

Section of the Apse, from West to East.



Exterior view of the Window.



The Girth House, in the parish of Orphir, Orkney. Exterior view of the Apse, taken from the South-east.

NOTICE OF REMAINS OF A ROUND CHURCH WITH SEMICIRCULAR  
APSE, IN THE PARISH OF ORPHIR, ORKNEY.

By GEORGE PETRIE, CORR. MEM. S. A. SCOT.

THE very remarkable ruin now to be described stands in the churchyard of the parish of Orphir, Orkney, immediately opposite to, and within a few feet of, the door of the present parish church. Its peculiar appearance attracted my attention several years ago, and at that time I made a sketch and measurements of the ruins, and forwarded copies to Sir Henry Dryden, Bart., who on a subsequent occasion accompanied me to Orphir, and measured the ruins with me.

The churchyard is near to the sea-shore, and the immediate neighbourhood abounded with numerous traces of ancient buildings, which are believed to be the remains of the palace of Jarl Paul, who lived at Orphir in the twelfth century. During some excavations, which were made about 1859, close to the outside of the churchyard wall, great quantities of bones of various domestic animals were found, and amongst them were jawbones of dogs and cats in great abundance. The farmer who is tenant of the farm adjoining the churchyard, and his servants, who had made the excavations, informed me that they had found some hundred or more jawbones of dogs and cats, and I can readily believe it, for, when on a visit to the place, two years ago, with Dr. George W. Dasent, author of "Burnt Njal," I picked up in a few minutes several amongst the rubbish.

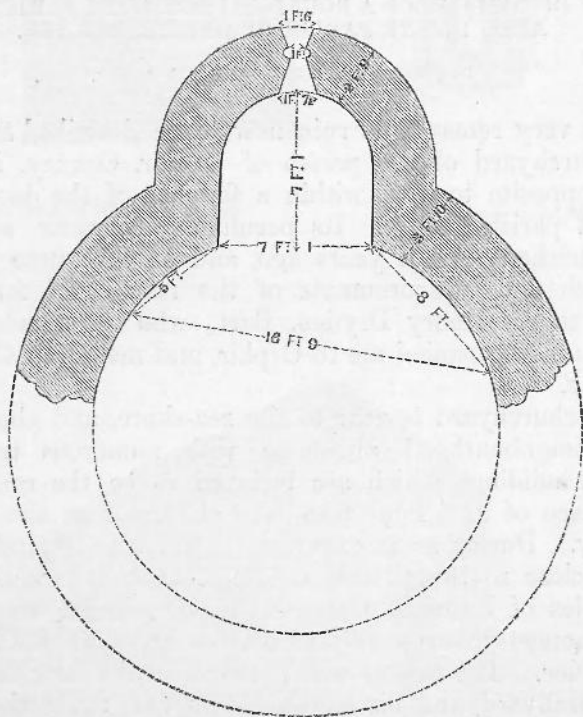
There can be no doubt that the ruins are those of a circular church, with a semi-circular apse.<sup>1</sup> A gentleman who

<sup>1</sup> The Rev. J. L. Petit, in his notes on circular churches, in this volume, has given this as the most simple and ancient type. He cites several examples of this

had seen the present church in the course of erection, in 1829, assured me that the remains of the wall attached to the apse were circular, and extended beneath the foundations of the parish church; and even now they can be traced up to its side walls, beneath which they disappear.

In the old Statistical Account of the parish of Orphir, there is the following account of the ruins:—

“In the churchyard are the remains of an ancient building, called the Girth House, to which great antiquity is



The Girth House, Orkney. Ground-plan of the ruins, with the Eastern Apse.

ascribed. It is a rotundo 18 ft. in diameter, and 20 ft. high, open at top, and on the east side is a vaulted concavity, where probably the altar stood, with a slit in the wall to

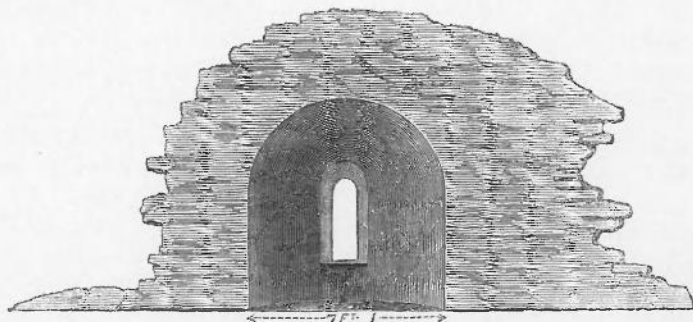
circular plan, without recesses, except an apse or porch, and gives a ground-plan of the chapel at Altenfurt, near Nuremberg, which is precisely similar to that of the church at Orphir. See p. 102, *ante*. It may deserve notice, in connexion with the curious subject of

this Notice, that in Ireland, according to Dr. Petrie, no church of circular or of octagonal form appears to have been anciently erected. *Eccles. Archit. of Ireland, Essay on the Origin of Round Towers, &c.*, p. 160.

admit the light ; two-thirds of it have been taken down to repair the parish church. The walls are thick, and consist of stones strongly cemented with lime.”<sup>2</sup>

The measurements which I have taken so far verify those given in the old Statistical Account, for I make the diameter to be about 18 ft. 10 in. The walls have certainly been built with very strong mortar.

The remains of the circular wall of the church are 3 ft. 10 in. thick. They extend only to about 8 ft. on each side of the apse, and there is no appearance of door or window. The wall of the apse is 2 ft. 9 in. thick. The internal measurement of the apse is as follows :—width in front, 7 ft. 1 in. ; height,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  ft. ; depth, backwards to the window, 7 ft. 1 in. The sole of the window is 1 ft. 6 in.



Interior of the Apse, as viewed from the door of the present Parish Church.

above the present level of the ground inside the apse. The opening of the window is 3 ft. high and 1 ft. wide. The frame for the glass has been 1 ft. from the outside, and the splay of the window gives a width of 1 ft.  $6\frac{1}{2}$  in. on the outside, and 1 ft.  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in. on the inside. The height of the window, including the splay, is, on the inside, 3 ft. 7 in., and on the outside 3 ft. 6 in. The distance from the ground to the spring of the arch of the apse is 4 ft. 6 in. on one side, and 4 ft. 3 in. on the other. The window is a few inches towards the north side from the centre of the wall of the apse, and looks eastward. The whole height of the apse,

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair's Stat. Acc. vol. xix. p. 417.

measuring from the level of the ground on the inside to the top of the ruin outside, is about 11 ft.

The church has, evidently, from the name which it still bears, been the "Gyrth," or sanctuary for the district in former days.<sup>3</sup>

*Kirkwall, July, 1861.*

<sup>3</sup> Gyrth, as used by old Scottish writers, signified protection, in a general sense; also a sanctuary or asylum, as in Stat. Rob. II. The word has been derived from A. S. gird, an enclosure; or from grith, peace, security. When Edward III. threatened an invasion, persons who had taken refuge in sanctuaries

were pardoned on condition of serving in Baliol's army, and they were called Grith-men. Girth also denoted, as it has been stated, the circle of stones surrounding an ancient place of judgment. See Skene and Jamieson, *in v.* Girthol occurs in the same signification as girth.