

III.

DESCRIPTION OF AN EARTH-HOUSE AT PITCUR, FORFARSHIRE. BY DAVID MACRITCHIE, F.S.A. Scot.

Although the existence of the large and important earth-house at Pitcur has been known to this Society for many years, the Society's volumes of *Proceedings* contain as yet no representation of the place. It is for this reason that I now submit a brief description of this interesting structure, illustrated by a carefully-executed diagram of its ground plan,¹ with some sectional views.

It is situated in a field on the farm of Pitcur, $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles south-east of Coupar-Angus, and it is locally known as 'The Cave.' Access to it may be obtained either by entering a gate on the east side of the public road opposite the ancient tower and modern farm-house of Pitcur; or otherwise it may be approached from the south side of the farm-house of 'Leys of Hallyburton,' which is only a few hundred yards from 'The Cave.' A protective post-and-wire fence marks the spot; and that portion of the structure which is still roofed over is further safeguarded by having a locked door at its entrance (*c* in the ground plan), the key of which is kept by the lodge-keeper, at the main entrance to Hallyburton House. Visitors to the 'Cave' will therefore bear in mind that the first step is to obtain the key, if the original appearance of the building is to be properly understood; for the greater part of the earth-house is a complete wreck, and only the roofed-in portion remains unaltered since it was built.

It will be seen from the ground plan (fig. 1) that this Pitcur weem is longer and more varied than most of its congeners in Scotland. The

¹ The orientation of the ground plan is obtained from the latest Ordnance Survey; for which I have to express my indebtedness to Captain Bairnsfather of Beechwood, Coupar-Angus.

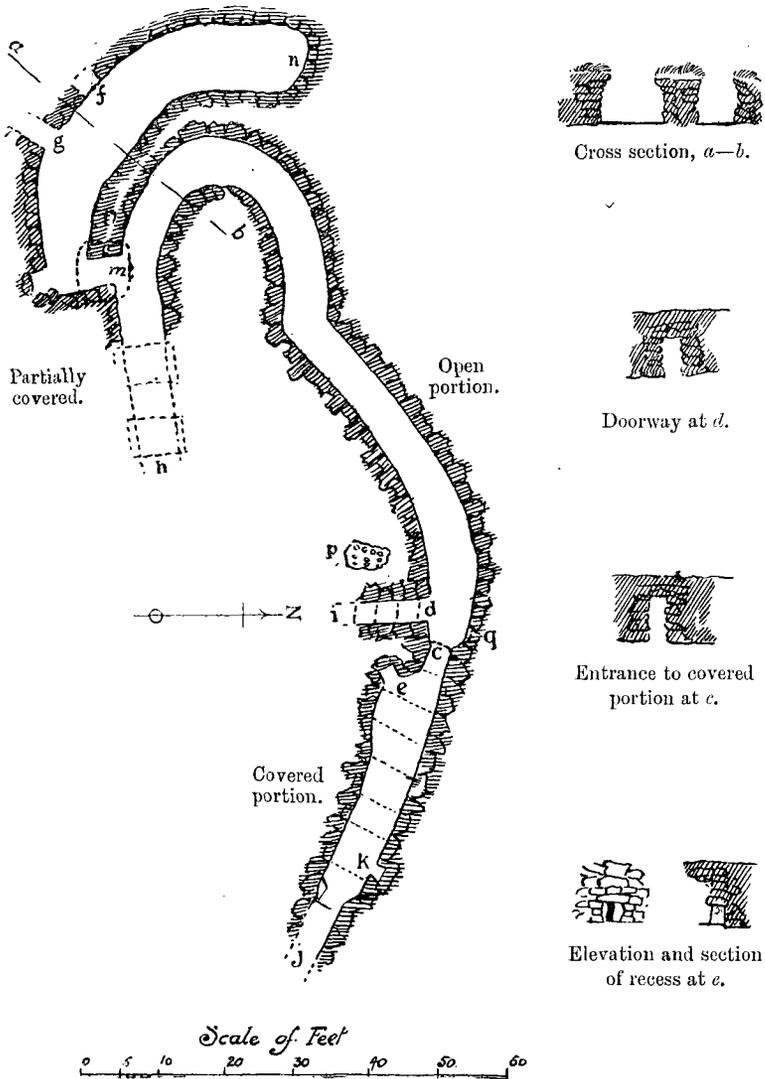


Fig. 1. Ground Plan and Sections of Earth-House at Pitcur, Forfarshire.

