

## XV.

### THE "WAG" OF FORSE, CAITHNESS. REPORT OF FURTHER EXCAVATION MADE IN 1947 AND 1948. BY ALEXANDER O. CURLE, C.V.O., LL.D., F.S.A., F.S.A.Scot.

During the clearance of certain parts of the ruins in 1946, evidence came to light, at two different places, of a pre-wag occupation, followed by similar discoveries in 1947.

The importance of this made it highly desirable to continue the excavation in the hope that still more evidence might be obtained of what appeared to have been a settlement of the Early Iron Age.

The evidence was as follows: (1) a number of sherds of a cooking-pot found at a depth of 18 inches beneath the floor of the "herd's" cabin K at the entrance to Wag L of the plan (fig.3, 8); (2) potsherds, scorïæ and paving on the floor of area F, from an occupation almost on the outcropping rock, the pre-wag character of which was borne out by certain structural details in the remanent portion of its containing wall on the north; and (3) the ruins of hut O, on the northern arc of the circular wag, the entrance to which had been removed by the construction of that enclosure. With regard to site (1), further digging revealed that the potsherds found beneath the floor of K seemingly came from an isolated hearth in a pocket of the rock, and further research in its immediate neighbourhood was precluded by the close proximity of the main walls of the wag. The evidence for the earlier occupation of area F has already been stated in my communication of 1948.

As regards further exploration of the wag, clearance of debris to the south-west of area F showed that what had previously been considered a

