

II.

THE VITRIFIED FORT OF LOCHAN-AN-GOUR, ARGYLLSHIRE.

By ALAN REID, F.S.A. Scot.

The picturesque rocky knoll shown in the centre of fig. 1 is situated in Glen Gour, on the western side of Loch Linnhe, and nearly opposite to Onich, in Lochaber. The knoll is about a quarter of a mile in length,

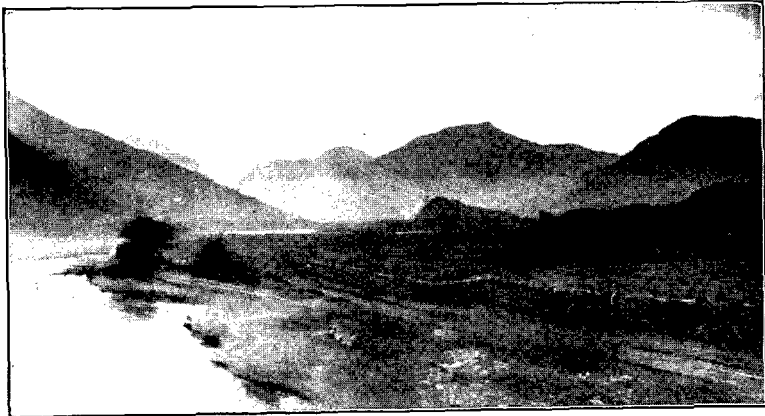


Fig. 1. The Fort of Lochan-an-Gour, from Salachan Bridge.
From a photograph by Mr James Black, B.Sc.

its eastern end rising over 100 feet above the marshy or watery levels of the glen. This higher portion of the knoll is separated from its lengthy western slopes by a depression that may be described as being partly natural and partly artificial. Its sloping surface is comparatively even, grassy mounds, and traces of roughly built walls appearing at intervals all round it. These have enclosed an area measuring, roughly, 250 feet in length by 30 feet in breadth—the fort of Lochan-an-Gour.

Glen Gour extends for some miles north-westwards of this knoll, which

figures in the Ordnance Survey as Torr-an-Duin, the Hill of the Fort. A Fort-William guide-book refers to it as "the vitrified fort of Lochan-an-Gour," the Lochan being a widening of the river Gour which stretches along the southern side of the knoll. A minor stream gathers the waters of the glen on its northern side. Very clearly the great knoll of

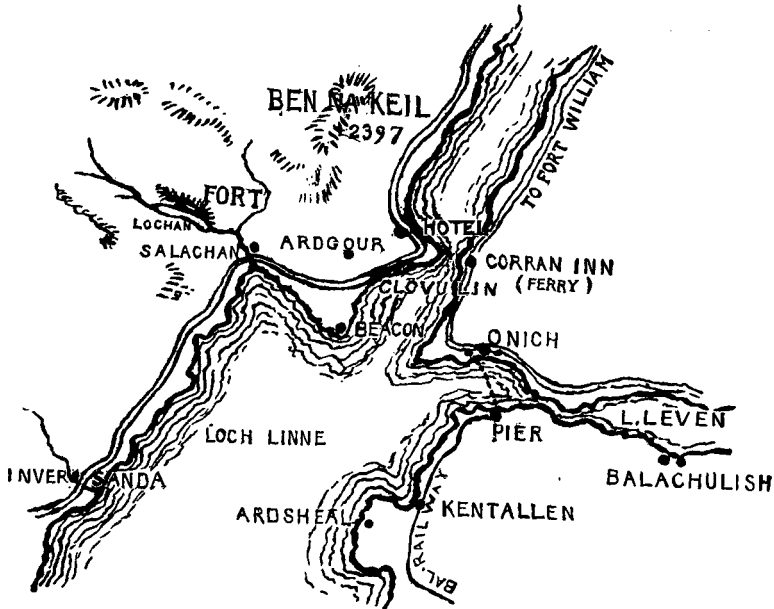


Fig. 2. Map of Ardour and District.

quartzite, nearly covered with heather and bracken, was at one time entirely surrounded by water. For fishing purposes, Captain MacLean of Ardour has just erected a dam near the entrance to the glen, which may soon restore to Torr-an-Duin its pristine appearance and isolation. Its geographical situation is shown in the sketch map, fig. 2, with reference to its better-known surroundings.

