

IV.

DESCRIPTION OF ANTIQUITIES IN ORKNEY RECENTLY EXAMINED, WITH  
ILLUSTRATIVE DRAWINGS. BY GEORGE PETRIE, Esq., KIRKWALL, COR.  
MEM. S.A. Scot.

In the summer of 1853, James Farrer, Esq., M.P. for Durham, visited Orkney, and, having permission from the Earl of Zetland, proprietor of the Island

of Burray, proceeded to make excavations in a large tumulus near the sea-shore, on the north-east side of the island.

It was soon ascertained to be the ruins of a very large Burg or round tower, surrounded on the land side by an earth embankment of a horse-shoe shape, the ends or "heels" terminating at the shore on the east and west of the burg. Mr Farrer having little time to spare, endeavoured, by making excavations at various points, instead of tracing the walls throughout, to obtain as much information in regard to the building as the circumstances would allow.

The tumulus towers high above the shore, and is seen at a considerable distance, resembling a large conical barrow. This is caused by the great quantity of stones and rubbish which is piled around the exterior of the building, and which also fills the circular area within. The burg was found to be about 60 feet in diameter from outside to outside of the building, and the wall 15 feet thick, leaving an inclosed area of 30 feet in diameter. The ruins of a chamber or cell were discovered in the thickness of the wall on the north-west side. This cell has not been thoroughly cleared, but its floor appears to be nearly on a level with the roof of the cells on the opposite side. On pulling down a portion of the wall of the burg on the south-east side, where it was much dilapidated (see Plan, Plate II.), a cell (*a* on Plan) was broken into, having a low entrance (*b*) at its south end into a large passage (*c*) running across the wall, but blocked up at both extremities with rubbish. On the south side of this passage, and immediately opposite to the entrance (*b*) was another entrance (*d*) into a second cell (*e*), which was entire.

On digging away the rubbish on the outside of the south side of the wall, a stone was accidentally lifted, and a covered way or passage discovered underneath, leading down by a flight of several steps to a well (or something very like it), excavated out of the rock and clay. (See Plate II.; and small view in profile.) This appears to have afforded a concealed communication between the well and the passage, or main entrance (*c*). The well is between the earthen rampart and the burg, and is about 10 feet high from the roof. A querne stone was found in it.

Mr Farrer again visited Orkney last summer, and resumed the excavations in Burray. I accompanied him to the island, and suggested the propriety of leaving the building undisturbed, and of the careful removal of the rubbish, both outside and inside. Being convinced that the passage (*c*) (see elevation on Plan, Plate II.) flanked or guarded on each side by the cells (*a* and *e*), was the principal entrance to the burg, we set the workmen to excavate along the interior of the wall in the direction in which the passage appeared to lead, and after a great deal of labour, they found the entrance. The covering stones of this

main passage from the floor of a deep recess of the same breadth above, which extends through the wall to within two or three feet of the outside.

There are traces of other cells in the ruins, but it will require much labour and expense to clear away the whole of the debris. The building is, however, so very curious and interesting, that it is very desirable to have it completely cleared; and it is a further inducement to this, that the curious relics discovered in the burg, and now in the Society's Museum in Edinburgh, were all found among the debris. The burg was probably more than twice the height of the present ruins, and appears to have had the inclosed area open at top, the cells or apartments being all in the thickness of the wall. This would readily account for the clay cup, portion of bone wheel, &c., being found among the rubbish and stones. For, when the upper portion of the wall fell, or was thrown down, the contents of its cells would naturally be precipitated with the debris in and around the building.