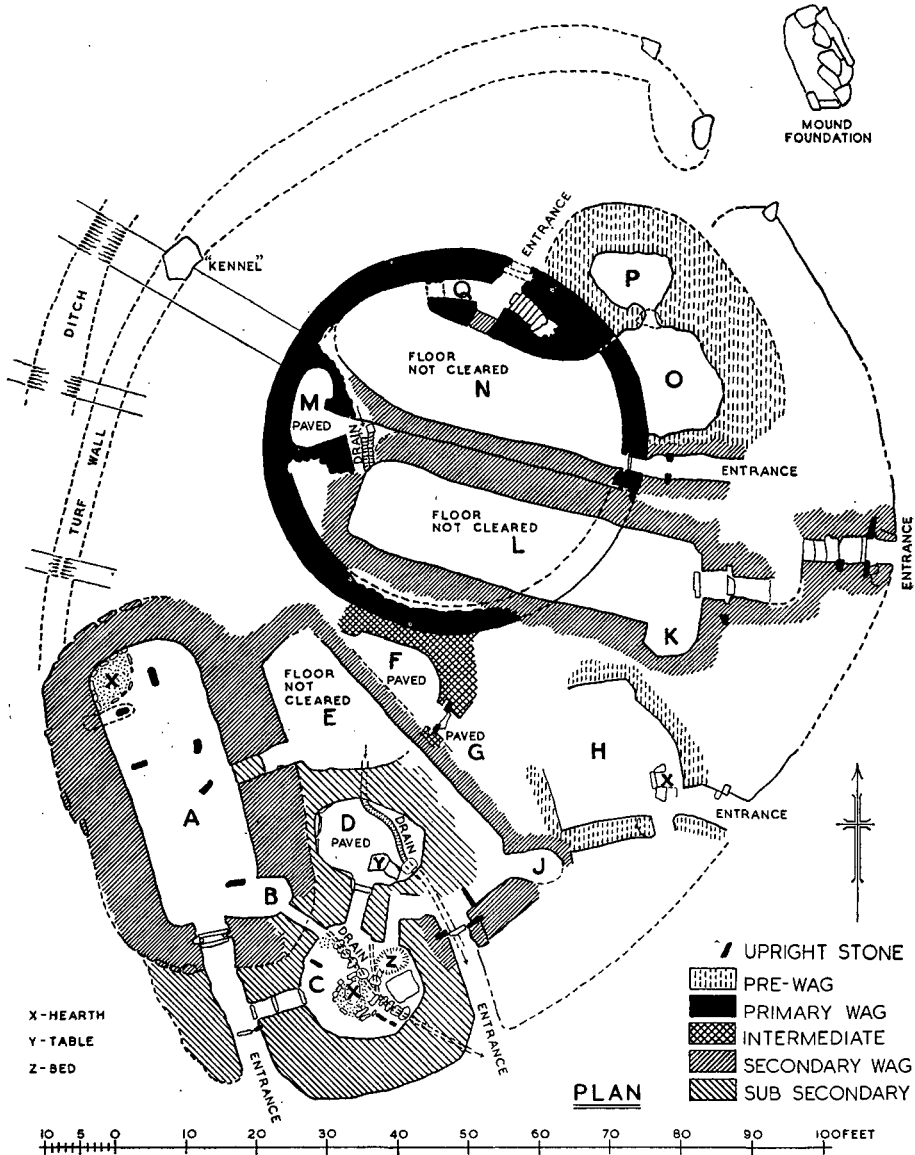


Fig. 1.

continuous wall on the sides of a wag on the west was in reality a long line of heavy foundation-stones for a wall, which had never been completed. Towards the south end of area E the conditions were rather confusing.

A passage into the area (D) had apparently been broken through the wall of the adjacent dwelling C, and subsequently closed by an upright slab, just beyond an entrance evidently intended to give access to the proposed wag E. Inward from this point, in clearing away the debris alongside the wall of the supposed granary D, there were found a number of sherds of thick, heavy cooking-pot (fig. 3, 7), several of which had deep impressions beneath the rim made evidently with a round-ended implement (fig. 3, 7) identical in character with impressions on a sherd found in the adjacent dwelling (C) in 1939 and possibly part of the same vessel. There was also found an unusual relic, a stone discoid bead,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in diameter (fig. 3, 12).

An examination of the hut O on the north of the circular wag, the entrance to which had been obliterated by that building, showed that, while obviously anterior to the wag, it had not been so by any length of time. But excavation through the floor revealed that it had been constructed on the ruins of a much earlier building, the floor of which lay at a level of from 1 foot 9 inches to 2 feet beneath that of O (Pl. XLVI, 1).

The early building yielded a few potsherds, including a rim, which clearly collated it with the occupation of the early site found in K. Finally, a section cut through the walls of both periods produced from the original surface potsherds of a still earlier occupation of the site.

To the east of area H and to the south of K there was a heavy accumulation of debris, the clearance of which, as it was outside the then ascertained limit of the wag buildings, did not appear to justify the labour involved. However, a large flat stone was observed lying horizontally on the surface, with the top of an upright pillar-stone which supported it. As this indicated the existence of yet another wag, work was at once commenced in clearing away the ruins, and the remains of a small circular wag were eventually exposed (Pl. XLVI, 2). Of this a lintel and pillar alone remained *in situ*, while other pillars on or adjacent to their original positions lay around (fig. 2, R). The overall dimension of the court, where obtainable, was approximately 12 feet; so, allowing for 3 feet as the projection of opposite lintels from the wall-head, the space to be covered in the centre must have been about 6 feet. As the west wall had been removed in the past the full dimensions were not procurable. In clearing the refuse to reach the base of the remaining pillar-stone *in situ*, a heap of peat-ash was uncovered lying on a floor at a depth of some 8 inches. Further clearance of the ground to the level of the base of the ash-heap exposed a circular hearth (Pl. XLVII, 1) surrounded by a kerb of oblong stones set on edge, with two taller stones forming a fire-back on the east. The west side of the hearth had been removed, but enough remained to indicate its diameter as 6 feet. It was paved all over, and an interesting feature was an opening in the paving formed by the breaking off of a corner of one of the paving-slabs near the centre, obviously for the purpose of admitting a draught to keep the

