

## 8. A PREHISTORIC VESSEL FROM NORTH UIST.

The fragments of the remarkable prehistoric vessel which forms the subject of this note were discovered in 1951 during the lifting of peat 1 mile NW. of the village of Clachan, on the SW. coast of the island of North Uist. The find-spot lies immediately S. of a small loch (not named on the Ordnance maps) between Loch nan Struban and Loch na h-Iolaire, some 900 yards inland from the seashore; its National Grid reference is 08/798650. The original position of the fragments in the peat is not known, but it is probable that they lay not less than 5 ft. from the former surface of the moss, of which some 4 ft. had already been removed and a further 2-3 ft. was being cut at the time of discovery.<sup>3</sup>

The fragments recovered are of coarse ware, averaging half an inch in thickness, containing a high proportion of grit, chiefly crushed quartz, including fragments up to  $\frac{1}{16}$  in. in diameter. This gritty "backing" is visible only in section, the inner and outer surfaces of the sherds being smooth, possibly as the result of the application of a fine clay slip. The surfaces are of varying shades of brown and

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXIII, fig. 4, No. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *T. Dumf. and Gall. A.S.*, xxix (1952), 185.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks are due to Miss E. L. MacDonald of Locheport, North Uist, Mrs C. W. Murray of Aviemore, and Mr G. G. Simpson of Glasgow University, for information about the discovery. The sherds have been deposited in the National Museum of Antiquities (Ex 2).

black, while the interior of the fabric is fired black towards the inside, shading to grey towards the outer surface of the wall. The appearance of the ware suggests that it has been fired on an open hearth and not in a kiln. Both surfaces, before cleaning, were encrusted with patches of a peaty deposit, brown and flaky on the inside, and black and very adherent on the exterior. In many places it filled and obscured the ornament, and could be removed only by careful excavation with a needle.

A tentative reconstruction of the vessel is shown in fig. 5. Unfortunately, insufficient fragments remain to allow the profile to be restored with certainty, but the curvatures of the various sherds and the manner in which the walls have

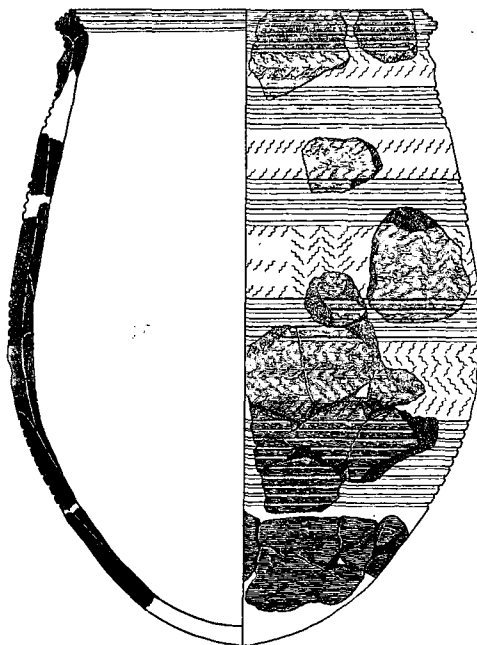


Fig. 5. Tentative reconstruction of a vessel from North Uist. ( $\frac{1}{2}$ .)

been built up suggest that the original shape and dimensions did not depart markedly from those shown. A number of fresh breaks show that more fragments were originally present than were available for purposes of reconstruction, but inquiry has failed to produce the missing pieces.

The decoration is zonal, and consists of alternate bands of shallow round-bottomed parallel grooves, executed probably with the articular surface of the leg or wing bone of a bird, and of patterns built up from impressions of the edge of a cockle-shell, which is said to occur in profusion on the neighbouring seashore. The lowest portion of the pot is undecorated. Though no fragment of the base itself survives, the slope of the walls in the undecorated zone make it almost certain that the bottom was rounded, as shown, and not flat.

The ornament as a whole is executed with considerable care and precision. The only noticeable irregularity occurs in the third zone of shell ornament from the top, in which the design seems to consist of alternate panels of vertical herring-bone and of three horizontal lines of oblique impressions.

In addition to the ornament described, a low raised band encircles the neck a short distance below the base of the rim, and a groove of similar dimensions has been formed round the belly of the pot at its maximum diameter. Study of the broken edges of the sherds shows that the walls have been built up in a series of overlapping strips. A continuous series of these strips, each overlapping the one below on the inside, forms the base and the outer half of the wall up to the lower edge of the everted rim. A second thinner series of strips, of which the overlaps are less regularly disposed, reinforces the first series on the inside up to the same level, but is absent from the base. The everted rim appears to have been added as a separate ring.

