

NOTICE OF THE OPENING OF A TUMULUS IN THE PARISH OF
STENNESS, ON THE MAINLAND OF ORKNEY.¹

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DURING several successive summers James Farrer, Esq., M.P., has visited Orkney, and has excavated a considerable number of the Tumuli which abound in the islands. I have had the pleasure of assisting him with my local knowledge in all these excavations, and I have preserved notes, measurements, and sketches of all that has been done and found.

On occasion of his visit in 1860, Mr. Farrer expressed a desire to open all the larger tumuli in the vicinity of the circle of standing stones at Brogar, Stenness. Some of these had been previously excavated by him, and a large stone urn was found in one of them. By his request I communicated his wish to the Society of Antiquaries in Edinburgh, and their Secretary, Mr. Stuart, immediately wrote to Mr. David Balfour, of Balfour and Trenabie, on whose lands the stones and tumuli stand, and his consent to the excavations was cordially given. As it was then late in the season the work was postponed till the following summer, when it was arranged that a deputation from Edinburgh should be present at the opening of the tumuli. The beginning of July was accordingly fixed; and, in the course of a correspondence between Mr. Balfour and myself on the subject he suggested that a large tumulus in the parish of Stenness, known in the district by the name of Maes-how, and not far distant from the remarkable circle of standing stones known as the Ring of Stenness, should be explored. I immediately acquainted Mr. Farrer with Mr. Balfour's proposal, and he at once agreed to include it in his operations. To expedite

¹ Communicated to the Section of Archaeological Institute at Peterborough, July, 1861.

matters I visited the place before Mr. Farrer's arrival, and arranged with the contractor for the work, as to the part of the tumulus at which the excavations were to be commenced. Most fortunately it happened that the spot selected was directly over the gallery or passage which leads to the centre of the tumulus, and the covering stones (A and B) of the passage were soon reached.