Unfortunately, this fort was not brought under Dr Christison's

notice when he was examining similar relics in the neighbouring district of Lochaber. Nor does there seem to be any record otherwise of its important features. A somewhat cursory examination of the site made in the summer of 1907 showed these to be noteworthy; and more careful search made in the spring of 1908 confirmed and deepened that impression. The guide-book note regarding vitrification was found to be correct. Vitrification does exist, as the specimens now in the Museum testify; and several other structural details clearly indicate



Fig. 3. Plan of the Fort of Lochan-an-Gour.

that the Ardgour fort was an early work of considerable extent and strength.

From the plan of the fortified area shown in fig. 3, the general appearance of the enclosure will be gathered. The growth of heath and fern is such as to make a clear view of the site impossible, but low mounds rising over buried stones and debris indicate the outlines fairly well. A little digging into several of these mounds brought to view the remains of walls built of waterworn and carried stones, of a texture foreign to the quartzite bed on which they lay. Where nature had indented the rocky sides of the knoll, courses of laid stones were found making good the deficiencies, so that the enclosing wall might run the straighter round the somewhat narrow area. On the lower knolls, lying westwards of the fortress proper, several similar mound-marked

enclosures are also traceable. Doubtless, these are the remains of pens for sheep or cattle, but they were stone structures, as an occasional boulder shows.

At the western or inmost end of the fort, and directly over the trench-like depression, is a remarkable tumulus, a few feet in height, and roughly circular in shape. At first sight this might be regarded as the ruin, or as the foundation of a round tower, the necessity for such a defence being clearly apparent here. On all sides but this, Torr-an-Duin is more or less precipitous. Here its approach, over a succession of gentle slopes, is easy; and even a fosse, if unprotected, would fail as a means of security. The fortress, also, would be peculiarly amenable to assault from this point, and might be damaged by the crudest weapons if not specially strengthened where most vulnerable. But the evidence for a tower goes no deeper than the sod. The removal of a few spades of turf simply proved the mound to contain the remains of a wall of exceptional strength and character, great masses of stone and vitrified fragments lying in confusion all through it.

Our serious investigation of the relic commenced at the point marked with a + on the plan, fig. 3. Here was the appearance of building in the shape of two courses of large stones, nearly hidden by heather, but showing plainly in their arrangement the hand of man. On clearing these of turf it was evident that they lay in an undisturbed position. Digging behind this fragmentary wall, we unearthed the first evidence of vitrification (specimen No. I.). The flux looked so pale, so milky-white among the dark turf in which it was embedded, that our first impression was that we had discovered a large agate or chalcedony. Soon all such ideas were dispelled, for behind that wall, as shown in fig. 4, lay tons, apparently, of vitrified fragments of every shape and size. Very carefully were these examined before they were lifted, ample time being spent in thought and remark. Search was made for an inner wall corresponding to that outside of the vitrification, but in vain. Our conclusion was that here an outer wall of built stones had been strengthened by a vitrified inner wall or lining. All around the Torr,

on its sides and at its base, lay the fragments of the outer wall still partly *in situ*, its inner, fire-fused lining lying in broken masses within the tumulus that overlooks the depression on the west.

No traces of vitrification were found in the clearings made at several points along the lines of wall stretching eastwards of the tumulus. All the vitrified materials lay gathered together, as it seemed, at the western end of the fort, and at no point did the vitrification bear the appearance of a solid wall. The largest portion found measured 2 feet in length,

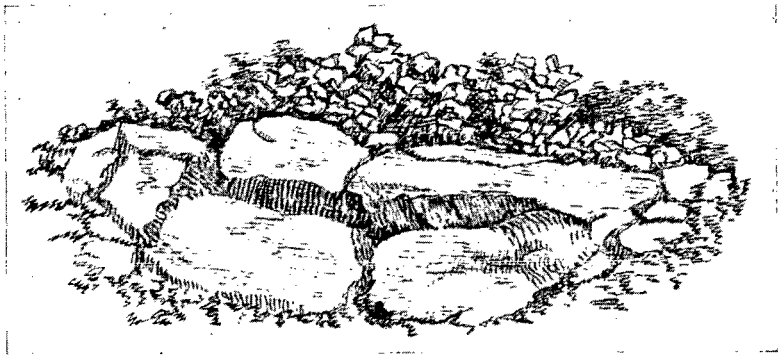


Fig. 4. The Wall and vitrified material.

and was about 1 foot in diameter. With the aid of Mr Allan MacMillan, this large specimen, weighing nearly one hundred pounds, was removed, and carefully packed in a box for transit to Edinburgh, where it arrived in pieces. Possibly certain details of the railway service may have had more to do with its fracture than had methods of construction? But these, ingenious and laborious as they may have been, had little value in the eyes of Mr Ross, the obliging contractor for the Ardgour dam. He declared that he could make a better job with concrete in half an hour than the ancients had done through days of furious firing!

