

II.

INTERIM REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF A BRONZE AGE DWELLING AT YARLSHOF, SHETLAND, IN 1931. BY A. O. CURLE, C.V.O., F.S.A.Scot.

On the western side of the narrow isthmus which links Sumburgh Head, the most southerly point of Shetland, to the mainland, a low headland projects into the Voe of Sumburgh and forms the southern extremity of an inner bay. On the crest of this headland stands the gaunt ruin of a dwelling-house of no great antiquity, to which Sir Walter Scott in *The Pirate* gave the name of "Yarlshof" in substitution of its older title "The Lord's House." The land on the isthmus, to judge from the head of cattle which it carries, must afford good pasturage. So with fishing in the sheltered waters of the Voe, and pasture ground to landward, the site must have had attractions for settlers from the earliest times. Whatever the antiquity of the Yarlshof may be, which is uncertain, it has been but the latest of many structures on the site. Over an area of at least an acre, generously ceded to the nation by Mr Bruce of Sumburgh, the proprietor, and enclosed by His Majesty's Office of Works, there is ample evidence of occupation over many centuries in deposits of kitchen-midden refuse of great extent, and in the existence of foundations and excavated ruins.

Towards the end of the last century and previous to 1897, a series of violent storms revealed evidences of masonry on the seaward front of the headland, which Mr John Bruce, the late proprietor, in due course proceeded to explore. The result of the examination of this

part of the site was the discovery of a range of prehistoric dwellings of unique character, and in a remarkable state of preservation, stretching along the shore-line for a distance of over 160 feet and with indefinite extension landwards. The centre of this range was a broch, reduced to a height at most of 7 feet, and by the erosion of the coast, destroyed to the extent of about one-third of its circumference. The interior of the broch contained the remains of a secondary building, and of the same character were obviously the greater part of the structures



Fig. 1. Commencement of Excavation.

beyond its periphery. The excavations were duly reported in our *Proceedings* with plan and illustrations in 1906,¹ and need not detain us further here. The site having been handed over to the care of H.M. Office of Works, I was requested on behalf of the Ancient Monuments Department to undertake its further exploration.

After some preliminary examination of the refuse mound to the north-west of the previous excavations without finding any definite indications of structure beneath, my attention was directed to a hole situated some 60 feet to the eastward of the ruins of the Yarlshof and some 40 yards back from the sea-front, in which there was revealed building extending to a depth of some 3 to 4 feet below the present surface. This hole had been made on a proposed line of an enclosing

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. xli. p. 11.

BRONZE AGE DWELLING AT YARLSHOF, SHETLAND. 115

fence, but the Inspector of Ancient Monuments, recognising the importance of the remains revealed in it, had procured an alteration in the boundary line. Here, therefore, were indications which induced me to commence operations on this spot (fig. 1). It was soon made clear that

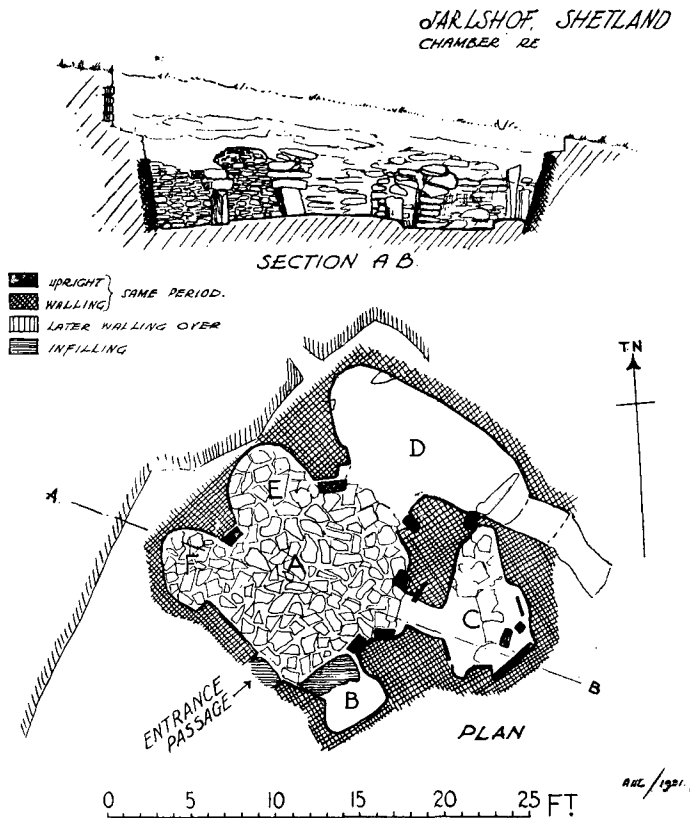


Fig. 2. Plan and Section.