only one in my experience that was of as considerable a size was situated at Caolas, in North Uist; but that specimen was so utterly destroyed some years ago, for the sake of its stones, that one cannot say what its dimensions were. The Pitcur house consists of one long subterranean gallery, slightly curved throughout most of its length, and bending abruptly in a hook shape at its western end. From this western end a short, broad gallery or room goes off, curving round the outside of the 'hook.' The length of the main gallery, following the medial line, and measuring from the extreme of the entrance at either end, is about 190 feet; while the subsidiary room is 60 feet long. For most of its length, this subsidiary room is 10 feet wide, measuring at the floor level. On account of this unusual width, it is reasonable to suppose that its roof was of timber; for although the walls slightly converge at the top, reducing the intervening space to 8 or 9 feet, the span is still so great that a flagged roof would scarcely have been practicable. To be sure, the walls might have been raised several courses higher, in the usual 'Cyclopean arch,' and thus the interval to be bridged would become sufficiently narrowed at a height of say 12 feet. But there is no indication that the walls of any portion of this earth-house ever rose higher than the present level of their highest parts. Thus the inference is that this subsidiary room may have been roofed with timber.

The same deduction has been made with regard to the earth-houses discovered on the estate of Mudhall, in the parish of Bendochy, 3 or 4 miles to the north-west of the one presently under consideration. "They appear to have been roofed with rafters of wood, covered with earth and turf," says the Rev. Dr Marshall in the course of his description of them.¹ He does not give his reasons for drawing this inference, but presumably they are based, as in the case of the side room at Pitcur, upon the absence of any sign of roof-stones. If the conclusion in either case is correct, it would accord with the statement made in the tenth-century Saga of Thorgils ('Orrabeen's Step-son'), that the roof of a

¹ *Historic Scenes in Perthshire*, Edinburgh, 1880, p. 234.

certain underground house in Ireland "rested upon upward-bent balks,"¹ or beams of wood; which pretty plainly implies that the roof itself was of wood. Then, again, there was an earth-house discovered in Mid-Lothian, towards the end of last century, about a mile and a half south-west of Borthwick Castle, which presumably was roofed with wood. When discovered, at anyrate, it had no traces of a stone roof.² Thus, although the great majority of the souterrains of the British Islands appear to have been roofed with massive flag-stones, yet it would seem that timber roofs were employed in some instances, and probably this subsidiary room at Pitcur was a case in point. That seems to be the most one can say upon the subject, for no vestige of a roof is visible at the present day, and the whole of this side room is open to the sky.

So also is the main gallery, except towards the eastern extremity, where a section of about 50 feet in length yet retains its roof of huge flag-stones intact (J to C in ground plan). It is this covered portion that is inaccessible without the key of the door that has been placed at the doorway *c*, for that is very properly kept locked;³ and as for access from the entrance J, that is rendered impossible, owing to the fact that the ground overhead is arable land, and the original entrance has been ploughed over until it has dwindled into a mere rabbit-hole. This covered section is unquestionably the most interesting and instructive of the whole building; for, as already stated, the other parts are more or less ruined and roofless. A few remaining flags lying in the unroofed part of the main gallery show, however, that it once possessed the usual stone roof throughout its entire length. This was rendered possible by the comparative narrowness of the main gallery, the width of which on the floor averages about 6 feet. The greater breadth of the subsidiary gallery will be realised by glancing at the cross section, *a—b* in the plan.

