

### III

#### AN ACCOUNT OF THE EXCAVATION OF FURTHER BUILDINGS OF THE VIKING PERIOD (VIKING HOUSE NO. II), AT "JARLSHOF," SUMBURGH, SHETLAND, CARRIED OUT ON BEHALF OF H.M. OFFICE OF WORKS BY ALEX. O. CURLE, C.V.O., LL.D., F.S.A.Scot., F.S.A.

When ground was first broken revealing the existence of remains of a Viking settlement at Jarlshof, it happened to be at a spot where an alleyway ran between two buildings, and which had been used in later times as the site of a midden. In the summer of 1934 the more westerly of the two buildings was explored and duly reported on.<sup>1</sup>

In 1935 the structure on the opposite side of the alley, and a group of associated chambers to the south-east, were examined. Unfortunately the greater part of the meadow in which the ruins were situated had been brought under cultivation, and a crop of bere prevented the complete exploration of the site towards the east. The building facing the alley was in a very ruinous condition and the plan difficult to ascertain. Originally it had been a house, possibly a dwelling, or a range of rooms or offices associated with another Viking house lying to the east of it in the ground under crop. It measured some 50 feet in length, was rounded at either end, and lay parallel to the dwelling previously excavated (see plan, Plate I). There had been an entrance 3 feet

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxi. p. 265.

in width through the main wall, distant some 6 feet or so from what appeared to have been the south-east end. It may have been coeval with the other house, or even earlier, as the drain which crossed the floor of the latter belonging to the second period of occupation had been responsible for a partial destruction, and very rough replacement, of the north-west portion of the front wall, under which it partially passed. Of the original house very little apparently remained. The outer face of the front wall, from a short return which seemed to be the only remaining portion of the south-east gable, extended along the side of the alley for a distance of 32 feet, built apparently in characteristic fashion with alternate layers of turf and stone. At the end of this section there was a slight projection outwards, causing a departure from the original alignment in the farther extension of the front. This latter portion of the wall was entirely a reconstruction formed of large stones roughly put together (fig. 2). Beneath the right-angled projection where the alignment changed, there was an inlet into the drain, evidently intended to catch surface water from the alley, the surface-level of which had a fall of 1 foot 3 inches from the south-east to this point, and it had possibly been in connection with the formation of this drain that the wall had been reconstructed. A portion of the original wall remained at the north-west end, while on the outer front, except for a short stretch of walling some 3 to 4 feet in length which had collapsed inwards, no trace of the original wall remained, as far as ascertainable.

Seemingly the whole building had been allowed to fall into ruin and then reconstructed for secondary purposes. It had apparently been a three-roomed house. Though the outer wall on the north-east side had practically disappeared its line towards the north-west end must have passed close by the ends of the platforms indicated on the plan (Plate I) at the entrances to Rooms I and II, with the exception of the end of the platform on the left of the entrance to Room I, which had obviously been displaced. What happened eastward of that it is difficult to say. Room III had originally been some 25 feet in length, but, owing to alteration in the south-west wall, was of unascertainable width.

The three rooms, after final abandonment of the dwelling, had been used as ash-pits, for peat-ash lay deep over the floors, and in Room I there was also a considerable amount of food refuse. Room I, which was irregular in shape owing probably to the dwelling having tapered towards the end, measured some 9 feet in length by 7 feet 6 inches in width where widest. There was evidence of two or three occupations, recognisable by the occurrence of flooring flags, and, in one instance, of a

short length of inferior building, at different levels, but no indications of the periods to which they belonged. The floor had been paved, and there was no discoloration of the soil which actually covered it. The walls forming the chamber were in a very ruinous condition, as the methods of building employed by the Norsemen did not make for any permanent stability. From the north-east there was an entrance to the room some



Fig. 2. North-west end, showing Reconstruction of Wall.

4 feet 6 inches in length, with platforms extending the length of the passage on either side (fig. 3), measuring in width about 4 feet, and, as remaining, some 2 feet in height, formed of earth enclosed with walling. In the interior of the room a single upright slab was set in the floor at right angles to the inner wall of the end platform. At the base of the partition wall dividing this room from Room II there were the remains of a flue which must have been connected with a furnace, from which came some specimens of iron slag and of bog iron.

An opening in the partition wall in the south corner of the room gave access to Room II. This had been a larger chamber than Room I,

measuring about 12 feet by 9. The floor of it was also paved, and it dipped towards the entrance, which was, as in the previous case, from the north-east. The passage led inwards for a distance of 4 feet with a width of a little over a foot. The walls on either side were set deep, but the lower part of the passage was filled in with broken stones and debris



Fig. 3. Entrance to Room I, showing Platforms to right and left.

as if for drainage. A single lintel at the inner end covered the passage, leaving a space below such as might have allowed entrance for pigs or sheep (fig. 4). As in the case of Room I, a platform flanked the passage on either side faced with stones, and in the south-east corner of the room there were the remains of another platform in a ruinous state. In the opposite corner a recess had been formed behind a short projecting wall. Parallel, and only a few inches in front of the north-west wall of this room, there was a bench about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  foot in width, and similar in height, formed of turf or soil, with one or two upright stones on the side, and covered with flat stones like drain covers. Benches, somewhat similar on plan, are shown to have existed in Greenland, where they were

employed to support hacks to hold hay for feeding sheep.<sup>1</sup> The character of the passage as above described admits of such a possibility in the likelihood of this chamber having been used for sheep or pigs in one part of its history.

