

## XI.

REPORT ON THE PARTIAL EXCAVATION OF A BROCH AT SAE BRECK, ESHA NESS, IN THE PARISH OF NORTHMAVEN, SHETLAND.

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Sae Breck is situated towards the SW. extremity of the Esha Ness peninsula about one-third of a mile NW. of the croft of Garderhouse, and the name originally meaning the seaward slope is now applied to the hill hemmed in by the lochs of Gardie, Framgord and Breckon. The hill rises to an elevation of 205 ft. above sea-level, and overlooks the ruined Cross Kirk of Eshaness to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west (fig. 1). On

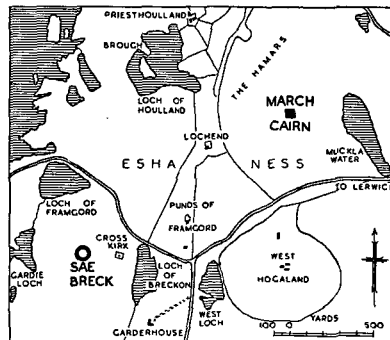


Fig. 1. Map of site.

the summit a conspicuous "mound about 8 ft. 6 ins. above the bottom on an enclosing ditch, outside of which again there has been a circular bank with a diameter of 112 ft. from crest to crest," was observed and recorded by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland;<sup>1</sup> but as its precise nature could not be determined from the superficial features, the Commission listed it as a cairn though adding a question mark.

In July 1949, however, the author was able to devote a couple of days to a brief excavation of the mound to try to prove identification. The masonry then exposed firmly established the fact that the structure was not a cairn but a broch. Where the top of the mound had been levelled for the erection of a coastguard hut a core of rubble suggested a promising point for beginning operations. Almost at once an entrance to a mural chamber (A)

<sup>1</sup> R.C.A.M. (*Shetland*), No. 1361.

of typical broch construction was encountered in what turned out to be the southern arc of the broch tower (fig. 2). Its lintels were missing and the jambs were reduced in height to 2 ft. 3 ins. above the sill from which there was a drop of 2 ft. 4 ins. to the floor of the chamber. Presumably the sill was the same distance above the floor of the tower, but the exact dimension

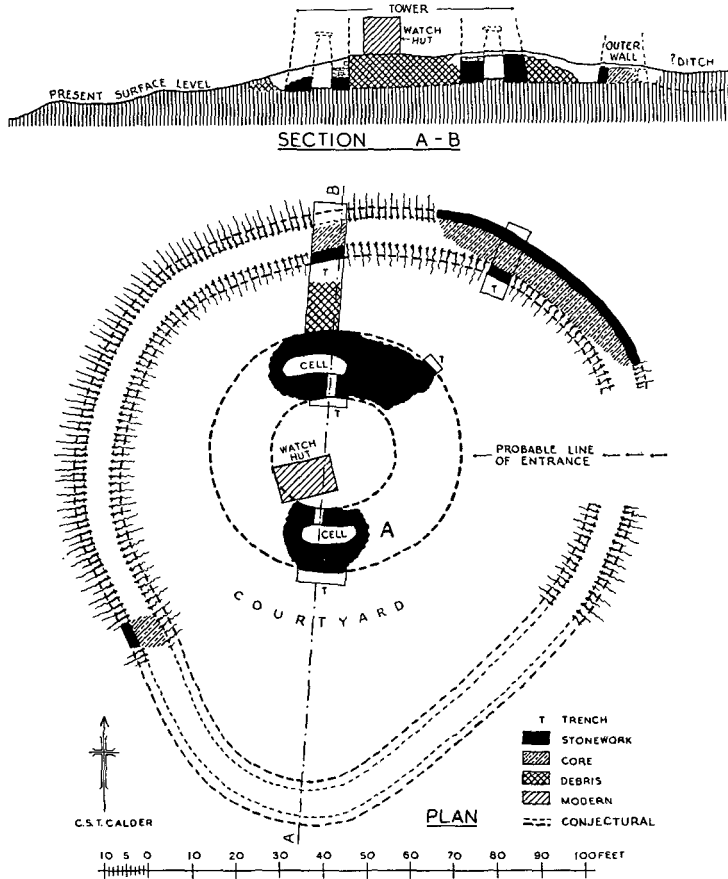


Fig. 2. Plan and section of broch.

