

# THE ORKNEY BOOK.

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## Part I.—The Story of the Past.

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### PREHISTORIC ORKNEY.

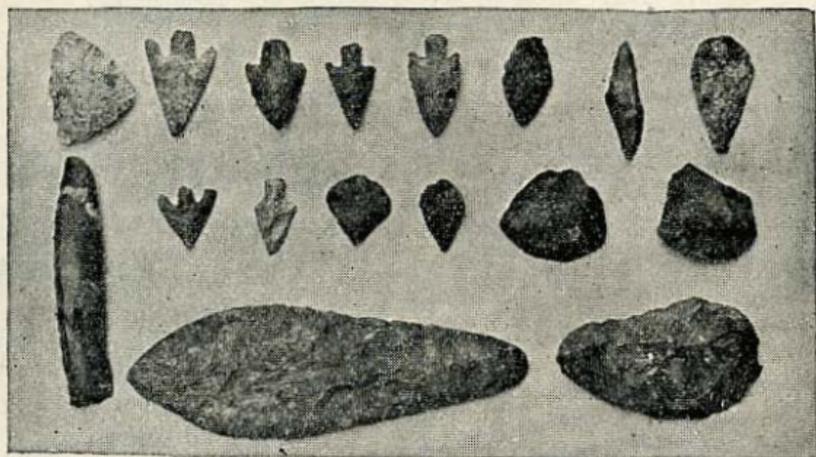


What period of the world's history were our islands first inhabited, and who were their first inhabitants? These are questions which we cannot now answer. History is always made before it is written, and long ages must have passed in the history of these islands before any written records began to be kept.

Yet there are some records of that dim, forgotten past, which patient research has gathered together, and which can be made to tell us a few fragments of our Island story. If we look into one of the museums where relics of the past are preserved, we may find such things as flint arrow-heads and knives, stone axes and hammers, bronze spear-heads, and other tools and weapons of the early inhabitants of our

islands. These silent witnesses tell us a little about what manner of men they were, and how they lived their long-forgotten lives.

The use of stone implements marks a very primitive stage of life, yet one which may not be entirely savage. There are tribes now living which are still in their Stone Age. A recent traveller tells of having seen an inhabitant of the South American Andes skin a hare very neatly with a small flint knife. This knife is now in Kirkwall, and is precisely similar to many which have been dug up in Orkney.

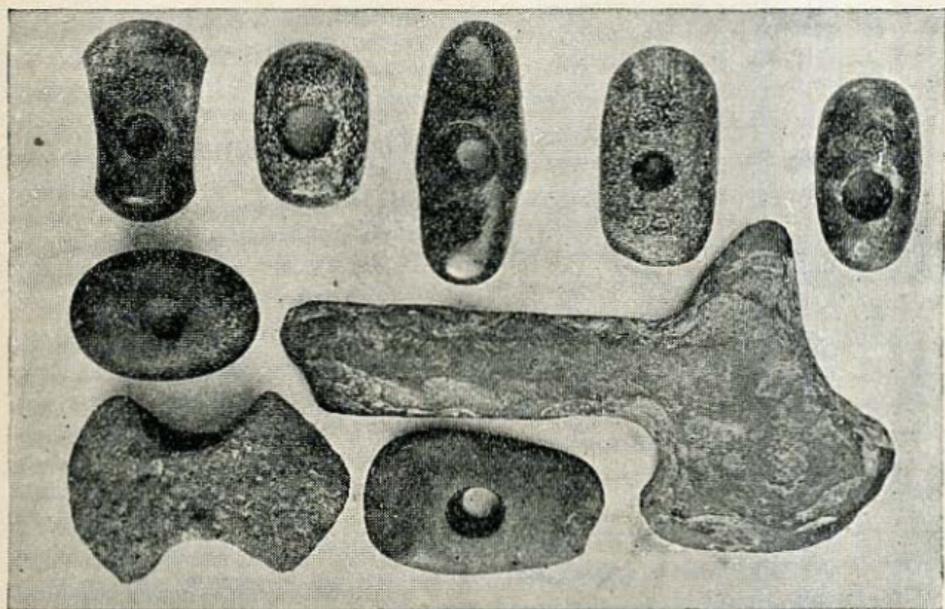


*Flint Arrow-heads and Knives.*

Flint is not a common stone in the Orkney Islands. It is found in occasional lumps and pebbles among the clay which has been carried from other places by the glaciers and icebergs of the Ice Age. Flint is common in the southern parts of Great Britain, however, and the arrows and knives found in our islands may have been brought from the south, or the art of making them may have been learned from tribes among whom flint was a more common material. This kind of stone, the fine steel of the

Stone Age, was used for small implements over a wide area of the world.

