

III.

EXCAVATION OF A CHAMBERED CAIRN AT HAM, CAITHNESS, AND OF A HUT-CIRCLE AND TWO EARTH-HOUSES AT FRESHWICK LINKS, CAITHNESS. OBTAINED UNDER THE GUNNING FELLOWSHIP. WITH A NOTE ON A WINGED HORSE CARVED ON ONE OF THE LINTELS IN THE EARTH-HOUSE AT CRICHTON MAINS, MIDLOTHIAN. BY ARTHUR J. H. EDWARDS, F.S.A. SCOT., ASSISTANT KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM.

CHAMBERED CAIRN AT HAM.

In the county of Caithness only three earth-houses have hitherto been recorded—two in the parish of Latheron and one in the parish of Dunnet. The latter, which is situated near Ham at the edge of a cliff on the eastern side of a small geo, about 233 yards north of the farmhouse of Ham, is not an earth-house in the accepted sense of the word, but a chambered cairn rising from the natural surface of the ground to some 8 or 9 feet above the level of the adjacent field. The mound can be distinctly seen from the roadside, its presence being made still more prominent by reason of a modern cairn of stone which has been built on the top. The exact diameter cannot be ascertained, as there is no definite margin, but at one time it has probably measured somewhere about 100 feet.

The monument has long been known in the district as the Picts House, and in Pococke's *Tours*, p. 156, and the old *Statistical Account*, vol. xi. p. 257, reference is made to it under this name; but in both of these descriptions mention is made of the existence of two "cells" with separate entrances. If this is the same construction, only one "cell" or chamber is now extant, entrance to which is obtained through a covered passage. In the *Statistical Account* the entrances to the cells are also described as seemingly to have led from two outer circular compartments of about 17 or 18 feet in diameter. But, before the present excavation, the only indication of what might have corresponded to one of these compartments, was an oval grass-grown depression some little distance south of the extreme outer end of the entrance passage, whose broken and incomplete walls extended, before excavation, for a distance of 4 feet outwards from the point where the lintels begin and the covered passage leads from the face of the slope into the chamber in the heart of the mound. Taking a lead from the description given in the *Statistical Account*, an attempt to discover the existence of a second "cell" or

chamber was made by an excavation which commenced at a point 8 feet west of the opening of the covered passage, and extended for about 15 feet in a northerly direction (A on fig. 1). At the northern extremity

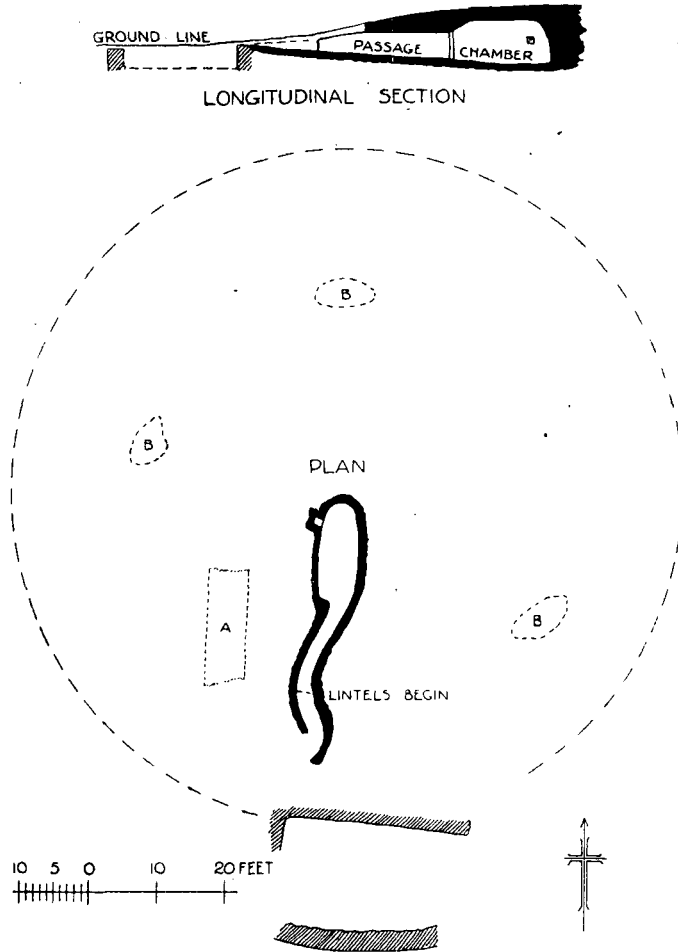


Fig. 1. Plan and Section of Chambered Cairn at Ham, Caithness.

