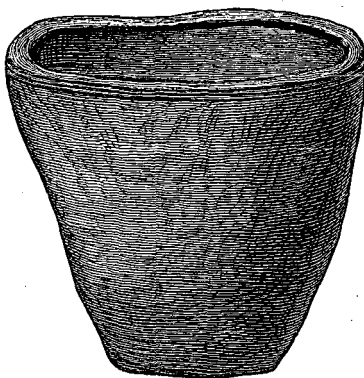
From the style and contents of these interments apparently after cremation, the rude clay urn of the mound or cairn, and the other adjoining small pits or urns, each having like the first mentioned its covering stone; it is probable they may be all of the same period, the principal interment being that of the clay urn still covered with its cairn, about the centre of which it was found. The presence of the steatite vessel seems to give a Norse character to the whole interment, although it was apparently found towards the side of the cairn. It shows at least a participation in the interment by the Norsemen, to whom these steatite vessels seem so peculiarly to belong.

The Keeper of our Museum, Mr Joseph Anderson, has done much to illustrate the Norse occupation of our country in his interesting and valuable "Notes on the Relics of the Viking Period of the Northmen in Scotland; illustrated by specimens in the National Museum of the Antiquaries of Scotland."<sup>1</sup> He quotes numerous instances of the dis-

<sup>1</sup> Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot., vol. x. p. 536.

covery of these steatite vessels of various forms and sizes found in Norway, the old home of the Northmen, and shows their exact correspondence with the steatite vessels, their contents, and surroundings, which have been found in the north of Scotland—Caithness, Orkney, and Shetland, the districts formerly visited and occupied by the Northmen, and where alone in Great Britain these peculiar stone vessels have as yet been found. Mr Anderson considers these vessels to belong to the heathen Viking period, or late Iron Age, beginning about the end of the eighth century and reaching to the beginning of the eleventh, when the Northmen were converted to Christianity.

The discovery of this steatite vessel is therefore of much interest as an additional instance of the early presence of the Northmen in this outlying island between Orkney and Shetland, and the Society is much indebted to Mr Bruce for his account of the discovery, and the presentation of the urns to our National Scottish Museum of Antiquities; as well as for his kind and liberal offer to make further investigations in the island, which we may hope to be able to take advantage of on some future occasion.



Large Steatite Urn, found at Stennis, Orkney  
(20 inches high).