

THE FORT ON THE CRONK-HOWE-MOOAR.

In the "Chronicon Manniæ," under the year 1249, it is recorded that Reginald, Olaf's son, King of Man, was slain on May 30th by the Knight Ivar, "in a meadow near the Church of the Holy Trinity at Rushen."* It is also stated that his body was taken for burial to Rushen Abbey—a very natural and probable event, as Reginald was a Christian King, and Rushen Abbey was the chief ecclesiastical establishment in the Island and the burial place of several previous Kings of Man.



FIG. 28.—Distant view of the Cronk-Howe-Mooar, from the South-East.

But local tradition in the south of the Island has it that Reginald was buried in his armour in a great tumulus-like mound near Port Erin. This is the mound known to English visitors as "the Fairy Hill" (fig. 28). It is marked as "Cronk Mooar" on the Ordnance Maps, but most of the natives living around call it "Cronk-y-mur," which is nearer to what there is reason to believe is the ancient Manks name meaning Hill of the

* *Chronica regum Manniæ et insularum*—Munch's and Goss's translation (Manx Society, 1874), Vol. I., p. 103. The next sentence reads:—"He was buried in the Church of St. Mary of Rushen."

Fort. The second word, which is the Manks article "of the," would seem to have become confused by a Norse-speaking people with their own word "Howe," after which the third word "Mur," a fort, was taken to represent the Manks adjective "mooar," big. And in this corrupted form the name "Cronk-Howe-Mooar" has come down to us from the period of the Norse occupation of Man. Cronk and Howe being the Celtic and Norse respectively for "hill," the name has suggested that the successive early invaders had each called the mound "hill" in their own tongue and the later Manks, adopting both these, have added the final term, making the whole the "large-hill-hill" or, according to another interpretation, the "hill-hill-in-the-marsh." The surrounding meadows are still marshy, and were, no doubt, more so in earlier times.

The great mound lying thus on the low ground behind Port Erin and in a line between Fleshwick and Port St. Mary Bays—and about one mile from each—is a conspicuous object from all directions. The suddenness with which it rises from the level field (fig. 29) and its regularity of shape, with circular base and conical form, suggest that the whole mound is artificial, and this, along with or apart from the tradition of Reginald's burial, has caused many archæologists visiting the place to regard it as being probably a tumulus, and to compare it with the celebrated Maes-Howe in the Orkneys. For example, Mr. Arthur Moore, the late speaker of the House of Keys, author of the "History of the Isle of Man," refers to this similarity to Maes-Howe, and urges that the Cronk-Howe-Mooar should be investigated. The Geological Survey Memoir (p. 415) mentions it as a ridge of late-glacial gravel that has been artificially shaped. The view has also been pretty generally held by visiting Antiquaries that the top of the mound, whether natural or artificial, had been subsequently used as a fort and shaped for that purpose; and, finally, an obvious trench or moat encircles the base.

There were thus various possibilities, and two or three

rival theories, in connection with the mound, and for nearly thirty years we have been anxious to dig into the top and the base of the hill and set these doubts at rest. It has, however, been impossible, on account of the strong feeling locally against examining or interfering in any way with any prehistoric monuments, to obtain the necessary permission from both owner and tenant until in the winter of 1912, when fortunately* we were enabled, partially at least, to carry out our intentions— with the following results :—

The mound is approximately 30 ft. in height and about 420 ft. in circumference ; and the distance from the edge of

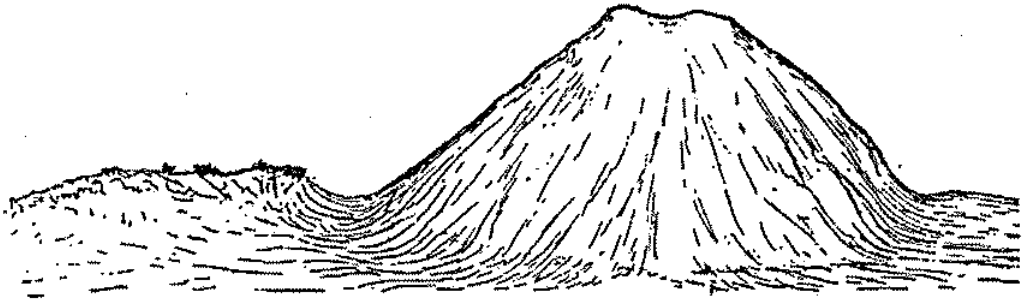


FIG. 29. Sketch of the Cronk-Howe-Moat, from the Moat, at the North side.

the base to the centre is therefore about 70 ft. The shallow moat encircling the mound is on the average 20 ft. across. The irregular top of the hill measures about 40 ft. by 30 ft. (S.S.W. to N.N.E.), and has a depressed central area of 30 ft. by 25 ft., surrounded by raised edges, or earthen ramparts, 7 ft. or 8 ft. in height.