Orkney must have had a large population in those early days. The number of ancient graves which have been found seems to indicate this, especially if we suppose that most of those graves with their heaped-up mounds are the resting-places of chiefs and great men rather than of the common people. The graves which remain are of varied



*Stone Hammers and Axes.*

types, from the simple cist of upright stones roofed with horizontal slabs and covered with earth, to the large mound with its carefully built chambers.

The variety of the objects found in those graves, from the rudest flint and bone implements to those which are carefully finished, and finally to objects made of metal, shows that the burials belong to different periods. They tell us of long ages of increasing though now forgotten civilization. Some of the mounds, indeed,

show by their contents that they cover the remains, not of the original and unknown inhabitants, but of the Norse conquerors, and thus really belong to the period whose history has come down to us in writing. But in the very mound where the Norse warrior was laid to rest, there are sometimes also found the relics of burials of a much ruder age. Such mingling of the materials of our unwritten history makes the story which they tell a very difficult one to read.

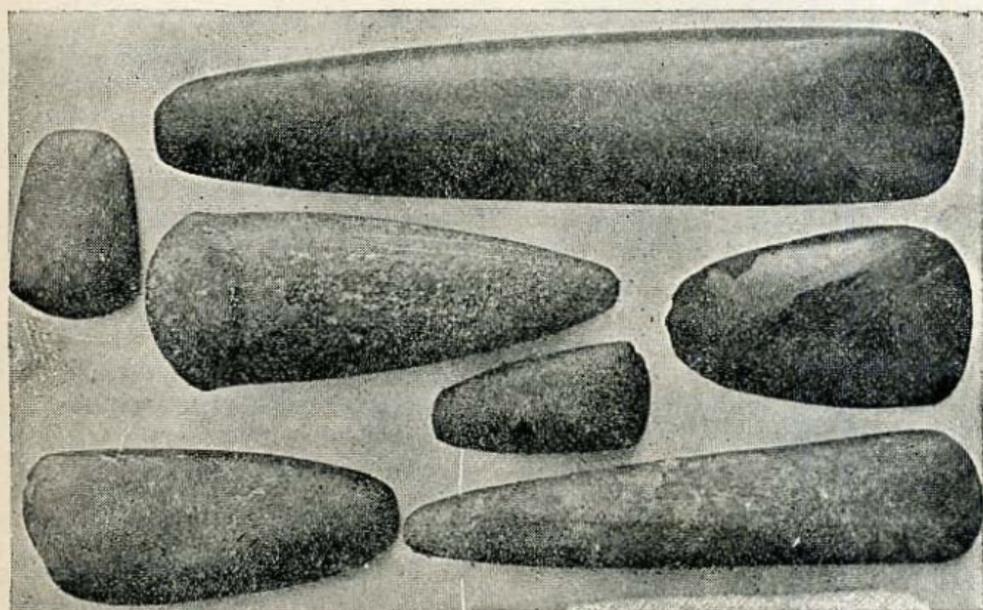
There are few remains in our islands more striking than the chambered mounds, or Picts' houses, as they are called. The most complete and probably the most recent of them is that known as Maeshowe. They consist of a mound of earth heaped over a rude building, sometimes of one apartment, but frequently of several, the entrance being a long, low, narrow passage, through which it is necessary to stoop or crawl in order to gain an entrance.

Possibly those Picts' houses were built at first as houses to dwell in, though later used as tombs. It is not uncommon to-day to find buildings used for burial which were designed for other purposes. If ever our race and all its records were to vanish as completely as the primitive inhabitants of the Orkney Islands have done, we can imagine some future explorer of the ruins of St. Magnus Cathedral writing a learned treatise to prove that the largest building in our islands was erected as a burial-place for our dead.

Those mound dwellings, or Picts' houses, may seem to us a very strange form of house to live in. Where can we find to-day houses of such a type, and with so very inconvenient a form of entrance? The

Eskimos, as travellers tell us, are in the habit of building just such houses with blocks of snow, and they find this the best type in the extreme cold of their Arctic climate. Possibly the Picts' house type of dwelling was used in Orkney and in other places for similar reasons.

