

AN ACCOUNT
OF
SOME SUBTERRANEAN HABITATIONS IN
ABERDEENSHIRE.

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AMONG the most useful labours of the antiquary are certainly those which are directed to the illustration of the history and manners of our ancestors. In most countries of Europe, these researches have been conducted with eminent success by persons in general very well qualified for such investigations. Nor have such studies been neglected, either in the southern or northern parts of our island, as might be shewn from the very numerous list of English and Scottish writers on these subjects. From their successive inquiries, a great deal of new and curious information has accordingly been obtained. But the subject is as yet far from being exhausted, although a late author boasts, that he has not left any difficulty unexplained, nor any doubt unresolved, in the ancient history of Scotland. He has not, however, in several respects, been more successful than many others who have preceded him.

Attached to a certain theory, he wages perpetual war with others who oppose his favourite doctrines, some of which are evidently untenable; while they, in their turn, as obstinately maintain their own. With one, the Goths are the favoured people; with another, the Celts; while the historical records of the Romans, our best guide, and almost only authority, are thrown into the shade, or grossly perverted, to serve the purposes of the parties.

Next to the evidence of history, in which we are by no means altogether deficient, the surest foundation for establishing any opinion in regard to the early inhabitants of Scotland, is the monuments of their arts of peace or war which they have left behind them. Were these more generally and carefully examined, much greater light than we have yet seen, would soon be thrown upon our national antiquities. Many of these remain still unexplored, unknown, and unpublished, though, for a century past, we have had many authors, who either partially or generally pretend to enumerate and describe them. It was only of late that a Roman camp, of the largest size, was discovered within a few miles of Aberdeen, where their army had passed the river Dee, and which was formerly unnoticed by any writer, until an imperfect account of it was sent to Mr G. Chalmers, who has inserted it in the first volume of his *Caledonia*. Within a few miles of that camp still appear what seem to be the remains of a large town, not improbably the capital of the tribe of the Taixali, who at that time occupied this part of the island. These remains consist of some hundreds of circular walls, scattered over more than a mile in extent, of two or three feet high, and from twelve to twenty or thirty feet in diameter. But this would require, and well deserve, a drawing, and separate description. Within these few years likewise has been observed near Newton, in Aberdeenshire, a rude stone pillar, with

several lines of letters deeply engraven on it, the characters of which, though abundantly distinct, are perfectly unintelligible to several respectable scholars who have received copies of them. Besides these, are still to be seen, in various quarters of this district, many upright insulated stones, on which are engraved a variety of rude lines and figures, but, having no appearance of a cross on them, would seem to indicate an age anterior to the date of Christianity. In the course, however, of a short time, many of these have already disappeared; and, in a little while longer, from the rapid improvements of the country, many more of these monuments of antiquity will be totally obliterated. The vestiges of encampments, tumuli, barrows, and fields of battle, will be levelled by the plough; the pillars and circles of stones, already much diminished in number, will be built into walls and houses; and every memorial of past ages buried in oblivion. Would it not, then, be an object highly deserving the notice of that learned body, who are associated together for these very purposes, to use their best endeavours to prevent the total loss and destruction of our remaining national monuments of antiquity? A small sum of money might certainly be collected, sufficient to defray the expences of two or three well qualified persons, who might perambulate the whole of Scotland in the course of one or two summers, and make out correct drawings and descriptions of them, to be afterwards either published or deposited in their archives. It is supposed, that two or three active young men, fond of such pursuits, might be found voluntarily to undertake such an agreeable tour, with proper introductions, and without any other recompense. It was expected that the parochial reports of Scotland, procured by the indefatigable exertions of their laborious editor, would have rendered such a measure far less necessary. But this has by no means been the

case. The greater part of the clergy have paid much more regard to the present than the ancient state of their parishes; as the object held out to them appears to have been rather statistical and agricultural inquiries, than any thing of literary or antiquarian research.

