

4. SOME LATE BRONZE AGE BURIAL CAIRNS AT MUSSELBURGH.

From the links at the edge of the Firth of Forth where Musselburgh Racecourse

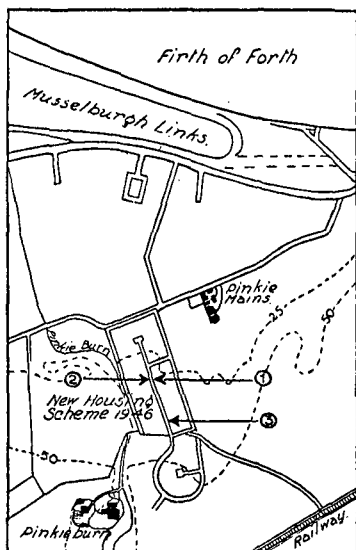


Fig. 1. Musselburgh: sites of cairns in housing scheme roadway.

now lies, flat land stretches southwards some $\frac{1}{2}$ mile as far as the ridge on the end of which stood the Roman station of Inveresk. During the laying of drains and other services for the new Pinkie Mains West housing scheme on this land, a cinerary urn was struck in the middle of January 1947. Thanks are due to the workman, Mr Dickson, to the foreman, Mr Malloy, and to the Burgh Surveyor, Mr Dryburgh, who in turn reported the find. When I visited the spot all concerned were extremely helpful, labour was provided for further exploration, and later a site-plan was supplied (fig. 1).

The section visible in the housing-scheme trenches showed clean sand, unmixed with stones or gravel, over the whole area underlying nearly 2 feet of soil. The surface of the field is approximately 28 feet above O.D. Just where the urn had been found there was a considerable number of water-worn boulders lying in the spoil from the trench. They had been found close together over a length of ten or a dozen feet, in the centre of which the top of the urn was struck after the boulders had been cleared away. It stood mouth

upwards (fig. 2). Boulders still *in situ* in the side of the trench formed, with

¹ Good, *Liberton in Ancient and Modern Times* (1893), p. 153.

the brown earthy sand among them, a horizontal layer a foot or more thick whose top was 3 feet 9 inches below the field surface. The section in a cross-trench showed that close to where the stones ceased, and on a level with just above their base, there started a horizontal dark band in the sand, an inch or so thick. Above this the sand was markedly yellower than for some distance below it.

It therefore seems as if the dark band marked the old turf-line, with zone of weathering below it, of the land surface on which a low cairn had been built to cover the cinerary urn. At some subsequent date sand had again blown over the

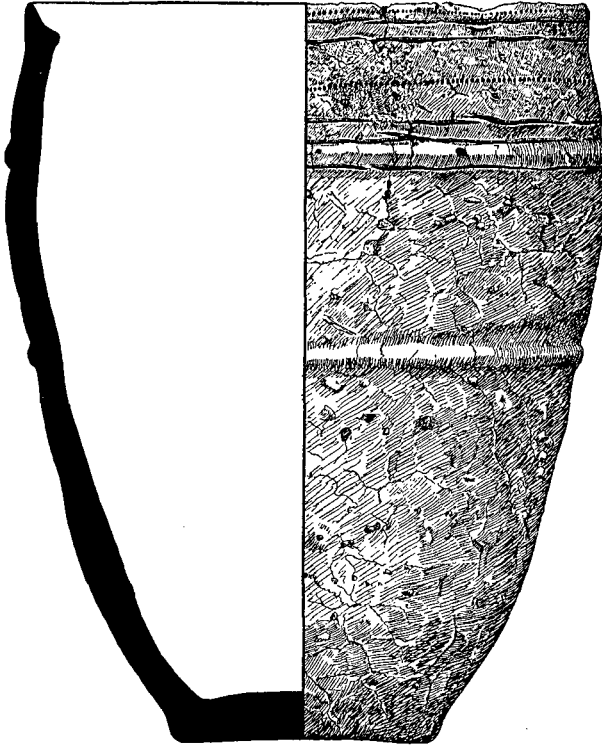


Fig. 2. Musselburgh: Urn No. 1. (3.)

area burying the cairn deeply. A minor detail noted was that the dark band at the point examined did not come right up to or underlie the boulders, though the weathered zone did: suggesting that the turf had been stripped in the preparation for heaping the cairn on the spot.

