

Artistic and Cultured Civilisation Disclosed.

Dates Back Nearly 3,500 Years.

As one approaches Dornoch from the Mound by train, immediately on passing through the level crossing gates, a few yards outside Dornoch station, there is to be seen on the right a little hill strewn towards its summit with large rounded stones. From a nearby quarry it will be noticed that the hill is composed of sand and gravel and that it is, in fact, a moraine deposited by a glacier during a period of the Ice Age. It was on such an eminence that prehistoric men frequently made their tombs. Although this hill always has looked a likely site for such a purpose, it was not until Mr Robert Gunn was ploughing there in early December last that any evidence was forthcoming, that on Cnoc-na-caorach (Hill of the Sheep) was actually a spot where our early ancestors were laid to rest.

The site is ideal. Although the elevation of the moraine is only some 60 feet above the level of the sea, the situation is commanding and it overlooks a wide stretch of land and sea from Tarbat Ness to Struie and Bonar with Beinn Donuill in the distance and the commanding monument of the Duke on Ben Bhraggie standing like a sentinel on guard.

Mr Gunn's plough struck a large boulder, but this often happens, and it was not till some weeks later that an opportunity presented itself to remove the stone from the track of the plough. Then it was noticed that it overlay a large flag-stone, beneath a corner of which there appeared a cavity. On moving this large stone with a crowbar, Mr Gunn noticed protruding through the infallen soil what appeared to be human remains within a small stone chamber. He at once informed Mr H. M. Ross of the Sutherland Arms Hotel, Dornoch, the tenant of the farm of Achinchanter, who, in turn, advised Mr John Campbell, Station House, Dornoch, who has taken a keen interest in antiquarian matters. The exploration was then undertaken under the supervision of Mr J. M. Davidson, joint secretary of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, with the generous permission of Mr Ross and Mr Thomas Adam, factor to the Duke of Sutherland, the proprietor.

Despite the arctic weather conditions prevailing, the excavators received much assistance from willing helpers, Mr R. Ross, Bishopfield, lending much valued aid in this respect.

The cist was found to be constructed of heavy stone slabs, set on edge and it measured about 4 feet 1 inch long and 2 feet 1 inch broad. The two sides and one end each consisted of a single stone, while the other end had a second stone keyed in at right angles. The interstices at the corners were very carefully built in with smaller stones securely packed. The depth of the chamber was about 2 feet. On two of the slabs distinct evidence of tooling and shaping was clearly visible; and the whole structure in its compact and solid state presented one of the best examples found within recent years in the North of Scotland.

Within there was found human remains which showed that the body had been placed in the little tomb on its left side in a contracted position. It was lying on a bed of soft sand, finely sifted and entirely free from pebbles, and beneath this was a gravel base rudely paved with rounded stones.

The body was frequently set with its face towards the east, but in this case it was observed how long the axis of the cist was directed exactly to that point on the horizon where the sun set at the winter solstice. The significance of the winter sunset and the laying to rest of a now-unknown chief of the Bronze Age on the summit of Achinchanter, the one attuned to the other was so striking as to appear more than accidental. In all probability there is here a suggestion of a symbolism in their ancient worship and religion.

The excavators cleared the surface to the east and found a rough pavement of heavy stone boulders adjacent to the cist end slab, and this was found to connect with the massive top stone of a second cist. The capstone measured about 5 feet by 4 feet and it required the combined efforts of five men to raise one side and to pivot it over. The chamber was constructed in a similarly impressive manner with large slabs, but the size in this case was smaller at 3 feet 6 inches long, while the width tapered from 28 to 21 inches, the depth being approximately the same as the first.

The constructional details of the two cists differed considerably, and it was apparent that they had not been built by the same hands. This difference in building was reflected in the condition of the remains. The first shed damp and water off, whereas the second drew damp and moisture into the chamber. The result was that while the human remains in the first were tangible, in the second they were quite intangible and only the shadow remained.

Within the second tomb towards the

S.W. corner was found a little clay pot of the food vessel type. It was placed quite near the head, and from the black carbonised material within, it was apparent that it contained some material. Analysis has shown that this black deposit is the remains of a cereal which was placed in the little vessel to be ready in case of the need of the deceased on his post-mortem journey. The vessel is a rather heavy, hand-made urn about six inches in height, nicely fluted at the neck and tapering rapidly to a flat base. It is decorated over its exterior surface with finely set markings in herring-bone pattern incised on the clay, while it was still soft and unfired.

The character of the pottery found in such tombs is of importance as the distinguishing features in the variety of vessels met with give a fairly definite indication of the approximate date when it was fashioned. This particular example, however, cannot in the meantime, until it has hardened sufficiently to bear handling, be definitely stated to belong to this or that category, but in its ornamentation and construction it is very similar to a "food vessel" unearthed by Mr Davidson during excavations at a Bronze Age Cemetery at Kilbowie, Dumbartonshire, in 1934, and may possibly belong to a period near the middle of the Bronze Age indicating an age of perhaps 3500 years.

Within an inch or two of the head there was also found an arrowhead of flint. It was 1½ inches long and is a beautiful example of the barbed and tanged type. All its points are perfect. It is in mint condition, peculiarly elegant in form, exquisitely proportioned and very delicately serrated all along its angled edges. It is a particularly fine specimen of early craftsmanship, marvellously delicate in its manufacture, the point being very sharp and the barbs finely executed.

At the same end of the cist a small fragment of bronze—like the end of a pin—was discovered. Damp and decay had dissolved the remainder of it.