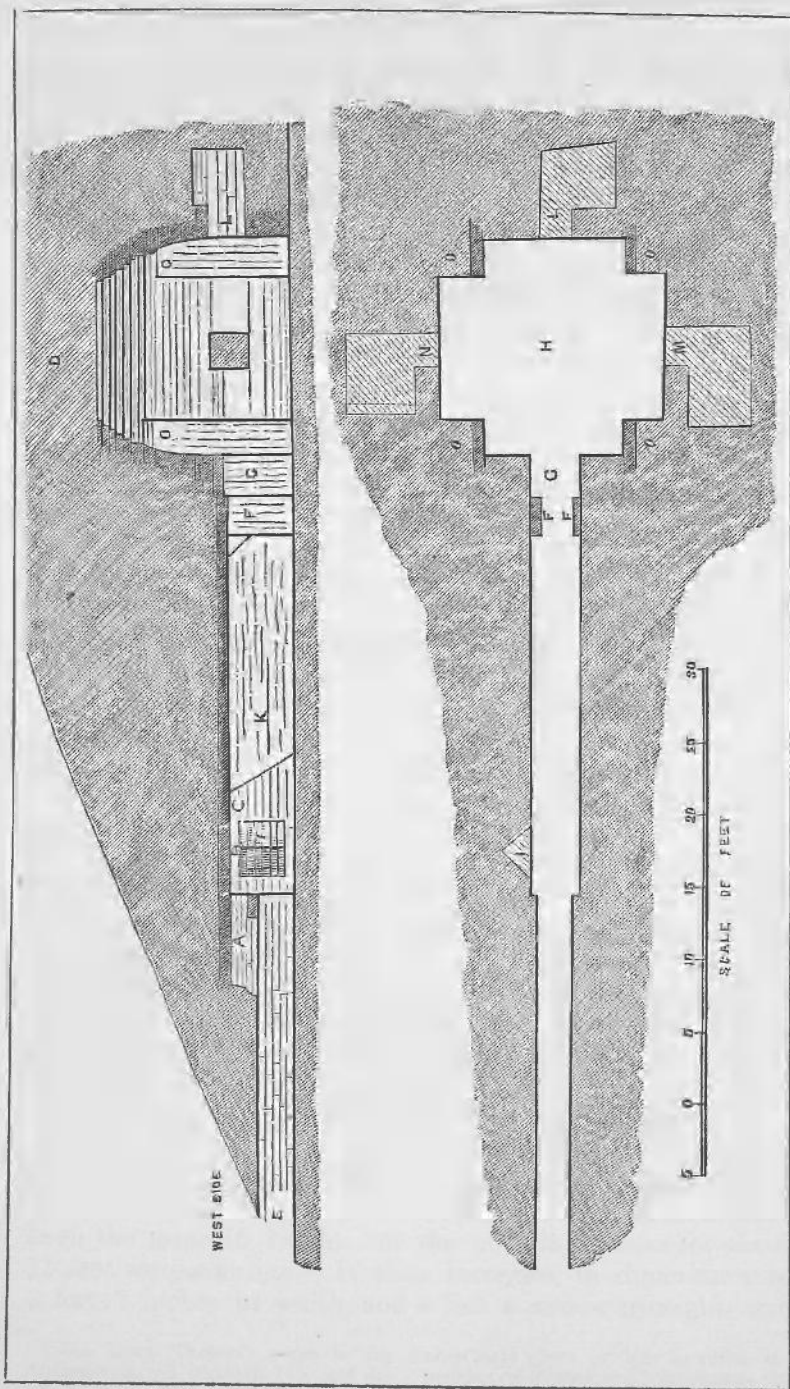
The Tumulus of Maes-how is situated about a mile to the north-east of the Ring of Stenness. Lieut. Thomas, in his Memoir on the Celtic Antiquities of Orkney, published in the *Archæologia*, describes it as the most remarkable tumulus in Orkney, and "called M'eshoo or Meas-howe;" it is a very large mound of a conical form, 36 feet high and about 100 feet in diameter, and occupies the centre of a raised circular platform, which has a radius of about 65 feet. This is surrounded by a trench 40 feet in breadth.²

Maes-how had evidently been previously opened. The recent excavations were commenced on the W.S.W. side. The covering stones (A and B, see ground plan and section) were reached, and lifted in the presence of Mr. Farrer and myself. We went down into the passage and proceeded to its inner end, which we found blocked up with stones and clay; but, as there were evidences of the existence of a chamber beyond the passage, and as it appeared easier of access from the top, excavations were then made from above (at D), and the walls of the building were soon found. They were carefully traced, and it then became evident that they formed a chamber about 10 feet square at the top, but widening towards the bottom. The chamber was completely filled with the stones which had originally formed the upper part of the walls and roof, and with the clay which had completed the top of the tumulus. Having been cleared out, it was found to be 15 feet square on the level of the floor, and about 13 feet in height to the top of the present walls.

The passage has been traced to the margin of the base of the tumulus, and runs inwards in the direction of E.N.E. It is 2 ft. 4 in. wide at its mouth (at E), and appears to have been the same in height, but the covering stones for about 15 feet were wanting. It then increases in dimensions to 3 feet 3 inches in width, and 4 feet 4 inches in height, and

² See Lieut. Thomas's paper in the *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv. p. 110, and the general plan of the antiquities of Sten-

ness there given, pl. xii., in which the position of "Meeshow," as regards the Ring of Stenness is indicated.



