

IV.

NOTES ON SEPULCHRAL CAIRNS DISCOVERED BY THE BLOWING OF SAND ON THE SANDS OF BRACON ; AND ON THE SCULPTURED STONE DISCOVERED AT SOUTH GARTH, ISLAND OF YELL, SHETLAND. By J. T. IRVINE, F.S.A. SCOT., PETERBOROUGH.

When first seen in 1862, the blowing sand had but partially exposed the tops of the cairns, disclosing also lines of rude stone walling of a structure lying east and west, on portions of which the cairns appeared partially to rest. In 1863 the largest cairn had become uncovered to the extent of one-third or so, the mass of stones uncovered rising only about 1 foot 6 inches, or at most 2 feet, above the general level of the sand.

The following notes were drawn up after the opening made in 1863 :—The cairns are formed of large, rounded beach stones, the interstices filled with pure sand. The largest (Cairn A) was connected with the next (Cairn B), distant about 20 feet to the east, by traces of a wall of loose stones, which then turned northwards, and had the remains of another cairn (Cairn C) partly upon it. Beyond this a little way it again turned westwards, and was soon lost in the sand. At the place where it disappeared, however, there were traces of another cairn (Cairn D). This was about 50 feet north from Cairn B.

An attempt was first made to open Cairn C. Its top course was composed of large stones. When these were removed, a layer of rough schist flakes was disclosed, laid flat on 4 or 5 inches of sand, under which lay a cake of burnt wood ashes, a few inches in thickness. In this layer minute fragments of oxidised copper appeared, and among them a bit of fine copper piping and a thin fragment much crumpled up. These fragments were subsequently sent to the National Museum. Cairn D was next examined, and found to be of similar composition, though no traces of copper were visible in the layer of its wood ashes.

A day or two afterwards, Mr W. Gordon and myself endeavoured to open Cairn A, the greater part of which was still covered by the base of the sand-hill. This, together with the size and roundness of the beach stones composing it, made the work difficult. After removal of the sand and stones for about 1 foot 6 inches on the north-east side,

which was the most exposed, a single human vertebra was found which showed no trace of burning. About $3\frac{1}{2}$ or 4 feet further inwards the top of a skull became visible, but was again covered over and left till next day, when, in company with Rev. W. Crabb and Mr Thomas Irvine of Midbrake, the burial was carefully and completely exposed. The skeleton lay on its back, the arms placed straight down along the sides, the head being to south-east. The body appeared to have been placed in a slight hollow in the sand, and a kind of stone-lined grave was formed by placing large stones along each side and covering stones across. The bones were delicately formed, and the height might be about 5 feet or thereby; the teeth showed little wear, and some had never come up from the sockets, though there was no other appearance of youth. An outline of the skull was taken, a copy of which is sent herewith. Its form and character did not appear to indicate a lower capacity than the average of the present day. The bones were carefully collected and reinterred in the churchyard of the Kirk of St Olaf on Ness.

Proceeding with the removal of the stones towards the centre of the cairn, we shortly reached and partially exposed a mass of burnt ashes, evidently the central deposit. Among the ashes were intermingled fragments of burnt bones and large pieces of charcoal, some of which exhibited the curious appearance of holes like those formed in drift timber when floating at sea. Finding no object which could suggest a date for the interments, and the excavation having been carried as far as possible into the steep slope of the sand-hill, further removal of the mass of large and water-worn stones under the sand was given up.

At the east end of the sand, walls of loose stones have also been uncovered. Tradition states that, prior to the erection of the Kirk of St Olaf on Ness, an earlier Kirk stood at the western end of the sand in Dãäll, but of it nothing has been seen. The cairns, however, are close to the site indicated, and were it not for them, the lines of walling of the structure running east and west, which have been referred to, might have been supposed to be its remains.

