

VI.—*Notes on Ancient Shields and Highland Targets, one of the latter having embossed upon it the Cognisance of the Lord of the Isles.*

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[*Read before the Society, 10th April 1871.*]

There is a class of Scottish antiquities to which hitherto comparatively little attention has been paid by the archæologist, I mean the warlike weapons, offensive and defensive, of our Highland forefathers, many of which were used down to a comparatively recent period. Of these weapons much ignorance seems to prevail even among the Highlanders themselves, who almost invariably answer inquiries as to their age, that they had no doubt they had been used from time immemorial.

In England, and on the Continent, much interest has been taken in the study of arms and armour. On the Continent, the books are endless; in England there are the works of Meyrick, Grose, and Skelton, with Boutell's "Monumental Brasses and Slabs," and others of a kindred nature, all showing how much instruction may be gained by such inquiries when followed out in a proper spirit. In Scotland, we certainly have M'Ian's "Highlanders," and the "Costume of the Clans" by John and Charles Sobieski Stuart, both admirable works, but treating more of dress than of the armour and weapons, which, though alluded to, can scarcely be said to be illustrated, and without delineation they are almost valueless, as so much, in these weapons, depends upon the ornamental detail for character.

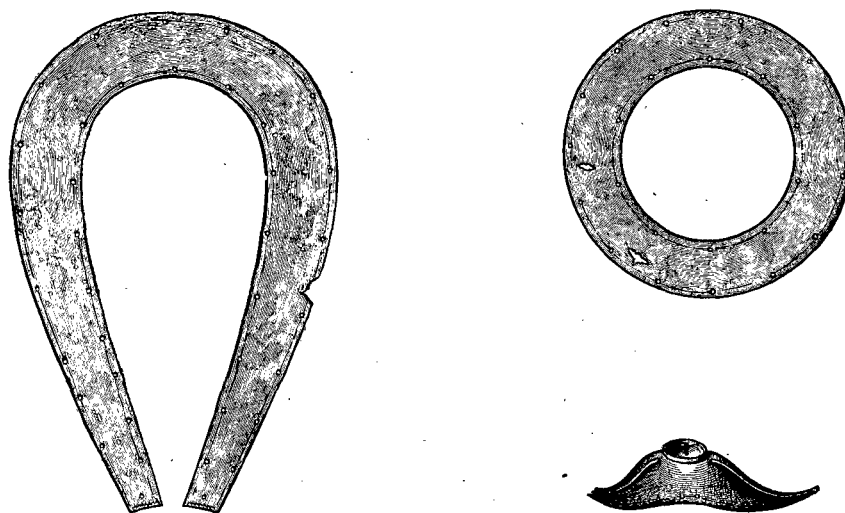
At present I wish to call attention only to one of these Highland weapons, the *Targaid* or Target. No weapon of war has, at different periods and among different nations, assumed so many forms as the shield. It was square, oblong, and kite-shaped. The brass mounting of one of the last form, which was found under 6 feet of moss on the hill of Benibreae, in Lochaber, with other brass ornaments for a shield or armour, shown in the accompanying woodcuts, has been deposited in our Museum by Cluny Macpherson, Castle Cluny. The shield assumed a variety of other forms,



Engr. by W. & A. E. Johnston.

HIGHLAND TARGET, THE PROPERTY OF M^r DRUMMOND, R. S. A.

it was triangular, crescent, and fiddle-shaped, concave and convex ; it was hollow and fluted, also oval and circular, varying in size from being large enough to protect the whole body to the small mediæval hand shield, which was no larger than the iron or bronze boss of the Scandinavian or Anglo-Saxon shield. During the 15th and 16th century, a sort of tilting shield was introduced ; it was made to fit the shoulder, sometimes covering the chin also, and was screwed to the armour. I have one of these, which is cross-barred lozenge-ways, and between the spaces is elaborately engraved.

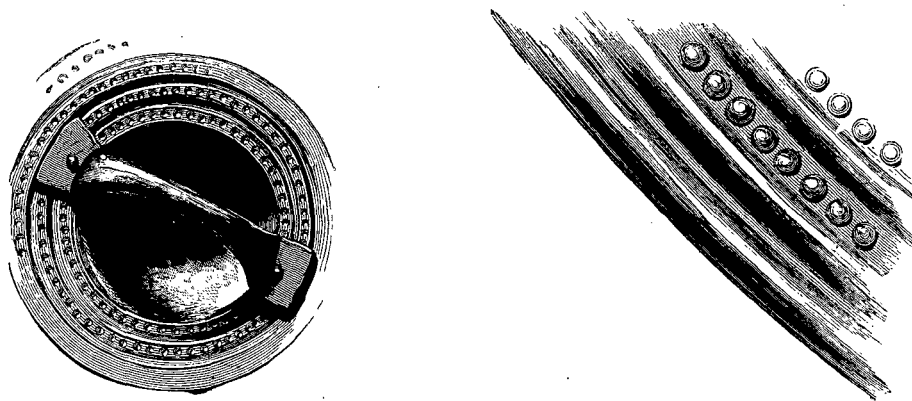


Elongated Bent Plate of Thin Brass, 25 inches long, and Circular Plate, 13 inches diameter, with Boss of Thin Brass, 8 inches long, found at Benibreac.

The circular and oval forms seem to have been the most common and the most continuous in their use, and it is with these we have at present to do. The round shield was an early Greek, Etruscan, and Roman form, it was also used by the Assyrian, Mexican, and Indian nations, and is still used by many of the savage tribes of Africa. On the Trajan column, both the Romans and Dacians, again, have them nearly all of an oval form, while on the Roman sculptured stone found near Carriden,¹ Linlithgowshire, the ancient Britons have them of an oblong-square, with a boss in the centre, while the Roman soldier's is of an oval shape. With one of this form, convex and radiating from the central umbo, a Roman soldier is

¹ Plate XXVII., Museum of the Antiquaries.

armed on a bas-relief found at Housesteads, Northumberland.¹ The Scandinavian and British shield of bronze was circular, and was chased or struck up in the metal itself, generally having a large boss in the centre, with a series of concentric circles, between which the space was filled up with rows of small nail-head-like studs. Those found at Yetholm, and now in our Museum, are beautiful specimens of this class. They have also been



Handle and Studs of Bronze Shields.

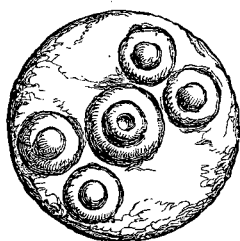
found in Ireland, and one very similar to these last, but with fewer circles, was this year got in Lough Gur, County Limerick.² Occasionally there are more large bosses than the central one, these again surrounded by smaller studs in rows. Of this variety there are good specimens in the British and Copenhagen Museums. Underneath the central boss is the handle.

