

## II.

EXCAVATION OF A NUMBER OF GRAVES IN A MOUND AT ACKER-  
GILL, CAITHNESS. BY ARTHUR J. H. EDWARDS, F.S.A.Scot.,  
ASSISTANT KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM. WITH A REPORT ON THE SKELETAL  
REMAINS FROM THE GRAVES. BY PROFESSOR THOMAS H. BRYCE,  
M.D., F.R.S., F.S.A.Scot.

The number of Viking burials discovered in Scotland which have been recorded is not many, and in most of these, minute and precise details of the actual structure which covered or enclosed the interments are wanting. The special characteristics of the construction of any sepulchral monument are matters of the utmost importance, and especially so when there is an absence of relics in the graves. This was not understood by the older excavators, and those who have read Dr Joseph Anderson's description of the Viking burials found in Scotland, must have observed how often it has been remarked that the phenomena of the burial were not recorded. For many reasons, however, these early pioneers must be excused; they no doubt did their best. Even to-day, the temptation for some excavators to get at the interior of a cist or chamber to find what it contains, without paying any attention to structural features, often proves irresistible. In Caithness, when one considers that the county was held by the Vikings for a period of over five hundred years, it certainly does seem extraordinary that only three graves have been recorded—those at Castletown, Longhills, and Reay—which can be identified as having belonged to this period of occupation. I believe that not only have many Viking graves been unearthened without being recognised, but that there are probably others still to be brought to light.

The Museum has now a very valuable collection of relics of the Viking period found in Scotland, but with many of these the information regarding the circumstances of their discovery is so meagre, indeed in some cases it is non-existent, that comparison with the graves now about to be described is an impossibility.

In the parish of Wick, about a quarter of a mile north-west of Acker-

gill Tower, on the north side of the field in which is situated the Decoy Pond (O.S. Map, Sheet XX.), are a number of long mounds, probably composed of blown sand, but now mostly covered with grassy turf. The building of the wall which encloses the field on its northern side, and the cutting of the road which leads from Ackergill Tower to the golf-links, have divided one of these mounds nearly in half lengthwise. At the time the road was being formed the workmen found quantities of human bones, but no attempt seems to have been made then to elucidate the problem as to how or why the bones came there. The greater part of the mound, which contained certain of the graves about to be described, lies on the landward side of the wall, at a distance of about 100 feet from the high-

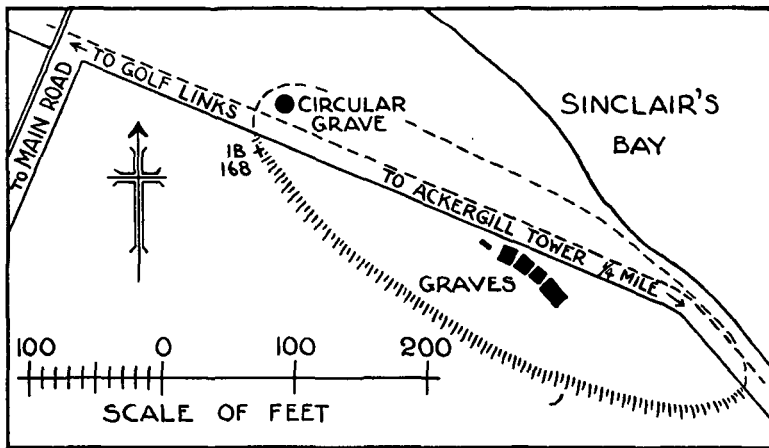


Fig. 1. Plan of Mound near Ackergill, Caithness, showing relative positions of Graves.

water mark, and 20 feet above sea-level (fig. 1). It is a natural mound composed of sand, and measures about 400 feet in length and 70 feet in greatest breadth, although at one time, before it was intersected by the road, the breadth may have been nearly twice as much. It lies nearly north-west and south-east, and from its north-western end rises gently from ground-level until it reaches a height of 10 feet above the roadway, and perhaps a foot or so less from the level of the ground in the adjacent field. Most of the surface is covered with a fine grassy turf, but for a distance of some 200 feet from its northern extremity the turf has disappeared, and the wind having blown away the sand, has exposed a surface covered with pebbles, larger stones, small boulders, and fragments of Caithness slab. Here and there the upper portions of flags set on edge protrude above the ground in seemingly regular formation.

At a distance of 175 feet from the north-western extremity of the mound I found the head and side stones of a long cist partially exposed (fig. 2, No. 1). Several of the cover-stones remained, but these were lying in the interior, which evidently had at some time or other been disturbed.

