

II.

NOTICE OF A SCULPTURED SLAB FROM THE ISLAND OF BURRA,
SHETLAND. By GILBERT GOUDIE, F.S.A. Scot.

This unique monument, now safely deposited in the Museum of the Society, came under my eye in the course of investigations which I made in the Burra Isles on the occasion of a visit to Shetland in the month of July 1877. Richly sculptured as it is with a wheel-cross of elegant design, with interlaced ornamentation of Celtic pattern, and a variety of figure subjects carefully executed, it may be ranked among the foremost in interest of the Sculptured Stones of Scotland. As it lay, with the decorated side uppermost, at a short distance to the south of the church in the ancient churchyard at Pabil, it might have been noticed at any time by any one who chose to look for it, or who, chancing to observe it, had recognised its significance as a relic of Christian art from a period of remote antiquity. But from age to age it appears to have escaped notice. The parish clergymen who wrote the *Old* and the *New Statistical Accounts* of the district in the years 1799 and 1841 respectively, seem to have been unaware of its existence or of any other sculptured remains, nor is it noticed by any authors, natives or strangers, who have published accounts of the country from time to time, though the site is of more than ordinary interest ecclesiologically, from the fact of its having been occupied formerly by one of the towered churches of the north, of which that on the island of Egilsay in Orkney is the only preserved specimen, as will afterwards be shown. The stone has past memory marked the resting place of the members of the family of Mr John Inkster, Baptist missionary in the island. As usual in the case of such relics, it had been regarded as an importation, at some unknown period, from "the East." Beyond this no traditional idea appears to have been preserved regarding it.

I lost no time in communicating with the Misses Scott of Scalloway, to whose family and that of the Sinclairs of House, whom they lineally

represent, the islands of Burra have belonged for about four centuries.¹ These ladies at once most courteously gave me their consent to the removal of the stone for preservation here, and this has since been accomplished at the instance of Mr Lewis F.U. Garriock of Berry, through his agents in the isle. My own acknowledgments and the thanks of the Society are due to the Misses Scott and to Mr Garriock for their obliging co-operation in facilitating the final acquirement of the stone for the Society.

I. THE STONE AND ITS SCULPTURINGS.

The stone (fig. 1) is a slab of finely grained sandstone 6 feet 10 inches in length. The breadth of the upper portion, measured across the enclosing circle of the cross, is 1 foot 7½ inches. Towards the lower extremity the breadth is slightly contracted, the minimum breadth being 1 foot 5½ inches.

The thickness varies from 1½ to 2½ inches. The sculpturings are on one side only.

The sculpturings are formed by incised lines, with the exception of the four figures of ecclesiastics, in which case the whole of the back ground is recessed as well. In general terms, the sculpture consists of a cross at the top, having a short shaft which is flanked on either side by two ecclesiastical figures. Below this, and forming the base upon which the shaft rises, is a rectangular panel containing a grotesque animal; and at the bottom two figures, half man half bird in shape. The whole is boldly but carefully executed, and the drawing is characterised by no small degree of artistic precision.

The cross is enclosed within two circular incised lines, and is of the type known as Maltese. It is formed by intersecting arcs of circles, thus leaving four divisional spaces, *vesica* shaped, which are filled in with

¹ In 1527, when an attempt was made by the Earl of Caithness with a strong military force to invade the Earldom of Orkney, he was met by the Orcadians and Shetlanders, and defeated and slain in a pitched battle at Summerdale in Orkney. The Shetlanders were led on that occasion by Edward Sinclair of Strome, William Sinclair of House, and Oliver Sinclair of Hilwra [Havera]. See the *RESPITE* to them and others implicated, granted by King James V. in the Appendix to Barry's "History of Orkney," p. 496.

interlaced work, as are also the triangular spaces on either side below. The interlacements in the *vesica*-shaped spaces consist of circular rings and figures of 8 intertwined, and in each of the triangular spaces is the well known *triquetra* knot. The arms and shaft of the cross are left plain, with the exception of an incised pattern on the base of the shaft consisting of four inner loops encircled by two outer ones.

The four figures of ecclesiastics are arranged two on each side facing inwards towards the shaft. Each holds a crozier, of the *bacula* or staff shape, and two of them have what appears to be an oblong satchel slung over the shoulder. They are habited in cloaks, which reach to near the ankles, and have pointed hoods drawn over the heads.

