

AN ACCOUNT

OF SOME

SCULPTURED PILLARS IN THE NORTHERN PART OF SCOTLAND.

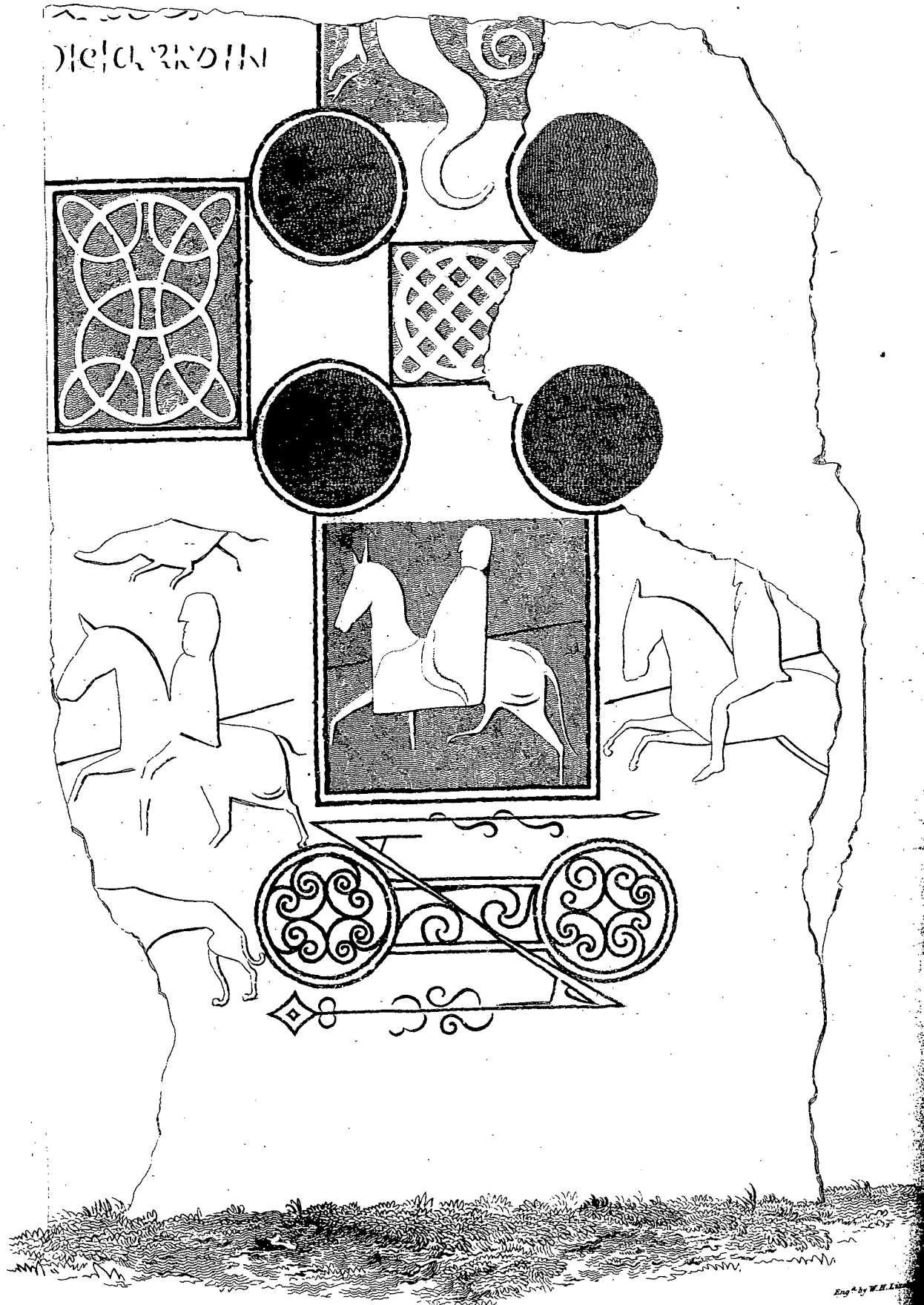
ADDRESSED TO THE EDINBURGH SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES.

