



THE UNDERGROUND LIFE

DAVID MACRITCHIE

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**BY
DAVID MACRITCHIE**

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In his *Travels in the Western Hebrides: from 1782 to 1790*, the Rev. John Lane Buchanan, 'A.M., Missionary Minister to the Isles from the Church of Scotland', has much to say of the wrongs and sufferings undergone at that time by 'an unfortunate and numerous class of men known under the name of *Scallags*.' This term is the Gaelic *scalag* or *sgalag*, signifying 'a servant' or, more primitively, 'a slave'; and indeed Buchanan clearly regards this latter definition as best describing the condition of those people. 'The scallags,' he says, 'are slaves *de facto*, though not *de jure*.' 'The slave is driven on to labour by stripes, so also is the scallag; who is even formally tied up on some occasions, as well as the negroe, to a stake, and scourged on his bare back.' Very significant, too, is Buchanan's testimony to the good nature of a certain minister in North Uist, of whom he says: 'Never was the minister and tacksman [lease-holder] of Ty-Gheary known to kick, beat, or scourge, or in any shape to lift his hand against his scallags in the whole course of his life.' Further evidence of the mean condition of this servile caste is afforded in these words: 'The scallag, whether male or female, is a poor being, who, for mere subsistence, becomes a predial slave to another, whether a sub-tenant, a tacksman, or a laird. The scallag builds his own hut with sods and boughs of trees; and if he is sent from one part of the country to another, he moves off his sticks, and, by means of these, forms a new hut in another place.' Sometimes, however, these wretched people, fleeing from the tyranny of the dominant caste, sought refuge in a different kind of habitation. 'The only asylum for the distressed in the Long Island is the King's forest, where severals are sheltered with their families and cattle for the Summer season; where they live in caves and dens of the earth, and subsist, without fire, on milk, the roots of the earth, and shell-fish. But in the Winter season cold and famine drive them back again to seek for subsistence and shelter under the same tyranny that had driven them to the forest.'

It is not unlikely that this caste of 'slaves' had inherited the blood of a different race from that of their masters, by whose forefathers their own had been subjugated. At any rate it is quite clear that, in one respect, they represented a way of living once followed in most parts of the British Islands, and indeed throughout the world. This was when they dwelt 'in caves and dens of the earth'; and it is, in fact, for the sake of their dwellings rather than for themselves that I have here introduced the *scallags* of the Outer Hebrides.

By the word 'cave,' however, we need not necessarily infer a natural excavation. It is the common usage of Irish archaeologists to apply this term to underground structures of a wholly artificial character. An illustration of this usage will be seen in an interesting note on 'Artificial Caves, Co. Antrim,' by the Rev. Canon Moore, in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*,¹ where the 'cave' in question is an underground gallery corresponding to the 'weems,' or 'earth-houses' of Scotland. The Scotch terra, 'weera,' really illustrates also this comprehensive

¹ Vol. i., Fifth Series, 1891, p. 595.

rendering of 'cave,' because 'weem' is simply a quickened pronunciation of the Gaelic *uaim*, 'a cave.'²

The way in which these places were made seems to have been this: First of all a deep trench or passage was dug, usually widening out at one end in varying shapes and degrees, and of very considerable length in some instances. Then its sides were lined with walls of unhewn and un-mortared stone, and the roof was formed by gradually approaching the upper tiers of the walls together until they almost met, when large slabs placed above them by way of keystone completed the whole. In some cases where the trench was only a long narrow passage, the walls rose up perpendicularly, and the roof was made by placing broad slabs horizontally across. At other times, a row of tall upright stones was placed on either side of the passage, and these inclined together at the top, so as to render any superimposed flag-stones almost or altogether unnecessary. But where the gallery widened into a chamber, such methods as the two last indicated could not be followed, and the only available plan left to those primitive builders was to bring the opposite sides gradually together in the manner described, so as to form a kind of arch—what is known as a 'cyclopean' arch. Sometimes where the space to be covered in was wide, and the roof was not intended to be high (as it seldom was), the area of roofing was circumscribed by introducing a concentric circle of pillars, forming in fact a rude cloister. But this seems to have been exceptional.

Writing in 1831, Logan gives the following account of these structures³:—

'In the North of Scotland numerous artificial caves are found, of a construction resembling those in Ireland. They are called Eird-houses⁴ in the Low Country, and are considered as the hiding-places of the aborigines. They are sometimes of considerable extent, being long and narrow; but many, to render the size more commodious, have in subsequent periods been built up at the farther end. The sides are usually built of small [?] stones, without cement, and the roof is composed of large thin stones resting on either side. The entrance to most of them appears now only a rude hole or opening, but some are more artificial. Near Tongue, in Sutherland, are some where the passage is formed by large stones inclined to and resting on each other.

'The appearance of these Eird-houses on the exterior, when they are at all discernible, is that of a slight, green eminence, and except one is directed in his search, it would be difficult to discover them. In the parishes of Achindoe and Kildrummy, in Aberdeenshire, they are numerous...

'In the parish of Golspie, Sutherland, subterraneous buildings have been discovered, having a small oblique entry from the surface of about two and a half feet square, which, after advancing three yards, widens to about three feet, and winds a few yards farther to an apartment of about twelve feet square and nine high, covered above by large broad stones, terminating in one, formed like a mill-stone, having a hole in the centre, probably to emit smoke. From this cell a passage led to others, which are now inaccessible from the fall of the super-incumbent earth.'

² The Welsh and Cornish forms are *ogof* and *ogoe*, respectively; and these words are applied, I understand, to artificial as well as to natural 'caves.' The original word from which the Gaelic, Welsh, and Cornish variants have come must obviously have been something like *ogam* or *ugam*.

³ *The Scottish Gael*, vol. ii. pp. 11, 12.

⁴ Icelandic, *jard-hus*—*i.e.* 'earth house'

Although it entails some repetition, I shall also add two other general descriptions of the same kind; not only because each account contains some detail omitted in the others, but also because a word or a phrase of one writer enables one to realise better the descriptions given by the rest.

The first of the two following extracts is from Dr. Hill Burton's *History of Scotland*:—

‘Another class of structures very abundant in Scotland are called Eard or Earth-houses, Picts-houses, and Weems. . . . They exist in many places in Scotland, but chiefly they concentrate themselves near Glenkindy and Kildrummy, on the upper reaches of the river Don, in Aberdeenshire. There they may be found so thickly strewn as to form subterranean villages, or even towns. The fields are, to use a common expression, honey-combed with them. They give no artificial signs above ground. The peasant will sometimes know where they are by an unploughed patch in the field, in which a few stones crop above ground, with furze growing between them; in other instances the earth above is sufficient to let the plough pass over the edifice, and a small hole between two projecting stones marks its entrance. Through this hole a corpulent man will find difficulty in squeezing himself. It brings him to a sloping tunnel, which he descends some six or eight feet. He is then in a subterranean gallery, in which he may be able to stand upright; the ordinary height varies from five to eight feet. It is some thirty feet long, and may probably have lateral galleries to the right and the left. There are few places in which the sensation of the dungeon or burial in life is stronger than in those artificial caverns, and that on account of the colossal and massive character of the roof. There is no cement, and no mark of tooling on the stones. If the gallery be eight feet broad at the floor, which is not an uncommon breadth, the walls, built of rough stones, will be found so to slope inwards by overlapping as to bring the sides within six feet of each other. Across this breadth are laid gigantic blocks of granite [or other stone].

‘When we ask,—What were the uses of such buildings? we are again launched on the great ocean of guesswork. There is a laboriousness in their structure not naturally associated by us with the makeshift arrangements that content the savage in the construction of his dwelling; yet that they have been human dwellings is the accepted opinion regarding them. If we adopt what is said by Ptolemy and other ancient geographers, and in some measure sanctioned by modern travellers, about a troglodytic or cavern-living population in Arabia, we may suppose that we have here the actual dwellings occupied by a race of like habits at the opposite extremity of the globe.

‘Any incidental testimony to their uses yielded up by these dark caverns has been extremely meagre. In general they have been found empty. In some of them there has been noticed a little rubbish, from which it may be inferred that at some time human beings had cooked and eaten food in them; as, for instance, cinders, bones of animals, and shells. A few articles, ornamental or useful, made of bones, flint, and bronze, have been found in them. In several the quern or hand-mill has been discovered; and this being indeed the only characteristic movable of which they have given up several specimens, it has sometimes been inferred that the buildings were ancient granaries.’

As the quern or hand-mill, is distinctly a *domestic* utensil, scarcely yet out of vogue in the outlying islands of Scotland, the above inference is very ill-founded. On this assumption, every cottage which possessed a quern, in daily use for grinding the ‘daily meal,’ would also be a ‘granary.’

‘But, taken as a whole, the contents of these catacombs are not sufficiently extensive or characteristic to speak to the object for which they were made. Any incidents occurring in the unknown number of centuries through which they might have existed might have supplied their trifling contents. A set of schoolboys seeking a holiday’s amusement in their mysterious recesses—a set of gipsies using them for casual shelter or concealment on their tramp—might be sufficient to leave such vestiges of human use as these structures afford.’

This important reflection is one which ought never to be overlooked; and the remains of what was presumably a tinker’s fire in the Cave of Raitts, on the occasion of my visit to that place, renders the argument still more forcible to me. But it is not difficult to differentiate between casual relics, unconnected with each other, and other objects such as the querns spoken of, which are associated with these “weems,” in one instance after another, and which obviously ought to be associated with the builders themselves. Although Hill Burton’s account is well worth quoting, it must be remembered that, since he wrote, a great deal of information has been gained regarding the ‘weems’ and their contents : and the evidence furnished by Dr. Joseph Anderson (cited pp. 45-46 *post*) clearly shows that these structures are rightly called ‘underground houses.’ In the meantime, however, we may continue to quote from Hill Burton.

‘We can only tell what they pretty clearly have not been intended for. They have not been the sepulchres of the dead, nor have they been places of Christian worship; for both these uses have, as we shall presently see, their own special marks, and these are not found in the earth-houses. It is one of their specialties, too, that none of the stone sculptures so abundant in Scotland is found about them.

‘It has not escaped the notice of those who have examined these works and endeavoured to account for them, that Tacitus tells us how the Germans lived underground in winter. To hold that the subterranean structures in Scotland are alone a sufficient existing testimony to the accuracy of a statement regarding the Germans, would be a strong conclusion; but, on the other hand, it in no way impugns the accuracy of the statement of Tacitus that there are no remains in Germany itself of the underground habitations mentioned by him. The habitation in which the barbarian burrows in the earth to keep from the cold is likely enough, if we may judge from what travellers see, a mere temporary makeshift, that, when it ceases to be inhabited, will disappear almost as soon as the residence of the mole. On the other hand, the feature that gives emphasis to the earth-houses of the North is their enormous substantiality. Uncouth, gloomy, and utterly unadorned as they are, a wondrous amount of labour, and considerable skill in mechanical power have been devoted to them by their makers, who have rendered them stable as the everlasting hills, and the monuments of a seriousness and tenaciousness of purpose which must have possessed some adequate inducement in the minds of the workmen.’

The writer to whom I am indebted for the above passage from Hill Burton⁵ also says:—

‘Such underground buildings were common over the country; and of the use of them it does not seem to us that there is much room to doubt. Tacitus, in writing of the Customs of the Germans, says:—“They dig caves in the earth, where they lay up their grain, and live in winter. Into these they also retire from their enemies, who plunder

⁵ The late Rev. Dr. Marshall, Coupar-Angus; *Historic Scenes in Forfarshire*. Edinburgh. 1875, pp. 298-300.

the open country, but cannot discover these subterranean recesses.” We believe that the underground houses served the two-fold purpose in Scotland, as well as in Germany.⁶

One more description is that given by Sir Daniel Wilson,⁷ in these words:—

‘Among the relics of primitive domestic architecture brought to light in later times, no class is more remarkable than the weems, or subterranean dwellings, which have been discovered in various parts of Scotland. They are, indeed, scarcely less common than the sepulchral cairn. ... In general, no external indication affords the slightest clue to their discovery. To the common observer, the level heath or moor under which they lie presents no appearance of having ever been disturbed by the hand of man; and he may traverse the waste until every natural feature has become familiar to his eye, without suspecting that underneath his very feet lie the dwellings and domestic utensils of remote antiquity.’