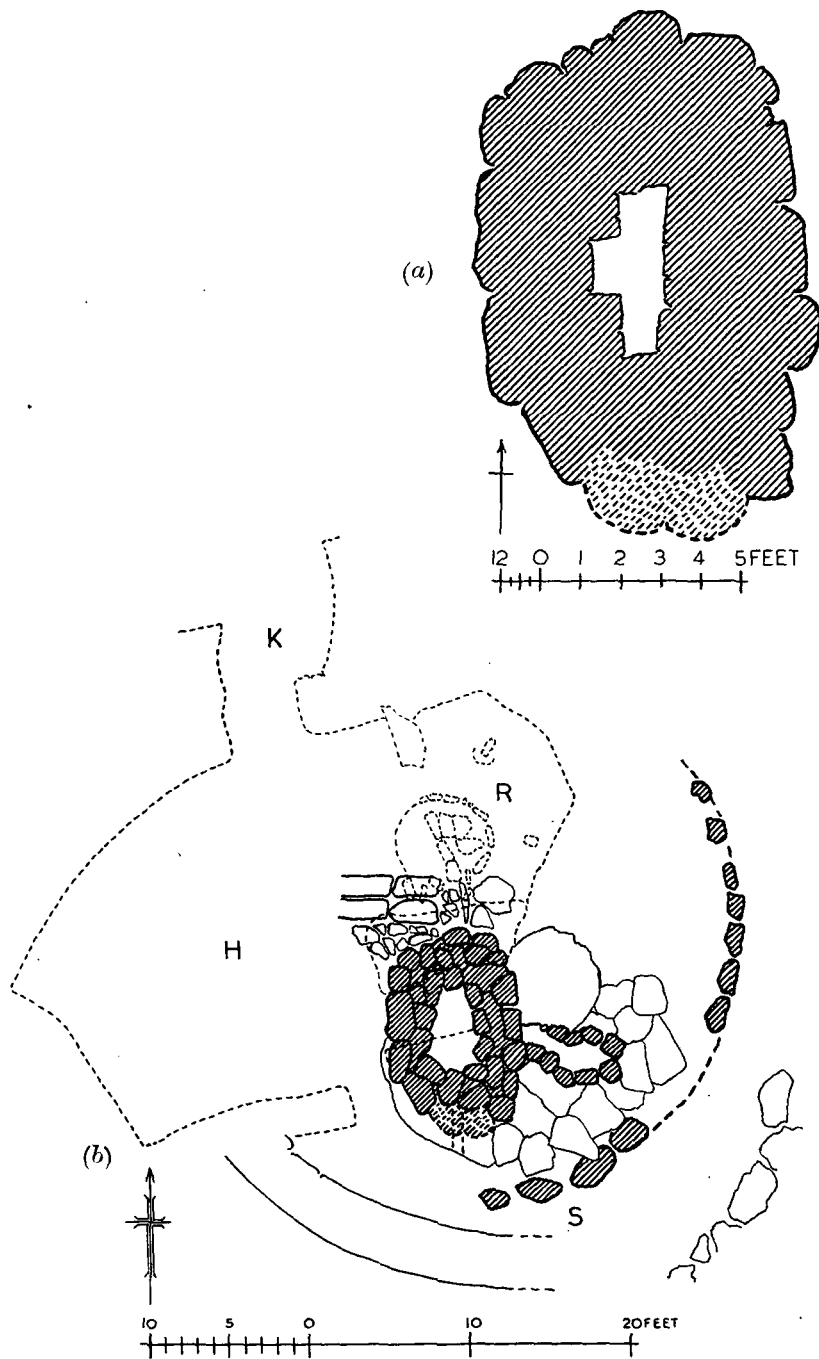


Fig. 2. Plan of "Platform," showing (a) exposed cist, with lateral recess; (b) unopened cist, bath, etc.

peat fire alight, for which further provision was made by leaving the ground directly beneath open, while elsewhere it was solid. That it was an original aperture was clear from the manner in which the point of the paving-slab

