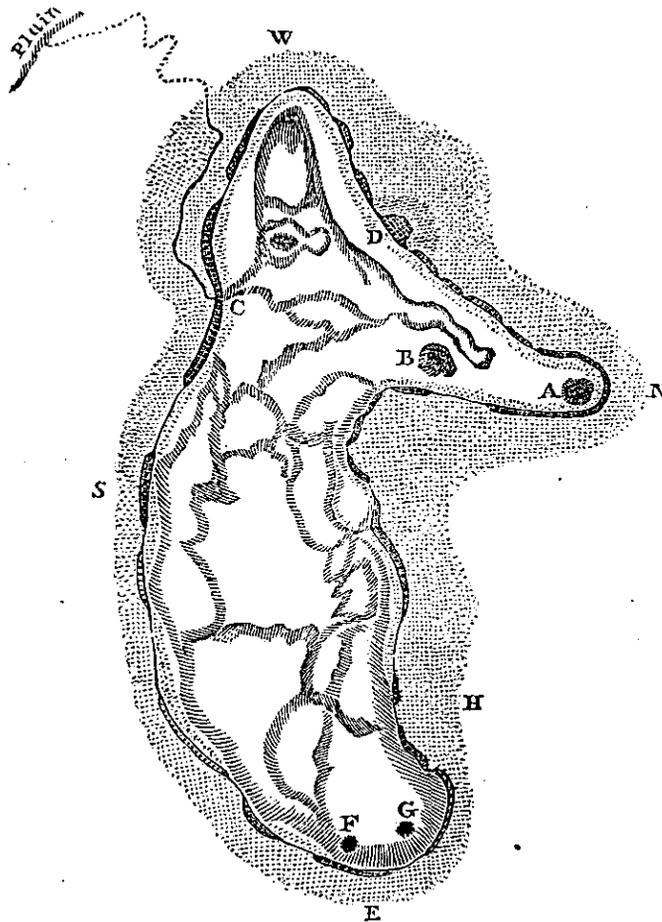


XXIII.—Description of the Hill Fort of Dùn-da-Làimh, in the Parish of Laggan, District of Badenoch, Inverness-shire.

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[Read to the Society 27th February 1832.]



- 1305 feet circumference, measuring along the wall.  
 405 feet extreme length from west to east end.  
 102 feet average breadth within walls, exclusive of angle projecting northward.  
 216 feet length, from C to point beyond A.  
 22 feet average thickness of walls.
- A, a rude detached piece of rock, supposed to be artificially placed.  
 B, a well, generally supposed a spring-well, but doubtful.  
 C, supposed entrance or doorway, indistinct from quantity of rubbish.  
 D, spot where rubbish has been partially removed outside, discovering wall quite entire and firm, upwards of 5 feet high.  
 F & G, two small cairns or piles, recently erected, of stones from wall.
-  Denotes remains of wall as still standing, and relative positions of sections.  
 Denotes appearance of debris, or rubbish from wall, fallen along declivities of the hill, and within the wall.  
 Denotes irregular and broken elevations of surface within walls.

THE ruin, known in the district where it is situated, by the name written above, is, in several respects, not unworthy the observation of the antiquary. The evidently remote, and to us uncertain period of its creation, the purposes for which it may have been designed, and the indications furnished, by its ap-

pearance and construction, of a certain form and power of society, are interesting considerations suggested by surveying it. In submitting this notice of it to the Antiquarian Society, being myself but a very young brother of their order, and equally weak as young in every acquirement constituting a respectable antiquary, I must lay before the Society, rather as inquiries than as conjectures of my own, the considerations suggested by the view of this ruin.

I confine myself to a detailed description of its situation and its present appearance, adding an observation or two comparing this with some other ruins observed in the more northern parts of the Highlands of Scotland.