The plan and evolution of Room III was very difficult to comprehend

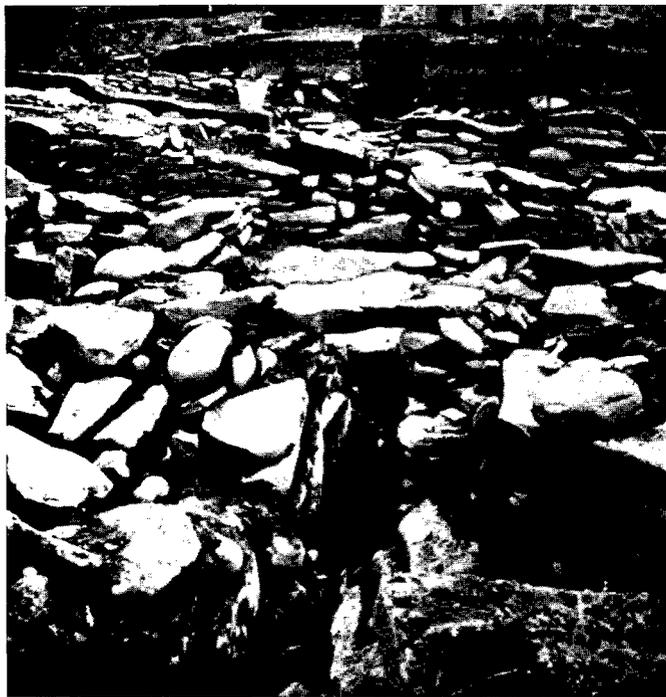


Fig. 4. Entrance to Room II, with a Lintel over it.

(fig. 5). It had been an oblong chamber, measuring in length 25 feet from the end wall on the south-east to the face of the actual wall separating it from Room II, and some 13 feet in width. At a distance of some 4 feet 6 inches in front of the latter, parallel, and extending almost to the full width of the room, was another wall, in a ruinous condition, but remaining to a height of about 1 foot, in two courses, which acted as a facing to a bench of soil, probably employed as a dais. Crossing this wall at its north-east end is a single line of flat stones, which suggested the base of a later retaining wall. It was carried right forward beyond the apparent edge of the building, but could not be

<sup>1</sup> See Daniel Brunn, *Fortidsmindivog Nütidshjem paa Island*, Copenhagen, 1928, p. 283.

followed owing to the bere crop. Again, at a distance of 4 feet 6 inches or thereby, further into the chamber and parallel with the end wall, was another facing wall of large stones, giving the appearance of the formation of yet another dais at a lower level and possibly of an earlier period. In front of this last-mentioned wall there was an indeterminate extent of compacted clay on the floor, and a similar bed of clay formed the



Fig. 5. Room III from the south-east.

flooring in front of the opposite wall at the south-east end of the chamber. The wall fronting the alley had been much interfered with on its inner face, as may be seen from the plan. Originally there had been an entrance through it, blocked at a later date. Through the outer wall, on the opposite side, there was an entrance corresponding to those into Rooms I and II, flanked also by similar platforms.

On the right of the entrance there were, however, two platforms in place of one, and it will be noticed from the plan that the rear platform projects beyond the front of the back dais in exactly the same manner as the foremost platform extends beyond the line of the inner

wall—as if platform and dais were each associated features of separate plans. Within, on the floor some 18 inches distant from the inside of the outer wall, there was a large flagstone firmly set on edge, and between this and the wall, against which there stood a couple of upright stones, there had been a fireplace. Besides the evidence of the fire supplied by the condition of the ash on the floor, one of the stones



Fig. 6. Fireplace in Alleyway at Base of Wall.

against the wall was burnt to a brick-red colour. An excavation in the floor of this chamber revealed a bed of peat-ash to a depth of 3 feet lying on what appeared to be virgin sand.

In the alley against the front of this chamber there was uncovered in 1934, beneath the midden refuse, a small fireplace still filled with burnt broken stones (fig. 6). Behind this a flue passed inward through the wall, and, this season, it was met with at the base of the partition wall between Rooms II and III at the rear of the supposed dais. The deposit of peat-ash on the floor of this chamber lay to a depth of nearly 20 inches, and there was no food refuse mixed with it. From the evidence

of structure it appears to have been occupied as a living- and sleeping-apartment.

At the extreme south-east end of Viking House No. II, and extending partially across the end of the alley, were the foundations of two other chambers which differed entirely in character from those previously described (fig. 7). A doorway, some 2 feet 9 inches wide, in the south



Fig. 7. View across Chambers at the south-east end.

corner of Room III, gave access to a passage which led westward for a distance of 22 feet into the alleyway, and also to a doorway on the left into a small rectangular chamber, measuring some 7 feet by 8 feet, with a paved floor. The entrance from the passage is singularly narrow, measuring only 1 foot 3 inches in width, but in the south-west corner another entrance 2 feet 9 inches wide opens out from the end of the alley. The wall which forms the south-east end of the above chamber is carried across the alley to meet the outer face of the wall of Viking House No. I, and also forms the north-west wall of a long, narrow

chamber, measuring 2 feet 9 inches in breadth and 10 feet 6 inches in length, with an entrance through its east wall at the north-east corner. On the wall opposite this entrance was a shallow recess some 2 feet 6 inches wide. This chamber had also been paved.

