

XXVIII.—*Notes on an Ancient Cave, &c., discovered at Aldham, now called Seacliff, in East Lothian, in 1831.*

By GEORGE SLIGO of Aldham, Esq., F.S.A.Sc., &c.

[*Read to the Society 9th April 1832.*]

DURING the execution of some ornamental improvements, I lately, by accident, discovered remains of very remote antiquity,—an account of which I shall take the liberty of submitting to the Society, as I conceive them to be of great interest, and to bear incontestable proofs of having at one period been appropriated to a Religion in which human victims were made the sacrifice of barbarous superstition. They are further of interest, from exhibiting to us the remains of Pagan worship in nearly the same state of preservation as when the last victim was offered upon the altar.

That part of the country which formerly constituted the ancient parish of Aldham (or Auldhame) is situated on the north-eastern coast of the county of Haddington, about three miles east from North Berwick, and stretches from two to three miles along the seashore. In the northern part of this district the land is about 100 feet above the level of the sea, and the coast presents a range of perpendicular crags, composed chiefly of trap rock. To the south the land gradually falls, and at the extremity is a flat sandy beach.

About the middle of this district the rocks recede back into the land, and form two semicircular ranges, which are separated from each other by a bold promontory of from 80 to 90 feet in height, which runs out to near the high-water mark. During the course of ages, the loose sand from the shore has been drifted upon the face of these rocks to such an extent, that in most places they are hid from observation, and now only present the appearance of sloping grassy banks, with here and there a mass of projecting rock appearing above them. A flat space of light, linky ground, containing about twenty acres, stretches from their base to the sea.

In May 1831, it was found necessary to remove a large portion of the

blown sand from the front of the rocks alluded to, when a cave was unexpectedly discovered on the western side of the promontory which separates the two bays. It was at first imagined to be a natural cavity in the rock, and the labourers were directed to clear out the sand which filled it, with the view of finding how far it receded. The operation was begun at the top, and the workmen continued to descend as they advanced. After a large portion of the sand was thus removed, I was surprised to find the labourers throwing out quantities of charcoal and bones of animals, mixed with marine shells. On descending into the cavity which they had formed, I found that beneath these remains there was a regular pavement, which at once evinced that the art of man had been employed in its formation. Part of this pavement had unfortunately been already lifted and thrown out with the sand, but to prevent farther injury being done, the workmen were directed to commence their operations further down the bank, and accordingly they began to remove the sand, so as to reduce it to a level with the pavement of the interior. The altar, which stands in front of the cave, was soon cleared of the surrounding sand,—the rocks which partially concealed the entrance gradually appeared,—while the entrance to the north of the altar, as well as the clay floor, covered with the ashes, charcoal, and bones, and at length the pavement in the interior, were progressively laid open to view, so that the whole cave became exposed in exactly the same state in which it was left by its former owners. The object of its original formation could no longer remain doubtful to the mind. The large stone altar in the front, the pavement within, the charcoal and the bones of the victims, all bore incontestable proofs of the object of its formation—of its having been a place of sacrifice and of pagan worship.

The rock in which the cave occurs is formed of clinkstone, resting upon a bed of soft red sandstone; and it was in all probability this natural circumstance which induced the inhabitants of a barbarous age to select it for their purpose, as, by the removal of the red sandstone, which was capable of being easily wrought, an arch of very hard rock would be left for the roof of the cave. The floor is about 20 feet above the level of the sea at high water, and the front is partially concealed by masses of rock, which have apparently been placed there for the purpose of screening the interior. The entrance has been cut through the rock on the north side of the altar. The bottom has a gentle slope downwards from the front to the back of the cave;

and those parts which are not covered with pavement appear to have been smoothed over by a bed of clay. From the centre of the altar to the back part of the cave is 29 feet. The extreme width near to the entrance is 28 feet, and this width becomes gradually narrower towards the back. The height of the cave at the front is 20 feet; it rapidly diminishes to about 13 feet, and gradually becomes narrower towards the extremity, where it is 3 feet 3 inches only above the bottom.