The grotesque animal below is apparently purely conventional, but with a certain resemblance to a lion. The tongue protrudes and is curled round at the tip. The outline of the body is formed by a double incised line which curves round into spirals above each pair of the fore and hind legs. The tail is twisted forwards over the back, and is drawn with a single incised line, as are also the jaws and feet of the animal. The joints of the knees are empha-

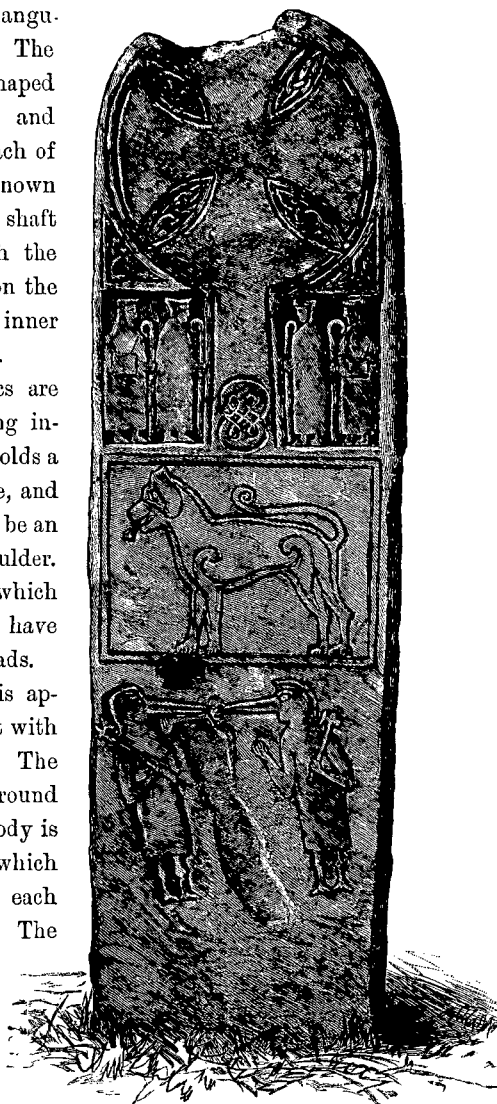


Fig. 1. Sculptured Slab from the Churchyard of Pabil, Island of Burra.

sized by cross strokes which terminate the double lines round the body, the outer line only being continued from the knee downwards. The five claws of the feet are plainly indicated. The whole is enclosed within a rectangular panel (formed by a double incised line) from the top of which springs the shaft of the cross.

The two semi-human figures at the base hold axes in one hand which rest on the shoulder, the other arm being upraised in each case. The chin, eye, and general form of the head is human, but in place of the human nose and mouth they are provided with elongated beaks. These beaks appear to meet together through the two eyes of a human head placed between them. The figures are clad in short tunics reaching about half way to the knee. The legs are apparently those of birds, three claws on each foot being perfectly distinct. Part of the stone is scaled away between the two figures, so that doubts may be raised as to whether the mask, into whose eyes the beaks are inserted, may not have been prolonged into a body. The two figures are not enclosed within any marginal lines, and below them is a blank space where the slab was probably inserted into a stone base, or into the ground. The surface of the back of the slab is irregular, and there is no evidence of its ever having been enriched with sculpturing.

I have confined myself in the foregoing to a simple description of the sculpturings; and I prefer not to enter upon the consideration of the symbolic character which certain of the figures may bear. That these had a meaning perfectly recognisable at the time need not be doubted, but, in the present state of our knowledge, any attempt to define this meaning here would be mere speculation.

There are only two stones known, in Scotland, on which the particular form of cross which we find on this stone occurs. These are, the stone on the roadside near Whithorn in Galloway,¹ perhaps the earliest Christian site in Scotland, and the elaborately sculptured stone from the island of Bressay in Shetland.²

¹ Sculptured Stones of Scotland, vol ii. p. 77.

² Sculptured Stones of Scotland, vol i. p. 95.

The points of resemblance to this latter are very marked. They are as follows:—(1) the interacements filling in the *vesica*-shaped spaces are almost identical in each case; so are also (2) the ecclesiastical figures on both stones, in their dress, hoods, croziers, and satchels. On the Bressay stone, as in that of Burra, there is (3) a conventional animal below the ecclesiastics with its tail curled over its back. There is also a general resemblance in the whole design, and in the arrangement of the figures. But the Bressay stone bears in addition a lengthened inscription in Oghamic characters, a cryptic form of monumental writing found only in early Celtic districts; and the strictly Celtic period in Shetland terminated in the ninth century.