the site had, from time to time, been in occupation over a long period, and so before the earliest buildings could be explored it was necessary to examine and ascertain the importance of the superimposed structural remains. The position of the hole in relation to the dwelling subsequently excavated was slightly to the north of the letter C on the plan (fig. 2). Some 3 feet to the east of the opening and not far below the turf there was encountered the angle of a foundation formed of large boulders, lying on broken material, which in turn rested on natural sand. Being obviously a late foundation, it was planned, photographed,

and removed. Similarly to the northward, over what ultimately proved to be the north-west end of chamber D, a paving of large flags was uncovered at a depth of about 2 feet beneath the adjacent surface, extending north-east for a distance of some 7 feet with a width of 2 feet 9 inches, and outlined with upright slabs firmly wedged in on its south-west side (fig. 3). An exploration to the northward revealed that this paving was a fragment of some structure destroyed by a much later building, which, running in a south-westerly direction, seemed to have



Fig. 3. Secondary Paving and Uprights with later wall in the background.

had some connection with the Yarlshof. The paving was consequently also planned, photographed, and removed. In the course of this last operation there was found a small segment of an armlet of polished steatite. As an armlet of similar material was found in the broch of Dun an Iardach in Skye,¹ and now in the National Museum of Antiquities, the paving may conceivably have been referable to the Broch period.

The clearing of the chamber originally entered (C on plan) was now proceeded with. It was irregular in shape, terminating in a sharp angle towards the north, and broadening out in the opposite direction, and measured 9 feet in length by 5 feet in greatest breadth. The wall towards the exterior stood to a height of from 4 to 5 feet, carefully constructed with large, flat, water-worn stones, with the addition at one

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. xlix. p. 67.

point of a large upright slab firmly set in the ground, as in some megalithic sepulchral chambers (fig. 4). At no place were pinnings employed to fill the interstices between the stones, a detail in which the building differed from that of the adjacent broch and its secondary erections. The wall-head reached to within a foot of the present surface on the south and east sides of this chamber, and, where uncovered, it was observed that whereas on the exterior it presented a finished or regular surface in respect of the upper course or two, beneath it was



Fig. 4. Chamber C looking inwards.

composed of rough boulders, obviously built into the sand, which was still in its natural condition, in their immediate vicinity except as after stated. It is obvious, therefore, that when this dwelling was complete the surface of the soil in this direction was little more than a foot below what it is at the present time, and that the roofs projected well above it. Yellow clay had been used in the wall of this chamber to a height of 3 feet 2 inches above floor-level, obviously to prevent the percolation of water. As the wall rose upward on the inside it sloped backwards, showing a departure from the perpendicular of some 8 inches at the wall-head, a style of construction noticeable also in the building secondary to the broch. A pier with large flat stones on top projected about a foot from the face of the wall on the south, and a tall monolith, the top of which was about 3 feet 6 inches above the floor-level, stood

out a foot from the wall on the east, both obviously connected with the roofing arrangement, which, from the analogy of the secondary buildings on the sea-front, had probably been by corbel vaulting. The floor was entirely covered with a sandy clay burned to a bright red colour, and partially paved (and that on the south side only) with flags. At a short distance out from the east wall a hearth had been formed on the top of a large stone, and a thin flat slab, as if to form a fire-back, had been placed behind it with its base set in a bed of yellow



Fig. 5. Sheep Bones beneath wall at entrance.