By John Stuart of Inchbreck, Lit. Gr. P. Aberdeen.

THE inhabitants of every country, even of the most rude and barbarous, appear to have been possessed with a strong desire of perpetuating the memory of every remarkable event connected with their history. To commemorate those events, public monuments of some sort or other were contrived, according to the genius and state of civilization of the people. From the shapeless pillar, the cairn or barrow of earlier periods, we find a regular gradation of such memorials, up to the most magnificent sculptured structures of Athens or of Rome. Of these monuments, the narrow and contracted kingdom of Scotland appears to have possessed its full proportion, and many of them of such antiquity, as to baffle the researches of our most illustrious scholars to trace their origin, or to explain the devices engraven upon them. This observation is peculiarly applicable to those which belong to the era prior to the introduction of Christianity; for the labours of



Stone at Fordun



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Fig. 1.

Maiden Stone on Bennochie

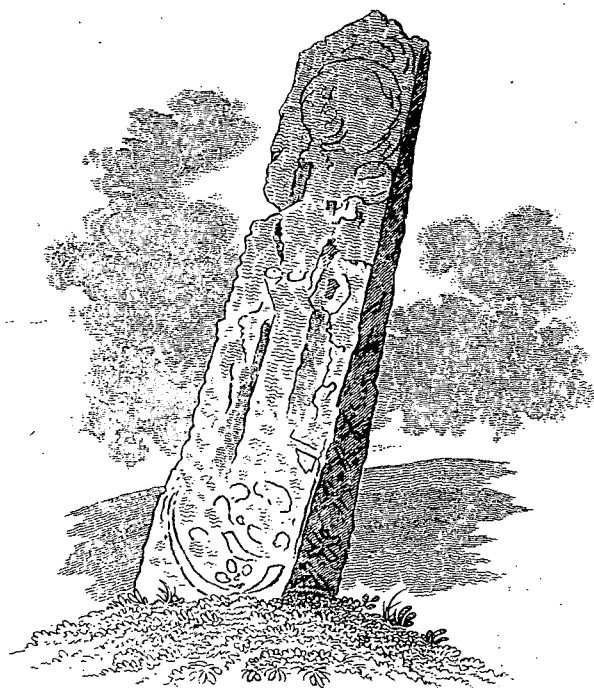
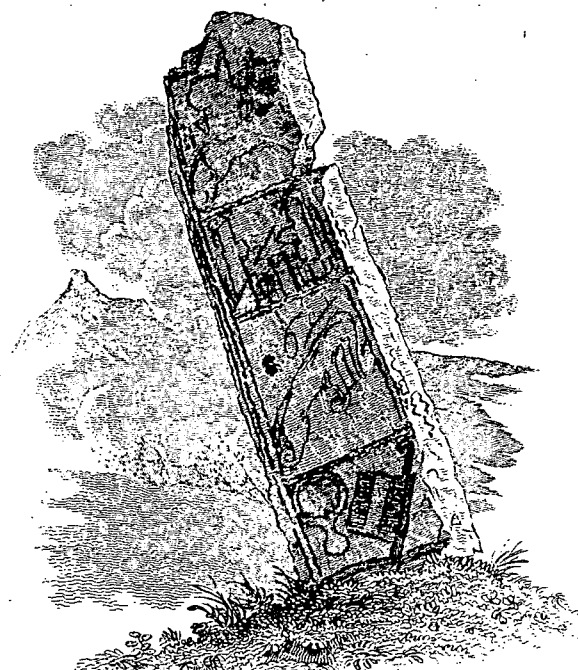


Fig. 2.



Drawn by J. Skene Esq.

Fig. 3.

Stone at Kinnellar



Scale of feet

Fig. 4.