The trench that we cut into the outside of the hill from the base started at the S.S.W. point (which we chose because of the uniform steepness of the slope and the apparently undisturbed base), and led inwards towards the centre. About 2 yds. in we came upon a well-marked bed of sand 2 ft. from the floor and 6 in. in thickness. The rest of the section was

* The mound is now (1914) incorporated in the Port Erin golf links, and the top has been levelled to form a "teeing" ground.

ordinary brown earth, containing many fragments of stones—Manx slate and others, mostly angular. We then took a step upwards and continued the excavation on the top of this layer of sand for another couple of yards, when we came upon a well-marked layer of clay about 3 ft. from the floor crossing in fact the middle of our section. The rest of the section was as before. Both the sand and the clay thinned off and died away towards the outside of the hill, and seemed to be getting thicker as they ran inwards. We then raised our level again to the top of the clay and continued in for another 2 yds., and by this time we had got well into a bed of loose gravel, occupying the end of our tunnel about 18 in. from the floor. The stones in this gravel were rounded pebbles of various sizes up to an inch and a half in diameter, but many smaller, all obviously water-worn. We again raised the level of our excavation to a couple of feet above the layer of gravel, and continued in for another 3 yds., and during the greater part of this distance we had two well-marked bands of clay, which approached each other and thinned out, joined, and then disappeared towards the surface of the hill as seen on the sides of our trench, and seemed to be thickening and diverging still further as they ran inwards to the centre of the mound. We had now worked about 27 ft. horizontally inwards, and the floor of our trench had gone up about 6 ft. from the base of the hill; so we may conclude that we had sampled the structure of the hill for certainly more than one-third and probably nearly one-half of the distance horizontally to the centre, and from its base up to about half its height—and throughout, as far as we had seen, the sections showed a natural stratified surface of sand, gravel, clay, and layers of earth and stones (known to geologists as “Late-Glacial Flood Gravels”*), some slightly curved and lenticular, but all evidently bedded and having

* See Lamplugh, *The Geology of the Isle of Man—Memoirs of the Geological Survey*, 1903, pp. 371, 472.

every appearance of having been naturally deposited by floods. There seemed no reason to believe that any other part of the major portion of the hill would show any different structure, so we next turned our attention to the artificial-looking earthworks on the summit, and first cut a trench 24 ft. long from east to west, and 6 ft. deep, through the raised edge or rampart on the western side. The section showed a well-marked core of grey clay under the surface soil and over the undisturbed bed of stony earth forming the top of the hill, and it seems probable that this wall of clay has been brought up from the moat, or from some other part of the surrounding marsh to steepen and stiffen the top edge of the hill. Another smaller trench through the opposite rampart, on the eastern side, showed much the same structure.

The depression in the centre of the top now engaged our attention. One small conical knob of stone was seen sticking up for a few inches from the grass (see fig. 30), and on digging down along its inner edge it was found, as we had expected, that this knob was the top of a large stone, about 4 ft. high, standing on end and forming part of a wall, which we then traced east and west for 18 ft. This southern wall, or rather revetment, for it was merely a stone facing on the inner side of the earthen ramparts, was rudely built of unshaped stones, some of which were long slabs of the local metamorphic rock, and others were water-worn boulders of glacial origin. The largest stones were placed upright and the smaller ones filled in between in rough courses. The photograph (fig. 30) gives such a distinct representation of this wall that any further description is unnecessary. The eastern wall, at right angles to this, measured 10 ft. 3 in. in length, and consisted of about seven larger stones along the base with about six courses of stones making a height of 3 to 4 ft. We then traced and exposed a similar wall on the north side and one on the west broken down in its central part—where there may possibly

have been a gap, or step, forming an entrance. In short, we excavated a rectangular area of about 18 ft. by 10 ft., surrounded by the revetment wall and extending to about 4 ft. below the present surface of the ground—evidently the inside of a small fort or primitive defensive work on the summit of this strongly-placed mound in the marsh.