clay, and its edge carefully packed in against the adjacent upright with small boulders. Burnt clay covered the hearth, and from this there were recovered numerous carbonised grains of a species of barley, probably bere. All over the surface of the floor, above the red clay and to a much less extent within it, there lay bones of sheep and of oxen, and also some bones of birds. There were a few limpet-shells, but none of any other species, among the food remains. Partially beneath the wall, on the right of the inner end of the passage leading out of this chamber, lay the head and horn-cores of a sheep, and lying around were numerous sheep bones, though not an actual skeleton (fig. 5). In clearing out this chamber, at a depth of 4 feet, there was found a saw, or possibly a sickle, of slate 6 inches long by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch broad, with a finely serrated edge and a curved back, and with

a notch near the base as if for a thong to attach it to a handle. Scrapers fashioned from quartz pebbles were found at various depths, and at the bottom hard heavy pottery with much stony grit in the body, and some of it blackened and polished on the exterior surface, but in no case was any decoration observed on the pot. A chisel of bone formed from the leg bone of a sheep, cut diagonally across and with the terminal process hollowed out to form a socket, a relic of Maglemosian type, was found near the bottom, and there were also



Fig. 6. Main Chamber with entrance to Chamber C, "ash-pit" and blocked entrance on right.

recovered at various depths implements and flakes of stony slate. Remains of saddle querns and rubbers were found, but there was no trace of a rotary quern. A short passage 2 feet 6 inches in length and furnished with door checks led out of this chamber into a large central chamber measuring some 10 feet long by 9 feet 6 inches broad (A on plan), out of which there opened further cells and chambers (fig. 6).

On clearing this out, the entrance to the dwelling was discovered, the position of which had been hitherto anticipated from the thin layer of clean sand which, coming from the south-west, lay over the floor beneath the fallen flat stones of the superstructure. It is situated towards the southern end of the south-west wall, measures 2 feet across, and is at right angles to the sea-front. It is still blocked by three flat stones, which lie so truly horizontally as to suggest that the

blocking has been intentional; but that fact can only be ascertained after further exploration. The blocked entrance will be seen just to the right of the illustration (fig. 6). The floor of the central chamber, and also those of two round chambers that open off it to the north-west (E and F on the plan), are carefully paved with a double layer of paving slabs laid on yellow clay.

On the right of the entrance is a small cell (B. on plan) with a straight wall at the back, and measuring at ground-level 4 feet long

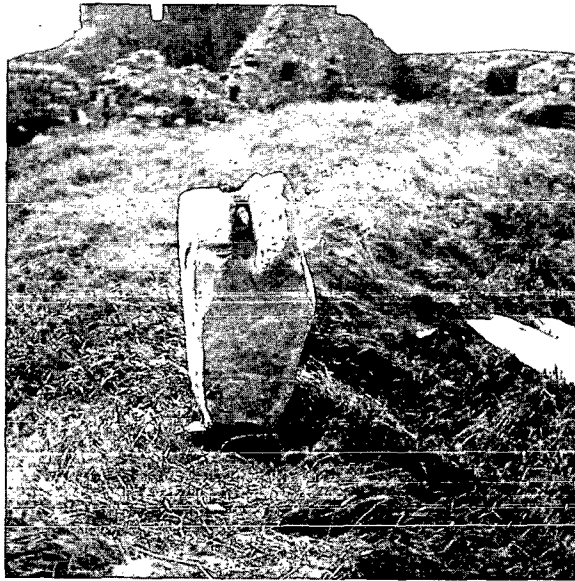


Fig. 7. Pierced block of Sandstone.

by 2 feet 6 inches broad (see fig. 6), which has been covered with a separate roof, as is indicated by a large stone remaining in position across the south angle. Across the front of this cell, above a large boulder placed on the floor, there has been erected a very loosely built wall, showing that no regular access into it was contemplated. In clearing it out there was found at the bottom a deposit some 8 to 9 inches deep, composed chiefly of peat-ash intermingled with a certain amount of burnt bone and black carbonised matter, but with no indication of fire having been lit within it or of its use as a forge. From this deposit there were recovered many fragments of clay moulds which had been used for the manufacture of bronze swords, bronze socketed axes, and other objects. From it there also came roughly fashioned stone axes of the Shetland type, hammer-stones abraded at the end, scrapers of white quartz,

