

## I.

ACCOUNT OF THE EXCAVATION OF TWO HUT-CIRCLES OF THE  
BRONZE AGE, IN THE PARISH OF MUIRKIRK, Ayrshire.  
By J. G. A. BAIRD, F.S.A. Scot.

The parish of Muirkirk is almost entirely moorland, cultivation being confined to the low-lying land in the valleys of the Waters of Ayr and Greenock. Hence, there is in this parish a considerable number of remains of more or less ancient constructions which have escaped demolition by agricultural operations. According to a charter of the monks of Melrose, the district was covered by forest in the twelfth century, chiefly birch, to judge by the remains in the mosses, and was the haunt of wolf and red deer, as testified by horn and bone. Both stone and bronze implements have been found, but no thorough examination of the remains referred to above has been made, so far as I know. Last autumn, however, a beginning was made, and several investigations were carried out by Mr Fairbairn, head keeper on the Wellwood estate, and myself. The former had long been anxious to examine a spot which seemed to show traces of man's handiwork. This was a grassy patch among the heather, with a few stones appearing here and there, suggesting the site of a cairn, which examination proved to be the remains of a hut-circle (fig. 1). The circle is situated on a gentle slope lying west to east at right angles to the general slope of the hill, which is south and north, and about 900 feet above sea-level. It is at a considerable distance from any existing spring, but a small runnel passes close by, which probably maintained a constant supply of water before the hill was

drained. Removal of turf and heather exposed a rough pavement of water-worn stones of all shapes, mostly of a weight which a man could carry, but one considerable boulder stands at the entrance. There was also removed a large quantity of small stones, and debris, which no doubt filled the spaces between the uneven stones and made a more or less level floor. About 6 feet from the entrance, and 3 feet

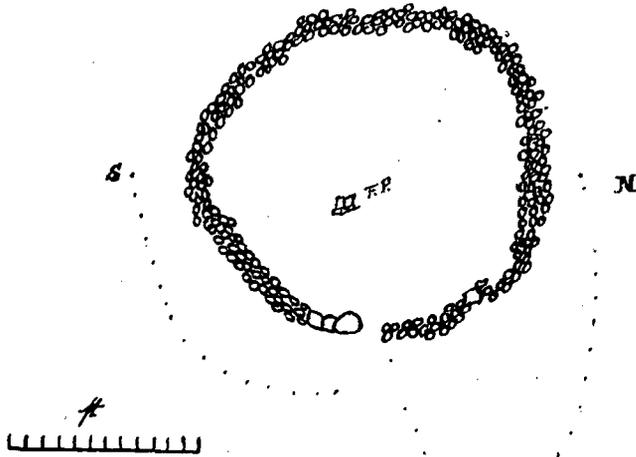


Fig. 1. Hut-circle No. 1, at Muirkirk.

from the centre of the circle, was found a fireplace paved with flat stones, with others set on edge to form a back on the side next the doorway. These stones and the earth in their interstices showed signs of fire when laid bare. The wall of the hut appears to have been about 2 feet high, enclosing a circular space from 18 feet to 19 feet in diameter. The pavement of the eastern half-circle is continued beyond the wall to a distance of 4 feet to 6 feet, extending to 12 feet beyond and on the north of the entrance (shown by dotted line on plan), but the latter part of the pavement may be the remains of a

screen or shelter for the entrance. The relics discovered were few in number, but of great archæological value, being fragments of bronze-age pottery, which were found near the fireplace, and testify to the antiquity of these dwellings. Nothing was observed which threw any light upon the construction of the roof, nor have any tumuli been noticed in the neighbourhood of the circle. The choice of

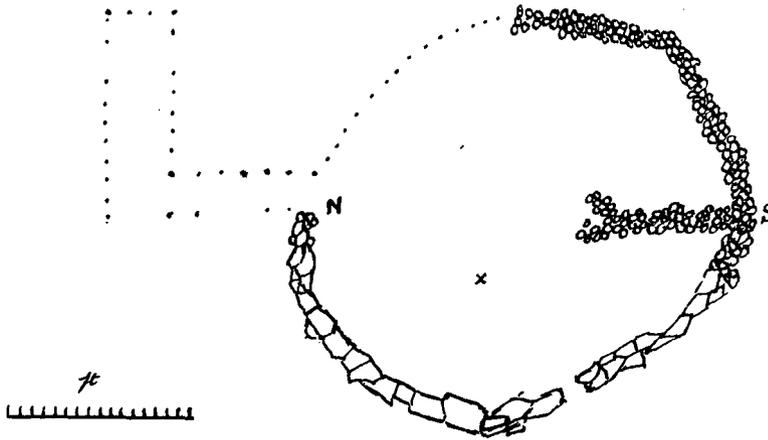


Fig. 2. Hut-circle No. 2, at Muirkirk.

site, on the north side of a hill which rises about 500 feet above it, with no shelter from the prevailing wind, and in a stormy district, seems somewhat strange. But in the long course of years which have passed since the hut was built, the climate may have altered for the worse, and if the hills were covered with rough forest, it may be that the site presented advantages which are not now apparent.