Ground-plan and longitudinal section of the Chambered Tumulus, Mesolithic, Orkney.

continued so for 26 feet, when it is again narrowed by two upright stone slabs (F F) to 2 ft. 5 in. These slabs are each 2 ft. 4 in. broad, and immediately beyond them (at G) the passage extends 2 feet 10 inches farther, and then opens into the central chamber, its width at the opening being 3 feet 4 inches. The dimensions of the passage, from the slabs to its opening into the chamber, are 3 feet 4 inches wide, and 4 feet 8 in. high, and the entire length 52 ft. About 34 ft. from the outer extremity of the passage, there is a triangular recess (I) in the wall, about 2 feet deep, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height and width in front, and, lying opposite to it was found a large block of stone of corresponding figure and dimensions. This block had probably been used to shut the passage, and had been pushed into the recess when admission into the chamber was desired. From the recess to the chamber the sides of the passage are formed by immense slabs of stone. One, on the north side, measures upwards of 19 feet long, and $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick (see K). The floor of the passage is also paved with flagstones, and when opened it was covered with lumps of stone, as for draining, to the depth of 18 inches.

On emerging from the passage we enter the chamber. Immediately in front, opposite to the passage, is an opening (L, see ground plan) in the wall, about 3 feet above the floor. This is the entrance to a cell measuring 5 feet $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches, by $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height. A large flagstone is laid as a raised floor between the entrance and the inner end of the chamber. The entrance is 2 feet wide, $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet high, and $22\frac{1}{2}$ inches long.

On the two opposite sides of the chamber, to the right and left, are similar openings nearly on a level with that just described. The opening on the right (M) is $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. wide, 2 ft. $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, 1 foot 8 inches long, and 2 feet 8 inches above the floor of the chamber. The cell to which it gives admission measures 6 feet 10 inches by 4 feet 7 inches, and $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height, and it has a raised flagstone floor $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, similar to that of the other chamber. The opening on the left (N) is $2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. wide, $2\frac{1}{8}$ ft. high, and $1\frac{3}{4}$ ft. long, and about 3 feet above the floor of the chamber. The cell which is entered through this opening, measures 5 feet 7 inches by 4 feet 8 inches, and 3 feet 4 inches in height. It has no raised floor like the other cells. The roofs, floors, and sides of the cells are each formed by a single slab ; and blocks of

stone corresponding in size and figure to the openings were found on the floor in front of them. These have been used no doubt to close the entrances of the cells.

The four walls of the chamber converge towards the top by the successive projection, or stepping over, of each course of stones beyond that immediately beneath it, commencing about 6 feet above the level of the floor, in a manner exactly similar to the construction of the so-called Picts-Houses of Quanterness and Wideford Hill, Kirkwall.³ By this means the chamber has been contracted from 15 feet square at the bottom to about 10 feet square at the present height of the walls, which are about 13 feet high, and when entire it was in all probability brought to a narrow aperture, a few feet square, at a height of 19 or 20 feet from the floor, and then completed by slabs or blocks of stone laid across the opening. Clay has then apparently been piled above and around the building, to the extent of several feet on the top, and many feet around.

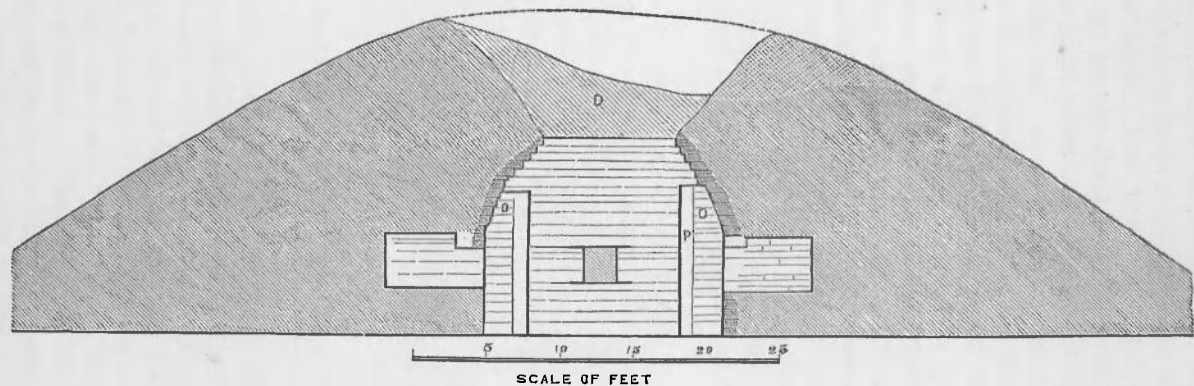
A large buttress (o) stands in each angle of the chamber to strengthen the walls, and support them under the pressure of their own weight, and of the superincumbent clay. These internal buttresses vary somewhat in dimensions, and one of them is considerably lower than the others; but they appear to have been originally all nearly similar in height, and each has a large slab forming one of its sides.