¹ *Thorgrils's Historie*, translated by Professor B. Thorlacius, Copenhagen, 1809, pp. 70-72. (*Floamanna Saga*.)

² Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*, p. 453 of vol. iii., edition of 1799.

³ As mentioned above, the key is kept at the gatekeeper's lodge beside the entrance to Hallyburton, on the main road between Coupar-Angus and Pitcur.



Fig. 2. Pitcur Earth House. Interior view looking from *c* towards *k*.

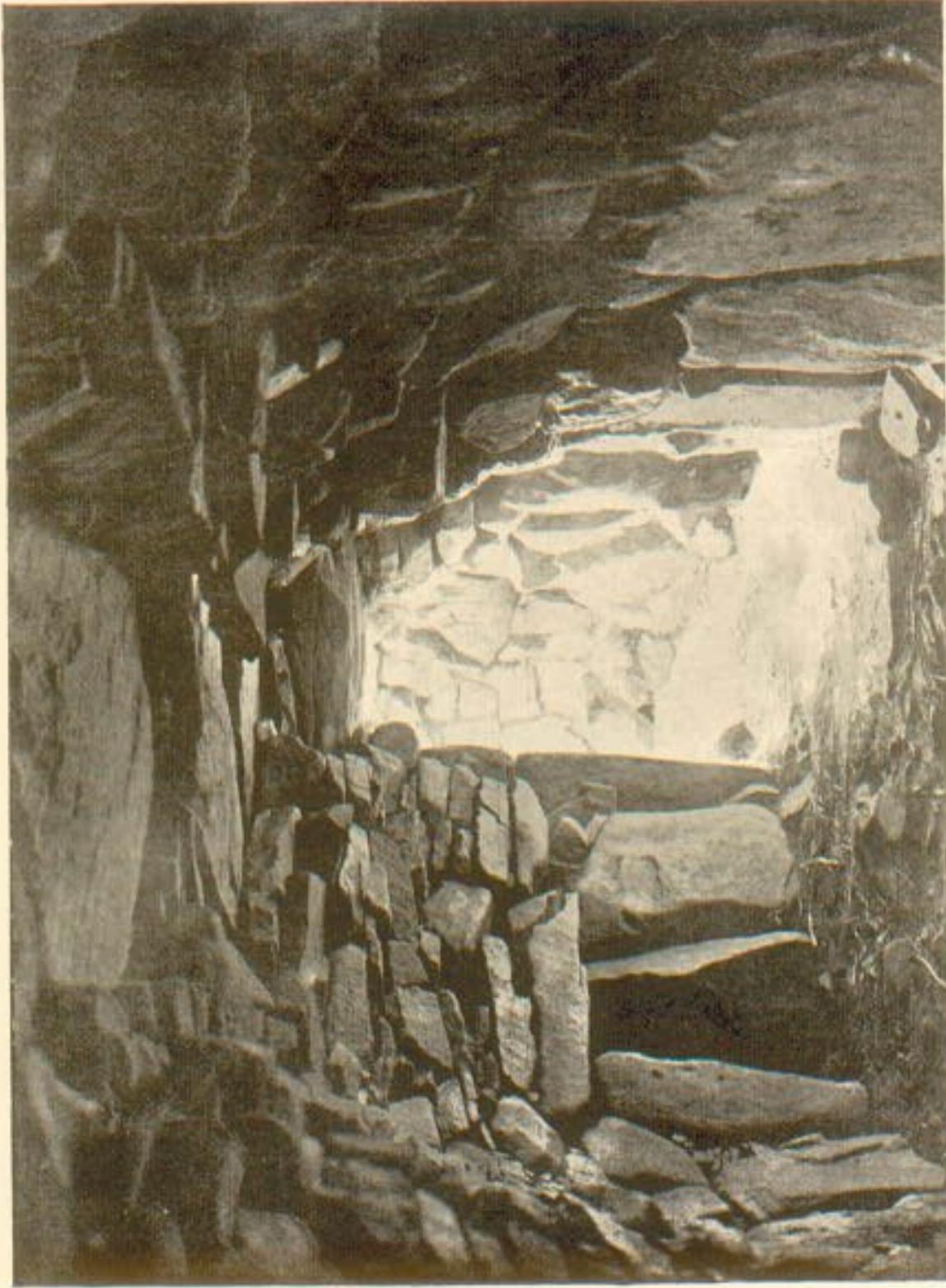


Fig. 3. Pitcur Earth-House. Interior view looking from *k* towards *e*, and showing fireplace (*e*).

The Pitcur earth-house had at least three separate entrances, namely, at the points *h*, *i*, and *j*. The subsidiary room appears also to have had an independent connection with the outside world, at the point *g*, and perhaps also at *f*, though the latter may only mark a fireplace or air-hole, for the condition of the ruin makes it difficult for one to speak with certainty. The entrance at *i*, which slopes rapidly downward, is roofed all the way to *d*; and consequently this short passage remains in its original state.

Within the covered portion, and quite near its entrance, a well-built recess (*e* in the plan) seems clearly to have been used as a fireplace, although the orifice which presumably once connected it with the upper air is now covered over. Another and a smaller recess in the covered portion (*k* in the plan) can hardly have been a fireplace, and it is difficult to know what it was used as.

One other point of interest is the presence of two cup-marked stones (*p* and *q* on the plan). Of these, the former is lying isolated on the surface of the ground near the entrance *i*, while the latter forms one of the wall stones beside the doorway *c*. Curiously enough, the two cup-marked stones in the earth-house at Tealing, in the same county of Forfar, occupy exactly similar positions. The presence of these cup-marked stones at Pitcur, however, is only mentioned here as a necessary detail of the description. For, as Dr Anderson remarks¹ in connection with the stones at Tealing, such cup-marked stones are found in various situations, and their occurrence in connection with that earth-house "has therefore no special significance with respect to the age of the structure, and there is nothing in the association or the circumstances