On many of the early sculptured stones in the north-eastern counties of Scotland, such shields are represented, but whether of bronze or wood it is impossible to say. On a stone at Benvie, a figure on horseback has a shield having a central boss with a series of concentric circles, and figures on the cross near Dupplin Castle have the same; these may be of bronze, such as the Yetholm specimens, while, on a fragment from Dull, Perthshire, now in the Museum, figures are represented having shields with a large central and four smaller bosses. A figure is represented on the St Andrew's sarcophagus carrying a shield of an oval form, which has the narrow ends hollowed out,

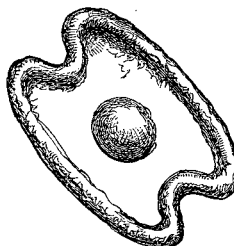
¹ Museum of the Antiquaries.

² Plate XXVI.

and a large central boss. On the Irish crosses such shields are also figured. On one of these in the street of Kells, county Meath, a battle is represented, the combatants on one side having simple round shields and swords, while the others are armed with spears and shields having an enormous spike or pointed boss, of which there is also one on a fragment at Jarrow, Durham. The shields of the chiefs, sculptured on their tombstones in the West Highlands, seem invariably of a triangular form, and on one slab alone, at Kilmory, Knapdale, does the shield seem circular. I should suppose, how-



Fragment of Dull Cross.



Sarcophagus at St Andrew's.



West Highland Chief.

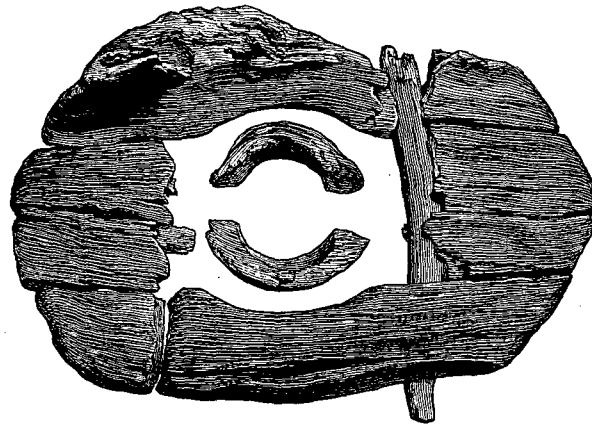
ever, that the wooden shield was more common than the bronze one, from the immense number of bosses which have been found all over the country, the wood having rotted away, leaving the bosses which are of iron or bronze. The iron specimens had often a bronze rim; occasionally they were plated with silver, and in some rare cases overlaid with a thin plating of gold.

During the excavations in the peat mosses of Thorsbjerg and Nydam, in South Jutland or Slesvig, under the sanction of the Danish government, and conducted by Conrad Engelhardt, between the years 1858 and 1863, remains of wooden shields were found in great abundance, these being thin boards varying in breadth from 3 to 9 inches, the average thickness $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch. Although hundreds of these were found, only three complete shields could be made up. The diameter seems to have been from 22 to 44 inches; in the centre was the opening across which the handle was placed, over this opening was fixed the metal boss or umbo; on one piece only was found the remains of leather, the outer rim seems to have been protected by an edging of bronze. Occasionally the shields were highly ornamental, from having thin plates of bronze, cut into a sort of heraldic-looking pattern, riveted to them.

Numerous iron and bronze bosses have been found in Anglo-Saxon

graves, and to judge from the length of the rivets to attach these, the shields were $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick, in this respect resembling the Scandinavian specimens. One was found in Yorkshire in a perfect state, having a bronze boss and a metal rim. We are told of a king of the Goths in the year 553, the supposed age of these Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon shields, who, standing in the front of his band of warriors, received so many of the Roman javelins in his shield, which thus became so heavy that he was unable to hold it up, and was killed while his attendant was changing it for another. From this it would seem that the shield must, sometimes at least, have been of stronger material than those found in England or Slesvig.

The reading of this incident suggested to me that there was in our Museum the pieces of some circular object, very much decayed, and called



Wooden Shield, found in Blair-Drummond Moss.

in the old catalogue a wooden wheel, but, from the loose way in which the pieces were put together, it was difficult to say what it had been. On examining it, Mr Anderson and I were certain it could not have been a wheel, seeing that when it was carefully put together it was oval. I was now confirmed in my conjecture that it had been a shield, there being enough to show that the centre had been hollowed out for the handle, which, being raised on the outside, would form the boss. It, and part of another, were found in Blair-Drummond Moss, and presented to the Museum by the late Henry Home Drummond, Esq. The fragments of another were found in the same moss in 1831; and, somewhere near it, a mortar or hand-mill, fashioned from the

section of an oak ; “there were also some flint arrow heads.” Fortunately for comparison, a perfect specimen has been found since in Ireland, in the parish of Kiltubride, county Leitrim ; it is $26\frac{1}{2}$ inches long by 21 inches broad, and half an inch thick. Besides the boss, which is perfect and 3 inches high, there are seven slightly raised concentric circles, the whole carved out of one piece of wood, in this respect differing from the Blair-Drummond one, which is composed of three pieces most ingeniously put together by two mortises through the whole breadth, into which are put



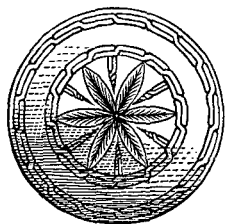
Section of Wooden Shield.

two pieces of wood about 2 inches broad and half an inch thick, these not only holding it together but preventing warping, while the centre is a solid piece of wood hollowed out for the hand, and is $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, the two edges gradually bevelled up to make them join firmly. The shield is 2 feet long, 1 foot 7 inches broad, and at the thickest part $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch, and gradually thinning towards the outer edge, where it is about 1 inch. From this it will be seen that such a weapon in the hands of a powerful man who could use it would be an admirable defence, as in the case of the king of the Goths. Certainly shields of wood, half an inch thick, such as those found in Jutland and England (and the same may be said of the Irish one), would have been quite useless against the Roman javelins ; and even Mr Engelhardt was puzzled how they could have been kept together to be effective, seeing he only found in one piece out of the hundreds any trace of dowelling.

There can be no doubt that the Highland target is the traditional continuation of these early bronze and wooden shields, which evidently were the successors of the Cetra, or small round shield made from the skin of some animal, and mentioned by Tacitus as having been used by the Britons and also by the Mauritanians, who, he says, made it of elephants' skin. These must have resembled the shields used by some of the African tribes and North American Indians at the present day. They are almost invariably made of wood and covered with leather, the instances to the contrary, when

they have been made of iron or steel, being the mere whims of individuals. One such is represented in the portrait of the Hon. James Campbell, son of John Lord Glenorchy (1708); another, having a formidable spike, is in my own possession, and resembles one I have seen, said to have been used by an Earl of Marr, but there is nothing whatever of Highland character about them, being simply the iron or steel target formerly used in other European countries, which were occasionally embossed and engraved in a most elaborate manner. One of these, of Italian workmanship, is preserved in our Museum, having on it a classical subject in high relief, of the best style of this art during the 16th century. A curious Dutch shield of iron, belonging to Mr Charles Lees, R.S.A., is convex and covered with large bosses, some round and some of triangular form. It looks like a pageant shield.