The next hut-circle examined (fig. 2) is at a lower elevation, about 700 feet above sea-level, and on fairly flat ground which occurs on a northern slope. The site is a deposit of sand and gravel. This

structure is not so well preserved as the first; the pavement is incomplete, and part of the wall has disappeared. For this, cultivation at some former period and a stone dyke which runs close by may account. The internal diameters are 34 feet and 38 feet. The wall of the western half-circle has a foundation of heavy stones forming the core of a bank about 2 feet in height and 3 feet wide at the base. From south to east the wall is less substantial, and from east to north it has almost disappeared. To judge from present appearance, the circle has probably been divided into four quarters, three of which have each an arrangement of stones like a hearth, while the fourth, which seems to have been unpaved, may have sheltered the domestic animals. The entrance is from the southwest. On the northern side there appears to have been a small annexe, the pavement of which remains, and is shown by a dotted line on the plan. It had no wall. The relics of occupation found among the debris under the turf consisted of some fragments of coarse glazed pottery, two rough pieces of flint, and some charcoal. No tumuli have been noticed in the neighbourhood of this circle, but for that cultivation may account. Nor is there any spring close at hand, but there is running water about 200 yards away.

But the most important discovery remains to be told. In the centre of the circle a circular pit about 3 feet deep and 4 feet in diameter was found, filled with stones such as had been used for pavement. The stones, some of which, with the soil in which they lay, were blackened as if by fire, were removed, and the pit further excavated to a depth of about 6 feet in all without any result, except that between 4 feet and 5 feet below the surface, and underneath the stones, a very thin layer of carbonised vegetable matter appeared, the remains perhaps of a primitive carpet of twigs or some other convenient material. At the bottom, the fragments of an urn of the bronze age were found, flattened out by the weight above them, and decayed by damp. Nothing else was observed, except that

about 2 feet below the surface a stone about the size of a brick was found, just over the urn, as if to mark the spot (indicated by a small cross on the plan, fig. 2), though, of course, its position may have been quite fortuitous.

The facts given above present an enigma which can only be solved, if ever, after much further investigation of hut-circles. Meanwhile,

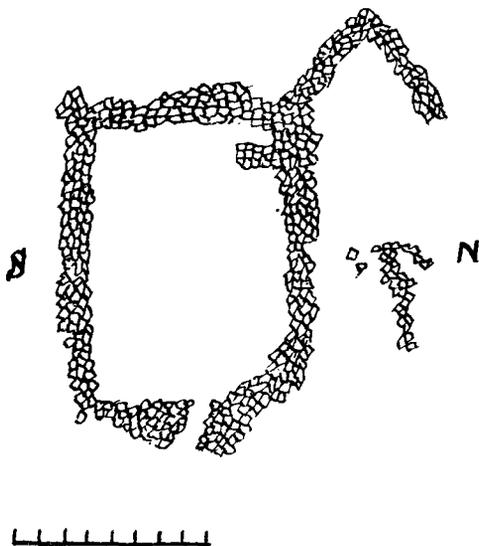


Fig. 3. Rectangular Hut, at Muirkirk.

the occupation of the site and its peculiar feature may form an interesting subject of speculation.

The third construction explored (fig. 3) proved to be a rectangular hut, 12 feet by 7 feet, with walls about 2 feet in height, well paved with flat stones, and with a fireplace in the north-west corner. The entrance, a foot wide, passing aslant through the eastern wall, is clearly defined. The hut lies east and west, 1300 feet above sea-level, just below a steep southern slope rising about 200 feet above it, and

on an almost level bed of clay. The relics found here were fragments of coarse pottery, glazed and unglazed. At the north-west corner there is a curious arrangement of stones laid on the surface of the ground, forming with the wall of the hut a sort of three-sided enclosure, and within a few feet lie more stones, evidently laid down by hand. This hut seems to be an advance from the hut-circle. The walls are similar to those of the latter, but the paving much superior, and the fireplace is placed in a more suitable position. For what reason the hut was constructed at such a height is far from clear. A summer sheiling would hardly be necessary in the locality; there are no signs of cultivation, yet it was undoubtedly made for and inhabited by human beings. Judging from the thickness of the overlying turf, it must have been abandoned centuries ago.

The last excavation brought to completion revealed an ancient kiln with flue, in good preservation. It is situated on the edge of a cleuch, placed there to facilitate the construction of the flue, which enters the kiln at the bottom. The shape of the kiln is that of an inverted truncated cone. Its diameter at the top is 6 feet 6 inches, and at the bottom 3 feet; its depth 7 feet 6 inches. It is faced with stone inside, and the bottom is neatly paved with thin flat stones. The flue is 9 feet long, 2 feet high, and 18 inches wide, built with stones and paved like the kiln; its mouth, opening into the cleuch, is formed of three heavy stones. The flue was full of ashes, apparently of burnt coal. On a level with the top of the kiln and with one common wall are the remains of a small hut, 7 feet by 6 feet, with low walls and rough pavement. In vol. vii. p. 273, of the *Proceedings* of the Society a similar pit is figured and described, which was said by a gillie to have been used for cooking deer in the olden time. But this pit, found in Strathnaver, appears to be at not more than 600 feet above sea-level, and not beyond the limits of cultivation. Moreover, the situation is not defined; nor is it clear that a thorough examination was made. The two pits are so much alike that a common