portions of slate saws, and from near the bottom a large rectangular block of sandstone pierced at one end as if for a rope, and such as might have been used as an anchor (fig. 7). It is said that a similar stone was found at the broch of Clickemin. From the very bottom there was recovered a four-sided stone vessel with rounded corners, fashioned of fine-grained sandstone, measuring over all some $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 2 inches in height. The blackening of the external surface on the sides showed that, in the first instance, it had been used on the fire, but from the appearance of the under side of the base it is obvious that it had been subsequently employed as a rubber and the bottom worn away. Several large pebbles of quartz—one of which had been used as a hammer-stone—and a neatly fashioned knife of slate stone were also found in this cell. From holes in the wall were extracted two scapulæ of sheep, one of which had obviously been used as a shovel (fig. 8). An object of unknown use made from one of the lumbar vertebræ of a sheep was also found. A perforation had been made through its upper and lower surfaces, and a small pin of bone was found inserted into one of the vascular foramina,



0 1 2 Inches

Fig. 8. Scapula of a Sheep which has been used as a shovel.



Fig. 9. Perforated Sheep's Vertebra with pin inserted in foramen.

for which it appeared to have been fashioned (fig. 9).

Following the south-west wall northwards from the entrance, a circular recess or cell was found (F on plan) occupying the west corner of the dwelling. It measures 3 feet 9 inches across the entrance and 4 feet in depth. As previously mentioned, the floor of this chamber was carefully laid with paving-stones on a bed of yellow clay. There was only slight evidence of burning on the surface of it. In clearing out the interior on the lowest level, six

pieces of one or more clay moulds were recovered, notably a piece $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches broad and long—part of a mould for a bronze sword. There

were also found a stone axe, roughly flaked on one side only, and a piercer of bone formed from the astragalus of a sheep, and a few animal bones. Immediately to the north-east of this cell is another (E on plan), similar in form, measuring 5 feet 6 inches across the front and 4 feet 3 inches from front to back. The floor was also paved in the same manner as the last, but there were no indications of burning on it, and it contained very few bones and practically no relics. Forming the north-east side of the dwelling is a long oval



Fig. 10. Chamber D as seen from Chamber C.

chamber (D on plan), entered by an entrance 4 feet wide from the main chamber. It measures 13 feet 6 inches in length by 5 feet 3 inches in greatest breadth, and the wall all round stands to a height of from 3 to 4 feet (fig. 10). At the south-east end on the floor-level a large pointed boulder has been laid in the floor reaching from wall to wall at a distance of about 1 foot 4 inches from the end, and rising to a height of 7 inches, thus forming behind it a manger-like enclosure (fig. 11), which appears to have been about 8 inches deep, as indicated by two slaty stones lying horizontally and partially beneath this kerb. There was considerable indication of fire in front of this stone, but much less in the enclosure behind it. At the opposite end of the chamber three stones were set in alignment across the floor at a similar distance from the end—two projecting from the opposite walls, and the third set

between them. In the side walls behind the projecting stones spaces had been left in the walling about the size of the respective stones, viz. $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches and 2 feet 3 inches. Between the lower courses in the wall of this chamber yellow clay was also observed to a height of 1 foot 5 inches from the floor. The floor was not paved, but covered with sandy clay burned red, though not to such a brilliant colour as on the floor of chamber C. There were not many bones found upon it, nor many relics. Among the latter, however, was an adze-shaped



Fig. 11. South-east end of Chamber D, with back of unexcavated structure beyond.

axe of grit $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches long by $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch at greatest breadth, fashioned from the segment of a large circular vessel which had been blackened by fire, the sooty encrustation still remaining on the back of the axe, which had obviously never been used. A portion of a clay mould for casting some indeterminate object in bronze was also found. Within the enclosure at the south-east end of the chamber there was recovered a large heart-shaped object of sandstone, measuring $8\frac{3}{4}$ by $9\frac{1}{4}$ inches, with a circular perforation towards the centre of the broad end (fig. 12). Throughout the excavations at floor-level, and especially from a foot or two above it, broken examples of similar objects frequently came to light, usually of slate, but in one or two instances of sandstone, the number found amounting to between thirty and forty. A similarly fashioned slatey stone from an unknown provenance, measuring 1 foot by $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches,

also perforated at the broad end with an oval hole 3 inches by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch and placed eccentrically, is in the Goudie Collection in Lerwick. So far the use of these objects has not been revealed, but the presence of so many within the dwelling seems to indicate that as being connected with the structure.

