

III.

ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF A CINERARY URN WITH OTHER RELICS, NEAR MARCHHOUSE, MUIRKIRK, AND THE EXCAVATION OF AN EARTH-HOUSE AT YARDOUSES, CARNWATH. BY ARCHIBALD FAIRBAIRN, CORRESPONDING MEMBER.

CINERARY URN WITH OTHER RELICS FROM MUIRKIRK PARISH.

On the 29th of January 1924, a decorated cinerary urn, containing burnt bones and other relics, was recovered from the right bank of the

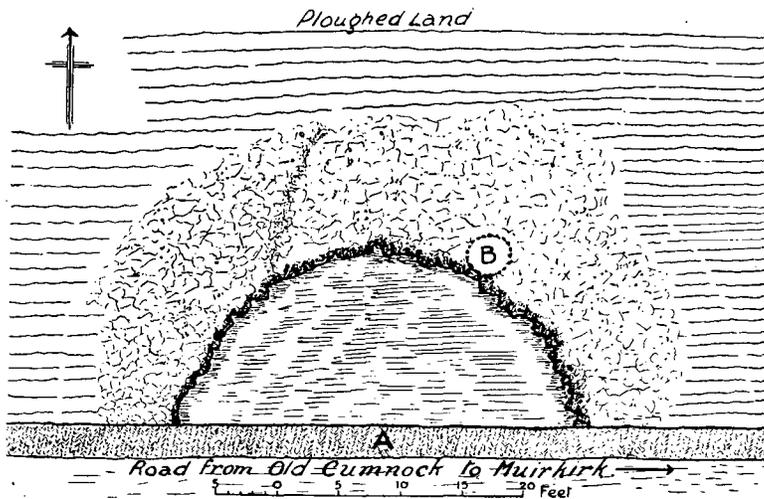


Fig. 1. Plan of denuded Cairn near Marchhouse.

public road leading from Muirkirk to Cumnock, at a point $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Muirkirk and 120 yards east of Marchhouse, a cottage situated on the roadside. The site of the find is the crest of a natural sandhill, over which the road takes its course (fig. 1), and where, quite recently, the steep gradient was cut out and the road lowered and widened to meet the requirements of modern traffic. The workmen at the time of the road improvement saw no signs of an interment, and it was on the date mentioned that Mr James Neilson, the road contractor, carrying out some repairs on the spot, noticed that the sand which had fallen from the bank by action of frost and thaw had exposed the urn in question. Information of the discovery was speedily brought

to me, which I conveyed to Major and Mrs Broun Lindsay of Well-wood, and when we arrived on the scene we found that the urn had already been removed from the bank, emptied of its contents, and deposited on the roadside.

A careful scrutiny revealed no further trace of urns that day, but 12 feet west of, and on the same level as, the urn burial—which was 5 feet from the present surface—I found embedded in the dark coloured sand of the cutting two unburnt bones, much decayed and very fragile.

It was noticeable from the discoloration of the filling-in that the urn had been buried in the sand, but how far below the prehistoric ground-level depended on the amount of turf, now converted into fine loam, accumulated there from the original road-cutting. From the depth of soil ascertained later in the exploration of the site, the cinerary urn had probably been buried about 2 feet deep, and there was no evidence that it had ever been contained within a cist. The urn, on discovery, was in an inverted position, covering a large deposit of burnt bones, and containing as well a small urn of the incense-cup type, an unburnt bone pin polished and pointed at one end, a bronze awl pointed at one end and flattened at the other, and an unworked flake of radiolarian chert.

We took charge of the urn in its soft condition, and also of its contents, and after careful drying and hardening the whole was deposited in the care of the Society.

On making a minute examination of the site the following day, I picked up from amongst the loose soil fallen from the cutting and within a few feet of the urn burial, a fragment of pottery showing part of the undecorated rim of a different vessel.

A thorough search of the whole site was decided upon, and carried out under the personal supervision of Major and Mrs Broun Lindsay. With the concurrence of the tenant farmer, a trial trench 27 feet long and 7 feet wide was opened in the field, parallel with the road-cutting and passing within 3 feet of the spot where the first discovery was made. Throughout there was an average depth of $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet of fine loam overlying sand, and the whole was carefully examined to a depth of $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet to clean undisturbed strata, without any further trace of urns being found.