The leather of the Highland shield is very generally embossed with Celtic ornamentation,—a sort of repoussé work, in the form of the twisted interlacing ribbon pattern, with scroll leafage filling up odd corners of the design, and now and then rude attempts at animals.¹ On one belonging to Sir J. Noel Paton there is a galley, a fish, and a nondescript kind of animal; and among those in the Museum is one with birds and grotesque animals surrounding its outer margin, sometimes initials and a date, the whole design divided by concentric circles of brass nails and bosses, the latter often engraved; in this style of ornament they resemble the early bronze



Boss.



Boss.

shields, with their bosses and smaller studs; sometimes they are bound by a brass or steel rim.

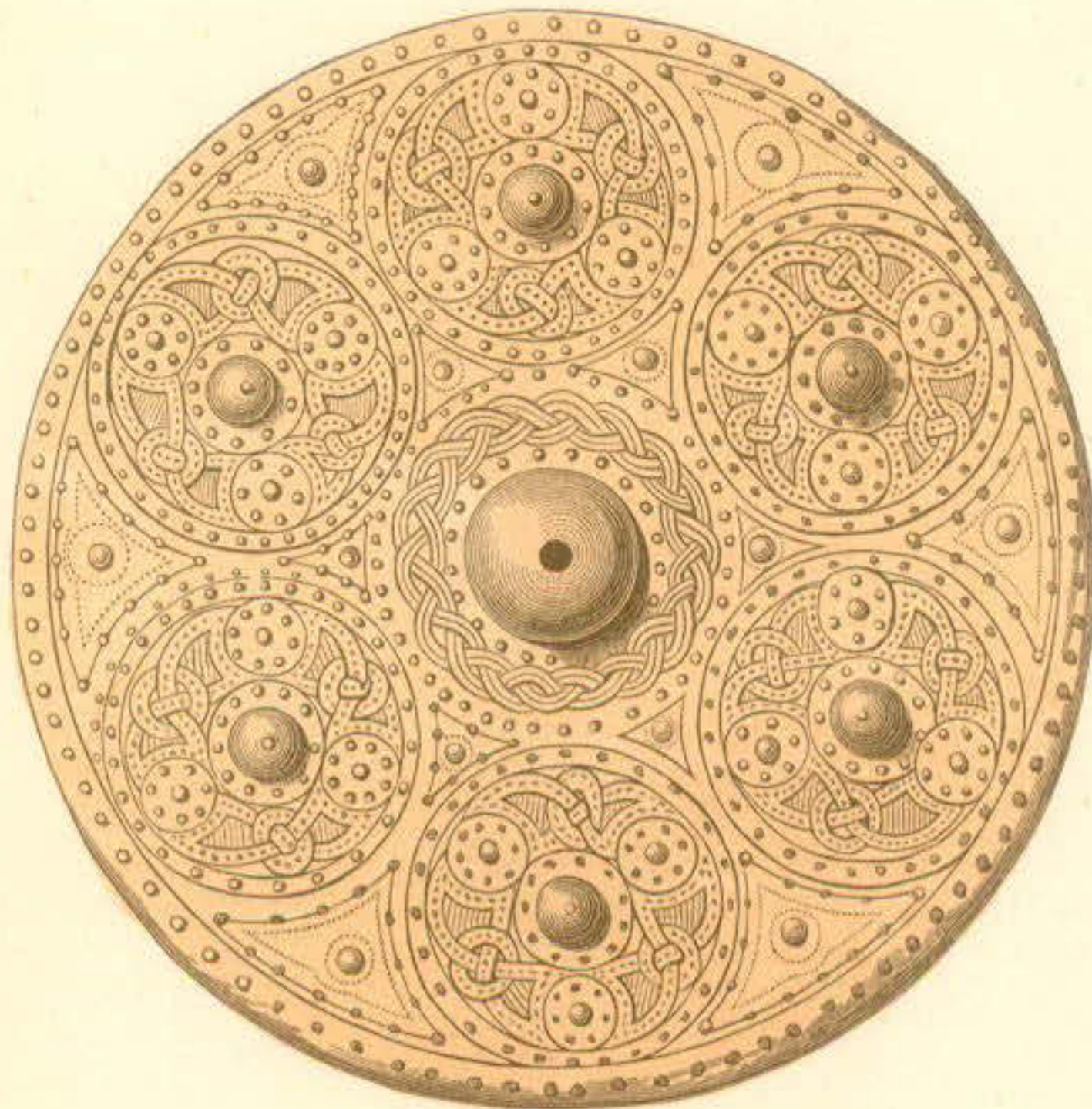
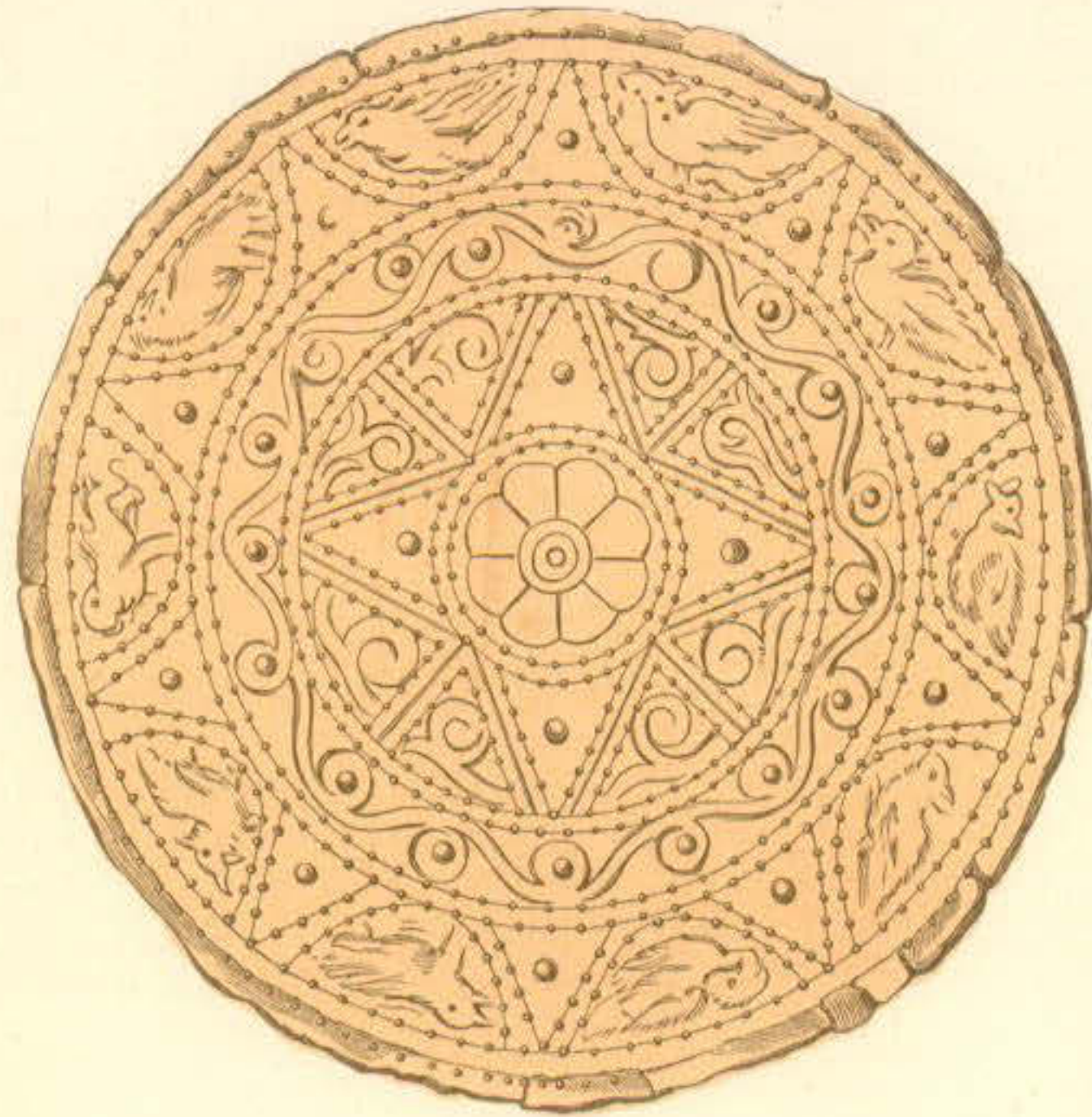
Occasionally the shield was converted into a formidable weapon of offence by having a strong and long pike screwed into the centre. This can easily be understood when the manner of fighting adopted by the Highlanders

