

7. IN UNDERGROUND HOUSES, &c.

Among the oldest forms of primitive domestic architecture of which we have the remains in Scotland, are those rude and dark subterranean, or semi-subterranean dwellings which are known under the names of "Earth Houses," "Picts' Houses," "Weems," &c. These cave-like dwellings are usually built with rough cyclopic walls of large stones, and roofed over by flat flags and a covering of earth and soil. Some of their component stones have been found marked with circles and cups; as at

Eday, Orkney.—There is in the Museum of the Antiquarian Society a stone from the island of Eday, Orkney, marked with two sets of triple concentric circles, each having a cupped centre; and a faded portion of a third set. There is also a double spiral cutting of several circles; and the outer spiral line of one volute crosses and makes a junction with the outermost spiral line of the other volute. The stone was discovered in Eday a few years ago, in a large pile of ruins which had once formed a so-called "Pict's house." The building, according to Mr Hebden—who presented the stone to the Museum—was about forty yards long and ten broad. The incised slab is of sandstone, and is three and a-half feet long, fifteen inches broad, and eight inches in thickness. (For a representation of the cuttings on it, see Plate XIX. fig. 4.)¹

Holm of Papa Westray, Orkney.—In 1849, in examining a Pict's house in the Holm of Papa Westray, my friend, Captain Thomas, found on a stone—built into the wall near the entrance—a neatly engraved circle about four inches in diameter, and two other small conjoined circles on another stone in the building. Mr Petrie has more lately detected on other stones in this subterranean building other circular and linear markings, which,

¹ Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vol. iv. p. 185.

he says, "it is easy to see have been formed by a pointed instrument tolerably sharp."¹

Pickaquoy, Orkney.—In 1853, Mr Farrer excavated a built subterranean structure in Pickaquoy, near Kirkwall. The building was so dilapidated that it was difficult to trace whether it was a grave for the ancient dead or a house for the ancient living. Mr Petrie, a most excellent judge on such a question, thinks that it was an archaic dwelling-house. In one of the chambers a stone with a central cup and a group of concentric circles engraved on it was found built upright into the wall. The appearance of the circles upon this stone is copied into Plate XIX. fig. 5. Another long slab was found with thirteen small cavities along one of its edges, and a larger cup or cavity in the centre of one of its sides. "When," remarks Mr Petrie, "a short time afterwards I examined the engraved circles, and especially the cavities cut in the stones in the walls of the Pict's house at Papa Westray, the similarity was so striking that it required no stretch of imagination to suppose that the same instrument chiselled the figures in both places."²

Frith, Orkney.—Mr Petrie has found an elongated stone sculptured on one end in a ruined wall in the parish of Frith. The sculpturing consists of a volute or spiral line making four turns. The diameter of the outermost circle is above six inches. See it drawn in Plate XIX. fig 6. I allude to this stone here, chiefly as forming one of the Orkney group; and partly because it had been used in building, though not apparently in the construction of a Pict's house. The ruined wall, in the base of which it was discovered, stood at an ancient broch or burg at Redland, where it turned up in some diggings conducted by Mr Farrer. But this was possibly not the original site of the stone; for it seems to have been used casually for building material. The stone itself is now in the Antiquarian Museum, Edinburgh.

We do not know the age at which the "weems" or underground houses were used by our Scottish forefathers; but there are one or two pieces of evidence which go far to prove that the carving of cups and

¹ See notices and figures of these carvings, in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vol. ii. p. 61.

² Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, vol. ii. p. 61.

circles upon large stones existed apparently before these underground houses were built, as in the following instance in a Pict's house at

Letham Grange, Forfarshire.—Several years ago the stones forming a Pict's house built into the banks of the river Brothick, near Letham Grange, were removed for building purposes. Some of the foundation stones of the walls were left. Lately, on removing these foundation stones, one was found carved on both sides with cups and circles, and has been kindly presented to the Museum of the Society by Mr Hey of Letham Grange. It is a sandstone block measuring three feet nine inches in length, three in breadth, and one in thickness. Both sides are very rough and broken, and in this uneven condition have had chiselled upon them the cups and circles, single and double, which they contain. See Plate XX. figs. 1 and 2. One side of this sandstone block has carved upon it some forty cups. Most of these cups are isolated; but some are connected together by intervening ducts or gutters. The two largest and deepest are surrounded each with two encircling rings traversed by the usual radial groove. Several cups have one surrounding ring. At the upper and right hand corner a centre cup is surrounded by a circle of seven cups. Two of these cups are themselves ringed. On the opposite side of the block are carved fourteen or fifteen cups; three of them surrounded by a single guttered or incomplete circle; and seven of them encircled with two rings each, with the usual radial duct traversing them.

