



NOTE
THE ARROWS INDICATE
THE DIRECTION OF SLOPES.

BARNSCAR

AN ANCIENT SETTLEMENT ON BIRKBY FELL

CUMBERLAND



SURVEYED IN SEPTEMBER, 1891. BY C.W. DYMOND, F.S.A.

ART. XVII.—*Barnscar : An Ancient Settlement in Cumberland.* By C. W. Dymond, F.S.A.

Site and Surroundings.—The remains occupy a portion of the top and sides of a long flat tongue of land, 600 feet high at that part, extending in a general direction west-south-west from Devock Water to the estuary of the Esk, and in the region of the Eskdale granites. With a fine outlook around three-quarters of the circle of view, ranging from the Wastdale mountains on the north-east to the sea on the west ; the masses of Black Combe on the south ; the heights above Devock Water at a little distance inland ; and nearer, across a depression watered by Black Beck, the dominating peaks White Pike and Knott. On the other hand, the ridge is flanked by a range of crags which interrupt the view into Eskdale, distant about a mile. Its axis nearly coincides with the line of five stone piles, from which the surface falls on both sides—at first almost imperceptibly ; nowhere abruptly. The greater portion of the site is clothed with a luxuriant growth of bracken, among which most of the remains are hidden. Though now quite unsheltered, it is possible that formerly it may, in some measure, have been screened from the violence of storms by protecting scrub or woods : for there is good evidence that vast tracts of such uplands, now bare, were once timbered.

Many other ancient remains—similar, and, for the most part, apparently of the same age—are scattered over the fells in the vicinity. The occurrence of some of these was noted by the late Mr. J. Clifton Ward in an early volume of these *Transactions** : but there are others which may be added to the record. A group of cairns, exactly like those at Barnscar, may be seen on the south side of

* Vol. iii., p. 251.

Muncaster Fell, a little below its highest point : and on the descent from Barnscar to Eskdale, all the way down the hollow between Raven Crag and Latterbarrow, extending to Crag and Knott End, are what look like the ruins of an extensive settlement, of different date, consisting of foundations of inclosure-walls, garths and rectangular buildings. Associated with these, and perhaps belonging to them, are three long barrows, fenced by large stones—two of them about 20 feet long and 3 feet high ; the third smaller. Their position is near the upper side of a large grass-field, on the 400 feet contour, south of the western end of Raven Crag. They promise well to repay examination.

Description of the Remains.—These consist of:—(1) the ruins of a group of small inclosures and hut-circles, which may be called the village or homestead, situated at the extreme west end of the settlement ; (2) sundry banks and walls ranging, for the most part, nearly parallel with the ridge ; (3) a multitude of cairns scattered irregularly over the ground east of the village, up to a point a little over a mile from the foot of Devock Water. The space thus occupied and delineated in the accompanying plan is 2,300 feet in length, and in greatest breadth 1,200 feet. It is believed that very few, if any, existing cairns within the area surveyed have escaped notice : and no others were observed beyond its borders, except some outlying ones, perhaps 20 or 30, on the slopes below those in the south-western corner of the plan.

(1) The village, at the extremity of the flat part of the ridge, is just at the brow of a marked westerly declivity. The works, which extend 220 feet north and south, and 190 feet east and west, cover nearly three-quarters of an acre of ground dipping gently southward. The ruin has been so complete that it does not now seem possible to get more than a general idea of the original form of the parts. The inclosing banks are, no doubt, *rudera* of walls of uncertain

certain thickness ;—only a few stones, marking lines of facing on one side or the other, being here and there visible. One of these walls seems to have swept around the northern portion which was divided into two courts with a common entrance, and with two huts attached to the western one. In the open space south-west of these courts are indications of four detached hut-circles, one of which is now divided by banks of stones, perhaps thrown up during some work of examination. In the middle of the eastern side occurs an irregular inclosure, flanked on the south by a large hut, to which is attached a spur forming one side of a passage 20 feet wide. On the other side of this is another inclosure, with a hut in its eastern corner ; two undefined hollows, which may be remains of huts, outside it on the west ; and a hooked bank, forming a large hut or shelter, attached to its northern side. From the before-mentioned divided hut-circle a flat spur-bank, 40 feet long and 5 to 7 feet wide, extends in the direction of a small outlying lune-shaped mound. North of this spur, on the crest of a low knoll, may be observed in the plan a bordering of small stones set in the ground in a figure something like a 6 reversed. Finally, down the middle of the passage in the centre of the village, runs a straight line of small earth-fast stones, also shown in the plan. With ample facilities for free entrance, there is here nothing of the nature of fortification : and the partial protection furnished by the walls was only sufficient to shelter the inhabitants from the wind, and to make them secure from attacks of wolves.