¹ Plates XXIV.-V.

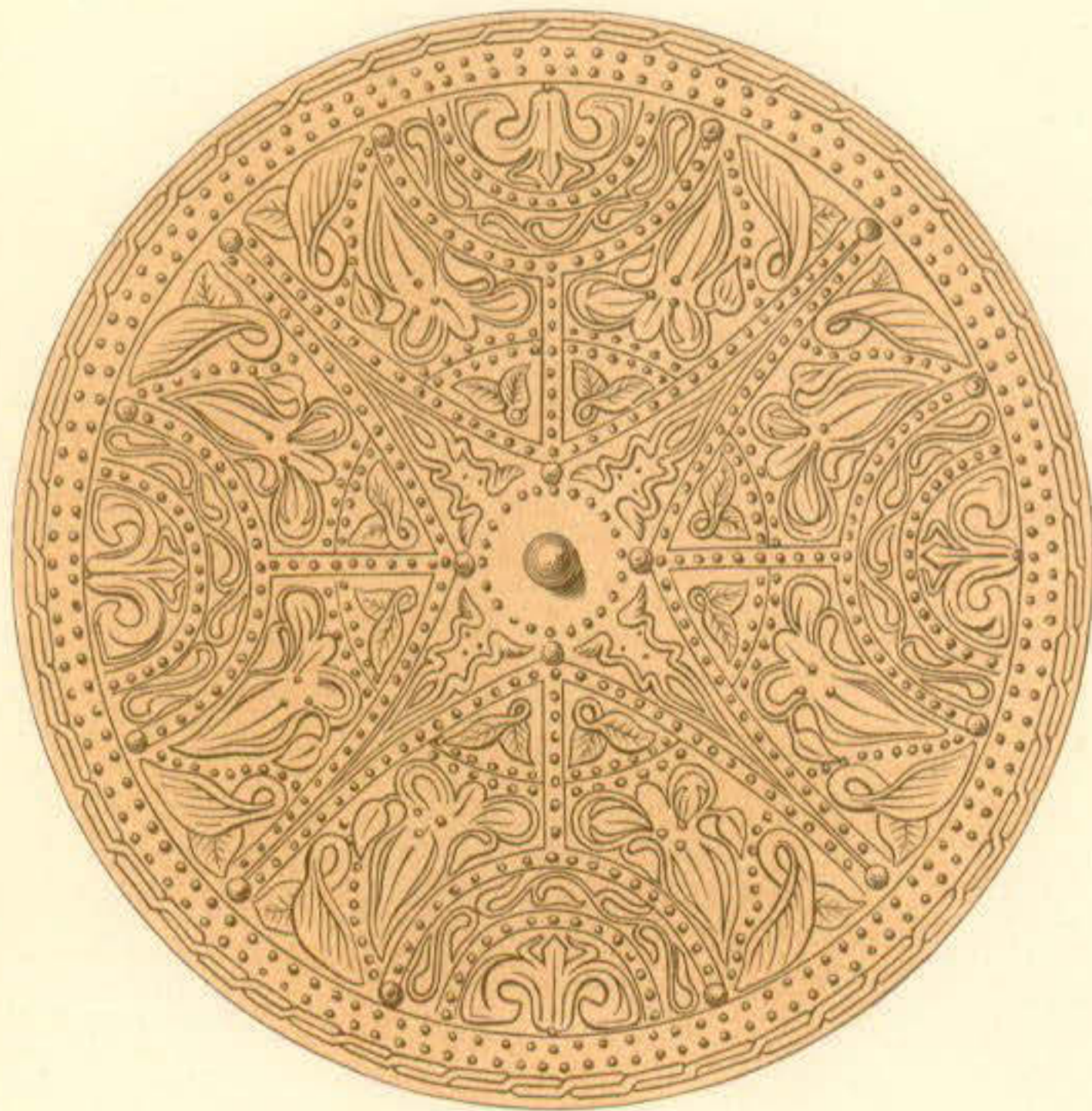
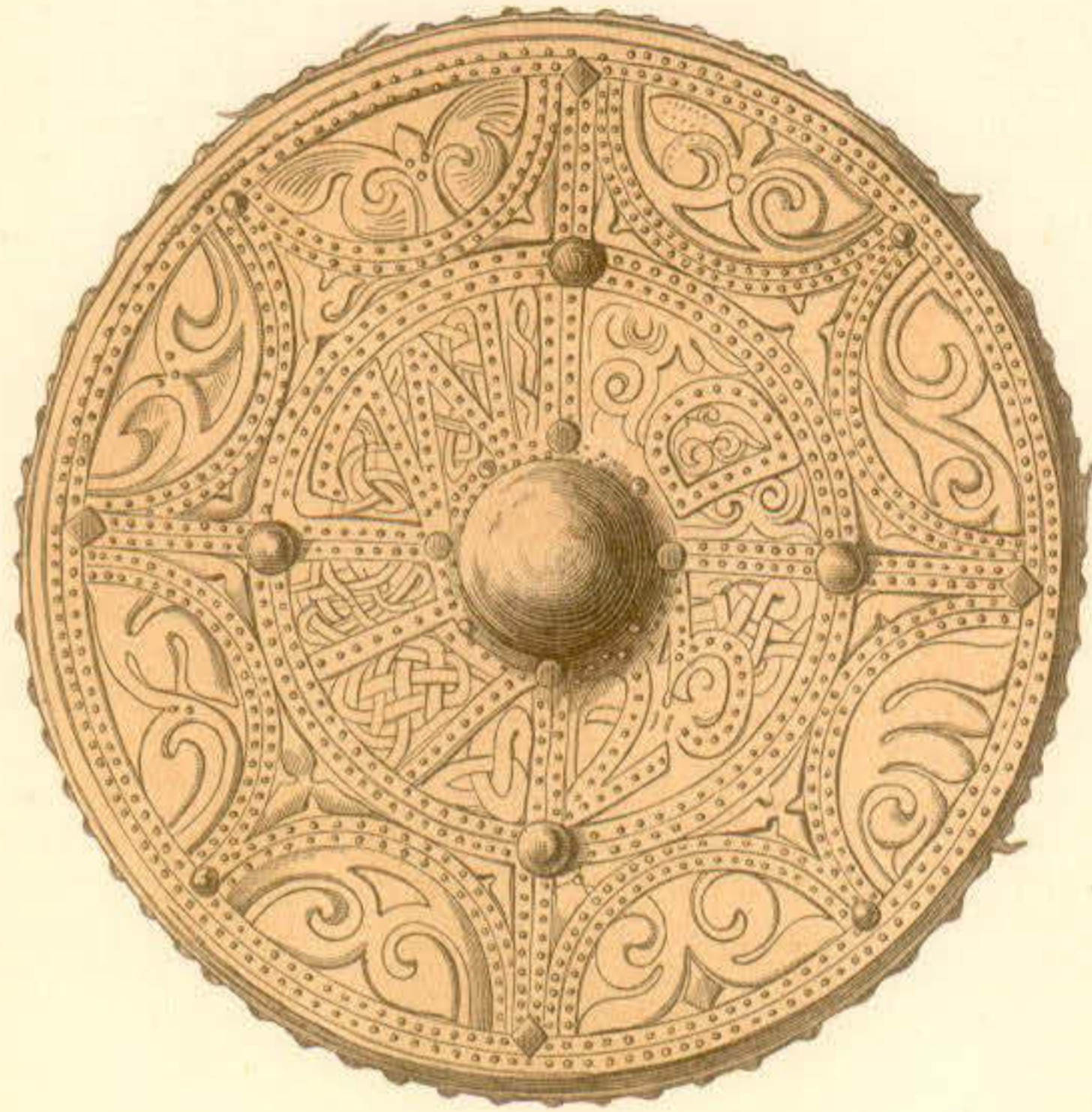
is considered. On approaching the enemy, "after discharging their pieces, they threw them away, as was their custom, drew their broadswords," raised their targets, and rushed forward before the smoke had cleared away, generally scattering their opponents by the fury and impetuosity of their attack, as was the case at Killiecrankie, Prestonpans, and other engagements. In the coat of arms granted to M'Pherson of Clunie in 1672, and emblazoned upon the green banner of the clan, the supporters are two Highlanders dressed as they fought at the Battle of the Shirts—each is armed with a shield having this long spike. Rae also tells us, in his history of the Rebellion in 1715, that the Laird of Luss joined the Highland host followed by "forty or fifty stately fellows, in their hose and belted plaids, armed each of them with a well-fixed gun on their shoulders, a strong handsome target, with a sharp-pointed steel of about half an ell in length screwed into the navel of it," &c. These targets generally have so much similarity in design, that we cannot help thinking they must have been made at one place in great quantities. In the specimens figured by Skelton, Logan, and Dr Stuart, this likeness is very apparent.