The altar stands at the entrance, opposite to the centre of the cave, and is formed of one large stone, irregularly shaped, and presenting somewhat the appearance of an inverted cone. It has a flat top of $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet in diameter, and tapers downwards to $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet at the undermost part which is seen. It rests upon an elevated piece of the solid rock, which has evidently been left for the purpose at the excavation of the cave, and it is supported in its position by a rude building of stones and clay. The artificial mound on which it is placed is 3 feet 1 inch in height, and the altar is $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet, making the total height of the altar 7 feet 7 inches. When the cave was first laid open, it so much excited the curiosity of the inhabitants of the country, that it was considered prudent, before it was inclosed, to remove one of the stones which supported the altar, and to supply its place by another of larger dimensions, in order to prevent it from being rolled down from its position by the wantonness of the visitors. In doing this, a small portion of the clay was removed from the north side, and from beneath the altar was taken the skeleton of a child, apparently between six and eight months old, who had probably been one of the unhappy victims of barbarous superstition. Close to the altar, upon the opposite side, was found another skeleton of a child about the same age; and it is conjectured that the remains of more of the victims would have been found, if the stones which support the altar had been removed, or the pavement in the interior lifted. The inner edge of the altar is about two feet beyond the front of the rock, and has thus been placed in the open air, as if it had been considered unholy to offer up the sacrifices except under the canopy of heaven.

The greater part of the interior of the cave is covered with a pavement of rude construction, composed of undressed flat stones taken from the beach, and varying in size from one to three feet in diameter. This pavement has been formed in the shape of two circles of about equal sizes, touching each other, and somewhat resembling the figure 8. The stones in the centre of

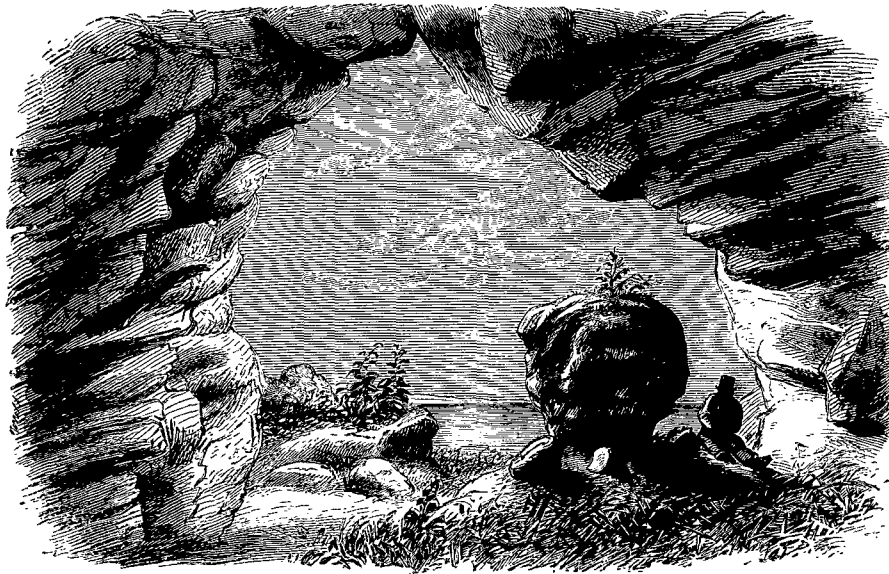
the circles are laid flat, while those of the sides have been sunk into the ground upon edge, in order to give additional strength, and to mark the form more distinctly. The one circle begins at the base of the altar, while the side stones, which are set upon edge to mark the circumference, are here considerably larger, and, by projecting about a foot above the pavement, serve also to form part of the artificial mound by which the altar is supported. The other circle is more in the interior of the cave, and part of it was unfortunately removed by the workmen employed at the excavation, as already mentioned. On the south side of the inner circle there is a stone, which had probably rested upon the edge of it, of the form of an oblong square, lying in a horizontal position, and measuring 6 feet 6 inches in length, by 3 feet 9 inches in breadth, and about 2 feet in thickness.