use might be suspected. What was this use? The kiln is situated on the edge of a meadow which has been cultivated, and about 100 yards from a small homestead, now in ruins, which may occupy the site of a former building of the same nature. The climate is apt to be wet, and harvests must have been precarious. The land was the property of the monks of Mauchline, doubtless good farmers, and the most likely conclusion is that the kiln was used for drying corn in a wet season. The adjoining hut may have been a shed for subsequent treatment. As to cooking deer, it is difficult to see the use of constructing an elaborate pit for the purpose, which might involve the carriage of the carcass for a considerable distance; and it may be added that shepherds and gillies are unsafe guides as regards ancient remains.

NOTE ON THE POTTERY FOUND. BY A. O. CURLE,  
*Director of the Museum.*

The fragments of pottery found in the first hut-circle are parts of one side of a rather straight-sided beaker, showing no portion of either the lip or the base. The largest fragment (fig. 4) measures some  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches by 3 inches, and has a thickness of  $\frac{3}{10}$  inch. The curve of the segment is too flat to afford an accurate index to the measure of the circumference of the original vessel. The ornamentation consists of three rows of short vertical impressions, each separated by two horizontal lines; beneath this group, at the upper and lower edges of a broader zone of unornamented surface, occurs a row of oblique markings placed convergently; and below the lower row is a repetition of the horizontal lines and vertical impressions.

The pottery found in the pit within the second hut-circle consists of the greater part, though in many pieces, of a tall, flat-bottomed vessel with an ovoid body and a neck slightly constricted above the shoulder. There is not a complete section remaining, but the largest



Fig. 4. Fragment of a Beaker found in Hut-circle No. 1.

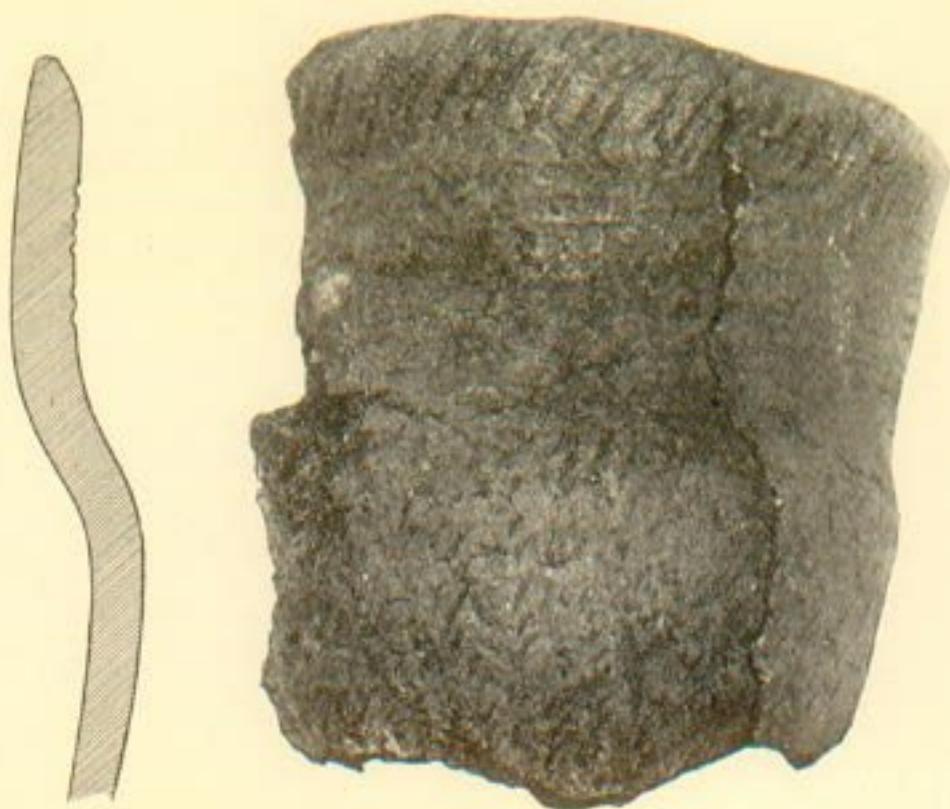


Fig. 5. Section and View of Fragment of Pottery from the Pit in Hut-circle No. 23.

portion, with the addition of a small segment of the base, measures  $6\frac{7}{8}$  inches, and the original height of the vessel has not greatly exceeded this. The interior diameter of the mouth has been approximately  $4\frac{1}{8}$  inches, and the thickness of the wall  $\frac{7}{16}$  inch. Though the form is distinctly that of a beaker urn, late in the series of that class of bronze-age ceramic, the decoration is not analogous. On the exterior surface from the lip downwards there extend for about an inch a series of parallel oblique impressions of a twisted cord; beneath this, encircling the neck, is a group of parallel horizontal rows of oblong markings made with a small punch; around the upper part of the body runs a single band of chevron markings placed horizontally, while, extending downwards from this band almost to the base, are a series of vertical rows of similar impressions.