

X.

NOTES ON A CHAMBERED CAIRN, AND A WORKING GALLERY,
ON THE BEORGS OF UYEA, NORTHMAVEN, SHETLAND.

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The above monuments, which are unnoted on the Ordnance Survey maps, are situated in a barren and desolate area in the remote north-western corner of the Shetland mainland about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles WNW. of the township of Burra Voe. They lie within 150 yards of each other on the boulder-strewn slopes of the Beorgs of Uyea and overlook the Mill Loch to the east (fig. 1). The National Grid reference for the cairn is HU (N41) 328901 and for the gallery HU (N41) 327901.

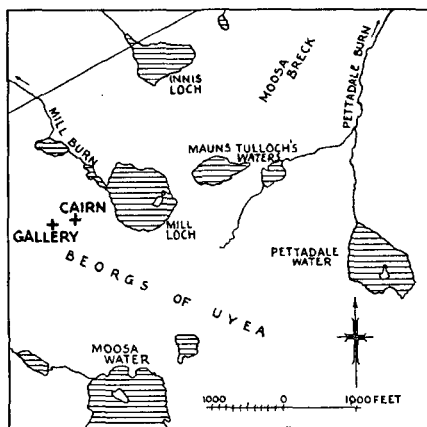


Fig. 1. Map of sites.

In the summer of 1942 Mr Laurence G. Scott, their discoverer and joint author of this paper, with the help of Mr James Johnston, Sandvoe, and Mr William Mouat, Fairview, North Roe, cleared away sufficient debris and peat to enable him to take notes and measurements of the obvious features of the structures, but these observations were laid aside during World War II to await a more suitable opportunity for their publication. Later, in 1949, Mr Calder visited the spot to make further investigation and check the particulars.

CAIRN.—The superstructure of the cairn has vanished in the course of time, and the existing wall-head is now on a level flush with the hillside into

which it has been dug and founded. The external outline of the building is lost in the mergence of the debris with the rocky and peat-covered slopes, and thus the monument is rendered hard to find unless on close inspection. Of what remains, only a ruined chamber with an entrance-passage is visible as a sunken gallery which lies lengthwise, at right angles to the slope of the hillside, in a direction from NW. to SE. The walls are built of dry-stone masonry and for the most part are founded on a bed of solid rock, which, on the western half of the chamber, projects for a short distance into the interior near the floor-level (fig. 2). In greatest height the walls of the

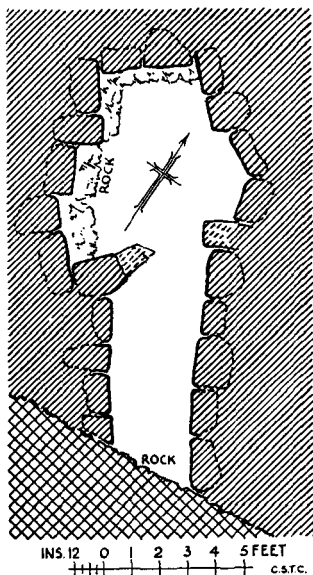


Fig. 2. Plan of cairn.

chamber now rise only to $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft., and converge as they ascend by an overlap in the courses of masonry in the manner of beehive corbelling; at the inner end where the beehiving is most pronounced the overhang is as much as 6 ins. in a height of 1 ft. 8 ins. The lintels of the passage are missing, but it is a fair assumption that the height of 2 ft. 3 ins. above the floor to the present wall-head is the original dimension, as a large single stone spanning the void at this level was formerly observed by Mr Scott and noted by him as being a lintel *in situ*.