Stone at Dyce



Scale of feet

Engd by W.H. Lizars

our most learned antiquaries have been chiefly confined to such as, along with the figure of the cross, contain such sculptures as frequently serve to point out, not only the age, but the very event that they were intended to commemorate. Yet, of both these kinds, although many are irrecoverably lost, there are still a considerable number which have escaped the notice of the numerous authors who have treated of these subjects, and which must soon share the same fate, if they are much longer neglected. The object of this paper is, therefore, to point out and describe some of those which appear most worthy of notice.

In the *first* place, it may be observed, that, upon many of our most ancient stone pillars, both antecedent to, and after the age of Christianity, there appear certain *similar* emblematical or hieroglyphical figures, the meaning of which (for they certainly had some meaning) it seems extremely difficult, if not impossible, to explain. Of those, the most frequent and remarkable is, one or two circles of two or three inches in diameter, deeply sculptured on the face of the stone. Sometimes the two circles are so joined and connected together, as to have the appearance of a pair of eyes or spectacles; and, in this case, one of the circles is occasionally imperfect, as in the stone at Newton, to be afterwards noticed. There also are sometimes various ornamental figures inscribed within the circles. Of these circular figures, one is to be seen on an ancient monument in the church-yard of Kinnellar in Aberdeenshire,—one in the neighbouring church-yard of Dyce,—one at the house of Dunichen in Forfarshire,—and one very much ornamented in the stone at Fordun, of which a drawing is herewith presented to the Society. On the stone at Kinnellar, where there is no cross, the larger circle contains within it three smaller ones; and upon that often published near Chapel of

Plate vi. Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Plate v.

Plate vi. Fig. 3.

Pl. vi. Fig. 1. Garioch, and called the Maiden Stone, which has a cross on the back of it, the form is that of an antique mirror having a handle attached to it.

Another emblem very frequently found on these ancient pillars, intended to commemorate some remarkable event, is a figure of three straight lines passing through the body of the sculpture. It is to be seen passing between the two circles on the stone at Fordun, and also of a form, and in a manner exactly similar, on

Pl. vi. Fig. 4. that at Dyce; also on one of the stones at Newton, where it passes through the centre of the body of a large serpent, which is an emblem likewise very frequently observed on such monuments.

Pl. ix. Fig. 3. There is also often to be seen on them a figure like a crescent, variously ornamented, as in fig. 3 and 4 of plate vi. and sometimes also an instrument resembling a comb for the hair, as on that of Dunichen.

What may have been intended by these symbols, so often repeated, on upright stones erected on different occasions, and at a great distance from each other, I shall not pretend even to conjecture, much less to explain; but I must farther declare it as my firm persuasion, that they were not employed merely as ornaments, but to express some latent meaning, at that time probably well known, though, in the lapse of ages, now totally lost and forgotten. In the absence of written characters, which were not generally introduced at the period of these sculptures, they certainly served to record some particulars of the event which they were meant to commemorate, though now unfortunately not intelligible.

As to written characters inscribed upon ancient monumental stones found in this country, there are scarcely any known to exist, except those belonging obviously to the Roman period, or

perhaps a few Runic letters occasionally met with on some of them. On the copy of the Fordun stone herewith sent, will be found what appear to be the remains of some alphabetic writing, Plate v. but so entirely defaced, that not a single letter is now distinctly legible. The only example of the contrary, that is, of letters neither Roman nor Runic, which are very clearly marked, is to be seen on one of the granite pillars at Newton, in Aberdeenshire, Plate ix. Fig. 1. where the inscription is very deeply engraven, and is undoubtedly of very remote antiquity; at least, nothing in any way similar has ever occurred to my observation. The stone is extremely rude in its form; nor is there upon it any attempt at ornament whatever. An exact copy of it is also herewith sent for the examination of the Society, along with a fac-simile of the sculptures upon Fig. 3. another stone placed beside it, though they are supposed to have had no original connection with each other. The inscription has already been submitted to several eminent antiquaries, but no one has been able to decypher or explain it. A small and inaccurate representation of it was also published in Sir Richard Phillips' Monthly Magazine some years since. A more exact one, with the letters drawn of the same size and form as the original, was afterwards sent him; but he declined publishing it, and it was afterwards lost by him. The late General Vallancey, the eminent Irish antiquary, then very old, to whom a copy was also sent, pretended to have read the two first words, "*Gylf Gomarra,*" but professed to be unable to proceed any farther. As it must belong to some of the northern languages, I have had some thoughts of transmitting it to Copenhagen or Stockholm, but have hitherto delayed doing so, from being unacquainted with any literary character in either of those places, to whom I might address it. Should the Society still think it deserving of being engraved,