Such, then, in all probability, were the ‘caves and dens of the earth’; in which the fugitive scallags of the Outer Hebrides lived for months at a time during the latter part of last century. The late Captain Thomas a naval officer whose duties led him to the Northern and North-Western Isles, where he became greatly interested in these underground structures, of which he has bequeathed some most admirable descriptions,⁸ indicates the situation of several of them as follows :—

‘At Sitheen, in Benbecula, a fragment of one of this class of structures remains; and I have information of them at Ness, Lewis, where they are known as Tigh fo Thalaimh [“underground houses”]; at Northton, in Harris; at Mealista, Lewis, where the stones were removed for building; near Cladach; and on the east side of Ben Eval, near Loch Eport, North Uist. I am also informed that there is one at Gress, and another at Sgiggursta, Lewis. The latter was “about 20 feet long, 6 broad, and nearly 6 feet high.” That industrious describer Martin [who wrote in 1703] tells, “Some 30 paces on this side [of the chapels in Valay, North Uist], is to be seen a little stone house underground. It is very low and long, having an entry on the seaside. I saw an entry in the middle of it, which was discovered by the falling of the stones and earth.” And again of Erica (Eric’s-ay), South Uist, he says, “ There are some houses underground in this island, and they are in all points like those described in North Uist; one of them is in the South Ferry-Town, opposite to Barray.” Dean Monro, in his description of the Hebrides [1549] writes:—“Into this North head of Ywst (i.e. North Uist) there is sundry covis and holes in the earth, coverit with hedder [heather] above, quhilk [which] fosters maney rebellis in the country of the North head of Ywst.”⁹

To these instances may be added the statement of a writer of 1577-1595, who, in describing the Hebridean island of Eigg, says:—“Thair is mony coves under the earth in this Ile, quhilk the cuntrie folk uses as strenthies [strongholds] hiding thame and their geir thairintill. And he tells how, in March 1577, the islanders sought refuge from an invading army in one of those ‘coves’; which, however, became their tomb, as the invaders lit a fire at the entrance and smoked the unfortunate refugees to death,

⁶ *Historic Scenes in Perthshire*, Edinburgh, 1880, p. 234.

⁷ *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, vol. i. pp. 107-108.

⁸ Notably in vols. iii. and vii. of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (First Series).

⁹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. vii. (First Series) pp. 171-2.

‘to the number of 395 persones, men, wyfe, and bairnis.’¹⁰ I am not aware if any cave, natural or artificial, is pointed out at the present day as the scene of this wholesale slaughter; but it is obvious that, in any case, it must have been of great extent, if it accommodated even half the number of people stated by the sixteenth-century writer.

Captain Thomas also supplies the following information:—

‘Besides those described in this paper, hypogea or eirde-houses have been made—in Skye; at Ullinish (*Stat. Acc.*, vol. iii. p. 249); at Campstanvag and Lacksay (Martin, p. 154); in Ross-shire, in Glen Shiel (Anderson’s *Guide*), and Applecross (*Stat. Acc.*, vol. iii. p. 378); in Sutherland, at Clachtoll, Assynt (*Stat. Acc.*, vol. xvi. p. 206); at Tongue (M’Culloch); at Erribol, [described] by Dr. A. Mitchell (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 240); at Kintradwell (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. v. p. 244); Brora (Cordiner, p. 75); Bakus, above Dunrobin (*Agr. Surv. Suth.*, p. 171); Helmsdale (*Stat. Acc.*, vol. iii. p. 405); on the Brora and at Craigton, near Golspie (*Agr. Surv. Suth.*, p. 171). In Inverness-shire one is figured and described at Baits, Badenoch (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. v. p. 119, and *Garnet’s Tour*, vol. ii. p. 40 [also pp. 24-26 of present paper]). They occur in nine different places in Aberdeenshire, ten in Forfarshire, and two in Perthshire. Quite lately I saw the remains of one in a railway cutting near Cameron Bridge, in Fife. South of the Forth they appear to have existed at Bathgate, Lanark, and Lesmahago; but the southernmost and most interesting of all, is that described by Dr. J. A. Smith at Newstead, in Roxburghshire (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. i. p. 213). Six at least, are known in the Orkneys. In Shetland they are noted at Fyell, Unst (*Mon. Anthro. Soc.*, vol. ii. p. 343); at West Houland (p. 320, Z.c.), and Safester, Sandsting (p. 311, l.c.); Trondavoe (?), Delting (*Stat. Acc. Shetland*, p. 57); and at Voe, Dunrossness?¹¹

Examples incidentally mentioned by Dr. Anderson, in his *Scotland in Pagan Times (The Iron Age)*¹² are these:—

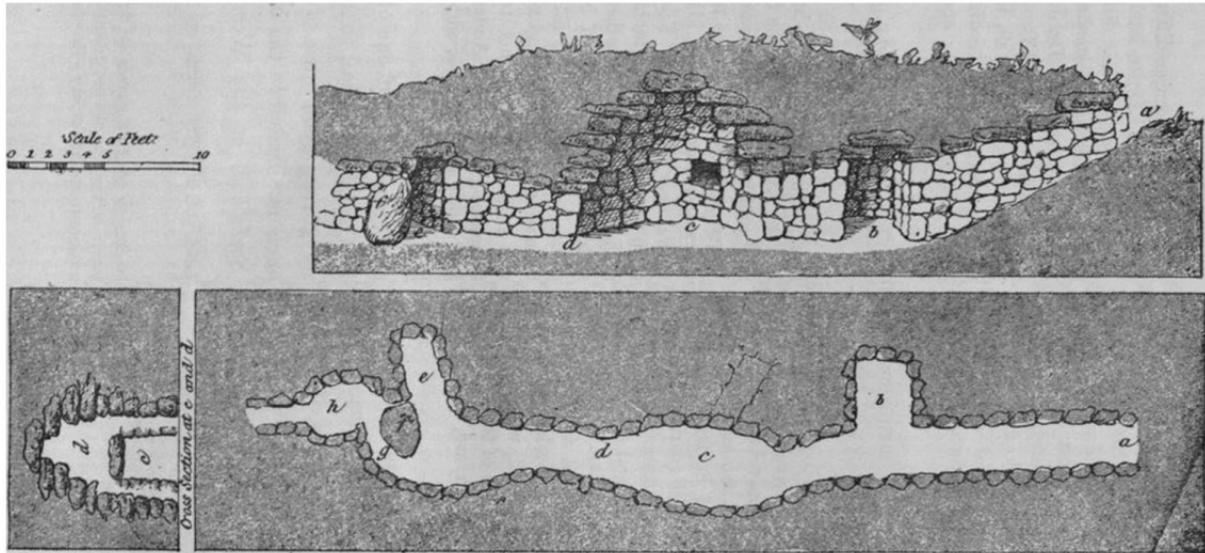
‘An earth-house at Erribol, in Sutherlandshire.’ The double earth-house beneath Dunsinnane, in Perthshire. ‘A group of five’ at Airlie; one ‘on the farm of West Grange of Conan, near Arbroathone at Fithie; another at Murroes; another ‘in a field at Tealing’; and another at Pitcur, near Coupar-Angus—all of these being situated in the county of Forfar. Aberdeenshire examples are found at Migvie Buchaam (Strathdon), Culsh (parish of Tarland), ‘Clova, near Kildrummy,’ Kinord, and at Auchindoir and Kild rummy, as above referred to. ‘One at Pirnie, in the parish of Wemyss, in Fife, and another at Elie,’ in the same county. Another ‘at Crichton Mains, in Midlothian.’ Finally, one situated ‘near the village of Newstead, in Roxburghshire,’ and another ‘at Broomhouse, in the parish of Edrom, Berwickshire.’ Illustrations relating to twelve of these earth-houses are given in that portion of the work cited, where mention is also made of similar structures in Cornwall. The descriptions of these Scottish earth-houses given by Dr. Anderson, and his observations thereon, are, however, doubtless well known to most who will read these lines.

¹⁰ I observe that in *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia* (new ed.), s. v., Eigg, the number is placed at 200. The above account is printed by Dr. Skene, in his *Celtic Scotland*, vol. iii. p. 433.

¹¹ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. iii. (First Series) pp. 185-6, note.

¹² Edinburgh, 1883, pp. 281-306.

The sectional view and ground plan, here reproduced,¹³ of one of the underground 'caves' or 'houses' visited by Captain Thomas, together with his written account of it, will convey a very good idea of the appearance of such structures. This specimen is situated in the island of South Uist, and is known as *Uamh Sgalabhad*, or the Weem of Skalavat.



Sectional View and Ground Plan of Underground Gallery called *Uamh Sgalabhad*, near Mol a Deas, Huishnish, Island of South Uist.

From, Plate XXXV. of Vol. VII. of *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*.

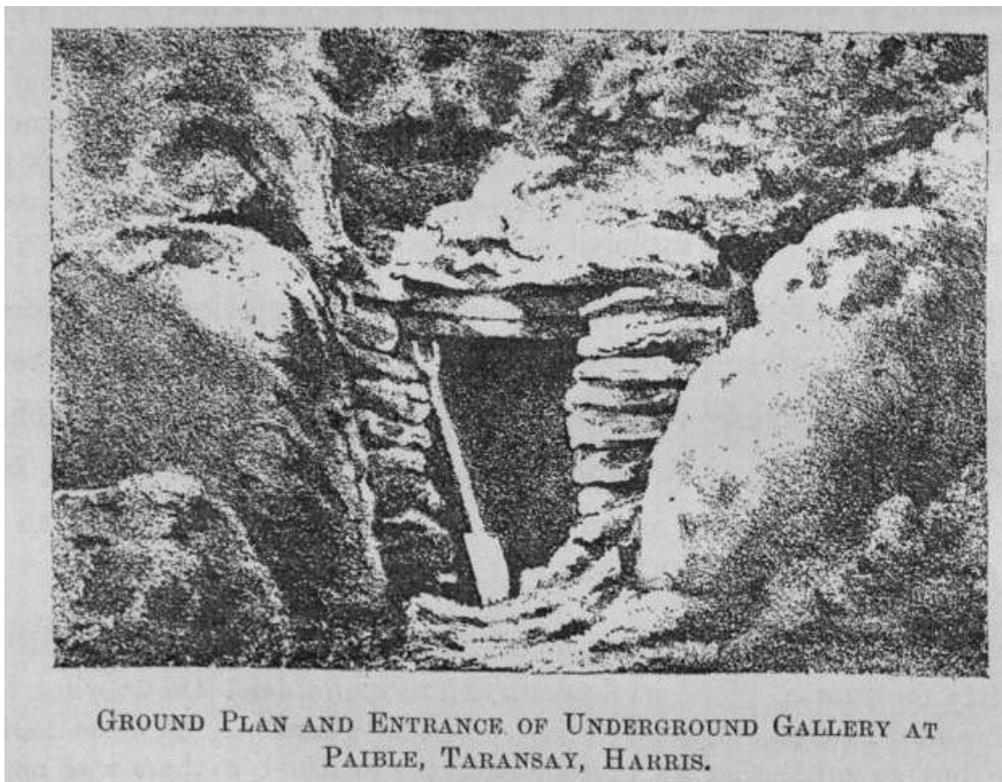
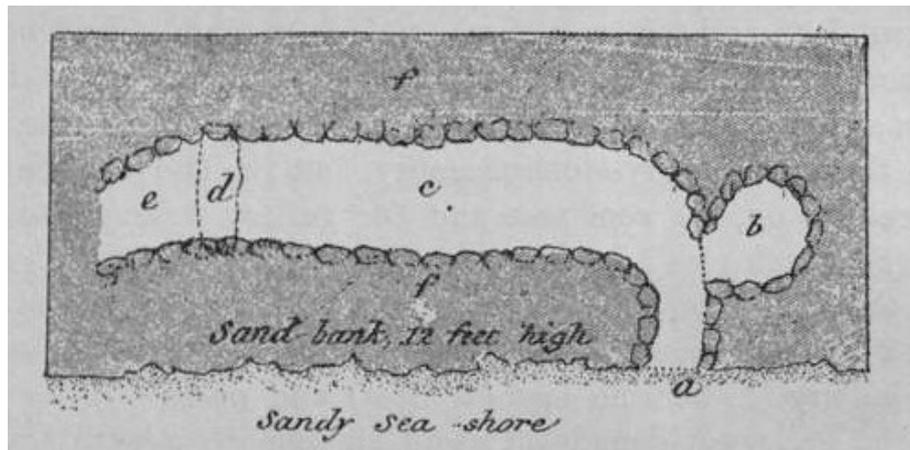
Captain Thomas describes his descent into it, and the result of his examination, in these words:—

‘An irregular hole was pointed out by the little lassie before alluded to, and some of my party quickly disappeared below ground. As they did not immediately return, I thought it was time to follow, and squeezing through the ruined entrance (a), I entered the usual kind of gallery, which descended into the ground at a sharp angle. At the bottom, on the right-hand side, was the usual guard cell (b); the sides of dry-stone masonry, but the end was the face of a rock *in situ*. Proceeding on, the roof rose and the gallery widened to what was the main chamber (c), which was 7 feet high under the apex of the dome, and 4 feet broad. Upon the west side of this chamber, and about 2 feet from the ground, is a recess, about 2 feet square and 4 feet long. At the further end, and in the same right line the gallery (d) became low (2½ feet) and narrow (2 feet). Again the roof rose, and the gallery widened till stopt, in face, by a large transported rock (f); to the right of the rock, a rectangular chamber (e), 2 feet broad, extended 4 feet, and ended against rock *in situ*. Round, and beyond the rock, the wall of the left side of the gallery was built, but the passage (g) was so narrow that I contented myself by looking through it. This incomprehensible narrowness is a feature in the buildings of this period. Some of Captain Otter’s officers pushed

¹³ From Plate xxxv. of vol. vii. of *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (First Series). I have to express my thanks to the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for permission to reproduce this and other illustrations from the Society’s *Proceedings*.

through into the small chamber (h) ; beyond this the gallery was ruined and impassable; the total length explored was 45 feet.'¹⁴

On the following page he gives a similar description, this time with reference to an underground gallery in Harris; which may, therefore, have been one of those very 'dens of the earth' in which Buchanan's 'scallags' took refuge. A representation of the ground plan of this gallery is here reproduced, as also a view of the doorway; both being copied from the original illustrations.¹⁵



¹⁴ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* vol. vii. (First Series) pp. 167-8.

