

## III.

NOTES OF CROMLECHS, DUNS, HUT-CIRCLES, CHAMBERED CAIRNS, AND OTHER REMAINS, IN THE COUNTY OF SUTHERLAND. BY JAMES HORSBURGH, OF LOCHMALONY, ESQ., FIFE, F.S.A. SCOT.

*Road between Lairg and Alt-na-harra.*—A short way beyond Lairg, on the right hand, there is a small circle of high stones, 10 or 12 feet in diameter; on Loch Shin, a Pictish tower, on the south bank; a little further on, and to the left of the road, there is a brough or Pictish tower, and another at same distance on the right, both in ruins.

Between Alt-na-harra and Bettyhill, on the south bank of Loch Naver, on a promontory, there is what is called a Pictish tower; but my impression is that it is not round. Near the farm-house of Clibrig, in a copse-wood, there is a standing stone, with a rude cross cut on it; and close to it are the foundations of a small chapel, with many large square stones lying about, which I now think are the remains of a primitive church, such as are to be seen in the Western Isles. The stone with the cross on it is said to be over the grave of the last priest. On the road to Bettyhill, on the north side of the loch at Grubmore, there is a Pictish tower. One can walk all round on the top of the covering stones of the passage between the external and internal walls, which appears to be very narrow.

At Grubeg, on the left, is what I suppose to be a small cromlech or chamber of a cairn, the covering stone about 8 feet long. On the opposite side of the river Naver, at Dalharold, there are two high-standing stones, said to mark the grave of a Dane killed in battle. At Syre a Pictish tower, Langdale a Pictish tower, and at Skail, close to the shepherd's house, a large cairn, which may be the remains of a Pictish tower, as I did not examine it particularly. It is quite easy to tell the difference, as a Pictish tower is always built of flat or square stones, and a cairn is composed of bullets and irregularly-shaped stones. Opposite to Skail, on the right bank of the river, there is a Pictish tower at a place called by the various names of Rhifail, Caisteal Rhenal, Caisteal-na-Goil, and Ishalamby. Near Skail is a small stone, with a cross on it, over the grave of the Red Priest, of whom there are an immense number of stories

and anecdotes, if they could be got; but the people are very shy of telling them. He is said to have been the progenitor of the Mackays, his daughter having married an Irishman of the name of Callaghan. This Callaghan quarrelled with his neighbours, and attacked and took possession of the Pictish towers at Bettyhill, Dun Richart, and Tongue.<sup>1</sup>

This is the only tradition I know where mention is made of Pictish towers, except one regarding the Sandy dun at Bettyhill, where an old woman hid a *croc* of gold previous to the dun being attacked, and measured the distance from it with a clew of thread.

At Carnachie there is a Pictish tower, and nearly opposite, on the right bank of the river, is Dun Viden, a Pictish tower, with some appearance of outworks or terraces; some of the flags which covered the passages have been made use of for enclosing calves when weaned, and have been mistaken for kists. About half way up the hills above Dun Viden there is a track of comparatively level ground, and on this I came upon several circles formed of earth and stones, about 30 feet diameter, and overgrown with heather. They were all two and two, and the entrances faced from east to north-east. Their walls were about 3 feet wide and 2 feet high, overgrown with heather. All round those circles are numerous small cairns, called the Dun Viden cairns, and supposed to be over the dead killed in a battle on the spot; but as the ground has the appearance of having been cultivated, I rather think they have been just gathered off to clear the ground.

Higher up on the hills, somewhere between this and Skelpick burn wood, when shooting on a misty day, I came upon a pit the shape of an inverted cone, 7 or 8 feet deep, and neatly lined with stones. My gillie, an old pensioner, and who knew many of the old traditions, said at once that it was a pit for cooking deer in the olden times (see the annexed woodcut, section of pit). I often looked for it afterwards, and never could find it again, the mouth of it being nearly covered over with heather; in fact, I nearly tumbled into it, it was so hidden.