The question naturally suggests itself, Where were these made? Certainly not in the Highlands; my own opinion being that, for the West Highlands, at all events, they were made in Glasgow. In confirmation of this opinion, my friend the late Joseph Robertson told me that, in the MS. account of one of Queen Mary's masques, Highlanders are mentioned as appearing in their native dress of skins, and having Glasgow targets. Mr. Dickson was kind enough to make search for this, but did not succeed in finding it, although he also thinks he saw it somewhere taken notice of.

Nothing is more difficult than to assign dates to Highland weapons of almost any sort, from the retention of forms and styles of ornamentation of a very early, down to a comparatively recent period, unless the weapon bears undoubted evidence of antiquity. Now and then a date is found upon Highland Targets, and by comparison of design and workmanship a date may be given to others of similar manufacture. Sometimes again, when the history of a particular target is known, it may be of no value whatever in determining the date of others which may have been used at the same time; such a one is at Cluny Castle, said to have been the property of Prince Charles Edward, but unfortunately it is of French manufacture, and has nothing whatever of Celtic character about it; instead of the



HIGHLAND TARGETS IN THE SOCIETY'S MUSEUM.



HIGHLAND TARGETS.

usual decorations, it has patches of silver chasing in the form of warlike weapons and emblems, while at the centre, in the place of a boss, is a chasing in relief of the Medusa's head. In the armoury at Warwick Castle was a rival shield of similar design, also said to have been used by the Prince. This was unfortunately destroyed during the fire at the castle in 1871.

The same difficulty as to date is experienced with Scandinavian weapons of various sorts, and is well illustrated in a quaint kind of powder-horns, very antique in design, on which are carved a series of the heroes of antiquity, each armed with a circular shield, which at first sight looks very like the Highland target; but on examination it has a large central boss, with a series of studs between it and the rim, not unlike bronze specimens in the Museum at Copenhagen, like these also in having only one handle. I have two powder-horns of this kind, on one of which the date is only 1739; while on the other, which is evidently of an earlier period, there seems a fringe of some kind round the outer rim of all the shields.

