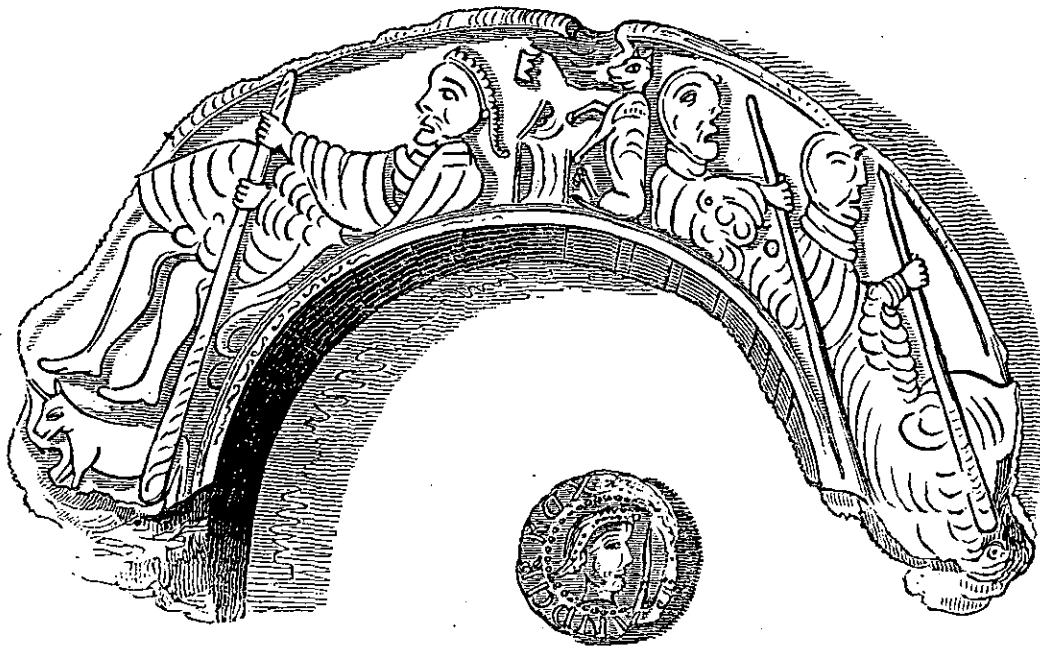


XVIII.—OBSERVATIONS on FORTEVIOT, *the Site of the Ancient Capital of Scotland,*

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[*Read to the Society January 23, 1832.*]



HAVING had occasion lately to visit some of the remains of antiquity in Strathearn, generally ascribed to the Picts, I was led to consult the few authorities we possess on this subject, with a view to ascertain the accuracy of the traditions relating to them; and these investigations have led to the remarks which I now take the liberty of submitting to this Society.

There are few traditions which have obtained more universal belief than that, at some unknown period, Abernethy was the metropolis of the Pictish dominions. This fact has been confidently stated by our earlier Scottish historians, and repeated again and again by an innumerable host of imitators and followers.

Our later antiquaries, too, have very generally fallen into this error; and by one writer we even find it made the subject of an instructive moral reflection, "that of the extensive capital of the once powerful nation of the Picts there remains now not a vestige saving a single tower." As to the use or object of this tower, however, being equally destitute of a roof and a door-way, these imaginative writers have been somewhat puzzled. By some it is supposed to have been the tomb of the Pictish kings; by others either the steeple of their church, or the "point from which the Pictish Monarch frequently enjoyed the beautiful and varied prospect which extended on all sides around him."

I need scarcely say, that the tradition of there having existed at Abernethy an extensive metropolis, is as inconsistent with the state of civilization to which Scotland had at that time reached, as it is unsupported by our older and more authentic chronicles. In fact, the whole story is a mere dream of the fabulous historians, and must take its place among those numerous fables which own Hector Boece as their parent.

There is no mention whatever, either in the earlier and more authentic historians, as Fordun, or in the old chronicles, of Abernethy having been at any time a metropolis, or even an occasional royal residence of the Pictish kings.