The excavations are to be resumed next summer, and the result will be communicated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Meanwhile, it is interesting to find Professor Munch of Christiania, in a communication which I had from him recently, stating, that as the old form of the name of Burray "was Borgarey or the Burghs Island, it is evident, that this very burgh caught the eye of the first Norse settlers, and gave the name to the island; or," he adds, "do you think it probable that it was built or extended by the first northern pirates, who took their winter residence in Orkney and Shetland, and either fitted ancient burghs to their own use, or constructed them from the beginning, as they perhaps did at Mousa, in Shetland, where (is) the Moseyjaborg-Mousaborg, where the Norwegian Squire, Bjorn, took his lodgings in the winter 900 with his wife Thora, having eloped with her?"—

There are some large tumuli near the Standing Stones of Stenness, which I had long wished to have opened; and as Professor Munch had expressed a similar wish, I was very much delighted when Mr Farrer, in July last, requested me to assist him in opening them, as he had obtained the consent of Mr Balfour of Balfour, on whose property they are. One of these tumuli is on the west side, and the other two are to the north and east of the Ring of Brogar, or circle of standing stones. The last two were selected to be opened. That to the eastward stands on the margin of the upper or north Loch of Stenness, and is an elliptical barrow, 112 feet long, and 66 feet broad at its base. The height is 22 feet, and the ridge at the top is also about 22 feet long. A very considerable cut or trench was made across it towards the north end, but it did not lead to any discovery. If, as I trust, the excavation be resumed next summer, the re-

sult will probably prove more satisfactory, as I cannot agree with some of the gentlemen who visited it in believing that it is simply the earth, &c., excavated in forming the ditch round the circle of stones, which has been gathered into a heap, and is not a barrow or grave. It bears internal evidence of far more care in its construction than was likely to be expended on a mere heap of rubbish. The tumulus to the northward is thus described by Lieut. Thomas in his *Celtic Antiquities of Orkney*:—"It may be aptly compared to the shape of a plum-cake, for it is circular, and rises nearly perpendicular for 5 feet, when it becomes almost flat on the top, or rather is surmounted by a very depressed cone. Its diameter is 62 feet, height 9 feet." Dr Wilson, in his *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, p. 45, expresses an opinion that this tumulus "is most probably not sepulchral, but rather the platform on which a building of wood had been reared, though its present symmetrical form may render this doubtful." He also thought that the larger tumuli at Stenness had been despoiled already of their historical contents, and would not therefore repay the labour of opening them. As I have however, opened about forty barrows of various sizes in Orkney, and had besides the advantage of a personal inspection of the Stenness tumuli, I had not only no doubt that the "plum-cake tumulus" was sepulchral (see plan and elevation, Plate II.), but that the partial excavations which appear to have been made in it and the other two already mentioned, had not robbed them of any of their historical contents, and so far as opportunity of exploring them has been afforded, I have not been disappointed. I merely mention this to show the danger of missing valuable relics by neglecting to open tumuli, because they present appearances of previous excavations. Unless these have reached, at least, the natural surface beneath the centre of the tumulus, there is reason to believe that the cist and its contents may still be untouched.

On the 27th July last, upwards of twenty men commenced operations on the elliptical and "plum-cake" barrows, but their labours were chiefly directed to the latter, in which a trench of about 9 feet wide was cut through the centre from north-east to south-west, that being the direction in which I had frequently found the cists. In the afternoon they came to a cist (see Plan A, Plate II.) placed 5 or 6 feet southwards from the centre of the barrow. The earth having been carefully cleared from the cover or lid of undressed stone, it was then lifted, and a large cinerary urn of mica stone, about one-third part filled with pieces of calcined bones, was discovered in the cist. As the urn has since been deposited in the Society's Museum in Edinburgh (it measures about  $19\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height, by  $22\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter at the upper part), it is unnecessary here to do more than refer to Plate II., which shows its general appearance. But it may be mentioned that two large urns (although not so large as the Stenness one), also

chiselled out of mica, were lately found, one at Birsay, and the other at Birstane, near Kirkwall. The Birsay urn was found in a cist which formed one of a great number discovered above the ruins of a burg. The covering stone of one of the cists had a bird very distinctly carved on it, described by an intelligent person who saw it as resembling an eagle. Might it not have been a raven?