of the excavation the depth from the surface of the mound to the bottom, which was considerably below the level of the roof of the present chamber, was about 5 feet. In so far as finding a second chamber the result was negative, and the second cell mentioned in the *Statistical Account*, and which Bishop Pococke described when he visited the site

in 1760, still remains a matter of obscurity. The excavation was not, however, without its value, for it was ascertained that the body of the mound, although supposed until now to be of earth, was really an agglomeration of boulders and slabs of stone with only a few inches of soil on the top. Without penetrating deeply into the mound, an examination was made at various other places (B on plan), and the evidence obtained showed that the structure was similar to that of a cairn.

The exact nature of the oval depression in front of the entrance to the passage had next to be determined, and on the removal of the turf from its extreme outer edge on the south side, a slightly curved wall was found running from east to west. The wall, which measured 23 feet in length and 3 feet in height, was faced only on its outer or southern side. The top of the wall was flat, and consisted of a series of thin slabs, 2 feet 6 inches in breadth, regularly laid for the whole of its length. The inner side, irregular and without form, gradually sloped down towards the centre of the depression in a mass of irregularly placed stones and pieces of rotten slab. The centre of the depression was also dug out, but no floor was found. At a distance of about 19 feet north from the face of the first wall, another wall was found which also ran east and west. This wall measured 26 feet in length and nearly 4 feet in height, and it also was faced only on its outer or southern side. Above the wall before excavation was a covering of fragments of slabs and stones mixed with soil, but when this was removed it was seen that, as in the first wall, the top was well defined by flat slabs, between 2 and 3 feet in breadth, which covered it from end to end. Behind this building was the mass of stones and boulders that formed the body of the mound, of which the wall appeared to be an integral part.

At the western end of the inner wall and on its southern side another portion of walling, 4 feet in length and faced only on its eastern or inner side, was set at right angles. Its termination was rough and irregular, and gave the impression that it had continued further. From near the angle formed by these two walls a cut was made inwards in nearly a direct line with the present opening of the covered passage, and at a distance of 8 feet from the outer face of the long wall, the eastern wall of the passage leading to the chamber was disclosed. This wall, of which it was evident only part remained, curved slightly to the right for a distance of 4 feet, and gradually increased in height from 1 foot 6 inches to 2 feet. The end of the other wall of the passage was then laid bare, a distance of 2 feet separating one wall from the other. Both walls running parallel, curved slightly to the left, and the height gradually increased to 3 feet at the point where the lintels began

(fig. 1, Section). The passage now curved slightly to the right and extended inwards for a distance of 13 feet, the height gradually increasing until at the part where it opened into the chamber it had reached 3 feet 10 inches. The passage was not paved.

The chamber, which was of drystone building, measured 14 feet 9 inches in length, 4 feet 10 inches in width where the passage entered, and 3 feet 6 inches in width at the back, where the curve which forms the round commences. The walls converged slightly as they rose upwards, the roof being formed of flags of stone, two of which had fallen in, leaving an open space in the centre about 3 feet square. The total number of flags which had covered both passage and roof was 22 in all. Near the end of the west wall, 3 feet above floor-level, was a small recess, which measured 1 foot in height, 1 foot 3 inches in breadth, and 1 foot 6 inches in depth. In a crevice at the back of the recess, caused by the flat slab which formed its floor not having fitted closely, there were found a quantity of limpet-shells and a few large fish-bones, probably cod. The floor of the chamber was covered with a black earthy deposit, mixed with disintegrated limpet-shells and comminuted fish-bones, the limpet-shell deposit being found in much greater quantity near the entrance than at any other part. The floor was not paved, and a measurement taken from the centre of it to the roof showed that the height was 6 feet 6 inches.