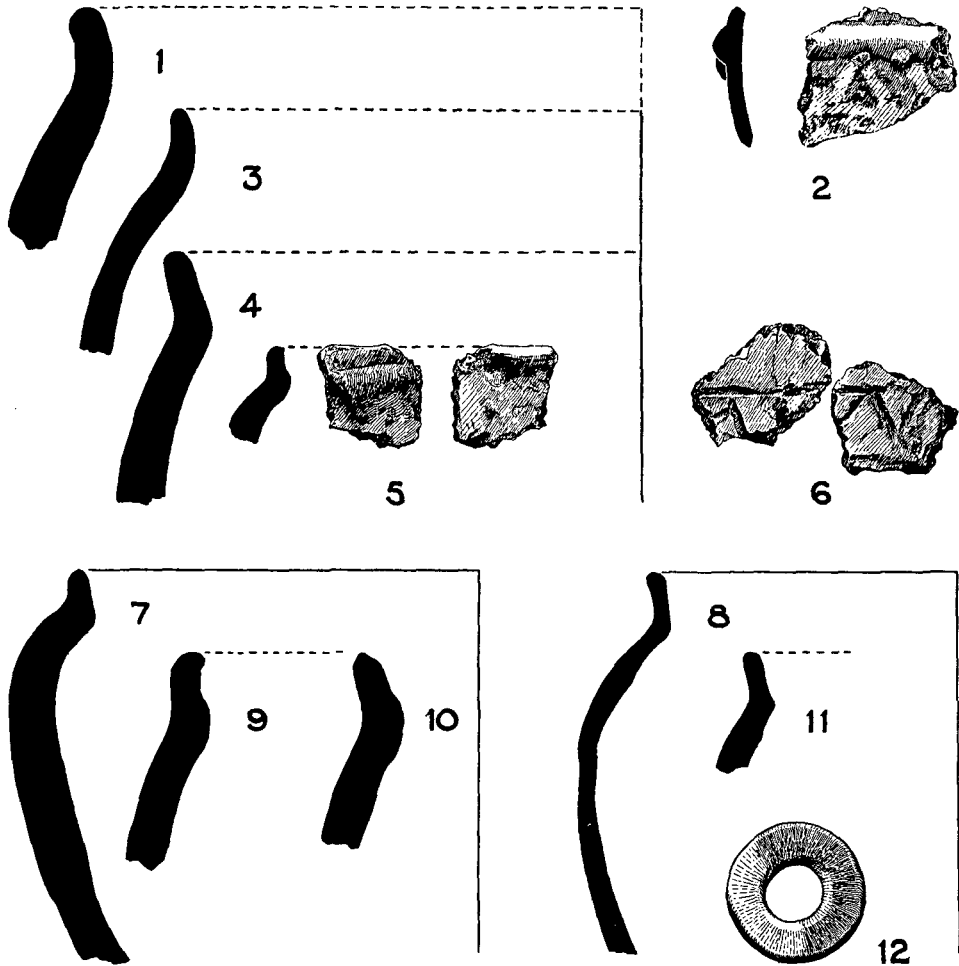


Fig. 3. Pottery fragments and sections ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ): No. 12, discoid bead ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ).  
 [No. 11 was found 8 inches from lowest level in ex-wag south-east of H.]

had been fractured, and from the depth of peat-ash which had accumulated beneath. Moreover, to admit a current of air from outside, a small aperture had been left in the south-east angle of the enclosing wall at its base. The necessity for admitting a draught to keep peat fires alight was carefully considered in the past, and it may be the case that certain conduits leading

into prehistoric dwellings, of dimensions too small to admit of their being penetrated by any known human being, may in reality have been air-vents. Such constructions were invariably provided in Viking dwellings, and were found both at Jarlshof in Shetland and Freswick in Caithness.

The heap of peat-ash at the base of the upright pillar, being obviously connected with the fireplace, was carefully sifted, and a few potsherds, of a more sophisticated character from any found elsewhere on the site, were recovered, suggesting the occupation by people using more elaborate technique than any met with elsewhere at the wag (fig. 3, 2). A small flake of flint was also found here, which appeared to have been used as a strike-a-light. From a depth of about 1 foot below the wag surface we found two halves of the miniature "saddle-querns" characteristic of the Early Iron Age.<sup>1</sup> Each of these portions measured  $8\frac{1}{4}$  by  $4\frac{1}{4}$  inches across. As such stones could not have been easily broken, it raises the question whether they might not have been destroyed as an act of sabotage! The other relics consisting of hammer-stones are noted at the end of the communication.

While examining the hearth it was observed that a marked subsidence had occurred in the wall forming the back of hut K in wag L, and presuming that this was due to the wall resting on a kitchen-midden, the dipping portion of the wall was removed, when there was found a deposit, some 4 to 5 inches in depth, of sea-shells (periwinkles), and amounting to about a pocketful, which had been placed on the wall during its erection.