Close to Dun Viden is Loch Manaar, where dozens of people come twice every year for the cure of diseases. They come before sunrise, bathe in the loch, walk round it, drink from a holy well, and throw some

<sup>1</sup> See Notes of Various Objects of Antiquity of Strathnaver, with map and plates. By the Rev. J. M. Joass.—*Proc.* vol. v. p. 357.

pieces of money into the loch. There is a legend about this loch, which I forget; but a woman was chased by a priest, and threw something in it, and called out that it was Loch Manaar—that is, the loch of my shame.

On the right of the road, somewhere near Carnachie (as well as I can recollect), and on a level haugh between it and the river, there is a large space, probably an acre, surrounded by a circular earthen fence or rampart.

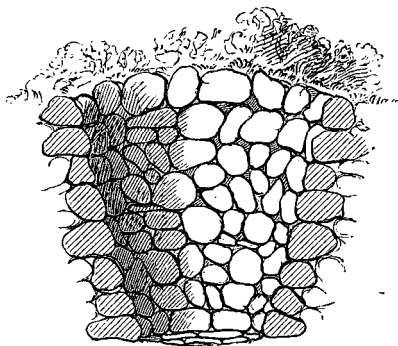


Diagram of Conical Pit, with built sides, on the hill near Skelpick Burn Wood.

I forgot to mention that above Loch Manaar are two earthen circles of the same size, and in the same position with regard to each other as those above Dun Viden; and also numbers of small cairns, or rather heaps of stones, near them.

At Skelpick, close to the farmhouse, are two round cairns, one nearly demolished, and the other has apparently been opened.

Beyond this, on the right bank of the Skelpick burn, there is a long cairn, 80 or 90 yards in length, which I opened, and came upon a polygonal-shaped chamber, 11 feet diameter, the sides consisting of large stones 6 feet high, one of them 7 feet by 4 and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  feet thick, placed at a distance from each other of 3 or 4 feet, the intervals being built up with long square stones. The roof had been formed by very large flags overlaying each other. The chamber had been opened from the top, and the

whole inside was filled with stones and rubbish, so that I only cleared it out. Before I commenced operations, however, there was no appearance of it having been meddled with, and I dug it by chance, where the cairn appeared to be highest. Nothing whatever was found in it. A little further up the hill there is another cairn, I think a long one. On the other side of the Naver from Skelpick, there are remains of a Pictish tower at Achalamy.

The next place we come to is Rhinnovie, above which, situated in a most imposing situation on the top of a conical hill, is Dun Rhinnovie, or Caisteal Dun, a Pictish tower; and lower down, on the side of the road, are two long cairns, or else one divided in two by taking away stones, and it is curious that the field in which they are is called "Ach na Kil na Borgen." Can this have been the burial cairn of the inhabitants of the burgh above it? The people who named the field must have thought so.

Between the two cairns there is a large standing stone, and others lying down. This was probably the chamber, the small stones having been cleared away for building, and the standing ones left.

Above the Naver Ferry, on the hills to the east, are four cairns, called Cairns Cuil or Cumhal; and lower down, on the left bank of the river, nearly opposite Bettyhill, is the Sandy Dun, on the top of a rocky hill, and nearly choked up with sand. The walls of this tower are 8 or 10 feet high, and it would be well worth clearing out. There is a ledging all round the interior at a few feet from the present bottom.

On mentioning the Red Priest stone, I should have stated that not very far from it there is a knoll, surrounded by a dyke called Croc-an-sagairt, on which are the remains of his church. The old church of Farr is said by the people to have been built with stones carried away from this place.

In Farr churchyard there is a stone, with a beautifully executed cross on one side; the other side is plain, and it was probably originally intended to have had the symbols carved on it that are usually found on stones of the same description. I met Mr Jastrebski a few days after he had made his sketch of this stone, and, not being satisfied that he had made the figure in the lower compartment quite correct, I afterwards made a sketch of it with great care.

People here say that many years ago a Norwegian vessel was wrecked, and the captain and mate drowned. The bodies were washed ashore, and buried in the churchyard, and that in the following year the surviving crew came back in another vessel, bringing this stone and another smaller one with them, and erected them over their graves. The stone is gneiss, which is common in this district.

I find in one of my note-books a sketch of a stone from Barbary (I forgot where I had got it), but the figures of two birds have some resemblance to the above.