The cist found at Stenness was formed by flags placed on edge. Those at the two sides were parallel with the line of the trench, and were each about 5 feet 10 inches long, and those at the ends were each 2 feet. The interior of the cist was 2 feet 6 inches long, 2 feet wide, and 2 feet 1 inch deep. The spaces between the ends of the side (of the sides) stones, where they projected beyond the cist, were filled with gravel, which was also placed beneath the stone on which the urn stood. The gravel was no doubt intended to drain off any water that might descend through the superincumbent clay of the tumulus. I saw a very curious instance of a similar provision in a bowl barrow opened near Kirkwall last spring. There were two cists in the centre of the barrow, at a small distance from each other, and between them the inner end of a drain, which conducted any water that might collect to the outside of the barrow on the west side. The barrow was only about 12 feet in diameter at the base, and the drain, rudely constructed with small stones, was between 2 and 3 inches in width and depth.

The cist containing the stone urn found at Stenness not being in the centre of the barrow, I suggested to Mr Farrer to continue the excavation on the opposite side of the centre, and the digging having been accordingly resumed in that direction, another cist was in a short time discovered. This cist (see Plan c, Plate II.) was also formed by flags placed on edge, and was 2 feet 9½ inches long, and 1 foot 7 inches wide. An urn of baked clay, mixed with small gravel, stood in the north-west corner of the cist, and contained fragments of calcined bones. This urn was 5 inches in diameter, 5 inches deep, and of an average circumference of 17 inches, but it almost immediately fell to pieces on being exposed to the atmosphere. A broken stone pestle, and a block of stone, with two rows of incised rings round it, similar to those on the stone urn, were subsequently discovered in the tumulus. I am not without hopes that farther excavations would lead to the discovery of, at least, another grave in the centre of the tumulus beneath the natural soil, the two cists already found having been 2 or 3 feet above the level of the surface of the ground surrounding the barrow. Until these excavations have been completed, and in the absence of weapons or personal ornaments, it would be premature at present to attempt to arrive at any certain conclusion as to the period to which this interesting barrow belongs.

About a year ago, I visited the Pict's house in the Holm of Papa Westray,

opened by Lieut. Thomas, R.N., in 1849. In his description of the building, he mentions that, "on the side wall near the entrance, and about 6 feet from the floor, there is a neatly engraved circle about 4 inches in diameter; there is also another stone with the appearance of having two small circles touching each other engraved upon it; but it is so common," he adds, "to find geometrical figures upon the Orkney flags, from a semi-crystallization of the pyrites which they contain, that I am unable to decide whether those seen in the Picts' house are natural or not." I carefully examined the walls of the main chamber and of the square chamber at each end, and was agreeably surprised not only to find the circles referred to by Lieut. Thomas, but also to discover quite close to them, as well as on various other stones in the walls, other engraved figures. One set is on a large lintel over the entrance of the passage between the south chamber and the small cell on its east side. The thorough washing of the walls, by their exposure to the weather since Lieut. Thomas cleared the rubbish out of the chambers, has left the engraved figures on the stones quite distinct, and it is easy to see that they have been formed by a pointed instrument tolerably sharp. I may refer to drawings of some of these on Plate III. I have not had an opportunity of taking a cast from them. Nos. 1 and 2 are on the east side of the main or centre apartment; No. 3 is the lintel-stone over the entrance of the passage between the south chamber and the cell of the east side of it; No. 4 are stones from the east wall of south chamber.

Mr Farrer opened a tumulus at Pickaquoy, near Kirkwall, in 1853, but this I did not see till some time afterwards, when it was in so dilapidated a state that I could not make out whether it had been a barrow containing two built cists or graves, or a Pict's house; but most probably it had been the latter. The two cells or graves were separated by a mass of building about four feet thick, and the largest, which was 8 feet long by 4 feet 6 inches wide, was to the south of the smaller one, which measured 6 feet 4 inches in length and 4 feet in breadth, and was divided lengthways into two equal compartments by stones set on edge. The length of the cells was in the direction of east and west. About 1 foot 9 inches distant from the west end of the north wall of the largest cell a stone, with concentric circles engraved on it (see drawing, Plate III.), was built upright in the wall. Another long slab was found with 13 small cavities along one of its edges, and a rather larger cavity about the centre of one of its sides. When a short time afterwards I examined the engraved circles, and especially the cavities cut in the stones in the walls of the Pict's house at Papa Westray, the similarity was so striking, that it required no great stretch of imagination to suppose that the same instrument chiselled the figures in both places.