Attached to the Viking dwellings of the period were various store-rooms, the larder, dairy, etc., in which were kept the supplies, and some



Fig. 8. Paved Passage leading out of Room I.

such purpose these two chambers must obviously have fulfilled. Even in the larger of the two there were no traces of a bench, or platform, such as appeared in the other houses, nor was there any discoloration on the floors to suggest that they had been employed for sheltering or stabling stock. Some sherds of pottery found in a passage were identical in character with those found in Viking House No. I in 1934.

The chambers in House No. II had obviously at some period of their history been used as sleeping places, possibly by the humbler members of the Viking establishment even when they were used for other purposes.

The larger room, III, might have been the women's room. No rooms have been discovered which could be identified as stables, byres, or smithy, usual complements of such an establishment.

From Room I a paved passage (fig. 8) led outwards in a north-easterly direction for a distance of 12 feet, gradually expanding in width from 2 feet 3 inches to 4 feet, until it was crossed by a later wall. This wall was found to be the end wall of another building, measuring in the interior some 16 feet in length by 6 feet in width. The wall surrounding

it was not of the same character as that of the Viking house, and, from its position blocking the exit passage, the building was obviously later.

At a distance of some 10 feet from the south-west end of this building, and below the floor-level, a wall composed of unbroken beach stones crossed it obliquely. As this wall, which varied from 2 to 3 feet in breadth, passed through a bed of peat-ash, which also extended beneath, it was probably a foundation.

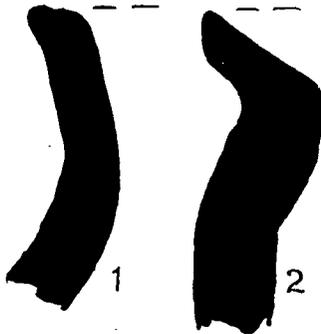


Fig. 9. Sections of Rims found to westward in the Meadow.

To the right of the paved passage from Room I there remained two sides of what had apparently been a flagged enclosure formed of upright slabs, and, according to later custom, probably used to harbour a calf. The slab forming one side measured 4 feet in length.

Excavation made in the meadow to the westward revealed the existence of other foundations in that direction. Some sherds of coarse pottery (fig. 9) showing an everted rim found among them were not similar to those characteristic of the Viking period as revealed in the excavation of the house, and were probably of later date.

In the excavation of Viking House No. I a drain was discovered crossing the floor from a westerly direction, pointing to the existence of an associated chamber at its source. Unfortunately the presence of the Mausoleum prevented the complete exploration of the area, but a deep trench was carried forward, as far as could be done with safety, in the direction of the front of that building, and in this a wall was exposed, the base of which lay at a level of 23 feet 3 inches above Ordnance datum, practically that of the adjacent wall of the Viking dwelling. As numerous loom weights, pieces of large steatite vessels, a piece of a haunched hone, and a characteristic small hone of black slate, perforated at one end, were found at the foot of the wall, it was probably

the end wall of the chamber for which we were seeking. Further exploration can only be effected after removal of the Mausoleum. Beneath this wall lay an earlier wall approaching it at right angles from an easterly direction.

The most interesting features discovered in the course of this excavation were the platforms (see plan) situated at the entrance to Rooms I, II, and III, and in the east corner of Room II of Viking House No. II. In all probability these were erections intended for the support of box-beds.<sup>1</sup>

#### RELICS.

The relics found in the course of this excavation were not numerous or important, but were closely analogous to those found in 1934 in the Viking House No. I.

*Bone Objects.*—A perforated head of a femur, measuring  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter and 1 inch in height (fig. 15, No. 7), was found below the turf in the supposed store chambers at the south-east end. Similar objects were found in the course of the excavation of the prehistoric dwellings at Jarlshof in 1933, and as one of these came from the earth-house "h" it was presumably contemporary.<sup>2</sup> Another was found at a high level in the Viking house in 1934.<sup>3</sup> A number have been found in brochs. These objects are usually designated whorls, but such employment for all of them is not obvious.<sup>4</sup>

A piercer,  $3\frac{7}{8}$  inches long (fig. 11, No. 4), was found on the paving of the passage which led out of Room I.

A piercer or needle,  $3\frac{3}{4}$  inches in length and perforated at the head (fig. 11, No. 5), was found in Room III below floor-level.

A broken piercer (fig. 11, No. 3) was found outside Viking House No. I, in midden refuse referable to the Viking period.

*Brass.*—A ring,  $\frac{1}{16}$  inch in diameter, formed of thin brass wire (fig. 11, No. 8), was found in Room III at floor-level (24 feet above Ordnance datum).

*Bronze (Miscellaneous).*—From one of the supposed store chambers at the south-east end came an object, measuring 3 inches in length, which was evidently a portion of the rim of a bronze vessel with a repairing strip folded over it, and from the same spot there was recovered a relic in

<sup>1</sup> The positions of beds on either side of the entrances are shown in the typical plan of a "Hearth-room-house" of the later Middle Ages in Norway in the notes to *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the classic Norwegian romance, by Sigrid Unset, *q.v.*, English translation, p. 930.

