

**PRE-HISTORIC REMAINS
OF
CAITHNESS, WITH NOTES
ON THE HUMAN REMAINS**

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Pre-Historic Remains of Caithness, with Notes on the Human Remains by Samuel Laing & Thomas H. Huxley

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SAMUEL LAING & THOMAS H. HUXLEY

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BY

o. c.
SAMUEL LAING, ESQ., M.P., F.G.S.

WITH

NOTES ON THE HUMAN REMAINS,

BY

o. c.
THOMAS H. HUXLEY, ESQ., F.R.S.,

PROFESSOR OF NATURAL HISTORY, ROYAL SCHOOL OF MINES.



WILLIAMS AND NORGATE,
14, HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN; AND
20, SOUTH FREDERICK STREET, EDINBURGH.

1866.

PRE-HISTORIC REMAINS

OF

CAITHNESS.

IN presenting to the Museum of Scottish Antiquaries the interesting series of Pre-historic remains which I have had the good fortune to discover in Caithness, I think it desirable to place on record the principal facts connected with their discovery in a more complete form than was possible in the papers on the subject, which have been read at meetings of various learned Societies. I am further induced to adopt this course by the opportunity which it affords of giving illustrations of the objects for the benefit of those who may not have seen the originals, and more especially because it enables me to present to the scientific world the valuable remarks of Professor Huxley on the crania and skeletons, accompanied by accurate drawings which have been made under his superintendence.

A few introductory remarks may be permitted in order to explain the objects with which these researches were undertaken by me during a short residence in Caithness in the course of the past autumn.

The problem of British archaeology may be thus stated. We know the two extremes of a series. The one is that of Quaternary man, whose relics have been found at Hoxne, in the drift gravels of the Ouse and Thames, the caves of

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Torquay and the Mendips, and other localities. These clearly carry back the existence of man on British soil to a period contemporary with the flint weapons of Abbeville and Amiens, and with the river and cave-men of France and Germany; when very different conditions prevailed of climate, of sea and river-level, and of configuration of sea and land. At this period Britain was probably connected with the continent; the rigour of the glacial epoch had but partially abated; the great glacial rivers still poured forth volumes of muddy water into valleys in which the loëss was deposited which has since been excavated for hundreds of feet; the reindeer lived in the south of France; and the mammoth and woolly-haired rhinoceros roamed over the plains of what is now England.

In stating this as a fact, which by the mass of concurrent testimony is now placed beyond doubt, I offer no opinion as to the absolute antiquity of this period. That is a question for authorities who, like Lyell and Prestwich, have devoted their attention to "Quaternary Geology." If they are right in supposing that none but existing causes, or rather causes of the same order as those now existing, have brought about these changes, the period required is immense. But if, as some continental geologists believe, more intense and convulsive causes have prevailed, this period may be indefinitely shortened, for if we once depart from those operations of nature of which alone we have experience, all calculation becomes conjecture, and our chronological scale may as well be written in thousands as in tens of thousands of years. However, for archæological purposes this is a matter of indifference, and in either case we start with the fact that at the most remote period yet disclosed, when man existed on the continent along with the extinct animals, he also existed in Britain.

The other extreme of the series is defined by the first dawn of history, which shows us man existing in the British Isles with a knowledge of the metals and a certain amount of

civilisation. From this point downwards archæology has so far explored the field that we can distinguish and classify an unbroken succession of the remains of the Keltic Britons; the Romans, and Romanized Britons; the Pagan and Christian Anglo-Saxons; and the Scandinavians; down to the Anglo-Norman and Mediæval periods where archæology ends.

The intermediate, or Secondary period, has, as regards the continent, been partially filled up by the result of researches into the Danish Kjökkenmöddings and Swiss Lacustrine-dwellings. The progression of a Stone, Bronze, and Iron period with different races of men, implements, and modes of sepulture, may be taken as established. In certain cases the distinctions may be a little doubtful, and the formations may, so to speak, overlap; yet on the whole there is evidence of a succession of races, and of a regular advance from rudeness to civilization and from lower to higher types of man.

