

## I.

## EXPLORATION OF A CHAMBERED CAIRN AT ACHAIDH, SPINNING-DALE, IN THE PARISH OF CREICH, SUTHERLAND. BY ALEXR. O. CURLE, SECRETARY.

Westward some seven and a half miles along the northern shore of the Dornoch Firth lies the hamlet of Spinningdale. The gaunt ruin of a cotton-mill erected by Mr Dempster of Dunnichen to promote the spinning industry in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and destroyed by fire in 1809, stands in a green meadow between the road and the shore, and attracts the attention of the traveller. Turning off the main road above this ruin, and proceeding up the glen for about half a mile, one comes to a bridge across the Rhivra burn. Within the adjacent wood, at no great distance from the road, lie the remains of two large cairns, both much dilapidated. The lower of the two gives no indication of its original character, but the other, some forty yards to the north-east, shows from the upright slabs in its interior that it has been chambered. Much of it has been carted away, no doubt to build the adjacent dykes; but though no longer the impressive monument it was before a utilitarian age had reduced its dimensions, there still lingers in the neighbourhood, as evidence of its former prominence, a legend of its erection. Many hundred years ago, so runs the tale, a fell disease visited the district and took a grievous toll of its inhabitants. To the survivors its destruction became a matter of supreme moment and of no insurmountable difficulty. Everyone knew where the disease was. The scene of its ravages was only too well known. Accordingly, they formed themselves into a great circle around the infected area, gradually diminishing its diameter as they walked inward, keeping their prey before them. Just as they were converging on the centre, crowding around from all sides, the disease, in the form of a small animal, vanished underground. To make sure that it would have no opportunity of

reappearing in their midst, they raised this great cairn over the spot where it had disappeared.

If you trace the course of the Rhivra burn upwards through the wood, by a path which, crossing and recrossing the stream, discovers its cascades and deep fern-fringed pools, you will come out on the moorland about half a mile to the east of the cairn whose excavation I am going to describe. It is known, I am told, as the cairn of the Red Dog—that faithful animal having hitherto been credited with the protection of his master's remains. You will find it close beside the road at the edge of the fir-wood below the crofts at Achaidh. On first observation, it appeared as a mass of boulders, each such as a man could easily lift. It was some 8 feet in height and about 50 feet to 53 feet in diameter. Like most cairns one meets, it had already been the object of some untutored archæologist's curiosity, who at various points had made excavations in it, but had failed to find the chamber in the interior. It was observed that it was not circular and that there were indications of four horns projecting approximately E.N.E. and S.E. and W.S.W. and N.W. for a distance of some 16 feet, with a width of about 20 feet at their base, giving the cairn the appearance shown on the ground-plan, fig. 1. A considerable depth of humus, accumulated largely from the pine needles, covers the stones on the outer edge, and this would need to be removed before the plan could be definitely ascertained. Unfortunately the time at my disposal did not enable me to do this. It was not originally my intention to excavate, but my attention was arrested by a single large stone lying partially exposed towards the south side of the cairn, and resembling in form and dimensions the lintel stones of the horned cairns I had elsewhere examined at Skelpick and Rhinavie in Strathnaver. Considering that this stone gave the clue to the character of the cairn, a clearing was made in rear of it, and the existence of the chamber was at once made manifest.

Clearing away a small pile of boulders recently erected on the top of the cairn, the original apex of the domed roof was reached. A number of large flat slabs some 2 to 3 feet in length lay radiating from a

central block of yellow sandstone exposed for a height of 4 or 5 inches and some 8 to 10 inches in diameter, as shown in fig. 2. This stone, about 1 foot in depth, tapered downwards and was firmly inserted in the