On the way from Farr to Borge Castle, there are the foundations of a Pictish tower at Clarkhill, the stones of which are larger than usual, being square blocks. Borge, or as it is sometimes called Caisteal Phourouf, is situated on a rock projecting into the sea, under which the sea flows through a natural archway. The ruins are of small extent, and have been built with mortar. It is said to have been a stronghold of the Mackays, and is mentioned, I believe, in history.

About a mile to the east of Farr, on the Thurso road, above the ground officer's house, called Fiscary (Faisk Arfhaich, near the battle-field), are four large cairns, and below them, near the road, a great number of small cairns or heaps of stone. A number of those heaps were opened for the Duke of Sutherland to inspect, but nothing was found in any of them. I saw them the day after, and there was no appearance of kists, or remains of any sort.

Between Farr and Tongue, after crossing the Naver Ferry, there is an *Eirde house* at the farm-house of Auchinbourin. Some miles on, near Borge-farm house, there was a Pictish tower, now demolished, and on the side of the old road to Tongue, another. On the left of the road there is a Pictish tower at Dalchairn, one on the road to Scullamy, and another below Rhi Tongue, called Cairn Lia.

At Torrisdale, at the mouth of the river Borge, there are two Pictish towers, the one on the right bank, called Dun Richard, of which mention has been made. On the coast road from Torrisdale to Tongue, opposite Port Skerra, is Eillan Naomph, the saint's island, on which, if examined, may possibly be found some remains of a chapel or cell.

Between Port Skerra and Tongue, at Mr Ogilvy's farm-house, there is an *Eirde house* or weem. I think part of it is under his house.

*Tongue District.*—Between Tongue House and Kirkiboll, in a field on the right of the road, there is an Eirde house, which I opened for examination (it had often been opened before);<sup>1</sup> it is now about 25 feet long, 2½ broad at the entrance, and widens to 4 feet at the far end, where it terminates in a circle; the sides are built with small stones without mortar, and the top covered with large flat slabs.

At a place called the Krakenies, on the side of Ben Stomino, there is another Eirde house of a similar character: it measures 16 yards long, 2 feet wide near opening, and little farther in 3 feet, and 5 feet at its rounded extremity. None of the walls of these houses converge, but are quite upright.

Between Tongue and Ribegal, in a field on the right of the road, there is one which I was not allowed to open, the field being then in turnips, but from description it was much the same as the others. Near Deanside, there were remains of the end of another on the bank of the burn, but it has since been washed away in a flood. Near Ribegal there used to be three upright stones, called by the old people a "Teampul." They were broken up by Mr Mitchell, the late farmer, and are now built into the dyke at the road side; the hillock on which they stood is still called "Croc-tigh-goil," the hillock of the school-house.

Beyond Ribegal at Drim-na-coub, where a battle was fought between the Mackays and Sutherlands, are to be seen the graves of those who were killed; and an oval of middle-sized boulders, 9 feet by 7, with what appeared to me to be a kist, the upper part of the flags composing it sticking out of the earth a few inches. I was told it was for confining calves in; it might be worth while examining it.

To the west of this is Loch-an-Hacon, or as it is generally called Loch-an-Haalkal, in which is an island with the remains of a castle on it, said to have been built by Hacon for a hunting seat; the walls are an irregular square, 6 or 7 feet thick, and 5 or 6 feet high, built without mortar, and with flat stones the same as the Pictish towers. It is said that a causeway ran from the island to the mainland, a distance of 20 or 30 yards; the water is now, however, 6 or 7 feet deep. On the edge of the precipitous bank of the loch, and exactly opposite the island, there is a large boulder with a flat top, and on this there are a number of cups and rings.

<sup>1</sup> See Notice of Eirde house at Eriboll, by Dr A. Mitchell.—*Proc.* vol. vi. p. 249.

The people say they were made by the high heels of a fairy who lived in the castle. This stone is not generally known. Old Ross, the gamekeeper at Tongue, first told me of it, and he and I scraped off the moss and exposed the whole. He thought it was for playing some game. On the left of the stone, on a bit separated by a crack, there is a sort of a figure which appears to have been formed by cutting away the stone around it and leaving it in relief, and also some artificial cutting on the right, a sort of circular groove.