Mr Dryburgh pointed out that some stones were visible on the south side of the same cross-trench but about 20 feet further west. Part of a second cairn was then quickly exposed and remains of cremation burials were found among its stones. Proper exploration was put off till the following day, when Professor and Mrs Piggott kindly came to assist.

Pl. XXI, 3, shows the cairn about 10 feet across as it projected from a north-south cutting. The eastern edge, nearest the camera, and the north-east quadrant

had been removed partly by the original trench and partly by the previous day's trial hole. Though the excavation was not continued further west, it is probable that the cairn was only some 8 feet across in that direction. It will be seen that slabs laid flat and rounded boulders had been heaped in no particular order, and interspersed with sandy soil and hundreds of white quartz pebbles large and small. At one point these pebbles formed a layer 9 inches thick. There were besides a few water-worn pieces of coal, particularly near the south edge. One boulder was on edge, but this seems to have been accidental. It should be mentioned that only one or two white pebbles seem to have been dug up with the boulders of cairn 1. The slabs, also absent from cairn 1, were yellowish sandstone and most of the boulders reddish or yellow sandstone; two whinstone boulders were noted from cairn 1. The old turf-line was level with the base of

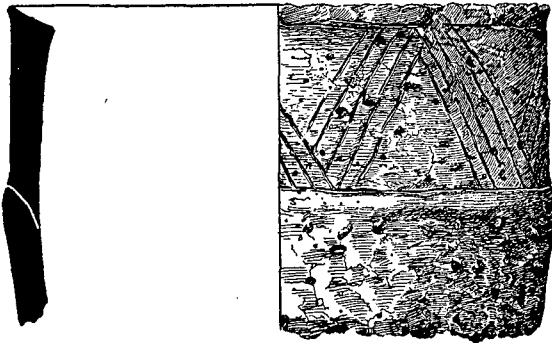


Fig. 3. Musselburgh: Urn No. 2. ($\frac{1}{3}$.)

the cairn; and a continuation of it rose up over the stones at the south edge, showing that grass had grown over the cairn. No turf-line was noted at the base of the cairn.

Only a couple of feet in from the edge of the north-east quadrant there were found the remains of an urn (fig. 3). It had rested on a slab which was flat on the ground. One overlying layer of boulders closely surrounded the rim, which was all that was left of it. Clearly the cairn had once risen higher than this, unless the upturned base of the urn had been left projecting. Any lowering must, however, have taken place before the sand submerged the old surface.

A foot away to the south-west, at the same level as burial 2, an urnless heap of cremated bones also lay on a flat slab (burial 3). Burial 4, similarly urnless, was found 2 feet from it to the south-south-west, a little to the right of the projecting heap of pebbles in the photograph. At a rather higher level and a foot or so south of the centre of the cairn was a larger mass of cremated bones and earth about 18 inches across—burial 5 (fig. 4, for which I am indebted to Professor Piggott).

The primary burial below the centre of the cairn was contained in an urn sunk mouth downwards in the undisturbed sand. The base was on a level with the ground surface of the time (fig. 4 and Pl. XXI, 1). The rim rested on a squarish sandstone slab. The filling of the straight-sided hole consisted of dark sandy soil containing fragments of cremated bone and charcoal. Two small drops of bronze were in it too, near the base of the urn. This filling had been heaped a

little above the base of the vessel. Some inches above it had been placed the largest slab in the cairn.