I again visited the Holm of Papa Westray in September last, and, along with R. J. Hebden, Esq., of Eday, opened a sepulchral mound, which I had long desired to explore. The accompanying sketch (Plate III.) will convey a better idea of the graves than any written description could give.

We commenced by digging in the compartment A, and found it filled with stones and earth, mixed with animal remains, amongst which were fragments of deer's horns, the horn core of the ox, and a jawbone of the boar, together with portions of a human skull. In the compartment B, the crowns and other portions of 10 pairs of deer's horns were found lying on and between layers of stones, intermixed with bones of the ox, deer, sheep, &c., the wing-bone of a swan, or other large bird, and the lower part of the bill of the curlew, with bones of various kinds of birds. And underneath a layer of deer's horns, and lying amongst others, part of a human skull (No. 1), face downwards, was discovered at *a*. A human skull (No. 2), or rather a part of one, was lying on its side at *b*, resting on a portion of a deer's horn. The face was towards the south-west. In the compartment C, fragments of at least two pairs of deer's horns were found. The remains of a human skeleton lay at *c*, the ribs in tolerable order, not apparently having been previously disturbed; but no part of the skull was found except the lower jaw (No. 3). The remains of another skeleton, without the skull, were found at *d*. Two skulls, one of them (No. 4) in good preservation, were found placed vertically at *e*, with the face towards the east. Another skull was lying on its side at *g*, with its face towards the backs of the two skulls at *e*. The skull at *g* appeared to belong to a skeleton extending in the direction of *h*, but there was not time to excavate the rubbish under which it lay. A headless skeleton also lay at *f*. Just before leaving the place, and while the vessel was waiting, I ascertained that there was a layer of sandy marl on the bottom of the graves and beneath the skeletons at *c* and *d*, flat stones were laid on the marl. On removing one of them at *d*, there was a small cavity, and, on turning up the marl and clay in the cavity, I found a small piece of a clay vessel or urn, apparently baked in the fire.

The general appearance of the place, as far as it was opened, was that of an immense grave of double the ordinary dimensions, but divided into three compartments by the large upright flags or stones marked *i*, whose tops were above the surface of the mound. The sides of the grave were formed by stones built in the shape of rude walls, but how much of these may have been removed before we examined the place we could not even conjecture, as the whole mound was more or less covered with loose stones.

*March 12, 1855.*

THE REV. W. L. ALEXANDER, D.D., Vice-President,  
in the Chair.

The following Gentleman was balloted for and elected a Fellow of the Society :—

CHARLES G. GREENSHIELDS REID, Esq., W.S.

The Donations to the Museum included :—

A Bronze Axe-Head, Four Bronze Celts, a Bronze Spear-Head, Cabinet Ornament of Brass, and Tooth of a Horse ; found near the supposed site of the Castle of King Malcolm Canmore, at Forfar :

A Bronze Celt, found on the Farm of Hallhill, Kincardineshire :  
Antique Highland Powder Horn :

Iron Spear-Head found near the Court Hill, at Fernybank, Forfarshire :

A small Stone Vessel or Lamp found at the base of the Hill of Laws, parish of Monifieth :

Six Silver Coins found in the Kirkyard of Monifieth : of Alexander III. of Scotland, and Edward I. and II. of England : and

Photographs of Eight Panels of Carved Oak, formerly in the Hall of Edzell Castle, Forfarshire : by ANDREW JERVISE, Esq., Brechin.

The Leathern Shroud found in a Stone Coffin in the Nave of the Abbey Church, Dunfermline : by the Rev. PETER CHALMERS, D.D., Dunfermline.

