

II.

NOTICE OF A GROUP OF LONG GRAVES, STONE-LINED, NEAR THE SOURCE OF THE WATER OF NORTH ESK. BY JOHN W. M. LONEY, F.S.A. Scot.

This group of graves presents the characteristics of a well-known type, which has, however, attracted little notice, doubtless on account of lack of interest arising from the entire absence of grave-goods in association with burials of this description.

I am informed that undescribed groups of graves of similar character have been discovered at Penicuik, at Nunraw, and in the neighbourhood of North Berwick, as well as elsewhere. A group of about twenty such graves found near Uphall has been described by the Rev. James Primrose in the *Proceedings of the Society* (vol. xxxv. p. 325); and another group of three graves, of apparently similar construction and character, at Gladhouse reservoir, has been described to the Society by the Hon. John Abercromby (*Proceedings*, vol. xxxviii. p. 96). Reference may also be made to notices of like graves (1) at Auchterhouse by Mr Alexander Hutcheson, and (2) at Stenton by Dr Richardson (*Proceedings*, vol. xxxix. pp. 393 and 441).

A number of like graves existed at Belhaven, near Dunbar, where their presence was disclosed some fifteen years ago in the raised shell-beach, when cut into by the sea during a severe storm. A short notice of these Belhaven graves was submitted to the Society last session by the Rev. Robert Paul, of Dollar (*Proceedings*, vol. xxxix. p. 350). Five years ago, when I was showing the site of the Belhaven graves to a friend, he was poking about with his walking-stick in the face of the sand-bank, and struck upon the end of an unopened grave. A few days afterwards Mr J. H. Cunningham, Mr Gilbert Goudie, and I opened the grave, where we found a complete adult skeleton in a supine and extended position; but there was no vestige of grave-goods in the surrounding

space of the grave, which was clear of either sand or gravel. No plans, measurements, or photographs were taken, and no notice of the find was formally brought before the Society.

Being thus fairly familiar with this type of grave, I at once recognised the North Esk graves as likely to be of interest when their existence was pointed out to me in June last by Mr John Tod, the keeper of the North Esk reservoir, to whom I am indebted not only for means of access to a somewhat inaccessible spot and for facilities to examine the graves, but also for practical assistance, and much information on matters of fact which he has kindly placed at my disposal.

This group, though comparatively few in number, is fairly complete, and its present position is peculiar and precarious, in that a more than usually severe winter might easily bring about the total destruction of the site. It seems, therefore, desirable to put on record the facts I have been able to ascertain regarding the discovery of the graves and their present condition.

Their natural site was originally a small double-topped knoll on the north-east side of the Water of North Esk, where it was joined by the "Gutterford" (formerly apparently known as the "Doit") Burn, flowing in a southerly direction between the Cock Rig and the Spittal Hill. The knoll was situated on the extreme western confines of the parish of Penicuik, between which and the parish of Linton the Water of North Esk formed the boundary at this point. The parish boundary has now followed the shore of the reservoir a little further west.

The knoll is composed of a bluish-grey shaly sandstone, lying at a somewhat steep inclination to the horizon. The stone in this position readily admits of being split into the rough slabs of which the grave linings are constructed, though in one or two of the graves the flooring stones were noted to be of the red sandstone which is found on the Cairn Hills, at a distance of two or three miles away in a north-westerly direction.

The accompanying plan of the district (fig. 1) has been made up and photographed from Bartholomew's pedestrians' map of the Pentland

hillside which rises to the Cock Rig, or Cook Rig of the Spitals, as it is named in the *Description of Tweed-Jale*, by Dr Alexander Pennecuik, who lived at Newhall, between 1652 and 1722, and to whose book, published, with notes, at Leith in 1815, much of the ecclesiastical tradition with which the neighbourhood abounds may be traced.

In 1850 the knoll became two small islands when the North Esk reservoir was formed by the construction of a dam across the valley about 400 yards to the south, for the purpose of providing a continuous supply of water for the use of the mills along the course of the river to its outfall at Musselburgh.