<sup>2</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxxviii, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. lxxix, p. 306.

<sup>4</sup> See *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxxviii, 1933-34, p. 271.

form of a four-pointed star, pierced with nine circular perforations, and small pin-holes at the end of each point (fig. 10, No. 1). It measured  $1\frac{7}{8}$  inch in extreme length and breadth, allowing for the absence of one point, and resembled a mounting for a binding. From each of the Chambers I, II, and III, as well as from the ground in front, came small

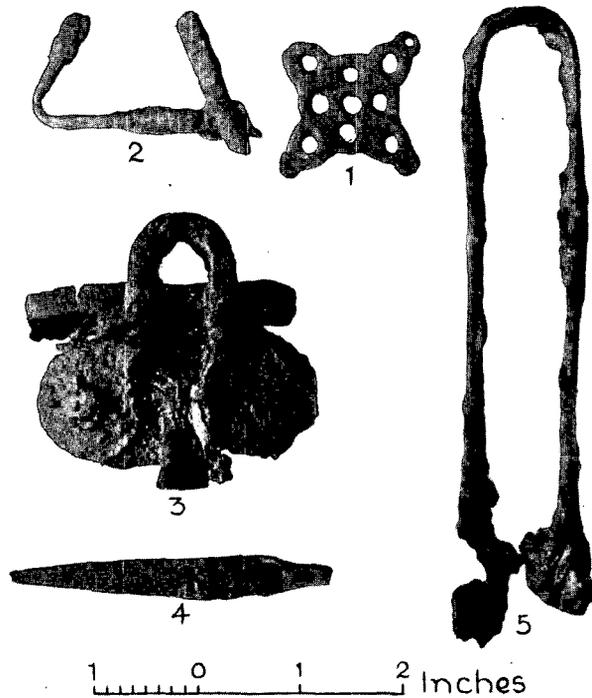


Fig. 10. Miscellaneous Objects of Bronze and Iron.

fragments of sheet bronze—eleven pieces in all. Similar fragments were found in excavating the Viking house adjacent in 1934. They have the appearance of being parts of a large bucket or cauldron, but their diffuse distribution is inexplicable.

The only other object of bronze found came from the floor of the chamber excavated outside Room I towards the east. It is a broken fragment with two arms, and in appearance suggests a portion of a balance (fig. 10, No. 2).

*Combs.*—Several portions of a large bow-shaped comb for the hair,

with teeth on one side, made of bone, with criss-cross decoration in the centre of the bow, was found among midden refuse in Room I, and three

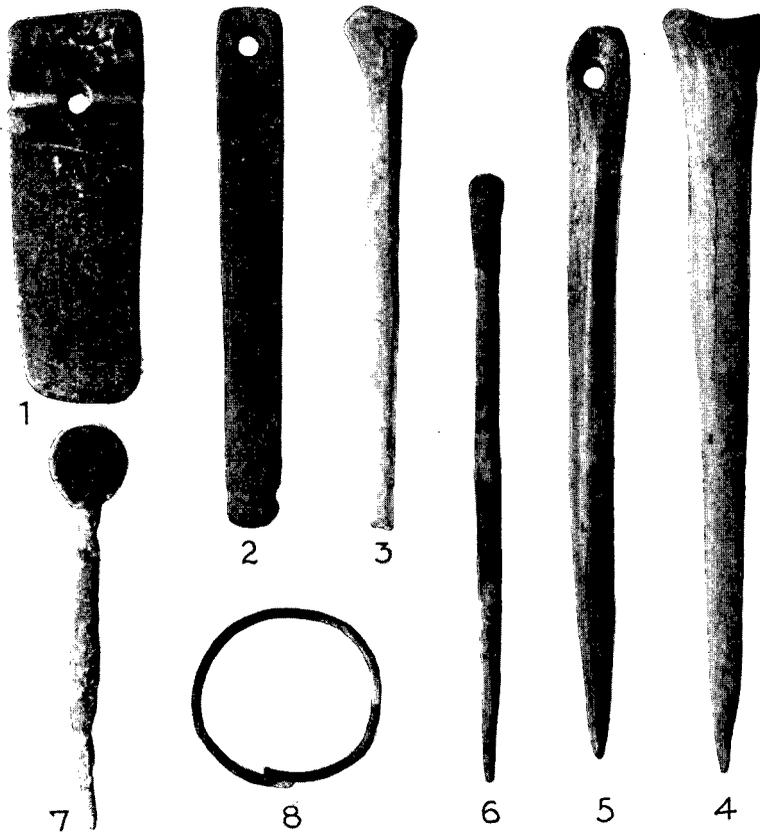


Fig. 11. Hones, Bone Piercers, Bronze Pin, and Brass Ring. (†.)

pieces, much decayed, of a straight comb of bone were found at floor-level in Room III.

*Hones.*—A small black hone, 2 inches in length,  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in breadth (fig. 11, No. 1), and perforated at one end, came from Room I, and portions of haunched hones (fig. 12) came from Room III, the trench in front of the Mausoleum at a high level, and from the meadow. A small black hone of slate (fig. 11, No. 2), perforated at one end and notched at the other,

$2\frac{5}{8}$  inches in length, was found in front of the wall, presumed to be of Viking period, before the Mausoleum.