All of the stones forming the two cists were of sandstone conglomerate and apparently emanated from one or other of two quarries on Dornoch Links. These, however, are three quarters of a mile away as the crow flies, and it is evident that the labour of transporting these massive slabs must have been considerable, particularly as the moraine itself presents a fairly steep incline from any direction. The people for whom these

tombs were so laboriously erected must have been of particular consequence. The burial place itself suggests that, commanding as it does a magnificent prospect of mountain and moorland, woodland and water, rock and ridge, many miles in extent. On every side as far as the eye could reach, the view extends, while the graves could be seen from afar in every direction by the people who had made them. Probably the whole was one time surmounted by a gigantic cairn. Now there is no sign except for a few bottom boulders uprooted by the plough. Field dykes, barns, outhouses and roads have probably taken their quota from the convenient cairn long before the plough carried cultivation over Cnoc-na-Caorach. But the cairn would be a landmark for ancient peoples, be they hunting, be they fishing, or at their agricultural pursuits. It may have been their temple, their rallying ground, or their guide.

Great interest was evinced in the discoveries and hundreds of people visited the site while the tombs were open. Many saw Dornoch and district from an angle they had never before witnessed, while many more caught a glimpse of a virile artistic and competent civilisation of period more than a thousand years before the ubiquitous Roman set foot on these shores.

The hope was generally expressed that it might be possible in some way to preserve these interesting structures as relics as noteworthy examples of prehistoric craftsmanship. In such manner new links are added to our ever-extending chain of knowledge, and remains such as these tell their own tale in their own vivacious language of ages and crafts and people who have long since passed away.

BRONZE AGE DISCOVERY STONE CISTS ON DORNOCH FARM A BEAUTIFUL FLINT ARROW HEAD

About the beginning of December Mr Gunn, who is the foreman on the farm of Achinchanter, Dornoch, was ploughing on the high ground of one of the fields adjoining the railway ground when the sock of the plough struck a large stone and dislodged it. Mr Gunn noticed that a cavity had been revealed, but it was not until a few weeks later that he had an opportunity of investigating this. He then noticed that a large stone slab had been partly uncovered, and later, with the help of some friends, he had this raised and discovered underneath a little stone-lined chamber.

Fortunately, he did not disturb the contents, but informed Mr H. M. Ross, of the Sutherland Arms Hotel, who is the tenant of the ground. Mr Ross at once got into touch with Mr John Campbell, Station House, who is an authority on antiquarian matters, and he communicated with Mr J. M. Davidson, joint secretary of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, who came north to superintend the investigation. Permission was generously granted by Mr Ross and by Mr Thomas Adam, factor to the Duke of Sutherland, who is the proprietor, to explore the site.

The cist was constructed of massive stone slabs, set vertically on edge, forming a rectangular box-like structure measuring about four feet by two feet inside and about two feet deep. Each side consisted of a single slab, and where the corners did not meet closely they were carefully packed with smaller stones, and the cist presented an appearance of solidity in construction such as has seldom been exposed for many years in the North of Scotland.

The cist contained the remains of a body, with the head facing towards the north-east. In such burials the body is generally compacted in that the knees are drawn up, and the remains in this case, although fragmentary, appeared to conform to this practice.

ANOTHER CIST.

In clearing the ground to the east of the cist there was discovered adjacent to the end stone a rude paving of heavy cobble stones, and after exposing this the excavators came upon the massive top stone of another cist. This was a large block measuring about five feet by four feet, and it required the combined efforts of five men to raise it and pivot it over. The cist in this case, however, was smaller, measuring some 3½ feet in length and the width tapered from 28 inches at one end to 21 inches at the other. Within this again were found human remains, facing in the same direction and in somewhat similar posture. Beside the head there was found a little clay urn of the food vessel type, typically associated with Bronze Age burials of this nature. The little vessel is of somewhat squat appearance and is finely decorated over the whole of its exterior, with the exception of the flat base, with fine impressions made in herring bone pattern.

Within the vessel there was apparently nothing but a dark and blackened-like sand, but analysis has shown that this material is a type of cereal which was put in to provide sustenance to the deceased during the journey to the next world.

Beside the head also was found, as part of the "tomb furniture," an exquisitely shaped and beautifully formed barbed and tanged arrow head of flints in a perfect state of preservation and with all its points intact. The business edge is finely and very delicately serrated, and the specimen is a wonderful example of the craftsmanship of prehistoric times.

Some hundreds of people have taken advantage of the opportunity presented by the opening of these tombs to examine them closely, and the hope has been expressed that they may be preserved and made available for public and permanent inspection in the future, as they form an interesting sidelight on the burial customs of our prehistoric ancestors.

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BRONZE AGE DISCOVERY IN SUTHERLAND

CROUCHING SKELETON

DURING ploughing operations in December on the farm of Achinchanter, at Dornoch, the plough struck a large stone, which, it became evident, covered a cavity. At a later date the stone slab was lifted, disclosing a stone cist. The contents were left intact, and Mr John Campbell, of Station House, a local antiquary, communicated with Mr J. M. Davidson, joint secretary of the Glasgow Archaeological Society, under whose direction the investigation was carried out.

The cist was found to be constructed of large vertically set stone slabs, the inside measurement being about four feet by two feet, and the depth about two feet six inches. Inside was found a skeleton in a crouching position.

After the ground to the east had been cleared, a paving of heavy stone boulders was encountered, and later the massive top stone of a second cist was revealed. This slab measured five feet by four feet, and the cist in this instance was smaller, the length being about three feet and the width tapering from two feet six inches to two feet. Within was found a small clay urn of the food vessel type of the Bronze Age.