was impossible to measure on account of an 8-foot layer of debris and packing which formed the hut foundation. The doorway was 2 ft. in width and penetrated the wall at a point 3 ft. distant from the W. extremity of the cell, which was round-ended and measured 12 ft. 6 ins. in length and 4 ft. 3 ins. in breadth. The outer and inner walls of the cell were respectively 6 ft. 3 ins. and 4 ft. in thickness, and still stood to a greatest height of 5 ft. to the broken down wall-head; they converged slightly as they rose, showing that the roof was originally finished on the beehive principle. The floor of the

cell was made of clay and was covered irregularly to a depth of 8 ins. with a layer of peat-ash mixed with an abundance of pottery fragments and limpet shells. This considerable quantity of material, enclosed as it was in a restricted space which was unsuitable for making a fire, suggested either that it had been dumped there or that fires had been made after the cell had become open to the sky. The pottery, too, would seem to bear out the idea of secondary use, as some of the sherds represented vessels of a type found at Jarlishof in the post-broch period.

Diametrically opposite in the N. arc of the wall of the tower a corresponding cell was revealed, but pottery and peat-ash were absent. Its entrance was not so well defined, but enough was left to indicate that it occupied a similar lopsided position in relation to the chamber, the opening being about 2 ft. 6 ins. from the E. end. The sill of the doorway was again placed high, giving a drop of 4 ft. to the floor, and in parts the denuded walls existed to much the same height as those of the first cell. The cell measured 15 ft. in length and 4 ft. 6 ins. in breadth, and its outer and inner walls were respectively 4 ft. 6 ins. and 5 ft. 6 ins. in thickness.

In a trench eastwards of this cell a portion of the outer face of the tower was also uncovered, and from the evidence found here and elsewhere it was inferred that it followed the line dotted on the plan. On this basis the imaginary east to west diameters, external and internal, appeared to exceed by some 3 ft. the known north to south diameters which were approximately 55 and 25 ft. Denudation was greatest on the E. side and probably the wall here was reduced to its foundations or in parts missing altogether; but where overall sizes were obtainable it was found to average about 15 ft. in thickness.

Around the tower, at distances varying from 15 ft. at the narrowest on the N. to almost 48 ft. at the widest on the S., and from 20 ft. on the W. to 30 ft. on the E., the "circular bank" mentioned in the *Inventory* bounded an eccentric enclosure or courtyard; actually the bank had overgrown the remains of a stout defensive wall. A gap on the E. side presumably locates the entrance, and it may be inferred that the approach through here led direct to the entrance of the tower. A bulge in the supposed line of the bank on the S. gives the plan a pear-shaped appearance, which may not be strictly accurate as irregularities on the ground in this quarter made interpretation difficult; but this course for the rampart, though doubtful, was the one that looked most probable on the spot, and it was selected in preference to one giving a more nearly circular outline. The unevenness of the surface in this part of the enclosure may quite well be due to remains under the turf of chambers and outbuildings of a later period. A narrow trench dug through the defensive wall on the NE. established a thickness of 10 ft. 6 ins. for the foundations of this rampart, and here an outer face of stones showed through the turf on an arc extending for a distance of nearly 60 ft. In the

prolongation of another trench from the northernmost cell the outer face of the wall was torn out entirely, but the inner still rose with a batter of 80° to a height of 3 ft. 3 ins. in well-built dry-stone masonry. The outer face was observable again for a short length on the SE. where it had been revealed in a clearance made by the coastguards. In construction the rampart was faced on each side with a revetting wall of battered masonry about 2 ft. in thickness and, in between, it contained a core of sand and gravel which, it is surmised, had been scooped out of a broad and shallow outer ditch. This method was followed at the broch at Kilmster, in Caithness, where also the corresponding wall was built in a similar manner.<sup>1</sup> Lack of time prevented verification of this feature and, in fact, confined operations to the bare fulfilment of the original intention—that of proving what type of monument was actually hidden in the mound.

The internal enclosing ditch recorded by the Commission was found to be a depression formed accidentally 4 ft. above the original ground-level between a fall of debris from the higher stages of the tower and the remains of the outer rampart. As no digging was attempted within the tower or in the courtyard only a few artefacts were recovered; these comprised two hammer-stones, a ball of quartzite 2.9 ins. in diameter, a steatitic spindle-whorl with rounded edge, 1.6 ins. in diameter and broken, and several pieces of pumice-stone.