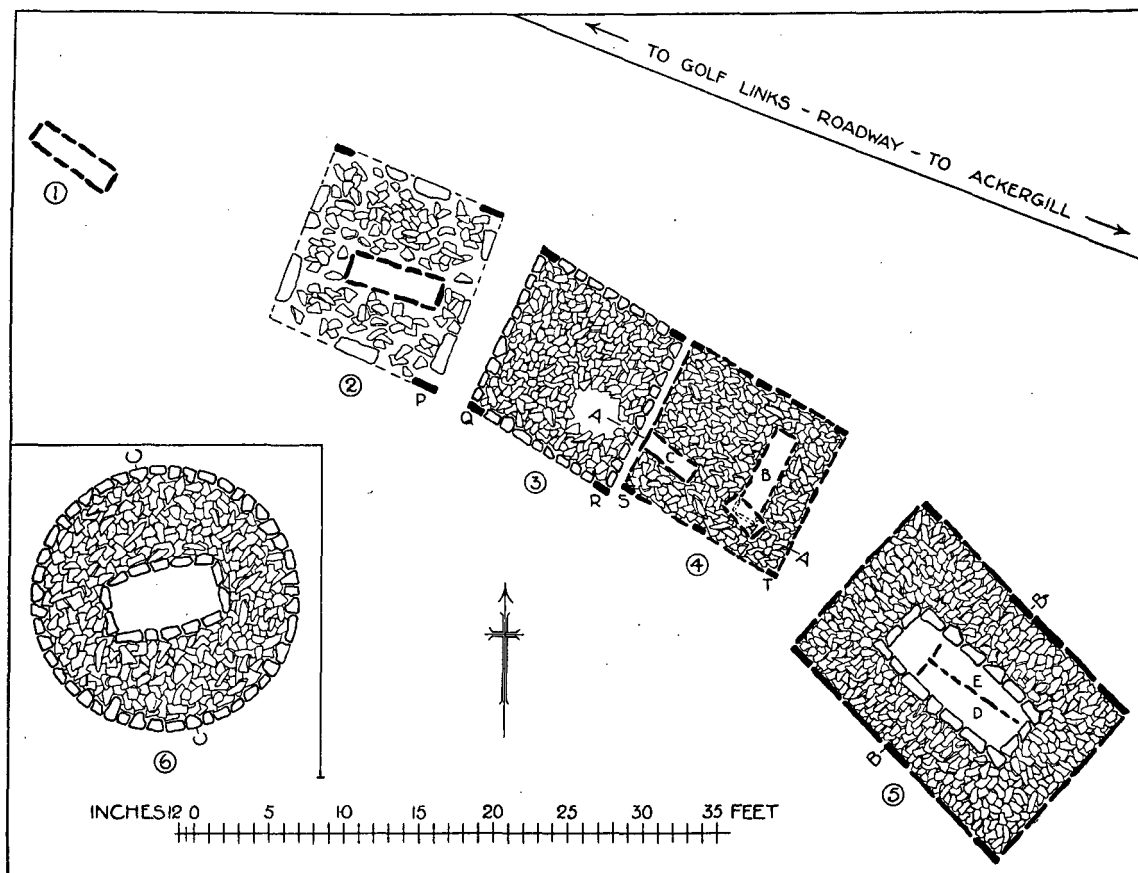


Fig. 2. Plans of Graves near Ackergill, Caithness.

The cist, which lay north-west and south-east, or  $38^{\circ}$  W. of N. magnetic, measured nearly 6 feet in length, 1 foot 6 inches in width, and 1 foot 4 inches in depth. It was filled with sand, and near the bottom, which was unpaved, were found a number of the long bones and ribs of a human skeleton, but no skull. So far as could be ascertained, it would appear that the body had been placed with the head to the north-west.

At a distance of 17 feet in a south-easterly direction from the previous

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cist, the upper portion of the stones of another long cist (fig. 2, No. 2) showed above a mass of pebbles and small stones. This cist, which lay west-north-west and east-south-east, or  $54^{\circ}$  W. of N. magnetic, measured 6 feet in length, 1 foot 7 inches in width, and 1 foot 6 inches in depth. There were no cover-stones and the bottom was unpaved. Distributed throughout the sand, which nearly filled it, were a few long bones and vertebræ of a human skeleton, and at the north-west end some fragments of the skull. It was observed that the cist had been set within an enclosure of stones placed on their flat



Fig. 3. View of Graves Nos. 2, 3, and 4 from south-south-east.

surfaces so as to form a kerb, the space between the kerb and the cist having been filled in with water-worn stones from the beach. At either end of the north-east side of the kerb, and at the eastern end of the south-west side, there was an upright stone which marked the corner. That on the south-east angle (fig. 3, P) measured 1 foot 11 inches in height, 1 foot 3 inches in breadth, and 2 inches in thickness. A number of the stones which had formed the sides were missing, but sufficient remained to show the continuity. Certain of these measured roughly about 1 foot 4 inches in length, about 1 foot in breadth, and from 2 to 3 inches in thickness.

At a distance of 2 feet 6 inches from grave No. 2 was the kerb of another four-sided enclosure (fig. 2, No. 3), the north-west side of which

ran almost parallel to the south-east side of the former grave. The kerb, which enclosed a space of nearly 12 feet square, was constructed of stones placed one above another on their flat surfaces, with a regular face to the outside. It had a total height of 13 inches, and was about 1 foot 3 inches in breadth (fig. 5, No. 3). At each corner a single stone had been set on end, the largest of these measuring 1 foot 4 inches in height, 11 inches in breadth, and 5 inches in thickness (fig. 3, Q and R, corner stones on south kerb). No cist or any trace of remains was found in the interior of the enclosure, which was filled with a mass of pebbles and stones. The uppermost layer, which was about 4 inches deep, consisted

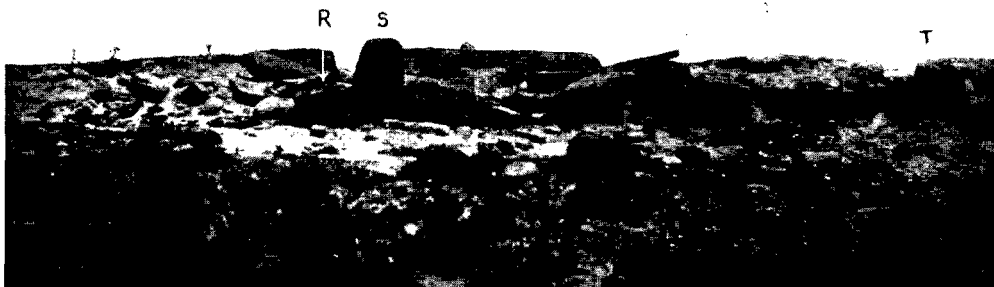


Fig. 4. View of South Kerb of Grave No. 4.

mostly of white quartzite pebbles, below them was a layer of about 4 inches of larger stones, and finally at the bottom, and resting on sand, a layer of still larger water-worn stones and boulders. One of the largest of these measured about 1 foot 3 inches in length and 6 inches in thickness.

With the kerb of its north-west side separated only by about 5 to 7 inches from the south-east kerb of the previous grave, another four-sided grave (fig. 2, No. 4) was found, two of the sides of which measured 12 feet in length and two 11 feet. The kerb enclosing the structure, instead of being built as in grave No. 3, consisted entirely of upright slabs set on edge (fig. 4), and an average measurement of these would be about 1 foot 9 inches in height, 1 foot in breadth, and 3 inches in thickness. Except at the north-west, where a stone was amissing, the corners were each marked by an upright flag, greater in height and thick-

ness than those of the kerb (fig. 3, S and T, corner stones of south kerb). The stone at the south-west corner measured 2 feet 6 inches