The whole bottom of the cave was covered, from one to two feet deep, with the ashes of charred wood, mixed with bones and large quantities of limpet shells. The bones were those of the human victim, the horse, the dog, the pig, and the sheep, and some of them have been partially calcined. The top of the altar also bears evident marks of having been subjected to the action of fire. It is not perfectly level, but inclines a little towards the east, down which side a dark stain similar to that upon the top is distinctly seen. The south side of the altar had charcoal and ashes firmly adhering to it, which probably had been caused by the sprinkling of the blood of the victim by the priest during the sacrifice.

The only remains of weapons or utensils used by the inhabitants of the cave which were found, were the tusk of some animal which appears to have been used as the handle of a knife; and the fragments of jars made of red earthenware, and of very rude construction. This conjecture has since been confirmed by a portion of another jar having been found containing a quantity of ashes within it.

The annexed drawings and sections¹ will convey a correct idea of the appearance, size, and construction of the cave.

¹ It has only been thought necessary to engrave the ground-plan of the Cave (see page 361), along with the view which follows, compared with a later sketch made on the spot.



I shall now proceed to notice other remains of antiquity which have since been discovered in the vicinity, and which bear some analogy to those I have described.

About 300 yards to the south of the promontory in which the cave has been hollowed out, there is a range of perpendicular crags, flat upon the top, but which vary in height from 20 to 30 feet, by the irregularity of the drifted sand at their base. A projecting part of these rocks had, on former occasions, frequently attracted my attention, from two vertical lines which seemed to have been artificially cut in it, and which gave it the appearance of three perpendicular stones of about fifteen feet in height. On removing a few feet of sand below these apparent stones, the workmen soon came to a mass of black earth mixed with the bones of animals, charred wood, limpet shells, and pieces of earthenware jars, similar to the fragments which were found in the cave, both in shape, materials, and manufacture. This mass of black earth was from four to five feet in thickness immediately below the marks in the rock which I have described, and it gradually diminished for about thirty feet down the bank, where the traces of it became lost in the sand. This black soil lay principally to the *east* of the supposed altar.

That this had, at a very remote period, been a place of sacrifice, cannot, I think, be doubted, from the bones of the animals, the ashes, and the portions of jars now before the Society. It is more rude, and is therefore perhaps of greater antiquity, than the cave; and if we suppose that the apparent three stones were intended for the altar, the sacrifice must have been offered at the *foot* of it, and not on the *top*, as was shown in the altar-stone of the cave, where marks of fire indicate a different position. There is also another important distinction, that here there is no appearance, from the bones found, of any immolations of human victims, which is sufficiently proved to have been the case in the cave, from the number of human bones which were discovered within it, some of which were partly burnt.

On the top of the cliffs, about a quarter of a mile south of the cave, I have found in various places pavements formed of flat sea-stones, buried about two or three feet below the surface of the ground. The largest of them appears to extend twenty or thirty yards in one direction; but as it is unfortunately underneath a plantation, I could not follow it out without destroying the trees. One part of it, however, I have opened about twelve feet in diameter, and found it to be a double pavement, that is, one pavement lying horizontally above another; and both are formed of flat sea-stones, measuring from two to three feet in breadth, and laid compactly together. The first pavement was about two feet below the surface of the ground, and had a small quantity of charcoal, ashes, and bones above it. On lifting part of this pavement, there was a stratum of bones, charcoal, and ashes, mixed with sand and shells, about a foot in thickness; and beneath, a second pavement, similar to the one above, which rested upon the natural clay soil of the country. For what purpose these pavements have been formed, it is difficult to conjecture. But there was a distinction observable between the bones and shells found here, and those which I have already described, that here no human relics were discovered, the bones being entirely those of domestic animals; while the shells, which were in great quantities, were altogether those belonging to the periwinkle, whereas those found in the cave and at the rocks were exclusively of the limpet kind. This was a very marked distinction, though I know not what conclusion to draw from it. In the cave and at the rocks already described, I did not see a single periwinkle shell, but only large quantities of the limpet; whereas at the double pave-

ment last mentioned there were cart-loads of the periwinkle shells, and not one limpet.