Both in form and decoration the vessel is without parallel. The deep baggy shape is related only generically, but not specifically, to the series of round-based Neolithic pots which are characteristic of the Hebrides and best represented in the chambered tombs of Unival<sup>1</sup> and Clettraval<sup>2</sup> and in the potter's workshop of Eilean an Tighe.<sup>3</sup> Such vessels are for the most part bipartite in form, with a shoulder or carination dividing the neck from the body, a feature which is absent from the present vessel. Similarly, the zonal arrangement of the ornament is entirely foreign to the Western Neolithic ceramic tradition, and though it is in some respects comparable with the decoration of certain bell-beakers and food-vessels, neither of these classes of pottery is ever decorated with shell impressions. This cardial ornament occurs only very rarely in Britain. It has been recorded occasionally from sandhill sites in North Uist,<sup>4</sup> from the Neolithic settlement at Gruting in Shetland recently excavated by Mr C. S. T. Calder, and from the coastal sand-dunes at Hedderwick, East Lothian, and at Glenluce, Wigtownshire. A recent find of sherds from the latter site, now in the Stranraer Museum, includes two from a vessel with a slight raised cordon ornamented with cardial impressions in herring-bone pattern, but the position of this cordon in relation to the rim is unknown.

In the absence of any close and dated parallels for the Clachan vessel, it must be enough to suggest that its general character, and the quality of the ware and the decoration alike, point to a date in the second millennium B.C., and probably within the period before 1400 B.C.

R. J. C. ATKINSON.

<sup>1</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXXXII (1947-8), 1-48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, LXIX (1934-5), 480-536.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, LXXXV (1950-1), 1-37.

<sup>4</sup> Beveridge, *North Uist* (1911), plate facing p. 238.





1. General view from head.



2. Sinister arm showing decoration and terminal moulding.



3. Lateral view of head.



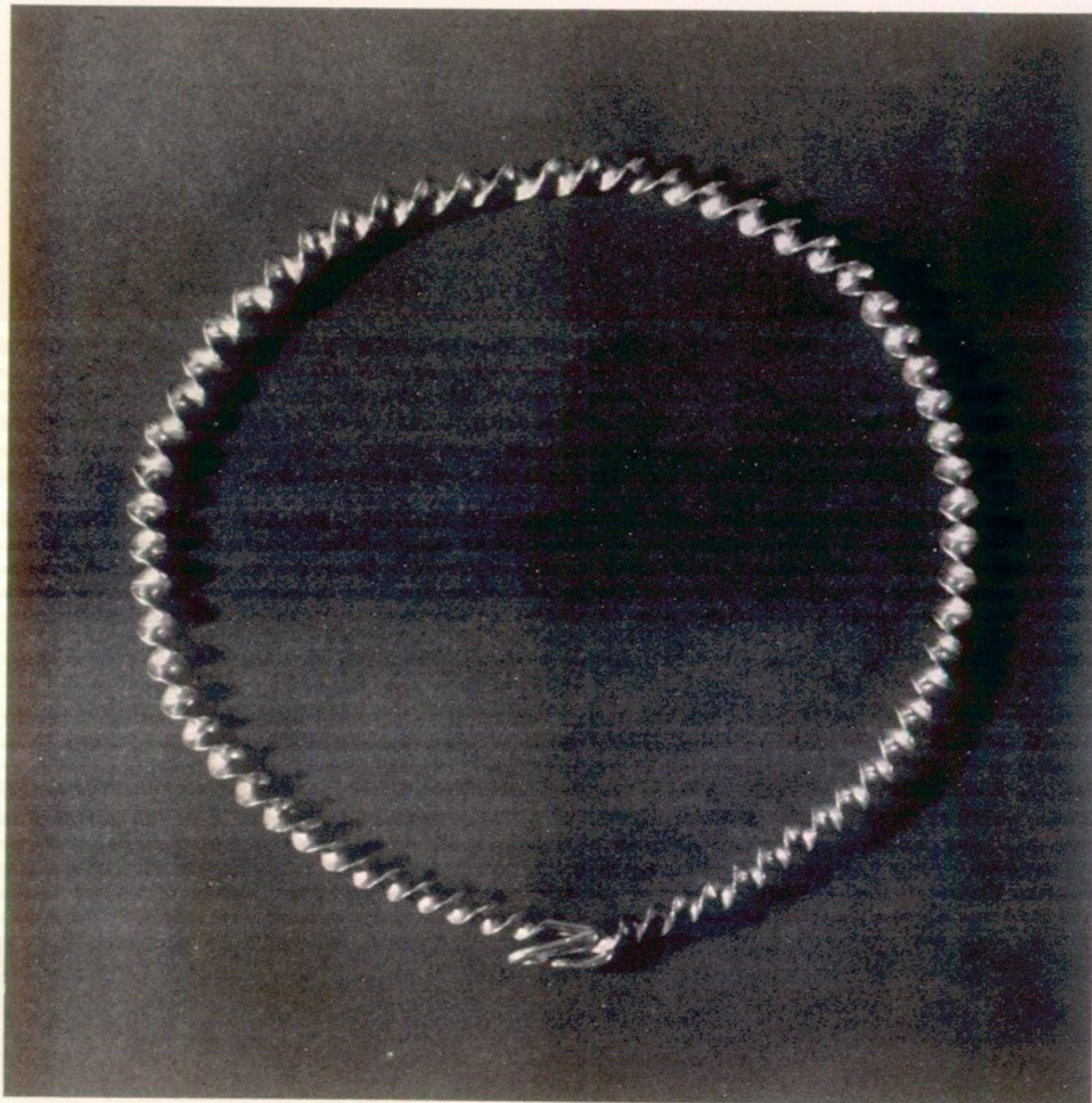
4. Base of shaft in rebated stone.