The first Ordnance Survey map shows both islands, but the revised Survey shows only that to the east, the waves of the reservoir during the winter storms having swept away the covering of soil on the west island, which is now submerged at high-water, and exists only as a rocky gravel bank when the water in the reservoir is low. There is now no apparent trace on its surface of graves having existed upon it.

In 1855 the records kept for the owners of the reservoir show that on the east island a number of different sorts of trees were planted. Of these, however, only some fifteen Scots firs have survived; and, in addition, there are some five or six self-sown rowan trees. To the binding effect of the roots of these trees on the scanty covering of soil the island owes its preservation from the fate of its sister islet to the west. As it is, the island has been much decreased in size; and in an unusually severe storm of wind some twenty years ago, when the reservoir was at its height, and its surface covered with floating ice, the island was temporarily submerged, and much of its soil swept away by the action of the waves and the grinding of the ice. The devastation caused by this storm revealed the existence of the graves. A view of the island, looking eastwards, showing its trees and covering of soil and its foreshore, which is submerged at high-water, is given in fig. 2. In another view of the island, looking westwards (fig. 3), the positions of some of the graves are shown by digging-tools.

The disclosed graves were at once noticed by Mr Garnock, the late

keeper of the reservoir, but no written record seems to have been made of the occurrence. I have ascertained from Mrs Tod, Mr Garnock's



Fig. 2. View of the Island looking eastwards.

daughter, and the wife of his successor in office, that Mr Garnock examined all the graves then disclosed, and opened one in the soil surface, probably that marked by the axe in the photograph, but that he found

no relics of the nature of grave-goods, though fragments of human skulls, teeth, and bones were seen.

The ground plan of the island (fig. 4) gives a complete survey, and a section across its centre from north to south on the line A B C. For this survey and section I am under obligation to Mr J. H. Cunningham.



Fig. 3. View of the Island looking westward, and showing some of the Graves.

The graves marked Ia, I, VI, VII, X, and XI were either laid bare during this storm, or have since been made apparent by the wearing away of the soil of the island under a similar process.

The depth of soil on the island varies from 18 to 24 inches, after piercing which the graves seem to have been scooped out of the soft natural rock to the required size. They are usually floored and lined

with three or more slabs on each side, and with a single slab at each end. They were also apparently covered with like slabs, and the junctions of the slabs seem to have been filled in with smaller stones on the outside. With two exceptions after mentioned, the general size of the graves points to burial in each of one adult person in an extended position, without a coffin. The graves were entirely filled with soil and gravel, in which respect they resemble the Gladhouse graves, and differ from those of Belhaven. Whether this condition has resulted from natural processes, or was brought about by intention at the time of burial, it is difficult to say. I note that Mr Abercromby, in describing the Gladhouse graves, inclines to the latter view.

From the position of the side stones in one of the graves, No. III (fig. 10), it would almost appear as if the body had first been laid on the prepared floor of the grave, and the sides and ends thereafter put into position, so closely is the general outline of a human figure followed.

The plan (fig. 4) shows (first) all that is left of the natural surface of the island; (second) the denuded gravel and rock of the foreshore, with a few detached pieces of turf-covered soil washed down from the main soil surface, also the high-water level of the reservoir last winter, it never having been full; and (third) the water-mark of the reservoir when the survey was made, the depth of the water in the reservoir being then only some 32 feet—an abnormal condition, brought about by the drought of the past summer, which was of some importance in the work of exploration and excavation.

The section is self-explanatory, and is useful in showing that the graves at high-water are beneath the water-level,—a fact which, in the porous condition of the gravel and rock through which the water must freely percolate, may perhaps account for the silted-up condition of the graves, and certainly abundantly accounts for the almost entire absence now of human remains therein.