*Mould.*—An object of steatite (fig. 13), with three pin-shaped matrices cut in it on one side, one similar on the other, and also on the latter a

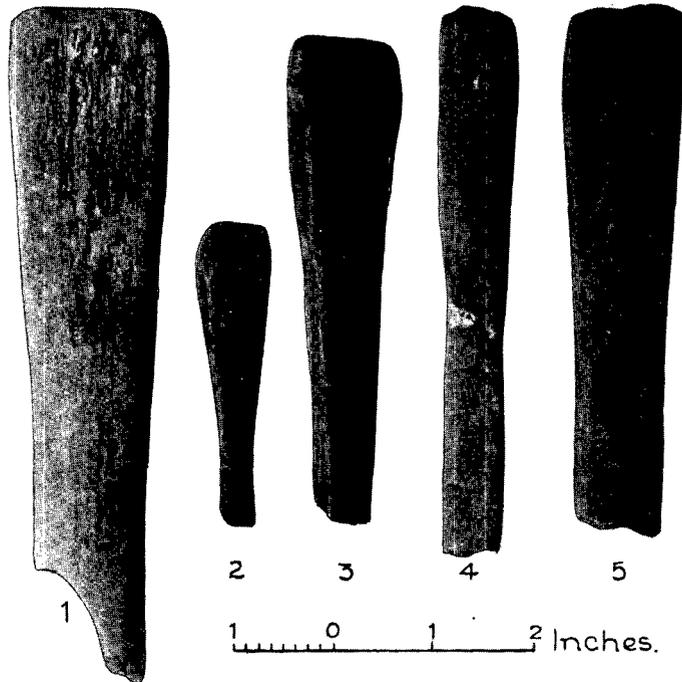


Fig. 12. Haunched Hones.

cylindrical matrix, was found under a paving-stone in the building outside Room I to the east.

*Pins.*—A bronze pin,  $3\frac{1}{8}$  inches in length, circular in section, measuring  $\frac{3}{16}$  inch in diameter at one end and tapered to a point at the other, with ribs formed of fine lines on the upper half extending for about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch down (fig. 11, No. 6), was found in the alleyway.

A disc-headed pin of bronze,  $2\frac{1}{8}$  inches in length (fig. 11, No. 7), came from the floor-level of the building in front of Room I. A similar pin was found in the Broch of Burray, Orkney, and is preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities.

The pointed end of a pin of polished ivory,  $1\frac{7}{8}$  inch in length, was found in Room III at floor-level.

*Iron Objects (Miscellaneous).*—An iron loop handle with thin strips of bronze attached, probably part of a bucket (fig. 10, No. 3), was found

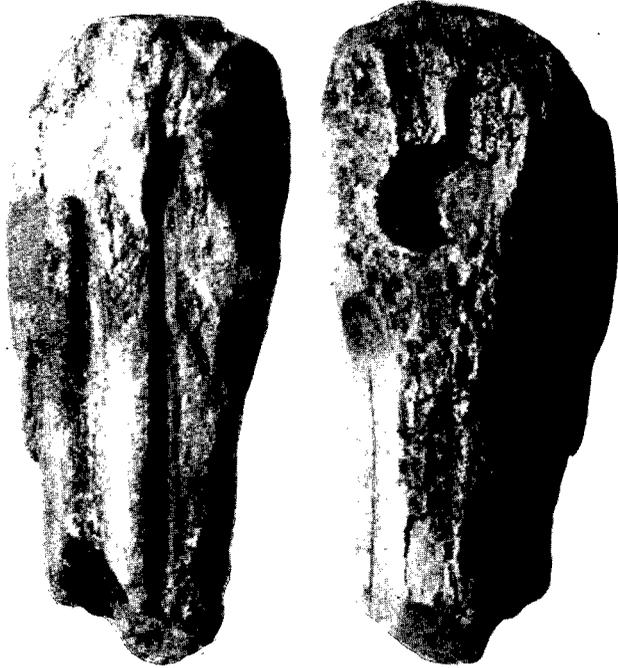


Fig. 13. Mould of Steatite.

at a high level in a deposit of oyster shells in a trench in front of the Mausoleum.

A knife-blade,  $3\frac{1}{8}$  inches in length (fig. 10, No. 4), was found at floor-level in Room III.

The remains of a pair of scissors (fig. 10, No. 5) were found at about 1 foot below the floor-level in Room III.

*Polisher of Quartz.*—A small pebble of white quartz, 1 inch in length (fig. 15, No. 9), reduced to a flat surface and highly polished at one end, was found in Room II.

This is an example of a class of objects of which a number were found on the site of the Roman fort at Newstead, Melrose, and also on

haughlands at Dryburgh, Berwickshire, by Mr J. M. Corrie, F.S.A.Scot., and have been reported on by him in the *Proceedings* of the Society.<sup>1</sup>

*Pottery.*—The sherds found were of similar character to those found previously, the body showing numerous impressions of leaves and seeds of grass. One sherd of thick pot (fig. 14) had a deep groove below the rim.

*Stone Objects.*—A shaped object of steatite (fig. 15, No. 8), incompletely perforated at one end,  $2\frac{1}{4}$  inches long, and with a constriction around the centre, was found in opening out the store-rooms at the south-east end.