In the quaint account of the Duke of Somerset's "Expedicion into Scotlande" in 1547, "Set out by way of Diarie, by W. Patten," there is notice taken of the "Targetts" used by some of the Scots at the disastrous battle of Pinkie. "Nye this place of onset, whear the Scottes, at their runyng away, had let fall their weapons (as I sayd) thear found we, bysyde their common maner of armour, certyn nice instrumentes for war (as we thought). And they wear, nue boordes endes cut of, being about a foot in breadth, and half a yarde in leangth; hauyng on the insyde, handels made very cunnylyn of ii cordes endes: These a Gods name wear their targetts again the shot of our small artillerie, for they wear not able to hold out a canon. And with these, found we great rattels, swellyng bygger than the belly of a pottell pot, coouered with old parchement or dooble papers, small stones put in them to make noys, and set vpon the end of a staff of more then twoo els long, and this was their fyne deuyse to fray our horses when our horsmen shoulde cum at them: Howbeeit bycaus the ryders wear no babyes, nor their horses no colts, they could neyther duddle the tone nor fray the toother: so that this pollecy was as witles as their pour forcedes." The above must not be looked upon as the ordinary military shield, but rather as an extemporised makeshift to answer the same purpose, by the irregular troops got together so hurriedly and with so much difficulty by the governor, the Earl of Arran,

who had recourse to the desperate measure of sending the Fiery Cross through the country to raise the army. This old Celtic and Scandinavian custom was, even by these nations, only used in cases of eminent peril; but when this Cross, the :—

“Dread messenger of fate and fear,
 Stretched onward in its fleet career,
 The fisherman forsook the strand,
 The swarthy smith took dirk and brand;
 With changed cheer, the mower blithe
 Left in the half-cut swathe the scythe;
 The herds without a keeper stray'd,
 The plough was in mid-furrow staid,
 The falc'ner tossed his hawk away,
 The hunter left the stag at bay;
 Prompt at the signal of alarms,
 Each son of Alpine rushed to arms.”¹

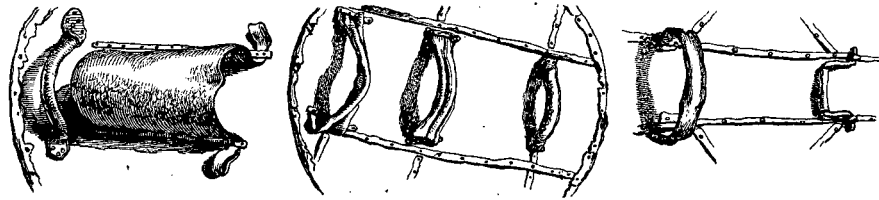
And so it was on this occasion; the summons was at once obeyed, and a motley, undisciplined, and poorly-armed crowd were assembled, but unfortunately, not like the Highlanders, who were accustomed to the almost daily use of their weapons. I have given the whole paragraph from Patten's diary, as it clearly shows that both the “Targets and Rattells,” from the primitive nature of their construction, had been hastily made up, and were not “their common maner of armour.” Something of the same sort may be alluded to in a description of the armour of the Highlanders to be found in the Wodrow MSS. under date 1678, where they are mentioned as carrying “targets and shields of the most odde and antique forme.” The *shields* here referred to may have been like the “nue boordes endes cut of,” &c., and used by the poorer clansmen.

Of late years, from the great scarcity of genuine targets, imitation ones have been much manufactured for the purpose of making up Highland trophies, but these have entirely failed in the embossing of the leather and engraving of the studs, where that has been attempted. This scarcity has been caused by the severe manner in which the disarming acts of 1746 were enforced; and

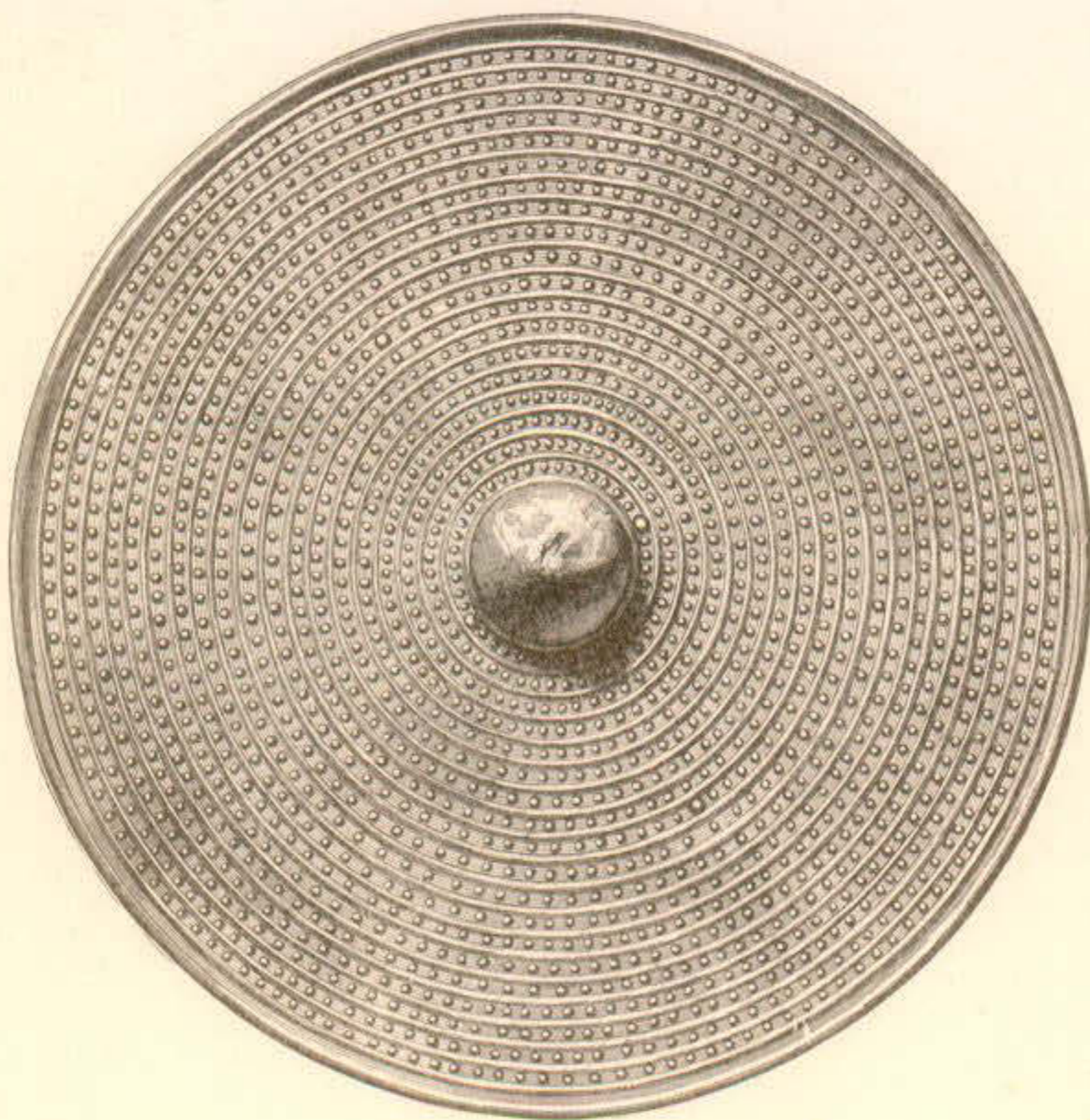
Boswell, describing in 1773 the armour at Dunvegan Castle, says—"There is hardly a target now to be found in the Highlands. After the disarming act they made them serve as covers to their butter-milk barrels." By this means, no doubt, a number would be preserved. In other places, again, where the target was a fine one, and cared for by the family, the embossed leather cover, the really valuable part, seems to have been taken off and rolled up, in which state it would easily be concealed. This appears to have been the case with the one to which I would specially call attention.¹ It was brought from the island of Skye many years ago, and is not only different from the ordinary specimens in beauty and symmetry of design, which is worked out in a different and more artistic manner, but is also peculiar from having embossed at its centre the heraldic cognisance of the Lord of the Isles, of which Nesbit says, "The Macdonalds of the Isles carried, as in our old books, a double-headed eagle displayed." Its diameter is one foot eight inches, which is the average size of the Highland target. It must not be thought that leather and leather-covered targets were peculiar to the Highlands in mediæval times; they were common in most European countries; Spain, in particular, was famous for them, and it may not be improbable that this was made in that country for one of the Macdonald chiefs, there having been a great traffic between the West Highlands and Spain, hides being exchanged for armour of all sorts, swords in particular. Spencer also speaks, in his "View of the State of Ireland," 1586, of the Northern Irish, especially of the Scots, as having round leather targets, often coloured in rude fashion. In this respect they differ from those of our Highlanders, as I am not aware of theirs ever having been painted, although the open work of the brass ornamentation was frequently filled in with leather or cloth of a bright colour. At the present day shields of buffalo hide or other strong leather are in use among many of the oriental nations; they are circular and almost invariably convex, the edges turned up towards the front, and are often most gorgeously emblazoned in gold and colour, having bosses of brass, silver, or even gold. In the Society's Museum are several fine specimens; one of these has an elaborate pattern in relief upon it, painted in purple and gold, while another has an ornamental design painted upon it in green and gold.

