

IV.

NOTICE OF INCISED SCULPTURINGS ON THE STEATITE ROCK AT FEIDELAND, THE EXTREME NORTH OF THE MAINLAND OF SHETLAND, AND OF A CLUSTER OF RUINED STRUCTURES STYLED PICTS' HOUSES, ON THE KAIM OF ISBISTER, SHETLAND. COMMUNICATED BY REV. GEORGE GORDON, LL.D., BIRNIE, CORR. MEM. S.A. SCOT., IN A LETTER TO DR ARTHUR MITCHELL, SECRETARY.

The Rev. Dr Gordon, in transmitting the accompanying notices, writes as follows :—

“ Mr George Cockburn, student in divinity at Aberdeen, while residing last summer at the extreme north of the mainland of Shetland, made, at my request, some sketches, and has also given me some descriptions of the antiquities on the Kaim of Isbister, and at Feideland.

“ These I now beg to submit to you, in the hope that such a notice, if read at one of the meetings of the Society, might lead to a more minute examination than has hitherto been made.

“ As to the *Kaim of Isbister*, I am satisfied that it is not the site of a Broch. The foundation-plans are wholly different from those of any of the many Brochs which I have seen ; but they agree well with those of the existing ‘ lodges,’ as the fishermen call their summer huts which they use, when they are employed at the haaf-fishing—such as are to be seen at Stennis Northmaven, at Ronas Voe, and at Feideland itself.

“ Had the Kaim of Isbister been the site of a Broch, some of the building stones would have remained on it. None are to be seen; and it would have been out of the question to have carried them thence, as has unfortunately been done at so many other places, to build houses, walls, and, as at Brae, to construct a drying-beach for fish. The transport of such heavy materials by so dangerous a path, as the long and narrow neck of rock that connects the Kaim with the land, would not have been attempted in modern times. There are, indeed, no structures or even vestiges of buildings in the vicinity to suggest the probability that old broch-materials might have been appropriated in their erection.

“ At p. 180 of ‘*Archæologia Scotica*,’ vol. v. pt. i., there is given, as the site of a Broch, ‘Feideland, on a *precipice* connected to the land by a neck of land, about three feet broad.’ There is

some confusion here, I suspect—as if the undoubted *Broch of Feideland* had, for its site, the *Kaim of Isbister*. The Broch at Feideland is on a low shingly beach, and *not* ‘on a precipice.’ The *map*, in the same vol. (of *Archæologia*) showing the sites of Brochs, is more correct, as it marks *no broch-site* between that of North Roe and that of Feideland. Had it recognised one at Isbister, it would have placed it about halfway, in the coast line, between these two. I saw but one at Feideland. There is probably another, as marked on the map, near Sand Voe (which I did not visit), although it is not given in the ‘List of Northmaven Brochs’ in p. 180.

“Had foundation-plans, such as are shown in Mr Cockburn’s sketches been met with on a flattish shore, or near a creek, where boats and their cargoes could have been landed and sheltered, they might have been passed by, as the remains of a deserted fishing station; but it is by no means likely that the holm on the rock or Kaim of Isbister would have been selected for this purpose in civilised times. To all appearance it must have been chosen as a site for dwellings, because it was also one of defence or secure refuge. Future excavations may reveal something indicative of the period at which it was inhabited. Yet there is a marked connection between that period, whatever it was, and the present day, in the close resemblance that may be traced between the ground plans or arrangement of the huts or ‘lodges’ then used, and that of those seen occupied to-day, at Stennis, Feideland, and Ronas Voe.

“This style of setting down dwellings close and parallel to each other (although not with walls in common) may be now traced in some of the older fishing villages on the east and north-east of Scotland.

“The local name of ‘Pechts’ Houses,’ by which I heard them first spoken of, is not to be overlooked, although it may indicate simply a mysterious antiquity for them.

“And now, as to the *Kliber Stone* at Feideland. The smooth soft surface must have presented, to the earliest inhabitants, a tempting field on which to develop that art of imitation, now said to be one of the few innate peculiarities allowed to belong to our race. No wonder then that large and fine sheets of steatite, like the *kliber-stone* of Feideland, should exhibit sculptures of various ages, down to the passing century.

In the very short time I could remain there, it appeared to me that the blocks that lie near to or even in the sea, had engravings not of yesterday. From the position in which some of these blocks now lie, it seemed as if they had been carved upon before they fell so low.

“It has been suggested to me, that the circle is not the sort of figure one would cut for mere amusement, without the help of a string and nail; and Mr Cockburn’s sketches show no centre hole; and it has also been suggested that the outlining of fresh circles, which you witnessed, might be the copying of old ones.

“Dr Joass, having seen Mr Cockburn’s sketches of the kliber-stone figures, has shown a striking resemblance between some of them and of figures selected from the second volume of the ‘Sulptured Stones of Scotland.’

“My object in sending you this communication will be fully attained, if you direct the attention of your antiquarian friends to this northern locality, which, although of much interest, is not likely to be often visited.”

