

NOTICE OF THE EXPLORATION OF A "PICTS'-HOUSE, AT  
KETTLEBURN, IN THE COUNTY OF CAITHNESS.

BY A. HENRY RHIND, F.S.A. Scot.

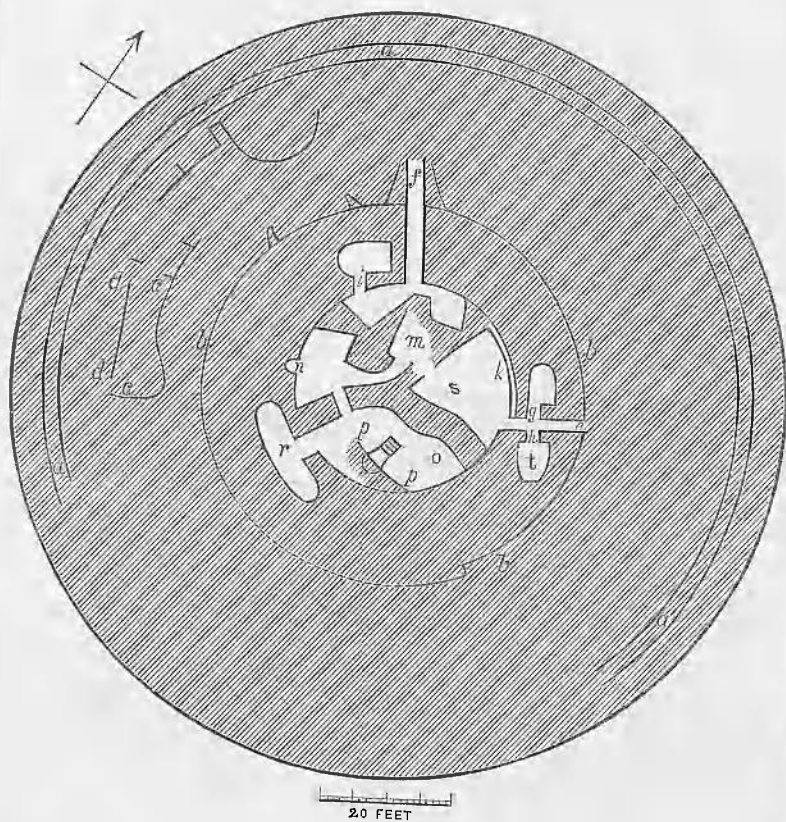
EVER since the publication of Pennant's well-known "Tours" brought the Antiquities of the North of Scotland under general observation, the so-called "Picts'-Houses" have attracted considerable attention and excited speculation.<sup>1</sup> Antiquaries, however, could not agree in defining to their common satisfaction the purpose those structures had probably been intended to serve, and it was even asserted that their popular appellation was a misnomer, inasmuch as the fact of their having been dwellings was distinctly denied. Within the last few years further data have been supplied for determining their real character, and there seems now no reason to doubt that they were in truth the habitations of men. The results too of certain excavations which I concluded early in the present year, tend strongly to confirm this view of the case, if indeed any confirmation were necessary.

The remains in question occupied a rather commanding site, on the brow of a gentle eminence, about a mile from the town, and a quarter of a mile from the river, of Wick ; and stood in the centre of a cultivated field, which was indeed the cause of affording me an opportunity for their examination, as the requirements of agriculture necessitated their removal. To James Henderson, Esq., of Billbster, who found their demolition indispensable, I have much pleasure in expressing my acknowledgments for having rendered me assistance, and every facility for conducting what proved to be a very laborious exploration.

The Kettleburn "Picts'-House," during the lapse of years, has had to contend not merely with "the gnawing tooth of time," but with other destructive influences more active in their operation, and more fatal in their results. The plough has regularly passed over it for at least a quarter of a

<sup>1</sup> See also the recently published Memoir on the Celtic Antiquities of Orkney, by Lieut. F. W. Thomas, R.N.; *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv. p. 88.

PICTS'-HOUSE, IN THE COUNTY OF CAITHNESS.