¹ Plate XXIII.

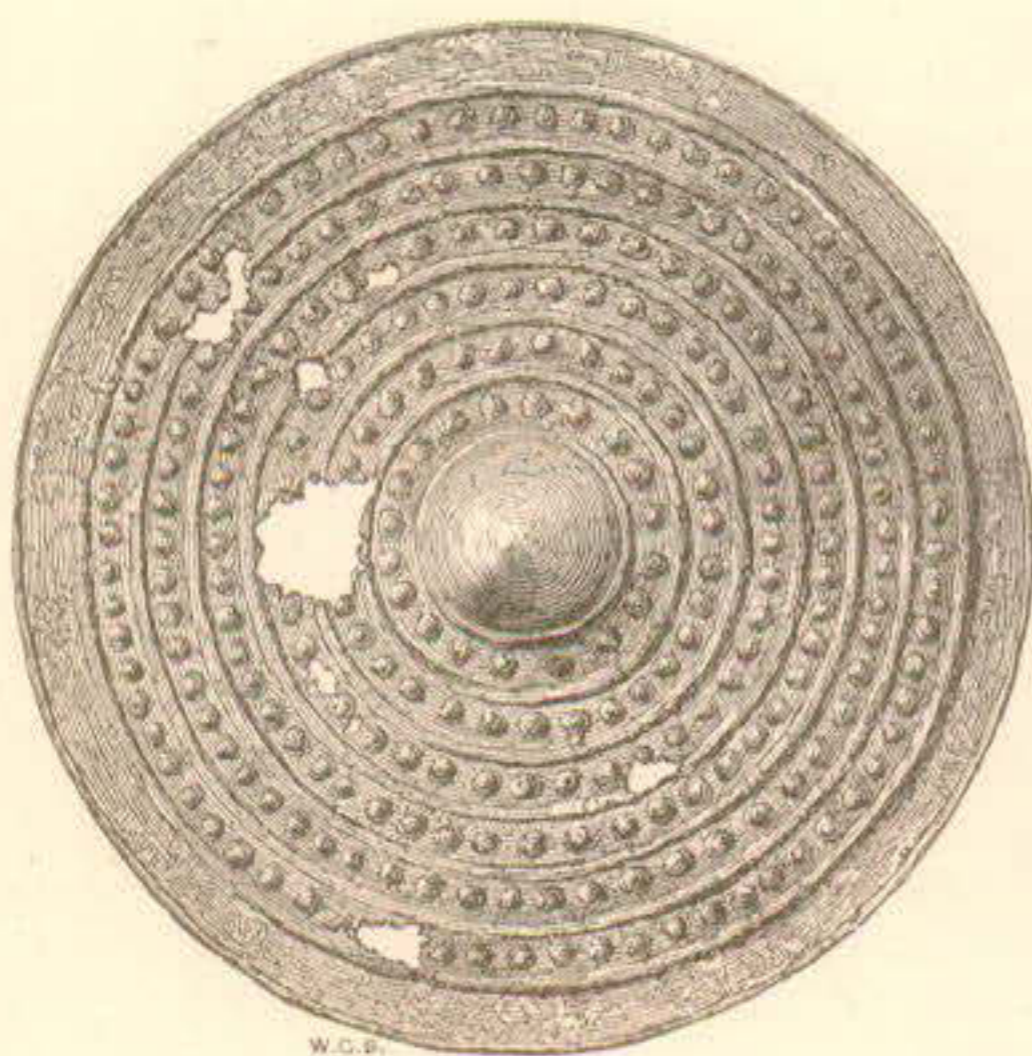
Among the native tribes of Africa they are also used, being generally made from the skin of the rhinoceros, and by the Kaffirs of an oval shape, and so large that they act as a protection for the whole body; while the Fans use them of many forms manufactured from elephant skin. The Nubians sometimes make them of crocodile's skin, to which they attach much value. The shield of the Abyssinian is convex, and made of buffalo hide with bosses of silver or brass. Among some of the North American Indians they are also common. The Highland target differs from those of the early Britons and Scandinavians in having one or two arm-straps, and occasionally an arm-piece of leather, as well as a handle; the very early shields of bronze or wood, only having a handle below the central boss. The back of these targets is almost invariably covered with deer skin, below which is stuffing of some sort to deaden the effect of a blow upon the arm. On the Trajan column all the shields seem to have the double arrangement, while the Greeks used an arm-piece and a handle towards the rim.



