

II.

NOTICE OF THE STONE CIRCLE AT CALLERNISH, IN THE ISLAND OF LEWIS. BY HENRY CALLENDER, Esq., C.A., EDINBURGH.

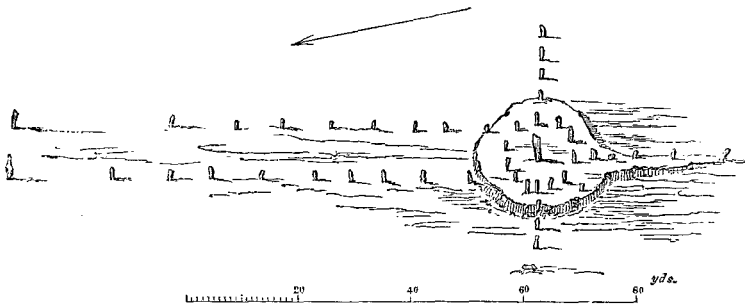
The rude circles of unhewn stone, termed Druidical circles, which have been erected in many parts of the United Kingdom, at a date outside of our historical or traditionary era, have attracted a good deal of attention at different periods. The one at Stonehenge, in Wiltshire, and the circle between Kirkwall and Stromness, in the Orkney Islands, known as the standing stones of Stennis, have been frequently commented on and described. In the Island of Lewis, the most northerly of the outer Hebrides, there are four of those circles, all of which are embedded in the moss (which seems to have grown up several feet since their erection), and have thus been carefully preserved in an erect position; they are within a short distance of each other. The one which is the subject of the present notice, in some respects differs from those in other localities, although, owing to its remote, and comparatively inaccessible situation, it has not been particularly examined, or very accurately described.

These four circles stand on the west coast of the island, at the head of Loch Roag, a deep Atlantic sea bay, studded with islands of various extent. Callernish, in the immediate neighbourhood of which the stones are situated, is a township, about sixteen miles from Stornoway, where there is a small but comfortable inn, now much resorted to by sportsmen, who find excellent salmon fishing in the Gremista Loch and river of the same name, which there falls into the sea. There are no other circles in the large island of the Lewis, except those at Callernish; and it may be noticed, in passing, that it was the same

parish (parish of Uig), but farther to the south, that the antique chessmen, some of which are figured and described in Wilson's recent work on Archæology, were found buried in the sand of the sea-shore.

In order to point out the relative position the several circles bear to each other, there is exhibited to the meeting a tracing from the Ordnance Survey Map, of sufficient extent to include the whole four circles, from which it will be seen that they are placed in no very noticeable connection with each other. On the Ordnance Map, the Gaelic name of "*Tursachan*" is attached to each circle, a word which, if it does not literally mean "mourners," is understood to convey that idea when rendered into English. This term is in accordance with the idea that these circles were sepulchral, and is otherwise appropriate as describing the effect produced on the imagination by the appearance on the wild heath of what Sir Walter Scott calls "these phantom forms of antediluvian giants." Little information, however, can be derived from such local appellations; what are "mourners" in Lewis are "Merry Maidens" at Penzance, each locality indulging its own fancy; but the Gaelic *Tursachan* seems to be the more natural term to be applied to objects which every one must feel are more like petrified spectres than any happy Lewis or Cornish damsels of the present day at least.

The Stonehenge and Orcadian erections consist of simple circles; but the principal one at Callernish is more elaborate in its design. In Martin's work, on the Western Highlands, written a century and a half ago, it is described and figured as "ye Heathen Temple;" and he mentions that he inquired of the inhabitants what tradition they had from their ancestors concerning the stones, and they informed him, that it was a place of worship in the time of heathenism, and that the chief Druid or Priest stood near the big stone in the centre, from



whence he addressed himself to the surrounding people. The appearance of the structure will be understood from the accompanying bird's-eye view.