Having at various places attempted, without success, to find further evidence of earlier occupation, I was seriously considering leaving the site when my attention was drawn to three large stones in line protruding through the surface towards the south-east. Accordingly, we cleared the turf from an area, hereafter designated ex-wag, measuring some 40 by 25 feet and disclosed a great mass of apparently tumbled stone, and the base of a broad wall on the south, from which it seemed possible that the stones had fallen. The mass did not suggest the ruins of a cairn. It was some 3 to 4 feet in height with a slight depression across the centre, and was composed of fairly large stones. When all the loose material had at length been cleared away, there was exposed a built platform, lying north and south (Pl. XLVII, 2), 2 feet in height and measuring 11 feet along the centre by 8 feet in breadth. It had been boat-shaped, and apparently pointed at either end. The surface was level as if so constructed. The building was rudely formed of boulders and irregularly shaped stones, with a notable absence of quarried material such as was used in the walls of the adjacent wags (Pl. XLVIII, 1). The outline of the south end had evidently been interfered with by the removal of one or two stones in the centre of

<sup>1</sup> These though approximately of the shape of saddle-querns do not, owing to their size, really conform to such a descriptive term, and I propose therefore that the term lap-querns might be used—their size suggesting their being worked while lying on a woman's lap rather than on the ground.





1. Hut O, with walls of earlier structure beneath.



2. Remains of small circular wig, with earlier hearth exposed in centre.





1. Remains of pre-wag circular hearth.



2. Built platform of boulders, from south.

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1. View of platform from S.E. angle.



2. Base of outer wall continuing northward into unexplored ground.

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1. Cist exposed in centre of platform.



2. Boulders exposed when covers lifted.

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1. View of west front, showing basin in left foreground.



2. South aspect, showing channel passing beneath paving slab subsequently destroyed.

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its length, and at the north end a single stone appeared to have been displaced (see plan, fig. 2). A slight disturbance had also occurred on the west face. At the south-west corner it approached close to the enclosing wall, which seemed to terminate at that point with one or two large stones. Along the west front the subsequent wag buildings had evidently interfered with whatever building may have been there. From the north-west angle large blocks of stone had been laid to make contact with the outcropping rock on which the wags were subsequently built. The structure appeared to have been laid to some extent on a paving of large flagstones, round the outer limit of which, from south to east, ran a kerb of boulders indicating the former existence of a boundary of some sort. Towards the north this setting of boulders was carried onwards into an unexcavated area. Outside the boulders the base of the containing wall, which started from the south-west angle, was continued northwards in a sharp curve also to an indefinite distance (Pl. XLVIII, 2). In the centre of the surface of the construction there were two heavy slabs, carefully laid in line, and lying so level as to militate against any suggestion that they had ever been displaced. On raising these a cist was exposed formed of boulders (Pl. XLIX, 1), with its floor on the rock, and measuring on floor-level 3 feet 4 inches in length by 1 foot 6 inches in breadth at the centre,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the south end and 1 foot 9 inches at the north end. A curious feature was a recess, immediately beneath the covers on the west side, measuring 1 foot 5 inches across the opening,  $10\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height and  $8\frac{1}{2}$  inches in depth, with the constructional boulders forming the sides, but with a neat filling of small, flat pieces of stone, set vertically, to form the back. Within this recess lay a much decomposed fragment of a sheep's jaw and two sheep teeth. The cist itself was entirely occupied by two very heavy boulders (Pl. XLIX, 2), filling it so closely that their temporary removal in order to examine the interior was a matter of considerable difficulty. Upon the floor there was no trace of an interment of any kind. A very few particles of charcoal were observed when it was first examined in 1947, but in the more particular examination made in 1948 nothing of the sort was found. At the base of the structure on the exterior, to south and east, channels had been formed as if for water, that on the east passing beneath a lintel on leaving the building (Pl. L, 1), that on the south formed in the surface soil (Pl. L, 2) and covered by a large paving-stone. There were no openings in the walls of the cist which could have connected with these channels, nor in the beds of the channels themselves were there any traces of sediment, such as would probably have been deposited had water flowed through them. The irregular outline of the building on the south front had probably been brought about by the removal of two or three boulders in the original face of the wall, in which case the flagstone must have been laid before the formation of the structure.



To the east and south of the building, bounded by the kerb on the south and originally in all probability on the east, there is an area paved for the greater part with large flagstones. Its irregular outline clearly suggests that it had originally extended over a wider area.

