

III.

JOTTINGS IN MID-LOCHABER. BY PROFESSOR DUNS, D.D., F.S.A. SCOT.

The district within which the jottings were made, in the course of two months last summer, includes only that part of Lochaber which lies between the Spean on the north and the Nevis on the south. It is bounded on the west by the Lochy and Caledonian Canal, and on the east by the Nevis range of mountains. Upper Lochaber lies to the north of the Spean; Nether Lochaber to the south of the Nevis; and Mid-Lochaber, the area now under notice, between these. The district is thus comparatively small, and, though not so interesting archæologically as localities in the near neighbourhood, it presents a good many facts not unworthy of record. The main object I had in view in visiting it was the examination of its surface geology—its peat, its gravel heaps, its boulders, and the glaciation of its rocks. This, of course, could only be done in a very general way, because an exhaustive examination of any one of those topics would have taken much longer time than at my disposal for a look at them all.

Stones varying in weight from a pound or two to several tons are found in heaps in many parts of the district. The contour of these heaps, and the apparent regularity of the association of the stones of which they are composed, constantly suggest the question "Are they natural or artificial?" That the majority of them are only natural collections of boulders is not to be doubted. Probably, however, some of the heaps may have been appropriated for commemorative purposes, as we know single boulders have. In two instances collections of stones were met with at considerable heights on the mountain slopes, which seemed to point to human agency. I show to the Society the representation of two of the natural heaps, and also of a circle which might have been very easily and speedily formed from such a collection of stones as is seen in the second illustration. This circle occurs on the Nevis slope, at a height of 1200 feet, at least, between *Allt Coire au*

Lochain, the stream which drains the well-known Ben Nevis Lake—*Lochan Meall an t' Siudhe*—and the torrent to the east, *Allt a Mhuilinn*, into which the *Allt Coire au Lochain* falls, just before it reaches the Lochy. The circle stands near to, and as if under, the shadow of a huge boulder heap lying to the south. Its position is exceedingly grand and wild. The upright stones are of fine-grained mica schist, one being 3 feet and the other 3 feet 3 inches high from the surface of the ground. The stones of the circle are chiefly the granitic porphyrites and felstone porphyrites of the neighbourhood, forming a row 3 feet broad. The diameter of the circle within the stones is about 28 feet. The stones are all covered with hard grey lichens, just as are the great boulders which lie on the same slope.

Special and frequent inquiries were made as to the occurrence of stone implements in the district, but none were found. Those to whom I spoke had heard of their having been found. Some had seen them, but they had disappeared, because "the tinkers bought such things, and also the horns of all sorts found in the moss." It is curious to have those waifs spoken of in this connection, especially as they are characterised by habits which might enable us to picture those of the early wanderers from centres of population and civilisation, to whom we are indebted for the stone implements. Some actually burrow in a great gravel heap in an out-of-the-way place—the burrows being lined with branches and coarse grass. Near to one of these I noticed a horse fastened to a stake by means of a chain, whose links consisted of strong birch twigs twisted with some skill. (A specimen was shown.) In a so-called hut of this kind close by the roadside lay about a yard of iron chain joined to a bit of twig-rope, some broken crockery, and a black bottle. Outside was a large stone, on which one end of a branch was laid at an angle of about 40° to the horizon, and near to it a perfectly rounded lump of granite, as big as an ordinary curling stone, whose use was to break the branch for fuel. It ought, however, to be stated that this skill in utilizing the only material at hand is not limited to the tinkers. I noticed a most purpose-like gate, whose wooden bars were

fastened by wooden pegs, one of whose posts was a slab of mica schist, the other a rugged pine sapling, while twig chain was made to serve for hinge and fastening.

When on the hills lying on the south-east of Glen Nevis, I measured roughly the area enclosed by the remains of the walls of the vitrified fort Dundbhairdall, and found it to be about 170 feet from end to end ; breadth at broadest part a little way from one end, about 106 feet, and at the narrowest part, a short distance from the other end, 50 feet ; the whole enclosure, when measured around the top of the wall, is about 600 feet ; the thickness of the wall at present is 21 feet, and the highest part of that yet remaining is 3 feet 6 inches. The measurement is not very exact, as it was by paces, counting 3 feet for each pace. The view from this fort is a sufficient reward for the somewhat tough climb. Here, moreover, as in all the other vitrified forts I have visited, distinct marks of prismatic structure occur in many of the vitrified stones, a peculiarity pointed out by me some years ago to the Royal Physical Society. The prisms are at right angles to the surface of cooling. (Specimens were shown.)