The above observations are intended as introductory to the principal subject of this paper, which is to give an account of some very curious remains in the parishes of Auchindoir and Kildrummy, in Aberdeenshire, which have hitherto been very little noticed. These consist of a number of subterraneous habitations spread over a space of a mile or two in diameter. The situation of them has originally been a forest, as appears from many large trunks of trees still dug up there; but is now chiefly a dry moor, lying upon a bed of free-stone, with small farms and streams of water interspersed in all directions. The excavated houses are on a perfect level with the surrounding grounds; so that they are most frequently discovered by the plough striking against some of the large stones which form the roof. The only opening to them appears to have been between two large stones, placed in a sloping direction at one end, and about eighteen inches asunder, rising perhaps only a few inches above the plain, so as to be scarcely perceptible. Through this narrow opening, like the entrance to the cave of Trophonius, one must slide down in an oblique direction to the depth of five or six feet, when he comes into a large vault, which is generally about that height, upwards of thirty feet long, and from eight to nine feet wide. Such, at least, are the dimensions of most of those that have been as yet discovered; and fresh ones are discovered very frequently,—the whole number already opened up being not less than forty or fifty. The floor is smooth, as if of clay, and the sides are built of rude uncut stones, without any

cement, but so firmly and closely wedged together, that the smallest of them cannot be moved from its place by the strength of the hand. The walls also form a sort of curve, bending inwards, so as to approach very nearly to a complete arch, when over the two opposing walls are laid very large stones, of five or six feet long, by way of roof, some of them being above a ton in weight. The whole then is covered over with a few inches of earth, and all so much on a level with the ground, as to be quite invisible to any person walking over them. There is, however, one curious circumstance, by which the writer of this account detected many of them. This is a small fold or inclosure of a square form, about ten or fifteen paces each way, dug a foot or two deep, with the earth thrown outwards, which is uniformly found in a certain direction, and almost adjoining to each separate cavern. Here had probably been the *tuguria* or summer habitations of the natives, composed of turf or branches of trees, as well as a proper situation for their cattle in winter, when they were obliged to have recourse to their under ground retreats, where all their more valuable effects were deposited. No article of furniture, no utensils or instruments, either of stone or metal, have, however, been found in these buildings, in so far as can be learned, but only a quantity of wood, ashes, and charcoal, chiefly at the farther end, where there sometimes appears a small aperture in the top, as an outlet for the smoke.

Such were the habitations of the natives of this country at a very remote period; and, from the structure of these dwellings, which so much resemble those described by Tacitus in his *Germania*, along with other circumstances, it is impossible not to believe that they were of the same extraction: "Ne cæmentorum quidem apud illos aut tegularum usus, materia ad omnia utuntur informi, et

“citra speciem aut delectationem. Quædam loca diligentius
“illinunt terra, ita pura ac splendente, ut picturam ac lineamenta
“colorum imitetur. Solent et subterraneos specus aperire, eosq.
“multo insuper fimo onerant, suffugium hyemi et receptaculum
“frugibus: quia rigorem frigorum ejusmodi locis molliunt: et si
“quando hostis advenit, aperta populatur abdita autem et defossa,
“aut ignorantur, aut eo ipso fallunt, quòd quærenda sunt,” &c.
Pomponius Mela also mentions a people of the same origin, the
Agathyrsi, “qui ob sæva hyemis admodum assiduæ, demersis in
“humum sedibus, specus aut suffossa habitant.” Kirchirus like-
wise, in his “*Mundus Subterraneus*,” relates many curious parti-
culars concerning the habitations and manners of the Germans,
even of his time; and such, or somewhat similar, no doubt have
been the dwellings of many tribes of savages all over the world,
which it were tedious and unnecessary to enumerate, as described
by various authors. Many of these are yet to be found in Ireland,
and Orkney, and several other parts of Scotland; but so great a
number collected together in one place has probably never before
occurred, at least in this island.