¹⁵ Plate xxix. of work cited.

The drawing is from a photograph of the entrance, which is 2 feet 10 inches high and 1½ foot broad. The sea flows up to it at high tides. ‘On crawling in,’ continues Captain Thomas, ‘there is seen the usual guard-cell (b), close beside the entrance, but so small that we may be sure the sentinel, if there was one, must have been a light weight; in fact, we are almost driven to the conclusion that there were no Bantings in those days. This guard-cell is but 2 feet 5 inches high, and 3 feet in width. The gallery (c) then turns at a right angle to the left hand. We excavated it for 22 feet; it was much ruined, and the labour of throwing out the sand was very great. At d a roof-stone was in situ, and I have no doubt it was at the entrance to the usual chamber; but as we had nearly reached the foundations of Mr. Macdonald’s barn, and there was little prospect of reward for undermining it, the excavation was abandoned.

When digging, we came upon two broken stone dishes (corn-crushers?) now in the Museum [Society of Antiquaries of Scotland]; and above the gallery were most of the bones of a small ox, placed orderly together, perhaps the gods’ share of some ancient sacrifice. Bones of the seal were common, and a few of the eagle.’¹⁶

‘I have next to notice,’ says Captain Thomas on another page, ‘that form of bo’h, Pict’s house, or clochan, whichever name may be adopted by archaeologists¹⁷, to which a hypogeum or subterranean gallery is attached.’ The example which, with its explanatory illustrations, is here cited (p. 14), is situated in the island of South Uist, near *Uamh Sgalabhad*, already described, ‘about half a mile inland from Moll¹⁸ a Deas (South Beach); and the Moll is about one mile and a half to the south of Husinish.’

The site of the bo’h is called Meall na[h] Uamh, or Cave Lump [or Mound]. It consists of a partly excavated oval dwelling-chamber (a), 7 feet by 14 feet on the floor; the dome roof has fallen in; there are two cuiltean or niches in the wall. A low curved subterranean passage (b), about 2½ feet square, and 20 feet in length, leads into an elongated beehive chamber (c), 13 feet by 5 feet, and 6¾ feet high; from thence an entrance (d), 2 feet by 2 feet, admits to a small circular chamber or cell (e), 5 feet in diameter and 5 feet high. The main passage inclines downwards, so that the floor of the second chamber (c) is nearly three feet lower than that of the first (a); and that of the inner one (e) a foot below the second (c).¹⁹

Reference has already been made to one variety of underground house, in which a kind of ‘rude cloister’ went round the sides. An example of this species of structure was found by Captain Thomas in South Uist, in the vicinity of the one just described, that consequently near the *Uamh Sgalabhad*, referred to on a previous page.

The ground (plan and sectional views are here shown (pp. 16 and 17), and the following is Captain Thomas’s account:—

‘The bo’h, or Pict’s house, as it would be called in the Orkneys—but the name is unknown in the Long Island—that I am about to describe, lies less than half a mile above the shepherd’s house; but so little curiosity had that individual that he was

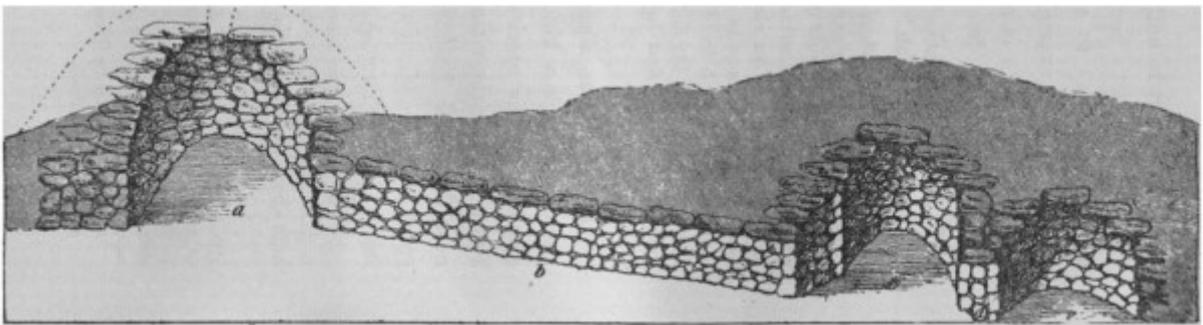
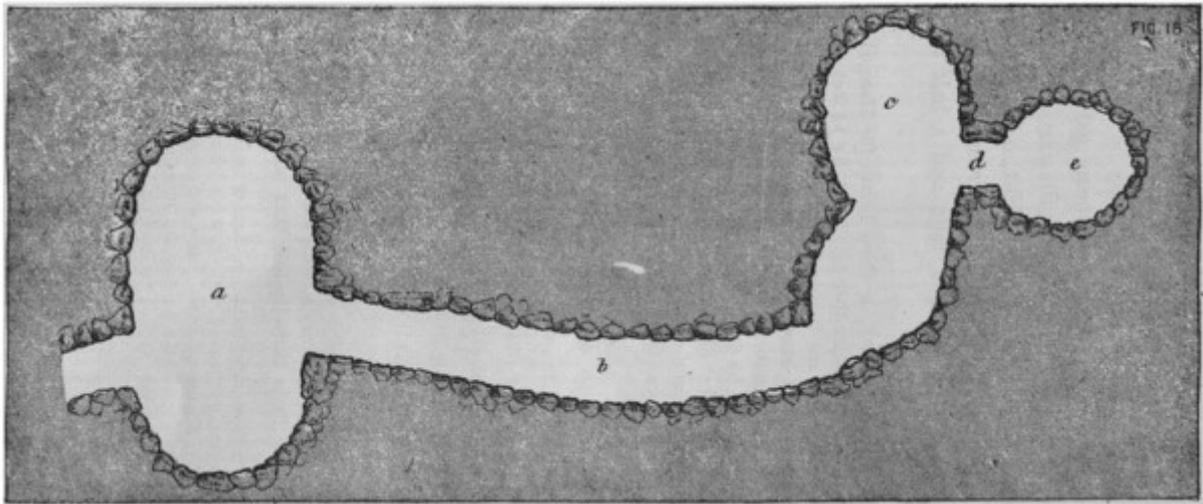
¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

¹⁷ All of these are popular names for the more super-terranean class of such structures, although the two latter are also applied to genuine ‘weems.’ The first is a phonetic writing of the Gaelic *both* (whence *bothy*, *booth*, etc.); the second arises from a wide-spread belief as to the builders and inhabitants of these ‘houses’; and the third means literally ‘a place of stones,’ and is better known by the spelling, *dachan*, applied to stone circles, churchyards, and hamlets.

¹⁸ I adhere to Captain Thomas’s spelling of Gaelic.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 164-5.

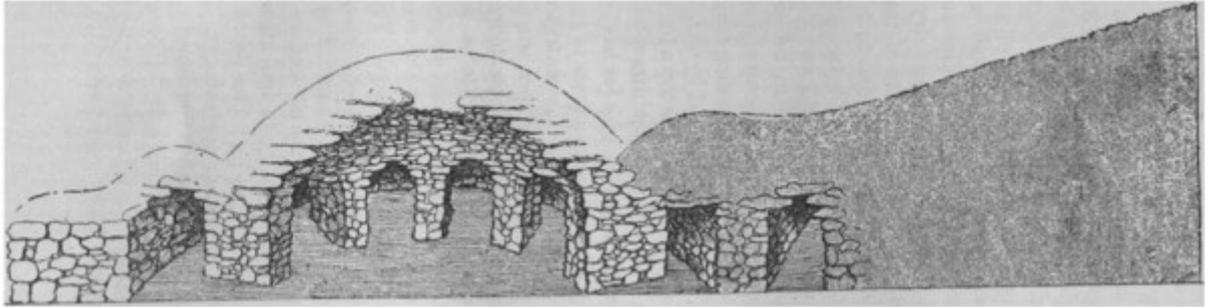
entirely unacquainted with it; and I believe it would never have been found by us but for a little terrier (in its etymological sense, of course) of a daughter.



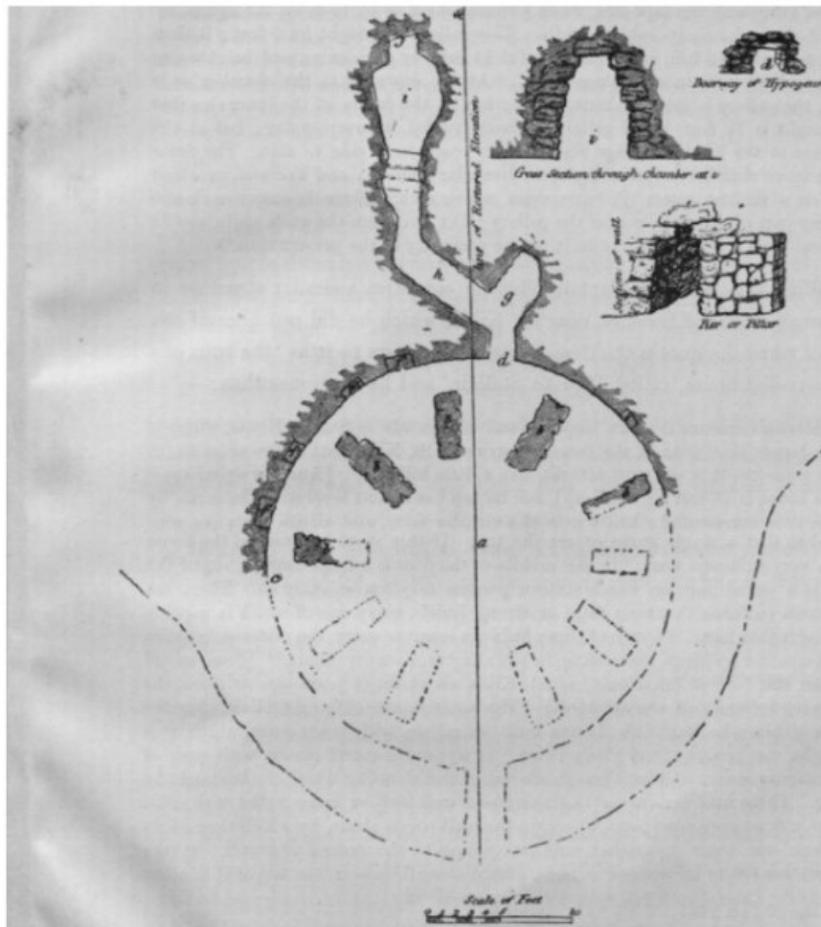
Ground Plan and Sectional View of Semi-Subterranean *Both* and Underground Gallery, Meal na H-Uamh, Mol a Deas, Huishnish, Island of South Uist.

