

ART. XVI.—*On some of the Stone Circles and Cairns
in the Neighbourhood of Inverness,*

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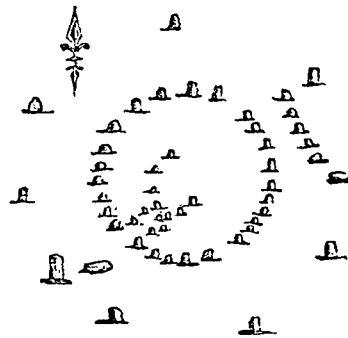
GENERAL SECRETARY TO THE NORTHERN INSTITUTION FOR THE PROMOTION OF
SCIENCE AND LITERATURE.

[Read 26th January 1824.]

FROM the scattered and mutilated condition of the cairns and circles of upright stones still existing in the recesses of North Britain, few additions can probably be made to the opinions generally entertained respecting them ; and perhaps little light can now be thrown on the legislative or religious policy of the ancient tribes of people to whom their formation has been ascribed. So many errors, however, have crept into the descriptions published of this class of Highland antiquities, and so little attention has been paid to the subject, that a correct account of some of the structures, it is thought, will be considered of importance, especially if connected with the interesting question as to the origin and descent of the people by whom they were raised. With this view, I shall describe a few of the structures which occur in the neighbourhood of Inverness (within the compass of 12 or 14 miles) such also as display most of the varieties to be met with in the northern countries of Scotland ; and I shall then subjoin some remarks on their general characters. It will be seen that the space to which I have restricted myself abounds with these relics of antiquity ; but it is also worthy of observation, that all the neighbouring districts, at least on the *eastern* side of the island, contain almost an equal number, and in as great variety.

I. *Stone Circles*.—The stones of which these are constructed are almost universally boulder or rolled stones, which were found either strewed over the surface, or imbedded in the great deposit of sand and gravel which covers the lower parts of the great glen of Scotland, and the slopes of the adjoining hills. They consist of rounded portions of red sand-stone and its coarse conglomerate, or of primitive masses, such as gneiss or granite, the latter being generally the smallest stones in the structures. Hence we are not to conclude, that the upright stones were in this district conveyed from any great distance to the positions which they now occupy; and the difficulty of transporting and elevating these masses does not here appear to have been so great as in many other parts of the island.

The neighbourhood of Inverness abounds with British hill and vitrified forts, in the vicinity of which many circles and cairns are found; but I will not enter at present on the question whether these are all referable to the same æra, or to the same people. Commencing our investigation at the lower or eastern termination of Loch Ness, several circles and cairns will be found on the estates of Aldourie, Dochfour, and Torbreck; but the most perfect and conspicuous circle in this direction occurs on the estate of Borlum, the property of the Right Honourable Dowager Lady Saltoun, on the farm of Kinchyle, and close by the road leading from Dores to Inverness, from the latter of which places it is distant about five miles.



This structure stands on the northern side of the strath of Dores or Durris, and commands an extensive view. It consists of three concentric circles, the inner one, however, not being complete. The outer circle is 21 paces in diameter; it has 9 stones still standing placed about 8 paces asunder, their height varying from 3 to 4½ feet. In this circle, one of the stones is considerably larger than any of the others, bearing from the centre S.W. by W.; and in the opposite corresponding point, N.E. by E., there is a similar pillar, but not quite so large. The diameter of the second circle is 10 paces; the stones 25 in number, set close to one another (inclining inwards) and each from 1 to 3 feet high. The entrance to this circle is distinctly marked, and is in the N.N.E. looking directly on the vitrified fort on the hill of Kessock. Of the inner circle (if it ever was entire) but one-half remains; the diameter is 4 paces—5 stones, each about 18 inches high.

There is no stone in the common centre; but in front of the western pillar (which, like that in the great structure to be afterwards described, is a prism 5 feet high by 2 thick) there is one lying prostrate, which seems never to have been displaced; and from it an avenue, lined on both sides by upright stones, conducts through the second to the inner circle. At the east corner, between the outer and second circles, is a row of 5 stones, which perhaps are displaced from their original positions.