Ground Plan, showing the remains at Kettleburn, excavated by Mr. A. H. Rhind, in 1853.

century, and a cottage of no mean size built entirely from its ruins, stands in its immediate neighbourhood. It need therefore be scarcely a matter of surprise that many important features in its original design are completely obliterated, as may be seen by reference to the accompanying plan, in which the outmost circle represents the extreme limits of the mound, whose diameter was not short of 120 feet. Immediately within this line a bounding wall *a*, three feet thick and three feet high, rudely built of large unshapely stones, was traced round the entire circumference, except where a breach had been made to furnish materials for the cottage to which I have alluded. From this wall to that marked *b*, the whole intermediate space presented an almost chaotic mass of ruin, and despite my most anxious endeavours and the care with which the workmen proceeded, I could only detect the merest fragments of building at long intervals. It was on the west side alone that walls sufficiently entire to admit of being followed for any distance, could be discovered; but even these were not calculated to enable one to form an adequate conception of the design of this portion of the dwelling. The wall *c* in particular was unintelligible, for although regularly "faced,"—to use the technical phrase,—to the outside, the wall *d* was likewise faced to the outside, and no building could be observed between *d* and *c* faced to the inside to correspond to *c*. I do not mean to say however that such may never have existed: and indeed the walls to which I am now referring, being so imperfect in every respect, should not be regarded as illustrating the plan of the structure further than as evidence, that the space between the bounding wall and that marked *b*, had been regularly built upon—a fact abundantly proved by the character of the rubbish which filled it, and by the substratum of ashes, intermixed with shells and bones, turned up at several points within its area.

After this space was cleared the circular wall *b* was reached, and was found sufficiently entire to the height of 4 or 5 feet, except where it had suffered by the hands of the builder of the cottage. The entrances *e* and *f* were then disclosed, and following the passages which led from them, the workmen slowly penetrated towards the interior. But the labour of clearing the various chambers was tedious

in the extreme, for they were filled with the debris of their roofs, which in every case had fallen in. In fact the passages *e*, *f*, *g*, *h*, and *i*, were alone in any degree perfect, as the large flat stones with which they were linteled over, about 2 feet 6 inches from the ground, had, without yielding, sustained the pressure of the superincumbent earth. Although the roofs, as I have said, had in every other instance given way, there can be little doubt, from the appearance of the rubbish in the chambers, that they had been constructed on the same principle as those in every "Picts'-House" which has hitherto been opened—that is, by the walls, after rising perpendicularly to a certain height, having been made gradually to converge until the vault was completed. Assuming this to have been the method employed at Kettleburn, it was plain that some of the larger chambers when entire could not have been less than 9 or 10 feet high; as their walls, which were built of unhewn stones, and without any mortar, did not begin to incline inwards, even at 6 or 7 feet from the foundation—the height to which some of them stood. But even had the cells been thus lofty, they would not have been without a parallel, for those in the "Picts'-House" at Quanterness, engraved in Barry's History of Orkney, measured upwards of 11 feet in height.<sup>2</sup>

It seems unnecessary to describe each chamber minutely, as an examination of the plan and the application of the scale to it, will afford a better idea of the internal arrangement of the structure than any verbal details could possibly convey. There are one or two points, however, on which a few explanatory words may not be superfluous. For instance, at *k*, in the chamber *s*, a double line will be observed which represents a wall that had been built, so to say, within a wall, but for what reason it is not easy to imagine, unless for the purpose of narrowing the chamber with a view to the construction of the roof. Again, several deficiencies will be noticed, in connection with the chamber *m*, which however I cannot supply, the ruin there having been thrown so thoroughly into confusion, in consequence apparently of some stones having decayed, as to baffle every attempt to trace the missing walls. The circular deflexure at *n* likewise requires some explanation. At this point a large boulder,

<sup>2</sup> See also plan and sections in the *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv. pl. xv.