It is matter for regret that even now, after excavation, one cannot say with absolute certainty that this was the monument referred to in the *Statistical Account* and in Pococke's *Tours*. The two faced walls and part of a third, found at the south side of the mound, may have formed one of the circular outer compartments mentioned in the first of these descriptions; but no published plan, however, seems to have been in existence prior to that given in the Ancient Monuments Commission's *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in Caithness*, p. 23, where this particular part of the structure is described as an oval depression which measured 27 feet by 14 feet. The walls, covered as they were with turf and nettles, would certainly have justified one in the assumption of the previous existence of a circular or oval compartment, and not until the present excavation was made could it have been possible to believe otherwise. The plan (fig. 1) shows that the smaller portion of wall would appear as if it had at one time joined the other long wall at right angles, and although no faced wall was found on the eastern side of the hollow, which would have made of the whole a rectangular enclosure, I am inclined to believe that in any case this portion was of secondary construction. With reference to the main part of the monument, it has until now been supposed that the chamber was contained in an earthen

mound; but the composition of the body of the structure undoubtedly resembles that of a sepulchral cairn, and in a region notable for its number of chambered cairns, it is not without the bounds of possibility that one of these early monuments may have been adapted for use as a dwelling-place in later times. The chamber, although it does not now conform to the style of construction usually associated with the earlier type of monument, may have been rebuilt to suit the needs of those who afterwards used it as a habitation.

EXCAVATIONS AT FRESWICK LINKS.

Freswick Links, situated at the head of Freswick Bay, on the east coast of Caithness, in the parish of Canisbay, is one of these areas covered with deposits of sand blown up from the seashore, of which we have many examples round our Scottish coast. Unlike the Culbin Sands in Morayshire and the Glenluce Sands in Wigtownshire—two similar but much larger areas which for years have yielded a rich harvest of relics, dating from prehistoric to modern times—few objects have as yet been obtained from Freswick Links. Bounded on its south side by Freswick Burn and on its north side by the road which leads to Skirza Head, the area measures about half a mile from north to south and about a quarter of a mile from east to west at its widest part. From about the middle and towards its northern end large sandy hollows or gullies have been swept out by the wind, so that there is exposed to view at the bottom of these a dark layer of soil or old land surface. Here and there in the gullies large boulders, some completely exposed, are scattered over the surface, while portions of others protrude from underneath. One feature worthy of note is the quantity of burnt stones, nearly all of which have been fractured by intense heat, many having been reduced almost to the size of road metal. At various places also, and perhaps more particularly near the spot called the Lady's Brow, are the remains of kitchen-middens composed mainly of limpet-shells and fish-bones.

In a gully about 600 yards north of Freswick House a single pillar-like stone protruded some 3 feet above the level of the ground, while in close proximity and with some appearance of regularity in the form of their setting, the upper portions of other smaller stones just appeared above the surface. As the seaward side of the gully, where it sloped towards the beach, was covered with a quantity of kitchen-midden debris, I decided that the site might be worth investigation. Excavation exposed to view an oval-shaped construction composed of single boulders resting on pure sand (fig. 2), which measured 17 feet in greatest length and 13 feet in greatest breadth. This had probably been a

hut-circle. A gap of 3 feet 9 inches on the south-west side of the enclosure formed the entrance, a pillar-like stone, which measured 4 feet in height, 1 foot 2 inches in breadth, and 1 foot 2 inches in thickness, standing upright at the eastern side of the gap being one of the portals of the doorway, and single boulders, the average measurement of which would be about 2 feet by 1 foot 6 inches by 2 feet, being part of the inner face of the surrounding wall. When the interior was cleared of loose sand, it was observed that one part of the floor on the north-east side was paved, and although there was no kerb, this portion may have been used as a hearth or fireplace, strength being lent to this supposition by the discoloured sand mixed with fragments of charcoal found near by.

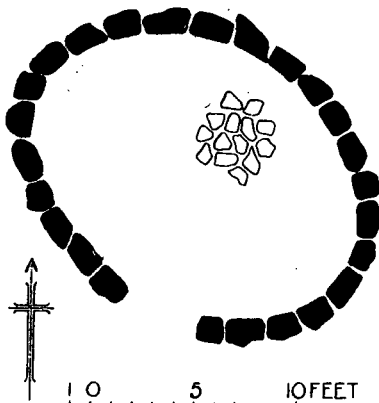


Fig. 2. Plan of Hut-circle at Freswick Links, Caithness.

The remainder of the floor was covered with a layer of clay some inches thick, in which were embedded limpet-shells in fairly large quantities, and in one particular place a number of shells of the common whelk. The only relic found was a grooved sinkstone of indurated sandstone, which measured $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length and $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches in thickness.