copies of it might be circulated over the north of Europe, where there is the best chance of its being understood and explained.

What I have hitherto written is only intended as introductory to the drawing and description of a very singular monument never as yet published, which has been lately discovered at the parish church of Fordun, in Mearns, celebrated in our early history as the residence of St Palladius, to whom it was dedicated, and whose remains were deposited there in a shrine of silver, which continued to draw a great concourse of pilgrims up to the period of the Reformation. It was first observed upon taking down the old church, for the purpose of rebuilding it, about thirty or forty years since. It had been placed horizontally as a base for the pulpit to rest on, and was considered as of so little consequence, as to be thrown aside for many years into the old Chapel of St Palladius hard by. It was, however, of late more carefully examined by the clergyman, Dr Leslie, who, having taken the trouble of getting it thoroughly cleared of the earth and moss adhering to it, found that it contained various figures deeply and not inelegantly engraved on it. I examined it in August last; and esteeming it highly curious, and of undoubted antiquity, the church having been probably the very oldest in the county,* prevailed on Mr Spencer, the schoolmaster, to make a drawing of it, which he has performed in the most spirited and accurate manner. The material is a very coarse freestone, being five feet one inch in length, by two feet eleven inches broad. The bottom part of it, consisting of rather more than a foot, is

* It is certain that, about 300 years since, a new oak roof was placed on it by *Sibbald of Kair*, as a punishment imposed on him by the clergy for some sacrilegious conduct; part of which was found perfectly fresh and sound when the church was last rebuilt.

left rough without any sculpture, for the obvious purpose of fixing it upright in the ground, in which position it had originally been placed. The thickness is fully four inches. The back part also has nothing engraved on it. It will be seen from the drawing that a considerable portion of the right side has been broken off; but this is of the less consequence, as it most probably contained ornaments exactly similar to those on the left. The black lines are deeply cut into the stone, while the shaded parts are hewn off its surface, leaving the inclosed figures in a sort of relief. The four black circles are holes very neatly cut quite through the stone; but for what purpose they were intended cannot possibly be discovered, as nothing similar has ever been observed upon such monuments.

On the top there is the appearance of some animal resembling a serpent, and on the left side the remains of some written characters, so entirely defaced as to be perfectly illegible, and which may have been continued upon the right side, now entirely broken off. Under these have been three squares filled with very pretty tracery, the first and third probably similar, the last being wanting, while the centre one in the middle of the four holes is of a different form, but equally well executed. The centre compartment appears to contain the principal figure of the groupe, being placed in a separate square, and represents a warrior on horseback, with a spear in his hand. On either side is seen another horseman with a spear in the same attitude, but who appear, in dress and otherwise, to be of inferior rank to the chief figure. Above the horseman on the left is seen the figure of some wild animal, but so rudely drawn that it cannot be distinguished. Below, on the left, are distinctly seen the hinder parts of the body of a large dog; and opposite, a very fine representation of the

two circles formerly mentioned, joined together like a pair of eyes or spectacles, and filled with ornamental carving. And, last of all, through the centre passes the connecting line of the three before noticed, the upper line terminating in a point like a spear, while the under one is somewhat different.