The original underground house, of which this sculptured block had been used as one of the foundation stones, was a structure about six feet in diameter, and six feet in height. It was built into the side of a gravelly bank or ridge. The masonry was of the rudest description. The floor of the house was only a foot or two above the level of the Brothick. The sculptured foundation stone was built—the Rev. Mr Duke of Arbroath writes me—“into the base course of the south wall, with the most deeply marked side facing the interior. Of course, as the whole building was originally under ground, the other side of the stone on which there were also ring markings was embedded and hidden in the soil. It is thus (he adds) clear to my mind, that whatever may have been the meaning or use of these markings, they were made at a date anterior to the building of the house,—that the stone, in fact, was an old stone, and had served

a different purpose before the Pict built it into the foundation of his dwelling.”

Ruthven, Forfarshire.—A notice and sketch of a sculptured stone, from another weem in Forfarshire, has been obligingly furnished to me by my esteemed friend Dr Wise, of Rostellan Castle, Ireland, who, a few years ago, devoted great attention to early Scottish antiquities, when residing in this country. This carved stone was an oblong piece of sandstone, which formed a portion of the roof of a weem at Ruthven, near Meigle. Upon one of its surfaces are several isolated cups; two, surrounded by a single ring; one, by a double ring; and another is enclosed by three circles. Three of the ringed cups are traversed each by a radial groove or duct which runs downwards into three cups set in a row. See Plate XXV, fig. 3. “The cups and circles were,” Dr Wise writes me, “partly covered with the other roofstones of the weem, proving the sculptures to have been cut before this carved stone had come to be used as a corner building stone.”

PLATE XIX.

FROM TORWOOD, STIRLINGSHIRE, AND ORKNEY.



PLATE XX.

FROM WEEM AT LETHAM GRANGE, FORFARSHIRE.