A disc of stone,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter, was found just below the turf above

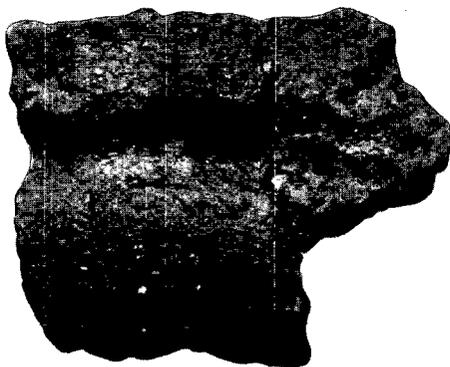


Fig. 14. Potsherd with deep groove below Rim. (3.)

the store-rooms; another,  $2\frac{1}{4}$  inches in diameter, was found at floor-level in Room II. A similar disc of same dimension was found at floor-level in Room III. Another, measuring  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter (fig. 15, No. 1), was found on floor-level in the store-rooms. Another, measuring  $1\frac{5}{8}$  inch in diameter (fig. 15, No. 4), was found outside Room I; and a sixth, measuring  $1\frac{1}{8}$  inch in diameter (fig. 15, No. 3), was found on the floor-level of the building in front of Room I. There is nothing to show what purpose these discs served, but it seems likely that they were used in a game.

*Tablets of Slate worked in Graffito.*—Some twenty-nine pieces of slate were recovered, found distributed all over the excavated area.

In many instances the marks are very faint. As a rule they have been produced with a blunt-pointed instrument, but occasionally a knife-point appears to have been used. A scheme of squares formed by

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. xlviii. p. 338; vol. l. p. 312.

intersecting lines seems to have been the general motive aimed at, and occasionally this has been partially scored out with cross lines (fig. 17, Nos. 3 and 4). One slate only appears to be approximately complete (fig. 16, No. 1). It is in form oblong, measuring  $3\frac{3}{4}$  inches by  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , and it

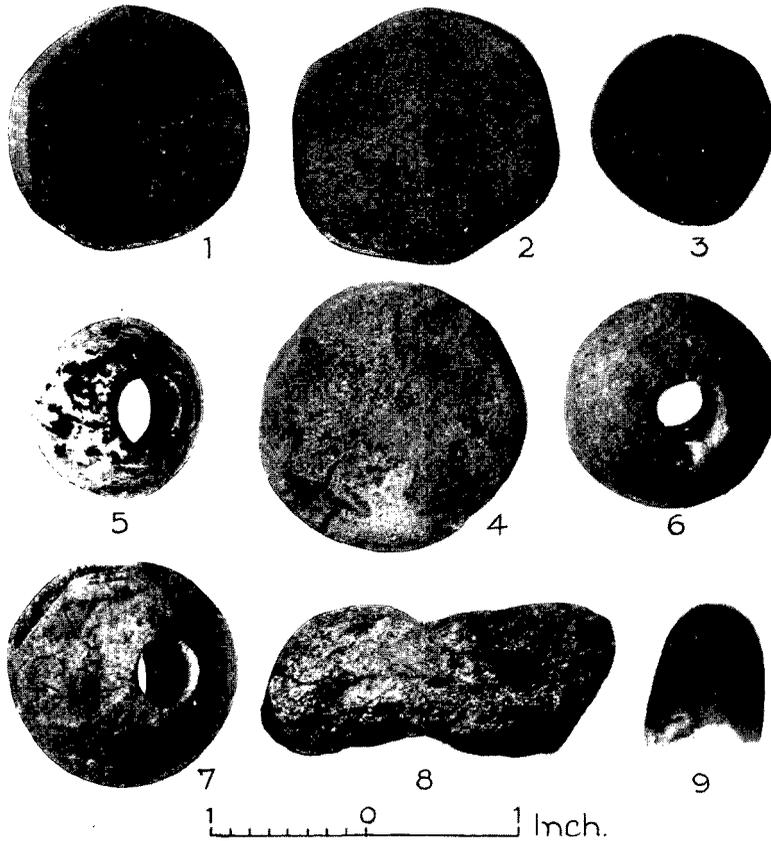


Fig. 15. Miscellaneous Objects of Stone and Perforated Femur.

has been divided into fifty-six compartments by longitudinal and transverse lines. There are no markings within the squares.

There is one fragment (fig. 16, No. 3) on which are incised markings quite different from any met with previously. The surface has been divided into two by a deeply scored line running lengthways of the stone. The division to the right has been filled with an ornament

which resembles scales, or links, placed vertically, with a transverse band towards one end. The other division, which remains plain towards the broader end of the fragment, has been divided at the upper end into five divisions by cross lines. The lower two have been filled with