It is important to observe that the localities in which these two stones were found are within a short distance of each other, the islands of Bressay and Burra being situated on the east and west sides respectively of the Shetland mainland, which is here attenuated to a breadth of not more than two miles, and both islands forming, with this intermediate portion of the mainland, a single ecclesiastical parish at the present day—Bressay, Burra, and Quarff.¹

It would therefore seem not improbable that both stones were erected by the same people, and near the same period.

The other stone referred to, that at Whithorn, is known to be of great age, both on account of its inscription, and of the monogram adopted by Constantine which appears on the paintings in the catacombs of Rome. The Welsh stones on which this form of cross appears are also of great age.² In the splendid Irish manuscript, the *Gospels of Durrow*, preserved in the Library of Trinity College, Dublin, there is a lion figure closely resembling the conventional animal on the Burra stone. It is the initial page of the book of St Mark.³ The spiral lines on the animal on the

¹ There is now a government church at Quarff, the minister having also Burra under his charge.

² These Welsh stones are at Dugoed (Westwood, *Lapidarium Wallie*, plate 59), at Capel Colman (*idem*, pl. 58), at Neverne (*idem*, pl. 61), and Llanfaglan (*idem*, pl. 81).

³ Fac-similes of the Miniatures and Ornaments of Anglo-Saxon and Irish Manuscripts, J. O. Westwood, 1868, plate 4, and p. 20.

Burra stone are also of the same character as those on the Burghhead bull-stones, and on the incised symbol stones of the Pictish district of the east of Scotland, which are generally considered among the earliest of our Christian monuments. There are one or two other points of resemblance to the sculpturings on Forfarshire stones which are striking. The fragment found during the restoration of St Vigean's Church, and figured in illustration of Mr Duke's paper (see "Proceedings" of the Society, vol. ix. plate 33, No. 14) bears a figure, with a pointed hood, precisely of the same character as the ecclesiastical figures on the Burra stone. Behind this figure is sculptured a crozier, also of the bacul or staff shape as on the Burra stone, side by side with the well-known double-disc symbol which is of early date and as yet of unknown meaning.

But whatever difficulty there may be in determining the age of the sculptured symbol-stones of the east of Scotland, there is, in the history of the Northern Isles, a pretty clearly defined limit as to the period within which sculptured or inscribed stones of the purely Celtic type could have

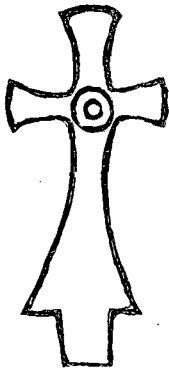


Fig. 2.

Incised Cross on a Slab at Papil.

been produced. The conquest of the islands by the Scandinavians in the latter part of the ninth century overthrew, if it did not actually obliterate, the early Celtic church in those islands. If, therefore, the date of this Burra monument is to be referred to a later period, it must be in consequence of a survival of the Celtic church in remote districts, notwithstanding the displacement of the Pictish race and their religion by the pagan Norsemen; or it must belong to the period when Christianity was revived in the islands in the beginning of the 11th century; but, in the latter case, the Celtic character of the ornamentation would require explanation, as a purely Scandinavian race and a new form of Christianity had then been established in the islands.

So far as I could ascertain there was no trace of any other sculptured stone in the churchyard at Papil, except one slab lying close by the monument already described. It is a slab of the same kind of stone, 5

feet $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches long by 1 foot $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches at its greatest breadth, bearing an incised cross of simple but graceful form, the character of which will be best understood from the accompanying figure (fig. 2). It is apparently of the same date as the other.

II. THE LOCALITY—BURRA ISLES.

In treating of an interesting relic like the Burra stone it may not be inappropriate, by way of further explanation, to refer briefly to the locality in which it was found.

