II.

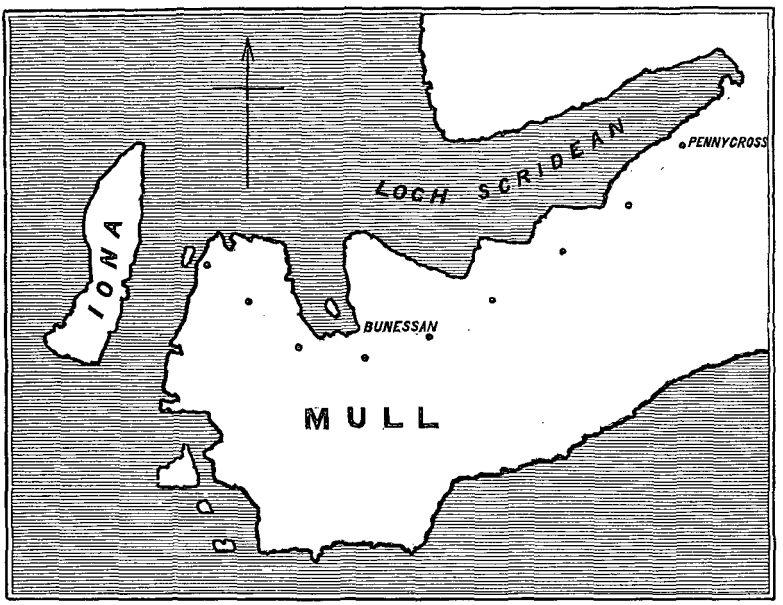
NOTICE OF MONOLITHS IN THE ISLAND OF MULL. By the Rev. THOMAS M'LAUCHLAN, F.S.A. Scot.

It has hitherto been pretty generally held that the standing stones throughout the country, whether singly or in groups, belong to the pre-Christian period of its history. Many of them, it is hardly necessary to

state, have been looked upon as ancient places of worship, more especially sun-worship, the great circle in them being held to be emblematic of the sun's annual course. Many arguments have been adduced in favour of this idea, and there is one to which a good deal of weight is due, although it has not, so far as the writer knows, been employed, except by Dr Jamieson in his work on the Culdees, that, in the language of the ancient inhabitants, a place of worship is to this day called "The stones," "clachan." The common phraseology in asking the question in the Gaelic language, "Are you going to the church?" is "*Am bheil thu 'dol do'n chlachan?*"—"Are you going to the stones?" The word has recently been transferred, by a common process of thought in English, from the church to the village, which usually grows up around it, and to which the name "clachan" is very generally applied; but the term "clachan" or stones is primarily applicable only to a place of worship. The idea has also existed that these stones mark the spot where justice was administered in barbarous times; that amidst these rough, gigantic pillars, erect and inflexible enough to be symbols of the most unbending justice, life and death were dispensed by the men invested by their countrymen with the awful function of doing so. And I need hardly repeat what has been so often urged, that these pillars, grouped or single, were but the monuments of the dead, that they marked the spot where heroes slept; that they were the progenitors, far removed, of those noble memorials now raised by an unsparing outlay of skill and wealth to commemorate the names of men who have deserved well of their country. There is nothing incredible in the supposition that they may have served all these purposes. Reasonable grounds might be produced for such a conclusion. It is in all probability the truth, and there is some ground for believing, too, that many of them served purposes which have never, in modern times, been supposed, and are of a date far more recent than any that has been attributed to them. It may be interesting to notice that in the ancient Life of St Kentigern, contained in the Chartulary of Glasgow, there is an account of the erection of one of these stones. We are told of the death of the British King by the hand of his swineherd, whom he was pursuing at the time. It is then said that the friends of the king erected a large stone as a "*regale signum*," or memorial of the event, with a hollowed stone of less dimensions placed above it, which,

says the writer, in the beginning of the twelfth century, stands to this day, south of Dumpelder hill about one mile.

Not long ago the writer of this notice paid a visit to the island of Iona, and during the time he spent there, he was called upon, in following out his object, to visit several localities in the neighbourhood—among others the district immediately opposite to the east, usually called the Ross of Mull; from *Ross*, in Gaelic, a tapering promontory, identical with



The Ross of Mull, showing series of Standing Stones leading towards Iona.