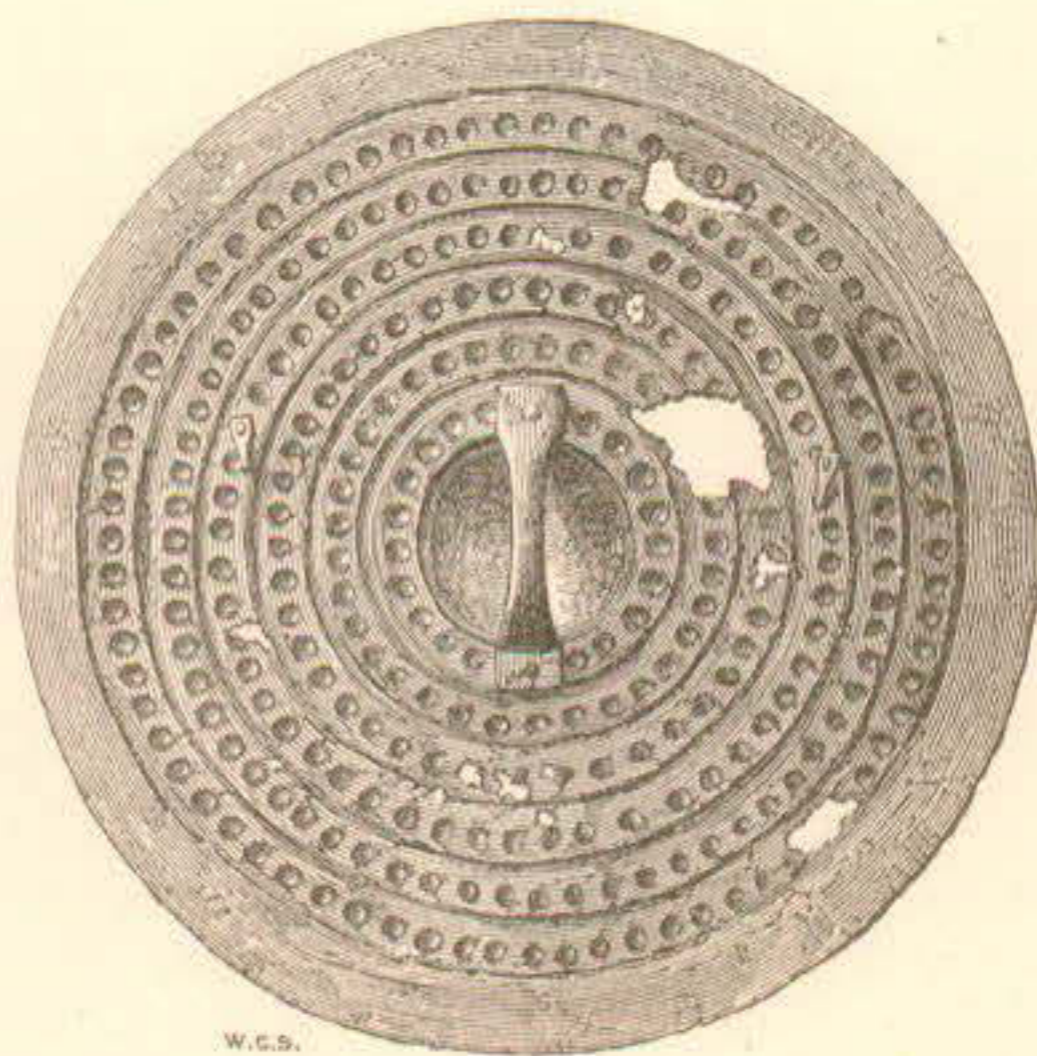
Handles and Arm straps of Highland Targets.



Yetholm.

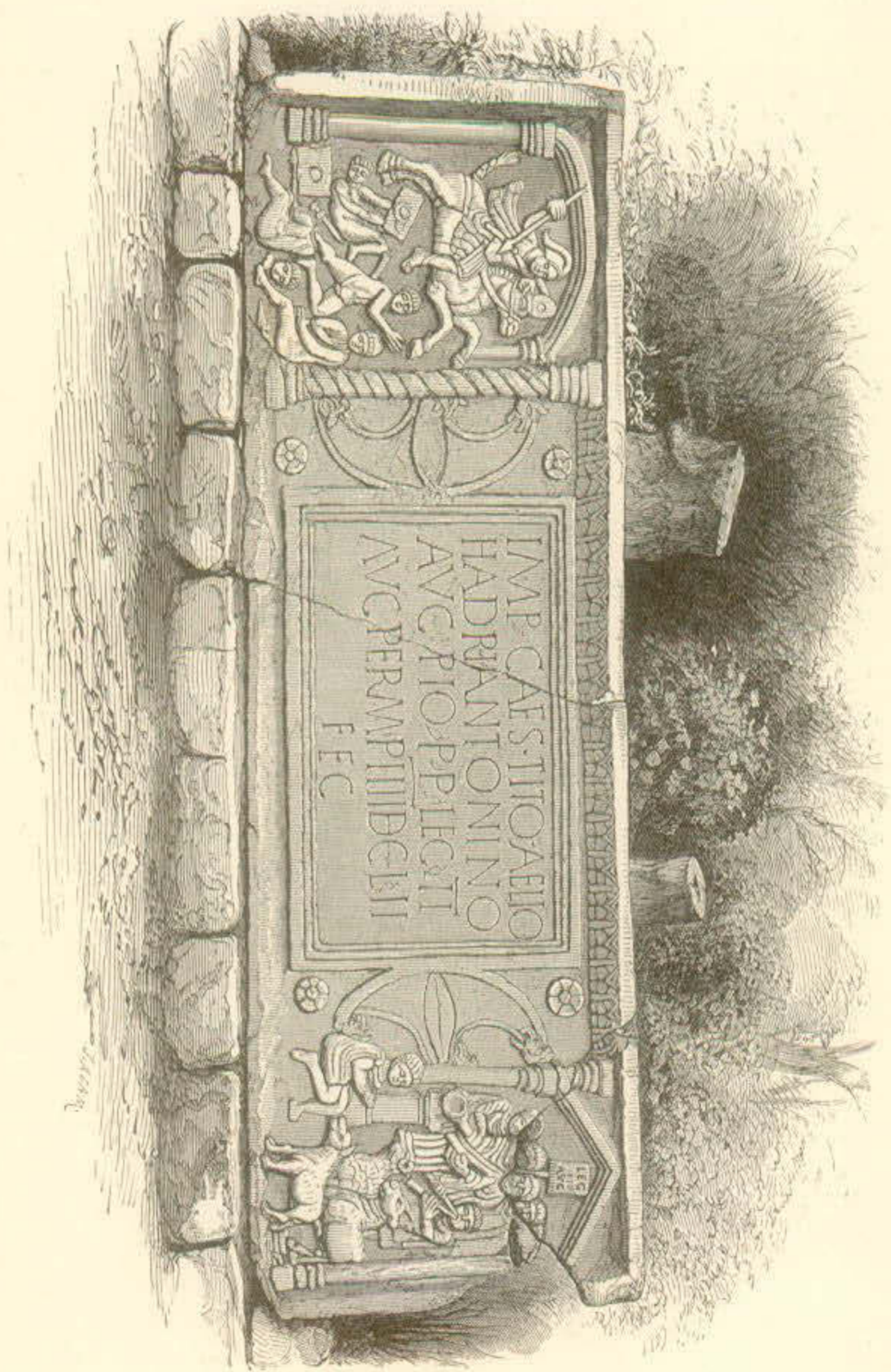


W.C.S.



W.C.S.

Lough Gur.



SCULPTURED ROMAN LEGIONARY TABLET, DISCOVERED AT CARRIDEN, LINLITHGOWSHIRE, 1869.
(9 feet in length.)