Where normally the entrance was to be expected, the mouth of the passage was completely closed in by a mass of solid rock, as high as the walling, which formed or seemed to form part of a natural bed incorporated in the construction of the cairn at the date of erection. The side walls of the passage terminate against the face of the rock and swing off from its plane

at an angle of about 60° . The closure of this extremity raises a doubt about the actual position of the original opening to the tomb and the mode of entering. It is possible that access was gained by the means expressed in one or other of the two following surmises, viz.: (1) by a short extension of the passage over the rock-surface in which the vertical face of the rock would then become a step down in the floor as in the sketch (fig. 3, A), or (2) by a direct drop entrance through the roof contrived by leaving an open space in the lintelling until after burial had taken place, when the opening would be immediately sealed by a slab and finally covered by the superstructure (fig. 3, B). Step-down entrances are known in the construction of

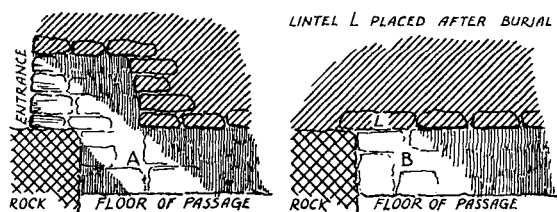


Fig. 3. Alternative suggestions for finish of entrance passage.

sepulchral monuments of the period as at Rodmarton in Gloucestershire.¹ The other method of entry by dropping through a lintel-space not only suggests a single ceremony of interment, after which the tomb was closed for good, but implies immediate concealment of the entrance against the unauthorised admission of spoliators. Vementry Cairn, in the Shetlands, may be cited as an example of such concealment. Here the passage to the chamber is lower than an original surrounding platform, and its mouth, which does not extend to the margin of the structure, is hidden and closed by the massive revetting stones still existing in an unbroken line in the frontal concave façade.² Also, no doubt for the above reason of hiding the true access to the tomb, the passage at March Cairn in the same islands is found in the side of the cairn instead of being placed in the more usual position in the proper front.³ Elsewhere in Britain, cairns have been provided with dummy portals,⁴ seemingly for a similar practice of deception in regard to the actual entrances.

In combination, methods (1) and (2) are illustrated in an underground galleried construction at Rennibister in Orkney, where "admission to the chamber seems to have been gained by a drop [through the lintels] to the passage," and "From the floor of the passage at its inner end there is a drop

¹ *The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales*, p. 73, fig. 1, opp. p. 140; pl. xiv., p. 222, item 16.

² R.C.A.M. (*Shetland*), p. 115, fig. 625. (Now known to contain a cruciform chamber.)

³ *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXIV, 199.

⁴ *The Prehistoric Chamber Tombs of England and Wales*, p. 73, fig. 1, p. 74, opp. p. 148; pl. xv.

of 2 ft. 6 ins. to the chamber" shown in the section as two downward steps cut out of the solid rock.¹ Rennibister is described as an earth-house, but no relics of a domestic nature were recovered and, if not originally, it was at least latterly in use as a tomb which on its discovery was found to contain nothing but the skeletal remains of six adults and twelve or thirteen young persons, all of mixed sex.

The average length of the passage of the Uyea Cairn is 7 ft. 9 ins. and it ranges in width from 2 ft. 8 ins. at the outer end to 3 ft. 3 ins. near the inner. From the latter point it contracts in an angular projection from the W. side, which acts as a partition separating the passage from the chamber; the partition is now partly broken down but, in its eastern portion, a void about 2 ft. or so in width marks the original opening for intercommunication.

On plan the chamber is trilobate in form, having a shallow and rather degenerate recess occupying the full extent of each side wall, and a third recess of more regular outline, that may be regarded as the principal compartment, finishing the inner end. The extreme dimensions of the chamber are approximately $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft. from back to back of the side recesses and 5 ft. 8 ins. from the partition to the back of the inner; respectively on N., E. and W. the recesses themselves measure 3 ft. 8 ins. by 2 ft. 4 ins., 3 ft. 3 ins. by an average of 10 ins., and 4 ft. 5 ins. by an average of 1 foot 3 ins.