Colum Cille's Cross.

ANGUS GRAHAM.

[To face p. 200.]





Torc of twisted gold from Morayshire. (Width  $4\frac{3}{4}$  ins.)

J. G. SCOTT.

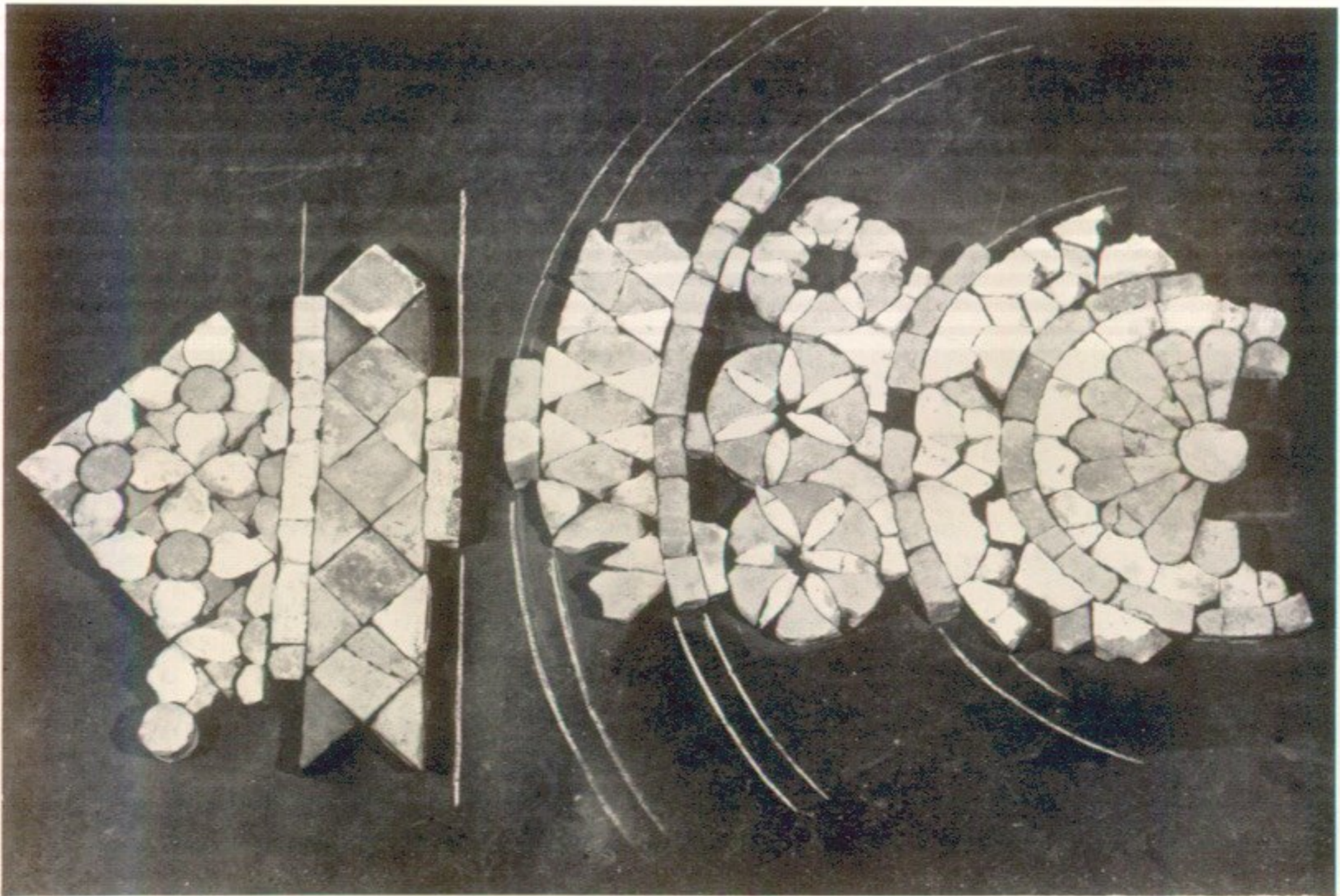




1. Bronze Penannular Brooch from Skye. ( $\frac{1}{2}$ .)



*Photo: S. H. Cruden.*  
2. Floor-tiles *in situ*.



3. Floor-tiles reassembled after cleaning.

*[Photo: Ministry of Works.*