

II.

NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF TWO CAIRNS ON THE ESTATE OF ABERLOUR, BANFFSHIRE, THE PROPERTY OF MR J. R. FINDLAY OF ABERLOUR, VICE-PRESIDENT. BY JOSEPH ANDERSON, LL.D., ASSISTANT SECRETARY AND KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM.

In June last I had the opportunity of excavating two cairns on the estate of Aberlour, Banffshire, the property of Mr J. R. Findlay, Vice-President of the Society. Mr Findlay supplied four workmen, and the operations extended over four days. The first cairn, situated on the farm of Gownie, about three-quarters of a mile to the south-east of Aberlour House, is on the summit of an eminence on the lower slope of the Hill of Allachie, and in a field which has been in cultivation for a considerable period. The boundary of the cairn, which was slightly oval in outline, was marked by a ring of stones of larger size than those which composed the mass of the cairn, the mean diameter of which was close on 40 feet. Its height in the centre did not exceed three and a half feet above the original surface, but it must have been at one time considerably greater, for we found that the central portion had been turned over and the larger stones removed, probably for building purposes.

Beginning at the south-east side we removed all the stones so as to expose the original surface for a width of about 12 feet through the centre of the cairn. Traces of charcoal and ashes were met with in small isolated patches here and there towards the centre, and a little to the west side of the centre we found three slabs which evidently formed part of the wall of a central chamber still *in situ*. They stood on end, edge to edge, and had their bases firmly fixed in the subsoil and wedged in with small stones. The slabs to right and left of the middle one of the three were not placed in line with it but slightly inclined inwards, so as to indicate a circular form of chamber; and from this indication we were enabled to trace in the subsoil the marks from which other slabs had

been extracted, which gave the chamber an apparent diameter of about 5 feet. The slabs remaining were respectively 24 inches, 20 inches, and 30 inches in width, 3 feet 6 inches in height, and about 9 inches in thickness. Eight such slabs set in a circular form edge to edge would have completed the chamber. There was no sign of a passage or of any other construction in the cairn.

The floor of the chamber had been much disturbed. In its upper layer, which was mixed with ashes, we found about a dozen small fragments of sepulchral pottery, showing that, as is not uncommon in chambered cairns, there had been several urns deposited in or on the chamber floor. Two fragments, belonging to two different vessels, have portions of the lip, one being slightly ornamented with finger-tip markings close under the slightly turned-over lip, and the other having a plain and slightly rounded lip. The other fragments indicate vessels with a globular rather than a conical section. The character of the pottery, so far as these indications can be relied on, is thus the same as is generally found in chambered cairns. The presence of the chamber alone, however, is not absolutely conclusive as to the age of the cairn, as the chambered cairns of the Stone Age are usually provided with passages leading from the chamber to the interior of the cairn, and in this case there was no evidence of a passage. But the passage may have been obliterated in the search for stones, which, at some former period, had removed the greater part of the flags which formed the side-walls of the chamber. The pottery is also more allied in form and structure to that of the Stone Age than to that of the Bronze Age.

Nearly in the centre of the chamber, and about 6 inches under the upper layer of the floor, we found an irregularly circular deposit of ashes and charcoal, containing the remains of an interment after cremation. The patch of burnt matter was about 2 feet in diameter, and from 2 to 3 inches in thickness in the centre, thinning out towards the edges. It consisted chiefly of a fine black unctuous ash mingled with small lumps of charred wood and calcined human bones much comminuted. The fragments of bone were quite softened from long exposure to the infiltration of rain, owing to the removal of the upper part of the cairn.

Portions of the long bones and of the skull were however quite recognisable.

This appeared to have been the original interment. It was at a lower level than that portion of the floor in which the broken fragments of the urns occurred, and it did not seem to have been either deposited in, or covered by, an urn. In the deposit of ashes there were a number of fractured pieces of white quartz, but no flint chips or implements were met with.