The large quantity of pottery already noticed as having been found in the first-mentioned mural cell included many rim and bottom pieces representing a good variety of vessels (fig. 3). This material is fully described in the appended report, for which I am greatly indebted to Mr J. R. C. Hamilton, M.A., F.S.A.Scot., Inspector of Ancient Monuments in Scotland. Also my thanks are due to Brigadier The Honourable William Fraser, D.S.O., M.C., for his kind permission to excavate the site and his generosity in gifting the relics to the National Museum, and to our Society for having defrayed the expenses.

#### REPORT ON THE POTTERY.

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Over 120 sherds of pottery were recovered from chamber A in the thickness of the broch wall. At least 24 vessels are represented belonging to three classes of ware. The first class comprises heavy crudely built cooking-pots, the clay containing an admixture of crushed steatite or soapstone grit. The second and by far the most numerous class is a relatively thin, red, hard-fired

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXII (1947-8), 136, and fig. 2.

ware with everted rims and ovoid bodies, tapering to a flat base. Finally, portions of small craggan-like pots occur with incurving shoulders and slightly everted lip rims. The pottery is illustrated in fig. 3, based on reconstructions made by the technical staff of the National Museum of Antiquities.

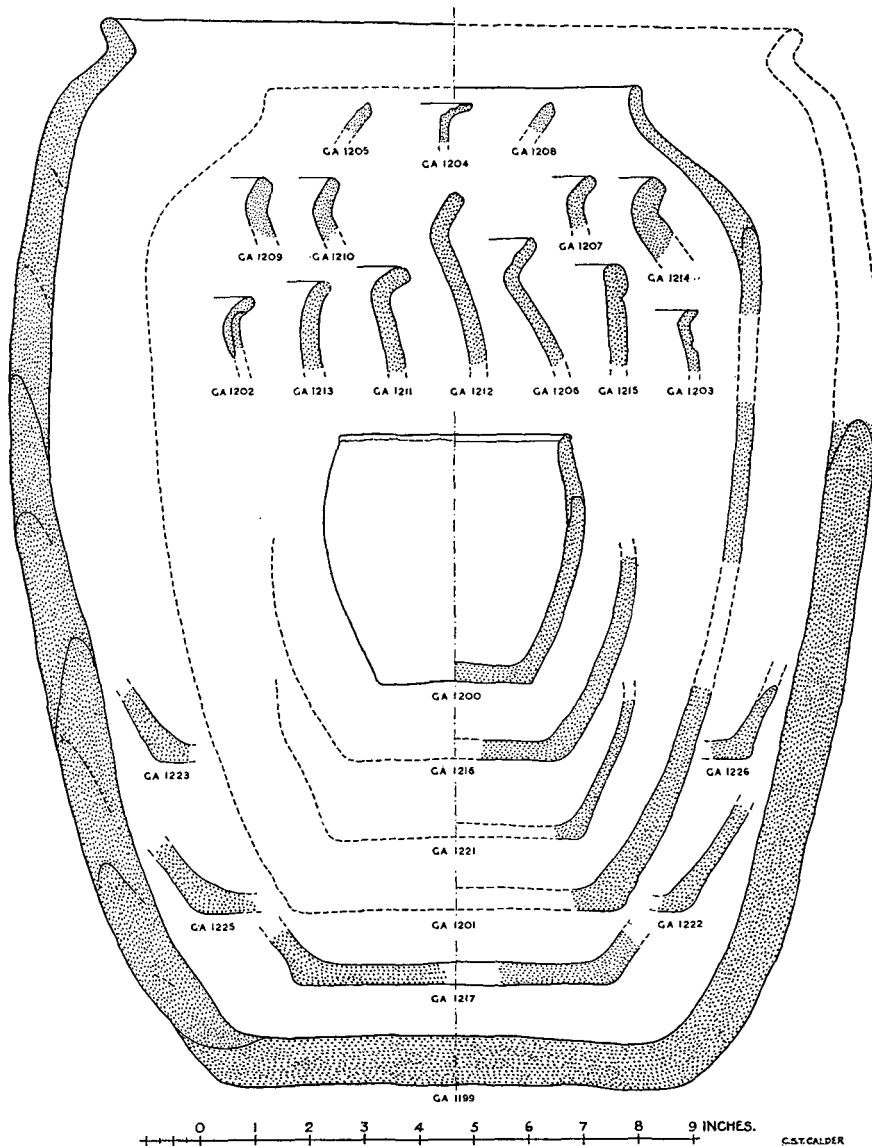


Fig. 3. Sae Breck broch: pottery.