A little to the north of the Lady's Brow the wind had blown away the sand, leaving a gully nearly 100 feet in length, 30 feet in breadth, and from 3 feet to 9 feet in depth. The floor of this gully rose gently from either side to its centre in the form of a low mound 21 feet in width, which extended inwards from the beach end for a distance of nearly 60 feet. On the north side of this mound a few scattered boulders protruded above the surface, while at its western extremity, entirely exposed to view, were broken portions of the upper halves of two circular querns, one of which had been in the process of manufacture. Near the southern margin of the mound, about its centre, was a bed of limpet-shells about 7 feet in length, 3 feet in breadth, and 1 foot in depth, while still closer to the edge was a large quantity of burnt stones, the depth of which at one point was ascertained to be 4 feet. The area occupied by the burnt stones could not be determined, as the mass continued under the bank which formed the southern side of the gully. Near the western extremity of the mound, and at a distance of about 200 feet from high-water mark, the top of a wall built of rough boulders was found at about 1 foot below the surface. The wall was carefully followed until the

outlines of a building took definite shape, and the interior was cleared of the discoloured sand and loose stones which completely filled it. The structure (fig. 3, A), which was evidently an earth-house, was roofless. It lay nearly east and west, the total length measuring 10 feet 9 inches internally. The building consisted of two chambers with an entrance passage. The walls, which were dry built, had a thickness of about 1 foot 6 inches, and consisted of rough boulders and slabs, entrance having been obtained from the south-east by a short passage, 2 feet 3 inches in length, 1 foot 9 inches in height, and 1 foot 6 inches in width, the floor of which was paved. The inner end of this passage opened into an oval compartment which measured 4 feet 9 inches from front to back by 7 feet in greatest width; the walls were 3 feet 2 inches in height. Separated from this compartment by two small upright slabs

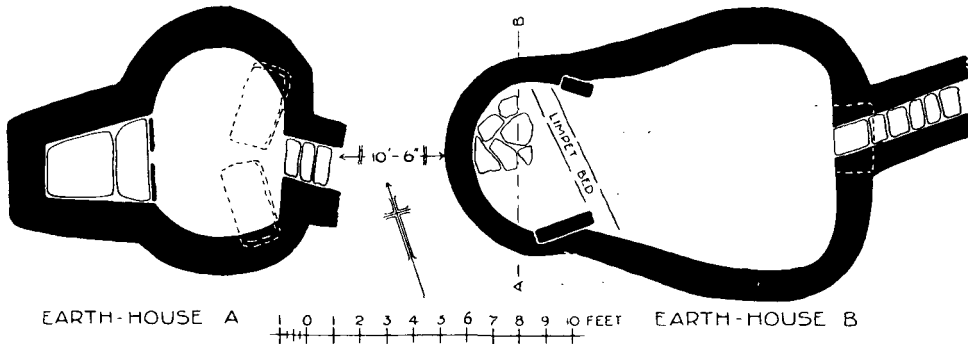


Fig. 3. Plan of Earth-houses at Freswick Links, Caithness.

set in the floor, each of which measured 7 inches in height, and 1 foot 5 inches and 1 foot 3 inches in length respectively, was another small chamber, trapezoidal in shape, the floor paved with two flat slabs, which exactly fitted into position. This chamber measured 4 feet in length, 2 feet in width at its narrow end, and 3 feet 3 inches at its wider end, with walls 2 feet 9 inches in height. Two large flags, which may have formed part of the original roof of the structure, were found in the circular compartment near the inner end of the passage, one on either side. The upper portion of the flags rested against the inner edge of the topmost course of the wall, while their bases, which nearly touched, rested on the floor. That on the south side measured 4 feet in length, 1 foot 5 inches in breadth, and 4 inches in thickness, the measurement of the other on the north side being 3 feet 8 inches in length, 1 foot 5 inches in breadth, and 3 inches in thickness.