[After referring to a passage in Tacitus (cap. 9. *De Moribus Germanorum*), and giving some extracts from Mallet's Northern Antiquities, on the subject of Pagan sacrificial worship, Mr Sligo's communication proceeds:]

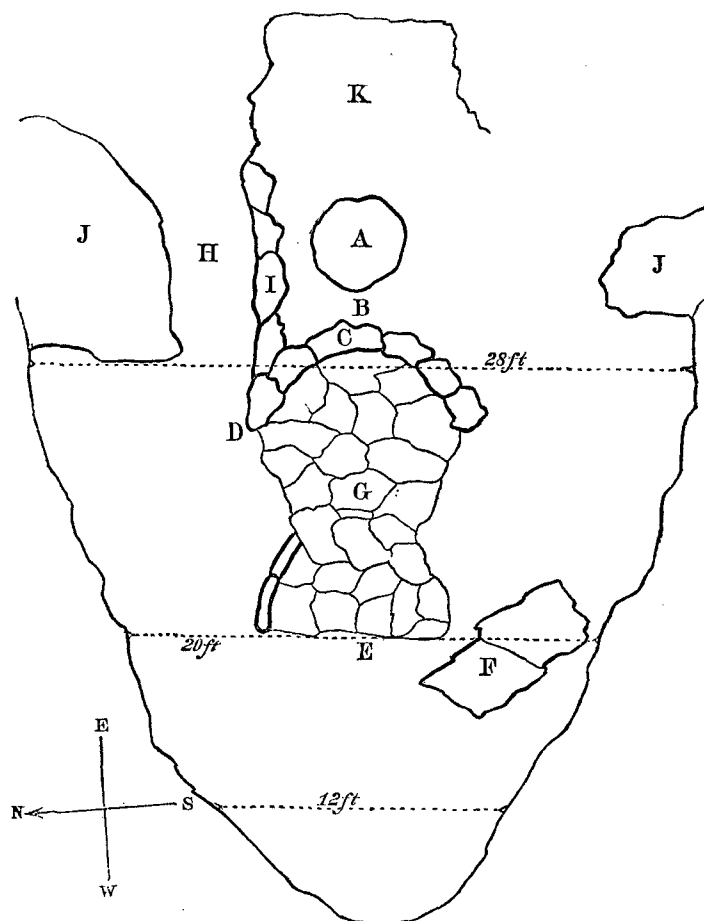
By the Scandinavian mythology we find that the deity "*Balder*" was the second son of Odin. He is described in the Edda as being so handsome in his person, and of so dazzling a look, that he seems to dart forth rays of light. He was worshipped as the sun, and is represented with a radiant head. The cave which we have been considering looks towards the east, and from it the sun is seen rising with peculiar beauty from the sea; besides, on certain days of the year it must rise immediately behind the altar and appear as if it were the fire upon it. If it be not connected with this mythology, it must be considered as a singular coincidence, that in that part of the country "*Balder*" or "*Baldrid*" is the titular saint, and many things to this day bear his name:—As, for example, a large stone on the coast is called "*Baldrid's Cradle*;" a rock in the sea, nearly in front of the cave, is called "*Baldrid's Boat*;" and a well in the neighbourhood is known only by the name of "*Baldrid's Well*." By the fabulous legends of the country, too, we are told of his miraculous works;—that the rock which is now called his Boat once stood near to the Bass Rock, about a mile from the shore; that the people desired to move it, but could not, on which Baldrid was transported to it upon the breeze, and having offered up prayers for its removal, it floated with him to the beach. May this legend not be connected with the story of the death of Balder as given in the Edda, where it says that "the gods carried the body of Balder down towards the sea, where stood the vessel of that god, which passed for the largest in the world. But when the gods wanted to launch it into the water, in order to make a funeral pile for Balder, they could not make it to stir: whereupon they caused to come from the Country of the Giants, a certain sorceress, who was mounted on a wolf, having twisted serpents by way of a bridle. Then the sorceress, bending herself over the prow of the vessel, set it afloat with one single effort, which was so violent that the fire sparkled from the keel as it was dragging to the water, and the earth trembled." It is true that Chalmers¹ makes mention of a famous