There were laid on the table for exhibition to the Society :—

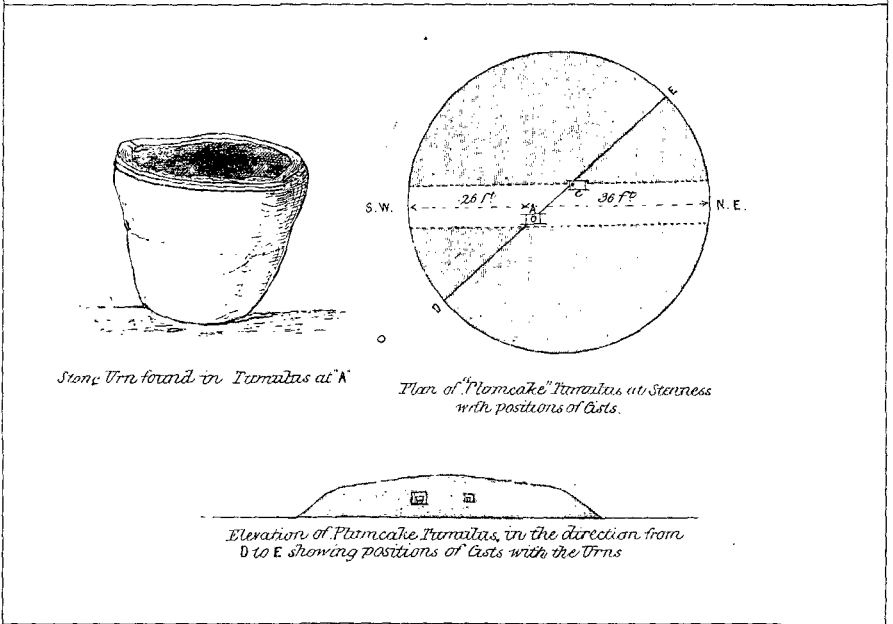
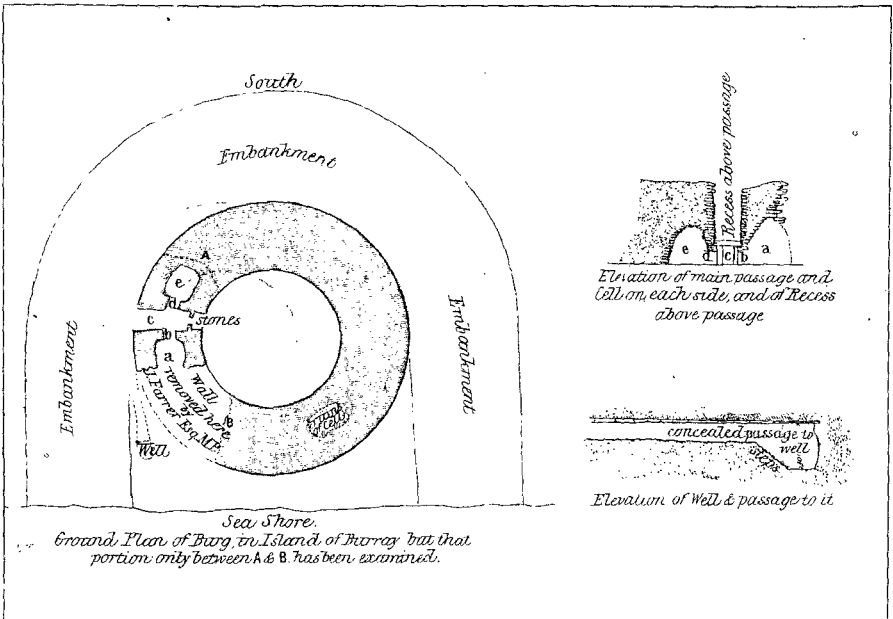


