

III.

NOTICE OF LONG CAIRNS NEAR RHINAVIE, STRATHNAVER, SUTHERLANDSHIRE. BY THE REV. ROBERT MUNRO, M.A., B.D., OLD KILPATRICK.

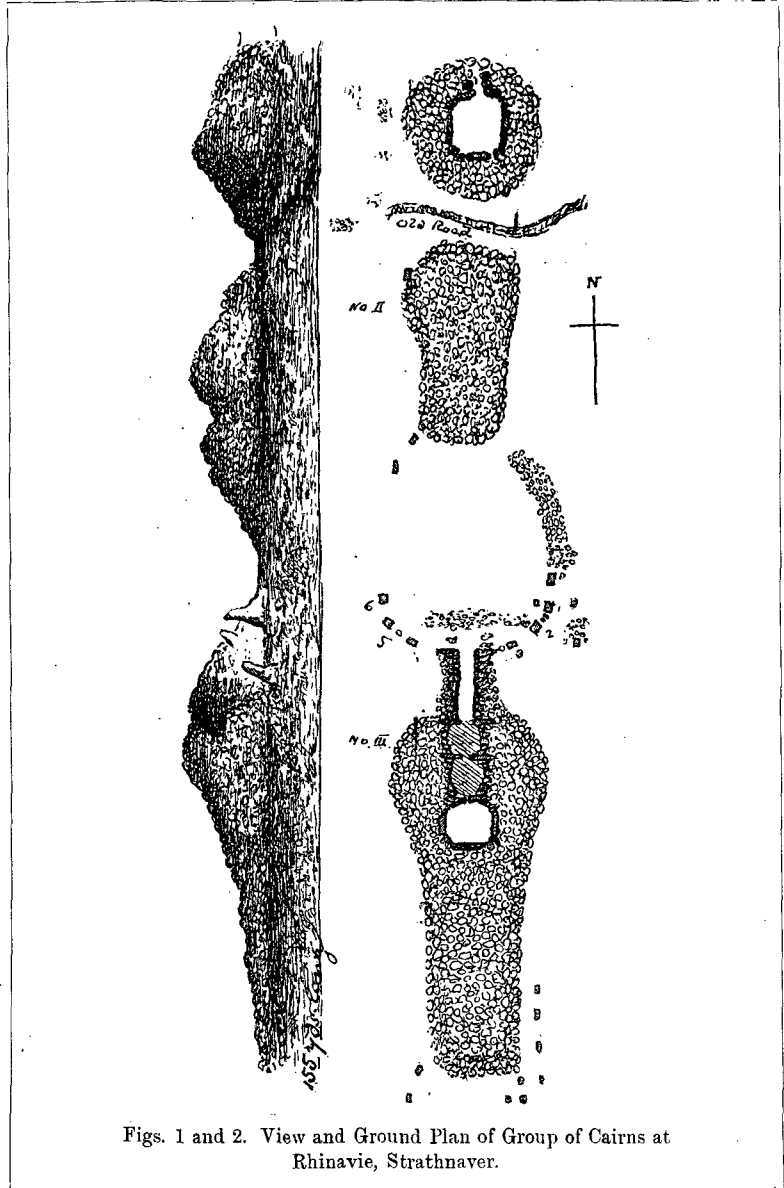
These cairns, three in number, are about a mile above the chain-boat at Betty-hill, and not far from Rhinavie, where there is a Pictish tower. They are placed on a slightly rising eminence at the foot of the hill on the left hand of the road to Skelpick. They lie in line, and their direction is due north and south. The largest is the most southern of the group; and fronting the entrance to its chambers there is an arc of a circle composed of large upright stones. A few feet north of the circle there is another long cairn which has not yet been opened. In general appearance it is similar to the former. Separated by an old road from this one, there is a third cairn, entirely different from the other two, being circular in form and possessing only one chamber.

The entrance to all the chambers that have been explored is on the north end, which is also, as indicated in the general view, the highest part of the cairns.

Until sixteen years ago, when they were dug into by the late Mr Mackay of Skelpick, at the suggestion of Dr J. Stuart, Secretary, S.A., Edinburgh, this group of cairns was in a wonderfully complete state of preservation; and it is much to be regretted that the investigations then made were not conducted with greater accurateness and scientific knowledge. Some digging was done; but as only a few bones were found, and something very different was expected, no account was taken of them. Unfortunately, everything was so disturbed then that it is impossible now to find any of the original deposits *in situ*. Though the walls of some of the chambers have, to a certain extent, been destroyed, by removing part of the masonry in the hope of finding relics of the past, their plan can still be traced. From my drawings of these, made in ignorance of the general plan and structure of long cairns, first clearly described by Dr Anderson, it will be seen that they are of the same type, although they possess some distinctive characteristics of their own.

Cairn No. 1 (figs. 1 and 2) is a circular heap of round loose stones, 60 feet in diameter, with a vertical height of about 12 feet. It has a chamber in the centre, the walls of which are composed of five rough granitic slabs set on end, the spaces between these being built up with uncemented masonry. The average height is 5 feet; but as the chamber is at present filled with rubbish, it must have originally been about 8 feet. One of the slabs (marked in fig. 6) is 7 feet 3 inches above ground. The others vary from 3 feet 6 inches to 6 feet. The diameter is 7 feet at the top, where there is a slight divergence in the walls, and along the floor the measurement is about a foot less. The entrance to this chamber is not clearly defined, but there are indistinct traces of its having a passage on the north side.