As happens with regard to most names of localities throughout the Highlands, in the Gaelic language the name of this ruin, *Dùn-da-Làimh*, expresses certain peculiarities of its situation and aspect. It is situated about ten miles from the inn of Pitmain, and nearly nine from the inn of Dalwhinny, both on the Highland road from Perth and Inverness, and only a few hundred yards from the military line of road leading from each of the places now mentioned, to Fort-Augustus, across the hill of Corryarrick. It may be easily pointed out to the traveller from the church or new bridge of Laggan. The general appearance of the middle parts of the parish of Laggan is formed, as the name also denotes, by two hollows or valleys (*Lag, Gael.* a hollow), one of them running from north to south, or nearly so, from the mountain of *Corryarrick* on the north, and terminated at the southern extremity by the hill of *Nessintully*. The other hollow or valley strikes off almost at right angles with the former, turning westward towards Loch Laggan, bending gently to the north, Loch Laggan forming its continuation, with its adjacent hills, for upwards of nine miles; and this valley produced (speaking mathematically), all along to the sea coast near Fortwilliam, a distance of more than thirty-seven miles. The valley now mentioned as turning off from the former, has its commencement at the conjunction of the small stream *Mashie* with the river Spey; and the hill or rock on which *Dùn-da-Làimh* is situated forms the northern side of this valley at its commencement. The particular range of hill or rock now mentioned, detached from others along the north side of the westward valley, may be traced as taking its rise from near the east end of Loch Laggan, stretching along eastward from Loch Laggan towards the Spey by an undulating or bending course, presenting a rugged front and acclivities, with a narrow or sharpened summit, and terminating abruptly and precipitously about three or four hundred yards from the present course of the Spey,

the intervening space being nearly level. On the summit of the termination the engineers or architects of the day chose to place *Dùn-da-Làimh*. It thus commands a view of both valleys and hollows; of that running from *Corryarrick* to the hill of Nessintully it commands a full view for a distance of at least sixteen miles, and of the other for a distance of nearly *three* miles only, the bending of the ridge westward, on which it is situated, interrupting the view of Loch Laggan. The *Dùn* looks thus, towards either "*hand*," as is said in the Gaelic language when speaking of any particular direction, equivalently to the Scotch word *airt* or *airth*. And dismembering the name *Dùn-da-Làimh*, we have "*Dùn*," the signification of which is known sufficiently; "*dà*," the Gaelic numeral *two*; and "*làimh*," a hand, or, *Scot. Airt*, i. e. the *Dùn* of the two *airts*, looking equally towards both, or commanding a full view of each of the valleys mentioned. The annexed sketch represents the form of the Dun, being a ground-plan of it. As a stronghold and a place of defence and security, the advantages of the situation are obvious and very striking. Without the wall at the western extremity, the hill runs, in a low bare ridge of but narrow extent, a distance westward of several hundred yards. Beyond this the ground is elevated, so as to overlook the *Dùn*, but at such a distance as to render this no disadvantage to the strength or safety of the hold within. Immediately at the western extremity, the ridge of the hill rises abruptly, the ridge narrowing as it rises; and around this, leaving still a part of the elevation within, the western extremity of the wall is drawn. From this all round, the wall is drawn to suit the form of the rock or foundation, accommodated, as represented in the sketch, to the windings and sinuosities of the rock. The wall is all along so placed as to bring its exterior front as near to the brink of the precipice as possible. This is manifestly the leading characteristics of its plan. From the western extremity to the mark C on the south side, the space immediately beyond the wall slopes off in a line approaching to perpendicular, while this and the whole space to the lower part of the hill is broken and rugged, affording no easy access even to an expert climber, but altogether excluding the idea of any possibility of hostile attack from this quarter. Winding up this ascent, however, there may be still traced, from the lower part of the hill, commencing from the plain, and considerably west of the *Dùn* above, the outlines of a pathway, and formed by immense labour. The traces are not indeed visible all along the face of the hill, but may be sufficiently marked to show that it led to an entrance into the *Dùn* at the mark C. This

is slightly traced in the sketch annexed. This road must have been admirably protected, especially towards the Dùn above, by huge ledges of rock on one side, and a downward precipice on the other; and the situation immediately approaching the door-way is so peculiarly situated, that a very small defensive force might be able to oppose any invading strength. Following the course of the wall eastward from the mark C, and on the south side, the rock is all along precipitous and abrupt outside the wall, till it becomes quite perpendicular towards the east end of the Dùn, and continues the same form round this end, to the mark H, on the north side. The rock still continues of a very steep and precipitous form, all along on the north side, to the western extremity of the Dùn; varying indeed in its degrees of steepness, but no part of the whole extent affording a very firm or sure footing. The degrees of steepness are indicated all round, on the annexed plan, by the dottings without the line of the wall. When the ascent is more gradual or gentle, the debris from the wall has spread more extensively on the surface; it being precipitated in other parts down the rock. The surface of the space within the walls is exceedingly unequal, as denoted on the plan, presenting no appearance of art, or attempt to reduce it to any kind of level; but from the appearance presented by some of the ledges forming the irregularities of this surface, it is almost obvious that the stones used in building the wall were detached from these. The rock is wholly of *secondary* formation, of what particular kind my ignorance of geological nomenclature prevents me from mentioning. It is divisible with no great difficulty into small pieces of flat form, approaching nearly to the appearance of rough gray slate. Of this simple rude material the whole wall was built. I have not been able to discover a stone all along the wall, or in the rubbish fallen from it, of more than twenty or thirty pounds weight. No cement or mortar of any kind, no vitrifying process, has been used. A considerable quantity of the fallen rubbish has been removed from outside the wall at D on the plan, exposing a portion of the outside, fair, firm, and perpendicular, as if it had been only the work of the last century. The thickness of the wall is not less, on an average, than twenty or twenty-two feet. On the plan, the lines mark, not the thickness, but the *height* of the remains still standing. What the original height may have been it is now impossible to determine with any degree of precision. No part of what remains exceeds the height of three or four feet; but from the quantity of rubbish lying and spread all along, the height must have been considerable. This is indicated along some parts of the