Indeed the only chronicle in which the name of Abernethy occurs at all is the Pictish Chronicle, which is of great antiquity; and there we find Necton, a king of the Picts who reigned about the year 470, described as founding a church at Abernethy, and dedicating it, along with the surrounding territory, to God and St. Brigid.<sup>1</sup>

This is further corroborated by Fordun, who gives the following account of the foundation of the church there, and quotes an ancient chronicle of Abernethy in support of it: "Isti quoque regi Brudeo successit Garnard filius Dompnach sive Makdompnach, qui fundavit et ædificavit ecclesiam collegiatam de Abernethy. Postquam illuc introduxit beatus Patricius Sanctam Brigidam, sicut in quadam chronica ecclesie de Abirnethy reperimus, cum suis novem vir-

<sup>1</sup> Pictish Chron. "Secundo anno immolavit Nectonius Aburnethige Deo et Sanctæ Brigidæ, presenti Dairlugtach, quæ cantavit alleluja super istam hostiam; optulit igitur Nectonius magnus filius Wirp, rex omnium provinciarum Pictorum, Apurnethige Sanctæ Brigidæ usque ad diem judicii cum suis finibus quæ positæ sunt a lapide in Apurfeirt usque ad lapidem juxta Cairfuill, id est, Lethfoss, et inde in altum usque ad Athan."

These boundaries, which retain their names to this day, include the village of Abernethy, and the surrounding territory to the distance of a mile and a half or two miles on every side.

ginibus in Scotiam: et obtulit Deo et beatæ Mariæ et beatæ Brigidæ et virginibus suis, omnes terras et decimas quas Prior et canonici habent ex antiquo." Thus precluding the possibility of Abernethy having been a metropolis after that date.

Having thus disposed of the common tradition regarding the site of the ancient capital of the Picts, it may perhaps afford some interest to endeavour to ascertain where the residence of their kings really was. Before commencing this inquiry, however, it will be necessary to make a few observations on the nature of the Pictish government.

On looking at the line of the Pictish kings, as contained in our ancient chronicles, there is one great peculiarity, which cannot fail of striking every one, namely, that hereditary succession by the male line appears to have been, even as far down as the ninth century, wholly unknown to them. We occasionally see one brother succeeding another, but in no one instance do we find a king succeeded by his son. Taking this fact in connection with the statement of Bede, who mentions as a remarkable circumstance, that whenever the succession to the Pictish throne came into doubt, those most nearly related to the last king by the female line were called to the throne, it would appear that there existed among the Picts a principle of succession to the throne differing from that of hereditary succession either by the male or female line, but that this principle was not so definite as to be at all times free from dispute. The only principle of succession which could have existed in these circumstances must have been that of election, although in all probability confined in its range to a certain class of individuals.

In order, however, to ascertain to what particular class of individuals this election was confined, we must look to the state of society among the early Picts.

It is a fact now admitted by all writers on Scottish history, that the Picts were the same people with the Caledonians. Now Ptolemy informs us that the Caledonians were divided into various large tribes, who in all probability, in accordance with the patriarchal system which exists among all people in the early stages of civilization, were governed by their respective hereditary chiefs; and it appears from Adomnan that there was a *nobile genus* or noble race among the Picts, in contradistinction to the *plebeii* or common people.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Fordun, iv. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Quendam de nobili Pictorum genere. Adom. ii. 11. Illo in tempore quo Sanctus Columba in Pictorum provincia per aliquot demorabatur dies, quidam cum tota plebeius familia. Adom. ii. 12.

Viewing these facts, then, in connection with the description given by Tacitus of the election of Galgacus by the Caledonians to oppose the invasion of Agricola,<sup>4</sup> it appears perfectly plain that there was at first no hereditary line of sovereigns among the Picts, but that one of these chiefs alone could be elected monarch; and that when this election was disputed, the one of the competitors who was most nearly connected with the last monarch was called to the throne, and this connection, it would appear, was generally by the female line.

After some time, however, the power and talent of some chief would enable him to change the principle of election into that of hereditary succession; and this appears to have been finally accomplished by Constantin the son of Fergus, who ascended the Pictish throne towards the end of the eighth century, and in whose family the monarchy remained for some time.

On the death of Ewen, the last king of this line, there succeeded a short period of anarchy and civil wars, until at length the celebrated Kenneth M'Alpin succeeded in re-establishing the hereditary succession in his own family in 843.

Previously, then, to the introduction of hereditary succession among the Picts, when they had not been as yet civilized, and were still unacquainted with commerce and manufactures,—when their agricultural knowledge was rude, and their occupations still continued to be war and hunting,—large towns would be unknown to them, and their capital would be merely the palace of the Pictish monarch, and would vary in situation according to the territory of the tribe of which that monarch was hereditary chief. After the establishment of hereditary succession, however, the residence of the chief in whose family that succession was perpetuated would then for the first time become the permanent residence of the Pictish monarchs, and capital of the whole nation.

Keeping these facts, then, in view, we must now turn to the Irish annalists, the earliest and most authentic sources of our history.

In Tighernac, the most ancient of these, we find that, previously to the establishment of hereditary succession to the throne in the family of Constantin, two of the Pictish monarchs are styled indiscriminately *Reges Pictorum* and *Reges Fortren*. This is exactly in accordance with the practice of the Celtic annalists, who frequently use the name of the capital town for that of the territory. Thus the kings of Ireland are frequently styled kings of Tara, those of Ulster kings of Eamania or Armagh, and in the *Laws of Howel dha* the king of England is termed king of London.

