

## I.

## AN IRON AGE SITE AT AIGNISH, NEAR STORNOWAY.

By E. CECIL CURWEN, M.A., M.B., B.CH., F.S.A.

While on a holiday in Stornoway early in August 1937, the writer was walking through a disused sand-pit situated about 200 yards south-west of the ruined Eye Church at the seaward end of the spit of sand which connects the Eye peninsula with Lewis. The chance discovery of a few shards of early pottery led to the finding of a hearth and small midden-heap protruding from the northern face of the pit at a level about 9 feet below the present surface. The site when occupied had been situated on the sandbank, and had subsequently been covered by drifting sand.

The hearth, part of which had fallen away down the talus of sand, consisted of a slab of local red clay,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet wide as exposed in the section, and nearly 3 inches thick, and upon this a pile of local water-rolled boulders, most of which had been cracked and split by heat. Among these stones was a quantity of peat-ash and a single small piece of unburnt peat. No recognisable wood-ash was observed.

The hearth was situated midway between what looked like the footings of two small walls,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  feet apart (internal measurement), that on the right (east) consisting of three courses of un-hewn stones, each about 4 inches thick. The interspaces between these walls and the hearth showed on the section a dark layer containing pottery and animal bones at a level from 3 to 6 inches above that of the top of the clay base of the hearth, but roughly level with most of the peat-ash. This dark layer appeared to represent the floor of the dwelling contemporary with the hearth. After the destruction of the hut, if such it was, the site had been covered with sand, but there was a reoccupation, marked by a dark layer about 18 inches above the clay base of the hearth, and stretching above the latter and a few inches above and beyond the eastern wall-footing. This upper occupation layer contained a pile of snail-shells, animal bones, and pottery similar in character to that found in the lower layer.

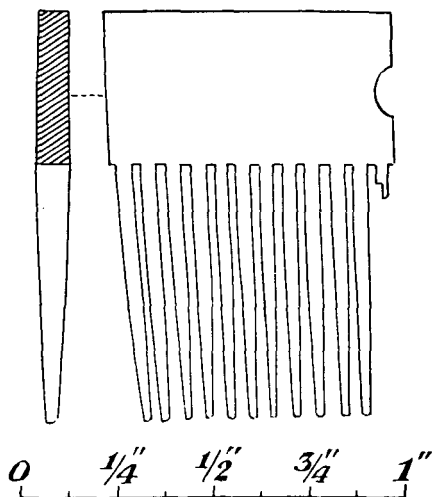


Fig. 1. Fragment of bone comb, Aignish.

Among the stones of the hearth were found, besides pottery, a

fragment of a bone comb (fig. 1), the head of a very large iron rivet or bolt, fragments of a flat piece of iron, and some bloomery cinder.

The comb, Mr A. J. H. Edwards tells me, is attributable to the early part of the Christian era, and it resembles combs found on Roman sites in England, but not earlier.