Mr Tate made further excavations here for the Anthropological Society in 1865. He states that the number of the cairns visible at

that time was five, and that they lay 21 feet below the brow of the sand-hill. He ascertained by inquiry that in 1818 the ground was intact and in pasturage; that in 1820 the sand had begun to be removed, and that at the time of his visit, in 1865, it had again covered the Cairn No. 5 to the depth of 5 feet. He mentions the discovery of the skeleton in 1863, and records his discovery of three more skeletons a little above the floor of the cairn. The first of these skeletons lay on a bed about 2 feet thick of fish bones. In the case of the second skeleton, a similar layer of fish bones reached from beneath the shoulders to the pelvis.

The cairns are now (in 1897) further exposed to the depth of several feet through the continued blowing of the sand for thirty-four years, and another has become visible to the east. In the case of the largest cairn, the mass of stones stands from 8 to 10 feet above the present sand-floor. They are among the largest stone cairns in Shetland, and it would be most desirable that they should be properly explored, as the sand banks have already begun to be re-formed on the side next the sea, and have already entombed part of what was open in 1863.

Sculptured Stone.—The following account of the discovery of the South Garth stone was given by Mr Thomas Irvine in 1863. Having occasion to go to Unst, he went to Cullyavoe, where he engaged a boat and men to set him over Blue Mull Sound. When off the South Garth, one of the men said, "Have you seen the wonderful stone the guidman of Garth has lighted on when flaying his peat-bank?" Mr Irvine said he had not, and induced them to run in, and went up to see the stone at the peat-bank, where it lay. Both its sides were covered with figures of men and ornament. The man who found it described how, as he flayed the turf off the peat-bank, to his great astonishment he perceived the bottom of one of the peats which he turned over to be ornamented, and on looking at the place from which it was raised, he saw that it was but the cast or print of the carving on a stone which lay under it. His first idea was that there must be treasure below, and he hastily lifted the stone, which was thin, and its underside was carved also. He then dug right down to the hard bottom, but no gold or anything else was there. After seeing it,

Mr Irvine called at Belmont, where Mr Thomas Mouat, proprietor of South Garth, then lived, and told him of the discovery, and strongly recommended that it should be brought to Belmont for preservation, to which Mr Mouat agreed, and asked Mr Irvine to inform the tenant that if he brought the stone over to Belmont he would allow him ten shillings off his year's rent. This Mr Irvine did. The man's wife, however, thought they might have made a better bargain. She went across to have a "persuasive crack" with the Laird, which ended in the decision that if the stone was brought to Belmont, they should have the ten shillings reduction, otherwise nothing.

Such is the substance of Mr Thomas Irvine's statement given to the writer in 1863. After this, all efforts for the recovery of the stone have been fruitless.

There is no tradition of any old Kirk at the South Garth. But at Gutches, no great way off, stood the Kirk of St John, on whose very site the Haa House of Gutches now stands, and another is said to have stood in Lingeye Island, off Gutches, from one of which two it had probably come.

The late Dr Edward Charlton of Newcastle had heard of the stone and obtained some information relative to it. In a note to the writer he says:—"I found to-day a note in my Journal of 1853 that the Yell stone was for a considerable time in the possession of Mr William Pole of Cullivoe. Mr Hamilton tells me that the Yell stone was found several years after the Bressay one." "It is perfectly possible that two stones of very similar design may have been found in Shetland, and there probably are more of the same kind buried in the old churchyards in that country. I should be glad to get this knotty point satisfactorily solved, though it is a matter of indifference to me where the stone was found, so long as it is a true Shetland antique." This note receives fresh value in so far as Mr Wm. Pole of Cullivoe was for very many years Mr Mouat's agent for receiving the rents of his Yell tenants. It is possible the estate account books of rents might show if any such allowance of ten shillings was made to the South Garth farmer and in what year it took place, as the stone might have been brought to Mr Wm. Pole in Mr Mouat's behalf. Mr Mouat died Feb. 25, 1856, which may account for it never reaching Belmont.