The child was only acquainted with the two here drawn; but there may be many more waiting the researches of the zealous antiquary. This Pict's house, then, is more than half destroyed, but there is quite enough remaining to make out the whole design. On a small, flattish terrace, where the hill sloped steeply, an area had been cleared by digging away the bank, so that the wall of the house, for nearly half its circumference, was the side of the hill, faced with stone, while the other side of the house, for it was almost gone, was built up from the ground. There are the usual niches (f) in the wall, which was 4 feet high. The interior of the house was circular, and 28 feet in diameter. Within the area were pillars, or rather piers (b, b, b), formed of blocks of dry stone masonry, raised distinct from the wall, and radiating from the centre of the house. These piers were about 4 feet high, 4 feet to 6 feet long, and foot to 2 feet broad; and there was a passage of from 1 foot to 2 feet in width between the wall and them. There were five piers remaining, and five more would complete the suite. These piers were evidently intended to lessen the space to be covered by overlapping; for while the breadth of the house is 28 feet, the central dome, or beehive, had, by this means, only 15 feet to span. So much of the roofing remained as to cover the spaces between the innermost piers, showing the method by which the roof was formed. The inner wall of the house is 4 feet high. From the top a lintel or broad stone commonly

reached to the nearest pier; a single stone [architrave] connected the outer ends of two piers, by which an irregular four-sided base [or bay] was formed, from whence a beehive dome was raised by three or four courses of stone.



RESTORED ELEVATION OF ANCIENT BOTH AND SECTION OF HYPOGEUM OR- TIGH LAIR ON THE LINE a.k. NEAR MOL A ilas HUISHNISH, SOUTH UIST



Ground Plan of *Both* and Underground Gallery, or *Tigh Lair* near Mol a Peas, Huishnish, Island of South Uist.

A larger dome rising from the inner ends of the piers covered the central space. . . . There were no remains of the original doorway, but I have shown where I suppose it to have been by dotted lines; but there may have been two doors opposite each other, and parallel to the slope of the hill. . . . It is not to be supposed that there is any regularity in the masonry; the stones in every case appear to be entirely undressed, and of every thickness and shape. . . . None of the stones were larger than could be easily lifted by a party of men with stretchers. This bo'h may have been the summer home of forty people. The hypogeum or subterranean gallery is on a level with the floor, pierced towards the hill, and is entered by a very small doorway (d), so low, indeed, that I supposed it to be partly blocked up by dirt, until we found the foundation on the native rock. It is but 18 inches high, and 2 feet broad, so that a very stout or large man could not get in. The doorway is short (2 feet), and at once the height rises to 5 feet inside, or thereabouts. Facing the entrance is an oblong chamber (g), 4 feet long, and nearly 3 feet broad (the analogue of the guard cell in the Pictish castles); the sides are partly of drystone masonry, and, at the end, of rock *in situ*. Turning to the left is a narrow (2¼ feet) gallery (h) of varying height; it was over the boots in water and quite dark, but my worthy coxswain worked away with the tape-line, while I endeavoured to write down the figures by the aid of a melancholy-looking candle.

This gallery is straight for 9 feet; it then turns towards the hill, and terminates (at 14 feet) by a widening and heightening of the gallery into an oval chamber (i). At the entrance to the chamber, as is usual, the gallery is lowest, about 3 feet; but at the centre of the inner chamber the height is 7½ feet. The gallery is partly roofed by overlapping; but at the entrance to the inner chamber single stones reach from side to side. The dome of the inner chamber is formed by three irregular courses; and the end, at which there is a shallow recess (j), butts upon native rock. There is native rock also forming part of the south side of the gallery; but elsewhere the walls are in nowise different from a dry stone dike built by the peasantry at the present time.²⁰

With this building, Captain Thomas compares a similar structure in the small island of Boreray, near St. Kilda, which he did not himself see, but of which he quotes the description. He refers to it as 'the ruin of a dome-roofed house, called Tigh an Stallair,' and he continues thus:—

'Martin's account is: "In the west end of this isle is Stallir House, which is much larger than that of the female warrior in St. Kilda, but of the same model in all respects; it is all green without, like a little hill." . . . [Another writer says] "The house is 18 feet high [? deep], and its top lies almost level with the earth, by which it is surrounded; below it is of a circular form, and all its parts are contrived so that a single stone covers the top. If this stone is removed the house has a very sufficient vent. In the middle of the floor is a large hearth; round the wall is a paved seat, on which sixteen persons may conveniently sit. There are four beds roofed with strong flags, or strong lintels, every one of which is capable to receive four men. To each of these beds is a separate entry, the distance between these separate openings, resembling, in some degree, so many pillars." ' [From an old woman, the 'oldest inhabitant' of St. Kilda about thirty years ago or more, the following information was obtained.] "The house is called Tigh a Stallair, after the name of him who built it."²¹ It was built on pillars, with hewn stone, which, it is thought, was brought from Dun's

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 165-7.

²¹ Its real meaning is evidently 'The House of the Falconer.' Cf. '*Caisteal an Stalair*', or 'Castle Falconer', mentioned by Dr. Stewart in his edition of Logan's *Scottish Gael*, vol. i. p. 304

Point. It was quite round inside, with ends of long narrow stones sticking through the wall round about, on which clothes might be hung. There were six croops [Gaelic *crub* = a wall-bed] or beds in the wall. . . . There was an entrance [passage] within the wall round about, by which they might go from one croop to another, without coming to the central chamber. It (the house) was not to be noticed outside, except a small hole in the top of it to allow the smoke to get out, and to let in some light. There was a doorway on one side of the house, facing the sea, where they had to bend in going in, and a large hill of ashes near the door would not allow the wind to come in. . . . The present inhabitants of St. Kilda, when in Boreray fowling and hunting sheep, were residing in it, till about twenty years ago [from 1862] the roof had fallen in ; some of the croops [bed-places] are partly to been seen yet.’²²

It will be seen, then, that this underground dwelling was occasionally used so recently as fifty years ago, although its occupants did not deny themselves a fire, like the ‘scallags’ of the end of last century. Why these people deprived themselves of this luxury is not clear; at any rate, if they occupied ‘dens in the earth,’ of as elaborate a construction as this one in the island of Boreray, with its central fire-place and vent. This Boreray house, which Martin described as ‘all green without, like a little hill,’ and which was therefore not precisely an *underground* house, in spite of its covering of earth and turf, is closely linked with similar dwellings in Lapland. Sir A. de Capell Brooke, in describing the Lapp *gumme* of sixty or seventy years ago, says²³ that it is ‘generally circular, or oblong, having the appearance of a large, rounded hillock, which indeed it may be termed.’ And he explains that ‘an opening in the roof, nearly over the fire-place, served to let out the smoke; and might be covered at times with a kind of trap-door, to retain the internal warmth, when the fire is burnt out. This is always let down at night.’ Thus, the Boreray house, and other underground dwellings in Scotland like it, had due provision for the escape of the smoke from the fire. So that one is led to infer that the refugee ‘scallags’ of last century dwelt in the rudest of all the varieties of underground dwelling; that which is little else than a passage, with no arrangement for a fire.

On this point Captain Thomas makes some observations that ought to be quoted. ‘Some doubt has been expressed,’ he says, ‘as to whether,’ structures such as that at Boreray, ‘were really dwellings.’ This particular variety of subterraneous building, while really ‘underground,’ is only partially—and, in some cases, not at all—beneath the level of the circumjacent ground; and it derives its ‘underground’ character from the great mass of earth that the builders of the original stone structure heaped over it, for good reasons of their own. The appearance that such an ‘underground’ building presents from the outside, is that of ‘a little hill, all green without,’ as Martin says of the one in Boreray, or of ‘a large, rounded hillock,’ to quote again the words of the Lapland traveller. It is this class, then, of ‘underground’ structure that Captain Thomas has in view, at this point. ‘But,’ he goes on to say, ‘Mr. Anderson has sagaciously recognised the difference between the *green* and the *grey* cairns; the latter have always been used as places of sepulture, but the green cairns, or Picts’ houses (popularly so called), have been invariably used as habitations, though sometimes also found to have been made places of sepulture. ‘The question, to my mind, would be readily decided,’ continues Captain Thomas, ‘if it could be shown that there was no arrangement for ventilation and the admission of light; for no place could properly be called a dwelling in which a fire could not be burnt without

²² *Proceedings of Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. vii. (First Series) pp. 173-4.

²³ *A Winter in Lapland*, London, 1827, p. 320.

smothering the indwellers. Although the primitive emigrants to these islands might have been content with as little light in their dwellings as some of the subjects of Queen Victoria, yet it is not to be conceived that any would exist in absolute darkness. But we shall find few instances at the present day in which these monuments are in sufficiently good preservation to afford the requisite information; in nearly every case that which might have been the *lum* (chimney) is mutilated, or has fallen in. Mr. G. Petrie was decidedly of opinion that there was a regular "hole in the roof of the one explored by him on Wideford Hill"; but that which seems entirely conclusive of the question is the description of a Picts' house in the parish of Golspie, which was terminated by a stone like a millstone, *with a hole in the centre*; an extremely good architectural device for consolidating the apex of the dome, and at the same time lighting and ventilating the interior. Assuming, then, that the Picts' houses were dwellings, the explanation of their internal details becomes easy; the cells were the dormitories, and there is not a St. Kilda man who would call them by any other name than wall-beds. All difficulties about the narrowness of the entrance and the confined accommodation vanish before the examples supplied from the Outer Hebrides. The long tunnelled entrance is an arctic feature, and, to my mind, is a proof both of the great age of these structures, and of a change of climate.' (On a subsequent page he more fully explains this view, in these words :—'I conceive that the primitive inhabitants made their dwelling with massive walls and a narrow 'tossut' [the Eskimo entrance gallery] to suit the rigour of the climate; that this rigorous climate extended to a comparatively recent time; . . . and that the prevalence of custom has retained a method of shelter suited to an arctic winter long after the necessity for it has passed.')²⁴

The Norse sagas have several references to underground or 'earth' houses; and of these the following is peculiarly applicable to that variety which was equally subterranean, and at the same time presented the appearance of 'a large, rounded hillock.' The *Heimskringla* tells us that, sometime during the ninth century, there lived in Naumudal two brothers named Herlaug and Hrollaug, who were kings over that district. 'They had been making a mound for three summers; it was made of stones and lime, and wood. When the mound was finished, the brothers heard that Harald Fairhair was coming with a host. Then Herlaug had a great deal of food and drink conveyed to the mound, and went with eleven men into the mound and had it shut.' When Harald Haarfagr and his followers reached Naumudal, the other brother submissively swore allegiance to him, and accepted from him as an earldom the territory which he and his brother had formerly ruled as independent kings. History does not say what Herlaug and his eleven men did after the departure of the great king. It is very unlikely that they agreed to live thenceforward as the vassals of Harald Haarfagr's new-made earl. One fancies there must have been something of a family quarrel over this arrangement, and perhaps the mound-dwellers either re-asserted their independence, or succeeded in effecting some kind of compromise. But, at any rate, the incident shows the fallacy of Captain Thomas' assumption that daylight and fire were necessities of the underground life. From the preparations made by Herlaug, it is evident that he expected to have to remain quiet—he and his men—within this 'hillock,' for at least several days; and it was obviously essential that no smoke issuing from any part of it should betray their presence. If ever they ventured outside while Harald's army was in the neighbourhood, it must have been after dark. For it is apparent that the intruders were to be left to take for granted that

²⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 184-5 and 195.

this mound-dwelling was a natural hill. Indeed, there are several reasons for believing that, while such structures were no doubt of 'arctic' origin, yet the question of concealment played a very important part in their construction, and probably also in the ways of their inhabitants.

This mound²⁵ (which, by the way, ought still to be visible in Naumudal wherever in Scandinavia that may be) was evidently a very superior sort of thing. Not only did it take three summers to rear, but its interior chamber—built, of course, before the mass of earth and stones was heaped above it—was constructed 'of stones, and lime, and wood.' The use of wood in such mounds is, we are told, 'a sure indication that the date of the structure is of the latest pagan period'; and neither wood nor lime is a characteristic of the oldest forms. Of these, Sir Walter-Scott uses very appropriate language when he speaks of 'those dens which are called Burghs and Picts' houses in Zetland, and Duns on the mainland of Scotland and the Hebrides, and which seem to be the first effort at architecture—the connecting link betwixt a fox's hole in a cairn of loose stones, and an attempt to construct a human habitation out of the same materials, without the use of lime or cement of any kind—without any timber, so far as can be seen from their remains— without any knowledge of the arch or of the stair.'—(*The Pirate*, ch. xxvii.)