(11) On the north-east side of the village, covering one of the entrances, is a low crooked piece of bank, 180 feet long and about 5 feet across, composed, as are the others, of stones and earth, now grassed over. Pointing in the direction of this, and in the middle of the plan, is another, similar, but in many parts more stony, ranging east and west 570 feet, and vanishing at its farther extremity

tremity just beyond a large stone measuring 4 ft. \times 1½ ft. Nearly parallel with this, and leaving between them a passage averaging 9 ft. in clear width, runs a third, 350 feet long, stony also, only 4 ft. across, and terminating abruptly at a stone 2 ft. in length, set up on edge in the ground at its east end. From its opposite end runs southward 150 feet a lateral branch, very stony, and almost entirely so toward its well-marked extremity. South of this,—and on that side approximately bounding the area occupied by cairns,—is a grassed bank of the same type, 1100 feet long, in some parts, especially toward the west, but faintly marked. On the northernmost slope of the hill, and bearing north-west and south-east, is a similar bank, 150 feet long, with a cairn-shaped swell at its upper end. In addition to the foregoing, there are many short bits of such banks, for the most part on the flat top of the ridge. Some of these, though now detached, strongly suggest original continuity. The missing portions may have disappeared, partly by degradation, and partly by that rising of the general surface which, when conditions favour, is a well-understood result of natural processes.

It may here be added that on a low rocky nab in the south-west corner, separated from the village by a broad but very shallow depression, are two straight parallel rows of small stones, set 4½ ft. to 5 ft. apart, 16 ft. long on one side and 6 ft. on the other. If not remains of the edging of a former bank or wall which has since disappeared, their intent is not apparent.

Though now so unfeatured, it may be that all these banks are but ruins of rude thick walls. It is not, however, easy to see why they were erected: for the lines could not have been defended; and there is nothing in the circumstances of the spot to suggest the need for such an open system of agricultural fences. In ancient areas of cultivation, similar banks are frequently found: and, in
many

many such cases, it is natural to suppose that they may have been cast up to define the limits of holdings.

All the fences shown in the plan are not, however, at present in the form of banks. Two of them are distinctly of different character. In the south-eastern quarter may be seen the footings of a 2 ft. wall, extending to a length of 190 feet, in some parts faintly marked, and nowhere standing above the surface of the ground. At the extreme north, and edging up westward toward the brow of the rather steep slope along which they lie, are the ruins of another and bolder stone wall, 240 feet long, with an outer chamber attached to it. In character these are more affiliated to the remains below Raven Crag than to those of Barnscar,—to which, however, by proximity, they seem to belong.

(III) There are 358 cairns shown in the plan. As before stated, these are practically all that are on the ground, except the few before-mentioned southernmost ones which are outside the limits of the plan. It will, I think, be quite inclusive, and very near the truth, to call the total number of cairns, in round numbers, 400. They are of various forms,—oval, circular, oblong and triangular: but the great majority are of the first two classes—which, practically, are but variations of one, the circular. In size they range between 25 ft. and 5 ft. diameter; and are generally of low elevation, often scarcely relieved from the general surface. Superficially they are of all degrees of appearance, from flat grassy mounds to cairns in which stones visibly abound. In a very few instances portions of slight stone edging may yet be seen. As is not uncommon, there seems to have been in several places an intentional arrangement in lines or groups: but nothing more than this is suggested by the plan. Here and there it is also suggested that certain cairn-like mounds in line may, in reality, be only short portions of banks, the rest of which may have disappeared. The irregular distribu-
tion

tion of the cairns is, in a few places, due to the condition of the land—whether wet or dry : but this is by no means generally the case ; eligible sites being very unevenly occupied.

The stones of one of the larger cairns eastward have been gathered up into a “bield,” or shelter, for shepherds : and, at five points along the ridge-way, piles of stones (two of them on cairns) have recently been set up for guidance in misty weather.

Water Supply.—The only means of procuring water for the village was by resorting to the runnels on the northern flank of the hill or to Black Beck on its southern side. The supply furnished by the former would be precarious ; and in dry weather would cease ; while the latter is more than a quarter of a mile away.