In an easterly direction and at a distance of 10 feet 6 inches from the

entrance to earth-house A, the wall of another earth-house, B (fig. 3), was found. This earth-house, the median line of which lay nearly east and west, measured 18 feet 9 inches in total length, and resembled the previous one, in respect that it also contained two compartments although of somewhat different shape, one being semicircular and the other sub-oval. Facing nearly due east was a paved passage, which measured 5 feet in length, 1 foot 2 inches in width, and 1 foot 2 inches in height. At its inner end and built in the thickness of the wall of the larger chamber was a lintel stone, which measured 2 feet 7 inches in length, 1 foot 5 inches in breadth, and 7 inches in thickness. Entrance to the chamber must necessarily have been made with some difficulty, as the underside of the lintel was only 1 foot 2 inches above the floor-level.

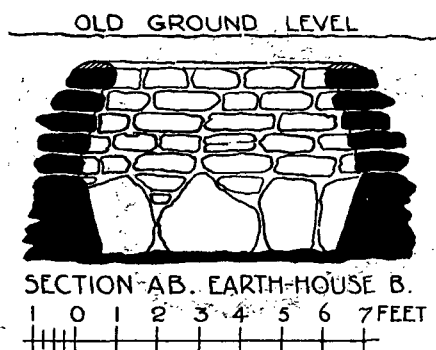


Fig. 4. Section of Earth-house at Freswick Links, Caithness.

The passage was completely filled with dark soil mixed with quantities of limpet-shells, the whole so impacted that it was only removed with difficulty. The chamber, which was sub-oval in shape, measured 9 feet 3 inches in length, and the stones which formed the dry-built walls were set in such a manner that they showed a fairly smooth and regular interior face. At the eastern end the height of the walls was 2 feet 6 inches and the width of the chamber 8 feet 3 inches; near the centre the height was 2 feet 9 inches and the width 8 feet; and at the western end, or entrance to the other compartment where the walls had converged until the distance which separated them was only 5 feet 6 inches, the height was 3 feet. The line of demarcation between one compartment and the other was made by two large slabs set upright, one on either side of the entrance to the inner compartment; that on the north side measured 2 feet 9 inches in height, 1 foot 2 inches in breadth, and 7 inches in thickness, and the other on the south side, 3 feet 3 inches in height, 2 feet 3 inches in breadth, and 6 inches in thickness. The compartment itself was semicircular in shape and built of rough boulders and stones, the height of the walls being 4 feet 6 inches. At the floor-level it measured 5 feet 6 inches in width, but at the head of the first course, which consisted of boulders placed in such a manner that their inner faces were tilted out at an angle of over 100° with the floor, the width increased to 6 feet 9 inches (fig. 4). On top of these boulders were several courses of rough stones, each of these courses protruding inwards

At the eastern end the height of the walls was 2 feet 6 inches and the width of the chamber 8 feet 3 inches; near the centre the height was 2 feet 9 inches and the width 8 feet; and at the western

a little from the one below, until at the top the walls had converged to a width of 5 feet. A peculiar feature was the fact that the highest course had been covered with a layer of clay of convex shape on the upper surface, showing a thickness of 3 inches at its centre. The clay when first uncovered was quite soft and pliable, but after a few days' exposure to the sun it had become as hard as brick.

Part of the floor of the compartment was roughly paved, and near the entrance was a bed of limpet-shells, about 1 foot in breadth and from 4 inches to 8 inches in depth, a portion of which extended into the larger chamber. Amongst the shells at the north end of the deposit were found the lower jaw of a child in its first dentition, before eruption of the permanent molars, and 1 foot further south in the same deposit, another part of the skull in a fragmentary condition.

Except for a saddle quern and rubber found at the floor-level in the large compartment, a few feet from where the passage entered, no relics were found. The quern measured 1 foot $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, 13 inches in breadth, and 5 inches in thickness. The rubber was $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, 7 inches in breadth, and 2 inches in thickness.

With regard to the actual excavation of this earth-house, the larger chamber presented no difficulty, except for the great quantity of sand which had to be removed; but the excavation of the smaller chamber was rendered more difficult, by reason of the mass of burnt stones mixed with dark soil with which it was almost completely filled. The boulders which formed the lower course were blackened with fire, and still had adhering to their surfaces a sooty deposit which blackened the fingers.