The brochs, or Pictish towers, as they are also called, are buildings of a different kind, which are

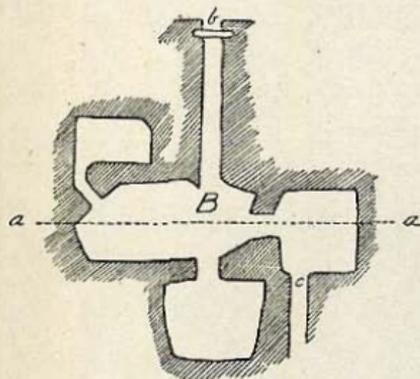


*Polished Stone Celts.*

also fairly common in Orkney. They are probably of later date than the Picts' houses. Considerable skill, as well as co-operation in labour, must have been required for their erection.

The most complete broch in existence is that of Mousa in Shetland. Of those which are found in Orkney, only the lower portions now remain. Over seventy such ruins have been examined, the best specimens being in Evie (Burgar), Birsay (Oxtro),

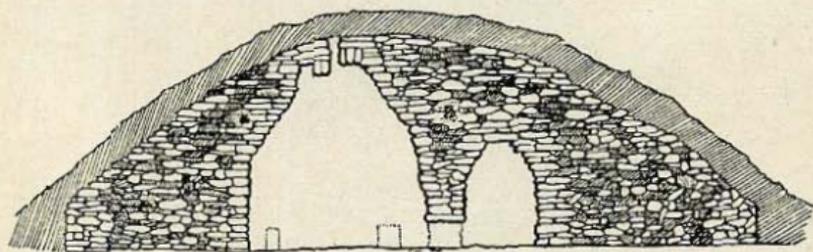
Harray, Firth (Ingashowe and Stirlinghowe), St. Ola (Birstane and Lingro), St. Andrews (Dingishowe and Langskail), Burray (East and West Brough), South Ronaldsay (Hoxa), Shapinsay (Borrowston), and Stronsay (Lamb Head).



*Plan of Chambered Mound,  
Wideford Hill.*

*b, Entrance. c, Blind Passage.*

with a space of four or five feet between them. This space is divided into a number of stories or galleries by horizontal courses of long slabs of stone, which form



*Chambered Mound, Wideford Hill.*

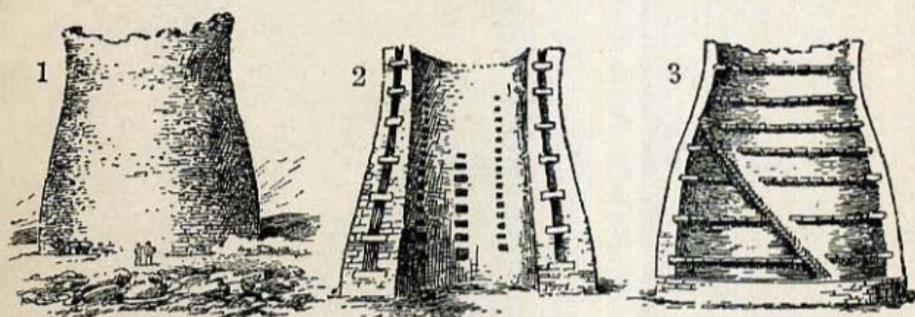
*Section on line a, a of plan.*

the roof of one story and the floor of that above it, and at the same time bind the two walls firmly together. A stairway gives access to the various stories, and light is admitted by small windows opening into the interior space of the tower, no windows being made in the outer

wall. A single door in the lower wall forms the only entrance to the inner court of the broch.

These towers were probably constructed for the purpose of defence, and against a primitive enemy they would serve as well as did the castles of a later age before the invention of gunpowder. Indeed, we read of the broch of Mousa being actually used as a fort in the time of the Norsemen.

Who the builders of these towers were we cannot discover. They are undoubtedly very ancient; yet their builders and occupiers were by no means savages. From the remains which have been found in them we



