

I.

EXCAVATION OF A DENUDED CAIRN, CONTAINING FRAGMENTS OF
STEATITE URNS AND CREMATED HUMAN REMAINS, IN ROUSAY,
ORKNEY. BY WALTER G. GRANT, F.S.A.Scot.

At the Geord of Nears, on the farm of Nears (Nearhouse), which lies on the south side of the island of Rousay close to the edge of one of the out-cropping shelves or ledges of rock which are such a prominent feature in the landscape of the island, is a slight mound about 25 feet in diameter, evidently the remains of a cairn from which nearly all the



Fig. 1. Ruined Cairn at Geord of Nears, Orkney.

stones have been removed. The site lies at an elevation of about 75 feet above sea-level, some 700 yards west-south-west of Trumland House, and some 270 yards from the high-water mark of Wyre Sound.

In the centre of this ruined mound is a setting of slabs, some of which rise to a height of 3 feet 6 inches and 4 feet above the present surface of the ground, while others no more than pierce the grass (fig. 1). From 4 feet to 6 feet from this setting is what may be termed another ring of stones set on end or on edge. These are most prominent on the northern arc, where two of them stand 3 feet 4 inches and 2 feet 3 inches in height, but on the east and west the stones rise only 2 or 3 inches

above ground. Most of the stones of both settings show a distinct inward tilt. The structure had the appearance of a denuded and much disturbed long cist of the type seen in some of the chambered cairns of North Uist, but this diagnosis was found later to be wrong.

On the 21st of June 1932 Dr J. Graham Callander, who was staying with me, proposed an examination of the site, which was undertaken forthwith. Unfortunately the cairn had been removed to within 18 inches of its base, but towards the north end of the inner setting of stones the remains of a small cist appeared, the ends being formed by erect slabs and the sides by building, as on the north side were two slabs laid on the flat and opposite it one placed similarly (fig. 2). The north side was 7 inches and the south side 4 inches in height. This little chamber measured 1 foot 9 inches in length and 1 foot 3 inches in breadth, while the slab on the west end was 14 inches in height. About 4 inches from the bottom fragments of steatite were encountered, and as some of the larger pieces were seen to be curved, it soon became evident that they had formed parts of one, if not two large stone urns of the type so frequently found in graves in Orkney and Shetland. Two fragments of a base which fitted were recovered, and these showed its diameter to have been 11 inches. The base was 1 inch thick, and the small remaining wall fragments springing from it about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. Only three small fragments of a rim were found, but they were too small to give any idea of the diameter of the mouth. Two of these pieces showed that the vessel had been encircled by two incised lines, one just under the rim and the other $1\frac{9}{16}$ inch below it.

The bulk of the other wall fragments measured from 1 inch to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch in thickness, while a smaller number were no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch to $\frac{7}{8}$ inch.

Amongst the broken fragments of the urns were found a few small pieces of cremated bones, two of which were fragments of a skull, which showed that they were human.

No other relics were found in the grave, so although this excavation adds another example to the list of short cists in Orkney containing steatite urns and incinerated human remains, it does not assist in dating this class of burial. Judged by the size of these graves they might be

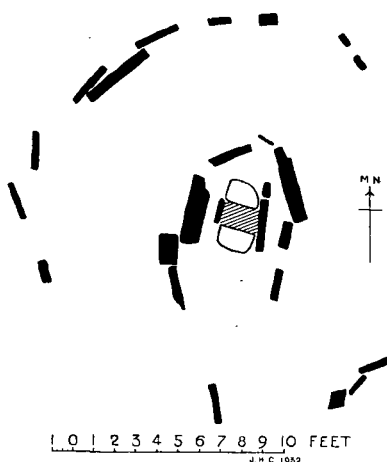


Fig. 2. Plan of ruined Cairn at Geord of Nears, Orkney.

assigned to the Bronze Age, and one authority has given his opinion that this is their date.¹ But if one can depend on the record of a series of short cists, one containing a large stone urn, found on the top of the mound covering the ruined broch at Okstrow, the question arises whether they are not of post-broch date.² There is no evidence that they belong to the Viking period, because although large steatite vessels belonging to that time are well known in Norway, their shape is quite different from those found in the short cists of Orkney.