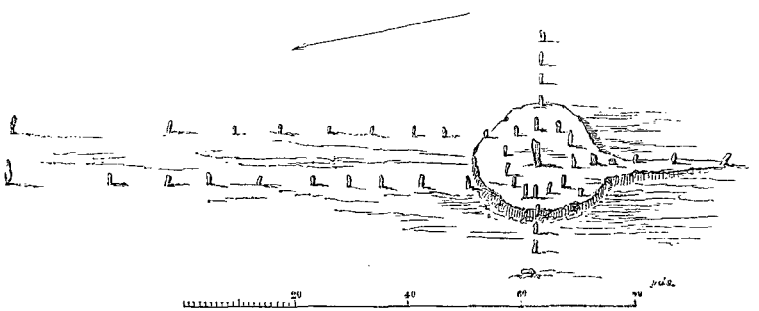
the Hebrew *Rosh*, a head. A little above the ferry stands a solitary monolith resembling in all respects those common throughout the Highlands, and whose object has been hitherto a mystery. On going to the spot and looking eastward, a similar pillar is observable, about half a mile away. On reaching this another appears at about an equal distance, still farther on; and in this way a series of these, rough, unhewn, and standing about six feet high, may be traced, with greater or less intervals, as far

as Pennycross on the shores of Loch Scridan. On making inquiry of intelligent persons in the locality, and more especially of the Rev. Mr M'Vean, who is always ready to aid the inquirer into the antiquities of Iona and its neighbourhood, he found that, within the memory of men now living, the whole series was complete from the north ferry where was the ancient crossing to Iona, for a distance of seven or eight miles. Several of them have now disappeared, some as a sacrifice to the cupidity of a vagrant called "Domhnull nan ulaidh," or *Donald of the treasures*, who turned them over in the hope of finding treasure buried beneath; and the largest and finest having this year perished through the falling of a great granite block, brought down upon it by the Duke of Argyll's quarriers in the neighbourhood. This was the first of the series above the ancient ferry, and was called "An Caitcheannach Mòr," *the Great Stone of the Common*, or *The Great Commoner*—the neighbouring land being called The Common, probably owing to the pasture immediately around the Ferry having been left common for the benefit of pilgrims visiting the opposite shrine. The destruction of this relic must have been entirely unknown to the noble proprietor, who has shown a truly patriotic interest in the maintenance of the ancient buildings in Iona. On making farther inquiries as to the purpose which this remarkable series of monoliths served, it appears that the tradition is uniform among the natives, that they were intended as guide-posts to strangers visiting Iona on pilgrimage. The people say that at one time they extended through the whole of Mull to the Green Point, as it is called, where the ferry existed then as now between that island and the mainland, and that those existing are but the remnants of the ancient series. If this be so, these pillars indicate the route which Columba would have pursued on his way towards the residence of Brude Mac Meilochon, the Pictish king, at the east end of Loch Ness. He would have crossed, as the ferry-boat does now, to Kerrera, from that to Oban, thence along by Connel Ferry, through Ardchattan, Appin, Duror, and Lochaber, across Drumalbin, or the wind and water shear between Loch Lochy and Loch Oich, where there is a place still called Laggan Achadrom, or *the Hollow of the Field on the summit*, and thence by the north shore of Loch Ness through Glenurquhart, where Adomnan tells us he wrought miracles.

There is a good deal to corroborate the popular tradition respecting these monoliths. They commence at what was of old the ferry from Iona to Mull; they follow exactly the line of what must have been the usual road through the Ross; and they are so placed, that each one of the number successively can be easily seen from that which precedes it. If this tradition be true, the erection of this series of uninscribed monoliths is brought within the Christian period. They are relics of the early Christian Church, or emblems of Christian, not of Pagan, religious zeal. The only feasible objection to this view is, that Iona was a Druidical station previous to the coming of Columba. Now Adomnan makes no mention whatever of this, nor would he have concealed it if true. He tells of the triumph of his patron over the Gentile priests in King Brude's palace, and would not have failed to narrate a similar triumph in Iona, if there had been such a thing. There is indeed a place in Iona called "Cladh nan Draoidhneach," or, as it is interpreted, *the Druid's Burying-Ground;* but we have yet to receive assurance that "Draoidhnach" really meant *The Druids*, ere we can attach much weight to such a fact. There is also a remarkable cromlech at the spot, called "Cladh an Diseart," or the Burying-Ground of the *Desertus*, or Hermitage, a little to the west of the Cathedral, the lintel of which was recently thrown down by a fatuous person, and which some might assume as evidence of Druidical residence on the spot. But the very position of this cromlech, on the verge of the burying-place, goes to corroborate what the writer holds to be the only true theory respecting these erections, that they are but the far-off ancestors of our modern horizontal grave-stones, when the grave-stones proper are made to rest upon pillars, one at each end.