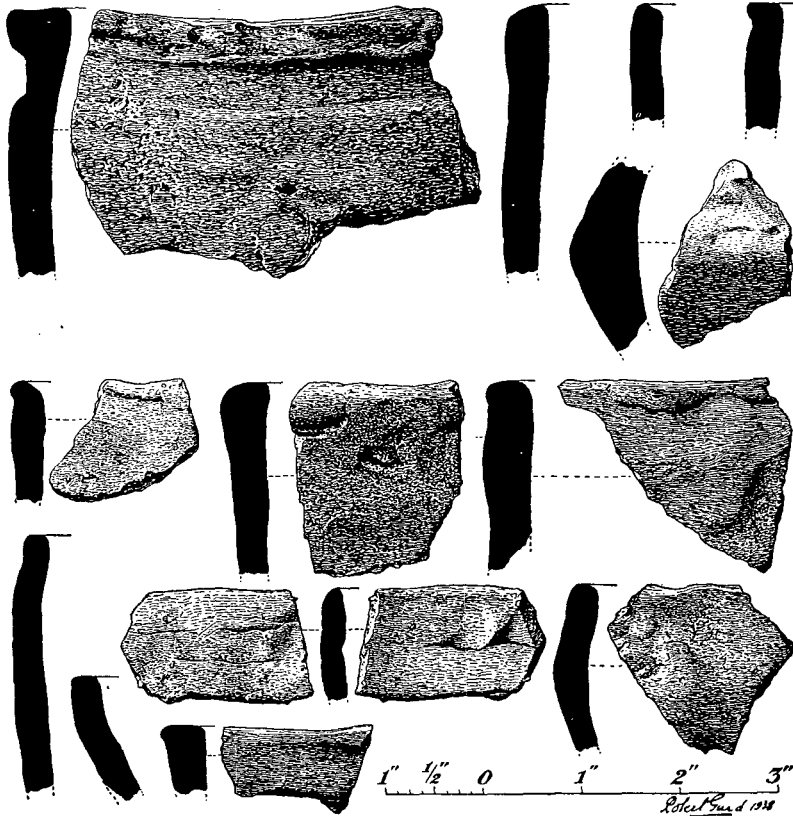


Fig. 2. Pottery shards from hearth at Aignish.

The iron bolt-head measures 1.5 inch by 1.2 inch and 0.2 inch thick; of the bolt itself the surviving piece is 1 inch long and 0.3 inch diameter, round in section. It is possible that what has been taken for the flat head is actually a piece of flat iron through which the bolt had been driven.

The other fragment of flat iron is about 2 inches by 1.5 inch and up to 0.4 inch thick, and is of nondescript character, giving no indication as to what it has come from.

The bloomery cinder has been submitted to Mr Ernest Straker, F.S.A., who has kindly had it analysed by J. Gilles of Neiderschelden, Nassau (Germany), who reports that it consists of "drops of cinder which contain

crystalline enclosures of sand, or iron ore, or roasted iron (probably bloomery).”

The pottery has been submitted to Mr A. J. H. Edwards at the National Museum of Antiquities at Edinburgh, and he reports that the shards are all of a type which can be obtained from various localities in the Outer Hebrides, and that they are probably contemporary with the earth-houses and the brochs, and that they should be referred to the early part of the Christian era. The rims are mostly straight in profile, and flat-topped, and there is a lack of decoration. Several characteristic shards are here illustrated for purposes of record (fig. 2). The pots were hand-made, and the fabric is sandy, being red, buff, grey, or black. A few red pieces have what looks like a smooth slip. Dr J. Wilfrid Jackson thinks that these shards resemble in some respects the pottery he has excavated in northern Irish souterraines and caves, making due allowance for differences in paste.

The bones from the hearth and midden have been submitted to Dr J. Wilfrid Jackson, F.Z.S., who has kindly reported on them to the following effect: The bones represent Sheep, small Ox (suggestive of the Celtic ox type), Red Deer, small Horse, Pig, Cetacea, and Codfish. These would agree with the Early Iron Age or Roman material of southern Britain, and also with the Iron Age material from the coastal caves of Northern Ireland.

The shells have been submitted to Mr A. S. Kennard, A.L.S., F.G.S., who has kindly identified them as follows:—

(a) *Marine mollusca.*

<i>Littorina littorea</i>	Linn. (winkle)	.	.	abundant.
<i>Patella vulgata</i>	„ (limpet)	.	.	1 example.
<i>Cardium edule</i>	„ (cockle)	.	.	1 valve.
<i>Mytilus edulis</i>	„ (mussel)	.	.	1 valve.
<i>Ostrea edulis</i>	„ (oyster)	.	.	3 valves.
<i>Mactra stultorum</i>	„	.	.	1 valve.

(b) *Land mollusc.*

*Xerophila itala* Linn.

These various details are here recorded from the realisation that it is only by such records that it may ultimately become possible to construct a chronological picture of the Scottish Iron Age. The material from this site has been deposited in the Museum of the Nicholson Institute at Stornoway.