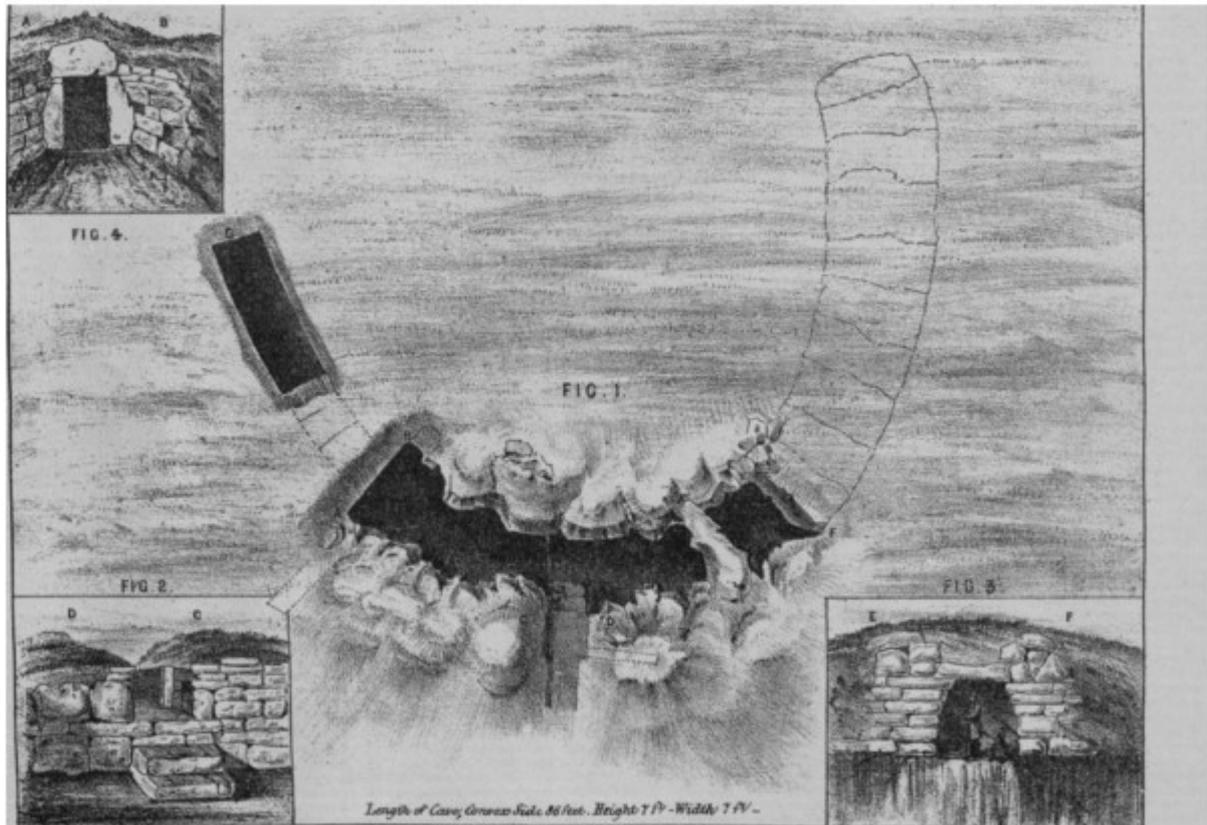
If, in the three or four preceding paragraphs, little distinction has been made between those structures which are wholly underground, and those which are more or less above the surface, the reason is that all of them are but so many links in one chain. Many are quite beneath the surface, many others slope gradually upward until they terminate in a chamber which is half above ground, so that its low, earth-covered roof looks from the outside like a gentle undulation of the soil. Others again (but of this class no examples are shown in these pages) are wholly above the general surface, although the superimposed earth gives them the appearance of mounds. While others again, those of the class referred to by Scott, are connecting links between the mound and the stone tower, free of any covering of earth and turf. Yet all are united by certain striking characteristics, of which perhaps the chief are—the absence of cement or lime, and the use of the rude 'cyclopean' arch. And, in the more primitive kinds, the idea of concealment. For, in the case of wholly underground structures, or of chambered mounds, it is quite evident that none but the initiated were intended to know that a habitable dwelling lay directly under their feet, or within the seeming hillock beside them. When Harald Haarfagr was receiving homage from one of the petty kings of Naumudal, he must obviously have been ignorant of the fact that, in the interior of the innocent-looking hill hard by, the other chieftain and his eleven followers were eating and drinking, and sleeping in safety. They had previously taken care to 'shut' the mound; that is, to close and conceal the low and narrow doorway that leads into such chambered hillocks. That the details of ventilation, and perhaps of light, were no doubt duly attended to, will be referred to presently. But the incident shows quite plainly that their primary aim was concealment.

A good example of the truly underground building, used for a like purpose, is found in Scotland, in the valley of the Spey. It is situated on the estate of Belleville, which was purchased by Macpherson of 'Ossian' fame, and remains still in the possession of his family. As one ascends the hillside that rises behind the little hamlet of Raitts, near Kingussie, one sees no indication of a dwelling, until one reaches the very spot, and looks down into a half-ruined but yet admirable specimen of the underground

²⁵ The story of which I have quoted at second hand from Mr. Du Chaillu's *Viking Age*, . pp. 494-5

gallery described on a previous page. Before it was violated, and so long as its inhabitants exercised due care, the casual visitor would have walked quietly over it, without ever dreaming that a couple of feet below him was the stone roof of a gallery of no inconsiderable dimensions.

This building (of which a ground plan and sectional views are here reproduced²⁶) is known now-a-days as 'The Cave of Raitts', otherwise 'the Big Cave' (in Gaelic *An Uaimh Mhor*), but still more generally as 'The Robbers' Cave.'



**UNDERGROUND BUILDING DISCOVERED AT BELLEVILLE PARISH OF ALVEY.
INVERNESS-SHIRE**

Last century it was known as 'The Cave of Clan Ichilnew' (*Clann Mhic Gillenaidh*), or 'The Macniven's Cave' and the local account of its inhabitants is as follows :—

The common tradition is that it was inhabited by a band of savage robbers, called *Clann Mhic Gillenaidh*, who are said to have been a remnant of the barbarous tribes who, after the overthrow of the Cornyns in the district, infested the wilds of Badenoch and plundered the peaceable inhabitants. Over the entrance of their hiding-place they erected a small cottage, in which lived two repulsive old women, who had no dealings with their neighbours. They thus continued for a long time to commit robberies and deeds of the darkest dye with impunity, but at last the suspicions of the Macphersons were aroused; they therefore sent one of their

²⁶ From Plate III. Vol. V. of the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 1865.

number, in the guise of a beggar, to ask for a night's lodging. Knowing the inhospitable nature of the inmates, the wily Macpherson pretended to be suffering the most excruciating pains, and begged to be allowed to lie down on a litter of straw in an out-of-the-way corner of the house. When this favour had been granted, he kept rolling from side to side as if in great pain; but all the while diligently watched whatever was going on. Most of the night the two old women were baking oat cakes, and thus produced a quantity of bread far in excess of their own needs.

Presently the large flagstone in the middle of the hut was raised, and the robbers came out. After feasting on Macpherson's choicest beef, they sallied out under cover of the night to make another raid. Having made this discovery, he left the hut in the morning and communicated the intelligence to his clansmen. The result was that a strong body of armed men repaired to the spot, surrounded the house, and, filling the cave with smoke, forced the savage inmates to bolt out one by one. In this way the whole gang were put to death.²⁷

The number of these cave-dwellers is said to have been eighteen. Another version of the story, not differing radically from the one just quoted, is given by an eighteenth-century writer in these words:—

'The accounts given of this subterraneous mansion are various. The people there give this account: That in primitive ages when anarchy prevailed throughout the Island, the country was infested with men of a gigantic stature, who had often made fruitless attempts to conquer the Island. Being repulsed at a time when they made their last and most formidable attack, such as were not either killed in the feight [sic], or escaped by sea, fled into the mountains, and being closely pursued by the enemy untill night stopt the pursuit, they advanced as far as the Spay [sic], and in a night's time finished the said cave, and lived there for some time, till by the continued searches of the conquerors they were at last discovered, and every man killed.'²⁸

A modern writer, well acquainted with the district, adds this information regarding the 'Great Cave':—

'It is an "Erd-house," the only one of this class of antiquarian remains that exists in Badenoch. It is in the form of a horse-shoe, which has one limb truncated, about 70 feet long, 8 feet broad, and 7 feet high.²⁹ The walls gradually contract as they rise, and the roofing is formed by large slabs thrown over the approaching walls. Tradition says it was made in one night by a rather gigantic race: the women carried the excavated stuff in their aprons and threw it in the Spey, while the men brought the stones, large and small, on their shoulders from the neighbouring hills. All was finished by morning, and the inhabitants knew not what had taken place.'³⁰

The denizens of this underground dwelling in Inverness-shire suggest in many ways a similar caste in Wales, described as 'living in dens in the ground,' as recently as the

²⁷ *Guide to Kingussie*, by Rev. H. N. Hutchinson, 1890, pp. 24-5.

²⁸ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol. xvi., 1889-90, p. 216.

²⁹ Sir David Brewster, who visited the place in 1835, gives these measurements—* Length of cave, convex side, 86 feet; height 7 feet; width 7 feet?—(*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. v., 1865, p. 119.) And the local guide-book, already quoted, states as follows:—'The Cave is in the form of a crescent, narrow at the entrance, but gradually extending to a width in some parts of 8 feet. It is from 40 to 50 feet long, and about 7 feet high. The walls are carefully lined with trimmed blocks of mica-schist from the neighbourhood, and the roof is formed of large flagstones of the same rock? This 'Curious Cave or hiding place' was also noticed by Dr. Garnett in his *Tour through the Highlands*; London, 1800, vol. ii. p. 40.

³⁰ *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, vol. xvi., 1889-90, pp. 190-191.

sixteenth century. Like their congeners in the Highlands, these people are said to have ravaged the surrounding district during the night-time, sleeping in their subterranean retreat when other men were awake; 'and scythes were fixed in the chimneys of the nearest houses, to prevent the nocturnal descent of these plundering ruffians. ... It appears that the enormities of the Gwylliaid Cochion Mowddwy ['the Red Banditti of Mowddwy'] had arrived at such a pitch as to render necessary the interposition of the most prompt and vigorous measures. To this end a commission was granted to John Wynne ab Meredith, of Gwedir, and Lewis Owen, one of the barons of the Welsh Exchequer, and Vice-Chamberlain of North Wales. These gentlemen raised a body of men, and on Christmas Eve 1554, succeeded in securing, after considerable resistance, nearly a hundred of the robbers, on whom they inflicted chastisement the most summary and effectual, hanging them on the spot, and, as their commission authorized, without any previous trial.'³¹

Suggested by both of these, also, is the instance of the underground house in 'Gothland,' which was made and inhabited by Sigmund the Volsung; according to the traditional account given in the *Volsunga Saga*, which work is supposed to have been written in the twelfth century. It is there stated that Sigmund and his sister Signy 'took counsel in such wise as to make a house underground in the wild-wood,' wherein he could hide from the persecution of the king. And in this 'underground' or 'earth' house Sigmund is described as living for about thirty years. Here, also, his son Sinfjotli, the child of incest, lived with him; and, in course of time, father and son 'fared wide through the woods and slew men for their wealth.' Sometimes, too, they would dress themselves in wolfskins, as 'wer-wolves,' and 'in that uncouth guise they wrought many famous deeds'—of the same infamous nature, no doubt.

Although, in this instance, as in the two preceding, the inhabitants of those subterranean houses are represented as living by murder and rapine, performed under cover of darkness, or by means of disguise, one can hardly deduce from a few traditional statements the inference that the people of the earth-houses were in general so characterised. Yet, since the dwellings were rude and primitive in the extreme, and as it is the habit of uncivilised man to prey upon others when he can, it would not be strange if the fierce denizens of those caves in Scotland, Wales, and 'Gothland' were typical representatives of this race of 'underground life.'

It is evident that in the construction of these underground retreats, the idea of concealment played a part. Indeed, such places which were plundered by the Danes in Ireland during the ninth century, are referred to by an Irish chronicler of about the twelfth century as 'secret' or 'concealed,' and their contents are described as having been 'in concealment underground.'³² Nevertheless, it is equally obvious that a clue to their entrance must have been known to the people who made use of such structures. The successful plundering of the underground places in County Meath by the ninth century Danes, is ascribed to the power of 'paganism and idolatry' by the Irish chronicler just quoted. What that writer meant by these words is not clear, without a correct understanding of the true signification of 'paganism and idolatry.' But from one passage in the Norse records one is led to infer that certain very simple tokens, known to the Danes as a body, or to some in their host, indicated to all the initiated the existence in this or that locality of an 'underground house.' The passage referred to occurs in the tenth-century Saga of Thorgils (styled Orrabeen's Step-son).

³¹ *Nugae Cambrica*, in the *Scots Magazine*, 1823, vol. xiii. pp. 424-6.