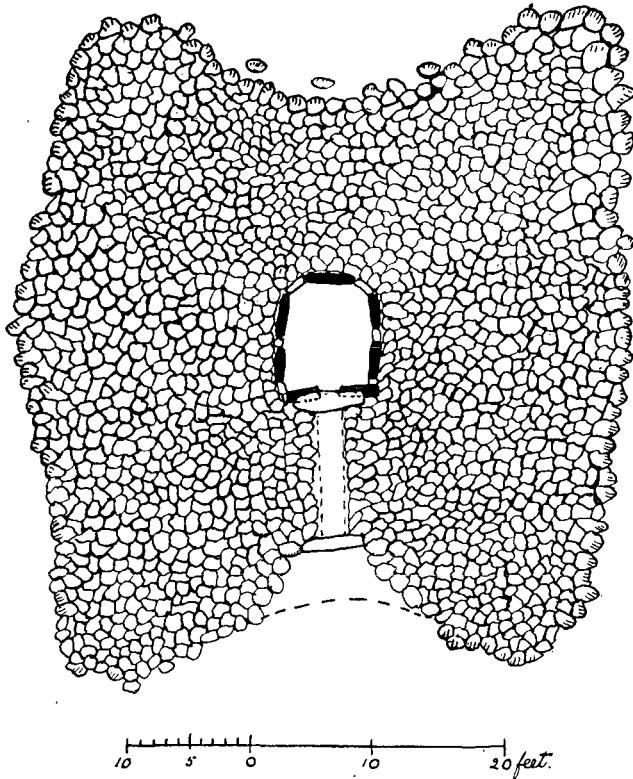


Fig. 1. Ground-plan of Cairn at Achaidh.

structure, like a keystone. On its removal a view was obtained of the interior of the chamber, the walls of which, built in beehive form, gradually converged upwards. It was noticed that a fall of the building in the past had occurred from behind the exposed long stone, and that the floor of

the chamber from front to back was covered with the débris. Work was consequently begun from the outer end, and enough of the roof was removed to allow the proceedings to be conducted with safety (fig. 3). The exposed block proved to be, as suspected, a lintel. It measured 6 feet in length and formed in section a roughly equilateral triangle whose side measured about 2 feet. The slabs, or posts, on which it originally

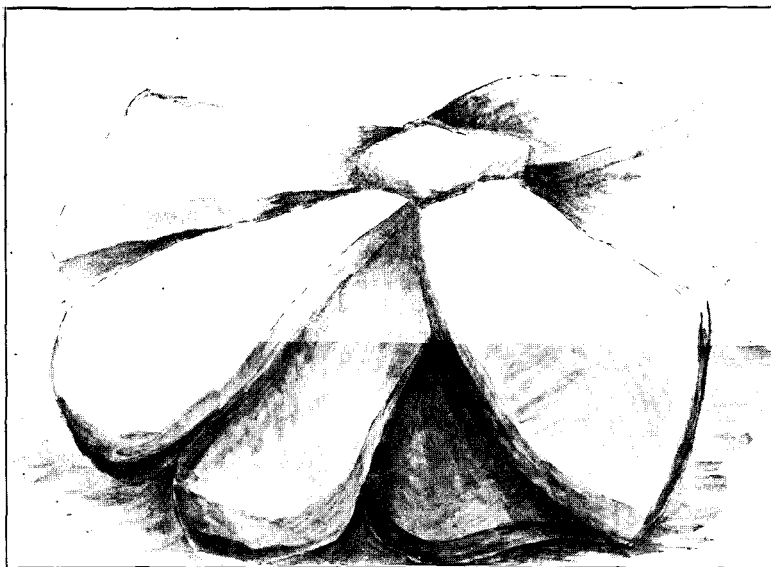


Fig. 2. View of the centre of the domed roof of the Chamber from above.

rested are not of the same height, and on the top of that on the south side of the entrance one or two flat stones have been placed to raise it to the proper level. Formerly—possibly due to the insecure bed thus afforded—the lintel stone had slipped slightly backwards from the chamber, and no doubt brought about the collapse of that portion of the roof which rested on it. When cleared out, the chamber was found to be rectangular, except at the junction of the back and side walls, where horizontal building fills the corners. Its extreme length is 8 feet 9 inches, its

breadth 7 feet, and it lies with its longest axis E.S.E. and W.N.W., with the entrance from the former direction. It is formed, as most of the Sutherland cairns appear to be, of large upright slabs with horizontal walling between them as shown in fig. 4. The slabs are seven in number; one at the back, measuring 4 feet 6 inches in height above the floor level and 3 feet 3 inches across, two opposite each other on either side, measur-