The plan further shows that the graves are all *approximately*, though not exactly, in an oriented position; and the dotted lines which I have

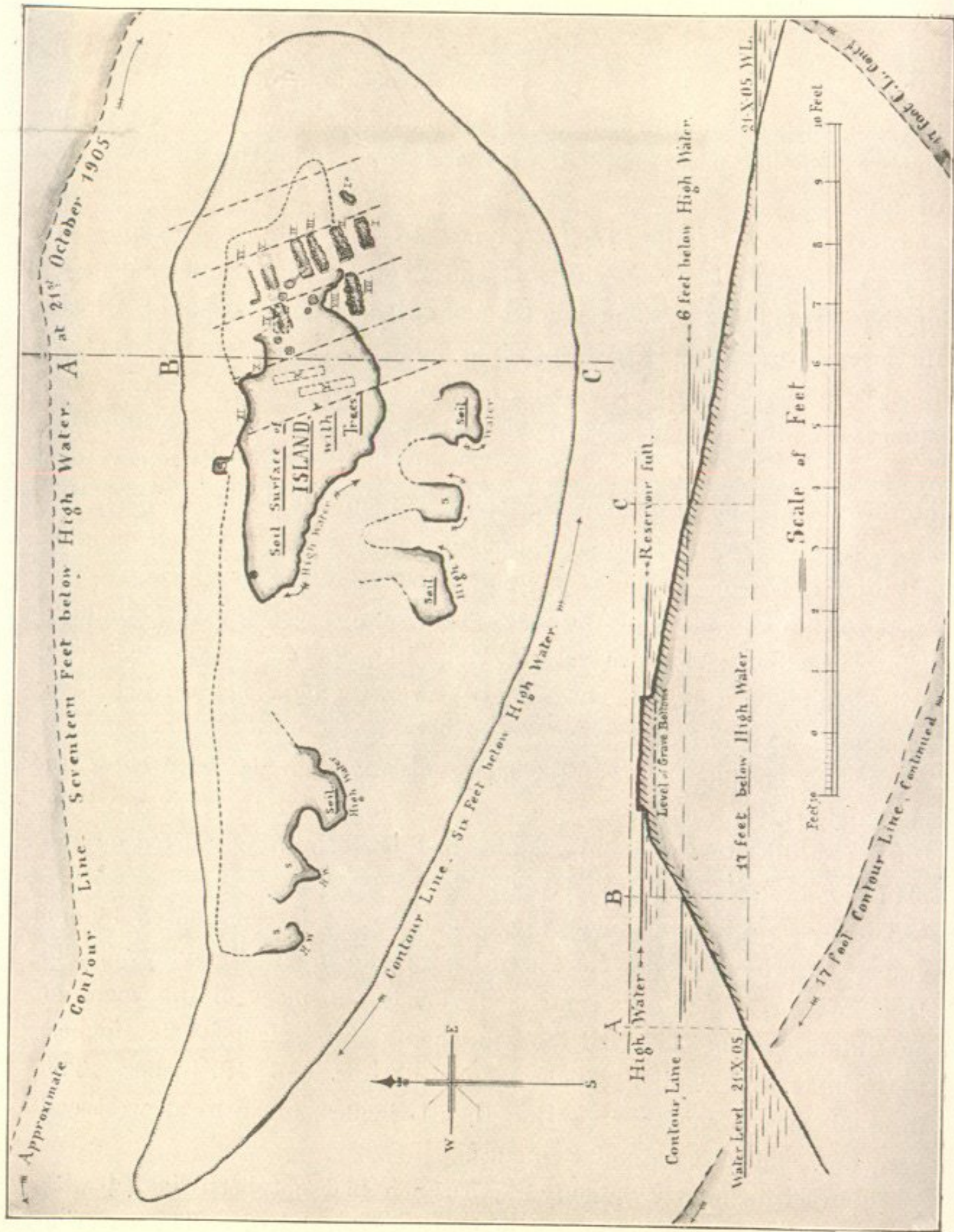


Fig. 4. Plan and Section of the Island.

put on the plan show that the graves lie in three rows, with possible indications of a fourth to the west.