On the summit of the ridge between Craigphadrick and Dunain Hill, on the north side of the great glen, are the fragments of a large circle, the stones of which are visible from the streets of Inverness, at least 2 miles distant. It is chiefly remarkable from its elevated situation, commanding a view of both the Moray and Beaulie friths, and as being in the vicinity of a large prostrate stone, with a niche or hollow carved in the centre of it, something in size and shape like a child's coffin. This hollow is 3 feet 7 inches long, by 13 inches wide; 15 inches deep at one end, and 9 at the other. It forms a parallelogram rounded at

the corners; and, if of ancient formation, it seems to be one of the Tanists stones, where the chief of a tribe was elected or sworn to protect and command his people; such as referred to by Sir Walter Scott, in his Notes to Rokeby (*Note 6, Canto IV*).

The structure which next deserves our attention is the great temple or clachan (the general Gælic name for all edifices supposed to have been used for religious purposes) of Inches, situated on the slope of the Leys, about two miles south of Inverness.



It is the most entire and the largest structure of the kind in Inverness-shire. It consists of two circles, there being four stones in the interior area, perhaps the remains of a third circle, or more probably the supporters of a flat altar stone, or cromlech, now removed.

The diameter of this inner circle would have been 5 yards; that of the second, which is quite entire, $13\frac{1}{2}$ yards. This last contains 28 stones set close to each other, and bending inwards, the larger ones being ranged round the western segment, and the principal entrance, which is 3 yards wide, bearing due *east* from the centre. The average height of the stones is 3 feet.

The diameter of the outer circle is 24 yards; the stones at present composing it are 15 in number, of the average height of 4 feet; but there are two larger than the rest, bearing S.S.W. and E.N.E.

Of these two the western or main pillar of the edifice is a rude irregular prism, 9 feet high, 15 feet in circumference, and about $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet by $2\frac{1}{2}$ across the top. On the top there is no hollow or basin; and the mass is probably about 3 feet sunk in the ground. The corresponding stone in the E.N.E. point of this circle is also a kind of prism, $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet high, 9 in girth, and 2 feet square on the top.

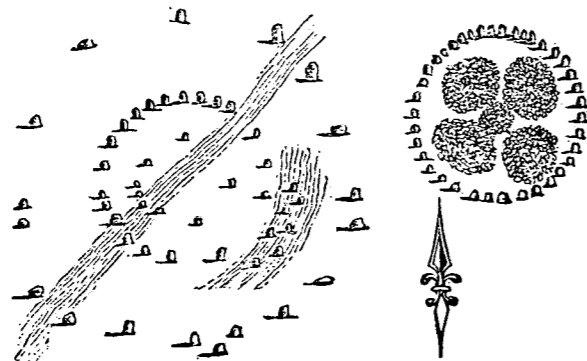
From the interior portion of a circle, an avenue proceeds through the second, in a direction due south, which appears to have conducted to two large prostrate stones placed in front of the great western pillar (*a*). In the structure just described, the avenue is straight; in one on the estate of Farr, near the banks of the river Nairn, I noticed a serpentine avenue; and, in some others, the great stone at the western corner, instead of being prismatic, is a high thin slab.

In some of the structures in this neighbourhood, a ditch or hollow, more or less complete, occurs between the outer and second circles, and the latter is sometimes formed of earth heaped up into a mound, without any upright stones. Somewhat of this description is the temple at Achnaclach or Stoneyfield, one mile east of Inverness.

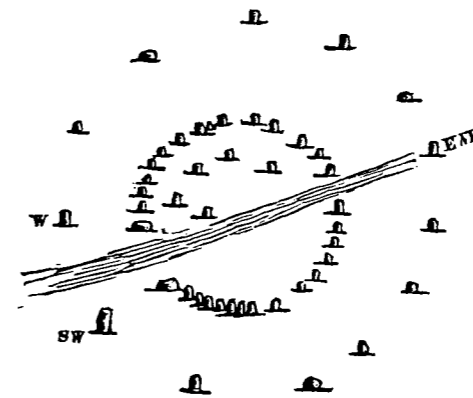
The plain of Petty, lying five miles to the eastward of this town, abounds with these remains, the most perfect of which are close by the public road. Of these, the first one meets with (a quarter of a mile eastward of the farm-house of Milltown of Culloden) consists of two rows of upright stones, thirty in number, forming a straight avenue or passage of two or three feet in width, and which probably conducted to some circle or tumulus

(*a*) Near the temple above described, a stone coffin or kistavean was lately discovered. It was 3 feet long, 2 broad, and 2 deep, and was filled to the depth of 6 or 7 inches with a fine mould, formed of sand, burnt bones, and ashes. It lay due east and west; and at the opposite ends, imbedded in the mould, were found two rude sepulchral urns, which are now in the museum of the Northern Institution at Inverness.

now removed from off the adjoining field. The direction of these rows is from E.N.E. to W.N.W., and the stones at the west end are considerably larger than the others. Half a mile east from these, and a little elevated above the right hand side of the road, a structure occurs, consisting as usual of two concentric circles, and part of an inner one.