At the south-east end of this north-east chamber the faced wall on either side had been prolonged for a distance of 2 feet 6 inches, as if to form an ambry or cupboard, but previous disturbance caused at this point prevented any conclusion being reached as to the purpose intended thereby. Exploration carried beyond the finished face revealed on the south-west the back of the wall of chamber C, and, as shown

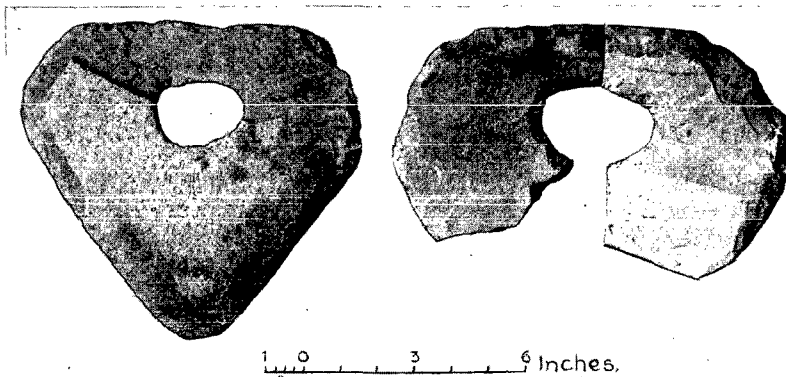


Fig. 12. Heart-shaped object of Sandstone and fragments of a second.

in fig. 11, boulders which appear to form the back of the wall of another structure to the north-east. The sand between these two walls was discoloured, and contained a number of flaked slates.

It was obvious that some disturbance had at one time taken place in the structural arrangement of chamber D. It will be observed that there are no piers or pillars projecting from the wall, as in chamber C, to facilitate roofing. In clearing out the chamber, however, four large upright pillars, each about 3 feet high, placed irregularly, and merely set in the sand, were found at a high level in the north-east arc, and it is suggested that these may have been originally placed in the floor of the chamber and been extracted at a later date and set up to support some temporary shelter behind the wall of the ruined chamber.

As no headers of bronze were found, and no fragment of a crucible, it is very doubtful if the chamber in which the bronze casting was carried on has yet been discovered.

In clearing out the sand from the centre dwelling at a level from 18 inches to 2 feet above the floor there were found numerous flaked slates, hammer-stones, etc., suggesting that after the roofs had fallen in, and a certain amount of sand had accumulated over them, advantage had been taken of the shelter afforded by the surrounding walls to squat in the interior and work. This level is shown in the illustration of a section of ground before excavation by the irregular line of small flat stones (fig. 13).



Fig. 13. Section of unexcavated ground showing secondary level of occupation.

The back of the outer wall where it is exposed on the south-east, consists of a backing of heavy boulders laid directly against the sand, with a finished facing of smaller and flat-edged stones on the interior. On none of the stones is there evidence of shaping or dressing. At the base of the inner ends of the divisional walls separating the cells and chambers from one another, are set upright slabs, with horizontal building above, in the manner adopted in the construction of the buildings secondary to the adjacent broch. The quadrangular mass shown on the plan between the chambers A, D, and C is formed with upright stones set firmly on its periphery towards A and D as if to form a central pier. The walling on the south-west of the mass within C appears to be secondary, as the red clay floor, apparent over the rest of the chamber, extends beneath it.

In clearing away the fallen debris of flat stones, presumably from the roof, that overlay the floor of the main chamber (A on plan), a thin layer of blown sand was observed covering the actual floor and still free from the discoloration which affected all the sand taken from the interior above the fallen masonry. In this clean sand were many animal bones. The facts that there were not many bones trampled into the clay floors, that there was no definite black layer above the floor, and that the amount of abrasion on the hammer-stones was invariably slight, seem to suggest that the occupation of this dwelling had not been of long duration. But further light may be thrown on this point when the structure, with its entrance passage, has been fully explored.