firmly imbedded in the soil, protruded a triangular corner a few inches above the surface; and the old builder being either unable, or too indolent, to remove this unwieldy obstacle, raised a little arch over it, rather than use it as a foundation, which its awkward shape would to a certain extent have prevented. There is one other portion of the plan, which may seem obscure, and to which I shall now refer—namely, the wall *pp*, which was tolerably entire only so far as it formed one side of the chamber *o*, for beyond this it failed, the stones having been long since extracted for the utilitarian purpose I formerly mentioned. Immediately under this wall was a regularly built well about nine feet deep, roofed over, so as to afford a basis for that part of the wall which passed over it, and accessible by steps from the chamber *o*. When discovered it was full of good spring water, of which, however, I had it emptied for the purpose of examining its construction, and instituting a search among the sedimentary deposit lest any object of interest might have fallen into it while the dwelling was yet tenanted. My expectations in this respect were not wholly disappointed, for, besides an article of bone, which I shall describe in its proper place, I succeeded in recovering some fragments of pottery, and two small pieces of wood, one of which bears the mark of having been cut by a sharp instrument. It may be noticed that the existence of a well, though an unusual, is by no means an unique feature, for similar conveniences have been found within other “Picts’-houses” in this country; but I am not aware that any have hitherto been met with so well contrived as the example now under view.

The dwellers in the Kettleburn House, however rude they may have been, were evidently not quite insensible to personal comfort, as they managed, by a system of drainage, to render more habitable their damp cells, which were floored with the natural clay in every instance so far as I could discern, except the chamber *t*, which was paved with large flat stones. Their habits, nevertheless, must have been filthy and slovenly, for accumulated heaps of ashes were observed in most of the chambers; and throughout the whole building there were plentifully strewed about, bones—many of them split, doubtless for the purpose of extracting the marrow, which could not fail to have been regarded as an especial delicacy—also whelk and limpet shells, the refuse

of their meals, which the barbarians did not care to remove.<sup>3</sup>

The spoils of the chase, likewise, were not wanting, in the shape of tusks of the boar, and fragments of the horns of the deer. These last were in considerable quantity, and were no doubt prized as the material whence various serviceable articles could be fashioned; for several pieces bore evidence of having had portions severed from them by means of edged tools. It is quite plain, too, from the great dimensions of many of the antlers, that they must have adorned a head which the noblest stag now existing in Scotland would scarcely have dared to encounter. Fish bones, about the size of those of the haddock, were also found, and considerable interest is attached to this fact, since Xiphiline, in describing the manners of the Caledonians at the time of Severus' expedition (A.D. 208), expressly asserts, that "of their fish, though abundant and plentiful, they never taste."<sup>4</sup> It must be remembered, however, that Solinus sums up the dietary of the inhabitants of the Hebrides in these words—"piscibus tantum et lacte vivunt."<sup>5</sup>

But there were other osteological remains whose presence was infinitely more surprising than that of those I have already indicated. Four pieces of a human cranium were embedded in a heap of ashes in the chamber *o*, which heap likewise contained several fragments of pottery and the primitive looking comb I shall afterwards have occasion to mention. It is by no means improbable that the inhabitants of the building I am describing, like most barbarous races, might have kept in their dwelling the skulls of slain enemies, as trophies of their valour, and it might thus happen that the fragments in question might have found their way to the place whence they were exhumed;<sup>6</sup> but it cannot be

<sup>3</sup> I have preserved as many of the bones as possible, with the view of ascertaining to what animals they belonged; but having had slight experience in osteological inquiries, I do not hazard any vague opinions where the utmost accuracy is desirable. I therefore wish to submit them to some member of the Institute who has studied comparative anatomy, with the intimation that it would be interesting to antiquarians generally, and personally obliging to myself, were he to append to this paper a note containing the desired information.

<sup>4</sup> Xiph. lib. lxxvi. Monumenta Hist.

Brit. p. lx. Since writing the above, I observe that, at a recent meeting of the Society of Antiquaries, Mr. Akerman, in making some remarks on a discovery of fish bones in a Cromlech in the Channel Islands, attributed, probably trusting to memory, the passage I have just quoted, to Herodian. It occurs, however, in the work of Xiphiline, the abridger of Dio.