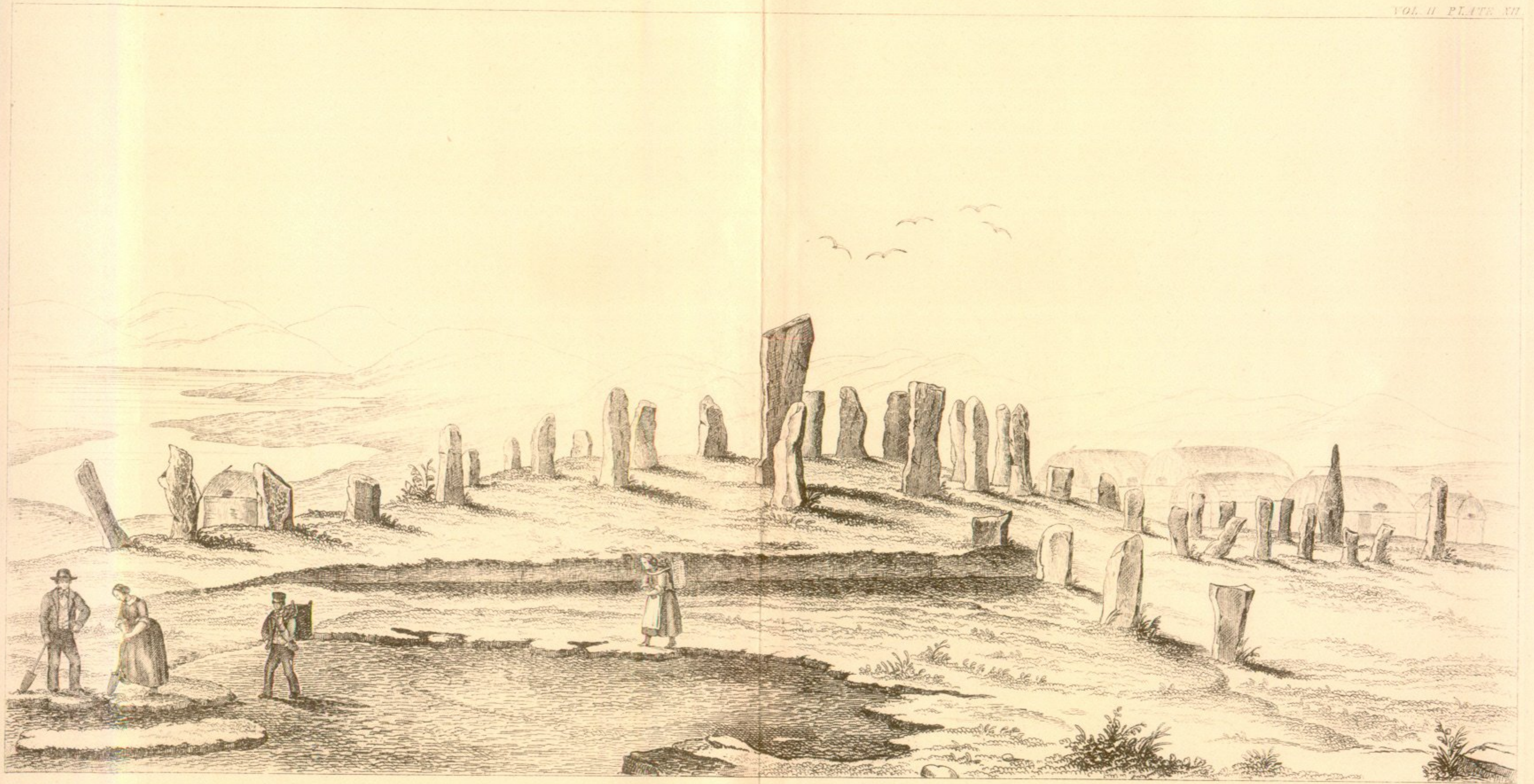
From this sketch it will be seen, that in addition to the circle, a double line of upright stones run parallel to each other in a northerly direction, while a single line of similar stones is projected from the South, East, and West points, thus giving a cruciform figure to the structure. A stone of larger dimensions than any of the others occupies the centre of the circle, and completes the whole. The peculiarity of figure which thus distinguishes this "Heathen Temple" has given rise to a good deal of theory and conjecture; but the flights of poetic imagination may be safely set aside, by simply taking the single lines as intended to point out the three cardinal points—the north being indicated by the double row or avenue. That the position was chosen and laid down from astronomical observation, can easily be demonstrated by visiting the spot on a clear night, when it will be found that by bringing the upper part of the single line of stones extending to the south to bear upon the top of the large stone in the centre of the circle, the apex of that stone coincides exactly with the pole-star; this is more readily done from the south line being on sloping ground, so that looking along the line upwards to the higher level of the centre stone is very much the same as taking an observation through the incline of a telescope. This coincidence is so exact, that it can hardly be supposed to be accidental, and affords, perhaps, the only trace we have of the knowledge possessed by the stalwart Druids who raised those old-world structures—their physical strength is sufficiently apparent from the immense masses of rock brought together for the building; but here we see them, as it were, watching the motions of the heavenly bodies, and detecting that invariable indicator of those northern regions, to which they would look as the land of their ancestors,—it being incontestible that at one time the Lewis was inhabited by a Scandinavian race, who have left no trace of their language behind them but that singularly indelible one adhering to the names of the principal places in the island, which, although taken possession of and retained by a Celtic race, are still known under such names as Melbost and Swanibost, Stornoway and Stimeravay, Tolsta and Skegirsta, with numerous other similar designations. It need only further be noted with regard to the position of the stones, that the double row, although it has the appearance of an avenue, does not seem to have been intended to serve as a mode of access to the circle; if such had been the case, the upright stones in front would naturally have been omitted, whereas they stand facing the approach without any deviation from the regular order.