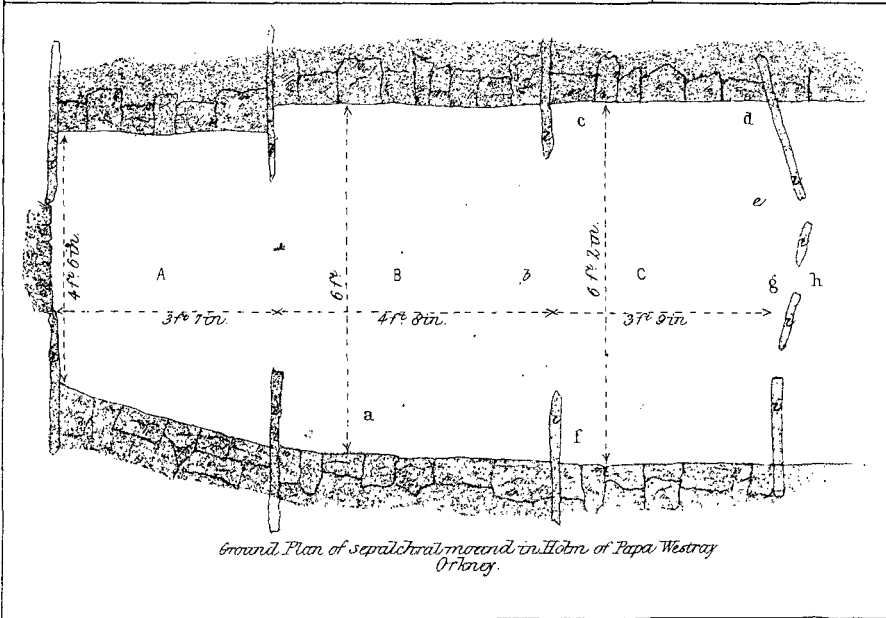
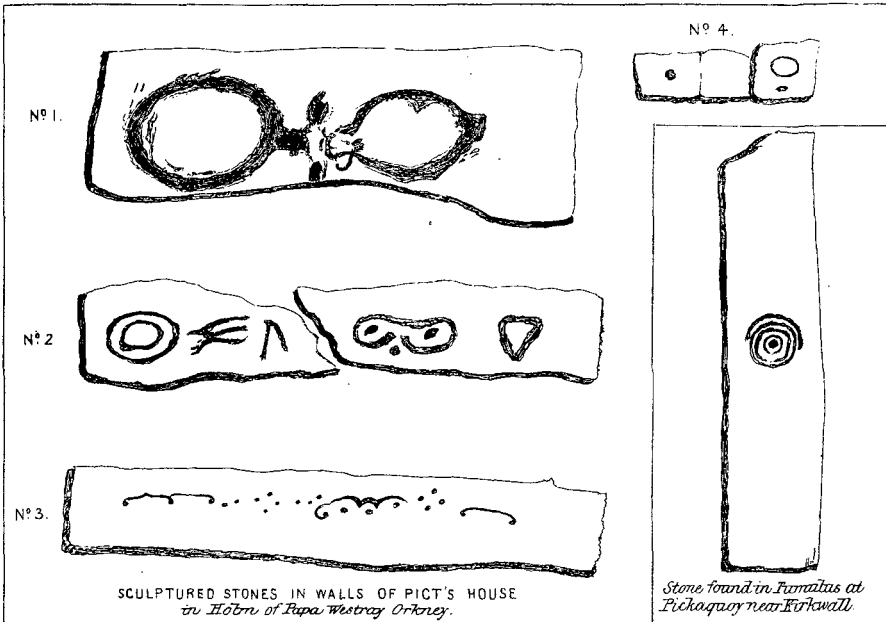
A Stone Patera, found in the Foundation of the Out-Fort on Barry Hill, Forfarshire : by the Hon. Capt. W. OGILVY of Loyal.

Nineteen Beads of Vitreous Paste, recently found in a Moss on the estate of Banff, Perthshire : by Sir JAMES RAMSAY, of Banff, Bart.

Antique Chessboard, inlaid in Ivory, with Subjects from Æsop's Fables : by H. J. ROLLO, Esq., W.S.

The Communications were :—





W & A K Johnston, Edinburgh.