

### III.

AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN SOME OF THE SYMBOLS ON THE SCULPTURED STONES OF SCOTLAND. BY THOMAS ARNOLD, Esq., ARCHITECT, CORR. MEM. S.A. SCOT.

[The scope and object of this paper, and the circumstances which have prevented its communication to the Society *in extenso*, are indicated in the following abstract, by Mr Arnold.]

This interpretation of the symbols which I have now the honour of laying before the Society arose through a careful examination and comparison of all the examples so admirably illustrated in Dr Stuart's splendid work, "The Sculptured Stones of Scotland." I had not then read his letterpress account of the stones (which is full of most valuable information), nor any of the numerous theories on the subject which had been written. Since that time I have read probably all that has been published on the subject, and carefully examined and revised all my conclusions, but have not seen any reason to doubt the general truth of the interpretation which I have given.

I have to regret that after giving much of my spare time and much study to the writing of a lengthened paper, going fully in detail into all the arguments and evidence which I could adduce in the discussion of this interesting subject, and in support of the conclusions given above, the paper, which had occupied some three months, was lost in London, and notwithstanding most diligent inquiries, has not been recovered.

The lost paper I intended to have laid before the Society at its first meeting. I now submit a short *résumé* of the paper, or rather the more important conclusions in it, and with it I send my first draft of the essay, which, though not at all so satisfactory in many respects as the missing one, yet goes over much the same ground and arguments.

It will be seen that I rely much on the artistic and technical evidences, and the analogy of treatment of similar primitive sculptures, because

with these my special knowledge best qualifies me to deal. It must be left for others more intimately familiar with the early literature and history of the period to attempt to fix the events which the stones commemorate. In the body of the paper I have touched on the importance of the sculptures as illustrating the famous school of Celtic ornamentation, &c., the source from which more than any other the special characteristics of Gothic art were afterwards developed.

The general conclusion of the inquiry is, that the stones on which these symbols occur were erected to commemorate departed chiefs or persons of distinction, and the "symbols" are primitive and conventional representations of the arms, armour, and ornaments distinctive of their rank, while others are religious or national or tribal emblems.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the heraldic and emblematic groups the stones are in many instances elaborately sculptured with figures illustrating chiefly important events, such as wars, treaties, and great huntings, from which very much is to be gathered as to the dress, manners, modes of fighting, &c. Then we have figures which represent various incidents in Biblical and early Church history, with figures of ecclesiastics, funeral rites, installations, enthronements, &c., and a few sculptures intended to teach primitive sacred beliefs, though these latter appear on those stones which from other reasons besides we can safely place amongst the latest.

As mere rudeness of design or workmanship is of itself no criterion of age, and the subjects sculptured have mostly yet to be assigned to history, we have to rely chiefly on the character of the ornamentation of the crosses, &c. Those that are simply outlined or rudely traced may or may not be most ancient. Yet from the uniformity of the arrangement and form of the objects, whether rudely or elaborately worked, the whole group of the sculptured stones may be safely assigned to a comparatively limited period.

[<sup>1</sup> That Mr Arnold's general conclusion may be compared with that of the author of the "Sculptured Stones of Scotland," the following extract is given from the preface to that magnificent work :—"The conclusion at which I arrive," says Dr Stuart, "is, that the symbols—the comb, mirror, books, brooches, 'spectacles,' 'crescents,' and associated figures, were all objects of personal ornament or use, and that when they appear on our pillar-stones they are to be regarded as symbols representing the dignity, office, or descent of individuals."—*Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Spalding Club), vol. ii. p. 30.]

From the districts in which the stones are mostly found, the character of the ornamentation, the style of the arms, dress, &c., it seems certain that they belong to the period during which the north-eastward portion of Scotland, the ancient Alban, was subjected from the ninth to the eleventh centuries to almost incessant inroads of the fierce semi-barbarous tribes, driven by necessity, tyranny, or adventure, from their Scandinavian homes.

This style of sculptured slabs no doubt became universal over the north-eastern districts, and would be continued down into much later times than those above named. In the Iona group the later mode of carving the objects in relief enabled the sculptor to reproduce with much greater fidelity the objects intended.