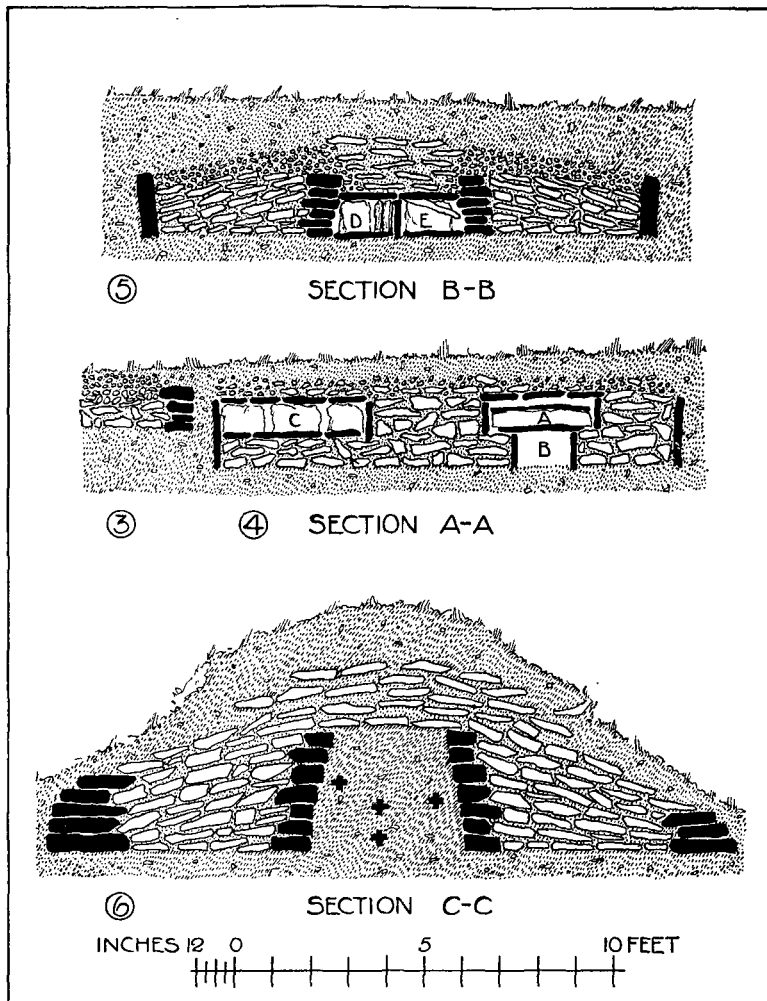
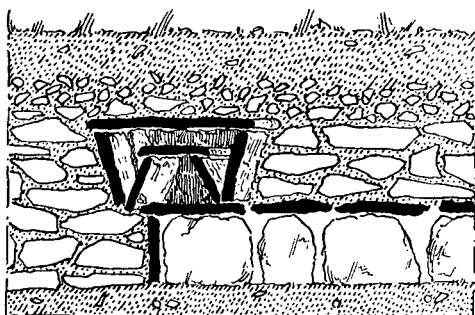


Fig. 5. Sections of Graves near Ackergill. (In No. 6 the positions of the skeletons are shown by the crosses.)

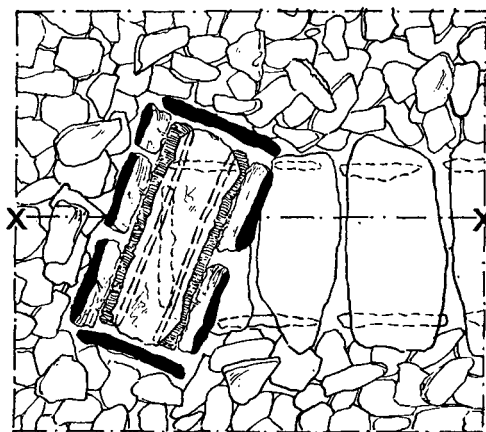
in height, 10 inches in breadth, and 5 inches in thickness. There had also been placed in the middle of the north-east and south-west kerbs a larger stone, somewhat similar to the corner stones, as if to mark the centre. With the exception of the kerb on the south-west side, which was exposed, the construction was covered with turf growing on the

top of some 8 inches of sand. The turf and sand being removed, a layer composed mostly of small water-worn white quartzite pebbles was exposed, and at the bottom of this a number of larger stones intermixed with larger pebbles of quartzite. When the stones and pebbles were removed the presence of two cists, A and C, was disclosed (fig. 5, No. 4), the first near the east side and the second near the west side. Another cist, B, was discovered later at a lower level while further excavation of the structure was being made. Cist A, which measured 2 feet 9 inches in length, and lay north-west and south-east, or  $22^{\circ}$  W. of N. magnetic, had three cover-stones, all of which were



SECTION X-X

Fig. 6. Section through Cists A and B in Grave No. 4, near Ackergill.



PLAN

Fig. 7. Plan of Cists A and B in Grave No. 4, near Ackergill.

*in situ*. The bottom was paved with a single slab, 1 foot 2 inches in breadth, and from the floor the sides slanted outwards, until the width at the top of the grave was 1 foot 6 inches. A peculiarity of this cist was its inner structure, which consisted of two thin slabs placed in the angle between the side stone and floor stone, and inclined inwards until within 6 inches of each other at the top, the intervening space being covered over by another slab (figs. 6 and 7). Inside this protective arrangement—something like a cist within a cist—and laid at full length on the floor, was the skeleton of a young child. The body had been placed on its back, fully extended, with the head at the north-west end of the cist. Immediately below this cist was found the head end of another cist, B, which lay north-north-east and south-south-west, or  $45^{\circ}$  E. of N. magnetic. The cist, which measured 6 feet in

length, 1 foot 6 inches in breadth, and 1 foot in depth, had four cover-stones, but was unpaved. It contained the skeleton of an adult male, which was found lying on its back, fully extended. The arms were close to the sides and the hands were placed under the buttocks. The skull had been moved from its natural position at the south-west end of the cist, and was found lying near the right side of the chest. Possibly the reason for this was, that when the burial of the child took place, which must have been some considerable time after the interment in Cist B, the perhaps unsuspected burial of the adult had been discovered, and the skull pushed forward, as the slab, which now formed the paving-stone of the child's cist, had formerly been one of the cover-stones for that of the adult.

Cist C, which lay north-west and south-east, or 33° W. of N. magnetic, measured nearly 4 feet in length, 1 foot in width, and 1 foot in depth. It was paved on the bottom and had four cover-stones, one of the kerb stones being utilised as the head stone for the north-west end. The cist had evidently been disturbed, as several of the cover-stones were displaced. Many of the bones of the skeleton were missing, and the skull, which was found at the north-west end, had a few bones of other parts of the body lying beside it.

Altogether three burials were found in this four-sided grave, the primary one being undoubtedly the adult in Cist B. That of the child was evidently a secondary interment, and a considerable interval must have taken place between this burial and that of the adult in Cist B. The bones of the skeleton of the adult must surely by that time have been denuded of flesh, as otherwise one can hardly imagine that the body would have been deliberately decapitated and the skull displaced. From its proximity to the surface the burial in Cist C was probably secondary also.