Cairn at Gownie Wood.—This cairn is on the slope of the hill near the margin of Gownie Wood, and about a quarter of a mile distant from the first cairn in a north-easterly direction. It is about 45 feet in diameter, approximately circular in its basal outline, and not more than 3 feet in height in the centre. It had been much disturbed by herds building shelters in it, and almost every part of it seemed to have been turned over. Like the first cairn, it had a circle of large earthfast stones set at intervals of a few feet round its basal outline, but about 10 feet beyond the base of the cairn there seemed to have been another circle of large stones, in some places close together, but generally with considerable intervals between.

We drove an opening of nearly 20 feet in width from the south-east side of the cairn to a point considerably beyond the centre without meeting with any traces of structure. If the cairn had ever contained a central cist or chamber, the stones of which it had consisted must have been removed. The ground underneath the base of the cairn, however, was mixed with ashes and charcoal in patches, chiefly on the surface, but towards the centre the intermixture of charcoal extended to a depth of about 2 feet. In another place towards the east side of the cairn the signs of burning reached to the depth of $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and at that depth on the undisturbed subsoil there was a deposit of ashes and charred wood similar to that found in the first cairn. This deposit was a circular mass of ashes about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in diameter and from 3 to 4 inches in thickness in the centre, thinning out towards the edges. It was almost entirely composed of burned wood, the charred fragments in some cases indicating fagots or branches of about 1 inch to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter. It differed from the deposit in the first cairn, however, in

that it yielded only the faintest traces of burnt bones—so faint, indeed, as to leave it in doubt as to whether it was bone ash or not. No other signs of interment were met with, and the excavation having reached the undisturbed subsoil, there was no inducement to prosecute the search further. It is possible that the original interment may have been in a cist on the surface of the ground in the centre of the cairn, which had evidently been turned over and the larger stones removed.

Groups of Small Cairns.—On the slope of the hill below the second cairn there is a group of small cairns, probably about twenty in number, some being within the margin of the wood. They vary in size from 10 or 12 to 20 or 25 feet in diameter, and seldom exceed 2 feet or $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height in the centre. Of these we selected two for exploration, but found no sign of interment or of structure in the cairns themselves, and no indication of purpose, either on or under the surface of the ground on which they stood. In both cases the subsoil under the cairn had never been disturbed.

There are two very remarkable groups of similar cairns on the hillside of Ruthrie, and a third on the south-western slope of the Little Conval on the neighbouring estate of Edinville, also the property of Mr Findlay of Aberlour. Although I have excavated a great number of small cairns of this description in Caithness I never found evidence of burial in them except in a single instance in which there were peculiar circumstances that seemed to account for the preservation of the skeleton. The body had been laid on a flat stone in the usual contracted position, and largish stones had been placed around and over it. The rest of the cairn was composed of comparatively small stones, and a growth of heather had crept up and over it, completely enveloping the cairn with an almost impervious layer of peaty matter which, by excluding the air and partially at least preventing the infiltration of rain, had preserved the bones from the complete decay which seemed to have been the consequence of the freer admission of air and moisture in the other cases.

It is stated in the Statistical Account of the parish of Aberlour that "there are no antiquities in this parish," but this statement must be taken with some qualification. There is a large oval-shaped hill-fort on

the top of the Conval, and on the hill of Allachie there is a circular enclosure of 60 paces in circumference with an opening on the N.E. side about 6 feet in width. The wall, which has been of stones in the lower part at least, now forms a low mound about 10 to 12 feet in width, and not more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height, but well defined around the whole circle. At the farm of Hatton there are the remains of a large cairn, which on the Ordnance Map is called a stone circle, and which probably was at one time surrounded by a circle of standing stones. This may be the one referred to by Rev. Dr Garden of King's College, Aberdeen, in his letter to John Aubrey of 15th June 1692, containing the earliest extant notice of the cairns and circles of Aberdeen and Banff, in which he says:—"Another place in the shire of Bannff and parish of Aberlour is called Leachell Beandich, which, as my informer told me, is as much as the Blessed Chapel, from another of those monuments which lately stood there in a corn-field, and is now demolished."