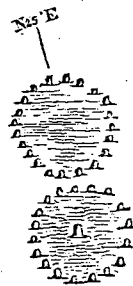
The largest circle is 24 paces in diameter, with 15 stones, the entrance being in the N.E. marked by two very prominent pillars, each about 5 feet high. The average height of the others is 3 feet; but there are two prostrate stones on the south-west, now greatly broken, which are much larger than any of the others, and which I suspect were once upright. The diameter of the second circle is 15 paces; there are 34 or 36 stones, many fallen and greatly displaced, especially on the south-west side, where they have rolled into a ditch or hollow. The smallest stones are at the east end, with an opening between them corresponding to that in the outer circle. Of the inner circle, the diameter is 7 or 8 paces, most perfect at the west end, where there are still four upright stones close to each other. Hard by this structure there is a circle about 15 paces in diameter, fenced round by a ditch, and filled in the inside with loose stones piled on one another like a cairn; but, having never been opened, it is impossible to say whether it is a true cairn or not.



A most beautiful and perfect temple next presents itself about 50 yards from the left-hand side of the road, and not far east from the junction of the post road and the district road which branches off to Nairn. It stands on a soft sandy plain; and is partly concealed from view by furze and broom. It consists of two circles, with slight indications, as in the others, of a similar arrangement of the stones in the centre. The one is 30 yards in diameter, and the other is 15. The entrances to both are exceedingly well marked; that in the outer circle being flanked by two great pillars, each 6 feet high by 12 in circumference, and bearing from the centre S.W. and W.

The breadth of the opening is 5 paces; and its position will be observed to be different from that of the entrances to the other temples already described. But this structure resembles the others in having a large column (now fallen) in the E.N.E. corner. The other stones of this circle (13 in number) are from 3 to 4 feet high. In the second circle, the stones are about half this size. They are 36 in number, closely arranged together, and bent inwards. There is also a second entrance, two paces wide, bearing N.N.E.; and the other opening is connected with that in the exterior circle by two prostrate stones each 5 feet long. As in the former examples, the larger stones are ranged

round the western portions of this structure, and the smallest towards the east.



Lastly, One hundred and fifty paces to the eastward of the temple just described, and about 50 paces from the public road, is another set of these curious remains. It consists of two small circles, each exactly 6 yards in diameter, placed not concentrically, but almost touching one another, like the figure 8. The straight line which would unite their centres bears from S. 25° W. to N. 25° E.; and in the middle of the western one once stood a single stone or pillar, now fallen from its upright position. The stones composing these two rings are closely set together, as in the inner member of the regular temples.

From these details, a uniformity of shape may be perceived to pervade these structures, though the stones are by no means so regularly fixed on the cardinal points of the compass, as has frequently been alleged. In the great pillars and prostrate stones, we discover the masses on which, as Scandinavian tales relate, the spines of victims were broken, and their bodies opened and examined; while the avenues and entrances were manifestly intended to lead to the *adyta* or centres of the inclosures, where the sacrifices were most probably offered up. The circumstance of the stones decreasing in size from the outer to the inner circles, and from the western to the eastern segment, is also remarkable.

II. *Cairns*.—Of the other series of ancient remains to which the title of this paper refers—the Cairns—the district in question contains many interesting examples. The only distinctive characters of the true cairn are, that it is more or less conical, the stones being somewhat regularly laid; and that its base is hemmed in or surrounded by a ring or circle of upright stones. Sometimes this circle is repeated at the top, and the summit flattened or hollowed out. In a few instances, a large circle encompasses the whole, the stones of which are placed several yards distant from the base of the cairn.

Many cairns are undoubtedly sepulchral, the dead being found in them in stone cists, and burnt (when the ashes are preserved in small vases or urns) or in whole skeletons, the body being either extended at full length, or drawn up with the head resting on the knees.

In other instances, the same cairn contains the remains of several bodies. But many want sepulchral relics altogether; and are supposed to have been raised on the spots where criminals were executed—where games were celebrated—where a traveller perished on his journey—or on the knoll where a funeral procession stopped to ease those who carried the coffin.