The discovery and subsequent excavation of grave No. 5 (fig. 2, No. 5) were a little more difficult, there being no surface indication that such a structure existed; but here and there, in the burrows made by rabbits, there could be seen portions of slabs and numbers of white quartzite pebbles, indications which pointed to the existence of another burial-place. That such was the case was definitely ascertained when a part of the kerb was uncovered at a distance of about 4 feet from the kerb of grave No. 4. The whole structure was much larger than any already excavated, and in the form of its construction and the manner in which the burial had been made it also differed materially from them. Instead of being nearly square it was rectangular, two of the sides measuring 20 feet in length and two 13 feet 6 inches. The kerb was composed of slabs which measured nearly 4 feet in length,



1 foot 6 inches in height, and 3 to 4 inches in thickness. A number of these had on their long edges either one or two well-defined D-shaped grooves, made by the wedges or levers which had been used to quarry them from the living rock. As in the other graves, the corners had been specially marked, and for this purpose a slab similar to one of the kerb stones had been placed upright instead of having been laid on its long edge. In addition to these corner stones two kerb slabs had also been placed on end, in the middle of each of the long sides.

Within the kerb was a wall 5 feet in thickness, the inner face of which formed a sub-oval chamber, lying with its long axis north-west and south-east, or  $30^{\circ}$  W. of N. magnetic, and measuring 10 feet in length and 3 feet 6 inches in greatest width. The details of the construction of the wall are worthy of note, as it had evidently been made with some care. First a layer of large stones had been placed on their flat faces in the sand; above these successive layers of similar stones had then been placed in such a manner that each overlapped the other in a scale-like fashion. Above this was another layer of rounded water-worn stones, and covering all, a layer of from 6 to 9 inches in depth of smooth white pebbles of quartzite, which varied in size from that of the egg of a pigeon to that of an ostrich. The layer of pebbles covered the upper surface of the wall only, and did not extend over the actual chamber. The inner faces of this thick wall which formed the sides and ends of the chamber measured 1 foot 6 inches in height, and were composed of large stones laid prostrate so as to form a regular facing (fig. 8). The actual number of courses was six, each of which projected a little inwards from the one below, so as to make the sides converge slightly. The chamber contained two burials, D and E, a male and female, the one separated from the other by a row of upright flags set on edge and 1 foot in height, which divided the chamber into two parts (fig. 5, No. 5). Each part formed a separate cist over which cover-stones had been placed. The cover-stones over D were six in number, and these still remained *in situ*. Those over E were fewer in number, not enough to cover the whole interment, the skull in particular lying bare and unprotected below a quantity of pebbles and sand, the pebbles having evidently fallen in from the top of the wall. It seemed on the whole as if much greater care had been taken in the burial D, that of the male, than in E, that of the female.

In D the skeleton had been laid on its back, fully extended, with the head to the north-west, and face upwards. The floor of the cist in which it lay had been paved. The other skeleton E was found lying partly on its left side, fully extended, but in the opposite

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direction to D, the head being at the south-east, face downwards. The floor on which it lay was unpaved.

Although it was more than probable that other graves existed in this part of the mound, I decided to explore that portion nearer the beach on the north-east side of the road. As already mentioned, the cutting of the road from Ackergill Tower to the links had divided the mound lengthwise into two separate parts, the major portion being on the landward side of the wall, which enclosed the field, where



Fig. 8. View of North Wall of Chamber in Grave No. 5.

also were situated the four-sided graves just excavated. The other and smaller portion lay on the north-east side of the road, and one could see here and there large hollows from which sand had been taken, a practice which has fortunately been stopped by the proprietrix. Mr Simon Bremner of Freswick informed me that a circular construction of 15 feet in diameter had been discovered somewhere in the immediate vicinity a number of years ago. So far as he could recollect, the construction had a well-defined built kerb of no great height, the surface within the kerb being covered with white pebbles. For another record I have to thank Mr John Nicolson, our Corre-

sponding Member, who very kindly gave me a sketch made by himself of a similar construction which was discovered in the same locality in 1902, the diameter in this case being  $16\frac{1}{2}$  feet, with a well-defined kerb which surrounded a cairn-like mass of stones  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet in height. As no attempt, however, was made to excavate either of these constructions, I decided, therefore, to try if it were now possible to locate one or both by probing with an iron rod; but the sand was too deep and consolidated for any satisfactory progress to be made by this method. During my search I observed near the north-western extremity of the mound, on the north-east side of the road, a cairn-like heap covered with sand and partially overgrown with bent. On the top near its centre, a pole with a notice prohibiting the removal of sand had been erected, and my attention was drawn to the fact that the cairn for the support of the pole seemed unnecessarily large for this purpose. I examined the base, and found that a well-built kerb surrounded the whole structure. The kerb, which enclosed a space 18 feet in diameter, and was from 1 foot to 2 feet in height, consisted of large flat stones placed one above the other in regular formation. As the labour involved in the preparation of a structure of this nature had not been for the sole purpose of supporting a notice-board, I determined to make a further examination. This disclosed a burial chamber (fig. 2, No. 6) whose structural details closely resembled those in No. 5. Contained within the circular kerb was a wall from about 5 feet to 7 feet in thickness, composed of large boulders and stones, mostly placed on their flat faces with fair regularity of construction. The inner face of this wall formed a sub-oval chamber which lay with its long axis east-north-east and west-south-west, or  $85^{\circ}$  E. of N. magnetic, and measured 7 feet 3 inches in greatest length and 4 feet 3 inches in greatest width. The height of the interior wall-face was 3 feet 3 inches, and, as in grave No. 5, the walls were composed of large stones laid in regular courses, the whole being slightly corbelled inwards (fig. 5, No. 6). The chamber itself was completely filled with sand, and there were no roofing slabs nor any evidence that such had ever existed. At about a distance of 1 foot 6 inches from the top of the north-west wall, a skeleton F was found lying fully extended on its left side with the head to the east-north-east and turned so that the face was downwards. Round the neck of the skeleton was a bronze chain (fig. 9), the ends of which were loose, and adhering to one of the round rings which formed the terminal links at one end was a tiny piece of iron, or rather iron rust.

Near the same level another skeleton G was found, also lying on its left side, but with the legs drawn up and the knees flexed. The

top of the cranium lay very close to the south-east wall of the chamber, while the face looked towards the west.

Between skeletons F and G, but at a very slightly lower level, was another skeleton H, which had been laid fully extended on its back. The skull was wanting, but as the position it should have occupied was at the point where the pole had been sunk, it was probably found by the workmen during digging operations and removed by them. The orientation was east-north-east and west-south-west, with the head towards the east-north-east.