³² *The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, edited by J. H. Todd, D.D., London, 1867, p. 115.

This Thorgils and another pirate captain, named Gyrd, had joined their forces on a roving expedition, the main object of which was plunder:—

‘Now they harried during summer with much gain; and exterminated many robbers and evil-doers, but leaving genuine farmers and traders in peace. Towards summer they came to Ireland [to a place] where in front of them they discovered a forest. Just after entering the forest they came to a spot where they saw a tree whose leaves had fallen off. They pulled up the tree [a sapling evidently], and beneath it they found an underground chamber, wherein they saw men with weapons. Thorgils proposed to his people that whoever should be the first to go into the earth-house should become entitled to the three objects of booty which he desired; to which all agreed except Gyrd. Then Thorgils sprang down into the chamber, and encountered no opposition; and there were two women there, one of whom was young and beautiful, and the other old, yet not without good looks. Thorgils went about the chamber, whose roof rested upon upward-bent beams [*bjaelker*, or balks]; he had a mace [cudgel, or stump] in his hand, wherewith he smote about him on either side, so that all fled before him. Thorstein went with him, and then they came out of the earth-house, and took the women, the young one as well as the elder, with them to the ships. The people of the place now set out in pursuit of them, and Thorgils getting on board, they steered out from the shore. Now a man of the host which was pursuing them stepped forward and harangued them; but they understood not his speech. Then the captured woman interpreted his story to them in Norse, and said : “He will resign his claim to the goods you have taken, if only you will let us go. This man is an earl, and my son; but my mother’s kindred are from Vik in Norway. Follow my counsel, then will you best derive benefit from this rich booty; for trouble comes with the sword. My son is named Hugh, and he has proffered to thee, O Thorgils, other goods rather than that you should carry me away, which could not be of any profit to you.” Thorgils agrees to their request, and brings them to land. The earl went joyfully towards Thorgils, and presented him with a gold ring; his mother gave him another, and the maiden gave him a third. Thereafter they bade each other a friendly farewell.’

From this story³³ it will be seen that the Norse adventurers at once suspected, or positively knew that the leafless tree (or branch) stuck in the ground indicated the concealed entrance to an ‘earth-house’; and it was probably by following this or similar clues that the invaders were enabled to rifle all such subterranean hiding-places of their contents. It is noteworthy that the foregoing story speaks of rich plunder obtained in that particular earth-house, the inmates of which are further described as wearing gold rings. This is quite in consonance with the references to the rich spoils obtained by the Danes, in the Irish chronicle quoted on a previous page.

One special feature of the house into which Thorgils descended, was that its roof was supported by rafters or balks. This appears to denote a comparatively modern form of earth-house; and we have seen that the ninth-century mound in Naumudal was constructed of ‘stones and lime and wood.’ It is not unlikely that the use of timber in the construction of earth-houses had by that time become common; and reference will be made on a subsequent page to some Scottish examples of this variety.

Among the booty obtained by Thorgils in this Irish earth-house was a sword, which he seems to have worn ever after. It came into use, indeed, at the end of this

³³ Here translated from the Danish version of the *Fl6amanna Saga* (*Thargilss Historie*) translated from the old Norse by Professor B. Thorlacius, Copenhagen, 1809), pp. 70-72.

expedition, for, when Thorgils and Gyrd were about to divide the plunder, the latter laid claim to the costliest articles, and the two chiefs consequently engaged in combat. 'Thorgils now used the sword he had obtained in the underground chamber, and with it he slashed off his rival's leg. In the following year, also, in a fight with an evil-disposed and cantankerous man, called Randvid,' Thorgils employed 'the sword from the earth-house' with fatal effect upon his opponent.³⁴ On more than one other occasion, this sword is specially mentioned. Two years after the expedition with Gyrd, Thorgils and Thorstein set sail for Iceland, 'to look after his [Thorgils's] possessions' in that country. The party suffered shipwreck on the eastern coast of Greenland, and, during their adventures on a certain iceberg, it is said that 'Thorgils had a woodman's axe in his hand, and the sword from the earth-house by his side.' And, again, it is stated that when, one morning, Thorgils discovered the carcass of a stranded whale, and beside it two native women who were about to carry off some of the meat, he un-gallantly used 'the sword from the earth-house' in cutting off the hand of one of the women, who dropped her bundle and fled with her comrade, leaving Thorgils and his hungry companions in possession of the whale.³⁵

Singularly resembling the adventure of Thorgils in Ireland is another, recorded in the *Landnamabok*, and belonging to the same period,—the reign of King Hakon. The following is the account³⁶:—

'Leif (Ingolf's foster-brother) went on warfare in the west; he made war in Ireland, and there found a large underground house; he went into it, and it was dark, until a sword which a man wore made it light.³⁷ Leif slew him and took the sword and much property, then he was called Hjorleif (Sword-Leif). Hjorleif made war widely in Ireland, and got much booty; he took there ten thralls, Dufthak, Geirrod, Skjaldbjdrn, Halddr, Drafdrit; the others are not named.'

It is worth noting that, in the course of the winter following the visit of Thorgils to the Irish 'weera,' his wife Gudrun bore him a son who was called *Thorleif*. It is possible that the *Landnama* story of 'Hjorleif,' and the similar story in the *Floamanna Saga* relating to the father of 'Thorleif,' may be merely two variants of one actual event. Nevertheless, they contain several notable differences. And, moreover, the descent into an 'underground house,' and the capture of a sword and other booty, with or without a struggle with the denizens of the retreat, must have been a very common incident in Ireland, during the ninth and tenth centuries, on the showing of the Irish chroniclers as well as of the Norse.

So common were such incidents, in the traditional lore of Ireland, that they came under a special classification, that of *Uatha*. This term is, says Professor O'Curry, 'the plural of *Uath*, a word not easily translated. *Uath* is evidently formed from *Uaimh*, a cave, or cellar [modernised into *Weem*, in Scotland]; and signifies some deed connected with, as the attack or plunder of, a cave.' Among the *uatha* mentioned in the 'Book of Leinster,' Mr. O'Curry cites 'a very curious story; known as the *Uath Uama*³⁸ *Cruachan*, or the plundering of the Weem of Cruachan. He also refers to a poem which tells how a certain 'unknown knight' withdrew on one occasion into this

³⁴ *Op.cit.*, pp. 73-75.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 93-98. The date of this adventure is fixed at 998 (*Les Skraelings*, par E. Beauvois, Paris, 1879, p. 30).

³⁶ Here quoted from Du Chaillu's *Viking Age*, vol. i., p. 504.

³⁷ The obvious meaning of this is that the intruder's eyes were becoming accustomed to the twilight of this subterranean abode, and that he could detect the glimmer of his opponent's sword.

³⁸ It is interesting to see in juxtaposition the earlier noun *uam* and its derivative *uath*.

place, and another hero— well known to tradition—following after him, discovered ‘a party of smiths at work’ inside;³⁹ no doubt manufacturing weapons, such as the redoubtable sword of Thorgils, and other utensils of less offensive nature.

These incidents relate to the ‘caves’ of Ireland. But the statement made to Thorgils by the mother of the underground ‘earl,’ that her kinsfolk belonged to Vik, on the coast of Norway, is only one of many indications that certain castes in Scandinavia were accustomed to lead the underground life at the same time as similarly-minded castes in the British Islands. Some instances denoting this have already been quoted; and it seems clear that the Scandinavian invaders of Ireland were enabled to rifle the earth-houses there for the very reason that their ranks included people to whom the ways of the earth-dwellers were quite familiar, either because of their kinship or their intercourse with them. It might be said that this knowledge was obtained from the ‘thralls’ whom they carried into captivity from Ireland; .but, on the other hand, there is no proof that the first earth-houses in Ireland were not constructed by natives of Scandinavia. It is at least interesting to note that in tenth-century Iceland the earth-house was apparently as well known as in other Scandinavian territories, including the British Isles. This is seen in a story quoted by Dr. Anderson (*op. (At., p. 290)*), who observes:—

“The use of such underground places of concealment is referred to in the *Saga of Gisli the Soursop*, which relates to events occurring between the years 930 and 980, and was written in Iceland about the beginning of the twelfth century. It states that when Gisli was outlawed, and every man’s hand was against him, he went to Thorgerda in Vadil. “She was often wont to harbour outlaws, and she had an underground room. One end of it opened on the river-bank and the other below her hall.” Again, it states that “Gisli was always in his earth-house when strangers came to the isle.”⁴⁰

Altogether, this tenth-century Thorgerda of Iceland, and her outlawed *protigte*, resemble very closely the ‘two repulsive old women’ and the ‘savage robbers’ who are said to have occupied the underground house at Raitts, Inverness-shire, and the cottage which was built over its entrance.

The illustrations which are here given represent some of the ‘weems’ of Scotland. Of these, the best example at present known is the one about to be noticed. For, although the cave of Raitts has been cited as an excellent specimen of such structures, it is much inferior in extent, and consequently in general interest, to the ‘Picts’ House’ of Pitcur, situated in the county of Forfar, about two miles south-east of Coupar-Angus, and near the base of the Sidlaw Hills. This ‘Picts’ House’ has the crescent or horse-shoe outline⁴¹ of the Raitts and other kindred ‘caves’; and it has, moreover, a supplementary gallery running parallel to one side of its exterior curve. This second gallery, however, is much shorter than the main building, being indeed only about one-third as long. The greater part of the main gallery, and the whole of the lesser one, is now open to the sun, the stone flags which formed the roofs having been nearly all carried off, no doubt for building purposes in connection with neighbouring farms.

³⁹ See Professor Eugene O’Curry’s *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, Dublin, 1861, pp. 257-8, 283, 586-7 and 589.

⁴⁰ The reference given by Dr. Anderson is *The Saga of Gisli the Outlaw*, Dasent’s translation, p. 72.

⁴¹ The outline is very irregular, and may only be compared in a general way to a ‘crescent or horse-shoe.’



The Picts House, Pitcur

But the south-eastern portion of the principal gallery, for a distance of about 45 feet (the whole length of the 'horse shoe' being something like 150 feet),⁴² still retains its flagged roof; and the interior is consequently dark, except for the dim light which comes through the doorway. Originally, no light can have entered by this doorway, as the main gallery beyond was also roofed over. Now, however, not only does a feeble light penetrate the 'cave' in ordinary weather, but the afternoon sun on a fine day is bright enough to enable one to photograph the interior, as in the first of the two views here' given.⁴³ This view, the one with the figure introduced, gives an excellent idea of the architecture of this particular 'weem,' and indeed of the 'cyclopean' arch everywhere. (It may be explained that the sunlight on the hither side of the view required to be supplemented by magnesium wire burning in the interior; and that the curved shape of the gallery can be realised when it is added that a second figure would be visible on the right-hand side, beyond the magnesium light, had the gallery

⁴² These figures are approximate; the line of measurement being taken along the middle of the gallery. In a description of this place, contributed to *Science* (New York) of July 22d, 1892, I stated the whole length at 134 feet; but this does not include a portion stretching for 16 feet beyond the main entrance.

⁴³ These views are reproduced by the Collotype process from photographs by Messrs. D. Milne and Son, Blairgowrie.

been straight.) The breadth of the gallery is about 6 feet, and the height 80 inches; the figure being that of a man of 5 feet 10 inches.



The Picts House, Pitcur

Overhead, about two or three feet above the roof of the gallery, is a ploughed field. The second view is taken from the interior, looking out through the sun-lit doorway into the now unroofed main gallery. The important feature of this view is the recess on the spectator's left hand, but really on the right, as one enters at the doorway. This is the kind of thing that Captain Thomas refers to as a 'guard-cell.'⁴⁴ The cavity measures 33 inches in height, 14 inches across the top, and 23 inches across the base, and it goes into the wall 21 inches. It is possible for a man of average size to squeeze into it in a sitting posture; but Captain Thomas is obviously correct in inferring that only a man of slight dimensions (or otherwise a boy, he might have added) could have acted as 'guard' in such a 'cell.' There is, however, much to be said against the idea that this and similar recesses were 'guard-cells.' In the weem under consideration, and indeed in the special portion here illustrated, there is another such recess at the inner end of the passage, on the left hand. (It is dimly visible behind the standing figure in the first view.) And the shape and dimensions of this other 'cell' quite preclude the idea that it was used as a kind of sentry-box. The same

⁴⁴ See page 11, *ante*,

may be said of two others of the same kind in the Airlie weem,—about to be noticed. An examination of these two would lead most people to the conclusion that they were fire-places; and this seems to me, at present, the obvious use of such ‘cells.’ However, a comparison of a considerable number of them would be necessary before one could come to a final conclusion on this matter.