A third cairn was identified 140 yards south-south-east of the first. Next day it was examined by Mrs Piggott. She reports that it was slightly smaller than the others, and outlined by stones set on edge. There were no quartz pebbles contained in its make-up. Unfortunately, before the character of the cairns had been recognised, a pipe-line about 18 inches wide had been cut through the middle of this one from north to south, with the result that very little of the central cremation remained. A large slab of sandstone just to the west of the pipe-line covered the greater part of a circular hole, cut into the undisturbed sand subsoil. This contained about a quarter of a cremated burial (No. 7) and two minute

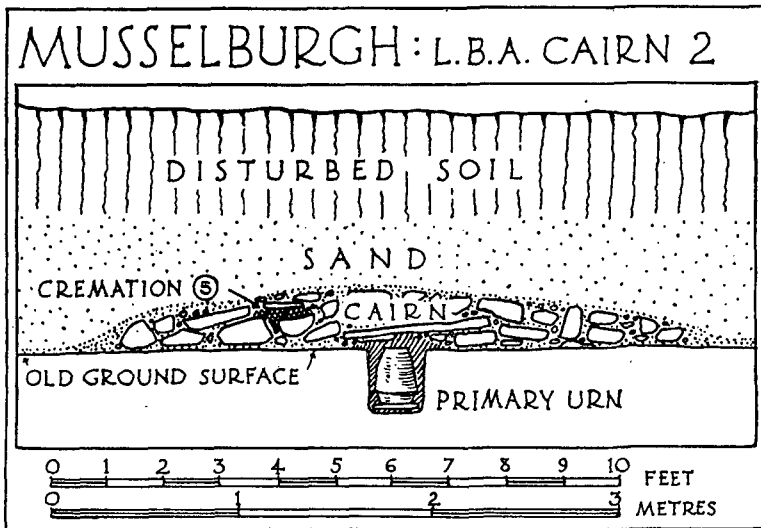


Fig. 4. Musselburgh: section through Cairn 2.

crumbs of pottery. Though it is possible that an urn may have been cut away by the pipe-trench, it is also possible that the burial had been an unaccompanied cremation, since the remains of the hole containing it were in the nature of a shallow scoop rather than a hole designed to hold an urn.

Urn No. 1.—Only one side and the base remain of this vessel, which was rather roughly made, 11½ inches high, of a grey-brown colour. Two cordons have been applied at about 2½ inches and 5½ inches below the rim, the upper having one thin scored line below it and two above. Two similar lines run below the rim outside. In addition there are comb impressions running in a line round the centre of the upper panel. A similar line runs just below the rim, and a third round the lower edge of the hollow bevel inside.

Urn No. 2.—Only the upper portion remains, light brown outside and dark inside. The rim, 8½ inches in diameter, is hollow-bevelled with a slightly everted lip. At one point on the rim there are scored a series of lines. A single cordon runs 3 inches below the rim, and above it there is an irregular chevron formed of bundles of scored lines bounded above and below by a single horizontal line.

Urn No. 3 (burial 6) is intact, 9½ inches high and 8 inches across at the mouth

(Pl. XXI, 2). Its colour is buff, with patches of red. The inside is steeply bevelled from the rim to a moulding nearly 1 inch below it. Outside there is a single cordon 4 inches below the rim, and above it widely-spaced vertical lines of comb impressions with a similar horizontal line above and below them. The bones which it contained were far less comminuted than was the case with those from the other burials, which were in fact so small that no indication could be obtained of years or sex. In no cremation preserved in the Museum are there such large fragments of bone remaining. When the urn was emptied it was found that the largest pieces, such as femur heads, had been placed in the urn first and the fragments were progressively smaller nearer the top. Throughout, green stains occurred on a number of bones, suggesting the former presence of drops of melted bronze from some object burnt on the pyre. Dr Osman Hill kindly examined the bones, which he considers to be those of a very young adult, and, to judge by their slightness, possibly female.

The urn cemetery at Musselburgh described in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. xxviii (1893-94), lay rather more than three-quarters of a mile due west of the recent discoveries. The urn published as No. 11 in that account is less similar to the new urns than would appear from the illustration, being considerably smaller, and its decoration in reality whipped-cord impressions.

R. B. K. STEVENSON, *Keeper.*



1. Musselburgh: Urn No. 3 *in situ*.



3. Musselburgh: Cairn 2 partly removed, showing pebbles; arrow points to Urn No. 3, still covered. (Width of photo 10 feet.)



2. Urn No. 3. ($\frac{1}{2}$)