At floor-level another skeleton J was found lying fully extended

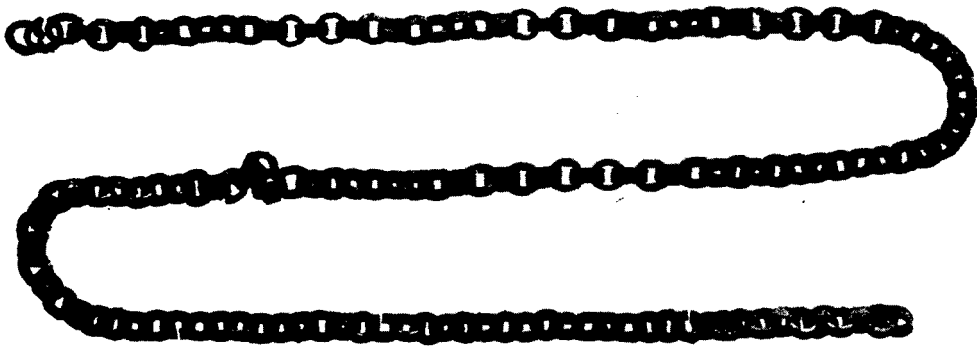


Fig. 9. Bronze Chain from Neck of Skeleton in Grave No. 6. (†.)

on its back in the centre of the chamber, the orientation being again east-north-east and west-south-west, with the head towards the east-north-east.

Near the kerb on the south-east side was quite a large number of white quartzite pebbles which had probably fallen from the sloping sides of the structure and remained hidden in the sand. No pebbles were found on the sides or top of the actual structure, but as it must have been fairly conspicuous with such an outer covering, these have no doubt been removed by passers-by who were not aware of the significance of the monument. The chain (fig. 9), which was the only artificial relic discovered, measures 15½ inches in length, and is made of bronze. At one end three links, which differ from the remainder in being circular in form instead of sub-oval, and flattened, have evidently been for the

purpose of attachment to some other object, perhaps a pin or brooch. The pattern is similar to those of chains from Livonia, of A.D. 1000, where one of the popular ornaments consisted of chain festoons held at either end by a Viking tortoise brooch of debased type.<sup>1</sup> In Gothland, where chain festoons have also been found, but in this case suspended from a form of brooch of the boar's-head type, which dates from the eighth to the eleventh century, the pattern of the chain, so far as can be judged from illustrations, closely resembles that of the chain from Ackergill.<sup>2</sup> In *Antiquités du Nord, Finno-Oughrien*, by J. R. Aspelin, similar chains from Finland are figured on pp. 331 (No. 1572) and 256 (No. 1269). Dr Haakon Schetelig, of Bergen, has very kindly informed me that there is in the collection at Bergen a chain of exactly similar pattern, but made of iron, which was found in a grave at Hardanger<sup>3</sup> dating from the tenth century.

Although I have no doubt that there are more graves in or near this locality which can be excavated and from which relics might be obtained, it can be seen from those now explored that although they are probably contemporaneous and the construction of each is much the same, two methods have been used for the disposal of the dead. The interments in Nos. 1 to 4 were contained within square or nearly square settings of stone, in the form of a kerb, either built, or composed of slabs set on edge. The burials were made in cists, and the cists were surrounded and covered with boulders and stones, with a top layer of white quartzite pebbles covering all. Each cist contained a single individual, although in the same enclosure there might be one or more cists.

In Nos. 5 and 6 the outer construction and shape differ. In each case the inner receptacle for the burials consisted of a sub-oval stone-lined chamber or large built cist, in which there were two or more burials, but the external form of the monument might be either rectangular or circular.

In graves Nos. 4 and 5 the white quartzite pebbles were in greater evidence than in the others, owing possibly to the fact that they were better covered with sand and turf, but I think it can be safely assumed that this was a common feature to all.

Numerous instances of the association of white pebbles with graves and interments are known, and these range from Neolithic to modern times. In our own *Proceedings*, vol. xviii. p. 286, in 1884, Sir Arthur Mitchell contributed a paper on the occurrence of white pebbles in connection with pagan and Christian burials, and Miss Nona Lebour

<sup>1</sup> *British Museum Guide to Anglo-Saxon Antiquities*, pl. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Teckningar ur Svenska Statens Historiska Museum*, Tredje Häftet, ser. v. pl. iv., figs. a-d.

<sup>3</sup> Aarsberetning, 1889. *Foreningen til norske Fortidsmindesmerkens Bevaring*, pp. 74-5.

has collated and published a number of such incidents in the *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3rd series, vol. ii. 1913-4, pp. 121-34. The general opinion seems to be that such pebbles of quartzite were used in association with burials for ritualistic purposes or with religious significance, or, in some cases, for decorative effect. My own opinion regarding the white quartzite pebbles on the graves at Ackergill is that they were decorative. I might also mention that at the present time one might search the whole of the beach in vain for a single specimen of a rounded pebble of white quartzite.

Certain other graves, which would now appear to be analogous, were excavated at Keiss over sixty years ago by Mr Samuel Laing, a Fellow of our Society. Unfortunately, minute and precise details of the excavation are wanting, but a sufficient number of facts can be obtained from the author's account in his book on the *Prehistoric Remains of Caithness*, which go to show that the graves at Keiss had certain features of construction which resembled those at Ackergill. At Keiss, which is situated 4 miles north of Ackergill, the graves had been contained in a mound composed of blown sand. In the central line of the mound a number of cists were found at intervals of about 15 feet. The cists were usually orientated north and south or north-east and south-west, and above each was a pile of stones from the beach, measuring from 1 to 3 feet in height, surmounted by a layer of from 1 to 3 feet of sand covered with turf. No mention is made of a stone setting or kerb, but the piles of stones found above the cists would seem to correspond with the stones found above and around the cists at Ackergill. More clearly analogous, however, was the circular construction found in the same mound, and called by Laing the "Chief's Cist and Cairn."<sup>1</sup> It consisted of a circular structure 18 feet in diameter, with a kerb 2½ feet in height and from 9 inches to 1 foot in thickness, which enclosed a cairn of stones. Towards the centre of the structure the stones had been built with some care, and these when removed disclosed a cist 6 feet 7 inches in length. An illustration shows the cist to have been constructed of flat slabs set on edge and roofed over with large flat stones. So Laing has described it, and, except for the difference in the structure of the cist, the other details would seem to fit the circular grave at Ackergill, even to the diametrical measurement.

Skeletal remains were found in each of the graves, and certain relics, said to have been stone weapons, but these illustrated by Laing in his book can hardly be accepted as such.

