

III.

EXCAVATION AT THE NESS OF BURGI, SHETLAND.

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The Ness of Burgi is a small headland situated at the southern end of the main island of Shetland, across the voe to the west of Jarlshof and Sumburgh Head. It is formed of sandstone, the beds tilted at an



Fig. 1. Burgi: Natural arch.

angle and forming an inaccessible cliff on the east and south side; on the west it dips less steeply down to the sea. This promontory forms part of a peninsula of some ten acres in extent, fringed by cliffs and only accessible from the mainland by a natural arch of rock (fig. 1). A path has recently been made along the top of the arch, by removing some sharply protruding points of rock and levelling up with gravel. Previously the narrow track could only be recognised by the wear of centuries on the rock, and the actual traversing of it presented such an element of hazard that obviously no large animal could ever have been driven across it. Above this natural barrier, at a narrow part of the

peninsula, the remains of a low rampart extend from cliff to cliff. Beyond this a grass-covered plateau stretches for a distance of a few hundred yards until the fortification is reached.

Immediately in front of the "Burgi," a rampart, with corresponding ditch on either side, is carried across the narrow junction of the headland. The rampart is formed of earth and stones, and appears to have been revetted on the inner side with a roughly built wall about 3 feet high, banked with a compacted mass of clay intermingled with stones.

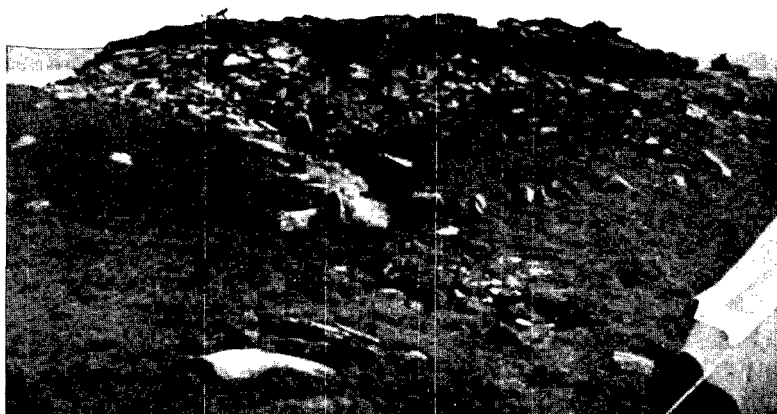


Fig. 2. Burgi: Approach.

A passage leads through the rampart, flanked at its commencement by two boulders and lined with stones on each side for a distance of about 8 feet (fig. 2). On the scarp of the inner ditch the natural rock rises steeply to a height of about 12 feet, and on the summit of this is built the fort, or "Burgi." This consists of a rectangular building with a roughly levelled platform in front, 4 feet wide, running approximately north-east and south-west. It is in a ruinous condition at the south-west end and its original length cannot be ascertained. At present it is about 74 feet in length and from 21 feet to 18 feet in breadth.

A passage, which still retains the three outer lintel stones in position, and which measures 4 feet in height and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  feet in width for the first

5 feet, but decreases in width to 4 feet for the remaining 16 feet, leads through the building, near its centre, into a sort of natural courtyard, about 20 yards square, formed by the cliffs which surround a level stretch of turf. Outside the entrance three slabs of stone resembled drain covers. They were, however, more probably paving-stones, or even lintels fallen from above. Some 5 feet from the entrance there had been a door, evidenced by a doorstep, formed by a narrow upright slab, still *in situ*, on one side, and by two bar-holes, passing through the



Fig. 3. Burgi: Doorway.

thickness of the walls into a chamber on either side. There were no traces of either bar-holes or doorstops at the exit. Some of the lintels which had evidently covered the passage were lying within it, tilted up against the side. The earth in the passage was very damp, and there was much decayed vegetable and animal matter mixed up with it, as well as many bones, including those of rabbits, sheep, oxen, seal, and fish, as well as limpets and some whale's remains. There was also a fragment of a sandstone vessel, half an inch in thickness and about 11 inches in diameter.

There are two main chambers; the east chamber opening off the central passage, and the west chamber entered directly from the back of the building. The narrow tunnel-like entry to the east chamber,

6 feet long, 2 feet wide, and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet in height, and covered by four lintels, opens off the passage immediately behind the front doorway. The room is 18 feet long, but only 7 feet wide. The end is curved, and the walls, now standing to a height of about 6 feet, are slightly corbelled towards the top (fig. 4). It seems probable that they would have sloped gradually inwards until they were close enough to be spanned by lintels, a number of which were found lying within the room. In this chamber were found many fragments of bone, chiefly of sheep, a few

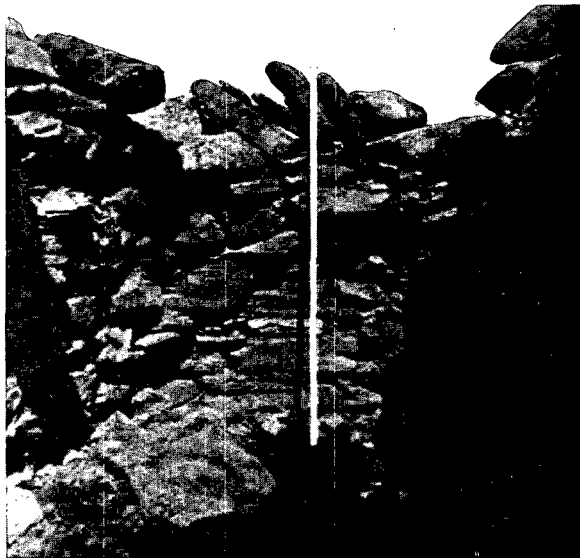


Fig. 4. Burgi: East chamber.

small pieces of burnt bone, a number of fragments of pottery, and some burnt peat.