Leaving the vitrified fort, and after taking a look at the huge boulder known as the rocking-stone, we pass the shepherd's house at the back of Glen Nevis farm, and a few minutes' walk along the foot of the hills brings us to Glen Nevis churchyard. This lonely burial-place is on a great gravel heap surrounded by beech trees, which a colony of rooks have appropriated for nesting. Here I noticed for the first time illustrations of a practice common all over the district. I refer to the use of natural waterworn or weathered stones of fantastic shapes, instead of artificially formed tombstones. These are placed at the head, or at the head and foot of the grave, presenting a very odd appearance. Some "rubbings" were taken from the usual tombstones. Two of them represent sand glasses ; one of them has a written scroll over it, with the legend in old letters—"AS RUNS THE GLASSE" (fig. 1). The other, which is more rudely carved, has no inscription. On a slab of dark slate is the incised figure of a plough placed on the stone vertically (fig. 2).

The other and more important rubbings now shown to the Society were made from tombstones in Kilmalie churchyard. The first to be noticed

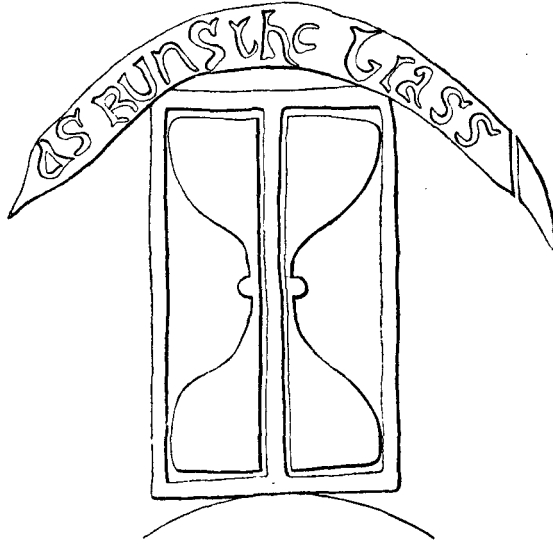


Fig. 1.

is an imperfect slab of arenaceous mica schist, 4 feet 6 inches by 1 foot 6 inches (fig. 3). It is surrounded by a double roll moulding with a single

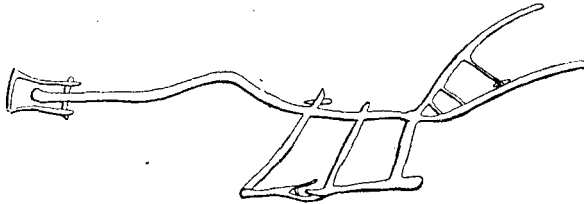


Fig. 2.

narrow ribbon ornament, and has on the centre of the surface a sword, on which is inscribed in rude letters "HER LYES DONALD MAKINEN." As

the slab has been broken across just where the guard of the sword begins to appear, we lose the style of the handle.¹ The ornamentation is a somewhat hard, intricate interlaced work. This foliaceous work springs, on one side, from the feet and the horns of a deer, carved with much spirit, and, on the other side, it is connected with what on the stone better than in the rubbing seemed to be the feet, tail, and ears of a wolf-like animal, as if in pursuit of the deer. But, looking at this part of the ornamentation in the light of several rubbings, I have once or twice asked, "Can what at first appeared so clearly to be the form of an animal be no more than an effect produced by the disposal of the plant ornament?" The inscription may be, most likely is, more recent than the sword, the blade being utilised to commemorate "Donald Makinen." The next slab is also of mica schist, and is 4 feet 3 inches in length and 1 foot 4 inches in breadth, a little narrower at the bottom than the top. It is surrounded by a triple roll moulding, so managed as to give a not ungraceful appearance to the whole stone. On the upper surface is a sword, guard very slightly recurved, with small bulbous knobs at the ends; pommel distinctly bulbous oval, or pear-shaped. The folia-

¹ This, as well as the feeling of its accompanying foliaceous work, have been exceedingly well indicated in the dotted parts above the break, by R. Thornton Shiells, Esq., F.S.A. Scot., to whom I am indebted for the admirable rendering of the rubbing, represented in fig. 3.

