

III.

THE CAIRNS IN CROMAR, ABERDEENSHIRE.

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The district of Cromar is extremely rich in cairns. It seems not improbable that within its limited area are contained more of these structures than within any county in Scotland. In the Report on Sutherlandshire of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, though doubt may perhaps be thrown upon what the Commissioners defined as cairns, it would appear that the total number of cairns in that large county is less than that in Cromar; and Lieut. Thomas ("Celtic Antiquities of Orkney," *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv. p. 88) estimates that in that county "at least two thousand might still be numbered." But I have myself, or by the assistance of others, counted in Cromar 1947 cairns, and it is likely that many more must of necessity have been overlooked in the extensive tracts of broom and rank heather.

In Cromar there are three distinct varieties at least of cairns to be found, which for distinction I shall term *small*, *large*, and *giant* cairns.

The small cairns are mostly circular in shape, with diameters varying from 10 feet upwards, and are all bun-shaped, with a height of from 1 to 2 feet. It is not uncommon to find three, four, or five of them so placed as to be in a straight line with one another, suggesting that they were intentionally thus arranged, and reminding one of the "Reihengräber" in the burial-fields of the Bronze Age mentioned by Herr Theodor Benecke of Harburg in his description of "Vorgeschichtliche Friedhöfe" in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* of 5th January 1913.

Between the small and large varieties there are no intermediate forms, and the impression one receives is that they are quite distinct and had each a different import.

The cairns which we distinguish as large are also circular in shape, are about 4 or 5 feet in height and have a diameter of some 40 feet. They are generally flattened on the top, even when they have not been disturbed, so that this seems to have been their original design. While the small cairns, as will presently be mentioned, tend to be met with in assemblages, the large cairns are never grouped together, but have the peculiarity of being at least half a mile apart, though they sometimes stand on the outskirts of a collection of the small ones.

The localities where the large and small cairns occur are never on the extreme hill-tops, but on the shoulders of the foot-hills, less abundantly

on the lower grounds, and always where the rock is covered by a stratum of soil, as if any interment they contain necessitated some scooping out of the earth beneath. In this they resemble the cairnless cemeteries—"Flachengräber" or "Urnenfelder" of the Bronze or early Roman Age—of which Benecke writes that they are found "Auf höher belegenen Grundstücken . . . auf einem ihren Göttern geweihten Hügel auf dem sie ihre Opfer darbrachten."

The giant cairns form a separate class and have their special peculiarities. Their diameters are very large, from, say, 70 to 100 feet; the height is also greater, being from 10 to 12 feet; their form is that of a pointed cone, not truncated like the large cairns; and their circumference is circular, with the single exception of the Blue Cairn on the south of Craig Dhu on the Balnagowan range of hills. Those at Tilly-cairn, Knocksoul, and Drummy stand on stone platforms which extend beyond their bases.

There are numerous instances in Cromar in which the small cairns are planned in connection with prehistoric walls, but so far as has been observed there are none where the walls are directly connected with the large and giant cairns; although they may approach very close to them, they do not appear to form part of the same plan.

The giant cairns in Cromar are found close to the great entering roads along which dangers might have approached, and are all, with one exception, on commanding points whence they are visible from one another, which suggests at least one purpose which they may have served.

So far as my observation has gone, I believe that *Cemeteries of Cairns* are peculiar to the North of Scotland, and that the largest of these are in Cromar. When a map of Cromar, on which all these prehistoric objects have been laid down, is examined some interesting inferences may be drawn. There seems no reason to doubt that the small cairns are burial-places, and they are in a vast majority, while the large and giant cairns form only a minute proportion, and are dissociated from the former. That the custom of burying the dead in specified localities which exists among us at the present day, existed also among the cairn-builders, is distinctly observable. Apart from the large and giant cairns, it is rather a rare thing to find an isolated cairn. They are in groups, and great areas exist upon which there are no cairns at all, even where the operations of the agriculturist or road-mender are not responsible for their absence. The interment of the dead was not done in haphazard fashion, but was carried out in special situations.

THE CROMAR CEMETERIES.

The aggregation of cairns into groups reaches in Britain its climax in the great cemeteries on the Balnagowan and Craiglich Hills. So far as I know there is nothing elsewhere that can for a moment be compared with them for size, and they strike with amazement the very few visitors who penetrate to the remote localities where they lie and who possess sufficient discernment to understand and appreciate them.