To describe the Picts’ House of Pitcur in full would be a work in itself, requiring also many illustrations. It is, I am informed by Sir Arthur Mitchell, the best example in Scotland, at present known, of these structures; and it is still more remarkable, he adds, for the unique character of certain vases and other articles which were discovered in it several years ago.⁴⁵ Most of these were secured at the time by the then proprietor of the estate on which the weem is situated, whose wish it was that Sir Arthur Mitchell would contribute a description of them to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. This has not yet been done, but one may be permitted to express the hope that an account of these extremely interesting articles by so eminent an authority on the subject may yet be forthcoming.

The Pitcur ‘house’ is situated in a neighbourhood which contains many such relics. Another weem of the same kind is found in the adjoining parish of Auchterhouse, in the Sidlaw Hills, says a writer already quoted.⁴⁶ In the same range, and situated four miles to the south-west of the Pitcur weem, is the famous peak of Dunsinnan, which is crowned with a vitrified fort, locally styled ‘Giant Macbeths Castle.’ The proprietor of the estate of Dunsinnan having in 1855 made some excavations within the area of the ramparts of this fort, the result was as follows :—

‘In the course of the excavations there was discovered a doorway, consisting of two rude unhewn slabs forming the posts, and a similar slab forming the lintel. From the doorway, which was low and narrow, and could not have been entered by a man in an upright position, there was a sloping passage leading to what seemed to be a house or burrow of considerable size, but underground; so that, while the house, if such it can be called, would have contained more than one, perhaps two or three persons, the doorway could only have admitted one at a time, and the passage could easily have been defended by any one armed with a spear.’

The reader (who was not the writer) of this Dunsinnan paper,⁴⁷ added the following observation :—

‘The underground or *Eirde* house, which on investigation would probably be found to be larger than indicated by Mr. Brown [the writer of the paper], the vitrification of the walls of the fort, and the spiral ring [a ring which was found there], all tend to throw back the construction of the fort to a period of great antiquity.’

Dr. Joseph Anderson gives the following description :—⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Dr. Anderson states that ‘fragments of the red lustrous ware commonly called Samian’ were discovered here. (*Op. cit.* p. 304.)

⁴⁶ The late Rev. Dr. Marshall, Coupar-Angus.—*Historic Scenes in Forfarshire*, Edinburgh, 1875, p. 153.

⁴⁷ The author of these (Notes relating to Dunsinnane Hill was the Rev. Thomas Brown, minister of Collace; and the paper (which appears in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, First Series, vol. ix. pp. 378-380) was read by Mr. A. Laing, F.S.A., Scot. The editor of the *Proceedings* adds:—‘An account of the Hill Fort of Dunsinnane, with notices of the excavations made by Mr. Nairne, and of three skulls found in the underground chambers (which were exhibited to the Society) by T. A. Wise, M.D., F.S.A. Scot, was read before the Society in April 1855, and published in the *Proceedings*, vol. ii. p. 93 with a sectional view of the fort and ‘eirde house.’

⁴⁸ *Op. cit.* pp. 281-282

'The space enclosed [within the ramparts of Dunsinnan] is about 150 yards long by 70 yards wide, and almost level. Towards its south-east side were two underground chambers, 20 feet in length, from 6 to 8 feet in width, and 5 to 6 feet high. The chambers communicated with each other, near their extremities, by two passages, low and narrow, not much exceeding 2 feet in width and 3 feet high. The floors of the chambers were paved with rough slabs. The walls were built with undressed stones, which at the height of 2 to 3 feet above the floor began to converge until the roof was spanned by flagstones laid across. The floors were covered with ashes and refuse, consisting chiefly of the bones of horses and cattle, and horns of deer. A quern was found by the side of one of the passages, and in another were parts of three human skeletons.'

Three or four miles north-west of the Picts' House of Pitcur are the lands of Mudhall, in the parish of Bendochy, whereon there 'are, or rather were, for they have been destroyed and obliterated, several of those subterraneous abodes which used to be called Weems and Picts' Houses. They were discovered, we are told in the Old Statistical Account, in the course of certain digging operations in the grounds of the Mudhall estate. When uncovered and cleared of the ashes and earth with which they were filled, they were measured, and found to be about six feet wide, five feet high, and forty feet or more in length. They were built in the sides, and paved in the bottom with rough whinstones. They were not straight in their length, but curved; evidently that they might be more easily defended against an enemy seeking to enter them. They appear to have been roofed with rafters of wood, covered with earth and turf.'⁴⁹ This last piece of information is very interesting, because it shows that the timber balks seen by Thorgils in the Irish weem during the tenth century had presumably many counterparts in other parts of the British Islands. That the use of timber in the construction of such buildings marks a more modern period than that of the exclusively stone structures has already been pointed out. And since timber was also employed in making the ninth-century 'mound' in Naumudal, it would appear that the more primitive roof of flags was going out of fashion a thousand years ago. One unfortunate effect of the wooden roof has been that, either through natural decay, or in those instances in which successful invaders set the torch to everything inflammable, a complete collapse of the roof has taken place, as these examples at Mudhall denote.

A similar fate to that of the ruined and 'obliterated' weems of Mudhall has overtaken another specimen of this class of structures, situated about four miles to the north-east of them (and five miles northward of the Pitcur 'house'). This ruined weem, of which a portion may be still untouched, lay underneath the road which passes through the village of Meigle, just between the church and the manse; and it was discovered (says my informant, the keeper of the valuable museum of the Meigle Sculptured Stones), about twelve or fourteen years ago when the ground was excavated for the foundations of a new house. In connection with the common belief that the weems were 'Picts' houses,' it is worth pointing out that Meigle is understood to be the site of a former Pictish 'palace'; of which there is no known trace, unless it be this weem.

⁴⁹ Dr. Marshall's *Historic Scenes in Perthshire* (Edinburgh, 1880, p. 234.

About three miles due north of Meigle is Ruthven Church, and Dr. Marshall states that 'in a brae south of the Kirk of Ruthven there *was* a weem,'⁵⁰ which evidently has been destroyed in the same way as those at Mudhall.

But there is happily an admirable specimen quite intact, 'in a brae' two miles north-east of Ruthven Kirk, on the Airlie estate. This weem, locally known as 'The Cave,' is situated on the farm of the Barns of Airlie, lying between Airlie Castle and the Kirk ton of Airlie, but much nearer the latter of these places; and so unimpaired is it that one might walk past the trap-door that now covers its entrance, and only suppose it to be the lid of a well or spring. On raising this wooden trap-door, an irregular aperture is discovered, spanned on one side by a flagstone, laid horizontally, measuring 53 inches across. This flag-stone is the first of a series constituting the roof of this underground dwelling, which penetrates, in a curving direction, to a distance of 75 feet, taking the line of measurement along the outer or convex side of the crescent. The descent at the entrance is unusually abrupt, and one jumps down at once from the field above into the bottom of the 'cave,' which begins at a depth of merely 4½ or 5 feet from the surface. As one goes on, however, leaving the daylight behind, and lighting one's steps over the uneven floor by the aid of a candle or lantern, one feels that there is a constant, though very slight downward slope, all the way to the inner end, by which time the roof must be 2 or 3 feet below the surface of the upper earth. Perhaps it is more, but probably not, as the ground above also slopes downward in the same direction. Like the Cave of Raitts, this gallery trends to the left hand, and not to the right, as is the case at Pitcur. The height from floor to roof is 64 inches at the inner end; and here the two last flagstones of the series are of great size. The average height all along the gallery is something like 6 feet, the roof being seldom much higher or lower. The breadth is also very uniform—from 7 to 7½ feet. As stated, the curve is towards the left hand of the explorer, and that signifies an easterly direction. This curve is considerable, because, while the aperture faces NNE., one is going due east by the time one reaches the inner end. There appear to be no inscriptions on the rude walls, but there are three things worthy of note in this weem. One is 'the usual guard-cell,' as Captain Thomas calls it, on the right hand just after entering. Another is a second recess of the same description on the opposite or left hand side, and only a foot or two farther in. Both are built in the same way, with a big upright slab on either side and a third slab above these as lintel. The right hand recess measures 25 inches in height, 24 inches across (at the upper part, being slightly broader below), and penetrates to a depth of 22 inches. That on the left hand is 22 inches high, 28 inches across, and about 24 inches deep. But, in both cases, the height is increased by an extra foot *behind* the lintel, when the upward passage is terminated, in both cases by a slab stretching longitudinally across. The formation of these two recesses quite destroys the idea that they were 'guard-cells.' Granting everything to the small stature of the occupant, man or boy, of what use could he be when his head must necessarily be out of sight, behind the lintel? This alone is a sufficient objection, but the shallowness of the cavity constitutes another. Whatever may be said of other such cells (and one would have to compare a considerable number before an average could be struck), the natural conclusion to arrive at in looking at the two in the Cave of Airlie is, that they were simply fireplaces. The longitudinal slab behind the lintel, and higher up than it, might at first be considered an insuperable objection to this theory. But at the extremities of each of the slabs there is a break in the continuity of the stone-work which, though now consolidated

⁵⁰ *Historic Scenes in Forfarshire*, p. 153.

earth, may easily have been, in each case, an aperture for the escape of smoke. This arrangement would allow the smoke to filter upwards through the earth, instead of ascending in one column as it would do if there was only one wide vent; and thereby the chance would be lessened of anyone discovering the existence of this particular earth-house.⁵¹ However, 'a well-built smoke-hole' is mentioned in connection with one of the Aberdeenshire earth-houses.⁵²

The third point of interest in connection with the Airlie weem is a large, heavy flagstone (40 inches by 33, but irregular in outline) which covers a depression in the floor, quite close to the left-hand 'cell.' It has, no doubt, been lifted; and the cavity or well, or whatever it conceals has doubtless been duly inspected, and perhaps an account of it published. But such an account is unknown to me, and as I was unprovided with the means of lifting this slab on the occasion of my visit, I am unable to say whether or not the most interesting part of the Airlie weem lies beneath this stone.⁵³

Such, then, are some of the weems of a certain district of Eastern Scotland. They are, or were, all situated within a limited area, and they may only form a tithe of those lying in that locality; because, as has frequently been pointed out, it is generally by the merest accident that these underground structures are discovered at the present day. It is more than probable that there are many 'subterranean villages' besides those of the Strathdon neighbourhood,⁵⁴ but which as yet have not been laid bare to the modern gaze.

It is quite impossible, within these limits to deal with the many questions suggested by a consideration of these earth-dwellings. But some reference may be made to certain points raised by Captain Thomas; namely, the questions of warming, lighting, and ventilating. In the higher class of such structures (the chambered mounds) all those ends were met by the central fireplace and the hole in the roof above it. In others, however, it would appear that, in the words of Sir Daniel Wilson,⁵⁵ 'a solitary aperture served most frequently alike for doorway, chimney, ventilator, and even window, in so far as any gleam of daylight could penetrate into the darkened vault.' One is apt, at first, to be too exacting in this question of light and warmth. But let us glance for a moment at the Eskimos, with whom and with whose dwellings these underground structures and their makers have much in common. 'In huts where every chink is carefully filled up,' says M. Elie Reclus,⁵⁶ 'huts that can only be entered by underground passages, the heat generated by respiration and the combustion of oil and fat renders any other source of warmth almost unnecessary. A lamp burns in the midst of the wretched hovel . . . The cooking is done at this lamp, and it illumines the long night that lasts no less than four months from sunset to sunrise.' In the more southern instances under consideration there is no question of

⁵¹ This detail recalls the words of Gibbon, who, in speaking of 'the Tongouses and the Samoïdes ... a race of deformed and diminutive savages,' observes that 'the smoke which issues from the earth, or rather from the snow, *betrays* the subterraneous dwellings' of these people. [I have given several references to other similar dwellings, in various parts of the world, in a paper entitled 'Subterranean Dwellings,' contributed to *The Antiquary* (Elliot Stock, London) of August 1892.]

⁵² *Scotland in Pagan Times (The Iron Age)*, p. 287.

⁵³ It is stated by Dr. Anderson (*op. cit.* p. 292) that there is 'a group of five' weems at Airlie, but that writer only describes one of them, seemingly the 'cave' above referred to. He adds: 'The other four examples in the same neighbourhood are known to have existed but have neither been measured nor described.'

⁵⁴ Referred to on p. 4, *ante*.

⁵⁵ *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, 1863, vol. i. p. 111.