Between the outer face of the wall of C and of the unexplored structure to the east of it, at a depth of 5 feet from the surface, there were found large stones laid horizontally, below one front of which several courses of building could be felt by thrusting down the hand, thus indicating the existence of an earlier structure beneath the excavated dwelling.

The fact that stone implements and moulds for casting bronze tools and weapons were found in the actual floor-level leaves no doubt as to the exact stage of culture of its inhabitants. They were living in the late Bronze Age, though, as would be expected, they had not entirely discarded the culture of the earlier epoch of Stone.

The plan which accompanies this Report has been kindly supplied by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments (Scotland), for whose use it was made.

Among various relics which obviously were not associated with the occupants of the dwelling, there was recovered at 2 feet below the surface a small oblong block of stone measuring $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, on the upper surface of which had been cut four figures resembling twig runes, with a shorter cut, as if to represent a stop, at the end (fig. 14). The figures, however, are not true runes, nor are they matrices of a pin mould, to which they bear some resemblance. It is probable, therefore, that the tablet has been inscribed with bogus runic characters for some talismanic purpose after the use of runes as literary symbols had fallen into abeyance. There was also found at a height of about 2 feet above the floor-level at the north-west end of chamber D, lying above a large stone slab, a double-toothed bone comb measuring $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches by $1\frac{5}{8}$ inch, formed out of one piece of bone, and of a type for which no particular antiquity can be claimed. This supplied further proof of some disturbance in this chamber. From nearly the same depth and lower came also fragments of a comb, but of a much

older type, in which the teeth in double row had been cut at the respective ends of several plates of bone, which had been held in position by transverse bands of the same material fastened together with bronze rivets.

This being an interim report, it is not intended to give a considered account of the relics found, as that can be done more appropriately when the dwelling has been completely excavated. Including those mentioned above, however, they comprise: 7 saws, or fragments thereof, of slate; 2 knives of slate; 9 scrapers, or parts thereof, of white quartz; 6 stone axes, or parts thereof; 12 hammer-stones or pounders, mostly found on level about 2 feet above the floor; a bone chisel and one-half of another; a bone piercer; 3 anvil stones, two broken and one complete; a knob of



Fig. 14. Stone Tablet inscribed with Rune-like figures.

bone measuring 1 inch by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch by $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, with a ferrule of bronze at base; some three dozen fragments of perforated heart-shaped slates and flat stones, and one complete specimen; a wedge-shaped piece of pumice, obviously used as a polisher; 2 portions of saddle querns; a shaped pebble, apparently a rubber for use on a quern; 2 objects that seem to have been handles of stone clubs; 2 scapulæ of sheep—one showing wear by use as a shovel, the other broken away at the distal end; a lumbar vertebra of a sheep perforated transversely; a flat object of cetacean bone, 4 inches long by $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch broad obtusely pointed to one end, smoothed on one surface, and with the edges rounded; part of a small whetstone of quartzite $2\frac{11}{16}$ inches long, and part of another of sandstone; an oval disc of slate, very regularly chipped out, $8\frac{5}{8}$ inches long by $4\frac{5}{8}$ inches broad; a four-sided vessel of fine-grained sandstone, measuring across the top $4\frac{1}{8}$ inches by 4 inches, with wall 2 inches high, the bottom of which has been worn away by rubbing; and a quadrangular block of sandstone perforated at one end as if for a rope.

Miss Platt of the Royal Scottish Museum has kindly undertaken a

Report on the animal remains, which will be held over till the excavation is completed. I am indebted to Professor Wright Smith for identification of the grain, to Mr Balsillie of the Royal Scottish Museum for information regarding minerals employed, and to Mr Arthur Edwards for the photographs of the illustrated finds. (*Note.*—As all these relics have not been brought to Edinburgh, a slight discrepancy is possible in some of the numbers of objects.)

Finally, I desire to acknowledge the excellent services of Mr Strachan, the Office of Works foreman, and of the team of local labourers, who by their intelligent and enthusiastic participation helped materially to the success of the undertaking.