## CLASS I.

*GA 1199.* Sufficient fragments were recovered to allow the reconstruction of one vessel. This is a large cooking-pot with everted rim above incurved shoulder, ovoid body and plain flat base. Height  $18\frac{3}{4}$  ins.; rim diameter  $12\frac{3}{4}$ –13 ins.; base 9 ins. The walls  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick at the rim expand to 1 in. on the body and base. The clay, yellowish on the surface, grey interior, is tempered with crushed steatite, some particles measuring  $\frac{2}{8}$  in. in diameter. The pot was built on the ring principle, using eight or nine strips, the base being moulded separately.

*GA 1201.* Thirty-five fragments allowed the partial reconstruction of a smaller and thinner cooking-pot. This had a conjectural height of 15 ins., with a rim diameter of approximately  $6\frac{7}{8}$  ins. and  $5\frac{3}{4}$  ins. at base. The rim and shoulder had apparently been moulded separately, being attached to the body at shoulder level. The shoulder is more pronounced than in the preceding pot, incurving to a plain rounded rim.<sup>1</sup> The clay contains crushed steatite grit, the interior of the walls being dark grey in colour. The external surface is smooth, light brown in colour, and slipped. This is most evident near the base and on the shoulder, where the slip is  $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{10}$  in. thick.

*GA 1213.* Slightly everted rim fragment of cooking-pot. Brown clay with steatite grit backing, rim diameter  $10\frac{1}{4}$  ins. approximately.

*GA 1214.* Sharply everted rim fragment of large cooking-pot, similar to GA 1199, but thicker in section. Rim has tendency towards flatness in section. Coarse clay with crushed steatite backing.

## CLASS II.

In addition to the rim and base fragments enumerated below, almost 60 other sherds belonging to this class were recovered from the cell.

*Rims.*

*GA 1202.* Rim fragment of very fine texture, well fired to brownish-red colour. The strongly everted rim was applied to the pot and had a diameter of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ins. suggesting a relatively small pot.

*GA 1203.* Small rim and wall fragment. Sharply everted lip rim with oblique flat interior surface. A well-defined groove  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. wide occurs on outer face below rim. Made of well-fired red clay mottled black in firing.

*GA 1204.* Strongly everted rim fragment of fine, red, well-fired clay, slightly granulitic on surface. Thin in section, the upper surface of the rim carries three flutings. Diameter of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ins. suggests relatively small pot.

*GA 1205.* A fragment of thicker rim of light red, well-fired clay, with obliquely flat top and slight fluting of inner surface. Probably everted rim, but angle and diameter are indeterminate.

*GA 1206.* Everted rim and shoulder fragments of yellow clay, well-fired, with some steatite backing. Inner surface of rim slightly fluted. Fairly large pot with rim diameter of  $13\frac{1}{4}$  ins. approximately.

*GA 1207.* Fragment of slightly everted rim of dark gritty clay, red on surface and inner face. Tendency towards flatness in rim section. Large pot with mouth diameter of  $14\frac{1}{2}$ –15 ins. approximately.

*GA 1208.* Small fragment of rim. Angle indeterminate. In section the top

<sup>1</sup> M. E. Cunningham, *All Cannings Cross* (1923). Compare pl. 38, no. 6; pl. 39, no. 5; pl. 40, no. 2; pl. 42, no. 2, etc.

is obliquely flat. Yellow-red surface mottled black by fire, somewhat coarse texture. Probably fairly large pot with rim diameter of 11 ins. approximately.

*GA 1209.* Similar but thicker fragment belonging to a pot with rim diameter of approximately 10 ins. Light, fine clay, grey interior, orange-yellow surface, oblique flat-topped rim.

*GA 1210.* A similar but slightly thinner rim fragment with oblique flat inner surface. The clay is somewhat coarser and darker in colour. Diameter of pot approximately 11 ins.