At Watenan, 6 miles south of Wick, a number of cists and a

<sup>1</sup> *Prehistoric Remains of Caithness*, p. 14.

supposed hut-circle were excavated previous to 1865.<sup>1</sup> No record was made of their contents, but a consideration of certain features which they had in common with the graves at Keiss and Ackergill suggest that they were analogous. The diameter of the supposed hut-circle was 18 feet. It presented the appearance of a small cairn 3 feet in height, the stones being laid flat and sloping outwards. Part of an inner wall was found, at the end of which lay the remains of a skeleton on a flat stone. The construction was believed then to have been a small cairn, and although the plan of the now dilapidated structure would suggest that it may have been a hut-circle or a beehive dwelling, I am inclined to think that this structure was similar to the circular grave at Ackergill and to the "Chief's Cist and Cairn" excavated at Keiss by Laing. About 28 feet west of the circular structure were four cists, two being orientated north and south, one north-north-east and south-south-west, and one east and west. Here and there between them protruded thin slabs which had been set on end, and beside two of the cists were a number of small stones which appeared as if they had formed stony mounds on top. These details are interesting, and, taking the whole in conjunction, it is possible that we may have had here another series of burials similar to those at Keiss and Ackergill.

In comparing the graves at Ackergill with a number of burials elsewhere in Scotland, in which either the grave or the burial were enclosed within a stone setting, and which, by the character of the grave-goods found with the interment, has definitely been proved to belong to the Viking period, I can mention only a few in which the tomb was stated to be within a setting of flags raised on edge. The most complete record is that of the boat grave at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay.<sup>2</sup> Dr Anderson assigns the date of the first half of the ninth century to this grave, but Dr Schetelig inclines to the opinion that the beginning of the tenth century is more likely. From a plan prepared by Messrs M'Neill and Galloway, the orientation of this grave would appear to be east and west, and, from the position of the sword, the head towards the east. In Orkney, on the Island of Westray, in the Bay of Pierowall,<sup>3</sup> a cemetery of Viking graves was discovered, in which it seemed that each interment had been placed on the original surface of the ground, surrounded by roughly made enclosures of stones and covered by a mound of varying dimensions. The orientation of the skeletons was usually north and south. Another record, also unsatisfactory for the purpose of comparison of structure, because precise details of the

<sup>1</sup> Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions in Scotland, *Inventory of Monuments and Constructions in Caithness*, p. 168, No. 538.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xli. p. 443.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xiv. p. 86, No. 1.

nature of the enclosure have not been recorded, is that from Ballinaby,<sup>1</sup> in the Island of Islay, where two graves were found in the sandy links. Here two skeletons were unearthed a little apart, their heads towards the east, with a line of stones on edge which formed an enclosure round each. In this grave a number of relics were discovered which belonged to the last period of paganism in Norway, that is from about the beginning of the eighth to the close of the tenth century. Also in a burial mound at Eigg,<sup>2</sup> which contained grave-goods of the usual Viking character, traces of an interment were found together with the relics, within an enclosure roughly formed of stones in the centre of the mound. A ground plan shows this enclosure to have been rectangular in shape. Dr Haakon Schetelig in his monograph on *The Western Graves of the Early Iron Age*, and in that part which contains a summary of the obsequial ceremony of the Viking Age, has observed that the practice of surrounding the precinct of the grave by a square setting of raised flagstones is one which is peculiarly Scottish.<sup>3</sup>

☐ To turn to other countries for comparison, there are in Norway a great number of cist graves dating from the fourth to the sixth century not unlike graves Nos. 5 and 6 at Ackergill; but these Norwegian graves of the Early Iron Age are always covered by mounds of considerable dimensions, are never within square stone settings, and generally contain a goodly number of relics. In graves of the Viking time burials in stone cists are rare, but a setting of stones in the form of an enclosure round the graves is common. In Sweden,<sup>4</sup> in the Baltic Islands,<sup>5</sup> and in certain of the Baltic provinces of Russia, such as Livonia,<sup>6</sup> there are numerous mound graves or cairn-like structures which vary in size, their height above the natural surface of the ground usually rendering them conspicuous landmarks. Many are circular or oval, and enclosed by a circle of stones, others are triangular in shape, and others, again, quadrangular, within a setting of stones, and having a larger stone at each corner. In the case of an inhumed burial, the skeleton is often found buried in the soil a foot or so below the natural level, without any enclosing cist or chamber, the stones and earth forming the mound being heaped on top. The outer construction of these mound graves does therefore resemble to a certain extent the graves at Ackergill, but at Ackergill the graves—Nos. 1 to 5 at least, and I think No. 6 also—have been

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xiv. p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xii. p. 592.

<sup>3</sup> Haakon Schetelig, *Vestlandske Graver fra Jernaldren*, p. 232.

<sup>4</sup> Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age*, pp. 299-319.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Bähr, *Die Gräber der Liven*, pl. i.



constructed originally below or near surface level. In preparation the flat surface of the mound has been cut down to a depth of several feet so as to form a shallow pit either four-sided or circular; the walls of this pit would then be lined with flags set on edge or stones placed on their flat faces one above another, the interior afterwards being filled in with stones which covered the cists, or the stone filling arranged so as to form a chamber in which one or more burials could be placed. After a burial, therefore, the only surface indication would be either a square, oblong, or circular mass of pebbles or stones, which after a lapse of time might be covered with sand and overgrown with turf, so that all traces would be lost. In the Island of Bornholm<sup>1</sup> such inhumed burials have been known from the Early Iron Age and from Viking times, many of the graves having been found on level ground within a square of stones placed on end. In Gothland<sup>2</sup> the preponderating majority of Early Iron Age burials are those of inhumation closely resembling in their construction those at Bornholm. Complete stone cists, the walls of which have been constructed of upstanding flags, are found below surface level sunk in the soil with a stone placing or setting above them. These generally occur in very small and low mounds. In the larger mounds another method of building cists has been used. These mounds consist chiefly of stone alone, with an outer covering of smaller round stones, the larger stones which form a drystone wall being placed in a kind of scale-like formation.<sup>3</sup> The interior face of this wall is lined with prostrate flags laid regularly one above another, and these form the wall of the cist or chamber. This latter method is very similar to that employed in the construction of graves Nos. 5 and 6 at Ackergill, even to the scale-like placing of the large stones in grave No. 5 and the outer covering of small round stones over all.

On the whole, the graves at Ackergill show a closer resemblance to the Bornholm and Gothland type of various periods of the Early Iron Age than to those of the migration period or of later date in Norway. In contradistinction to these graves, however, in which a large number of relics were usually found, there is a paucity of relics in the Ackergill graves which would suggest a condition of life not far removed from absolute poverty, or a studied departure from the usual custom of pagan burial with grave-goods owing perhaps to the influence of Christianity.