<sup>5</sup> Sol. c. 22. I may mention here that fish-scales have been met with in a subterranean dwelling of great antiquity at Skara in Orkney.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the early Celtic nations seem



concealed that there is another possible method of accounting for their presence, I mean by suspecting the occupants of the "house" of cannibalism—a surmise which would be to some extent countenanced, were other vestiges of human bones detected among those dug up throughout the structure. I would wish to remark that the tenants of the "Picts'-house" at Quanterness, near Kirkwall, described in Barry's History of Orkney, have already been branded as anthropophagi by Headrick, the editor of the second edition of that work, in consequence of broken human bones having been found in their dwelling, along with those of sheep and other animals. The author of this impeachment does not seem to have been aware, that he might in some degree have supported his charge by referring to Diodorus<sup>6</sup> and Strabo,<sup>7</sup> who ascribe to the inhabitants of Ireland in the first century of our era, a gastronomic affection for the flesh of their deceased relatives—or to St. Jerome, who distinctly avers, "*ipse viderim Attacottos (an obscure Scottish tribe) humanis vesci carnibus,*" and whose veracity in this statement Gibbon "found no reason to question."<sup>8</sup> We must not, however, be hasty in stigmatising a people with the infamy of cannibalism except on the most unquestionable authority: nor would it be logical, far less would it be just, to accuse them of possessing so abominable an appetite on the evidence of one or two isolated facts which may have been purely accidental in their origin.

I shall now proceed to notice those relics discovered in the course of the excavations, which may help us, when viewed in conjunction with concomitant circumstances, to form some idea of the progress in civilisation which the inhabitants of the Kettleburn House had attained.

1. A pair of bronze tweezers,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches by  $1\frac{3}{4}$  broad. (See woodcuts.) Smaller instruments of this description, and suited for the purposes of the toilet, have repeatedly been found with sepulchral deposits, especially in Denmark; but I do not recollect having observed in any of the museums I have examined, either in this country or on the

to have been peculiarly addicted to the custom of preserving the skulls of their slaughtered foes; and the Gauls, if we credit Diodorus, "fastened the heads of the slain to the doors of their houses, as if

they were so many wild beasts captured in hunting." Lib. v. c. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Lib. v. c. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Lib. iv.

<sup>8</sup> Decline and Fall, Vol. II., p. 531. note. Fourth Edition.

continent, not even in that at Copenhagen, an example nearly so large as the present specimen.

2. A piece of iron, 6 inches long by  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch broad, flat on one side, and convex on the other, and resembling the point of a thrusting weapon. Not having been present when this object was exhumed, I almost inclined to question its authenticity, and to suppose that it might have been lying on the surface of the mound; but the workmen assured me that they dug it up from the very bottom, and I had no reason to suspect the accuracy of their statement. The probability of the occurrence of iron objects among these remains was afterwards confirmed by the discovery of a small concrete mass, evidently composed chiefly of iron, in the heap of ashes which contained the comb; and another metallic lump, also, I think, ferruginous, was brought to light elsewhere. Nor should it be omitted here, that a ball of bone, to be noticed subsequently, retains a portion of an iron nail which had been driven into it; while several of the cut bones formerly mentioned exhibit markings which could hardly have been produced by tools of any other metal.

3. A bone comb of extremely rude manufacture. (See woodcut.) Indeed, so large and clumsy are the teeth, that one might scarcely imagine this relic had been intended to bring under subjection even the hirsute locks of a savage; but analogy seems to prove that it really was what I have designed it, as an object of the same general form, though fashioned with sufficient neatness to show that it was undoubtedly a comb, was dug out of the ruins of the Burgh of Bugar, in Orkney, many years ago.<sup>9</sup>

4. The handle apparently of a knife, or some such instrument. This article, whose material I conceive to be deer's-horn, was obtained from the accumulations at the bottom of the well.

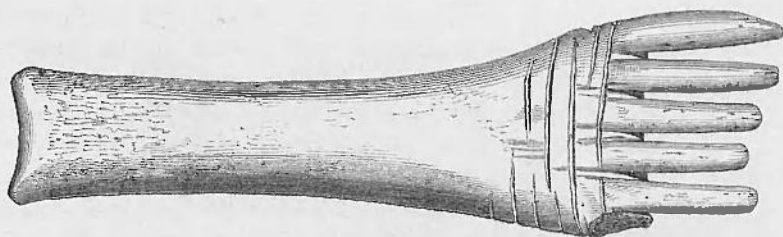
5. A carefully-smoothed and tapered object, of bone or stag's-horn, about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long.