The most imposing and complete association of circles and cairns to be met with, perhaps, in the highlands, occurs on a small plain washed by the river Nairn, about a mile to the east of the spot where the battle of Culloden was fought.

The whole of this plain, for upwards of a mile in extent, is covered over with large cairns, encircled by rows of immense slabs of sand-stone. Among these, numerous temples are seen; and small detached circles, half covered by grass and heath, occur between them. Stones of memorial, or single columns, are perceived stretching along the field, which is called the Plain of Clara; and, what is most remarkable, at the western extremity, where these monuments of a Pagan faith terminate, an oblong

inclosure presents itself, the site of an ancient Christian chapel, in which infants, who die before baptism, are still buried.

III. *Tumuli or Barrows*—that is, heaps of earth raised like cairns—are not numerous in this district; and are supposed to be the gathering places of the people for legislative, or other purposes, rather than memorials of the dead. The two largest of these moat hills are situated on the margin of the bay of Petty, close by the church, and measure each about 150 feet in circumference at the base, 120 at the top, their height being 42 feet.

In this class of antiquities we ought perhaps to reckon those circular inclosures or rings often seen in our heaths, formed of earth and stones, with the earth scooped out from the interior, like the pond barrows of Wales. None of them have been properly dug up; and it is uncertain whether they are sepulchral, the sites where games or religious ceremonies were performed, or only, as many have thought, the foundations of ancient circular huts.

The whole of the remains of antiquity now described have been referred to a Celtic origin by our statistical writers, and the commentators on the poems of Ossian; and the stone circles have usually been regarded solely as religious temples. That many of them are not Celtic, but the works of Scandinavian settlers or pirates, at least such as occur near the coasts, is rendered extremely probable from the circumstances that, according to the traditions and fables of our earliest chronicles, the Moravii, or ancient inhabitants of the country, between the rivers Spey and Varar, or Beauly, were a tribe driven from Germany by the Romans; and that all the coasts of the Moray firth during three centuries were constantly exposed to the predatory incursions of the northmen, who were also masters for a long time of Sutherland and Caithness, and had entrenched themselves in

the strong fortress of Burgh-head. The weapons, thought peculiarly indicative of the presence of a northern foe, have been found in great numbers over all the north of Scotland; and the names of many places, such as Kessock, Dingwall, Tain, Tarbet, Ness, Shandwick, &c. are derived from Norse words. It is remarkable also, that to this day, separate *Galic names* are still current in the country for several of these places; and the sculptured stones, as at Nigg, Hilton, &c. are generally thought to be Danish. The islands, and parts of the main land on the west coast, are well known not to have come under the dominion of the Crown of Scotland till the reign of Alexander III.; and long afterwards the inhabitants of these regions regarded themselves as more closely allied to Norway than to this country. The Dhuns, or Burghs in Glen Elg, likewise demonstrate the existence of the same Gothic people on the main-land.

Now, the first care of the early northmen, on landing on a coast, was to erect a temple to the god Thor, which served them ever after alike for religious and juridical purposes; and those places of assembly called Law-tings were frequented in Orkney and Shetland to a very recent period. (*Mullet, and Hibbert's Shetland*).

That the similar structures in the Highlands were also employed as well for legislative as religious ceremonies is proven by an allusion to one of them in the chartulary of Moray, fol. 51. In the year 1380, the Bishop of Moray was summoned to attend the court of Alexander, Lord of Regality of Badenoch, and son of Robert II. to be holden “apud le Standand Stanes de la Rath de Kingucy ester.” The business of the Court was to inquire into the titles by which the Bishop held certain of his lands; and, as he is summoned as a vassal, and had to protest against the proceedings, the Bishop is described as standing “*extra circum,*” and as taking instruments in the hands of a neutral person present.

The mention of “ standing stones” or circles is also not unfrequent in charters and other deeds relative to the boundaries of land, which renders it probable that, to a late period, they were used as places of assembly or public meetings. At all events, there seems reason to suspect that the structures mentioned in this paper are not, as is generally believed, entirely Druidical or Celtic ; more especially as the customs of the northern nations who, at an early period, frequented or dwelt along our coast, led them to raise the same kinds of monuments ; and this points out the propriety of devoting more attention than has hitherto been done to the study of Scandinavian antiquities, as illustrative of those of our own country.