Sculptures on the Steatite Rock at Feideland.—Sculptures occur upon fallen blocks and upon the natural face of the steatite rock in the Isle of Feideland for the distance of about 100 yards along the cliff. Towards the south the markings are indistinct, owing to the greater decomposition of the rock, which is there impregnated with a large quantity of iron. The sculptures are in the form of circles and squares, of a size varying from about 3 feet in diameter to less than one. The deepest marks are nearly a foot in depth, others are so faint as to be scarcely visible. The circles and squares are joined on one to another, and those markings which now appear as wavy lines may be either incomplete figures or the remains of figures partially obliterated. The sculptures are either rough pick marks, or smooth and carefully finished, in most cases perpendicular on the side next the figure and sloping outwards. Evidently the sculptures had been formed before the blocks fell down. There is no tradition about the falling of the soapstone cliff, and there is every appearance of its having taken place at a remote period. The people say that there are sculptured blocks entirely covered by the sea. Partially covered by the sea there are about seven blocks, in size 16 × 20 feet and upwards: above high water-mark there are about twenty blocks,

varying in size from 6 feet \times 10 to 16 \times 20. There are many sculptured blocks of smaller dimensions. From high water-mark to uppermost block is about 20 yards. Above this there is a strip of grass 40 feet in breadth, and on the upper side of it sculptured steatite *in situ*. This lower face is about 30 feet in height and is covered with markings—in several places the grass has grown over it, and very distinct markings, would no doubt be found on its removal. Above this lower face is a band of grass about 20 feet in breadth, and on the upper side of it steatite again crops out. The upper band of steatite is of no great height, bears few marks, and is much broken up by the overlying serpentine and mica schist which forms the upper part of the cliff running into it. The blocks would appear to have fallen down from the upper face of steatite and from that part which is now covered by the upper band of grass. Of course the different regions,—1, submerged blocks; 2, partially submerged blocks; 3, blocks above high water-mark; 4, lower strip of grass; 5, lower face of steatite; 6, upper strip of grass; 7, upper face of steatite; 8, serpentine, &c.—cannot be traced along the whole 100 yards, but these various regions are distinct towards the north, where the sculptures are in the best state of preservation. The cliff of steatite is on the east side of the (so-called) Isle of Feideland, and the sea spoken of is Yell Sound. So far as can be ascertained the inhabitants have no tradition as to what the marks are, or who formed them.

"Picts' Houses," Kaim of Isbister.—The Kaim of Isbister is situated on the east coast of the mainland of Shetland, a mile and a half north of North Roe, and the same distance south of Feideland Point, the extremity of the island. It lies in the scattald of Houll, and a neighbouring headland is termed Verdibrig, from a natural arch which fell down a few years ago. The Kaim is entered by a narrow footpath along the crest of a rocky ridge, more than 100 feet high. The footpath is 100 yards long. The Kaim is about 150 feet high on the west side—*i.e.*, the mainland side. It slopes towards the east for 120 yards until it reaches the level of the sea. For the first 70 yards it is covered with grass; the last 50 are bare rock. There is no level ground in the Kaim, but there are two steep banks running north and south—one about the middle of the green part, the other at the commencement of the rock. The Kaim seems to be a mass of mica slate covered with a little clay.

As indicated in the sketch exhibited, there are visible the remains of twenty-three "*Picts' Houses.*" In general appearance the houses resemble old potato pits. Seventeen houses in two rows are situated to the west of, and immediately above, the bank running along the green. They consist of pits about two feet deep. They had originally been partly excavated, partly built, but little of the walls, which had been composed of a mixture of stones and turf, remains. In some cases the west end of the house had been excavated and the walls of the east end built, no doubt, with the material dug out. Every advantage has been taken of the natural configuration of the ground. The houses vary in breadth from 8 to 10 feet, and in length from 10 to 24 feet. Sixteen feet would be the average length and 9 feet the average breadth. In a majority of cases the doors look to the south-east, but this, as well as the situation of the houses east and west, would seem to be entirely a matter of convenience—the door could not have been in the west end, owing to that end being excavated. On digging trenches in two of the houses, I found nothing but ashes and stones marked by fire, and what appeared to be the remains of a nail or some instrument of iron. I got neither bones nor shells.

I shall not venture on any speculation as to what these houses may have been, but would note the following points wherein they resemble the huts raised by Shetland fishermen at the present day. By actual measurement I found that they coincide in *size* with the huts at Feideland. In the fishermen's huts the door is invariably situated at the most convenient corner. The huts are frequently excavated at one end, and another marked peculiarity is joining two huts together so as to make one wall serve for a back to both, the water off the roof sinking down the wall the best way it can. This architectural peculiarity is six times exemplified in the Kaim of Isbister.

I do not think that much weight should be laid upon the name, as I have been repeatedly told by the more intelligent of the inhabitants that it was customary to say of any thing whose origin is unknown, that it was built by the Picts. It is also to be remembered that there was a Broch at Burravoe, North Roe, and another at Feideland, which would surely have been sufficient to shelter all the Picts that ever were in the district.

G. COCKBURN.