*Broch of Mousa, Shetland.*

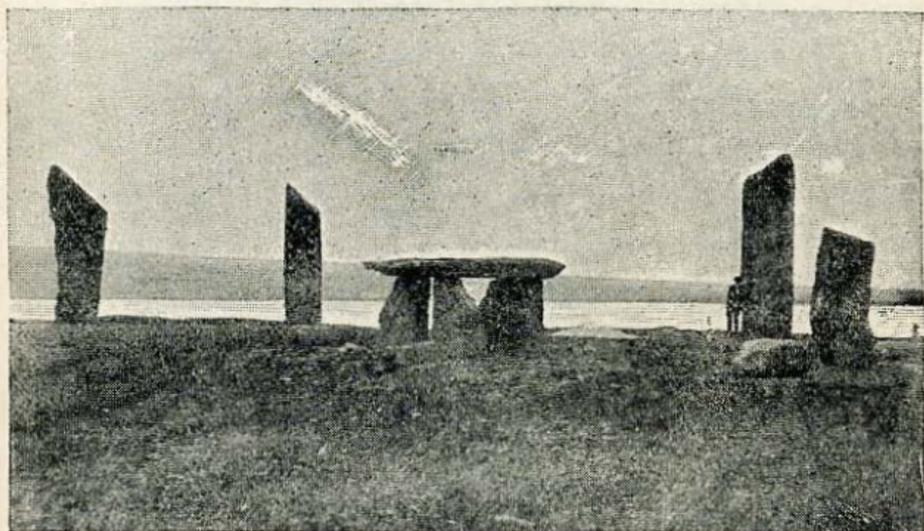
1. Exterior. 2. Section. 3. Section with inner wall removed.

learn that they were used by a people who kept domestic animals, who cultivated the ground, and who could spin and weave the wool of their flocks into cloth. No weapons of the Stone Age are found in the brochs.

It is certain that they were built, and that most of them may have fallen into ruins, long before the Norsemen came. Many of the places where they stand were named by those settlers from the broch which was found standing there. The words *borg*, as in Burgar, and *howe* (haug), as in Hoxa (Haug's aith, or isthmus), are found in many place-names.

It is certain, too, that the brochs were not then occupied, or we should have found some account of their siege and capture in the Sagas which tell of Norse prowess by land and sea.

Another type of ancient remains which is common in our islands is the standing stones. These are found in many places, either singly or in groups or circles. Regarding these relics of a distant past much has been written, but little is known.



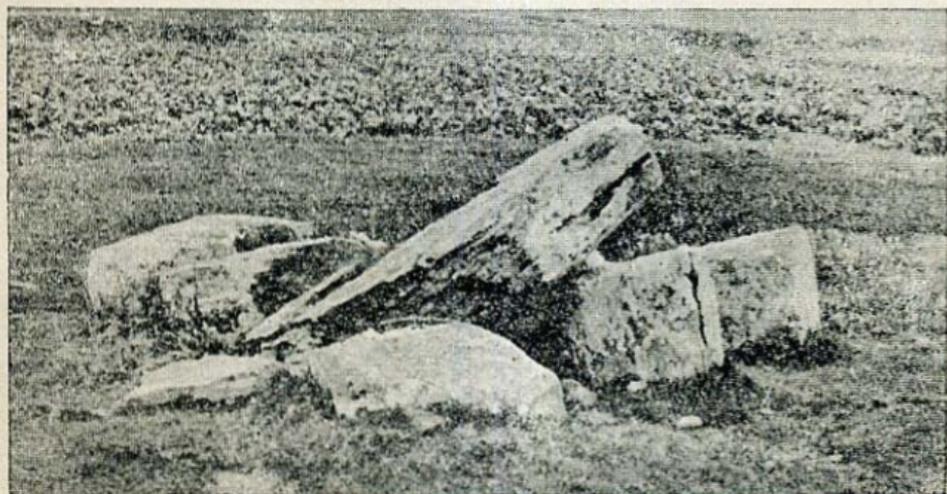
*The Stone Circle of Stenness as now Restored.*

An upright stone is the simplest and most effective form of monument, and is that which we most commonly use to this day to mark the resting-places of our dead. To the ancient Orcadian it was a matter of more difficulty to quarry and to transport and erect such monuments, and doubtless they would be set up only in memory of some great event, such as a notable victory, or the fall of a great chieftain.

The great stone circles, such as those of Stenness and of Brogar, are supposed to have served a different

purpose. They are believed by many to have been the temples of some primitive people, who met there to worship their gods. It has also been supposed that the people who erected those circles were sun-worshippers, as the situation of certain prominent stones seems to have been determined by the position of the rising sun at midsummer.

But in these matters we cannot be certain of our conclusions. Most of our great churches and cathedrals are placed east and west, with the high altar



*Fallen Cromlech or Table Stone, Sandwick.*

towards the east, and even the graves in our churchyards are usually similarly oriented; but this does not prove that we are sun-worshippers, whatever our forefathers may have been before they accepted Christianity. We may indulge in much speculation about them, and form our own opinions as to what they originally meant, but those hoary monoliths remain a mystery, and the purpose of their erection we can only guess.