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I.

## EXPLORATION OF A CHAMBERED CAIRN AT ACHAIDH, SPINNINGDALE, IN THE PARISH OF CREICH, SUTHERLAND.

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Westward some seven and a half miles along the northern shore of the Dornoch Firth lies the hamlet of Spinningdale. The gaunt ruin of a cotton-mill erected by Mr Dempster of Dunnichen to promote the spinning industry in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and destroyed by fire in 1809, stands in a green meadow between the road and the shore, and attracts the attention of the traveller. Turning off the main road above this ruin, and proceeding up the glen for about half a mile, one comes to a bridge across the Rhivra burn. Within the adjacent wood, at no great distance from the road, lie the remains of two large cairns, both much dilapidated. The lower of the two gives no indication of its original character, but the other, some forty yards to the north-east, shows from the upright slabs in its interior that it has been chambered. Much of it has been carted away, no doubt to build the adjacent dykes; but though no longer the impressive monument it was before a utilitarian age had reduced its dimensions, there still lingers in the neighbourhood, as evidence of its former prominence, a legend of its erection. Many hundred years ago, so runs the tale, a fell disease visited the district and took a grievous toll of its inhabitants. To the survivors its destruction became a matter of supreme moment and of no insurmountable difficulty. Everyone knew where the disease was. The scene of its ravages was only too well known. Accordingly, they formed themselves into a great circle around the infected area, gradually diminishing its diameter as they walked inward, keeping their prey before them. Just as they were converging on the centre, crowding around from all sides, the disease, in the form of a small animal, vanished underground. To make sure that it would have no opportunity of



reappearing in their midst, they raised this great cairn over the spot where it had disappeared.

If you trace the course of the Rhivra burn upwards through the wood, by a path which, crossing and recrossing the stream, discovers its cascades and deep fern-fringed pools, you will come out on the moorland about half a mile to the east of the cairn whose excavation I am going to describe. It is known, I am told, as the cairn of the Red Dog—that faithful animal having hitherto been credited with the protection of his master's remains. You will find it close beside the road at the edge of the fir-wood below the crofts at Achaidh. On first observation, it appeared as a mass of boulders, each such as a man could easily lift. It was some 8 feet in height and about 50 feet to 53 feet in diameter. Like most cairns one meets, it had already been the object of some untutored archæologist's curiosity, who at various points had made excavations in it, but had failed to find the chamber in the interior. It was observed that it was not circular and that there were indications of four horns projecting approximately E.N.E. and S.E. and W.S.W. and N.W. for a distance of some 16 feet, with a width of about 20 feet at their base; giving the cairn the appearance shown on the ground-plan, fig. 1. A considerable depth of humus, accumulated largely from the pine needles, covers the stones on the outer edge, and this would need to be removed before the plan could be definitely ascertained. Unfortunately the time at my disposal did not enable me to do this. It was not originally my intention to excavate, but my attention was arrested by a single large stone lying partially exposed towards the south side of the cairn, and resembling in form and dimensions the lintel stones of the horned cairns I had elsewhere examined at Skelpick and Rhinavie in Strathnaver. Considering that this stone gave the clue to the character of the cairn, a clearing was made in rear of it, and the existence of the chamber was at once made manifest.

Clearing away a small pile of boulders recently erected on the top of the cairn, the original apex of the domed roof was reached. A number of large flat slabs some 2 to 3 feet in length lay radiating from a