Fig. 3. View of the Chamber with part of the roof removed.

ing from 2 feet 9 inches to 3 feet 9 inches in breadth; and two lower stones on which the lintel rested, projecting from the sides 3 feet 9 inches and 2 feet 2 inches respectively. At some 4 feet 6 inches from the floor level the walls commence to converge. The highest portion, over which the roof remains, is 6 feet 9 inches above the floor, and to the apex the height must have been a few inches more. The passage where it enters to the chamber is 2 feet wide and 4 feet high. Beyond the lintel it is blocked with débris. In the circumference opposite the entrance to the

chamber, and midway between the two supposititious horns at the E.S.E., about 2 feet from the edge, there was uncovered a long stone 6 feet 4 inches in length and about 1 foot in thickness, which apparently marks the outer extremity of the passage. It is twelve feet distant from the inner lintel.

Some 3 feet of ruin covered the floor of the chamber, and it was not



Fig. 4. View of the interior of the Chamber, showing horizontal building between the megalithic slabs.

found possible in consequence to observe accurately the depths of the deposits which lay on it. The upper stratum, through which numerous large stones protruded, was of a dark, peaty colour, and was probably deposited by percolation through the roof. On the top of it lay the remains of a rat's larder—a number of empty cocoons of the emperor, or some other moth gathered from the heather, the jaw of a small rodent, and some other fragments of bone. The rat's hole was visible in one

corner. Beneath this stratum, which was a few inches in thickness, a layer of grey sand was encountered, throughout which were numerous white particles of quartz and a small amount of comminuted bone, which did not appear, however, to have been burned. A small quantity of charcoal also lay in this deposit. From it there was recovered a fragment of pottery (fig. 5) some 2 inches square and  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch in thickness, of a dark reddish colour, well baked and of a fine texture, neolithic in character, and ornamented with a few vertical impressions made with the finger nail. It had formed part of a round vessel with a slightly everted lip. There also came to light a small tanged scraper

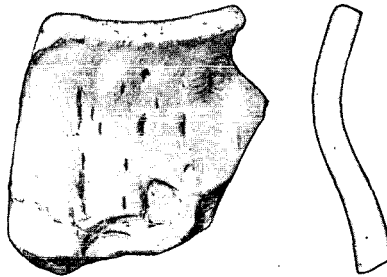


Fig. 5. Fragment of Pottery from the Cairn. (3.)

of greenish flint, with a small flaw or accidental perforation in the centre. Against the back of the chamber lay the remains of an unburnt skeleton, with some portions of bone lying between the building and the back slab. The bones were much decayed, and no part of a skull was found; nor was the position of the body determinable further than that it lay across the chamber with the feet towards the south. The remains were those of a well-grown adult of indeterminate sex, and comprised one portion of the lower end of a femur, a portion of the upper end of a tibia, also a portion of a fibula and the upper end of a radius. The interment appears to have been by simple inhumation. A few partially burned fragments of bones were found, but it is not certain that these were human.

Beneath the sandy deposit was a thinner layer of black soil free from any particles of stone, and which, when dry, resolves itself into a fine black dust. This appears to contain fine fragments of charcoal. It lay on the top of flags which for the greater part covered the natural clay surface. There were also obtained a single shell of a marine mussel, the tooth of a ruminant—probably of a small sheep—and a modern metal button. All these objects had probably found their way in through the interstices in the roof.

The soil from the chamber was carefully passed through a half-inch riddle, but the heavy rain and bitter cold (albeit it was the 26th July) rendered the process neither pleasant nor easy. The fact that only one fragment of pottery was found seems to imply that the chamber had been previously rifled.

The relics are now in the National Museum.

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