It would, however, be out of the question to attempt to date the Ackergill graves solely because of a similarity of structure to graves

<sup>1</sup> E. Vedel, *Bornholms Oldtidsminder og oldsager*, pp. 235-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Ältere Eisenzeit Gotlands*, Erste Heft, pp. 44-9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47, figs. 89-90.

of an earlier period of the Early Iron Age in other countries, and we must therefore take into consideration the few graves of the Viking period in Scotland which have been found either at surface level or in low mounds, and in which the interment and relics have been enclosed within a setting of flags raised on edge. These graves have been dated from the eighth to the tenth centuries, and have usually contained a fair number of relics. The absence of relics in the Ackergill graves is certainly disconcerting, as even in Iceland, where many of the graves are orientated east and west with the head to the west, in the usual manner of early Christian burial, quite a large number of relics have been found in them. The period during which that country was peopled by Norwegian emigrants extended from the end of the ninth century to A.D. 930, and the graves of this period are mostly near surface level or constructed under quite low and level mounds of stones.<sup>1</sup> Specific mention is made of five graves at Kalfborgara<sup>2</sup> which were surrounded by walls of loose stones and covered with gravel and stones. I have, however, been unable to obtain exact details of the construction of these graves, so that an accurate comparison is therefore not possible. I must mention, however, that Dr Haakon Schetelig is of the opinion that the boat grave at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay, comes quite near to the Icelandic type in form and period. Fortunately, the bronze chain found in grave No. 6, the date of which would appear to be about the tenth century, does help to a certain extent in fixing the date of the Ackergill graves; but from the discovery of one relic only, and that possibly incomplete, it would be preferable meantime to make no hard and fast statement until further excavations have been made. So far, I do not know of any graves in Scotland contained within either four kerbs of raised flags, or circular or quadrangular borders of ortholithic building, but I have assumed that the graves at Ackergill are contemporary, although between one and the other certain details of their outward shape and construction may vary slightly. The Norse pagan custom of burial with the head in a northerly direction has certainly been followed, except in two cases, where the head of the skeleton was to the south.

Another factor which may be of assistance in the determination of the period of the Ackergill graves is the question of multiple interments in single graves, and for this purpose it will be necessary to consider graves Nos. 5 and 6 only, as, for reasons I have already given, grave No. 4 may be omitted.

In the Early Iron Age of Norway double interments are not known before the fourth century, and they are also very rare during the

<sup>1</sup> *Vestlandske Graver fra Jernaldern*, p. 231.  
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<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xiv. p. 89.  
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centuries preceding the Viking Age. Although forming but a relatively small proportion of all the graves recorded, they must be regarded as a feature of Norwegian burial customs of the last part of the pagan time. In grave No. 5, where there was a double interment, a male and female, the dating of the grave to a period between the eighth and tenth centuries is probably correct, although there is no evidence that the burials were simultaneous.

In grave No. 6 one cannot say whether the four interments have been successive or simultaneous.<sup>1</sup> It might have been possible to draw some conclusion if grave-goods had been present, but, unlike the graves of the Viking period of Norway and of Scandinavia generally, where relics have been found in goodly numbers in association with the interment whether inhumed or cremated, the Ackergill graves are singularly wanting in this respect.

Other instances of double burials in cists have already been recorded in our *Proceedings*, and in one of these found in a valley between the Bays of Scapa and Kirkwall in Orkney, in the parish of Newbigging,<sup>2</sup> the cists were discovered in what was stated to be a bowl-shaped barrow composed of clay. The cists, arranged in tiers, two above and one below, were found under a heap of stones in the centre. The upper two were empty, but the lower contained two skeletons in a flexed position, one with its head at the east end of the cist and the other with its head at the west end. No relics were found, but beside one of the skeletons was a small heap of ashes intermingled with calcined bones.

Two cists superimposed were found at Crantit,<sup>3</sup> near Kirkwall, and here also, as in the burial just described, the upper cist was empty, but the lower contained the skeleton of a young person together with some cremated bones. The orientation of the cists was east and west, and an implement of deer-horn was found in association with the interment.

In another group of cists at Isbister,<sup>4</sup> in the parish of Rendall, Orkney, one cist contained two skeletons, so similar in their placing to those found at Newbigging that it is stated the same plan would do for both. No relics were found in this grave, and the orientation has not been given. I have mentioned these instances of double burial in cists more as a matter of interest than in any attempt to institute a

<sup>1</sup> In a footnote on p. 46 of *Die Gräber der Liven*, it is stated that Pallas found grave enclosures made of stones without a superimposed hillock in Eastern Siberia on the river Abakan. In some graves the space enclosed by the stones, as at those in Ascheraden, is divided by other stone rows into two or three chambers. In these graves, observes Pallas, several persons of one family seem to have been buried.

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. vi. p. 411.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. xlv. p. 215.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. vi. pp. 414-416.

comparison; but again the absence of grave-goods is a singular feature in burials which presumably were those of a pagan people.

Near the head end of the cist which I have called grave No. 1, there was found, lying on the surface, part of a sculptured slab of clay slate (fig. 10), which measured  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height,  $16\frac{1}{2}$  inches in width, and  $1\frac{5}{8}$  inch in thickness. On one face there had been picked out, not chiselled, a horizontal rectangular figure or symbol, which measured  $11\frac{5}{8}$  inches by  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Below this rectangular figure there is a short section of a curved line, showing that there had been at least one other figure on the stone. I am indebted to Mrs Duff-Dunbar for the information that the symbol stone,<sup>1</sup> fig. 25, on p. 28 of the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, now preserved in the Museum and labelled as having come from Keiss Links, originally came from the northern end of that part of the mound which contained the four-sided graves, where it had formerly stood upright until its removal (fig. 1). This slab, which is of clay-slate, has on one face a rectangular symbol, part of the fish symbol, and an Ogham inscription. I do not suggest that either of these symbol stones was associated with the graves contained in the mound, but their proximity to them must be noted, as future excavations may reveal a reason.

The graves at Ackergill have yielded features new to Scottish archæology, and I have therefore been under the necessity of making numerous inquiries regarding them both at home and abroad, and to those who have so courteously replied I herewith tender my best thanks. The Society are much indebted to Mrs Duff-Dunbar, F.S.A.Scot., of Ackergill, who very kindly gave permission to carry out the excavations, and who very generously presented the relics found to the National Museum of Antiquities.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xxxi. p. 296.