Grave VII (fig. 11) is a very perfect structure, and in itself proves the existence of the third row, without putting too much reliance upon the washed-out spaces marked VIII and X as indicative of the sites of graves. By excavation at the point marked IX (shown in figs. 2 and 3 by a spade handle), I satisfied myself that there is there another grave in correct alignment with VII and VIII, but the trunks and roots of the surrounding trees prevented more than a small opening, which disclosed covering stones, two or three side stones, and two stones close together on edge in a perpendicular position at right angles to the side stones, which were suggestive of the head stone of one grave and the foot stone of another. The spot could only be very partially excavated, however, and the growth of the trees had no doubt disarranged the structure. I saw no vestige of human remains, nor anything of the nature of grave-goods; and a photograph could not be obtained.

As to the probability of a fourth row I cannot speak with certainty. The washed-out space marked XI looks like another grave-site. The experimental cuttings made at X and Y were perhaps not carried deep enough to reach any graves which may be there.

An enlargement of part of the survey is given in fig. 5 to show in more detail the structure and measurements of five of the graves, which were carefully excavated and examined, and which are numbered on the plan (fig. 4) Ia, I, II, III, and VII.

The first row in the plans (fig. 4 and fig. 5) is represented by one grave, Ia, which is the lowest of those shown in the view, fig. 6. It is of very small size, and is obviously the place of interment of an infant. The external measurements are — length 24 inches, breadth at west end 14 inches, and at east end 12 inches. The internal measurements are — length 21 inches, breadth at west end 9 inches, and at east end 8 inches.

This was apparently the only grave which had not been floored with slabs, the bottom consisting solely of the natural rock. The covering

stone or stones were not in position; and, as will be seen from the photograph, the construction is rude and irregular.

The second row contains five very complete graves and the remains of a sixth, with a space in which a seventh may yet be found between the graves marked IV and V on the plan, fig. 4.

Grave I is shown in the middle distance in fig. 6, the third grave

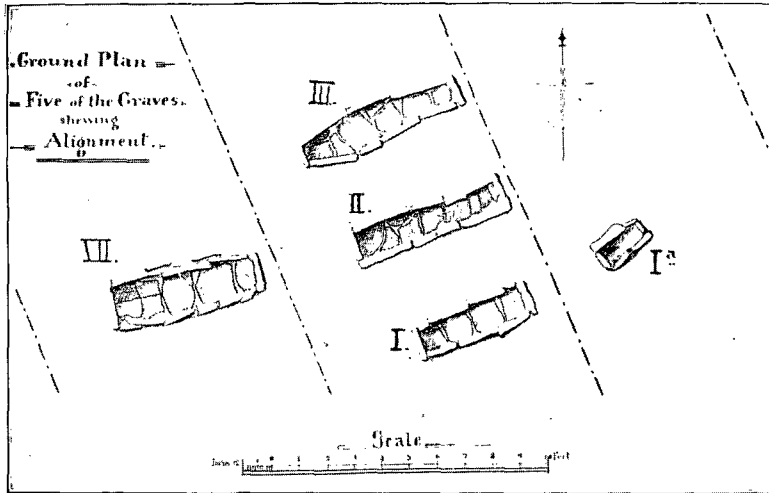


Fig. 5. Plan of five Graves, showing alignment.

in the top right-hand corner (marked by an axe) being the fine grave VII of the third row, to be afterwards illustrated.

Grave I, as shown in fig. 7, is of rude construction. Its external measurements are 4' 4" in length, with breadths of 10" at the west end and 14" at the centre and east end. Internally it measures 3' 10" in length by about a foot in breadth. The ends are each composed of a single stone, and there are three slabs on each side and four on the bottom, the two in the centre being of red Cairn-hill sandstone. The large slabs lying on each side of the grave may have



Fig. 6. View of three of the Graves.

been its covering stones. This grave seems to have been that of a child somewhat older than the occupant of the previous grave Ia. Its narrowness would preclude burial in any other than an extended position.

To the north there was a considerable space between graves I and III, and there were no surface indications of a grave, but, at somewhat greater depth than the average, grave II (fig. 8) was disclosed. Covering stones of small size were in position, and the grave was entirely



Fig. 7. View of Grave I.

filled with sand and gravel, which was carefully examined, but the presence of human remains could not be detected, and there were no grave-goods.