The stones themselves are not columnar, or shaped into any form, they are simply broad, flat blocks of gneiss—the all-prevailing rock from the Butt of the Lewis to Barra Head. The following are their dimensions:—Diameter of

circle, about 40 feet; length of west line, 43 feet; length of east line, 38 feet; length of south line, 69 feet; length of avenue, 270 feet; breadth of avenue, 27 feet; average height of stones, 6 to 8 feet; height of centre stone, 12 feet. There are thirteen stones in the circle including the centre one, nineteen in the avenue, five in each of the east and west, and six in the south arm. The accompanying plate presents an excellent perspective view of the structure, and the general appearance of the country in which it is situated.

The measurements of height are taken from the present level; but it must be borne in mind that there is a bed of peat moss, 4 or 5 feet thick, through which the stones rise from the clay beneath; this gives a height of 16 to 17 feet to the centre stone, and from 10 to 13 feet to the others, exclusive of the foundation. There are twelve stones in the circle, all of which are standing, probably as the Druids left them. Martin, 150 years ago, gives the height of the centre stone as 13 feet, and as the present height is 12 feet, this shows an increase or growth in the moss of 1 foot during that period. This, however, cannot be depended on, as Martin's other dimensions are in many respects manifestly erroneous; indeed, all writers who have described this circle—Logan, M'Culloch, Wilson, &c.—have given incorrect measurements, copying each the errors and exaggerations of the other. The measurements given above were taken by Mr Kerr, the intelligent clerk of works to the proprietor of the island, Sir James Matheson, who would, no doubt, if applied to by so influential a body as the Society of Antiquaries, order the moss to be removed, so as to discover in what manner the stones have been originally bedded, and to ascertain, at the same time, whether any building had been erected at the original level. After all that has been written about Druids and Druidism, Cæsar, in his "Gallic War," gives us, in a few sentences, the most reliable account of the system with which it was connected. He describes the Druids as the ministers of sacred things, having the charge of sacrifices, both public and private; and mentions, that at a certain time of the year they held a meeting in a consecrated locality, when the people assembled from every quarter, and that those who had any subject of litigation submitted themselves to the determination and sentence of the priests. This erection at Callernish might then, perhaps, be one of those sacred spots; and it would be most interesting to have the foundations opened up, after having been so long entombed in the moss to which it has been indebted, in a great measure, for its present state of preservation. Some parts of our Islands were long the strongholds of Druidical worship; it was here that the system is said to have had its origin, from whence it was carried into Gaul, but Britain was still considered, in the days of Cæsar, to be the parent country, to which its votaries resorted from other lands, in order that

they might be more perfectly initiated into the mysterious and sacred rites of this form of heathen worship.



W. & A. Johnston, Lithog.

DRUIDICAL CIRCLE - CALLERNISH - ISLAND OF LEWIS.

FROM A SKETCH BY MR JAMES KERR, CLERK OF WORKS TO SIR JAMES MATHESON OF THE LEWIS BART M.P. F.S.A.S.

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