There are few data obtainable regarding the number of cairns that exist in particular districts, for almost no one has taken the trouble to observe their distribution and record their numbers. Even the large-scale maps of the Ordnance Survey do not afford accurate information on these points. Hence comparisons as to the numbers of cairns in different parts of the country can be only approximately accurate. But my wanderings in many places where prehistoric remains are to be found lead me to think that groups of cairns approaching in number to a hundred are rare, and the literature of archaeology tells the same tale. In the map of Stonehenge given by Ferguson at p. 102 of his work on *Rude Stone Monuments*, there are only 97 barrows to be counted in that district; and Lord Avebury (*Prehistoric Times*, p. 147) gives the number as "no less than 270." In the 25-inch Westmorland Ordnance Survey of the Crosby-Ravensworth district, and in the similar maps of the valley of the White Esk in which Castle O'er lies, few cairns or tumuli can be made out, while the same is true of Dartmoor, Shap, Greaves Ash, Raedykes, the Barmekin, the Caterthuns, the Ord of Lairg, and other prehistoric sites which I have explored. Dalhalvaig in Sutherland is the largest collection of cairns I have met with outside Cromar, and it numbers fewer than 100. The Royal Commissioners on the Ancient and Prehistoric Monuments in Scotland make a hardly intelligible distinction between "cairns" and "mounds," and do not in their report on Sutherland mention the number of mounds, but it is some evidence of the rarity of cemeteries to find that they give (p. xlii) the total number of cairns in that county as 117. The largest collection of "Hünen-gräber" mentioned by Benecke is 25.

Compared with these, the Balnagowan Cemetery contains at least 903 cairns, and that on Craiglich Hill 967, entitling them to the claim we make for them of being the largest prehistoric cemeteries in Great Britain.

As an evidence of the sanctity which the prehistoric inhabitants of Cromar attached to their cairns, it is interesting to observe that, not

only in the case of the isolated or small groups of cairns, some of which are near the sites of their dwellings, but also in the great cemeteries such as those of Craiglich and Balnagowan, crowded as the latter are, and difficult as it must have been to collect a sufficient number of stones for forming the later cairns, none of the earliest of those that were placed there is ever found despoiled of its heap, or in any way interfered with. Wherever desecration has occurred, it has been the work of later times, by those who sought to rifle the cairn of its supposed contents or to procure some of the stones for modern purposes.

In the cemeteries and groups of cairns in Cromar, one frequently meets with those curious accompaniments called by some "Ghost Walls." In the Craiglich cemetery such a wall winds about among the cairns at the southern end; in the Balnagowan cemetery, near to St Machar's Cross, there are several others, some of which might perhaps be called "long cairns," but most are evidently walls; and they exist in other places, in situations and directions which suggest their connection with some kind of superstition.

In Cromar it is exceptional to meet with cairns whose base is not circular; some indeed are found which are *long* or *oval*, one or two that are *comma-shaped*, and a small number are so long in proportion to their breadth that they might well be termed *linear*; but I think it may be asserted with confidence that all really belong to the race who made the round cairns.

There is one long cairn which is one of the most remarkable structures in Cromar; possibly it is unique anywhere; it is so singular that it is a wonder it has not before been described, but so far as I am aware this has not been the case. Its situation is in a thickly planted part of the Balnagowan Wood, near its western side, and when viewed from one end has the appearance of a straight linear cairn 320 feet in length, made of the usual rounded stones of portable size, and has the common height of about 3 feet. When it came to be worked out on a survey, however, it was seen to consist of a series of segments, five in number, but all forming portions of a single plan. Its general direction was $21^{\circ} 45'$ west of the true north, assuming the magnetic variation for this district to be $18^{\circ} 45'$. If this bearing were prolonged northwards, it would appear to end in or pass a few yards to the east of the Blue Cairn, but the trees prevent an accurate estimate being formed of this, or of its relation to the visible horizon in either the north or south direction. This complicated cairn commences at its southern end in a horseshoe-shaped cairn 20 feet long and 7 broad. A gap of $16\frac{1}{2}$ feet follows, and we then arrive at the central or main portion, 105 feet long with an average

breadth of 9 feet, with projections and cup-like hollows; and after another gap of 16 feet, it continues as a bottle-shaped cairn 65 feet long, 15 feet broad at its southern end, and lessening to 8, 7, and 6 feet at the bottle neck. Finally, after a third gap of 17 feet, its termination on the north is a circular cairn with a diameter of only 6 feet. The plan of the whole shows a general resemblance to the outlines of the Milky Way at the section occupied by the constellations of Cassiopeia and Cygnus.

Though the late Rev. Dr Michie of Dinnet and others have examined a few of the Cromar cairns, and some objects of interest have been found in them, such as fragments of gold, and stone axe-heads, yet hitherto no proper exploration on scientific lines has been made of any of them. Stone cists and human remains have been found in some, but no examination of the ground beneath has been made, no "pit-holes" underneath discovered, nor any investigation undertaken as to the manner in which they were planned or founded.

The cemeteries and collections of cairns in Cromar appear to have had no connection with the underground dwellers who at one time existed in the same district. The earth-houses have no relation, in point of vicinity or in any other respect, to the localities where the cairns are to be found. It seems more probable that the earth-dwellers were what are termed "Urnenfeld" buriers.