6. A piece of stag's-horn, or bone,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, having an oblong hole drilled through it, and a perforation in one

<sup>9</sup> *Archæologia Scotica*, vol. iii., p. 39. A similar comb, found with a human skull and several heads of the *Bos longifrons*, near the church at Stanwick, North Riding of Yorkshire, was exhibited in the Museum

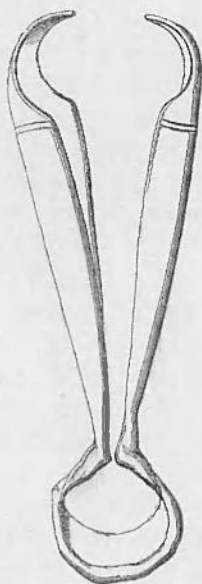
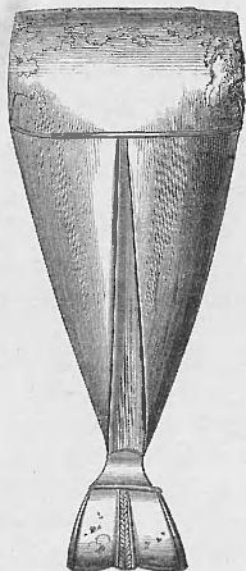
of the Archæological Institute at the York Meeting. (*Museum Catalogue*, York Volume, p. 6.) Another was found in the Roman Baths at Hunnum. Hodgson's *Northumb.*, vol. iii., 319. Another almost





Bone Comb.

(Length,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches.)



Bronze Tweezers.

(Length of orig.,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  in. ; breadth,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in.)

end, as if to receive some small implement of which it was intended to be the haft.

7. Two smooth spheroidal bone balls, the greatest diameter of each being  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch.

8. A similar ball, but only one half the size of the others. It is broken; and it here claims special notice, as having been partially pierced with an iron nail, part of which remains in the hole where it had been inserted.<sup>1</sup>

9. Two stones, of the type commonly regarded as whetstones. The present examples, however, which are 6 and  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, respectively, seem rather too hard in the grain to have answered the purpose indicated by that name very efficiently.

10. Seven perforated stone disks, of various sizes, from  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch to 2 inches in diameter. Articles such as these are of common occurrence in this country, and are now generally regarded as beads, or buttons—a conjecture not unlikely to be correct, “as very similar objects have been found in Mexico, which have certainly been used as buttons.”<sup>2</sup> It should be remembered that, though the use of such homely ornaments for fastening the dress would *prima facie* indicate a people scarcely acquainted with the very rudiments of civilisation, this inference would not be borne out by facts; for, to state one instance only, a disk of precisely the same character as those to which I am referring, was discovered, with two massive penannular armlets of bronze, in a tumulus in the Scilly Islands.<sup>3</sup>

11. The upper stone of a quern, formed in the usual manner, that is, with one perforation for the axis, and another for the insertion of the handle. Broken portions of three other querns were likewise found; and, in fact, few if any “Picts’-houses” have been opened which have not contained rude handmills of this description.

12. A shapeless lump of sandstone, having a cavity in its centre 9 inches in diameter, and 6 inches deep, worn apparently by friction. From the bottom of this cavity a round

as coarsely formed as that noticed in the text, “was procured from the ruin of a Picts’ Borgh in Caithness, in 1782.” Synopsis of Museum, Soc. of Antiqu. of Scotland, p. 23.

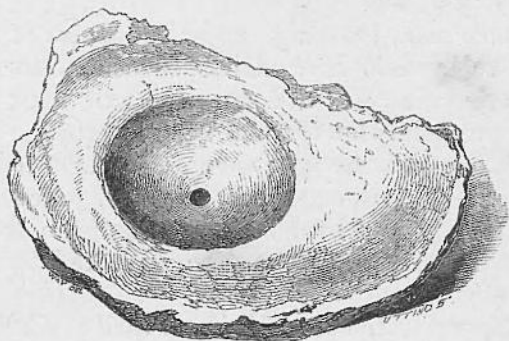
<sup>1</sup> This relic was picked up from the

ruin by the Rev. Charles Thompson, of Wick, who kindly communicated the circumstance to me.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Franks, in the *Archæol. Journal*, vol. ix., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Archæol. Journal*, vol. ix., p. 96.

hole penetrates through the stone, which, I suspect, like the last object (No. 11), formed part of a contrivance for bruising or crushing grain.