in which they occur in this particular instance which contributes to our knowledge of the purpose or significance of the markings themselves. They may or may not have been sculptured on the stone before it was taken to form part of this underground gallery." These observations, made with reference to the cup-marked stones at Tealing, are equally applicable to those at Pitcur.

¹ *Scotland in Pagan Times: The Iron Age*, Edinburgh, 1883, pp. 299-300.

It is instructive to note that the Pitcur earth-house is one of only three survivors of a number of earth-houses formerly existing within a radius of 10 miles from it. These others have disappeared in the usual way, a comparatively short time after their discovery, through neglect and indifference, or by deliberate spoliation, their massive stones being found useful for building purposes. The other specimens were situated as follows:—One on the same farm (discovered in 1863); one on the top of Dunsinnan,¹ 4 miles to the south-west; four in the parish of Auchterhouse, about 4 miles to the east;² one at Tealing, 8 miles to the east, this specimen being happily still in good preservation;³ ‘several’ on the estate of Mudhall, 3 miles to the north-west;⁴ one at Coupar-Grange,

¹ Discovered in 1854, and subsequently destroyed. See the Society’s *Proceedings*, vol. ii. pp. 93-99, and vol. ix. pp. 378-380.

² With regard to these, the Rev. W. Mason Inglis, F.S.A. Scot., minister of Auchterhouse, writes (30th December 1899): “Several of these remarkably interesting weems have been discovered [at Auchterhouse]—one of them not far from the church and another near the mansion-house. In the former, the space between the walls and the covering was full of rich mould, in which were found ashes of burnt wood, bones, and other deposits formed by the refuse of ancient repasts. In the latter were found bones, several querns—those in my possession being 14 inches in diameter—a bronze ring of primitive workmanship, and the bones of animals. In the immediate neighbourhood two similar subterranean dwellings were also discovered. One of these contained apartments constructed entirely of large flat stones. In these recesses were found wood ashes, several fragments of large stone vessels, and a quern. The other was simply a vault, in which were found a large stone vessel and a celt.

