

IX.

NOTICE OF A CHAMBERED CAIRN IN THE PARISH OF FIRTH, ORKNEY.

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The cairn which I examined in the course of last summer, and which is situated on the brow of Kewing Hill in the Parish of Firth, is locally known as the "Fairy Knowe," a nomenclature frequently applied to mounds of any size, and evidently adopted as the most convenient way to explain the existence of erections of unknown origin.

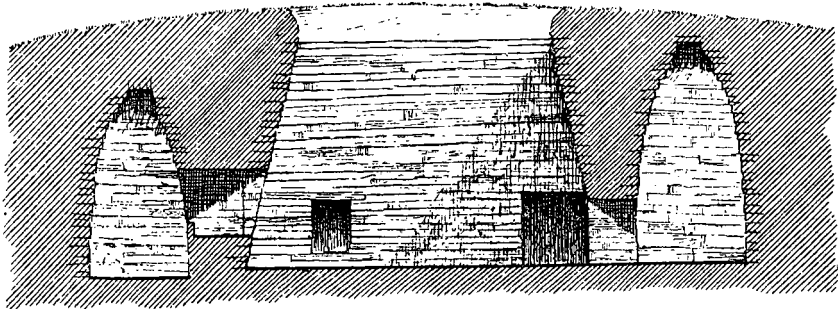
Operations were begun at the cairn early in July by digging a trench in an easterly direction, and the work had not proceeded very far when layers of masonry were exposed, but these failed for some time to give any indication of the nature of the structure of which they formed part. Gradually, however, traces of a rectangular chamber running north and south came to light, the walls widening as the excavation proceeded downwards, and after reaching a depth of three or four feet the work was continued longitudinally, which revealed the entire length of the chamber. Up to this point the debris consisted of slabs of various sizes, earth, and animal remains, among which the teeth of the dog were most conspicuous, and while larger bones were sometimes met with, they were in a very fragmentary state and beyond preservation. The length of the chamber being exposed, the excavation was then carried on in a downward direction, the difficulty of removing the debris increasing with every spadeful, until finally buckets had to be requisitioned in conveying the contents to the surface. At a depth of about six feet lateral recesses, five in number, were discovered, one of which subsequently proved to be the end of the entrance passage.

About a foot from the floor the deposit had a somewhat fatty, unctuous appearance, and contained two dozen skulls of the dog, several human long bones and five human skulls, three of which crumbled away when touched. The floor of the main chamber being exposed, the cells were then cleared of their debris, the only relics from them consisting of two

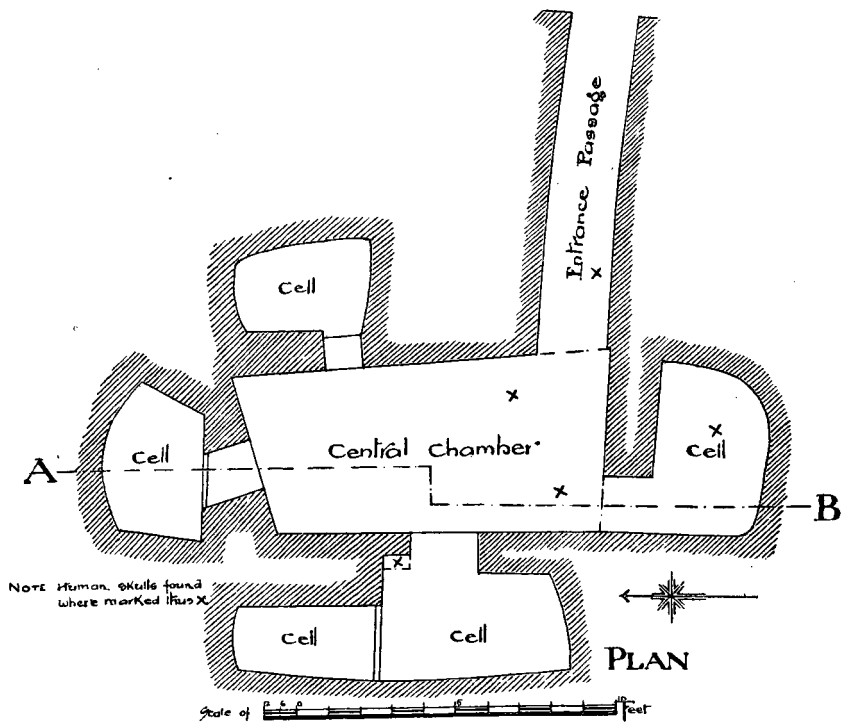
other human skulls, one of which was found on a slab in a small recess near the entrance to the cell branching off the west side, a circumstance which raises a question as to how the body could have been disposed of with the head in that position. This recess measured 10 inches long, 6 inches broad, and 6 inches high, and the slab with the skull, which lay on its side, fitted into it. The entrance passage was then cleared for about half its length from the inside, another human skull being found embedded in the clay near its roof. At this point it was considered impracticable to continue from the inside the work in the passage, and steps were accordingly taken to find the entrance, which, it was surmised, would be on a level with the floor of the passage. Digging therefore was commenced in the side of the mound, at a point calculated to be near the entrance, but although successful, we found that it had been built up flush with an exterior wall visible at one side and evidently encircling the cairn. The debris remaining in the passage was then removed from the outside, portions of human long bones, showing evidence of cremation, being found a short distance from the entrance the roof of which had given way.