The floor of the structure consisted of a natural bed of granitic gravel of some considerable depth, and before excavation it was covered by a growth of peat nearly 2 ft. in thickness. The peat was of a live fibrous nature, not "blown" peat, and, considering the slow growth of such vegetation, it is inferred that the cairn must have been destroyed or otherwise become ruinous many centuries ago. Without a fuller excavation than could be undertaken by Mr Scott, the peripheral extent and form of the cairn could not be determined but, from the internal arrangement of passage and chamber in the shape of a cruciform plan akin to those of the Shetland heel-shaped cairns, the monument obviously must be ascribed to that class of tombs.

WORKING GALLERY.—The gallery has been constructed in a short trench following the slope of the hillside, which has been dug out hard against the W. face of one of the numerous dykes of quartz-felspar-porphphyry that intrude into the local granite formation and are only to be found in this area north of the Ronas Hill plateau. The face of the rock itself constitutes one side of the structure, and the opposite side and ends are built in a rough continuous revetting-wall of dry-stone masonry (fig. 4). For the most part the wall consists of unhewn granite with a sprinkling of porphyritic pieces, and there are no pinnings in the joints. The space enclosed was covered by a roof of lintels which were laid at a slight inclination to the horizontal, the lower ends resting on the wall-head and the upper bearing on the more or less slanting face of the rock (Pl. XXXIX). Altogether there were nine lintels

¹ R.C.A.M. (*Orkney*), No. 325, fig. 147.

ranging in length and width from 5 × 2 ft. to 2¼ ft. × 7 ins. and all except one were composed of granite. The exception was made of spherulitic felsite, a rock peculiar to the Beorgs of Uyea and found nowhere else in Britain. The two largest, spanning the S. end of the gallery, were firmly bedded under an overgrowth of peat and heather and seemed to be *in situ*, but the remainder had all been disturbed at one time or another; a few were loosely in position, but three had fallen into the chamber and were shifted by Mr Scott to the ground-surface alongside.

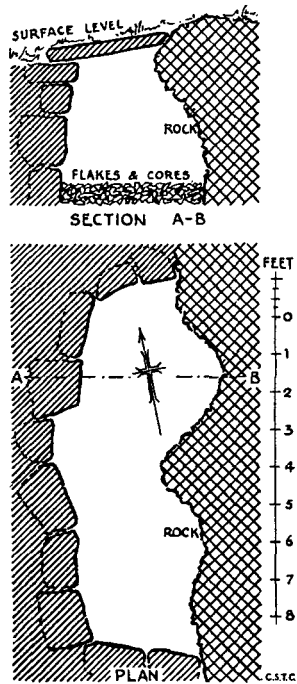


Fig. 4. Plan and section of gallery (sketched roughly to scale).

The galleried apartment thus formed measured almost 10 ft. in length by a variable width of from 2 ft. 2 ins. at the N. end increasing to 3 ft. 10 ins., and again contracting to 2 ft. 5 ins. near the middle before widening to 3 ft. at the S. end; the dimensions in height above an accumulation of rock chippings on the floor were 3 ft. 9 ins. and 3 ft. at the N. and S. ends respectively. On plan the shape of the chamber is very narrow and irregular, the excessive curvature being due presumably to the heavy undercutting of the face of the rock by the hand of man.

A singular feature in the construction is the lack of any break in the wall for the provision of an entrance doorway, and it may only be concluded that access was gained by dropping through the roof (Pl. XXXIX). This means

of ingress could have been achieved by the temporary removal of one or other of the lesser lintels which being of no great size or weight could be easily handled and, when the chamber was not in use, could be replaced and well hidden under clumps of heather or divots of peat. Alternatively there is a triangular space measuring 22×15 ins. between the two largest lintels owing to a tapering of the slabs, and this may have been the original way in, as on the ground beside the gallery there is a granite slab, 31×15 ins., which is of a size to have made a suitable cover for that opening.