The west chamber is larger, about 18 feet by 10 feet, and is rather curiously shaped, the walls adjoining the passage and the front of the building being straight, while the other two join in a curve. The entrance, from the back of the building, is placed 6 feet from the inner end of the entrance passage, 2 feet wide, just over 2 feet high, and 4 feet long. It is covered by three lintels, and above these the walls on either side rise for another 18 inches as if to support a further set of lintels, thus affording space for a window, as is occasionally found in brochs. Two hearths were found in this room, indicating two periods of occupation. They were both rectangular slabs of about the same size, much

marked and split by heat and covered with peat ash. They were at the curved side of the chamber, one at a level 6 inches above the other, but immediately over it. Possibly there was some outlet for smoke in the roof at this spot. At the occupation levels in this room the soil was dark and peaty and filled with a mass of bones of many kinds, and with limpets. There were also a larger number of fragments of pottery than had been found in the east chamber. At the entrance, at the lower occupation level, were a number of cobble-stones set on end.

Beyond this chamber, farther to the west, are remains of another smaller chamber, but so much of it has been destroyed by the storms of centuries that few details of its construction now survive, and there is no indication of a doorway.

The material used for building is unhewn blocks of sandstone, some of them as large as 4 feet square. They may have been brought from a rocky promontory only a few hundred yards away. The walls are roughly built and vary in thickness from 4 to 10 feet. They are erected directly on the natural rock. There is no trace of a stairway, and from the amount of stone on the site it does not seem probable that there was a second storey. It is remarkable that, though the building was so strongly protected in front by the ditches and rampart, and the main entrance was furnished with bar-holes, the inner ditch, which extended on the western side right to the edge of the cliff, terminated at the eastern end about 10 feet from the edge on the other side. As it stands, there is nothing to prevent easy access to the undefended doorways at the back. If there was, as presumably there must have been, a flanking wall at this side, it was not bonded into the building. The only trace of such a wall is a single stone, sunk vertically into the ground and jutting out at right angles from the end of the building. Possibly the wall, if such existed, was of lighter construction, and has since been washed away.

The "Burgi," which gives its name to the headland, is of a type which appears to be peculiar to Shetland. From the occurrence of an out-building, or forework of cognate construction, at the broch of Clickamin, it may be considered to belong to the period of the brochs. A similar construction has been noted by the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments on an island in the Loch of Huxter, Whalsay. The type will be described by the Commission, whose inventory dealing with Orkney and Shetland will shortly be published.

## POTTERY.

There were several varieties of pottery found. One was a black ware, polished on the exterior, of close-grained homogeneous material, hard in texture, with a sooty encrustation on the outside. It is curious that two pieces of this pottery which fitted together were found in different rooms. Another type was a coarse red ware, a few fragments of which were found in both chambers, evidently portions of cooking pots, with a black encrustation in the interior. There were also a few

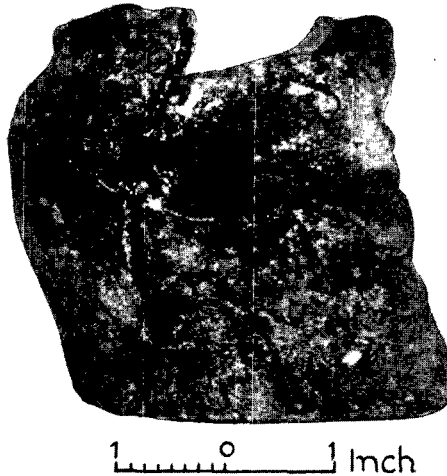


Fig. 5. Burgi: Fragment of pot.

fragments of a similar but finer ware, red on the exterior. From the east chamber came about a third of a vessel of thick, coarse, black pottery, rudely fashioned by hand. It is  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height, with a diameter of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches. There is a constriction under the recurved rim, which is low and irregularly finished at the edge. The paste used is very coarse and of a close consistency, with numerous small stones in its composition. There is a sooty encrustation on the upper half of the exterior (fig. 5).

There were no other relics found during the excavation, but in the *Proceedings* of 1882-3, vol. xvii., two circular carved stone discs are described as having been found in the ruins of a broch at Scatness, which must have meant the Ness of Burgi, as it is the only broch-like ruin on Scatness (pp. 296 and 297, figs. 1 and 2).

A ROMAN "VOTIVE LANTERN" FROM NEWSTEAD. 387

In conclusion I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to H.M. Office of Works for allowing me to conduct this excavation on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, for the assistance that was furnished by the Department, and for the arrangements made for my comfort. I also wish to acknowledge the help of Mr A. O. Curle, whose experience was invaluable to me.