*GA 1211.* Three rim fragments of large pot with rim diameter of approximately  $14\frac{1}{2}$  ins. Biscuit-coloured clay, relatively fine texture, orange-brown surface mottled black by fire. Strongly everted rim, flat top in section. Surface indicates wiping of the soft clay with a rag or brush.

*GA 1212.* Rim and shoulder fragment of ovoid pot with everted square-sectioned rim, originally 12 ins. in diameter. The rim angle is less acute than in the previous specimen.

*GA 1215.* Fragment of fine, well-fired, red ware with simple roll or plant-pot rim, originally  $12\frac{1}{2}$ -13 ins. in diameter.

#### *Bases.*

*GA 1217.* Three large fragments forming two-thirds of the base of a pot approximately 6 ins. in diameter. Coarse clay, hard-fired with reddish-brown surface. Oblique angle walls suggest ovoid form.

*GA 1218.* Segment of base of large pot of light biscuit-coloured silicacious ware. Modelled on flat, probably stone, surface. (Not illustrated.)

*GA 1219.* Segment of base of similar but heavier pot than *GA 1217*. Well-fired reddish-brown clay. Moulded separately to walls which were later attached. Breakage has occurred along junction cleavage. (Not illustrated.)

*GA 1220.* Segment of base of similar pot. (Not illustrated.)

*GA 1221.* Lower body and base fragment, latter with diameter of approximately  $4\frac{5}{8}$  ins. Thin, reddish, fine clay mottled black on surface by firing.

*GA 1222.* Basal fragment, slightly thicker than previous example and of darker clay. Otherwise similar.

*GA 1223.* Somewhat heavier basal fragment with traces of steatite backing.

*GA 1224.* Basal fragment. Light brown on surface, dark grey core. Micaceous clay. (Not illustrated.)

*GA 1225.* Fragment of base. Orange coloured, coarse in texture, containing mica.

#### CLASS III.

*GA 1200.* Small barrel-shaped pot. Height  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ins., rim diameter  $4\frac{1}{4}$  ins., base  $2\frac{7}{8}$  ins. Medium coarse clay, dark brown in colour with yellow patches. It appears from fracture on one side that the pot was built in at least two sections. Simple slightly lipped rim, flat base. Approximately two-thirds of the pot preserved when found and slight weathering of inner surface has caused emergence of granules in the clay.

*GA 1216.* Four fragments of lower segment and base of similar but larger pot, with a base diameter of 4 ins. Biscuit-coloured surface, mottled black by firing with dark interior. Probably barrel-shaped with flat base.

*GA 1226.* Fragment of base of similar pot. Dark brown clay. Possibly exposed to weathering as granules on inner surface are pronounced.

## COMPARATIVE MATERIAL.

The most complete sequence of broch and post-broch pottery available for comparison in the Shetland Islands has recently come to light at Jarlshof, close to the southernmost tip of the mainland, during the extended excavation of the broch complex by the Ministry of Works.<sup>1</sup> Here five classes of ware were distinguished, of which only two need concern us here.

The earliest pottery associated with the broch and a large round-house built within the attached oval courtyard in the immediate post-broch period at Jarlshof consisted almost entirely of the large cooking-pots with steatite temper crudely built on the ring principle as in our present Class I. The largest pot found at Jarlshof is not quite so massive as GA 1199 but, together with other fragments, is identical in profile, execution and rim section.

The forms are related to the large situla-like vessels of the Iron Age A cultures in southern Britain (All Cannings Cross and Scarborough), but cannot be directly derived from the wares of the earlier settlement on the site which represent a carinated bowl tradition within the Hallstatt corpus of ceramic types.<sup>2</sup> The present fabric is in every respect a coarser product representing a lower order of potting, the crude ringing of the pots prior to the application of a siliceous slip being at variance with the older smooth grey-black ware with cavetto below flat expanded rims. These divergences indicate the arrival of new peoples to the site, also reflected in a more primitive economy and the use of heavy slate tools and whalebone artefacts—almost entirely absent from the latest pre-broch dwellings. The reappearance of a slate industry and the use of steatite grit for tempering the clay suggested a native island source. Outcrops of steatite are exceedingly rare outside the Shetland Islands. None occurs in the Orkneys, and only limited pockets are to be found in the North of Scotland, Skye and Aberdeenshire.<sup>3</sup> In Shetland the outcrops are confined to the central and northern areas. On these grounds the Jarlshof ware was associated with a labour force brought down the peninsula to build the broch; a body of people who, on the completion of their work, settled in the courtyard where they erected a large round-house and byre.