Near the end of the trench on the west side a setting of stones, $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet wide, was encountered and laid bare. Leaving the inner and outer margin of this setting intact, the centre portion was removed and the ground examined underneath, without resulting in any further discovery of relics. The stones continued into the field at a depth of

2 feet below the surface, and they were followed far enough to ascertain their direction and to expose the arrangement of the margin. It was apparent that the setting took the form of a wide circle. There was no evidence of stones on the freshly ploughed surface of the field, nor any unevenness of the ground, to suggest a construction underneath, but by probing deeply the stones could be felt sufficiently well to enable a circle to be traced.

The application of the measuring-tape across the diameter of the mapped-out circle, from east to west, and parallel with the roadway, proved at once that the urn burial (A, fig. 1) occupied the exact centre of a circle 47 feet in diameter, the southern half of which had been demolished by the construction of the original roadway.

The excavation now proceeded with a view to exposing, perhaps, an enclosing wall, or the base of a protecting cairn. The chief difficulty lay in the disposal of the soil, and this was overcome by wheeling it off the area altogether, and by following up the outer margin first as a guide.

The accompanying plan, prepared by Major Broun Lindsay, D.S.O., accurately illustrates the construction found underneath the ploughing, and what is probably the remains of the base of a round cairn of the Bronze Age.

Midway between the surface and the inner margin of the south-west side of the cairn-base, several fragments of a cinerary urn corresponding to the fragment already referred to were found, and associated with them, a good sprinkling of burnt bones. At the same time, a similar fragment was found projecting from the upper soil of the road-cutting, 12 feet distant. All had the appearance of having been broken long ago, and were much overgrown with fibrous roots.

It was evident that the early roadmakers in cutting through the cairn, had broken and scattered with its contents, a thickly made cinerary urn with a plain rim, and had removed the central portion of the cairn covering the urn with the decorated rim; the modern road improvers also missed this vessel by a narrow margin in cutting out the gradient.

The interior of the area was examined carefully, as well as the upper part of the stony marginal base of the cairn, which in the higher parts the plough had somewhat damaged, and which still measured from $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet to 14 feet wide, but with disappointing results. The cairn-base within the margin of stones was next taken up and the ground underneath carefully trenched over, when it was seen that the construction had been laid down on a very poor and shallow soil overlying the sand.

At a point B indicated on the plan, and underneath the part of the cairn where there were most stones, the discoloration of the soil led to the discovery of a small pit which had been dug in the sand, and which

contained a rich deposit of burnt wood charcoal, intermixed with small fragments of incinerated bone. Possibly this was the method adopted for the disposal of the residue of the cremated ashes of the body, but there was absolutely no trace of the cremation having taken place on the spot, neither over any part of the base of the cairn nor underneath it.

In view of the importance of the find of the complete urn and its accompanying relics, the following particulars, gleaned on the spot, may be of interest.

The snowy whiteness of the burnt osseous fragments emptied from the cinerary urn was most noticeable, rivalling the description of the cremated remains of Hector. There were very few, not more than eight to ten fragments of burnt wood charcoal associated with the deposit, showing how carefully the ashes of the body had been gathered from amongst the cooled charcoal of the funeral fire.

The separate deposit of char, mixed with minute fragments of incinerated bone, found buried under the cairn strengthens the idea of methodical care, combined with sympathetic feeling, suggested by even the minor details.

Because of the problematical meaning and use of these diminutive urns, called "Incense Cups," found on rare occasions within, or associated with, cinerary urns, it is unfortunate that this one, otherwise in a perfect condition, should have been emptied of its contents before a minute examination had been made. I am, however, indebted to Mr James Neilson, who emptied both cinerary urn and incense cup, for the following details regarding the latter, and the position it occupied within the cinerary urn. The incense cup had been placed on the ground mouth upwards. It was filled with fine black ashes and a sprinkling of a white material, in small particles, presumably collected from the incinerated bone deposit which had been heaped over it within the urn. The bone pin was found in a vertical position, one end inserted into the contents of the incense cup and the other projecting several inches above its mouth. The bronze awl had also been placed within the incense cup, where it was found.