In the centre of the east pavement, the channel from the structure on that face is carried forward into a shallow, oblong basin, outlined with boulders and evidently paved on the floor, though one-half of the flooring had in the past been removed. This basin, and the channel by which it had been fed, measured 6 feet in length and 1 foot 6 inches in breadth. The channel at the south end passed underneath a large slab of Caithness "slate" on to the open ground beyond. At the north end of the building and on its east side there was a circular slab, evidently a hearth, with an upright flagstone erected against the building to act as a fireback. A roughly chipped stone potlid and several sherds of cooking-pots were found on and in the immediate neighbourhood of the hearth. The fact that this hearthstone is partially beneath the boulders, and that certain of the other flagstones appear to be similarly placed, seems to indicate that the construction, whatever its purpose, had been erected on a previously occupied area.

That area had evidently been confined within an arc of a circle formed by boulders having a radius of some 17 feet, centred on the north end of the building. Evidence of continuous occupation was furnished by the discoloration of the floor and by the numerous sherds of cooking-pots found upon it. A few feet farther out than the above-mentioned arc of boulders there is the base of a wall, not concentric, and evidently a continuation from the wall-base starting at the south-west corner of the construction.

Circumstances did not permit of the complete examination of the site, but the general indication is that the structure, whatever its purpose, had been erected on a dwelling-site, as evidenced by the discoloration of the soil covering the floor and the sherds of cooking-pots found upon it. The kerb of boulders appears to be related to the structure, while the wall foundation outside it was possibly connected with the original dwelling.

As the remains above described are evidently but a small part of an Early Iron Age site, extending along the eastern edge of the rocky outcrop on which the wags are built, it is very much to be hoped that some day it may be thoroughly examined and also that the wags be cleared out. In the meantime it is much to be regretted that, failing any protection, considerable damage was caused to the monument in the interval between cessation of work in 1947 and resumption in 1948. The cist had been opened, and the interesting pocket, or recess, on the west side had been completely destroyed; the channel on the south had been opened up and the flagstone which covered it broken in fragments; stones on the surface of the structure had been displaced and the outline of the basin interfered with.

In the absence of any ascertained analogy, it is not possible to determine with any certainty what purpose was served by this unique construction. A few facts, however, suggesting a solution have emerged. In the first place, the cist in the centre was undoubtedly a part of the original construction, the space having been left, or the outline of the cist having been formed with boulders, and the “cairn” built around it. The shape of the cist suggested its having been intended for the extended burial by inhumation of a person of short stature. From the complete absence, however, of any trace of a burial in any form, as well as by the filling of the cist with two large boulders, the presumption is that no burial had taken place. As already mentioned, the size and shape of the boulders, selected obviously to fill the space, indicate that this was a primary arrangement. The idea of burial is further arguable from the small pocket, or recess, which was found containing the remains of food, directly under the covers. The presumption is, then, that we have here a cenotaph to some notable person, whose remains were not recoverable, perhaps lost at sea or in the stress of battle. But this conclusion leaves quite unexplained the two channels, presumably for liquid and not air, from the existence of the basin formed in the paving into which one was directed. The floor of the cist being the “living” rock, and there being no sign of any water rising through it, disposes of the idea of drainage. One is unwilling to advance a theory which cannot be justified from any parallel discovery in Scotland, but the idea of sacrifice as a religious rite over the tomb, cannot be left out of consideration. The general impression obtained when the structure was uncovered, that the building had not originally been raised higher than the level of the cist-covers, is another curious feature. If the theory that this was a tomb be accepted, how is the character of the occupation of the area on which it was erected to be explained? The surface was considerably discoloured, and there were a number of fragments of cooking-pots recovered from it, while the hearth backed by a large flag was actually placed against the building, thus suggesting a continued domestic occupation of the site. Such are the facts which further exploration in the vicinity may possibly explain.

#### THE RELICS.

As was to be expected from the purpose of the main buildings, the relics were few in number; in fact most of those actually relating to the occupation of the wags came from the solitary domestic site associated with the Wag, A on plan, excavated in 1939. Many of the other finds came from the pre-wag occupation of the ground at the edge of the outcropping rock on the east front. The great majority of objects found were hammer-stones, large pebbles of ovoid and sometimes spherical shape, of a size such