⁵⁶ *Primitive Folk*, pp. 29, 30.

this long arctic night, and this renders it still easier to understand how those places were habitable; especially when the dwellers in them slept most of the day and ranged abroad at night. Referring again to the Eskimos, M. Reclus says:⁵⁷ 'But when one or several families are cooped up in a narrow space, not ventilated either by door or window, amidst a manifold accumulation of herbs, rotting meat, putrifying fish, rancid oil, rubbish, and waste of every description, what becomes, what can become, of cleanliness? . . . these huts are no sooner inhabited than they become stinking cesspools, vile sinks of filth . . . The filth and want of air cause the interior to send forth an almost unbearable stench.' That this was the probable condition of the ninth century mound dwellings in Naumudal, during the time of Harald's visit, must be apparent on a moment's reflection. And that it was a characteristic of the cave-man generally (whether the 'cave' was natural or artificial) is equally evident from Gaelic tradition. One Gaelic name for a cave-dweller (otherwise 'a savage') is *samhanach*, or sometimes only *samh*. Now, *samh* is defined as 'a strong, oppressive smell,' 'a bad smell arising from a sick person, or a dirty hot place;' and a West Highland scholar observes, in this connection, that 'it is a common expression to say of any strong, offensive smell, "it would kill the very *samhanaich* who dwell in caves by the sea."⁵⁸ Those *samhanaich* were clearly (from this and other allusions) regarded as a distinct race from the Gaelic-speaking population; and this name by which they were known, and which could be rendered into very plain English, indicates distinctly the condition of their abodes, if not of their persons.

But ventilation was by no means invariably ignored in the construction of these artificial 'caves.' One Irish archaeologist makes a passing reference to 'the ventilator usually found in these underground chambers;⁵⁹ and one of these Irish examples (that of Kildun, described in Sir W. Wilde's *Lough Corrib*) is specially cited by Captain Thomas⁶⁰ when referring to similar apertures in the weems of Buchaam and Glenkindy. As for the Pict's House of Pitcur, it resembles a rabbit warren in the number of its entrances; and that denotes a sufficiency of fresh air, at any rate. However, as observed by Sir Daniel Wilson, a single entrance would suffice for that purpose. Another fact has to be taken into account. That is, that most of these earth-houses, when discovered by us, have been lying disused for centuries, and, in many cases, the ground above has been ploughed over. But in their original condition, it may safely be assumed that the soil overhead was quite uncultivated, and that, like those 'coves' still in use in North Uist in the sixteenth century, they were 'covered with heather above.' It would thus be an easy matter to have small air-holes leading upward here and there without the slightest fear that these would betray the secret of the weem beneath. Such holes, in course of time, and after they were no longer required, would gradually become filled up, leaving no indication that they ever existed.

How far the use of the underground dwelling ought to be regarded as a mark of race, is a question which cannot be fully discussed here. The term 'Picts house,' so often applied to such structures in Scotland, embodies a wide-spread popular belief on this subject. This is, that the Picts dwelt underground, like Gibbon's Samoyeds, and that,

⁵⁷ *Op. cit.* pp. 22-3. He is speaking of their snow huts; but this does not affect the question.

⁵⁸ Many of the artificial 'caves' are situated on the sea-shore; and as the proverb quoted belongs to the Hebrides, it may indicate that *most* of such 'caves' in the islands are so situated. (For the references to *samh* and *samhanach*, see *Scottish Celtic Review*, pp. 62, 140-1; also McAlpine's *Gaelic Dictionary*).

⁵⁹ *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Fourth Quarter, 1891, p. 716,

⁶⁰ *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. vii., 1870, p. 187.

like those people also, they were 'deformed and diminutive savages.' Mr. R. L. Stevenson has incorporated both of these traditional beliefs in his ballad of 'Heather Ale,' which he rightly calls 'A Galloway Legend', although it is also localised as far north as Shetland; and the main thread of the ballad relates to a third characteristic attributed to them. The Picts, it is said, were famous for a kind of ale which they made from heather-tops; and they were equally famous—it would appear from Mr. Stevenson—for the large quantities of it that they consumed.

*'They brewed it and they drank it,
And lay in a blessed swound
For days and days together,
In their dwellings underground.'*

Be this as it may, the belief regarding their small size and their subterranean habits, has been current for more than four hundred years, as may be seen from the following remarkable statement occurring in an account, *De Orcadibus Insulis*, ascribed to Thomas Tulloch, Bishop of Orkney during the first half of the fifteenth century: '*Islas insulas primitus Peti (a Latinised form of Pehts, Pechts, or Picts) et Pape inhabitabant. Horum alteri scilicet Peti parvo superantes pigmeos statura in structuris urbium vespere et mane mira operantes, meredie vero cunctis viribus prorsus destituti in subterraneis domunculis pre timore latuerunt.*'⁶¹

A consideration of the earth-houses themselves quite bears out the tradition as to the size of their builders. Hill Burton remarked that 'a corpulent man will find difficulty in squeezing himself' through the entrance of the ordinary weem; and Captain Thomas, relinquishing the attempt to penetrate to the inmost chamber of *Uamh Sgalabhad*, observes 'this incomprehensible narrowness is a feature in the buildings of this period.' In a neighbouring specimen (that shown on pp. 16 and 17) he found an interior doorway, which was 'but 18 inches high, and 2 feet broad, so that a very stout or large man could not get in.' The entrance to the earth-house at Cairn Conan, near Arbroath, is 2½ feet wide, and apparently little more than 18 inches high.' (In such cases, it is, of course, understood that one has to creep.) The earth-house at Eriboll, in Sutherlandshire, is 'nowhere more than 4½ feet in height, and for the greater part of its length only 2 feet wide, expanding to 3½ for about 3 feet only from the inner end.' Captain Thomas also speaks of 'narrow underground passages, about 9 or 10 feet long, 3 feet high, and as many wide,' situated in Lewis. Such passages as these latter are, it is said, 'called by a Gaelic name which signifies hiding-beds.'⁶² But whether 'hiding-beds' or houses, the same peculiarity characterises either class. There are, of course, many underground structures which are both lofty and roomy, comparatively. But it is obvious that the size of the builders ought to be gauged by the most restricted of the passages and doorways, and not by those of wider dimensions. For while, on the one hand, people of all races and periods may construct houses and chambers of much greater dimensions than is required by even the tallest and bulkiest of the builders, it is inconceivable that any people would construct dwellings and hiding-places into which some of them could not enter. If the weems of Scotland had been built by a race whose average size was that of the present inhabitants of

⁶¹ Extracts from a Manuscript Volume of Chronicles in the possession of the Right Honourable Lord Panmure; Bannatyne Miscellany, 1855, p. 33.

⁶² For these references see Dr. Anderson's 'Iron Age,' pp. 289, 290, and 295; and *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, First Series, vol. vii., p. 171.

Scotland, the narrowness to which Captain Thomas refers would indeed be 'incomprehensible.' But when one accepts as accurate the traditional statement that the builders were of such a stature and bulk that they could pass with ease in and out of the buildings which they had constructed for their own use, then that difficulty vanishes altogether.

Thus, in view of the statements quoted in the preceding pages, which denote that these underground places were in occupation during the ninth and tenth centuries, and even as recently as the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries (although then more rarely), one would be led to infer that the original builders continued to be represented, until comparatively recent times, by castes who not only followed their mode of life, but who also had inherited some of their blood, and who consequently exhibited some of their physical characteristics.⁶³

With regard to the relics found in recent times in these underground houses, Dr. Anderson states as follows:⁶⁴

The only objects found in the earth-house at Mig vie, Aberdeenshire, 'were a bronze ring, several rude stone vessels like roughly-formed cups, large quantities of ashes and charred wood, and corroded fragments of iron implements.' In that at Buchaam, Strathdon, Aberdeenshire, 'were found the following relics of human occupation—an iron ring, and an object in iron which looked like the shoe of a wooden spade, some staves of a small wooden cog, a wooden comb, some fragments of pottery of coarse workmanship, a portion of a quern or hand-mill for grinding grain, fragments of deer's horns, and bones of the sheep and common domestic fowls.'

When the earth-house at Culsh, Tarland, Aberdeenshire, was 'cleared out in 1853, the earth which filled the chamber was found largely mixed with ashes on the floor, and the only relics obtained from its excavation were fragments of coarse unglazed pottery, a large bead, the bones of cattle, and two querns.' 'The earth with which the chamber was filled' at Kildrummy, Aberdeenshire, 'was largely mixed with charcoal and bones of animals, among which those of the horse and dog were recognised. No manufactured relics were found.' 'The articles found in the underground chambers' at Cairn Conan, Arbroath, Forfarshire, 'were few in number.

They consisted of some fragments of pottery, coarse, but wheel-made, pale yellow in colour, and differing in texture and manufacture from the usual hand-made pottery of native origin found in many of the other structures of the same class. It closely resembles some varieties of pottery that are constantly found in the vicinity of Roman stations in Scotland. A bronze needle and a portion of a quern were the only other objects found. But that the place had been long occupied was sufficiently apparent from the quantity of ashes mixed with calcined and broken bones of the common domestic animals which it contained.' One of the 'group of five' weems at Airlie, in Forfarshire, 'contained the usual traces of cookery in the accumulation of ashes and bones of animals upon the floor. The only other relics found in it were a brass pin, a stone mortar-like vessel, and fragments of querns.' 'Fragments of the red lustrous ware commonly called Samian,' were found 'in the earth-houses at Tealing, Pitcur, and Fithie all in Forfarshire.

⁶³ I have referred more particularly to this question in *The Testimony of Tradition* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Tribner & Co., 1890), and in a paper on 'Fians, Fairies, and Picts' read before the Folk-Lore Society on 10th February, 1892.

⁶⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 282-306.

With regard specially to the Tealing earth-house, it is stated that 'the usual evidences of occupation were found in the presence of ashes, charcoal, and animal bones throughout the excavation. The manufactured relics . . . are enumerated by Mr. Jervise as follows:—

'A piece of the red lustrous ware commonly called Samian, a bracelet, bronze rings, and coarse pottery, no fewer than ten querns, a number of whorls and stone cups, and an article made of iron slightly mixed with brass. . . . The large size of the gallery, in the present instance, and the occurrence in it of ten querns, indicate that it was frequented by a considerable number of people.' The floors of the double earth-house at Dunsinnan 'were covered with ashes and refuse, consisting chiefly of the bones of horses and cattle, and horns of deer. A quern was found by the side of one of the passages, and in another were parts of three human skeletons.' Nothing was found in the interior of the earth-house at Broomhouse, Edrom, Berwickshire, 'but fragments of bones of animals, among which the roe-deer was the only one that could be certainly determined.' With reference to the Cornish earth-houses, it is stated that 'one at Chapel Euny, in the parish of Saucreed, near Penzance,' contained 'whetstones; hammer-stones; spindle-whorls; several varieties of domestic pottery, red and black, mostly plain, but occasionally ornamented with markings made by a pointed instrument; an iron spear-head; and a fragment of the red lustrous ware commonly called Samian.'

These, of course, are only such relics as have survived the desertion or partial destruction of the earth-houses, and the final extinction of their inmates, as a distinct race. But it must be remembered that the records referring to them state that their most valuable contents were carried off by those who invaded them during the period when they were still in occupation.

Consequently, if these records are to be trusted, the 'weems' contained many other articles of much higher value and importance than the querns and pottery, which the spoilers did not think worth carrying away. Moreover, if the abandonment of the 'weems' was a gradual process, as it evidently was in some districts, and may have been in all, the people who formerly lived the underground life would become insensibly merged in the neighbouring populations, and their more precious articles would continue to be preserved in ordinary above-ground dwellings, after the idea of living underground, whether temporarily or permanently, had become wholly abandoned.

However, the object of this pamphlet is not so much to discuss the many phases of this question, as to draw attention to the earth-houses themselves. These appear to have been strangely neglected, outside of the archaeological world; although they are certainly as important and interesting as any other kind of structures, and, in the opinion of the present writer, more interesting and more important than any other.

The neglect referred to is, unfortunately, not confined to the study of them; for the buildings themselves have suffered in a deplorable degree in modern times. It is much to be regretted, for example, that so excellent a specimen as the Cave of Raitts should be left wholly unprotected from the inroads of stock, or possible injuries from any passer-by.

That it has undergone some deterioration during the past thirty years may be seen by comparing its present condition with the plan published in 1865. It would be an easy matter for proprietors to fence in and otherwise protect existing 'weems'; and, indeed, all of these valuable relics ought to be safeguarded under the Ancient

Monuments Protection Act. One consolation, however, remains to those who take an interest in these matters, and that is that the number of underground structures which have yet to be discovered and explored is probably much greater than the number already known to Archaeology.

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