FIG. 30.—Southern Wall of small Fort on top of the Cronk-Howe-Moor.

From the floor-level inside the wall it is impossible to see over the surrounding earthen ramparts, so the defence of the hill-top was no doubt carried on from the shelf of level ground outside and above the wall, with the rampart rising still for a few feet in front, and giving good protection. The walled

area in the centre may have been roofed over with branches and turf as a shelter and store ; and it is not difficult to imagine that in the days of bows and arrows, javelins and swords, a party of about twenty or thirty fighting men might hold the little hill-fort indefinitely while raiding the surrounding country for their supplies. It is not large enough to be regarded as a place of refuge for the country side in time of invasion, but might well be a position seized and fortified by a small party of Norse raiders who were cut off, had lost their ship, or were otherwise prevented from returning north for the winter. It is of course possible that the fort may originally have been formed at a still earlier period, in Neolithic or Bronze times, and had then been re-occupied by the Norsemen, but we have no direct evidence of such earlier occupation.

The only object we found in the digging that could give any clue to the period and the people of the little fort was a small implement (fig. 31) or weapon of iron and wood which was found on the floor about 3 ft. below the present surface close to the base of the eastern wall.

The entire length of the implement is 91 mm. (of which the iron part is 60 mm. and the wooden handle 31 mm.) and its greatest breadth 20 mm. The thickness of the iron part close to the handle is 15 mm., and its average thickness in the narrower blade-like part is 8 mm. The wooden handle varies in diameter from 8 to 9 mm. A "tang" of metal projects for something less than 20 mm. into the handle, and is about 5 mm. in diameter at its base, leaving only a thin shell of wood (a little over 1 mm. in thickness) at that point. The wood is stained with iron rust, and probably a good deal of its thickness has decayed away. The surface exposed is marked by very fine, closely-placed, and beautifully parallel lines giving it a silky appearance. It seems to be from a conifer, and is possibly yew.

The metal portion of the implement had, close to its free

end, a small rounded boss, or separate scale-like piece of metal, which became detached in cleaning. This is of rudely circular form and measures 18 mm. in the longest diameter and 16 mm. in the shortest; possibly, as there are several well-marked angles in the periphery, it was originally octagonal in form. There are traces of a cavity between this detached piece and the rest of the metal, and of one or possibly

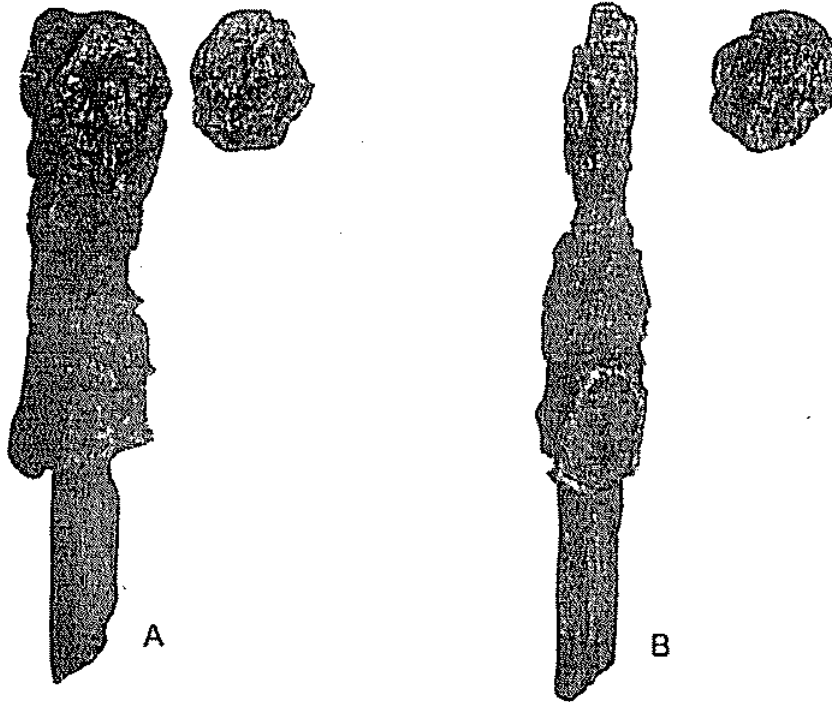


FIG. 31.—Iron and wood object from floor of Fort. A, broader face, and B, narrower edge; with both surfaces of detached boss. From photographs.