wall inside, by the rubbish being now found lying *upwards*, along an *acclivity* from the present remainder of the wall, where the stones could not have fallen unless from a certain height. This appearance, however, furnishes data rather for conjecture than for calculation. Judging from this and from the general quantity and mass of rubbish, I am inclined to think that the walls must have stood originally from ten to fifteen feet high.

It may be worthy of remark, that, in the angle of the Dùn, stretching out on the north side, there is a huge detached piece of rock, marked A on the plan. It is indeed a rude and almost a shapeless mass, but so placed as to indicate somewhat of design. There is no such detached block or mass to be met with on any of the neighbouring hills; and it being the very same species of stone as that of which the whole rock is composed, and of which the walls were built, and it being also pretty evident that the walls were built with stones quarried within the area of the inclosure, it must be naturally supposed that this block, had it been found originally in the situation it now occupies, would have been destroyed at once for the purpose of building, being close at hand, and its demolition being an easier process than that of digging from a quarry of continuous or solid rock. For what purpose it might have been placed here, can only be conjectured. The general supposition will be, that its use was religious. Had there been another stone placed over it at top, it would have answered pretty accurately to the description which is given of several of the *Cromleacs* in Wales and Cornwall. But there is now no appearance of a top-stone having ever been placed upon it. But it is so very common a thing among the more *civilized* generations of recent periods to destroy wantonly these venerable monuments of past and remote ages, that it is abundantly possible a part of this monument may have been precipitated down the rock for the amusement of some more modern and idle barbarians. This mass of solid stone may be estimated to weigh not less than forty or fifty tons. The mark B on the plan denotes a well, which the old people of this parish maintain to have been at one time known as an excellent spring-well. This, however, I have reason to doubt, having frequently observed it quite dried up during the summer; nor is there any flow of water from its surface. No doubt the best springs are known to shift their situation, as Highlanders say, from their receiving some *insult*; and we doubt not but this one has been subjected to many a rudeness in its day. But whether originally or anciently a spring-well or not, it is evident that pains were bestowed on forming it. It appears to me that the rock here

was excavated to form a hollow or pond, where rain-water might be collected, though in lapse of time the hollow has been filled up with mossy plants and vegetable matter. There are indications of a retaining wall to form one side of the pond having been built, so dilapidated and grown over with weeds and moss as to be scarcely discernible.

One striking feature presented in the present appearance of the area of the inclosure, is, that all its level and hollow parts, especially towards the south side, are covered with a very deep and rich mould, yielding a healthy and heavy crop of natural grasses. Such a deepness of soil cannot be accounted for by the single fact of sheep and goats in more recent periods finding pasture and shelter here. The soil is in some parts from two to three feet deep. A prosperous colony of moles has taken possession of all these spots, which of itself affords no mean indication of the goodness of the soil, detached as it is all around from any spot of a similar kind. It can scarcely fail to occur to any one, that this formation of soil, or accumulation of vegetable matter, must have been produced of old by cattle or quadrupeds of some description being here kept up for defence or protection. Manifestly enough, the quantity, extent, and depth of soil, could not have been produced by the few straggling animals that might occasionally make this their favourite resort.

But in surveying this rude, ancient structure, the circumstance most striking at first sight, is the labour necessary to have formed it. Considering the extent, thickness, and probable height of the wall when entire, this labour must have been immense, and considering, too, the slow process by which the building materials must have been necessarily procured. The stones forming the wall are in general of very small dimensions, from six inches to two feet or two feet and a half in length—very rarely indeed of the last-mentioned size—about from three to six inches broad, and varying in thickness from half an inch to three inches. Supposing that a thousand men were set to a similar undertaking in the present day, and with all the advantages of modern tools and implements, they would labour hard if they finished the whole in eighteen months. This calculation is of course conjectural, but I scarcely think that I overrate the labour in forming such an opinion. The continual inequalities of the foundation on which the wall is laid, and the immense spaces to be filled up, so as to bring the wall to a level at top, would prove a very material part of the difficulty and labour. What then must have been the amount of joint effort and industry necessary to complete this undertaking, in a rude and pri-