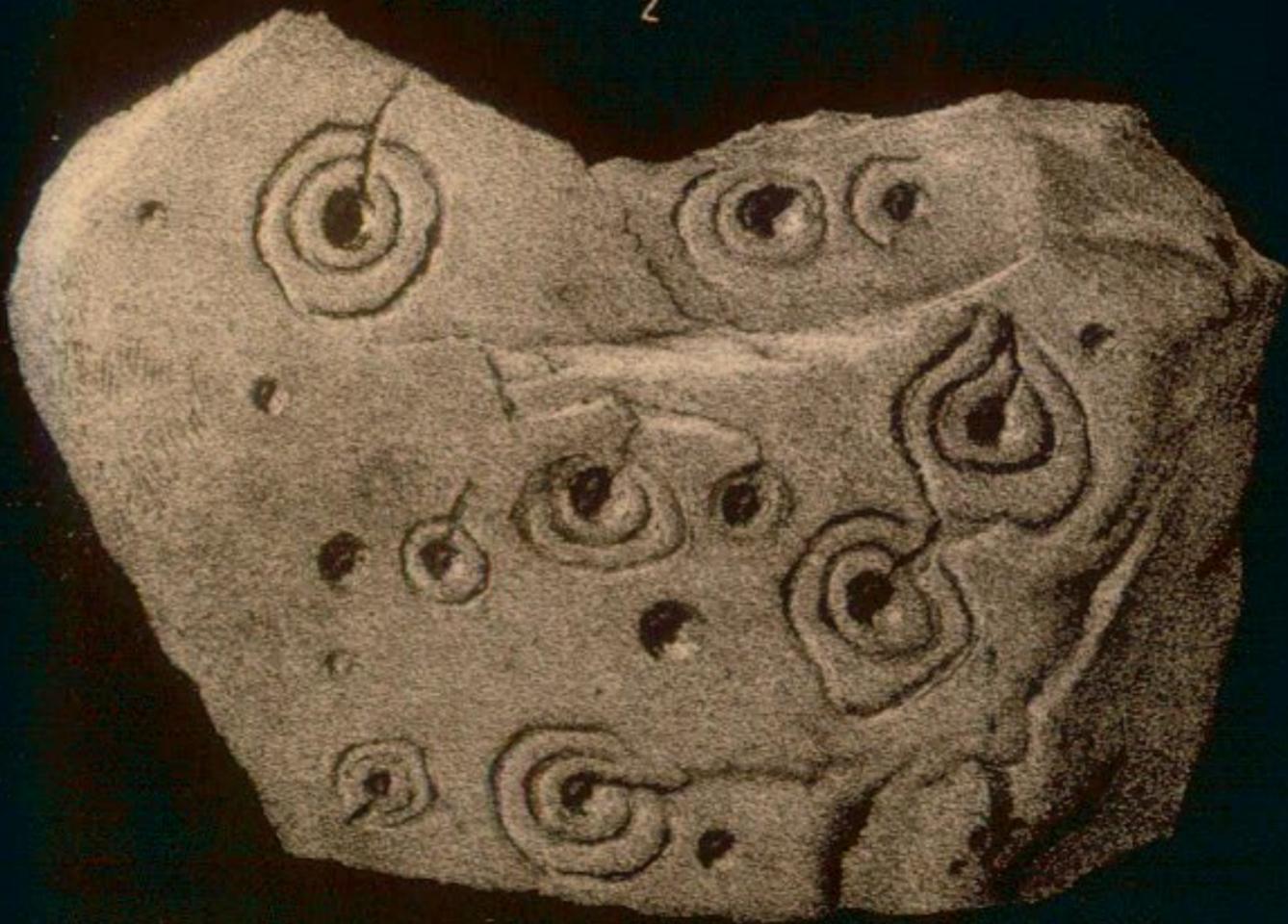
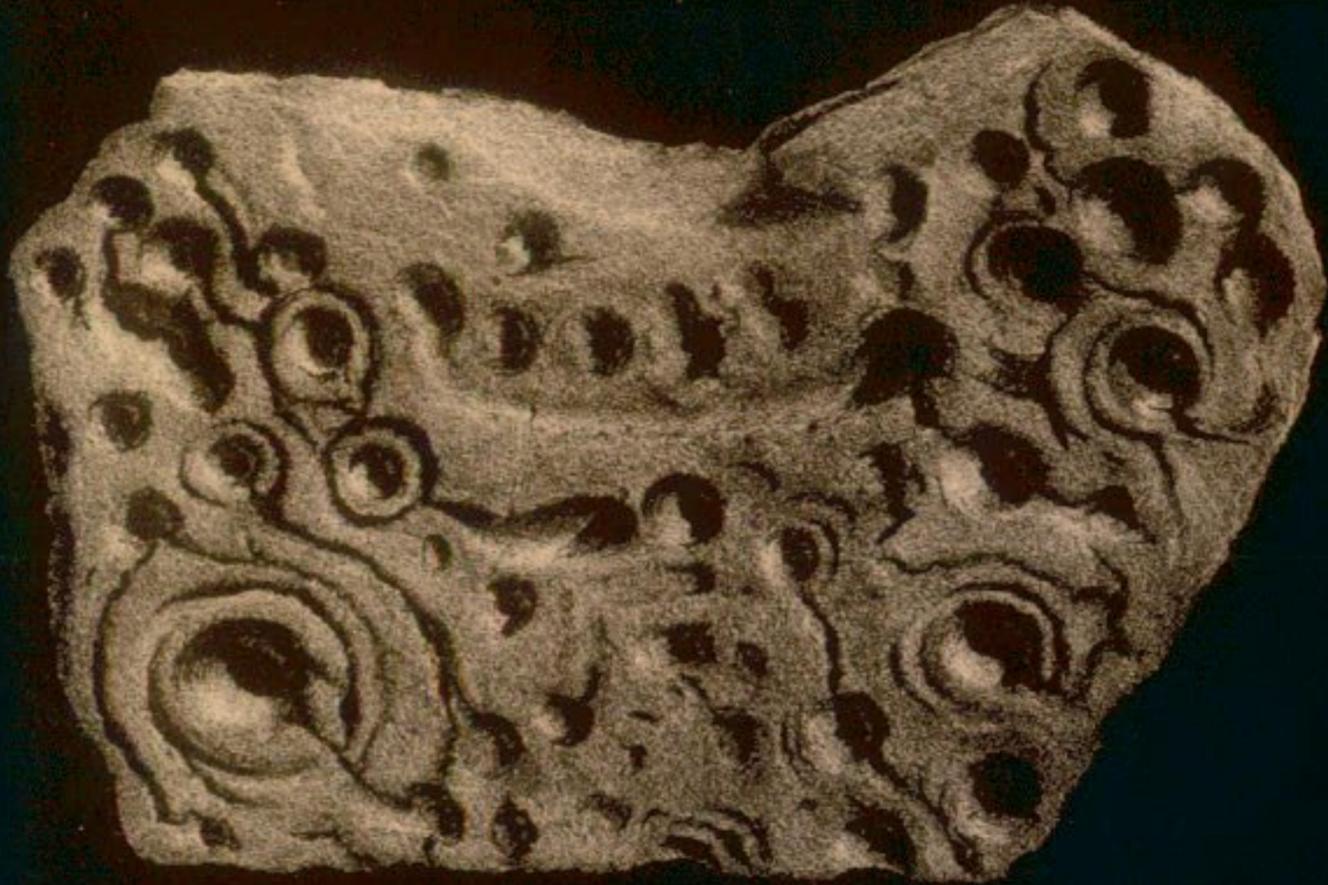


PLATE XXV.

ROCK AT BEWICK, RUTHVEN WEEM.