¹ Caledonia, vol. ii., p. 501.

saint of the name of "Baldred," who preached the gospel in this part of the country, who is supposed to have founded the church of Auldham in the vicinity, so early as the sixth century, and is said to have died there in the year 607 A.D.¹ Whether these rocks and wells received their names from the Christian saint or the Pagan deity, or whether the Christian saint, at that early period, may not have assumed, with the view of increasing his power, a name which he found had so much influence over the minds of a barbarous people, it is difficult to determine. But there is still another circumstance which leads me strongly to believe that this part of Scotland has at one period been inhabited by the Gothic nations; and that it was to them these antiquities I have described owed their origin. I refer to the names of the most prominent places in the immediate vicinity, which, from the information I have received from Mr Repp, appear to have been derived from the Icelandic language. The northern extremity of the bay is terminated by a rock which stretches into the sea a few hundred yards to the north of the cave. It is surrounded by the tide at high water, and is known by the name of the "*Gagin*," to which I could attach no meaning till my attention was called to its similarity to the Icelandic word "*Skagin*," which means a rock projecting into the sea in a similar manner. A little to the south of the bay is another high promontory called "*Scougal*," which has probably taken its derivation from "*Skogall*," a word in the same language, and having the same meaning.

By whatever tribes these remains of antiquity were originally formed, they are extremely interesting as having been constructed by a people who, at a very remote period, inhabited our native shores; and as presenting to us, from the perfect state of preservation in which they still remain, the manner in which these tribes constructed their temples, and the description of victims which they sacrificed to their gods. The cave has since been inclosed, to preserve it from destruction; but it is at all times accessible to those who have a desire to inspect it.

¹ Spottiswood, Church History, p. 11, gives a curious legend regarding the death of St Baldred. Aldham is derived from the Saxon "Ald," *ancient*, and "Ham," *a village*, from which we may infer that even at that early period it was a place of antiquity.



References to the Ground Plan of the Cave at Seacliff.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>A. Altar—total height, 7·7; Artificial Mound, 3·1; large Stone, 4·6; diameter at base, 4 feet, diameter at top, from N. to S., 6·6, from E. to W., 6·9; circumference at base, 14·6, at top, 21·6.</p> <p>B. Artificial Mound formed with small stones and clay for supporting the Altar. The stones on the north side are laid upon edge, to form an entrance to the Cave.</p> <p>C. Edge of the pavement nearest the Altar. This part of the pavement is terminated by a row of stones placed upon edge for supporting the Mound on which the Altar stands, and forms also part of the circumference of one of the Circles.</p> <p>DD. Internal terminations of the Mound for supporting the Altar.</p> <p>E. Termination of the pavement. It is supposed that the pavement extended further into the Cave, and completed the two Circles, but was lifted by the workmen employed at the excavation.</p> <p>F. Large Stone found lying in the interior of the Cave, and supposed to have been the place where the victims were slain. It originally was of the form of</p> | <p>an oblong square, but separated into two parts from having been undermined. It is 6·6 long, by 3·9 broad, and about 1·6 in thickness.</p> <p>G. Internal pavement, where it is supposed that the Priests offered up their prayers during the sacrifice. The stones are flat upon the surface, but irregularly shaped on the sides, and laid in a rude manner. The pavement appears to have been originally in the form of two circles. The interior circle has, upon the north side, two of the edge stones still remaining, which are placed perpendicular in the ground.</p> <p>H. Entrance to the Cave, between 3 and 4 feet wide, cut through the rock.</p> <p>I. Flat stones placed on edge for supporting the Mound on which the Altar rests.</p> <p>JJ. Large projecting stones on each side of the Cave, which appear to have been left when it was formed, for the purpose of screening the interior.</p> <p>K. Solid rock forming the outer extremity of the Cave, and which has been originally left as a foundation on which to place the Altar.</p> |
|---|---|