It is noteworthy that the pointed end of the bronze awl exactly fitted all the eighteen holes pierced through the widest part of the incense cup, while the flattened end of the pin fitted equally well the two circular grooves ornamenting its rim.

It is also worthy of note, that the incense cup was not used in this interment as an urn to contain cremated remains, and it is a matter of interest to inquire into the meaning of the perforations encircling it. Fire-vessels, ancient and modern, temporary and otherwise, have perforations constructed or pierced in them for the indraught of air to assist

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combustion. The means of fire-raising, in remote times, must have been both slow and uncertain, and a fire once kindled would then, as now, in outlying districts, be carefully attended and kept burning, for conveyance if necessary ; as a shepherd conveys a smouldering peat to set alight the heather. When such an important ceremony as a cremation burial had to be carried out, the solemn occasion would demand a sure and speedy means of setting alight the funeral pile. The quantity of black ashes which, on discovery, filled the incense cup, suggests that this vessel



1 2 3 inches

Fig. 2. Cinerary Urn from Marchhouse.

may have been used to convey smouldering material from the burning hearth to the funeral pyre, the vessel being finally included within the cinerary urn, as a sepulchral rite.

The cinerary urn (fig. 2), which measures $13\frac{3}{16}$ inches in height, $10\frac{1}{2}$ to $11\frac{1}{8}$ inches in diameter at the mouth, $11\frac{5}{8}$ inches at the bulge, and $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches across the base, is of dark brown colour, and has a heavy overhanging rim with a straight upright neck beneath, bordered at its junction with the tapering lower part by a slight cordon. The lip, which is sharply bevelled downwards on the interior, is decorated by a zigzag pattern, and the broad overhanging rim by reversed triangles hatched with alternate parallel lines and bordered at top and bottom by double

marginal transverse lines, all impressed with what seems to have been a thin cord wrapped round a core. The neck bears impressions of a round, blunt-ended, wooden or bone implement applied obliquely, and round the lower margin is a row of small narrow loops, the curved end upwards, formed by the impression of a twisted cord. On the encircling cordon is a row of impressions similar to those on the neck.

The incense cup (fig. 3), which measures $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch in height, $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter at the mouth, $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches at the bulge, and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch across the base, is buff coloured with a tinge

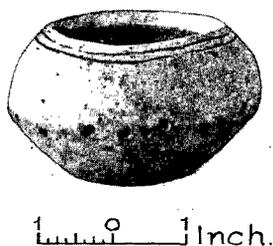


Fig. 3. Incense cup from Marchhouse.

of red in places. In shape it is like two truncated cones placed base to base. Round the rim are two transverse incised lines and the wall is irregularly pierced at the widest part by eighteen small perforations.

The bronze awl (fig. 4) which measures $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch in length, has a thin, flat, spatulate tang, and the bone pin (fig. 4), which is $7\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length, is pointed and rounded at one end, and broken across about one-third from the thick end.

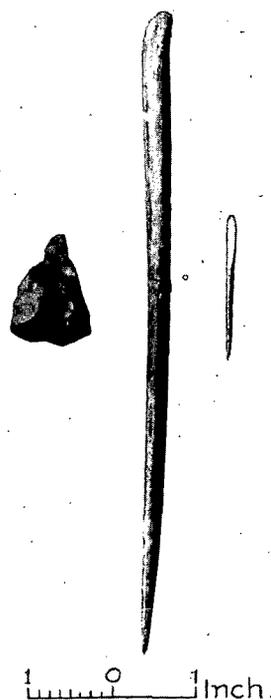


Fig. 4. Fragment of Chert, Bone Pin, and Bronze Awl.

EARTH-HOUSE AT YARDHOUSES.

Place names, though not always quite accurate in spelling, are very frequently of great assistance in archæological research. The name "Yardhouses" conveys in this form of spelling no real sense of its meaning, and might easily be regarded as commonplace to the non-inquisitive ear. The local pronunciation is "Yird-es," the contraction of

Yirdhouse, meaning earth-house, in Scots, which explains how this place got its name.

The structure under review (fig. 5) was brought to my notice by the name of "Yardhouses," and I was guided to the site—described as a "hole in the ground"—by my friend Mr W. Shaw Smith, who is intimately acquainted with Carnwath and its neighbourhood, and later gave valuable assistance in the excavation.