There is hardly any room to doubt that these Mull monoliths are Christian relics. But are they singular in this respect? Let any one cast his eye upon a ground plan of the great stone circle at Callernish (see woodcut), in Lewis, so long held to be a Druidical relic, and he cannot for a moment hesitate in pronouncing the structure to represent a cross, with the usual proportions of the Latin cross. Nay, it represents the peculiarities of the Celtic cross with the circle or nimbus, at the junction from which the arms project. It is an exact representation, upon a large scale, of any of the crosses which are still seen standing in Iona and other places in

the Western Highlands; so much so, that it is difficult to conceive how there can be any doubt about its real character. There was a paper read before this Society by the late Mr M'Kinlay of Rothesay, and which is printed in the Proceedings, vol. iii. p. 180, in which he describes a cross built in the Island of Bute, formed of great masses of stones. It consists, he says, of a mound 200 feet long, and from 15 to 24 feet in breadth. Within 25 feet of the east end lay the transom, 47 feet in length, the whole forming a gigantic cross, built of stones apparently gathered from the neighbouring burn. Mr M'Kinlay supposed that the construction of the cross was a penance for some grievous offence.[1]



Stone Circle at Callernish, Lewis.

If the construction of the Lewis cross was the result of a similar exaction, the offence must have been a grievous one indeed; but the discovery of such a structure in Bute goes to show that there is nothing improbable, but the very opposite, in the idea that the Callernish circle is a Christian relic. And were it merely the offspring of Christian zeal, irrespective of penance, there is nothing remarkable in the same zeal producing such structures as these as could lead to the discovery of Iceland in the miserable currachs of the sixth and seventh centuries.

This circle, like the Pictish towers, as they are called, might have been

[1] While on the subject of penance, I may be allowed to call the attention of the Society to some curious remains in Iona, showing what penance in many cases really was. In the south end of the island, close by Port-a-churaich, is a great expanse of water-worn stones, each about the size of a man's fist. The place is covered with conical

erected in a superstitious age as a means of defence. It is placed close to the sea, at the head of Loch Roag, just where assailants from the sea would make their descent upon the island, it being the nearest point, where a landing could be made, to all the more fertile portions of the Lewis, on both sides. Here, then, was it most likely that an object held to possess any special virtue as against enemies would be placed; and in the absence of timber to erect perpendicularly the outward symbol, at the time, of the Christian faith, and of skill to cut it in stone, what more likely than that it should be placed horizontally, and constructed at an expense worthy of the object, and of the most substantial materials to be procured in the place. Or, what is more likely still, judging from the apparent remains of sepulture within the circle, if it was intended as a monument of the dead, there is nothing inconsistent in the belief that it commemorates some distinguished man, but that it was constructed within theChristian period.

In stating this hypothesis, it is by no means intended to cover the case of all similar relics. The probability is, that these are of different ages. All that is meant is, that some of the customs of the ante-Christian period in Scotland descended to the Christian period, and that the only difference was in the object which they were made to serve; that the memorials erected in one generation in honour of heathen deities, or as commemorative of Pagan heroes, might in another age be made to subserve purposes connected with the existence and maintenance of the Christian faith.

mounds of various sizes, formed of the stones which cover the ground so densely, heaped carefully up, obviously by human labour. The whole has the appearance of a great group of pyramids, some of them 15 or 16 feet high, and of almost equal diameter at the base, while others are not a fourth part of the size. It is a most curious scene altogether. The story among the people is, that this spot was of old chosen for penance; and the usual kind of penance was, turning over one of these heaps, stone by stone, and erecting a similar one close by, the size of the heaps being graduated according to the heinousness of the offence to be expiated. Some of the heaps would require a week's hard labour to turn them over. This place is well worth a visit. The whole remains just as it was when the practice ceased in the sixteenth century, every heap remaining entire, with nothing around but perfect solitude. It is doubtful whether we have any similar remains in the kingdom.