

IV.

NOTICE OF THE DISCOVERY OF A PRE-HISTORIC BURIAL-PLACE
AT QUARFF, SHETLAND. BY REV. DAVID JOHNSTON, MINISTER
OF QUARFF.

The valley of Quarff, in which the pre-historic remains were found, is situated where the mainland of Shetland contracts to its narrowest dimensions, one other place only excepted. The trend of the valley is east and west, and it may be described as a ravine in the range of hills which terminates in the promontory of Fitful Head. These hills are among the highest in Shetland, and carry their bulk upwards to the rounded summits, which slope gradually away to the moorlands beyond. The rocks which guard the eastern entrance of the ravine are buffeted by the waves of the North Sea, whilst the strand at the western extremity is washed by the waters of the Atlantic; the distance between the two seas being so short that small boats are sometimes dragged overland from one to the other.

From time immemorial this valley has been inhabited. On either side, at greater or less elevations, "touns" or hamlets are dotted down. These are the dwellings of crofters, and in close proximity are the crofts or pieces of land allotted to each tenant.

Until very recently all the land was prepared for crops by the slow and laborious method of delving; now small ploughs are being introduced, and the ponies of the country are utilised for the work. It is probably owing to this innovation that the antiquities now submitted to the Society were discovered. The crofter upon whose land they were found adopted the new system of ploughing, but a certain mound on one of the "rigs" proved an insurmountable obstacle to his ponies, and he resolved, with the help of his sons, to clear the obstruction away. He, and his forefathers, for generations, toiling with the spade on the same land, had always been confronted with this mound. They dug around its base, and finding only gravel deemed it a worthless heap. Year

after year it was left undisturbed, and doubtless would have been passed by, in like manner, for years to come, had it not proved a hindrance to the plough.

The work of levelling down the heap having been begun, the labourers soon found that they had struck upon something else than a mere hillock of gravel. After a portion of the surface had been removed to a depth of about 18 inches, a stone slab was laid bare, which, on being lifted, disclosed a cist, in which were found a skull and part of a steatite urn (fig. 1) measuring $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter at the mouth,

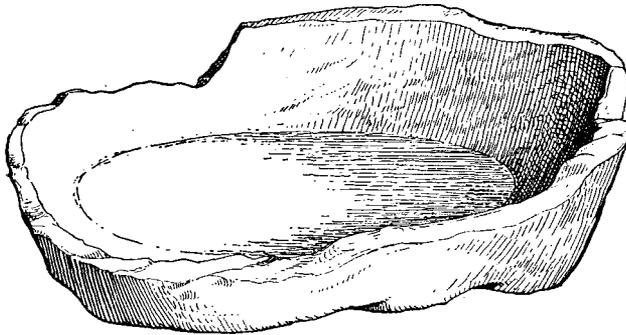


Fig. 1. Urn of Steatite found at Quarff, Shetland. (4.)

and partly broken away at one side, the more entire side being about 5 inches high, and the edge nearly an inch and a half in thickness, and roughly smoothed and rounded.

A further clearing away of the material of which the mound is formed brought to light more of these cists, in one of which the fragments of another steatite urn were found, but no human remains; and on raising the cover of one of the smaller cists, another urn, apparently made of clay and full of ashes, was discovered. This urn (fig. 2) is quite whole, and in a good state of preservation. It measures $9\frac{1}{4}$ inches in height, and $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter across the mouth, having a rounded taper to the base which measures $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter. The lip, which is $\frac{3}{8}$ inch

in thickness, is bevelled inwards, and the upper portion of the exterior is smooth and blackened. Clay urns are of very rare occurrence in Shetland, while urns of steatite are common.

So far as the work of excavation has been carried, there have been eight of these stone cists unearthed. Two of them, unfortunately, have been so despoiled by the workers that nothing can be said regarding them; the others, which have not been broken up, I have carefully examined and measured. Their dimensions are as follows:—

No.	Length.	Width.	Depth.
1	4 feet	2½ feet	2 feet
2	2½ "	18 inches	18 inches
3	2 "	18 "	18 "
4	22 inches	14 "	18 "
5, 6	About the same as No. 4.		

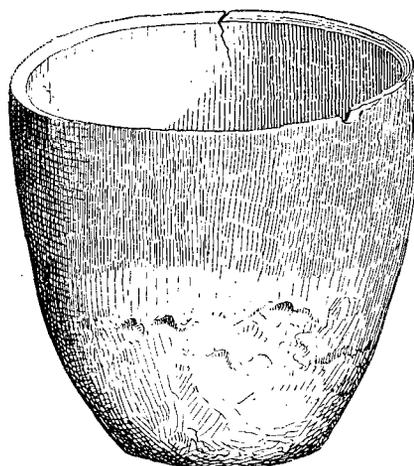


Fig. 2. Urn of Clay from Quarff, Shetland. (½.)

The covering slabs were in no case more than 2 feet beneath the surface. A distance of between 2 to 3 feet separates the cists. They have been carefully made, as all the apertures, formed where the uneven edges of the stones meet, are filled in with clay. A rim of clay had also been placed upon the upper edges of the cists before the covering was placed

in position—with a view, probably, of making the cover so close fitting that water would be excluded.

Looking at the cists as they stand embedded in the gravel, I am inclined to think that the stones of which they are composed were set up, the ashes of the dead, alone or inclosed in an urn, deposited within the chamber, the cover adjusted, and this being done gravel was then carried from the sea beach and piled around and over the cist.

If this were the mode adopted by the people in connection with their interments, then the artificial nature of the mound would be accounted for—and that it is artificial hardly admits of doubt. It does not consist of the peaty soil of the surrounding land, but of sand and pebbles similar to those found on the shore, about a quarter of a mile away.

The slabs of which the cists are built must also have been brought to the spot with great labour, as there are no stones of a like kind to be found in the neighbourhood.

I have closely inspected the slabs to see if they bore signs or marks of any kind, but found nothing.

It is to be regretted that the skull, which was found in the largest cist, fared badly at the hands of the labourers. It was thrown into a burn which flows past the place. Afterwards it seemed to occur to the men that they had not dealt in a seemly way with the relic; and resolving to give it, what they considered, decent burial, it was cast into a hole, and covered with stones. I had these stones removed in the hope of recovering the skull, but found it in fragments, and quite useless as an anatomical subject.

One tooth, a molar, was found in the jaw, and is now being carried about in the pocket of the crofter, carefully wrapped in paper—perhaps as a charm. The tooth is in a wonderfully sound condition.

The ashes found in the clay urn were treated with almost as little ceremony as the skull, having been scattered at the side of the cist. Enough, however, remained for the purpose of examination. They were dark in colour, and intermixed with white particles which had quite the appearance of calcined bones.

A layer of earth of a bright red colour was found near one of the cists which, I think, is composed of peat ashes. There is a certain kind of peat in this district, which, on being burned, leaves behind a red ash, and which becomes deeper in colour when subjected to moisture.

If the inhabitants of this country in pre-historic times disposed of the dead by the process of cremation, one might expect to find traces of the fuel employed, and as Shetland is a treeless region, that fuel would, of necessity, be peat or heather, possibly both.

[Through the good offices of the Rev. Mr Johnston, the Quarff urns have been acquired for the National Museum.]