<sup>4</sup> Inter plures *duces* virtute et genere præstans, nomine Galgacus. Tacit. *Vita Agric.*

It is therefore probable that Fortren was the royal residence of these two kings, and would be situated in the territories of the tribe of which they were hereditary chiefs.

The annals of Ulster style all the kings of the family of Constantin the son of Fergus also kings of Fortren; from which it would appear that Constantin was of the same tribe with the two former kings, and that in his reign Fortren was established as the permanent metropolis of the whole Pictish nation.

The next place which is mentioned in these Chronicles as a royal residence is under the reign of Kenneth M'Alpin, who is mentioned in the Pictish Chronicle as having died "in palace suo Fothuirtabhaict," afterwards called Forteviot.

The question therefore remains, Is this Fothuirtabhaict the same place as Fortren, or not?

This is however distinctly proved by the old history of the foundation of the church of Kilrymont or St Andrews, written about A.D. 1140, which places that event in the reign of Angus, the brother and successor Constantin. This Angus is styled by the annals of Ulster *Rex Fortren*, while the history of St Andrews expressly says that his residence was the *Urbs Forteviot*.

It is thus plain that Fortren and Forteviot are the same place, and that when Kenneth succeeded in re-establishing the hereditary monarchy, he took up his residence at the old capital of Fortren, then called Fothuirtabhaict.

Forteviot appears to have remained the metropolis of Scotland, and the chief residence of the kings of the race of Kenneth, down to the reign of Donald the son of Constantin and the fifth in succession from Kenneth.

In his reign we learn from the ancient Chronicles that it was destroyed in a battle which took place between the Scots and the Danes, during one of those formidable invasions which at that time harassed Scotland. In this battle the Scots succeeded in checking the progress of these invaders, though with the loss of their own king Donald, who was killed in the conflict.

This event affords another strong corroboration of the fact which I have advanced, that Fortren and Forteviot were the same place; for the Pictish Chronicle narrates the event in the following terms: "*Oppidum Fother occisum est a gentibus;*" while the Annals of Ulster say, "Ivar O Hivar, killed by the men of Fortren."

In the same Chronicle we find, in the succeeding reign, mention made of the royal city of Scoan, from which it seems probable, that on the destruction of Forteviot by the Danes, the kings of Scotland had crossed the Tay, and

taken up their residence at the more defensible place of Scone, where they were less likely to be surprised. This is the first time we find Scone mentioned in these Chronicles, and it probably continued to be the capital of Scotland till the reign of Malcolm the Third.

On the successful result of Malcolm's invasion of Scotland, for it can scarcely be deemed less, he appears, from the constant tradition of the country, and from other circumstances, to have made the more ancient metropolis of Scotland once again his principal residence, and to have erected a palace at Forteviot.

His son Alexander I. likewise resided some time there, and, from a circumstance I shall mention immediately, seems to have made some additions to the building erected there by his father. From this place, too, we find some of the charters of Malcolm IV. to have been dated. He appears to have been the last king who resided at Forteviot, as from this time we lose all sight of it, and his successors probably removed their general residence to Stirling.

From these remarks, then, it will appear that Forteviot is the only place which can claim the honour of having been the most ancient capital of Scotland, and that after its destruction by the Norwegian pirates in 904, Scone became the principal seat of the kings of Scotland until the reign of Malcolm the Third, when Forteviot again became the residence of the kings of Scotland, until at last, deserted by its royal occupants, it gradually fell into decay and insignificance.

The present village of Forteviot stands on the banks of a small rivulet called the May, near its junction with the river Earn, and about ten miles farther up the great strath of the Earn than Abernethy. About three quarters of a mile to the east of the village the ground rises and forms an eminence of considerable extent, on the top of which are the remains of a pretty extensive hill fort, constructed after the usual style of these strongholds.

The situation of this fort is naturally very strong, being partly surrounded by a morass, while a natural embankment extends along the south side of the eminence, but separated from it about twelve feet, to a considerable distance in the direction of the village, and thus forms a sort of covered way or approach to the fort, the entrance to which is fortified by several ramparts. In addition to its natural strength, every assistance which art could give seems to have been added for its protection. The less protected side of the fort is defended by five large earthen ramparts, through which there is another entrance to

the fort. The interior is about 130 feet in diameter, while the ramparts extend at a distance of about twenty feet from each other.