mitive state of society! It bespeaks a density of population in this remote quarter of the Highlands at a very early age, of which history furnishes no record. That the date of this singular erection must be referrible to a period beyond the reach of history, is indisputable,—and it is even beyond the reach of tradition. The traditions extant in this district regarding the origin and purposes of the Dùn are mere burlesque on its venerable antiquity. It was built, say the *Seanachies* of Laggan, by *King David of Scotland*, for the defence and protection of an only daughter, whose hand was sought by numerous competitors. Here the fair damsel was placed, and a royal edict was issued, assigning the daughter to the youth of his nobles who would ride up the hill and into the Dùn sitting backwards. One youth, more ingenious and daring than his compeers, became successful. He trained a wild he-goat of marvellous size and strength, to supply the place of a horse; he rode this animal, sitting backwards upon it, up the rock, and into Dùn-da-Làimh, and won the contested prize. The most striking evidence of its high antiquity may, I think, be deduced from comparing it with other ruins remarkable for their antiquity also, such as the Castle of Inverlochy, near Fortwilliam, and of "*Eilean-nan-rioh*" (*King's Island*), in Loch Laggan. The date of either of these has not, I believe, been ascertained, nor does tradition itself fix any particular date to them; and yet both the ruins now mentioned manifest undeniable marks of great comparative advancement in the art of building, beyond any thing to be seen in Dùn-da-Làimh. In the former ruins a regular plan is developed, the stones are roughly or partially hewn and formed, and mortar is abundantly introduced, to afford consistency and strength. Here there is neither or none of these—nothing but mere stone, and of such size and shape as to render the labour of building tedious and difficult; and I think it extremely doubtful whether any craftsmen of our present improved generations could with all their skill give stability and consistency, with such materials, to any similar wall. Buildings of this description of workmanship are, as far as known to me, not numerous in the Highlands of Scotland. The two approaching next to its style of building, which I have seen, are, *Dùn-Dornadilla* in the parish of Durness, Sutherlandshire,—and *Dùn-Feallasaig*, in the parish of Eddirton (I think), in Ross-shire. But each of these last displays an advanced state of mechanism compared with Dùn-da-Làimh. They were built, indeed, evidently enough for different purposes from that of the ruin now under consideration, being intended for the *fixed abode* of human beings. The stones also in these structures are much larger, particularly those of which *Dùn-Dornadilla*

is built, and were carried, although of very considerable size and weight, to a great height on the wall. No such result of mechanism is observable in *Dùn-da-Làimh*. It cannot, I think, be disputed that its origin and date are *aboriginal*. Its purposes become a different question. As a mere place of security for domestic animals, herds or flocks, it is not to be reasonably supposed that such labour would have been bestowed on its structure:—and, query, what were the domestic animals of the period, if any? In the northern Highlands there are pretty frequently to be met with rude inclosures of small compass, traditionally said to have been built for the protection of sheep and cattle from wolves. These, too, are generally found on the summits of small hills or abrupt elevations, but formed merely by the huddling together of loose stones, without any regularity of building.

Indeed the most rational conjecture regarding *Dùn-da-Làimh* seems to be, that it was erected for protection from hostile attack, both of human beings and of their cattle, and that hither both were collected on any threatened emergency. It must have formed, when in its original strength, a place of perfect security from any attack by missile weapons. Its only weak point seems to have been at the western extremity, where the adjacent ground is tolerably level till it approaches the wall, or within a few yards of the wall, when it rises more abruptly; and here a *storming party* might attempt forming a breach. We must speak in very respectful ignorance of the tactics of the period; but we may observe, that supposing such an assault to be dared, the form of the wall is at this point such as to render it easily manned, being of small extent; and showers of stones from its summit might soon repress the keenest temerity of assailants. The elevations of ground, too, within the walls afforded full observation to the garrison, of any approaching foe, from whatever quarter they came. Commanding a full and extensive prospect of every avenue from hill and strath, the call *to arms* within could be long obeyed before any arms from without could approach. No relics of any kind have been ever discovered, so far as I know, in this ruin. In turning over spots of the soil, I have discovered occasionally small pieces of charred wood; but I inferred these to be from occasional fires lighted on the rock, in some after or more recent periods. The rock at the eastern extremity of the *Dùn* presents an object of grandeur, to a person either standing at top, or below it on the plain. Its elevation above the course of the Spey may be estimated at eight or nine hundred feet.

*Laggan, 10th February 1832.*