The two isles of Burra (so called from a Pictish *Burgh* or *Broch*, once a conspicuous feature on the west isle) lie side by side on the western side of the Shetland mainland, south from the Bay of Scalloway. They are described by the late Dr Cowie as follows :—

“Southward from Trondra are the Burra Isles. Of these West Burra is the largest, being upwards of four miles long, but very narrow in proportion. East Burra, or House, is shorter, but of greater breadth in proportion to its length. A long stretch of water separates West Burra, on the one hand, from Trondra and House on the other. This narrow strait more resembles a river than a portion of the sea. It takes a meandering course, sometimes becoming narrow and constricted, and again expanding into wider pools, so that as his skiff bears the traveller down through the Sound of Burra, some fresh object of interest meets his eye on passing each projecting point. In one place the two islands of Burra approach so near to each other that they are connected by a wooden bridge, beneath which six-oared boats can pass. Owing to the presence of limestone the soil of Burra is very fertile, crops ripening here somewhat sooner than in the mainland. . . . The old church of Burra was adorned by a spire, but it has long since been removed.”¹

The modern writer ignores, or more probably was wholly unconscious of, the ancient ecclesiastical importance of these isles. Of this, however, we have unmistakable evidence, and a very striking relic in the sculptured stone which has been described.

¹ Shetland and its Inhabitants. By Robert Cowie, M.A., M.D.

The isle, now known as West Burra (in the churchyard of which, situated at the hamlet of Papil, the stone was found), was anciently termed, by way of pre-eminence, the *Kirk Isle*. The Rev. John Brand, writing in the year 1701, says that "the church here is very large, and hath a high steeple in it."¹ This is remarked most probably from Brand's own observation, or from information gathered by him, as nothing to the same effect is known to have been printed up to that time. Sir Robert Sibbald, in his "Description of the Isles of Orkney and Zetland," published in 1711, is more explicit. He says:—"Here (in the Kirk Isle) is a church, within a mile of the southmost end of the island, standing near to the sound side of *Burray* called *St Laurence Church* (built as it is reported, by the mid-most of the three *Norwegian Sisters*, the eldest having built the church of *Tingwall*, and the youngest sister the church of *Ireland*), the steeple whereof will be five or six stories high, though a little church, yet very fashionable, and its *Sanctum Sanctorum* (or Quire) yet remains."² Sir Robert goes on to state further that there is another chapel at *Brough*, near a mile and a half from the northmost end of this same island, but "how it is named, or by whom it was built it is not known; now it is become altogether ruinous."

This has all the appearance of being a narrative from Sibbald's personal knowledge; but on recently examining the Sibbald MSS. in the Advocates' Library, I found that the passage is quoted verbatim, without acknowledgment, from a manuscript bearing to be "A Geographical Description of the Island of Burray, 1654," and stated, in a later handwriting, to be "by Mr Hugh Leigh."³ Sir Robert Sibbald's work must be regarded in the light merely of a compilation derived from various sources previously unpublished; and his description of the church of Burra, while it cannot

¹ A Brief Description of Orkney, Zetland, Pightland Firth, and Caithness, 1701, p. 96.

² Description of the Islands of Orkney and Zetland, 1711.—Chapter third, the Description of Burray.

³ The Rev. Hugh Leigh, A.M., was presented to the parish of Bressay, Burra, and Quarff in 1672. He was suspended in 1702 for beating his wife, but reponed in 1704, and died in January 1714 (see *Fasti Ecclesie Scoticanæ*, part v. p. 423).

probably be accepted as an accurate account as at the date of his publication, is yet an indisputable testimony to the state of matters fifty or sixty years earlier, that is, in the middle of the seventeenth century. The traditional myth as to the Norwegian sisters, reported to have been such munificent church builders, need not be noticed.

It will be observed that, according to Sibbald, or rather to the Rev. Hugh Leigh, the church was dedicated to St Lawrence. This is confirmed by a legal document, more than a century earlier, now in my hands, but belonging to the county of Shetland. It is a charter of sale, dated 21st March 1547, by Ingabrocht Katrin's docther of Houll, to Gilbert Kaut of Brocht, of her two merk land in Houll. It bears to have been sealed "in sanct Lorence Kyrk of Burray."¹ This dedication to St Lawrence, the "Apostle of the Picts," is quite an appropriate one. Born, according to the Roman martyrology, in (619), he is reported to have laboured among the Angles in England and the Scoti in Ireland, and to have journeyed into Pictland, where he was visited by St Ternan; the chief field of his labours being the Mearns, where he is commemorated at Laurence-kirk.² We have already seen what a marked re-

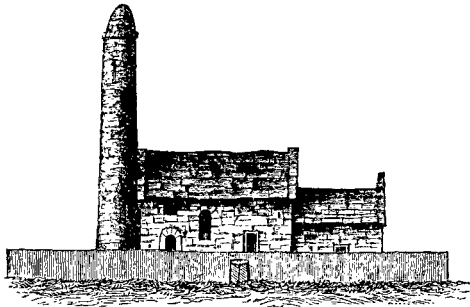


Fig. 3. Egilsay, Orkney. (From Hibbert's Engraving.)

semblance some of the figures on the Burra stone bear to the ancient sculpturings at St Vigeans in the Angus district.