two rivets or pegs in the centre. On the outside of the scale-like detached piece there is, near one edge and therefore not over where the rivets were attached, a depressed pentagonal area about 4 mm. across. On the other side of the implement at this free end, just opposite where the detached scale has come off, there is a crack or fissure running for about 10 mm., and 1 mm. across at its widest, which may indicate the place of junction of a second boss.

At the opposite end of the iron, close to where the handle is attached, there is on one edge a well-marked flattened area, 15 mm. in greatest length and 11 mm. across at the widest, slightly depressed in the centre to the extent of about 1 mm. at most, which may indicate where another piece of metal has been attached. The rest of the surface is irregularly worn and rusty. Its general shape one might describe as cylindrical or slightly conical in its lower half next to the handle, and flattened or blade-like in the upper half. It might be taken for a broken head of a javelin or small spear, were it not for the detached boss, which had apparently been fastened to one side of the blade-like part.

The shape and appearance of the object and of the detached boss are well seen in fig. 31, reproduced from photographs of the wider and the narrower faces. The photographs were submitted to Prof. Oscar Montelius, of Stockholm, who writes that although the object is so corroded with rust that it is difficult to be certain, he thinks it is probably a broken iron arrow-head, and adds :—" We have such arrow-heads with a tang to be inserted in the wooden shaft ; they date from the Viking period."

We have made, then, in all, a complete excavation of the artificial works on the top of the " Cronk-y-Mur," a deep trench for 30 ft. up the south side of the hill, two sections east and west through the earthen ramparts, and two trial pits in the moat. The digging occupied the first week of 1912, and at the conclusion of the work, in accordance with the agreement made with the owner, the earth and stones were filled in again, and the turf restored. But there need be no doubts in future as to the natural origin and the human use of the mound, and we may give the following as a brief statement of what our investigation showed :—

1. The greater part of the hill is a natural mound of stratified sand and gravel with thin layers of grey

clay. It is probably to be regarded as part of a small " esker " or kame of fluvio-glacial origin, piled up by the torrential floods which must have swept over the Isle of Man during the final melting of the confluent glaciers in late glacial or early post-glacial times.

2. We found no evidence of any burials or internal chambers in that part of the mound which we were able to examine in the limited opportunity afforded us.

3. The base of the mound may have been shaped to some extent by those who used it as a fort, and it has certainly been surrounded by a moat which on the east side separates the hill from an elongated ridge of sand and gravel, of which the mound was originally a partly-detached prolongation.

4. The top of the hill has also been shaped artificially and converted into a small fort,* surrounded by earthen ramparts strengthened by a rudely-built stone revetment, enclosing a sunken quadrangular area about 18 ft. by 10 ft. This may originally have been roofed in as a shelter, and as it is too small to have served as a place of refuge for many people, the suggestion is made that it may have been a position with natural advantages seized and fortified by a small body of Norsemen wrecked, storm-stayed, or otherwise isolated on the Isle of Man at the time of the Viking raids in the ninth and tenth centuries.†

* In Allcroft's " Earthworks of England " (Macmillan, 1908) a number of small early Norman fortresses are described from different parts of England—all built on mounds and surrounded by a ditch. Mrs. Armitage in " The Early Norman Castles of the British Isles " (Murray, 1912) shows that it was the Norsemen or Normans who introduced little forts on moated hillocks into France, and later into England after the Conquest. (See also the description of the small moated " Castle-mound " at Tomen in Montgomeryshire, 30 ft. high, with a diameter at the top of 40 ft., and superficially very similar to our Port Erin fort, given in Report of Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Wales, 1911.)

† Dudo of St. Quentin speaks of the Vikings " fortifying themselves, after the manner of a castrum by heaping up earth-banks drawn round themselves." (Armitage loc. cit., p. 56).