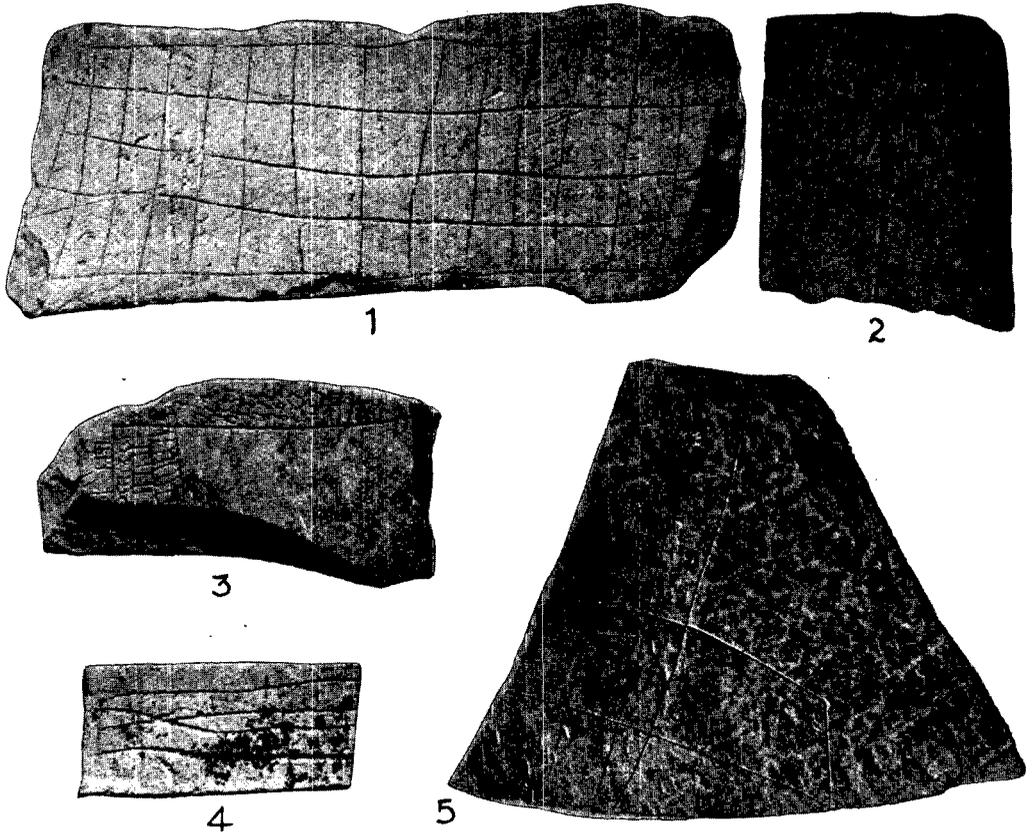


Fig. 16. Slates with Markings in Graffito. (†.)

vertical strokes, that immediately above with a series of C curves; the next above with carefully cut vertical lines, with a space left between the first line on the left and the second, into which has been inserted, adjacent to the first stroke, a C curve adhering to the upper divisional line, while all that remains of the graffiti in the upper division are some portions of oblique and vertical lines. There is a suggestion in the

series of horizontal lines with their distinctive markings that this slate may be a portion of a record or tally. It was found on the wall-head of Viking House No. I during solidifying operations in the autumn of 1935. No. 2 on the same fig. as the last shows also the scheme of

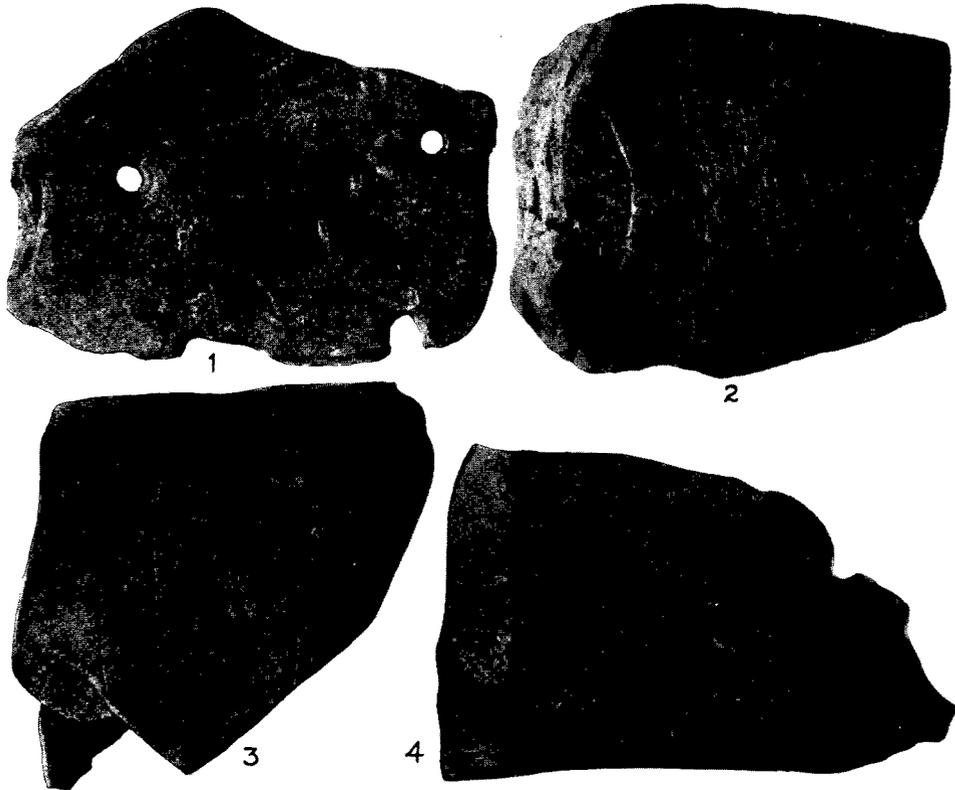


Fig. 17. Slates with Markings in Graffito. ( $\frac{2}{3}$ .)

squares. No. 5 shows a somewhat different arrangement of lines, quite enigmatical.