Immediately to the west of this stronghold, and on the top of another eminence, which is separated from it by a small ravine only, and which forms one side of the covered way formerly mentioned, there is a large tumulus, partly built with stones, but which I believe has never been opened.

This fort commands an extensive view of the great plain or strath of the Earn, which extends on all sides around it, and forms the centre, as it were, of a circle of large forts situated on the top of the neighbouring heights, which bound the place on the south and north, and which, from the extensive prospect they command, would effectually guard against the unseen approach of an enemy.

This fort, then, has every appearance of having been the ancient Fortren; it was afterwards probably the citadel of the more extensive Urbs Forteviot or Fothuirtabhaict of the kings of the line of Kenneth, and in all likelihood continued to be so until the royal residence was removed to Scone.

Tradition points out a piece of high table-land close to the present village of Forteviot, as the site of the palace which was afterwards built there. The ruins of this palace were still to be seen so late as the year 1772, and the building appears, from an account of its condition at that time, which I shall read immediately, to have been destroyed by fire.

The ground on which the palace stood, and which is called by the country people the Holy Hill, has been almost entirely swept away, along with the ruins themselves, by the encroachments of the May.

Henry Adamson, author of a curious and scarce book called the "Muses Threnodie," describes a visit to these remains in the year 1633 in these terms:

"Right over to Forteviot did we hy,  
And there the ruined Castle did we spy,  
Of Malcolm Ken-more, whom Mackduff, then Thane  
Of Fyffe (so call'd), from England brought again,  
And fiercelie did persue tyrant Makbeth,  
Usurper of the Crown, even to the death;  
These Castles ruines when we did consider,  
We saw that wasting time makes all things wither."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> P. 82. The title of the original edition is, *The Muses Threnodie, or Mirthfull Mourning on the death of Master Gall, &c.* By Mr H. Adamson. Printed at Edinburgh, in King James College, by George Anderson, 1638, 4to. The editor of the republication was James Cant.

And in a note the editor of the work, which was republished in 1774, adds, "The ruins of this palace *remain* at Forteviot, on the other side of Earn, almost opposite to Duppline."

The following account is given of these ruins in 1772, by the minister of Forteviot. "Hard by the village of Forteviot is a heap of rubbish, on an eminence commonly called the Holy Hill. From its present ruined condition, one would naturally be led to imagine that the elements have combined to raze it to the foundation; for the burnt stones and embers of which it is composed evidently prove that its destruction has been effected by fire; and the water of May (a river so called) continues to sweep away yearly more or less of its remaining ruins."

There is now not a vestige of these ruins to be seen on the spot where they once lay. But a very singular stone was discovered a few years ago, lying in the bed of the May, immediately under the Holy Hill.

This stone is represented in the Plate, fig. 1, and has every appearance of having formed a part of the ancient palace, probably the top of the gateway. The diameter is about five feet, and the stone is about a foot and a half broad and one foot thick. The sculpture is very rudely executed in bas-relief, and has apparently been done in the eleventh or twelfth century.

That this is the probable period to which we must refer this stone, is further corroborated by the form of the stone itself being semicircular, as there is every reason to think that the semicircular arch was introduced into England in the eleventh century, and may have been brought from thence into Scotland by Edgar, who finally established the family of Malcolm Kenmore on the throne of Scotland, by the assistance of the Norman and Saxon barons of England.

The subject of the sculpture consists of three figures, one of whom is separated from the other two by means of a cross, now somewhat defaced. It will be remarked that the single figure is represented with a head-dress of a more ornamental description than the other two, which marks him out as of a higher dignity. It is probably a rude attempt to represent a crown, and the other two figures are perhaps meant as followers or guards of the royal person. The animals introduced seem to have a symbolical meaning, to investigate which would lead into too great detail at present.

On comparing these figures with the heads as represented on the coins of our earlier kings, I was much struck with the resemblance which the princi-

pal figure on this stone bears to the coins of Alexander the First. There is but one coin of this king now in existence, and it is deposited in the Museum of the Antiquaries of Scotland. (Plate, fig. 2.)

It will be remarked, on comparing the head on the coin with that on the Forteviot stone, that there is a very strong resemblance both in the character and expression of the face, and in the sort of rude coronet which is represented on the head, which renders it exceedingly probable that this stone formed a part of an addition made to the palace by Alexander the First, and that the principal figure is intended as a representation of him.

This stone, which is now preserved at Freeland, the seat of Lord Ruthven, is the only remnant now to be found of the ancient capital of the kings of Scotland, and forms a curious, and perhaps the only specimen, of the state of the fine arts at that early period of our history.

I have been led into greater length in these remarks than was perhaps necessary; but I trust that any attempt, however feeble, to elucidate the local antiquities of our country, will be received with indulgence.