From what has been observed, the presumption clearly is that the

¹ One of the witnesses is Sir Jhone Muray, curat of Bressay. The female name Ingabrocht is the *Ingibiory* of the Sagas, still to be found occasionally in the islands as *Inga*.

² Kalendars of Scottish Saints, p. 378.

church at Papil in West Burra, with its "high steeple," was one of that remarkable class of which one specimen is still, fortunately, preserved in the north—that in the island of Egilsay in Orkney, whose tower was originally probably at least 60 feet high, and still stands to a height of 48 feet.

The architectural features of this structure would lead to the inference of its having been erected probably as early as the eleventh century, if not earlier; and would point to its being of a kindred character to the round towers of Ireland and to the towers still in existence at Abernethy and Brechin in Scotland, which are also of an early and unrecorded date.

The towered churches of Shetland, which, as already mentioned, appear to have been three in number, at Burra, at Tingwall, and at Ireland in Dunrossness, may in all likelihood be referred to the same period. But whether this be so or not, there is little doubt that the site of the church at Papil, where the stone was found, was a sacred one from a still earlier period—from the earliest times of the Celtic church. The name Papil is strongly suggestive of this. The early chroniclers of Iceland and of Orkney and Shetland allude to the *Papæ* (from whom the names Papa and Papil, common in the north, are obviously derived), as the pioneers of the Christian faith in those regions in times so remote as apparently to have been coeval with the Celtic paganism which it eventually superseded. The *Landnámabók* of Iceland states that:—

"Before Iceland was colonised from Norway [A.D. 874], men were living there whom the Northmen called *Papað*, they were Christians, and it is thought they came over the sea from the west; for Irish books which were left behind by them, and bells and croziers, and other things were found after them, which seemed to indicate that they were west-men. These things were found in Papeya, towards the east, and in Papyli."¹

In the *Chronicon Norvegiæ*, an ancient work, presumably composed in Orkney, it is similarly stated:—

"These isles were at first inhabited by the Peti [Picts] and the Papæ. But in those days they were not named the Orkneys but the land of the

¹ See Orkneyinga Saga, Introduction, pp. xii., xiii.

Picts. . . . The Papæ were so called because of the white garments with which as clerics they were clothed ; whence in the Teutonic tongue all clerics are termed Papæ.”¹

Probably, therefore, as early as the seventh, eighth, or ninth century, Papil in Burra was a seat of these missionary clerics labouring among the Pictish islanders, and following the rules and order of the Culdee community in Iona, to whom in all likelihood they owed their origin. This early establishment would doubtless be overthrown, if not extinguished, by the torrent of Scandinavian paganism which swept over the islands towards the end of the ninth century. It must have been revived after the reintroduction of Christianity among the Norsemen at the beginning of the eleventh century ; and the handsome towered church would be reared at some early date thereafter, in place of the more humble edifice which had answered the requirements of a more primitive age and people, if indeed it was not itself a survival from that more early period. It is to be deplored that every trace of this structure has long since disappeared, as have the other towered churches in Shetland. For many years the place lay waste, except as the burying-ground of the district ; but recently the Church of Scotland has erected a neat chapel as near as may be to the site of the ancient edifice, and, so far, of the remains of the material of which it consisted. The only undoubted relic of the early ages is the sculptured monument which is the subject of this paper, and the other slab, charged with an incised cross, which still remains on the spot (fig. 2).

It only remains to be remarked in conclusion that, with perhaps the single exception of the spot in question, Papil, the nomenclature of the Celtic period in the Burra isles has entirely disappeared, the place names at the present day, where not modern, being altogether Scandinavian.

¹ The only known manuscript of the *Chronicon Norvegiæ* bears to have been the property, in 1554, of Robert Reid, Bishop of Orkney and Shetland, and is preserved at Panmure House. It was printed by the late Professor Munch of Christiania in his *Symbolæ ad Historiam Antiquiorum Rerum Norvegiarum*, 1850 (p. 8).