Grave III, already referred to as following closely the contour of a human figure, is shown in fig. 10. It was opened in the spring of 1905 by Mrs Tod, who found a human molar tooth, which she has preserved, and a bone resembling a kneecap, which was again buried.

The illustration (fig. 9) shows on the left the site of the last grave (which had been filled up, but which I again opened), and to the right grave IV, with its eastmost covering stone held in position by tree

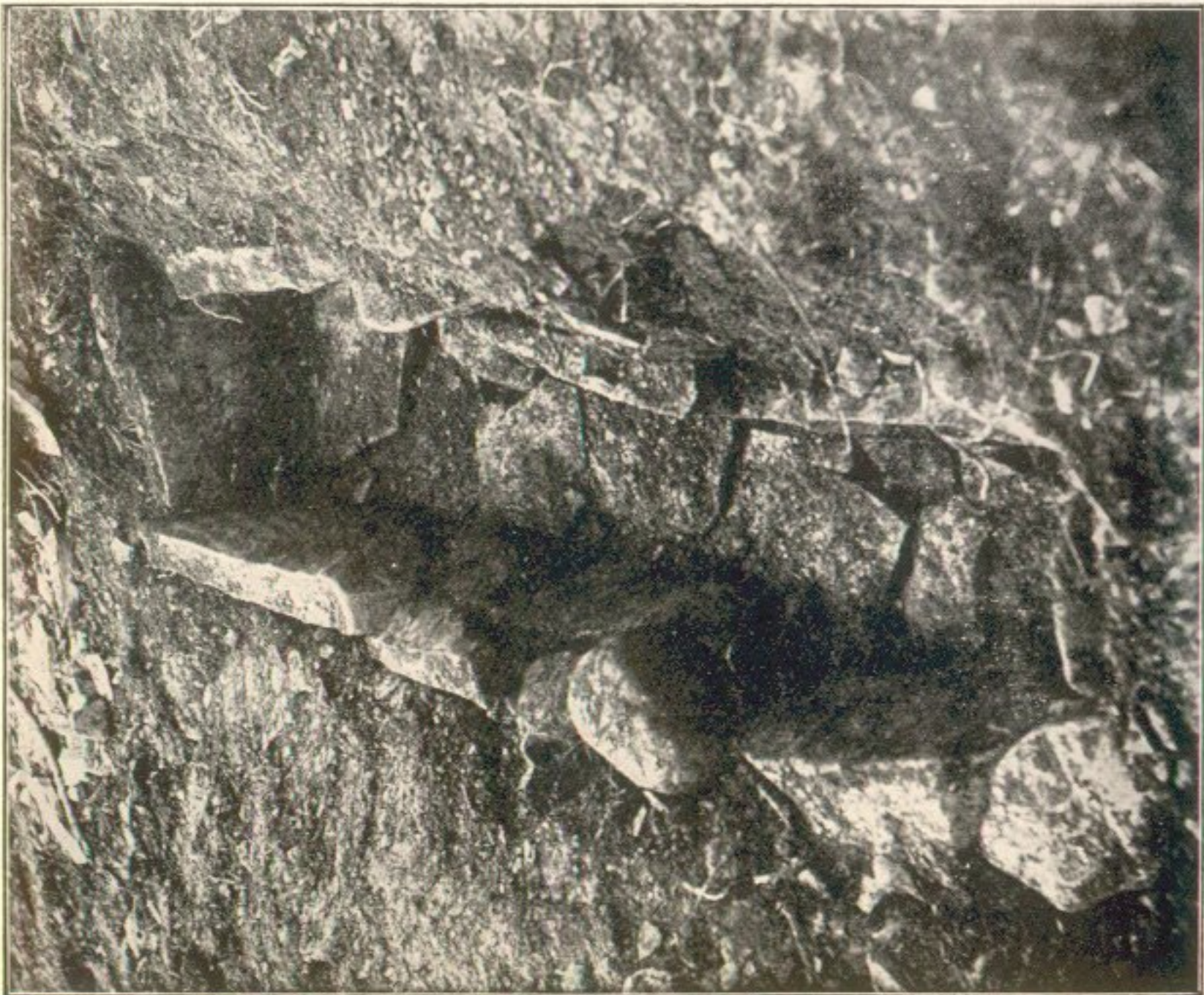


Fig. 8. View of Grave II.