as a man could grasp in his hand, worn down usually at both ends to a bifacial rounded surface, intersected frequently by a sharp edge. As a rule the surfaces are fairly smooth and not heavily pitted, while their general appearance suggests that they may have been produced by glancing blows, for even in primitive dry-stone masonry it must have been necessary at times to remove slight protuberances so as to effect stability in building. Though such may have been one of the purposes for which these hammer-stones were used, and while some of those found had been split lengthways, lending weight to this suggestion, it hardly furnishes an explanation for their numbers. It must be remembered that only one of the wags was actually cleared to floor-level, and that from its floor no hammer-stones were recovered; though some were actually found within the circular dwelling (C on plan) connected with it, while four came from an area which appeared to have been used as a refuse dump in area E outside and accessible from it. From the fact that the worn surfaces are occasionally very smooth and curved in both directions, it seems probable that they were also used as rubbers on saddle-querns, especially as no other implement was found which seemed intended for such a purpose. Perhaps, as was the case with the stone implements of an earlier age, they were universal tools, to be used for any purpose to which they could be applied.

As for the age to which they belonged, it is significant that while twenty-eight were found, only nine were found on levels referable to the period of the wag occupation, and of the remaining nineteen, two were found in the intermediate level beneath the floor of the small wag in H, which, however, was of small extent, and the rest came from the lowest level of the ex-wag area, and at the same relative level on the early floor discovered beneath the hut-circle O.

This distribution appears to indicate an earlier period for their greater use, but it must be remembered that the ex-wag was the largest domestic site uncovered. The early period for the use of such hammer-stones is, however, borne out by the finds on Traprain Law, where all such relics belonged entirely to the lowest and pre-Roman level. Numerous pounders or hammer-stones were found throughout the excavation of the prehistoric group at Jarlshof, with a preponderance in the later or Iron Age levels.

A segment of a circular object of lignite was found at wag-level outside the entrance to Wag E. A fragment of a broad ring of the same material was found at the entrance to Wag N. A roughly fashioned segment of another, possibly an armlet, with an indicated diameter of  $3\frac{1}{4}$  inches, was found at the level of the intermediate hearth in R, while another segment of a possible armlet of the same material, with indicated diameter of 4 inches, was found at ex-wag level while tracing the pavement towards the east.

A discoid bead of sandstone, already referred to, was found with potsherds and hammer-stones in the area above mentioned outside the circular

chamber D, seemingly used as a refuse dump from the dwelling C of the wag period.

*Pottery.*—Potsherds were recovered from all of the three levels of occupation, those from the lowest being most abundant, and those from the second, occurring beneath the small wag, the most distinctive.

The pottery from the wag-level came almost solely from outside the wall of area D. Several sherds of thick dark cooking-pot (fig. 3, 7), having large chips of flint-like material in the body, comprised most of it, one particular sherd being ornamented with deep finger-print or punch-made impressions under the rim, probably a part of the same vessel as a potsherd found in the adjacent dwelling (C) in 1939.

The pottery from the second level came from the heap of peat-ash which lay on the east side of the hearth below the small wag in H, while one remarkable sherd with trailed decoration and applied cordon (fig. 3, 2), found among the stones which overlay the ex-wag construction was evidently of the same period. A small fragment found also among the peat-ash of the second level in H has a cordon below the rim inside, and finger tip impressions outside (fig. 3, 5). A sherd ornamented with a reticulated pattern in grooved lines was found in the same situation. Pottery which came from the isolated hearth below the herdsman's cabin K (fig. 3, 8), and on an early floor-level 1 foot 9 inches beneath that of the later bee-hive dwelling O (fig. 3, 1) and from the ex-wag level (fig. 3, 4-5, 9-10), was for the most part remains of coarse, heavy cooking-pots with everted rims and an ogee profile.

Only one spinning-whorl was found, and that at a high level, on clearing ground above the ex-wag area, and therefore of no significance.

In conclusion I must again thank Dr Sinclair for permitting the continued excavation and for presenting most of the relics to the National Museum, with a sample to Wick Museum; Colonel McClintock for bringing the plan up to date, and Mr H. A. P. Rowland, surveyor, of Liverpool, for planning the ex-wag area exposed after Colonel McClintock's departure. My thanks are also due to Professor Pearson, of the University of Durham, who through the kind offices of Dr Allan, Director of the Royal Scottish Museum, examined the slag found in the occupied site adjacent to the early construction. Lastly, I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance from the Council of the Society which allowed the excavations to be carried out. I was again fortunate in having our Corresponding Member, Mr Simon Bremner, to act as my foreman.