To the south of this, near the shepherd's house at Chunside, there is a long-shaped earthen mound, apparently natural, with a rowan tree growing on the top, which has been broken by the wind. This is called Diarmad's Grave.

In Ben Laoghail wood, close to it, is a large cave called the Boar's Den, and above it is the Cullach coire, or the boar's corrie.

Fenian names occur pretty often in the north of Sutherland, particularly near Eriboll, where are Craig chorle, from Chaoril, genitive of Caorill or Carril; Craig na Coulin, Cuchullin, Corrie na Coul or Cumhal, and near it Corri-nuish-nach, which name long puzzled me, but I now believe it to be Coire-an-uisneuch, or usnoth; Ben chiul, Ghuile or Goll; Fion na ren, Alt-na Grhaine, &c.

On the Melness side of the Kyle of Tongue there was a Pictish tower called Dun Buidh. It was demolished by the late Mr Paterson, farmer of Melness, and he told me there was a skeleton found in it. At the head of the Kyle, at Kinloch, there is a large Pictish tower, called Dun Mai, with remains of considerable outworks. This tower would be well worth examination. To the south of the shepherd's house here there is a hillock called Craig na Eylish, and a field below it called the Temple field.

A little to the south of Tongue House, and near the fountain head that supplies it with water, there is the chamber of a cairn of the same description as that near Skelpick, but rather smaller; on clearing it out, I found that one of the large upright stones had two holes bored artificially a short way into each of its sides, but not quite opposite, the holes were about 3 inches diameter.

On the neck of land between Loch Craggie and Loch Laochail, there are the remains of a Pictish tower.

Opposite the village of Tongue or Kirkiboll, on a promontory project-

ing into the Kyle, is Castle Varich, a small square tower, like a border keep.

Between Tongue and Eriboll, close to the Hope Ferry, there is a place where it is said there was a "Teampul;" there are some large stones lying about. A little way on the other side of the ferry, to the right of the road, there is a Pictish tower at Ach-an-dun.

On Loch Eriboll there is a Pictish tower at Camus-an-dun, and near Eriboll farm-house an Eirde house.

On Loch Hope, a Pictish tower on the east bank, and from the name there had probably been another, or some sort of stone building at the head of the Loch, called Cashel dhu. Beyond this, in Strathmore, on the right of the road, is the far-famed Pictish tower, called Dun Dornadilla, or rather Dun Dornghial. This tower is about the same size as all the others; indeed, I am certain that there is not two feet difference in diameter between any I have seen in Sutherland. There is something under twenty feet of a part of the outer wall standing. This is supported on the inside by a buttress lately built, the remainder is in ruins, and what little is seen of the lower passage between the walls is very narrow, not more than two feet.

Between Eriboll and Durness I know of nothing particular, but at the latter place there is an old church, now disused, and in it is the monument of Donald M'Murh, with the following epitaph on it:—

"Donald Makmurh now hier lyes lo,  
Was ill to his friend, war to his fo,  
True to his Maister in wierd and vo."

The upper part of the font of this old church is, or at least was, lying in front of the door of Balmakiel House.

In the churchyard there is a flat stone placed over the grave of a Mackay, but said to have been brought from Lewis; there is carved on it the old Highland claymore with reversed guard, and the point is sticking into something that has the appearance of a crown or head piece.

A few miles from Durness, on the road to Gualan house, there are two cairns. One of them was opened many years ago, and I was told that the bottom of a brass candlestick was found in it; this was, no doubt, an elliptical Scandinavian brooch. The other was opened by Professor Worsaae, who took away a skull from a small kist that was in it. The kist was full



of bones when I saw it, and I took a thigh bone out with my salmon cleek; it was remarkably fresh. The hillock on which they are placed is called Cnoc-na-cnavan—the hill of bones.

From the foregoing list of what has come under my own observation, it must be quite evident that the country is full of antiquities, and would well repay scientific research. I have very little doubt that if the numerous lochs were searched, crannogs would be found in some of them. I perfectly recollect seeing an artificial cairn in a loch among the hills which form the boundary between Skelpick and Rhifail; very possibly, also, kitchen middens might be found, particularly in the neighbourhood of Tongue, where there is one of the finest *cockle* banks in the country, which the natives would naturally resort to.<sup>1</sup>