The drop from the ceiling to the floor is moderate, and the height of the chamber is such that a person could adopt a sitting posture inside in comparative comfort while, for instance, engaged in the manufacture of some kind of implement on the spot where a supply of the raw material of the rock was readily to hand. There is evidence pointing to the gallery as a prehistoric workshop where artefacts were fashioned by some individual who worked unobtrusively within its restricted space. Not only was the rock-face spalled and undercut but the splinters of the porphyritic rock, which littered the floor to a depth varying from 4 to 6 ins., had all the appearance of waste flakes chipped off in the process of the manufacture of stone tools. It is also not without significance that workmen's tools enumerated below were recovered from the waste material, some being found on the surface of it.

It may likewise be mentioned that along the course of the intrusive dyke the hillside was strewn with more bits of rock than one could expect from natural causes, as the porphyry is very hard and compact and does not easily weather and disintegrate. It is most probable that the pieces here are also the debris of tool manufacture, not unlike, though on a smaller scale, those factories or workshops of the Neolithic Period that have been identified in the making of stone axes, adzes and picks at Langdale Pykes in Cumberland and at Graig Lwyd in Wales. At these sites the local rock was used in such quantities that the hillsides were strewn with the waste products of this ancient British industry.¹

It is of interest to note that one of the very few Neolithic arrow-heads ever to be found in Shetland is made of quartz-felspar-porphyry, and that many of the Shetland stone axes and knives are composed of the Uyea porphyries. Whether or not these artefacts were actually manufactured on the Beorgs in or near the gallery there is not the slightest doubt that the stone for their production was quarried in the vicinity, and the facts lend colour to the probability of local factory establishments.

Relics from the gallery comprised: (1) An anvil or lapstone, $11 \times 7 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ ins., trimmed by flaking at either end, has almost hemispherical convex upper surface well smoothed and striated. At least a corner and some of one side has been broken away so that the original size and shape are uncertain. It appears to have been used in rubbing down and polishing something hard

¹ *Prehistoric Britain* (Pelican Book), by Christopher and Jacquetta Hawkes, p. 53.



Beorgs of Uyea. Working gallery, showing lintels (some removed). Dr T. M. Finlay standing on floor.

—axes and flensers come to mind—and part of its surface has been roughened by subsequent use as an anvil. (2) Eight hammer-stones, 3 to 4 ins. in length and $2\frac{1}{2}$ to $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins. in diameter, all of granitic water-rolled stones except one made of porphyry, of spherical or cylindrical shape convenient for gripping with palm and fingers. (3) Cores of porphyry, two of which in

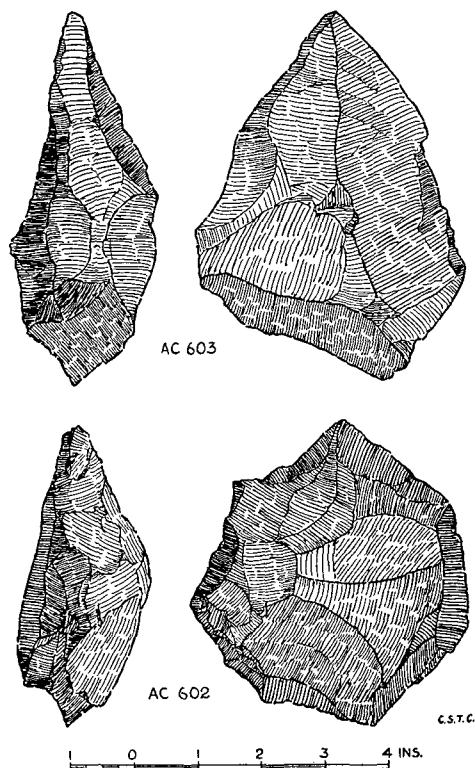


Fig. 5. Stone cores.

particular look like implements in the making (fig. 5): Museum register no. AC602-3. (4) Large flake of Riebeckite felsite which, from size and shape, might be a rough-out for a flenser of Shetland type. (5) Many other and smaller flakes of porphyry. (6) A disc of schist, $2\frac{1}{2}$ ins. in diam. but now lost. The anvil and specimens of the hammers, cores and flakes have been passed into the keeping of the National Museum.