Fig. 9. View of Grave IV.

roots. There lies to the right the unopened space, which may yet prove to contain another grave. Grave IV was opened in June 1898, Mr Tod being present. Amongst the gravel which filled the grave



Fig. 10. View of Grave III.

space was found a small portion of a human skull and two crowns of teeth. A paragraph reporting this occurrence appeared in the *Scotsman* of 29th June 1898.

Grave VII, the well-constructed grave already referred to as the

first of the third row, is shown in fig. 11. It is of sufficient size for the burial of an adult of average height, and its position on the shore admitted of the surrounding debris being so cleared away



Fig. 11. View of Grave VII.

as to enable me to obtain a photograph which clearly shows its structure.

The characteristic features of these graves, which lead to the surmise that they may be regarded as of the Christian period, are—

1. Their orientation ;
2. Their regular alignment in rows ;

3. The extended position of the body, as opposed to the doubled-up position generally affected in the pagan usage ; and
4. The absence of grave-goods.

The resemblance of the construction of the graves (in other respects than dimensions) to the short cists of the pagan period may be noted, and may justify the further surmise that the group belongs to an Early Christian period, when pagan methods of grave construction had not entirely died out.

To refer again to the district map (fig. 1), I would call attention to the apparently ecclesiastical associations of the district, as evidenced by such place-names as—

1. Spittal Hill—Ruins of Back Spittal—Site of Hospital.
2. Friarton, Upper and Nether.
3. Monk's Rig—Monk's Road, with Font Stone—Monk's Burn—and Monk's Haugh.
4. St Robert's Croft, and
5. Newhall, with its reputed site or ruins of chapel.

None of these names in themselves carry us back beyond the 11th century, and I need not take up further time and space with them, beyond referring to the 33rd volume of the Society's *Proceedings*, where Mr Coles, in describing the so-called Font Stone of the Monk's Rig (in reality the socketed base of a wayside cross), has set forth at some length what is apparently most of the information that may be gained from references in printed books to the ecclesiastical history and tradition of the neighbourhood.

I would, however, supplement Mr Coles' remarks on the subject with the two following extracts from Dr Pennecuik's *Description of Tweed-dale*, already referred to, on pp. 124 and 125 of which it is stated that—

“North from Patie's-hill is the Wester-Hill of 'Spital, the most verdant, smooth, and beautiful of all the Pentland Range . . . a short way up this hinder part of the hill are the foundations of some buildings, called in old writings the Back 'Spital, sheltered from the north by the Peat-rig, about the middle of the distance between the Doit-Burn and that of Fairlie-hope. . . .

“At the foot of the Monk’s Burn, where it joins the Esk, is a holm called the Monk’s Haugh. . . . New-Hall appears once to have been a religious house belonging to the wealthy order of the Cistercians, and to have held most of the surrounding district ; and the lands of the ‘Spitals seem to have been hospital lands endowed for sustaining the hospitals under the care and management of the religious foundation of New-Hall. Besides being a receptacle for the sick and superannuated, the Spitals were probably each a Hospitium or Inn, and with the road and its fonts and crosses, which also served as landmarks, an accommodation for travellers passing from one monastery to another, the Back ‘Spital suiting such as went by the north side of the hills.”

Possibly the graves may be of earlier date than the neighbouring ecclesiastical foundations ; and though the link (if link there is) may be of the slenderest description, I think it is desirable at least to connect this notice with Mr Coles’ summary, because the Back Spital lies only half a mile down the valley from the graveyard ; and when the history of the Back Spital is ascertained in fuller detail (as it may yet be from the discovery of the “old writings” referred to in Dr Pennecuik’s book), the presence in such close proximity to it of the graveyard may perhaps be a feature of some importance.