The earth-house is situated on the boundary of two fields, midway between the two farm steadings of Yardhouses, occupied by Mr George Elder, proprietor of one, and Mr John Elder, tenant of the other. The site is a hillock of dry arable ground, surrounded on all sides by land

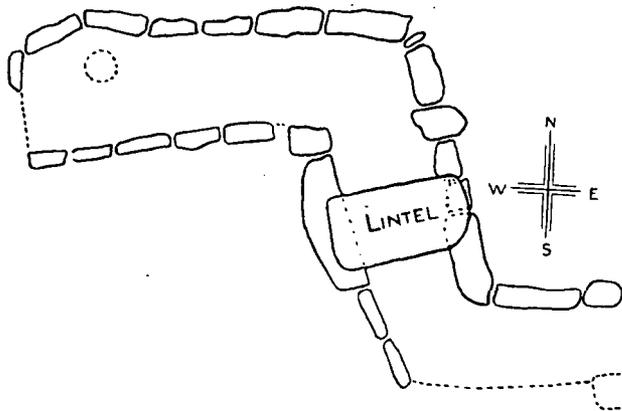


Fig. 5. Plan of Earth-house at Yardhouses.

under the plough, and overlooking the valley and upper reaches of the Falla Burn. The view is extensive, and the elevation is about 900 feet above sea-level. The eastern end of Calla, or Cauldlaw Moor—an exposed tract of land—is close at hand, to the south. This is a stony, heather-clad moor, overlooking two wide valleys and a large extent of country beyond, and is a ridge of great archaeological interest, as it is the site of many cairns.

The local name of the earth-house, I was informed by Mr George Elder, who took the liveliest interest in its excavation, is the "Elflaw Cave." To the west of it, 85 yards distant, is a strong spring, called the "Elflaw Well," which may to a certain extent account for the site selected for the earth-house. Curiously enough, "elfshot" in the form of flint arrowheads have been picked up from the land surrounding the ancient structure, and one perfect specimen, fully stemmed and barbed, was discovered some years ago close to its entrance.

Prior to excavation, all that was visible of the earth-house was the upper half of a portion of the entrance, which was seen to pass under the march dyke dividing Mr George Elder's land from that of Mrs Dow, of Wampherflatt, Lanark, and farmed by Mr John Elder. One roofing stone was in position, that which carried the stone dyke over the entrance passage, beyond which no trace of the structure was visible, except a grassy sward covering an exceedingly hard surface.

While earth-houses are plentiful in the northern half of Scotland, in the southern half they are rare. "In Fife there are two, Stirling none, Linlithgow one, Haddington none, Midlothian two, Berwick one, Roxburgh two. Not a single example is recorded in the south-west. In the mainland part of Argyll, Ayr, Wigtown, Kirkcudbright, and Dumfries they are not noticed; nor hitherto recorded in the central southern counties of Dumbarton, Renfrew, Peebles, and Selkirk."

The occurrence of this earth-house near Carnwath, in Lanarkshire, made it desirable that it should be excavated, and permission was most willingly granted by the proprietors and tenant, who gave the use of tools and afforded every facility throughout.

Early in May 1923, the excavation was begun by a small but enthusiastic party of voluntary diggers, and continued by spells at convenient intervals. Much encouragement was given by a visit to the excavation by Mr Graham Callander, Director of the National Museum of Antiquities, in the autumn of last year, and by the Council of the Society affording assistance which enabled the structure to be finally dug out in April of this year.

It will be seen, on reference to the accompanying plan, that the entrance passage faces east. It had originally a portal stone on either side, but only the half of one and some fragments of the other remain.

The length of the passage going west, to where it turns to the right, is 6 feet 6 inches. The wall on the right-hand side is intact in all but the original height. On the left it has been removed, but the original cutting through the hard clay soil to form the passage was clearly defined under excavation. This portion is marked with dotted lines on plan, and the original width of the passage here was probably about 2 feet 6 inches. The passage, on turning to the right, is 2 feet 10 inches wide on the floor-level, and continues for fully 9 feet, ending with a total length of about 15 feet 6 inches at two inner portal stone pillars; that on the right, a massive whinstone block 4 feet high, and the other on the left, of freestone, 4 feet 2 inches in height measuring from the floor. From the first turn to the middle distance the passage floor widens to 3 feet 2 inches, narrowing again to 2 feet 10 inches between the inner portals. Both passage walls are of dry-stone building, well preserved, and in their

original state. One huge boulder, 6 feet 2 inches in length and 1 foot 5 inches high, forms the greater part of the left lower course. From the floor-level width of 3 feet 2 inches the walls converge inwards, till at their full height of 4 feet 11 inches, where they are bridged by the cover-stone, the width between is only 1 foot 10 inches, illustrating the ancient method of bringing walls together, and within the possibility of being roofed over with flagstones.