Both earth-houses are new in type, and it is unfortunate that no relics were obtained, so that the period to which they had belonged could have been more or less definitely ascertained. That they are early is without doubt, as the saddle quern is associated with the prehistoric remains of nearly every country in Europe. A comparison between the relics found at Freswick and those from the earth-house excavated at Galson¹ in Lewis last year shows some striking differences. At Freswick the people seemed to have lived mainly by the harvest of the sea. They possessed only a limited supply of pottery, as none was found in the interior of the dwellings, and a search made of the kitchen-middens yielded only a few shards of rough, hard, undecorated ware. At Galson, in addition to limpet-shells and fish remains, large quantities of the bones of various animals, shards of pottery, decorated and undecorated, and implements of bone and deer-horn, were found inside the chambers of the earth-house and in the kitchen-midden.

Relics recovered from the vicinity of the kitchen-middens consisted

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. lviii. pp. 185 *et seq.*

of a hollow scraper of flint, which measured $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch in length by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in breadth, a whorl made from the head of a femur or humerus of an animal, and a pointed splinter of bone which showed cut marks. Very few fragments of pottery were recovered, one small shard being of the broch type, with everted lip and bulging sides, and the remainder, pieces of vessels of a rough undecorated ware, the sides of which had been nearly straight and the lips flat or partially rounded, somewhat similar to certain of the unornamented fragments found in the kitchen-midden at Galson.

I am indebted to Messrs John C. Brodie & Sons, W.S., who very kindly obtained for the Society the necessary authority to examine the cairn at Ham, and to Lady Alexander-Sinclair, who, in the absence of Vice-Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair, readily gave permission to excavate any sites at Freswick Links.

A WINGED HORSE CARVED ON A LINTEL STONE IN THE EARTH-HOUSE AT CRICHTON MAINS.

In the earth-house at Crichton Mains, Midlothian,¹ it has long been known that the walls contained a number of squared and chiselled stones with the diagonal and diamond markings so frequently seen in Roman buildings, but it has now been possible to add to this record by the discovery of a carving on one of the lintel stones.

In the long chamber of the earth-house to the east, about 27 feet from the inner end of the entrance passage, and $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the northern wall, on the third lintel from the end of the chamber, there is carved in high relief the figure of a Pegasus or winged horse, showing head, shoulders, forelegs, and wings (fig. 5). The wings are raised as if in the motion of flight and the legs outstretched as if galloping. There is no trace of the body or hind legs, and it is impossible to say if ever the figure had been complete. Over all, from the tip of the wings to the forefeet, the carving measures about 7 inches, and from the poll of the head to the belly about $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Individually the head measures $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches in length, the legs 2 inches in length, the wings 3 inches in length by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches across, and the neck from the poll of the head to the base of the wings, as nearly as can be ascertained, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The surface of the lintel is roughly picked, but that portion on which the figure is cut is more finely tooled. Whether the carving was done before the stone was put to its present use, or worked on it as now placed, is a matter of opinion. But, as it certainly would not have been easy to

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. viii. p. 105.

cut the design on the stone as it now lies, it is more probable that the sculpturing had been done previously.

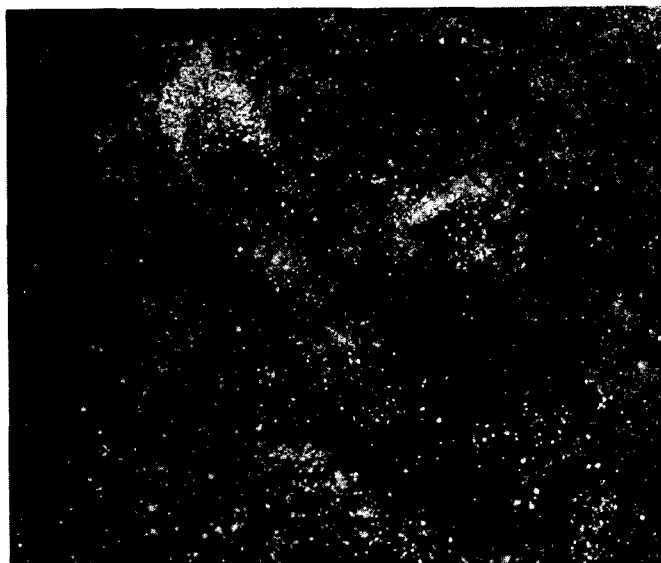


Fig. 5. Winged Horse sculptured on Lintel in Earth-house at Crichton.

I have to thank Mr Bryan Clayton, F.S.A.Scot., for his flash-light photograph of the stone from which the illustration has been made.