“These interesting structures have fallen in and have disappeared long ago. The *one* on my glebe was long utilised by a predecessor as a store-house for potatoes; but, unfortunately, this perished also through ignorance and stupidity. . . . This is all the information I possess in regard to these ancient structures in this parish.”

³ See the Society’s *Proceedings*, vol. x. pp. 287-288, and Plate IX.; the account and the illustration being both by the late Andrew Jervise, F.S.A. Scot. This earth-house was discovered in 1871.

⁴ “In the middle or towards the close of last century, several of these subterranean buildings were discovered in the course of digging operations on the estate of Mudhall. Mr Playfair (minister of Bendochy 1785-1812), in the *Old Statistical Account* of the parish, takes particular notice of this discovery as follows:—‘Several subterranean buildings were uncovered which, when cleared of the ashes and earth with which they were filled, were found to be 6 feet wide within walls, 5 feet deep, and 40 feet long, or more. They were built in the sides and paved in the bottom

1 mile north of Mudhall;¹ one at Ruthven, 5 miles north-east of Coupar-Grange;² five at Airlie,³ 2 miles north-east of Ruthven, of which one still survives, thanks to the care of a former Earl of Airlie, who, at the time of its discovery in the latter part of last century, inserted a special clause in the lease of the farm on which it is situated, stipulating that the tenant in all time coming should be bound to do no damage to the earth-house;⁴ and lastly, there was an earth-house at Meigle, 4 miles north of Pitcur, of which a portion is believed yet to exist within the grounds of the manse.⁵

Thus the Pitcur earth-house and the specimens at Tealing and Airlie, altogether only three in number, are the only survivors of a scattered group of about twenty, which have been discovered at various times during the last four or five generations. Special precautions have preserved the Airlie specimen intact, and that at Tealing appears to have been fairly well looked after. It is a matter of regret that the Pitcur with rough whinstones. In their length they were not straight, but a portion of a circle. It would seem that they had been roofed with wood, and covered above with earth and turf." The foregoing is extracted from an unpublished MS. of the late Rev. George Brown, minister of Bendochy, with reference to which his son, the Rev. James Brown, Elchies, Morayshire, observes (2nd January 1900): "There were no traces of these 'earth-houses' left by the time my father became minister of Bendochy. In his MS. he distinctly states that the discovery was made on the estate of *Mudhall*. As to the Coupar-Grange affair, I rather think it was a different building entirely. At least Pennant's description of the remains in his *Second Tour* points that way." It may be explained that Coupar-Grange lies about 1 mile to the north of Mudhall. It is therefore quite possible that the earth-house referred to in Pennant's *Tour* may have been one of those on Mudhall. On the other hand, the fact that Coupar-Grange is specified seems to indicate that the weem was situated within the lands of Coupar-Grange.

¹ See preceding note.

² "In a brae south of the Kirk of Ruthven there was a weem," says Dr Marshall (*Historic Scenes in Forfarshire*, p. 153).

³ Dr Anderson (*Scotland in Pagan Times: The Iron Age*, p. 292) specifies "a group of five," four of which appear to have been obliterated during recent times.

⁴ For accounts of this weem see the Society's *Proceedings*, vol. v. pp. 352-355, and Plate XXI.; also *The Antiquary* for July 1898 (Elliot Stock, London).

⁵ This I was informed some years ago by a local worthy, who stated that the weem crossed the present road in front of the manse, but had been greatly destroyed at the time the road was made or modified.

earth-house, which is of much greater importance in size and character, should have undergone so much destruction since its discovery; but there is at least this consolation, that the small portion of it which has escaped ruin is now carefully safeguarded by the proprietor.