No. 12.—Stone mortar, from Pict's house.

13. A large granitic block, pierced on one side to the depth of two inches, by a hole an inch in diameter, near which is a shallow cup-shaped indentation; while on the other side there are two similar cavities. It is singular that stones marked in the same manner have been found in a Yorkshire barrow,<sup>4</sup> but the use which they were intended to serve does not seem at all obvious.

14. A disk of micaceous stone, 13 inches in diameter, through the centre of which a hole has been drilled. This relic may possibly have been the upper stone of a small quern, to which it bears strong resemblance. The mineralogical characteristics of the stone are somewhat opposed, however, to this supposition. Fragments of two precisely similar disks were also discovered.

15. A small unhewn stone, having on one side two circular cavities of unequal size, each cutting the circumference of the other. These might perhaps have been produced by polishing a convex body upon the stone; but they are shaped so symmetrically as to induce the belief that they were hollowed out for some distinct purpose, and not fortuitously.

16. A water-worn pebble, 7 inches long by 2 broad, slightly dressed at one end, possibly with the view of adapting it for a whetstone.

17. Four disks of slate, each from three to four inches in

<sup>4</sup> Journal of the Archæol. Association, vol. vi., p. 4.

diameter, and chipped round the edges to their circular form. Similar objects, but very much larger, were obtained by Lieut. Thomas from a "subterranean dwelling" at Skara in Orkney.<sup>5</sup> He has termed them "plates," with what degree of probability I do not venture to say, but certainly the present specimens are too small to have been so used.

18. Many fragments of pottery, some exceedingly coarse, but none by any means fine, and all without any incision on the surface, or attempt at ornament. Among them were pieces of at least five small vases or cups of the same simple pattern, the chief features in which must have been a curved lip, and protuberating or bulging side.

19. Smooth stones of various shapes and sizes, such as may be picked up from the sea beach, were found in several of the chambers among the ashes and shells. They may have been casually carried from the shore along with the latter, or they may have been designed as missiles, for which some of them are well suited. With these may be mentioned a prettily variegated and polished pebble, which the workman who recovered it from one of the heaps of refuse, unfortunately broke. It is somewhat curious that a pebble of precisely similar appearance, though larger, possessed an extraordinary reputation as a curative agent, until very recently, among the more superstitious of the Caithness peasantry. It has remained in the same family for several generations, having been handed down as a valuable heirloom from father to son; and perhaps it owed the origin of its fame to having been found in a "Picts'-house," whence it would undoubtedly be regarded as a gift from the fairies, to whose revels every green mound was consecrated in the folk-lore of the North of Scotland.

It has been my intention on the present occasion simply to record a series of facts, and I did not propose to make any general observations on that peculiar and distinct class of antiquities to which the Kettleburn relic belongs—the so-called "Picts'-houses." I cannot, however, forbear remarking, that ancient though they undoubtedly are, there is, nevertheless, it seems to me, a tendency among archæologists to ascribe to them a more remote antiquity than existing data will warrant. Dr. Wilson, for instance, incorporates them in the first section of his recent excellent work, "The Prehistoric

<sup>5</sup> *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv., p. 135.