With the exception of a quantity of bones and teeth of the horse, and a small fragment of a human skull, of unusual thickness, which were found in the debris in the chambers, no other relics were noticed.

The most interesting circumstance connected with the explorations, was the discovery of about seven hundred Runes on the walls and buttresses of the chamber, and on the walls of the cells. They are in general very perfect, and only in a few instances do they appear to have become illegible. They seem to have been cut on the stones when these had begun to give way from the dilapidation of the building. This would imply that the tumulus had been raised by other hands than those which inscribed the Runes on its walls. Most probably it had been pillaged by the

³ See Barry's History of Orkney, and Lieut. Thomas's Memoir, Archæologia, vol. xxxiv. p. 122, where plans and ele-

vations of both these Picts Houses are given, pl. xv. See also Dr. Wilson's Pre-historic Annals, p. 84.



Tumulus of Maes-how, Orkney; transverse section, showing the principal chamber.
Excavated by James Farrer, Esq., M.P., July, 1861.

earliest Scandinavian invaders of the Islands, as from its great size it must have attracted their attention, and it may have subsequently been used by them for the interment of one of their Jarls. But this point will, it is to be hoped, be cleared up by the deciphering of the Runic inscriptions. They have been submitted by Mr. Farrer to those antiquaries in our own country most conversant with the interpretation of Runes, and also to Professor Stephens, of Copenhagen, Professor Rafn, and other learned archæologists in the North. The results will, it is hoped, speedily be published with accurate facsimiles of the entire series of inscriptions.

The figure of a lion or monstrous animal, with a singularly foliated tail, is cut on one of the buttresses (p, see the trans-



Figure of an Animal incised on one of the internal buttresses at Maes-how.

Scale, one-third less than the original.

verse section), and displays spirit and skill in its design (see woodcut). Beneath it are other figures—one of them has a resemblance to a serpent entwined around a tree or pole. The dragon is traced with more freedom of hand than the Runes, and there are no Runes on the edge of the stone on which it appears, except one or two rudimentary ones which are cut over the other figures.

The walls of the chamber are built of large slabs, which generally extend the entire length of the wall; the whole building displays great strength and skill in the masonry, and has a very imposing effect. There is every reason to

believe that the tumulus was originally erected as a chambered tomb for some chief or person of note, and that the large slabs which have been used in the building have either been taken from the same quarry which yielded the Standing Stones of Stenness, or that they may be some of the stones which have been removed from their original position in the circle of Stenness or that of Brogar.

I have opened about sixty of the Orkney tumuli, in addition to those which I assisted Mr. Farrer to examine; they have included both dwellings and tombs, but one class, to which I had proposed to limit the common name of Picts-House, has hitherto puzzled me. I had expressed an opinion, in which I found few disposed to agree, that they were tombs, and this has now received confirmation in the tumulus of Maes-how, which is, in fact, a so-called Picts-House on an improved plan and large scale, and is in reality a chambered tomb.

It is satisfactory to think, that Mr. Farrer's expenses and perseverance have had so gratifying a result, and that Mr. Balfour, on whose estate this remarkable monument exists, has given instructions to have the building secured as far as possible against dilapidation, by roofing it over in such a manner as to distinguish between the original structure and the addition made for its preservation.

KIRKWALL,

24 July, 1861.