On excavation, the passage was discovered quite filled with very fine soil, evidently silted through the interstices of the roofing flags before they had been removed, and suggesting a great antiquity for the structure. One fragment of early pottery was found embedded in the clay floor.

Beyond the inner portals the chamber turns sharply to the left, leaving a well-squared corner on the right, in line with the right-hand wall of the passage. It is 23 feet 6 inches in length, giving a total length of 39 feet measuring along the central floor-line of the structure from the outer entrance to the inner end wall. Only the lower course of the walls remains. The right-hand wall is constructed with six massive flagstones set on edge, while five, similarly placed, form the left, one flagstone measuring 2 feet 7 inches by 3 feet 11 inches. The width of the chamber varies from 3 feet 4 inches to 4 feet 2 inches at the middle distance, increasing to 5 feet 8 inches where the right-hand wall is curved outwards. At this point—the widest part—6 feet 6 inches from the further end, and marked with a circle on plan, the floor was much fire-stained, showing that the curved portion had been used as a hearth. Fig. 6 gives a view of the inner chamber from the inner end. The large slabs forming the lower part of the walls can be seen, as also the two upright portal stones giving access to the chamber.

The height of the chamber was not ascertainable, as the roofing stones were gone, while all that remained of the end wall, which was straight, and 5 feet 3 inches wide, was one portion of a flagstone in its original position, forming the right-hand corner.

The floor was in excellent condition, and was formed of the stony substance of the soil; it was covered over with clay, well trodden, and smoothly finished. It sloped somewhat boldly upwards from the inner entrance to the further end, thus solving the problem of drainage should water percolate in.

It has been asserted that earth-houses may have been used as store-rooms and granaries, as well as dwellings during the colder times of the year, from the finding of querns within them. It was remarked that the floor surface of this one would have been quite suitable for the handling of grain; nor does the presence of a hearth in any way detract

from the theory of a storeroom, in a structure planned to exclude the cold in winter and the heat in summer.

No tool marks were visible on any of the stones of construction, such as were discovered in the earth-house at Crichton Mains, Midlothian,



Fig. 6. Inner Chamber of Earth-house from the west.

or the one at Newstead, Roxburghshire. Both these structures had stones built into them showing Roman handiwork, pillaged, no doubt, from deserted forts, but important enough to give both earth-houses a post-Roman date.

The greatest care was taken to examine minutely the soil overlying the floor, but, with the exception of fragments of mediæval wheel-turned pottery found mixed with the previously disturbed soil within the interior of the chamber, no relics of importance were found. Charcoal

was thickly strewn over the whole length of the floor and passage, in addition to which two flint chips, two teeth of heavy animals, several bones, and a small square of red pigment—which had seen use—were found.

A final search was made outside the entrance, where, at a depth of 12 to 18 inches on the prehistoric surface-level, several fragments of thick unglazed, hand-made pottery were discovered, showing sections of the undecorated rims of two different pots of dark red clay. These fragments are similar to the fragment found embedded in the clay floor of the inner entrance, and probably belong to the period when the earth-house was first occupied.

Several pits were dug over the crest of the rising ground, a few feet east of the entrance to the earth-house, in search of evidence of an above-ground dwelling. The soil, differing from that which covered the structure, was deep, rich, and dark coloured, on a space 15 feet by 10 feet, and slightly lower than the surrounding surface. This accumulation of soil left little doubt in my mind that an above-ground dwelling had once stood there.

I desire to express my thanks to the owners and tenant of the land for permission to excavate, and also to Miss A. L. Shaw Smith for preparing the plan, to Mr W. S. Smith for the photograph, and to Dr G. S. Smith, Mr Brownlee, and others who willingly assisted with the excavation.