Notices.—Of history, there is none. Neither Camden, nor either of his editors in their “ Additions,” nor Nicolson and Burn, nor West, mention the place : and the second-hand descriptive notices in the local guide-books, short as they are, have errors which a visit to the spot would have enabled the writers to avoid. Barnscar does not appear in Morden’s map of Cumberland, used for Gibson’s edition of the *Britannia* ; but in Cary’s map, dated 1803, and substituted in Gough’s latest edition for the older one, the place is marked as “ Remains of the City of Barnaska.”

The only early and original account of Barnscar (which, by the kind assistance of the Editor of these *Transactions*, I am enabled to quote) is given by Hutchinson in his *History of Cumberland*, 1794,* from whence all later writers on this subject have drawn their information. He says :—“ On an estate belonging to Mr. William Singleton, to the north of Corney, are ruins of a considerable magnitude, called by the country people *Barnscar*, or *Bardskew*, or, in the maps, *Barnsea* : there is no tradition that gives us any

* Vol. i. page 562.

light what this place was, or to whom it originally belonged: by the great number of druidical remains in that neighbourhood, it may be reasonably conjectured, that this was the place of some of the ancient bards: but how far names subject to corruption, by length of time and changes of people and languages, are to guide conjectures like these, is submitted to the reader. The form of the ruins, or anything found therein, do not serve to support the notion of such distant antiquity." In a foot-note on the same page, Hutchinson refers to the following more particular account furnished by the Rev. Aaron Marshall, incumbent of Eskdale from 1770 to 1814, which is given under Eskdale Chapelry.* "It may possibly not be thought improper to mention another piece of antiquity in this neighbourhood, though out of the chapelry, the *Ruins* of the *City of Barnscar*, which is situated on a verdant hill, in the manor of Birkby, at the foot of the lake, called Devoke Water. Tradition gives the place to the Danes, who, it is said, gathered for inhabitants the men of Drig, and the women of Beckermot, in memory of which, there is yet a popular saying, 'Let us go together like lads of Drig and lasses of Beckermot.' This place is about 300 yards long, from east to west; and 100 yards broad, from north to south, now walled round, save at the east end, near three feet in height: there appears to have been a long street with several cross ones: the remains of housesteads, within the walls, are not very numerous, but on the outside of the walls they are innumerable, especially on the south side and west end: the circumference of the city and suburbs is near three computed miles; the figure an oblong square: there is an ancient road through the city, leading from Ulpha to Ravenglass."

Relics.—Mr. Marshall concludes his account by recording that "about the year 1730, a considerable quantity of

* *Ibid* p. 578.

silver coin was found in the ruins of one of the houses, concealed in a cavity, formed in a beam: they were claimed by the lord of the manor." Hutchinson adds:—"We have no further information of this treasure, which perhaps would prove the antiquity of the place."

Within the past year or two, Lord Muncaster, to whom the property belongs, cut a few trenches, examined some of the huts in the village, and dug into several cairns. In these were found, in an inverted position, several small cinerary urns, of the type commonly called "British," a few fragments of pottery, and some burnt bones. There are indications of small burrowings of earlier date which have not been recorded. First and last, 14 cairns appear to have been more or less opened, three trenches dug, and some attention given to two or three of the huts.

Conclusions.—Marshall's topography is confused and self-contradictory. In the same sentence he describes the place as being only 300 yards long and 100 yards broad; yet "near three computed miles" in circuit: as being "walled round, save at the east end;" yet as having, "outside of the walls, a long street with several cross ones," and "innumerable housesteads;" for which he mistook the cairns. I agree with the Editor in the opinion which he has sent to me, that, in recording the tradition as to the Danes, Marshall "had evidently got into some confusion between two places called Barnscar in this part of Cumberland:" for, as Chancellor Ferguson points out, there is another spot so named on the sea-coast, opposite to, and about a mile from Drigg, to which, if to any, the legend is more likely to apply. There must also be some unexplained error in the account of the coins, written for Hutchinson at least 60 years later than the find. It is incredible that any such beam could have appertained to the dwellings or cairns at the Birkby Barnscar; and, if found on the spot, it must have been placed there at a date far later than that of its
ancient

ancient occupation. But it is probable that the locality of the find was elsewhere. In either event, even if the coins were forthcoming, they would furnish no evidence of the age of the settlement.

I think it will generally be conceded that tradition errs in assigning this Barnscar to the Danes. It is absurd to speak of it as a "city;" for it can never have been anything but a very unimportant place—a mere upland village inhabited by a small pastoral, and perhaps agricultural, community. If the cairns were the burial-places of all its people, and of none but these, their number seems to indicate tenancy for, it may be, three or four generations: but if raised only over the remains of the more considerable persons, the period of occupation may have extended to centuries.