Cairn No. 2 (figs. 1 and 2) is an oblong heap 100 feet in length, and gradually swelling out towards the north end. This cairn was not opened when the others were dug into in 1867; but from an imperfect investigation I was led to conclude that it is also furnished with a series of cells. There are two stones marked in general plan, which I take to be the end of the retaining or bounding wall. As I did not know at the time when I made these investigations the distinguishing features of the



Figs. 1 and 2. View and Ground Plan of Group of Cairns at Rhinavie, Strathnaver.

Group of Cairns, Strathnaver.

general type, I regret that I cannot speak more definitely on this point.

Cairn No. 3 (figs. 1 and 3) is 230 feet long and 50 feet broad. Like cairn No. 2, it assumes the crescent shape towards the north end, and is higher in elevation at that point than anywhere else in its whole length. It is supplied with a tricellular chamber; the one furthest in is the largest, being over 7 feet in diameter and 8 feet in height. This cell differs from the others in this cairn in combining in its structure ortholithic with common rude masonry. In this respect it is exactly similar to the chamber in cairn No. 1, already described. I found here some pieces of charred wood and fragments of animal bones.

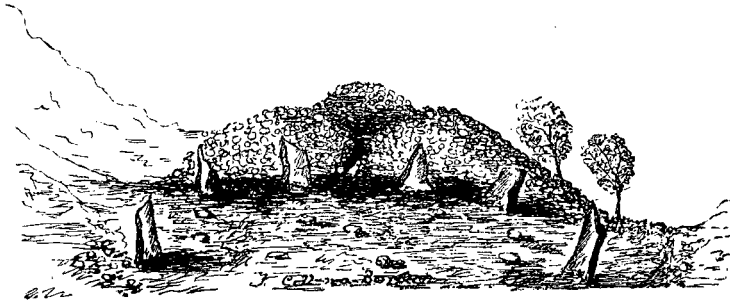


Fig. 3. North end of Cairn No. 3.

Divided from this cell by upright stones about 1 foot apart are two other cells covered with large slabs, one of which measures $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet by 3 feet. The walls of these are formed entirely of rude masonry.

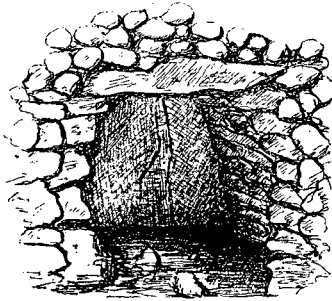
The middle cell is 5 feet long, nearly the same in breadth, and originally 6 feet 10 inches high.

The cell next the entrance is scarcely so large as the middle one; but this may be due to the fact that the walls have caved in considerably. So much is this the case, that the uprights forming the doorway from 1 to 2 are nearly jammed together, preventing at present any entrance from the one to the other.

The passage leading to the arc of circle on outside is 17 feet

long, and 2 feet high by 2 feet wide. It is solidly built, and was apparently roofed over.

In the arc, which is 48 feet across its extreme ends, there are six large upright stones, varying in height from 3 feet to 7 feet 10 inches, and from 2 feet to 3 feet broad. They are separated from each other by distances ranging from 10 feet to 16 feet.



Doorway from 1st to 2nd Chamber
of Long Cairn.

Besides these six large standing stones, there are in the arc a few small ones, none of them exceeding, and some barely reaching, a foot in height above ground.

Towards the south end of this cairn (No. 3), there is a number of upright stones of the same kind as in the quarter circle towards the north, but it could not be definitely determined whether the horns of the crescent were to the south, or pointed in the same direction as those on the north end.

From a hurried exploration at different points in long cairn No. 3, I inferred there was a series of chambers running the whole length of the débris of stones. On digging several feet I observed some deep holes below; but as the stones were very loose and dangerous, and my time limited, this matter could not be satisfactorily made out.

Comparing briefly this group of cairns with those explored at Yarhouse, Camster, and Ormiegill, I find that they agree with them in possessing tricellular chambers, with divisions into compartments effected by erect slabs; the diverging of ortholithic walls, and the converging of those composed of masonry; a solidly built passage; roofing with huge slabs; and a retaining wall. The Rhinavie cairns, however, differ from them in the following points: they are situated north and south instead of east and west; the chambers are in the highest end, which is to the north, and not, as generally in the Wick cairns, to the east; the largest of the three cells is not the middle but the end one; and they

have a segment of a circle of standing stones fronting the principal cairn, while the Caithness ones have a crescentic bounding-wall instead.

The oldest name by which these cairns are known is Ach-cill-na-Borgan—the *field of the Church (or burying-place) of the Borgen*, or “Broch-men.” They are so called in a rent-roll dating more than a hundred years back. This name they may have received at any time subsequent to the introduction of Christianity, but not earlier; for although *cill* is a Gaelic word, it is derived from the Latin *cella*, which points to a post-Christian date. We may, therefore, take the designation as a local description of the purpose which a later generation ascribed to the cairns.