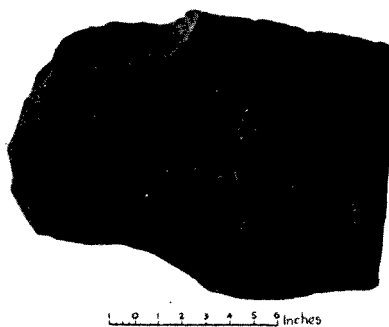


Fig. 10. Symbol Stone found near Ackergill, Caithness.

REPORT ON THE BONES FROM THE GRAVES. By Professor  
THOMAS H. BRYCE, M.D., F.R.S., F.S.A.Scot.

The following is a brief notice of the main features of the skeletons recovered by Mr Edwards from the graves at Ackergill. A detailed analysis of the characters of the skulls and long bones will not be submitted in this report. The value of such an analysis would be so much enhanced were the number of individual skeletons greater, that a full treatment of the material has been postponed in the hope that when further explorations have been carried out the report can be made more comprehensive. The bones were a good deal mixed and much broken, but reconstruction was possible in most cases, and satisfactory data have been obtained regarding the sex, age, stature, and head form of the individuals who were buried at this site. The skeletons are classified according to the legends on the labels which accompanied them.

A. *Four-sided Graves*, Nos. 4 and 5.

(i) Grave No. 4, Cist A and Skeleton A.—This contained the skeleton of a young infant of 16 to 20 months old.

(ii) Grave No. 4, Cist B and Skeleton B, yielded the skeleton of a male of rather delicate build, of middle age, and 5 feet 4½ inches to 5 feet 5 inches in stature. The skull is a small one, and might belong to either a man or a woman. The determination of the sex is based on the characters of the pelvis. The antero-posterior diameter of the skull measures 180 mm., the transverse 136 mm., and the vertical 132, yielding a cranial index of 75·5 and a height index of 73·3. The teeth are perfect, but the crowns are worn flat. The face is high and narrow and the nose is particularly narrow—the nasal index falling to 38·6. The nasal bones are specially long, and project forwards. The bridge of the nose is narrow and slightly concave. The notch at the root of the nose does not correspond to the nasion (middle point of the fronto-nasal suture), but lies below this.

(iii) Grave No. 4, Cist C and Skeleton C.—The skull is the only part of the skeleton preserved in this case. It is that of a child about 8 years of age.

(iv) Grave No. 5, Skeleton D.—The skeleton is defective, only a few of the bones being represented. The left thigh bone shows a well-united fracture. The position is good and there is not much deformity. The stature calculated from the right thigh and shin bones is 5 feet 5·34 inches.

The skull, labelled grave No. 5, Cist D, seems quite conformable with

the long bones described above. It is a well-formed male skull, showing the same general features as the skull from grave No. 4, Cist B. It is, however, longer and larger. The maximum length is 196 mm., the maximum breadth 141 mm., and the basi-bregmatic height 135 mm., yielding a cranial index of 71·9 and a height index of 68·8. The characters of the face closely resemble those of the skull from grave No. 4, Cist B. There is the same high narrow face and narrow nose. The nasal bones project forwards, and show the same concavity at the root of the nose as in the other skull. The teeth are all in place and show no caries, but are considerably worn.

(v) Grave No. 5, Skeleton E.—This is the skeleton of an elderly female. The bones of trunk and limbs have not been preserved. The base of the skull has gone, as well as the face. The skull is a fairly capacious one, measuring 179 mm. in the long axis and 135 mm. in its maximum transverse diameter, giving a cranial index of 75·4.

#### B. *Circular Grave*, No. 6.

Skeleton F.—The bones are those of an adolescent female a little over 20 years of age, and 4 feet 11 inches to 5 feet in stature. The seven cervical and the first dorsal vertebræ of this skeleton are all intact, and the lower cervical and first dorsal show green stains, from contact with the bronze chain. The skull is very thin-walled and delicate. It measures 180 mm. in length, 136 mm. in maximum breadth, and 133 mm. in basi-bregmatic height. These figures give a cranial index of 75·5 and a height index of 73·9.

Skeleton G is the skeleton of a well-developed man of middle age, and 5 feet 5½ inches to 5 feet 6 inches in stature. The skull is long (195 mm.) and narrow (139 mm.), with sagittal ridging and flat sides. The forehead is rather low and flat, and the supra-orbital ridges are prominent. Unfortunately, the nasal part of the face is broken away. The jaws have been preserved and the teeth are all in place. They show a considerable degree of wear of the crowns, but not a trace of caries. The length-breadth index is 71·2, the length-height index 73·8.

Skeleton H.—No skull was found with this skeleton. The bones are those of a young person of about 15 years of age, but whether boy or girl it is not possible to determine in the absence of the pelvic bones.

Skeleton J is the skeleton of a man advanced in life. The long bones, pelvic bones, and vertebræ show manifest signs of rheumatoid arthritis. The upper jaw is quite toothless and the sockets have been absorbed; only one tooth remains in the lower jaw. The measurements of the long bones yield a stature of about 5 feet 5 inches. The skull is massive and thick-walled. It measures 188 mm. in length, 139 mm. in maximum

breadth, and 134 mm. in basi-bregmatic height, giving a cranial index of 73.9 and a height index of 71.2. The face is relatively low and the nasal aperture is relatively wide, the index being as high as nearly 51. The broad nose of this skull contrasts with the high and very narrow noses of the other skulls of the collection. Another feature of the skulls already noted, namely, the length and forward projection of the nasal bones, is absent in this specimen.

This group of interments presents some interesting features. Four of the individuals were men, two were women, two were children under 15 years of age, and one was an infant of 16 to 20 months. The stature of the adult males averages approximately 5 feet 5 inches, while the young woman did not exceed 5 feet in height. They therefore belonged to a tribe or race of relatively low stature. The skull form is remarkably uniform, the average index of the six skulls being 73.9. All belong to the dolichocephalic class, and the indices all fall below the average index of the present inhabitants of Caithness. The narrowness of the nose and the forward projection of the nasal bones below a rather prominent glabella strike the observer; but in one instance the nose is relatively broad and the nasal aperture is much more open. The teeth are extraordinarily well preserved, are entirely free of any trace of caries, or of the results of periostitis in the alveoli. They are, however, in all the adult specimens worn down until the crowns are flat and cusplless. The features of the skulls do not justify any very dogmatic opinion regarding the race represented by these people. The general characters are much the same as are to be observed in Scotland at the present time, but the average cranial index of this small sample stands at a considerably lower level than that of the general population of modern Scotland. The low stature is not consistent with the idea of a pure Nordic people, but taken along with certain characters of the skull, especially of the nose, is quite consistent with the conclusion that we have to do with a mixed population including Mediterranean and Nordic elements, such as occupied the north of Scotland and the Hebrides in Viking times.