

II.

NOTES ON SOME OF THE ANCIENT MONUMENTS OF IONA. By JAMES DRUMMOND, Esq., R.S.A., F.S.A. Scot.

On my first visit to the island, in 1868, I found the cathedral and nunnery in a most neglected condition. As to the cathedral, outside there were all round heaps of stone and lime, which from time to time had fallen from the crumbling walls, and had been allowed to remain just as they had tumbled, and were overgrown with rank weeds of all sorts; while inside, the chapter-house and other places were in a state about which the less said the better. At Reilag Oran the same disregard to order was everywhere visible, the very turf growing over some of the most interesting monuments to the thickness of some inches. At the nunnery things were in the same state.

On a second visit, in 1870, matters were much as I found them formerly,—still the broken-down wall at the cathedral, to allow the cattle of the innkeeper free admission, the enclosure having been let to him for grazing purposes; but I am happy to say that in July last, when I was there, a great change had taken place for the better. At the cathedral there was no more cattle grazing, the opening in the wall had been built up, the heaps of stones and rubbish cleared away from about the foundations of the buildings, the grass now growing up to the walls, and it was a pleasure to wander about the place to study the ruins. Around St Oran's Chapel the same order prevailed,—no weeds and no confusion, but the grass kept trim and neat by a person appointed for the purpose, though, oddly enough, not the person who acts as cicerone, which seems to a stranger a sort of anomalous arrangement and waste of labour, for surely both duties would be better done by one, who should be made responsible for the condition in which the ruins and ground surrounding them were kept.

At the nunnery, I am sorry to say, the same state exists as formerly—weeds rank and wild everywhere. As to the cathedral itself, much more than mere pointing is wanted; the east wall of the chancel is in a most dangerous state, being cracked in nearly its whole height, and unless something is done soon, it may get beyond repair. Other walls are in a dangerous state also, but as far as I could see this was the most serious.

The sculpture on the monuments in the West Highlands is generally looked upon as of a merely ornamental character, but as we study them the designs turn out an earnest symbolism full of deep meaning and suggestiveness, many of them hinting at the history of a life, or, at all events, some of the characteristic habits of the deceased. The most common emblem, as we might expect in the localities where they most abound, is the cross, which is sculptured in endless variety, the earliest being evidently that which was rudely cut into the stone or on the surface of the rock, as in Columba's cave at Loch Coalisport. Next came the simple Christian cross done in outline; a nimbus would next be added; and thus they would go on adding and adding until it became at times almost bewildering from the intricacy of tracery, which, however, always resulted in some beautiful form from the artful combination of graceful curves and foliage. After the cross the sword is the most numerous, and naturally so among a brave and warlike race. Galleys are of frequent occurrence in many varieties of build and modes of rigging. Hunting scenes are often represented, and designed with much spirit. In some localities you find a salmon pursued by an otter; on a slab at Kiels a seal and otter dispute the prize, the one having it by the head and the other by the tail; and a fragment of a slab having the same on it is, or was lately, at Kilchenzie.

Of womanly symbols the foremost are the shears. This has by some been thought typical of the Fates as cutting the thread of life, but there can be no doubt whatever as to its real meaning when thus represented. It is frequently figured at the nunnery at Iona, and on one stone two pairs are carved, touchingly hinting at two sisters or friends buried under the same stone. But there is surer evidence even than this on a slab at Kilchenzie. Here is a pair of shears beside a sword, and this inscription opposite—"Hic jacet Katarina" . . . the rest being illegible: the husband's name has been effaced. At Kilkeran there is the fragment of a cross on which the shears are carved, and above them, "Hec est crux Calani M'Heachurna et Katarina uxoris ejus." Other female emblems on these stones are the comb, the mirror, a book or missal, and the harp.

Of clerical emblems you have the cross combined with the sword. At Iona there are four of these. In one case the design is very marked, and, from the style of art, very early. The cross, which is very unusual in

form, occupies the centre of the design, and is divided into three parts with a base ; at one side the galley, of early build, and at the other the sword. My own reading of this has always been a great chief or warrior by sea and land, who, in his old age perhaps, forsook the world and turned priest or monk. At Kilmartin some such reading is suggested in a different way. The sword is represented in its full length, but the lines of it continued and finished as a cross. Another unusually fine slab at Iona has a small cross close by the handle of the sword, and whoever it may have been erected to, this emblem must have pointed to some good deed or incident in his life. But there is more on this stone—below the sword is a box or casket, strongly bound with iron or brass. This seems of easy explanation, as expressing money, and would likely be placed over a donor or founder. All the suggestions of the foregoing emblems, excepting the mermaid, seem of easy interpretation, but others are not so simple ; for instance, a griffin is sculptured on some of these crosses and slabs. The most appalling figure is on the Prior's Stone at Iona, in which he is horned, his paws converted into formidable talons ; he is flapping his wings ; heraldically he is rampant, being placed over the chalice, and apparently defending it from some imaginary foe. This is easily comprehended. The dragon is of frequent occurrence also on the shields of the chiefs. One of the strangest is at Killean, a nondescript animal having a goat's head, and only two legs at the hinder part of its body, the feet with large talons ; the creature is collared and chained up. This is of easy interpretation.

This style of ornamentation, although it disappeared from such memorials at the time of the Reformation, during the excitement against whatever savoured of Popery, has since been carried into everything Highland, even down to our own times, and has added much to the beauty of warlike accoutrements as well as ornamental articles, such as brooches. The leather of their targets is covered with it, often in beautiful design ; their powder-horns are most chastely engraved with it ; the handles of their dirks are carved elaborately with the twisting serpent-like pattern, and it has lately been discovered on a pair of bagpipes of the date 1409 or 1410. In the last-mentioned case the decoration is carved on the chanter and drones, and also engraved on the brass mountings. [The paper was profusely illustrated by drawings.]