No industrial relics of any kind were found in course of the excavation, with the exception of a small portion of a steatite urn which could have had no connection with the remains discovered, and which, in all probability, had come from secondary interments previously brought to light at the west side of the cairn.

The length of the main chamber along the base of the east wall, which is slightly curved longitudinally, is 11 feet 10 inches, while the corresponding length of the west wall is 10 feet 2 inches, the east wall being thus 1 foot 8 inches longer than the west. The breadth of the chamber is 5 feet 3 inches at the north end, and 5 feet 8 inches at the south end. The walls are dry built and on the bee-hive principle, beginning to converge at a height of about four feet from the floor, which slopes slightly towards the entrance. The height of the chamber at the north end, which is best preserved, is 7 feet 2 inches, but the altitude must have been greater when the building was complete and when the



SECTION A.B.



Figs. 1 and 2. Section and Ground Plan of Chambers in Chambered Cairn at Kewing Hill, Firth, Orkney.

walls would converge so closely as to allow of the roof being completed probably by a series of transverse slabs. The four cells, which are oblong and on the bee-hive principle, branch off the west and east sides and the north and south ends respectively—their entrances, which range from 1 foot 3 inches to 2 feet in breadth, and from 1 foot 10 inches to a little over 2 feet in height, being, with one exception (that in the south end), a few inches from the level of the floor. They average 6 feet in height and 5 feet in length, the only exception as regards length being the one off the west side, which is 11 feet long, with a central partition extending half way down its height, while beneath this partition is a thin slab rising from the floor to a height of 10 inches and extending across the cell, the opening between the partition and the slab being thus restricted to a height of 2 feet 4 inches. The floors of the cells are on a level with their entrances, with the exception of those cells in the east side and north end respectively, which are a few inches lower than their entrances. The entrance to the cell in the north end also presents the peculiarity of having a slab 6 inches in height extending across it at its inner end. The roofs of the cells, which are in two cases imperfectly preserved, are formed of slabs set on edge, the walls converging to meet them. The entrance passage is on a level with the floor of the main chamber, and is about 11 feet in length, over 2 feet in height, and 2 feet 3 inches in breadth, the roof being formed of slabs set on edge.

As has been said, the relics from the cairn consisted of human and animal remains, the latter in great abundance, the large number of dog skulls, amounting to two dozen, being exceptional; but apart from canine remains, bones of other animals have been also identified, including a portion of the jaw of an ox.

I am much indebted to Mr George Ellison, Liverpool, for the plan and section of the chambers.

Professor Sir William Turner, K.C.B., D.C.L., has kindly favoured me with the following report on the human crania, and the animal remains which accompanied them:—

“The human remains consisted of five calvariæ and portions of three

thigh bones. They were from persons in the later stage of life, as the cranial sutures were in process of obliteration, and in two specimens they were almost completely ossified. I cannot speak definitely of the sex, though two were in all probability males.

"In No. 1 the orbito-nasal region of the frontal bone was absent, but the parietals and the occipital bone as far as the inion and superior curved line were preserved. The actual length was 179 mm., but if the glabella had been present a somewhat longer diameter would have been obtained. The parietal breadth in the squamous region was 145 mm., which probably represented the widest diameter of the cranium; the length-breadth index, calculated from these dimensions, would be 81, but the absence of the orbito-nasal region, by subtracting from the length, gave a higher index than if the frontal had been entire.

"No. 2 consisted of the frontal and parietal bones, along with the occipital squama for a short distance below the inion and superior curved lines. The calvaria was sufficiently preserved to enable me to measure the length, 187 mm., and the breadth in the squamous-parietal, 142 mm., from which a length-breadth index 75·9 was calculated. The glabella and supra-orbital ridges were moderately projecting; the forehead was a little retreating; the vertex was not ridged or highly arched; the post-parietal region was flattened obliquely downwards and backwards; the occipital squama projected behind the lambdoidal suture. The skull was apparently that of a man.

"No. 3 consisted of portions only of the frontal and two parietal bones, so that neither the length nor the breadth could be measured. The vertex tended to be ridged in the sagittal region. Nos. 4 and 5 were more imperfect even than No. 3, but from the character of the glabella and supra-orbital ridge in No. 5 it is probable that the skull was that of a man.

"It is much to be regretted that the skulls were so very imperfect, as the opportunities of studying human remains from chambered cairns have been so few that we do not possess sufficient data to enable us to generalise as to the cranial characters of their builders. Only No. 2

was sufficiently preserved to enable the arc of the skull to be seen and the cephalic index taken which was approximately dolichocephalic.

“The portions of thigh bones which reached me consisted of the head, the neck, trochanters and upper fourth of the shaft of two left femora, and of the middle two-thirds of the shaft of a right femur. The upper part of the shaft was somewhat flattened on its anterior surface, and approximated to the condition known as platymery. One specimen was smaller in dimensions than the others, and was probably a female. In the largest specimen the gluteal ridge was raised into a trochanter tertius.

“The animal remains were the skull and bones of the limbs of a dog; upper and lower molar teeth, with part of the upper jaw of an ox; a fragment of a tibia, probably of a small horse, and several bones of birds.”