Such is this lately discovered monument of antiquity, which most probably bore a reference to some important public event that had then recently occurred. In this situation, without any farther light, or even tradition, to lead to a particular explanation, it is only from conjecture that such can be obtained; and, if a probable one can be found, it is all that, in a question of this sort, could be looked for. I have accordingly formed an opinion on the subject, which, with much deference, and distrust of my own judgment, I now beg leave to communicate to this learned Society. I suppose, then—for it is merely supposition—that the sculpture on this stone may refer to the murder of King Kenneth the Third, in the year 994, as related by all our ancient historians. Fordun, the oldest, who was born at, or resided in, this very place, says that, while hunting, the King was decoyed by Finelè the daughter of Cruchnè, Earl or Maormor of Angus, whose only son had been justly condemned to death by the king, into her castle of Fothircarne, in the vicinity of Fordun, where he was killed by arrows shot from a statue described by him as constructed in a manner by much too ingenious for that early period. Upon this foundation Hector Boece has improved, as usual, by telling us that the statue was a resemblance of Kenneth himself, made of brass, and holding in his hand a golden apple, ornamented with six different kinds of precious stones, which he enumerates—a piece of jewellery not altogether suitable to the state of the arts at that time in Scotland. On laying

hold of this apple, the machine discharged its darts or arrows, by which the King was killed. John Major and Bishop Leslie concur in repeating the same improbable tale, though not with the minuteness of Mr Boece. Leslie, however, particularly mentions that, when this accident happened, the King was returning from Fordun, where he had been on a pilgrimage to visit the sepulchre and relics of St Palladius, whom he held in great veneration. But the authority, perhaps, most to be depended on, is that of the honest monk Andrew of Winton, who simply says that the King was attacked and killed, while riding near Fettercairn, by some of his own courtiers, instigated by Fenella, in revenge for the loss of her son. Buchanan, though he too frequently follows Boece as his guide, found this tale of his too improbable to be believed; for, after telling the story as related by that author and by John Major, he observes, that it appears to him very incredible. For it is not probable, says he, that in the extremity of Britain, after the decline of the fine arts among other nations, any statue could have been so ingeniously contrived, although John Major relates that Edmund, the son of Eldred, which is equally a fable, was killed in the same manner. Nor can I easily persuade myself, he observes, that there were at that time in Scotland so many jewels as Boece bestows upon this single lady. I, therefore, he proceeds, much more readily acquiesce in the opinion of Winton and others, who write that the King was waylaid and killed by some horsemen placed on purpose by Fenella.

Such is the opinion that I have formed of the occasion of erecting this monument, which, I think, is at least not altogether improbable. Perhaps something more satisfactory may

be offered by other members of the Society. In the meantime, I shall briefly state my reasons for this explanation of it. In the *first* place, then, the engraving on the stone appears to be of the antiquity required; nor do I know of any other event connected with this part of Scotland, and recorded in our early history, that could have given occasion for erecting such a memorial of it. In the next place, the figures evidently refer to some similar transaction. The scene appears to be a hunting match, where the principal figure in the middle may be supposed to represent the King, and the two other figures on horseback his murderers. The mutilated figure below is plainly a greyhound, and the animal above is either another, or the creature hunted, while that at the top, if it really represents a serpent, may allude to the art and cunning of Fenella (or Findlay) in decoying the King to her castle, or waylaying him on his route. Then the place where the murder was committed is acknowledged to be near Fettercairn, within five miles of Fordun, from whence the King was returning, after visiting the shrine of Palladius; and nothing can appear more probable than that any memorial intended to commemorate such a melancholy occurrence should be erected at Fordun hard by, which was, besides, esteemed a very sacred place, and resorted to by multitudes of pilgrims from all parts of Scotland. As to Fenella's Castle, we are told that it was levelled with the ground, as it still remains, while she herself escaped; and the body of the King was carried to Iona for interment. Why the stone should have been afterwards placed under the pulpit of that church, which, when pulled down, was at least several hundred years old, seems more difficult to be accounted for, unless it had been deposited there for its better pre-

servation to future ages; or that the family of Fenella, one of the most powerful in the country, should, at an after period, have had so much influence as to have caused it to be removed thither, that the memory of the whole transaction might, if possible, be buried in oblivion.