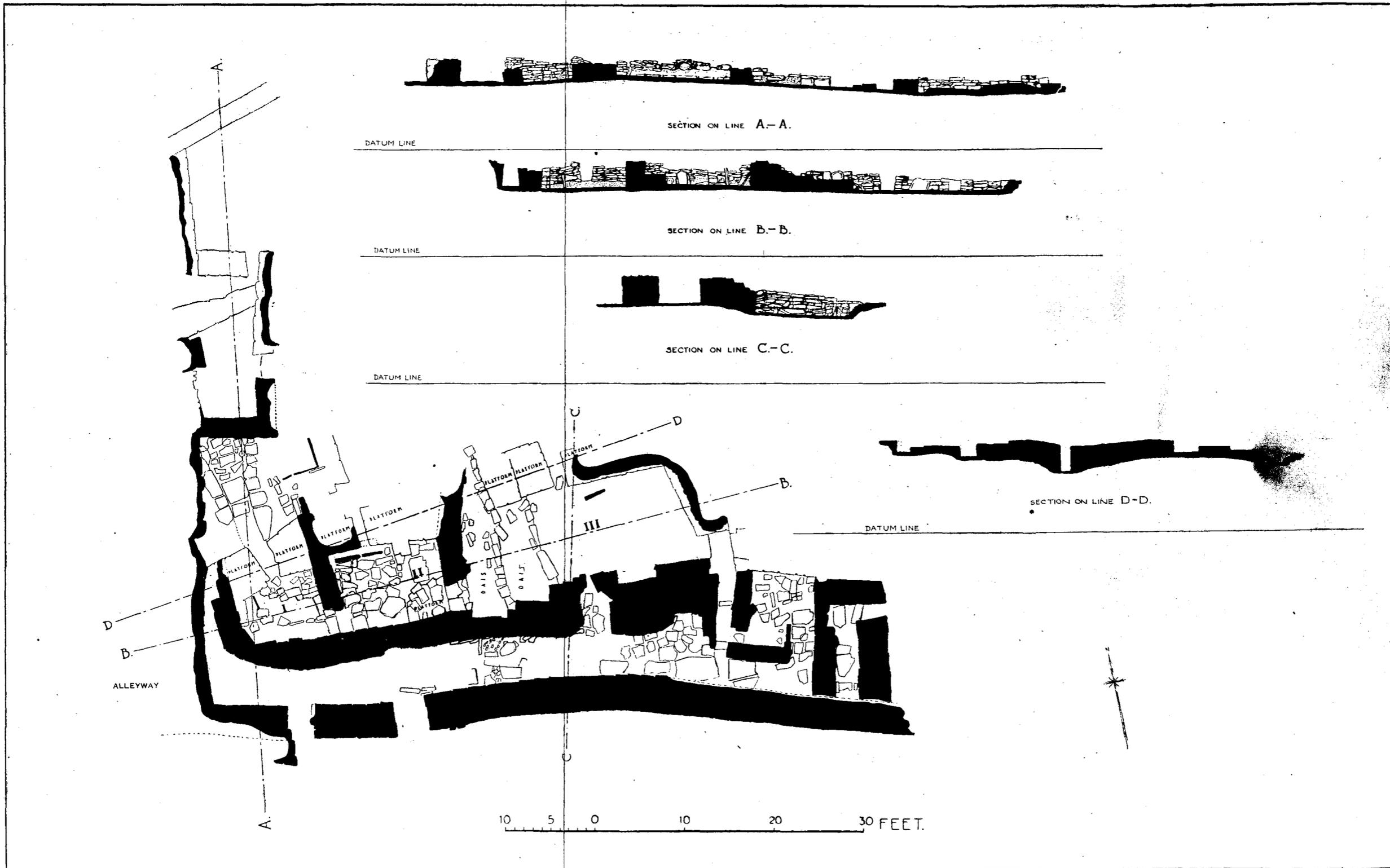
Two of the slates have been perforated. Fig. 18, with three perforations, has a series of graffiti apparently radiating from a point and crossed by a single stroke, in the lower left corner, and is pierced by three holes, approximately in alignment, along the opposite edge. Fig. 17, No. 1, shows four perforations of larger diameter.

*Whorls.*—Only two whorls (fig. 15, Nos. 5 and 6) fall to be recorded, and neither came from last season's excavation. Both were found on the wall-head of Viking House No. I during solidifying operations in the autumn of 1934.



Fig. 18. Perforated Slate. ( $\frac{3}{8}$ .)

In conclusion I desire to tender my thanks to those who took part in the excavations, and to Dr Graham Callander and Mr A. J. H. Edwards, who assisted in the production of this and the other reports of last season's work. Among the former was my son Mr A. T. Curle, M.B.E., and Mr and Mrs Peter Murray Threipland. Finally, as in all the previous seasons, I had cause to appreciate the services of the members of the Office of Works and the zeal and intelligence of the staff of local workmen.



ALEX. O. CURLE.

PLAN AND SECTIONS OF FURTHER VIKING BUILDINGS AT JARLSHOF.

PLATE I.

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