Annals of Scotland," implying that they date from the earliest ages of permanent human occupancy ; and Professor Munch of Christiania, in a letter addressed by him to a correspondent in Orkney, and published in a northern journal,<sup>6</sup> expressly declares that "these buildings belong to the stone-period, or to that mysterious people of the stone-period whose nationality is not yet ascertained." Now admitting the previous existence in Scotland of an allophylian race ignorant of metallurgic arts, such as that indicated by the Professor, what evidence is there for assigning the structures in question to a people so low in the scale of civilisation ? It cannot be that any such inference is fairly deducible from the style of their construction ; for we must not forget that the Germans knew not the use of mortar, and retreated to underground cells at the approach of an enemy, even in the days of Tacitus,<sup>7</sup> and that, according to Diodorus Siculus,<sup>8</sup> the Britons at the time of Cæsar's visit stored their corn in subterraneous repositories, which possibly, as in the case of the Germans, either were, or had formerly been, used as occasional places of residence. These facts will show that there is nothing, *per se*, in the formation of the "Picts'-houses" requiring us to regard them as the habitations of men in the very lowest stage of barbarism, that is, in the so-called "stone age ;" nor do I think that any specimens of handiwork hitherto discovered in them would fully justify such a conclusion, while the relics exhumed from the Kettleburn example plainly evince that its occupants were possessed of metallic implements. But here let it be distinctly understood that we can scarcely hope to determine with sufficient accuracy the period at which those buildings were probably erected, by reasoning inductively from the manufactured objects they contain, as these are not necessarily the work of the original occupants, there being strong grounds for believing that many of the "Picts'-houses" were inhabited, if not continuously, at all events occasionally, during successive ages. The relics obtained from them may therefore be the products neither of one race nor of one era. Nevertheless, as no objects characteristic of the remotest times, such as stone celts, axe, or arrow-heads, have been met with in any of them, so far as I am aware, there arises

<sup>6</sup> John O'Groat Journal of 30th May, 1851.

<sup>7</sup> De Mor. Germ., c. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Lib. v., c. 21.

from this source a species of negative proof in favour of the conjecture I have hazarded respecting their age. I do not wish, however, to theorise on the subject, as no good end could be gained by doing so at present, since few dwellings of the *peculiar* type in question have as yet been examined with any degree of attention; still, without venturing to anticipate the results of future observations, thus much I believe may be safely predicated, in harmony with archaeological data and the statements of the earliest authors, who afford us a glimpse of the internal condition of our country, that the "Picts'-houses," though they may not have been reared by aboriginal workers in stone, had at all events served their day, and probably passed into disuse, ere the legions of Rome invaded the Caledonian tribes.

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NOTE REGARDING ANIMAL REMAINS FOUND IN THE "PICTS'-HOUSE."

We are indebted to the constant kindness of Mr. Quekett for the following particulars. Amongst the bones submitted to him, in accordance with Mr. Rhind's wish, a few human remains were found,—the upper end of a *tibia* and portion of the parietal bones of the *cranium*, of an adult; also molar teeth of a young subject. Bones, teeth, &c., of horses appeared in great number; the cannon-bones chopped and broken up as if for extracting the marrow; and doubtless this animal had supplied a large share of the food to the occupants of the dwelling. The species appeared to have been small, larger however than the Shetland pony: there were remains of a horse of much greater size. Numerous horns and remains of large deer occurred (not the red deer), also of roe-buck, ox, sheep of small size, goats, pigs, tusks of boars, &c. The occurrence of many remains of dogs deserves notice; some indicating a large species, larger than a pointer, others being of smaller dogs. There were a few portions of bones of the whale, and a *radius* of the seal, probably the *Phoca vitulina*. The occurrence of horn-cores with other remains of the *Bos longifrons*, is a fact of interest showing the existence of that extinct species when these dwellings were inhabited. Mr. Quekett states that remains of this species, found in another "Picts'-house," were recently submitted to him by Dr. Wilson. Lastly, the list comprises the jaw of the water-rat, and bones of a bird, probably of the size of the heron or swan. Mr. Quekett has found difficulty in the endeavour to identify the kind of wood, of which a fragment was found in the well; it is not (as shown by the microscope) of pine, oak, beech, or any of our common woods used in building. He believes it to be hazel. It is proposed to form a collection, in the Museum of the College of Surgeons, specially illustrative of the primeval races, the animals used for food, &c. Mr. Rhind has kindly presented a selection from the remains here noticed; and those antiquaries who excavate sites of early occupation should bear in mind the advantages accruing to the Archaeologist from such a collection, and they will be induced, as we hope, to contribute towards its formation.