Since the above paper was read, several interesting facts have come to my knowledge. Acting upon the suggestion of Dr Anderson, I placed myself in communication with Mr A. Granger Heiton, F.S.A. Scot., son of Mr John Granger, tenant of the farm of Pitcur, who was at the expense of excavating the earth-house, or a portion of it, at the time of its discovery in 1878.

"The objects found by him," writes Mr Heiton, "were (1) a small red clay bowl of Samian ware in pieces, afterwards put together and found to be complete; (2) a Roman coin. One or two other coins were reported as having been found, but were not seen by him. These two articles were the only ones found by members of my family. . . . I am of opinion that our knowledge of the building could and should be greatly increased by a systematic examination of the soil in and around the building; the soil never having been sifted. The proprietor would doubtless give permission if approached in the name of the Society."

I further learned from Mr Heiton that the earth-house described in these pages is quite separate and distinct from that Pitcur earth-house, a portion of whose contents was given to the Museum as far back as 13th April 1863.¹ Hitherto, having been unaware of the fact that the large earth-house had not been discovered until 1878, I had assumed that the relics in the Museum had come from it instead of from the structure which had been unearthed fifteen years earlier. With regard to this earth-house last referred to, Mr Heiton writes:—

"As to the other find on the farm [of Pitcur], I have heard of an underground chamber having been discovered in a sandy knoll in a field called Ballo-field, on the S.W. of the farm, and just below the road leading between Pitcur and Ballo farms. Mr Hood [who presented the relics to the Society in 1863] was tenant of Pitcur at that time, but I only heard of the discovery fifteen years after it took place, when all trace had disappeared, and only the vague description of the griever who was at the discovery was to be obtained."

Our Society, therefore, does not at present possess any relics from the

¹ See p. 244 of Catalogue: HD, (1, 2) fragments of red embossed lustrous ware, (3) flint chip, (4) bodkin of bone, found along with iron implements.

earth-house described in the foregoing pages; but by the favour of Mr W. D. Graham Menzies of Hallyburton and Pitcur, F.S.A. Scot., the bowl found in 1878 has been sent for exhibition, and a representation of it is now here figured, elucidated by a description from the pen of Dr Joseph Anderson.

[The Samian bowl, which has been reconstructed so far as the pieces fit together and is shown in fig. 4, is 8 inches in diameter and 5 inches high. It is of the usual form of these bowls, with ornamentation in relief, having a rounded lip, underneath which is a plain band $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in depth. Under the plain band is the usual band of festoon and tassel ornament. Below this on the round of the lower part of the bowl is a band of ornament in relief arranged in panels or spaces separated vertically by wavy lines. These panels are wider at the top than at the bottom, in conformity with the rounded shape of the bowl, and are also of different widths. In the first panel to the left (as shown in fig. 4), which is subdivided across the middle of its height, there is in the upper part a bird within a medallion, and below it a hare. Below the hare are two small circles in relief. In the next panel, which is not subdivided, is a standing figure nude, and bearing a palm branch in the right hand. Underneath is a dog at speed. The third panel is a repetition of the first. The fourth is double the width, and contains at the top a lion in the act of springing, enclosed in a half circle; underneath is the subdivision of the panel by a row of five small circles between two borders of wavy lines. In the lower subdivision of the panel is another lion also about to leap. The fifth panel repeats the first and third. In the sixth panel is another standing figure nude, the upper part broken away.

With this bowl there are fragments of at least two other Samian bowls and a portion of the lip of a vessel of the ordinary coarse native pottery.]

