

III.

NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF A CAIRN AT MOSSKNOW, ON
THE KIRTLE WATER, DUMFRIESSHIRE. BY MISS DOROTHEA
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The Border counties of England and Scotland are renowned for historical and antiquarian interest, for here it is that legends and remains of mediæval times are numerous; here the Romans have left behind them many enduring traces of their conquest and occupation, whilst records of more primitive races are still to be found in some profusion.

Although lying well beyond the Roman Wall and the limit of the influence which this ancient boundary may be considered to more or less represent, Dumfriesshire possesses numerous sites of archæological value, many of which have been fully examined and described. In the south of the county, however, the very early relics in the form of Tumuli appear to have received but little attention. It is true that some burnt human remains and a bronze blade contained in an urn were discovered in 1880 by a labourer when ploughing a field at Shuttlefield, near Lockerbie,¹ but I have been able to find only a single reference² to a mound which has been scientifically excavated; and it is for this reason that I venture to hope that it may be of some interest to place on record the circumstances of the opening of a cairn situated not far from the village of Kirkpatrick-Fleming.

A considerable number of cairns occur in the valley of the Kirtle; and amongst about a dozen which I inspected, only one had apparently not been previously disturbed; in fact, one immediately to the south of Creca, and which is marked on the Ordnance map, is entirely demolished; and were it not for the presence of a circle of bushes, the spot would no longer be recognisable as the site of a former cairn. Another in very

¹ Anderson, Dr J., *Scotland in Pagan Times* (The Bronze and Stone Ages), Edinburgh, 1886, p. 21.

² Barbour, James, *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scotland*, vol. xxxiii. pp. 241, 242.

similar condition is found close to the sawmill at Mossknow. There appear to be two chief causes to account for the partial or total destruction of these mounds: they provide (especially when close to any highway) a convenient supply of road metal, and most of them have also been roughly (and fortunately often only superficially) opened in a search for the treasure they were supposed to contain. As a result of this second cause, the cists have in some cases been reached and the edges of the stone slabs of which they were composed left exposed to view, as in several instances near Irving Town, on the right bank of the Kirtle. That this demolition is certain to continue, and probably at a rapid rate, makes it an essential matter that, before it is too late, as many as possible of these cairns should be carefully examined, and their structure and contents recorded.

Through the kindness of Major-General Graham of Mossknow I was enabled to open one of the cairns on his property during May of last year (1908). It is perhaps most usual for burial mounds to be placed on a hill or in some other commanding position; but the one with which these notes deal is situated on low ground, in a field close to the road from Beltenmont Bridge to Rig, about 200 yards from the Kirtle, on its right bank, and immediately opposite Mossknow. It may be said to form one of a scattered group of burials, one of which is almost demolished, and provides a foundation for part of the buildings of a Mossknow lodge in the same field, while another is to be seen in an adjacent field, and a third is found in the remains (already referred to) close to the sawmill on the opposite side of the stream.

The illustration (fig. 1) shows the general appearance of the mound, which is raised about 4 feet above the field-level, and surrounded by beech trees—these doubtless indicating its former circumference, which would accordingly have been about 74 yards. Even a cursory view showed that it was greatly reduced in bulk; besides this, several depressions—one of which extends almost to the centre from the south-east side—seemed to show unmistakably that openings of some description had been made at these points. It was to avoid these that a trench

from 5 to 6 feet wide was cut from the north-west border towards and ultimately reaching the centre. Externally the cairn rose considerably towards the centre, though excavation showed that only 4 feet of foreign material overlay the natural soil both at the centre and at the edge where the opening was started. This seems to suggest the existence of an encircling ditch, which may have originally bounded the mound, and



Fig. 1. View of the Cairn before excavation.

has since gradually become filled up. The stones, mixed with loose earth, which were found to be 4 feet deep at the outer edge, towards the middle of the mound gradually became reduced to 3 feet, being replaced underneath by a layer of clay, a foot thick and yellowish in colour; this contained a large quantity of quartz, and had evidently not been previously disturbed.

The removal of this clay left exposed a flat stone, which was 5 feet 6 inches in length by 2 feet 6 inches in breadth, and lay, roughly speak-

ing, east and west. Below this was another and still larger slab, measuring 7 feet by 4 feet; it was placed in a similar position, and was separated from the upper covering-stone only by a small amount of soil, which must have gradually accumulated. On lifting this a cist sunk below the field-level was disclosed to view (fig. 2). Its sides and ends were built of four large single stones 3 to 4 inches thick, the



Fig. 2. View of the Cist and its covering Stone.

inside measurements of the cavity being—depth 22 inches, width 23 inches, and length 4 feet 3 inches. The stone slabs showed no trace of tool-marks, but may perhaps have been roughly dressed with stone; the joints between each were carefully plastered with clay, which had effectually prevented any infiltration of earth. The soil at the bottom of the cist was covered to a depth of 3 inches with clean river gravel, and on this lay some unburnt human remains, unfortunately in a very frag-

mentary state of preservation. A portion of the skull of an adult and a tooth lay at the eastern end, while at the centre was found an imperfect adult mandibular ramus containing several teeth, which immediately fell out when the specimen was handled. Close to this last were nearly a dozen and a half permanent teeth, with the crowns fairly well preserved, portions of others, and eight crowns of milk teeth. A number of decomposed limb bones also occurred. Neither these nor the other remains appeared to have been touched by fire, although many small pieces of charcoal were lying amongst the gravel, some of which was blackened and had unmistakably been in contact with fire.

The entire contents of the tomb were carefully removed by hand, but no pottery was found, nor trace of any weapon, even in the form of bronze stains on the bones, which Dr Prior of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) very kindly examined for this purpose. Taking into consideration the fact that pottery would undoubtedly have been more easily preserved than the human remains, and that it can be said with certainty that the clay covering the cist had not previously been disturbed, this absence of all accompanying relics is of interest, in conjunction with the probable inference that this was the tomb of one or two adult persons, with whom were buried a child or children. The idea that this was a burial of considerable importance is supported, not only by the evident care with which this primitive tomb was constructed, but also by the size of the cairn, of which, judging from its central position, this was in all probability the original interment.

Owing to lack of time, it was unfortunately found to be impossible to remove the entire cairn, or to pursue further investigations amongst any of the other mounds of the vicinity. It seems probable that the excavation of a series of these would be of much interest, and might yield results of great value.