The occurrence of the same ware at Sae Breck and in an analogous context therefore affords interesting confirmation of this theory, and suggests that this "native" ware was well established in the more northerly districts of the mainland in the 1st cent. B.C./A.D. Ultimately it must represent the widespread penetration of the Shetland Islands by Late Bronze Age—Early Iron Age immigrants related to those of the older settlements at Jarlshof.

This ware was superseded at Jarlshof by a fine, hard, well-fired pottery

<sup>1</sup> Report in preparation. See R.C.A.M. (*Shetland*), No. 1149; *P.S.A.S.*, xli (1906-7), p. 11 ff.

<sup>2</sup> A. O. Curle, *P.S.A.S.*, lxxviii (1933-4), p. 283 ff., figs. 55-58.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson and Phemister, "Talc, other Magnesium Minerals associated with British Serpentine." *Geol. Survey. Dept. of Scient. and Indust. Research: Wartime Pamphlet No. 9* reissued 1946.



introduced by the builders of the large wheel-houses in the courtyard in the 2nd and 3rd cents. A.D. The construction of these dwellings entailed the contraction and final abandonment of the earlier round-house. In addition to these architectural innovations the wheel-house people reorganised the field system on the landward side of the complex, introduced the rotary quern and painted quartz pebbles with a variety of symbols, a practice recorded from the secondary structures at Keiss in Caithness and at the Broch of Burrian in Orkney.

Their pottery was characterised by a wide variety of rim shapes, many of which can be paralleled in the present Class II, which agrees closely in texture and form with the Jarlshof wheel-house ware. Thus, the everted rim with oblique "flange" or flat interior surface (GA 1203, 1208-10) finds numerous analogies. The simple roll or plant-pot rim (GA 1215) also finds exact parallels in the Jarlshof ware. The everted rims, fluted on the inner surface, are common to both sites, and recur on fragments from Mousa<sup>1</sup> and in the Orkneys from the Broch of Ayre,<sup>2</sup> Okstrow,<sup>3</sup> Broch of Cairston<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere. Both the sharply everted "flange" and fluted rims occur on aisled round-house and wheel-house sites in the Hebrides,<sup>5</sup> and may ultimately be derived from Roman or sub-Roman types in the south.

The occurrence of this ware at Sae Breck demonstrates the widespread penetration of the Shetlands by the wheel-house wares, probably in the 2nd or 3rd cent. A.D. The occurrence of 120 sherds, including at least 24 different vessels, in such a confined space as the cell, suggests floor refuse rather than a midden deposit. The vessels are only represented by fragments apparently overlooked in the sweeping or cleaning of the earth floor. To judge from the Jarlshof sections the rim fragments GA 1203, 1204 and 1206 would appear to be early, the plant pot rim and oblique flat section forms (GA 1205, 1208-10) somewhat later.

The third class at Sae Breck can only be paralleled in a general way at Jarlshof. Towards the end of the wheel-house period, which was of long duration, there is a marked decline in ceramic traditions. The wide variety of rim forms disappears, and a darker, inferior clay—though still well fired—is used in the construction of simple cooking-pots with flat-topped rims and smaller vessels with roll or bead rims. Eventually this ware gave preference to a thin, hard, native class consisting of open-mouthed cooking-pots with square section rims. The Sae Breck pottery Class III, though not intimately related to the Jarlshof forms, may represent a parallel degeneration, the simple small barrel-shaped vessels representing a devolution in the northern part of the Islands.

<sup>1</sup> Large fragment preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities, Ref. No. GA 1.121.

<sup>2</sup> N.M.A., No. L. 1948, 83.

<sup>3</sup> N.M.A., No. G.D. 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> N.M.A., No. G.A. 298.

<sup>5</sup> The everted oblique flange rim is recorded from the broch at Dun Beag, Skye, *P.S.A.S.*, LV (1920-1), 110; at Foshigarry, *P.S.A.S.*, LXV (1930-1), 300, fig. 25 No. 2. Both sites yielded fluted rims.