It is interesting to note that both in the earth-house discovered in 1863—of which, unhappily, no trace now survives—and in the large earth-house still existing, there were found fragments of 'Samian' ware. Specimens of this ware were also found in the earth-houses of Tealing and Fithie, both in Forfarshire; and thus there are four underground

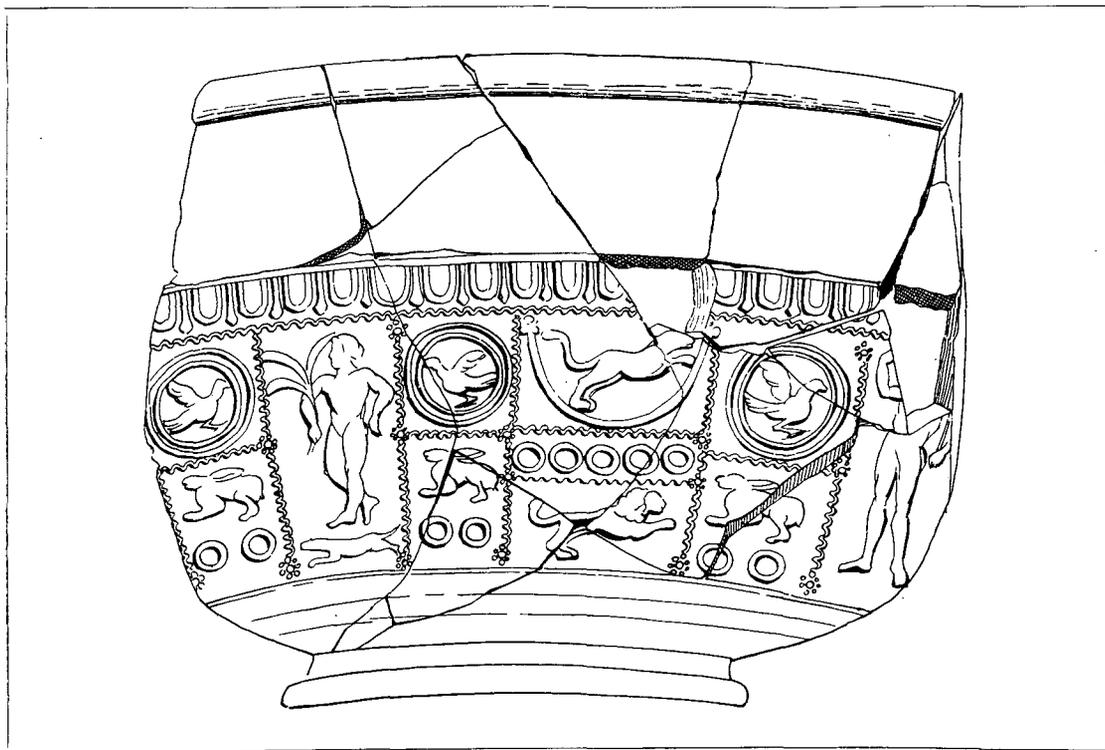


Fig. 4. Samian Bowl found in 1878 in the Earth-House at Pitcur. ($\frac{1}{2}$.)

sites on record, in this one county, in which this particular ware has been found.

Unfortunately, the Roman coin which was picked up at the same time as the bowl has been lost sight of ; temporarily, it may be hoped. Nor does there appear to be any trace of the "one or two other coins reported as having been found."

It would further seem that Mr Granger's excavation of 1878 was only partial, followed afterwards by supplementary excavation on the part of the late proprietor, Mr R. Stewart Menzies, M.P., with the result that many more objects were exhumed. The Hallyburton forester, who superintended these later excavations, speaks of "a bronze pin," as well as of a quantity of "stones, beads, etc.," all taken from this earth-house. And Sir Arthur Mitchell, who visited the place in company with the late proprietor, and who saw the whole collection of objects recovered, retains the impression that these numbered from one to two hundred, "many, of course, fragments, and many of no value." The numerous articles thus indicated by Sir Arthur Mitchell and the Hallyburton forester seem to have been mislaid—it is hoped not irretrievably—some time after the death of the late Mr Stewart Menzies.

[The Society is indebted to Mr MacRitchie for the use of the blocks of the ground plan, and interior views of the Earth-House.]