All the vitrified material lay inside of the stones that mark the

position of the defensive wall. It seemed as if it had simply fallen where it lay, or that it had been pulled down and spread over the circular west end of the fort. No clear marks of adhesion to the native quartzite of the knoll were discovered, nor was any portion of the vitrification found adhering to the stones of the wall. Though disturbance was obvious, the growth of bracken and heather roots that filled every interstice showed that it was remote. Every portion examined impressed us with the conviction that the fusion of the masses was the result of design, and not of accident. The Bale Fire theory of origin would not fit; for this portion of the fort lay comparatively low, and quite remote from the lofty eastern end, where alone a signal-fire could have been conspicuous. Besides, the stones knit together by the flux had been broken so as to present their freshly fractured edges to its grip, rounded stones and waterworn surfaces being conspicuous by their absence. Some of the pieces had a somewhat volcanic appearance, the flow of the flux being inverted through disturbance. Numerous small single stones (specimen No. II.) entirely covered with a brown enamel, and many groups of two or three stones (specimen No. III.) firmly joined by fluxes of various tints and textures, lay all over the uncovered area. It had the appearance of a mine or treasury of specimens of vitrification, but it offered little or no explanation of the mystery of its origin.

Nothing seemed clearer, however, than that the vitrification was the result of design and premeditation. This was evidenced, *First, by the systematic fracture of the stones.* In all the masses, larger and smaller, the cemented stones vary in size, but are all of small dimensions. They lie to each other so as to preclude the supposition that they were fractured by heat, nor were any of the small pieces riven as if by fire. *Second, by the downward flow of the cementing flux.* In every case the lava had the appearance of having run downwards, all the pendent nodules showing a symmetry of form similar to that of specimen No. III. None of the nodules were contorted as if driven from the side, and none were larger than those of the specimen. *Third, by the position of the*

vitrified portion in the configuration of the fort. A strong wall was a necessity at this easily assailable point, and the ordinary stone-built rampart was strengthened by a vitrified shell. By reason of its low and comparatively secluded situation, this point was not adapted for the display of the signal-fires to which vitrification has sometimes been attributed. If the specimens from Ardgour might be regarded as



Fig. 5. View of Torr-an-Duin from the S. East.

typical, vitrification was the result not of accident but of design ; for both premeditation and skill are apparent in these primitive, and not very successful, efforts to construct an enduring barrier.

The general appearance and character of the fort, and of Torr-an-Duin in its relation to the Lochan and the glen, will be gathered from fig. 5. From this point of view the fort, the fosse, and the contours of the site assume their most striking appearance. The waters of the Lochan are rapidly covering the marshy foreground, making access to the hill

more difficult than before, but adding greatly to the picturesqueness of its aspect.

One other feature connected with Torr-an-Duin is noteworthy, if not unique. Up its steep, eastern end a rough pathway leads to the



Fig. 6. The Post-cheek and Dook-hole.

top of the rock, interesting traces of a gateway appearing at a point about one-third up this ascent. On the right is the sharply cut recess for a gate-post shown in fig. 6, the chiselled hole for the dook to which the head of the post had been fastened appearing also in the drawing. This hole is no mere natural fault, for it pierces the quartzite to a depth of 6 inches, tapers in shape from mouth to socket, and bears the

marks of some sort of tool. Evidently, the flattened rocks on the left had borne the counterpart of this natural door-cheek in the form of a built wall, against which the door, swung on the post to the right, had closed. To the left, inside of this barrier, is a large quarry-like clearing, which, if used as a fold for animals, proves the necessity for a door at this particular point. These details are more curious than profound, and may, of course, belong to a period comparatively recent, though certainly not within living memory.

No tradition regarding the fort of Lochan-an-Gour lingers in the locality, nor appears in literature. Bronze weapons have been found in the neighbourhood; coins, also, of some age and importance, as has been described in the *Proceedings* of the Society. Stone or slate-lined burial-cists are not uncommon. Hugh Campbell, one of the Clovullin crofters, pointing to his slate door-step, told me he had taken it from the side of a grave disturbed by the plough on his little farm. The entire district belongs to Captain MacLean, to whose mother, Mrs MacLean of Ardgour, we were indebted for permission to make the investigation now recorded. According to Dr Christison, the nearest vitrified fort is in Glen Nevis, 12 miles distant from Glen Gour; and this record adds one to the scanty number of such structures connected with Argyllshire.