In the case of the lowest Danish middens we are carried very far back in the scale both of time and civilization, and made acquainted with the race of the early Stone period who lived when the configuration of sea and land in Denmark was materially different; on a platform of fir forests which has been succeeded first by one of oak, and finally by that of beech, which alone is recorded in history; without a knowledge of the domestic animals, except the dog; and in a state of rudeness which argues little, if any, progress since the date of the quaternary men of Abbeville and Les Eyzies.

In Britain this Secondary period remains, however, in a state of great confusion. The fundamental distinction of a Stone, Bronze, and Iron period has never been either conclusively established or conclusively negatived. Every day we hear of relics which in Denmark would be assigned without hesitation to the Stone period, being found in connection with bronze and iron; and if the case rested solely on British evidence, probably most antiquarians would have been of

opinion that there was no sufficient ground for any other hypothesis than that the race found in Britain by the Romans had colonized an unoccupied country a few centuries before the dawn of history. The utter uncertainty of what I have called the Archæology of the Secondary period in Britain is sufficiently shown by the speculations respecting the most important megalithic monument which we possess—that of Stonehenge—which has been assigned by different learned antiquaries with equal ingenuity and equal lack of solid arguments, to the era of Vortigern and Arthur; to that of Phœnician worship introduced in the flourishing days of Tyre and Tarshish; or finally, to the remote antiquity of some unknown Allophylian race.

The refuse heaps which have been the means of throwing so much light on the Pre-historic periods of Denmark and Switzerland appear to afford by far the best chance of ascertaining the habits and conditions of life of the pre-historic populations; but they require, even more than the ancient tombs and dwellings, the most accurate and systematic investigation, not only to give us truth, but to escape giving us error.

The shell-mound, or midden, is of itself a formation of no particular period. I have seen many a "Kjökkenmödding" accumulating at the back door of an Orkney cottage, where limpets were largely used for bait. It must be remembered also that the same mound has frequently been used over and over again for a succession of habitations.

There are many reasons why this must be the case, such as convenience of situation, access to the shore, drainage, supply of stones for building, and a richer soil and greener pasture; all of which are afforded to the new settler by the old ruined mound. In point of fact, very many cottages in Orkney and Caithness now stand on, or immediately adjoining to, old mounds; and a slight excavation, such as a child might make in sport, might readily bring together the con-

tents of the recent and ancient middens, and place a half-penny of Queen Victoria in juxtaposition with a stone celt or flint arrow. In my own limited explorations I have seen three or four instances which have taught me the necessity of extreme caution, and of attaching no weight whatever to the discovery of any article in connection with an old mound or building, which has not been found in some original undisturbed stratum, and its situation accurately noted at the time by a competent observer. In one case, a modern metal button was thrown up by the spade amidst débris of an ancient shell-midden. On investigation it was clearly proved to have been torn off the waistcoat of one of the workmen on the preceding day, and amidst a storm of wind and rain blown into and apparently incorporated with the refuse heap. Again, a coin of Elizabeth, which is now in my possession, was found in digging the foundation of a barn in Orkney, at about a foot below the surface, in a spot closely adjoining to a mound or Picts' house, some of the débris of which are at a level several feet higher than the site of the coin; so that if this estate were thrown into a large sheep farm, and the buildings removed, a century hence this coin might have been found in a green mound of shapeless ruins, at a level distinctly below stone hammers and teeth of *Bos longifrons*.

I dwell at some length on these instances, because I am convinced that nothing but error can result from attaching any weight to the evidence of simple juxtaposition in the same mound, refuse heap, or building, without accurate observation of the whole circumstances of each discovery; and, above all, that no reliance whatever is to be placed on anything which is found within two or three feet of the surface, in soil which is recent, or which may possibly have been disturbed.

As far as researches into the shell-middens of Scotland have hitherto extended, they have done little to clear up the uncertainty of British Pre-historic Archæology. Sir John