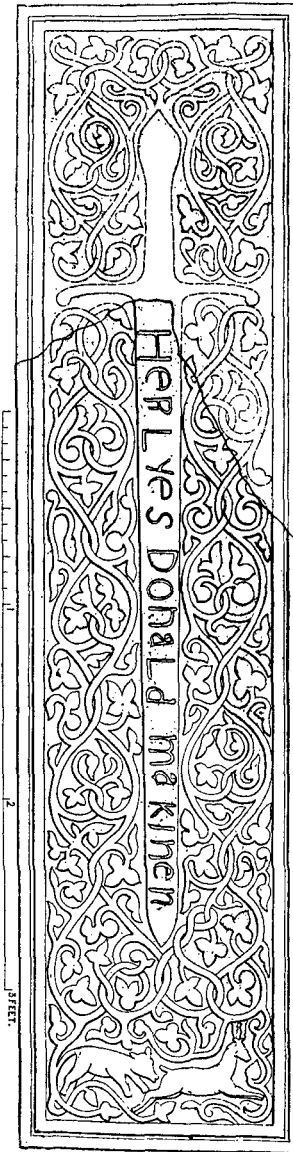


Fig. 3. Incised Slab, 6 feet in length.

geous work, which is much defaced, lies on one side of the surface, and, on the other side, the representation of an axe and of other articles too much defaced to be identified. The sword lies in the centre, and on the blade are traces of lettering.

A rubbing taken from the fragment of a slab of dark Ballachulish slate shows traces of an intricate and pretty foliageous ornament. Part of a sword is also seen, also with hints of lettering. "The Shears" is well marked, their point being at right angles to the sword. Does the significance of the shears vary with their position on the stone? Their positions might be arranged in groups, but whether or no the groups give data for inferences must be left with a query. This fragment has been long almost hid in the soil, from which I partially pulled it, but it kept the moisture to such an extent that only a very blurred rubbing could be got.

The next slab examined has had a piece broken off right across the centre, leaving only the two ends. Each piece is 1 foot 9 inches long and 1 foot 7 inches broad. The missing part may have had two figure-filled niches, corresponding to those shown in the rubbing. If so, the whole length would have been only a little more than 5 feet. On what remains we have a canopy in decorated Gothic, with basal niches, in which are two figures, one of which seems to represent a female, bearing in her hand what may be a mirror. The other also holds something, too much defaced to be made out. The whole slab has been surrounded by a broad band with an inscription now illegible. Traces of a good deal of painstaking tasteful work occur on this slab. This is seen both in the ornaments of the pointed arches and also on other parts of the stone, as, for example, in the tassels which depend from rosettes at the sides of the Corbel. On looking, at a short distance, across the slab, when the sun was shining brightly on it, a curious feature appeared. It will be seen that the straight lines are off the plumb. Now, when looked at as indicated, the effect of this was to give an appearance of perspective to the carving, and to bring out a pictorial effect. Was this intentional? If so, then it is not likely that the present position of the slab was its original one.

I refer only to another slab which is of arenaceous mica schist, and is more than 5 feet in length. On its upper surface is a recumbent figure wearing a pointed basinet much defaced.

When notice was given of these "Jottings" it was my intention to say something about the present state of the ruins of Tor and Inverlochry old castles, and to refer to the huge boulder in Glen Nevis, known as "The Stone of Council"—a gathering place of the Camerons at critical times in the history of the clan--and to "Claggan," or the skulls, all famous in the district in connection with feuds between Camerons and Campbells and Macdonalds. But I soon found that a knowledge of Gaelic is indispensable to one who would gather up the threads of tradition and weave them into an historical narrative, with the help of Gaelic names for natural objects and the Gaelic names of places. Enough, however, was ascertained to show that in this, as in other out-of-the-way districts of our land, there are fields of rich promise in this department waiting for investigation by capable workers. The aged, in whose memory local traditions are as clear and definite as the facts of written history, are passing away, and, even in these remote localities, a new generation is rising far too busy with positive knowledge to care much for traditional lore.

I was frequently informed that charred trunks of trees, charred bits of wood, and the horns of deer and oxen, had been found at the bottom of, or deep down in, Corpach Moss, and was directed to one place where some water-soaked burnt wood was seen, but there was nothing to warrant the assumption that it had been charred before the moss began to grow. There is a local tradition that the whole area of this moss was once forest, which had been burnt down to banish or to destroy the wolves. A like tradition used to be met with in Annandale with reference to Lochar Moss. The horns were sought for in vain. The only information elicited was, that they had been bought by the tinkers and taken out of the district. The remains of trees are not uncommon, covered with peat to the depth of several, in one case 6, feet. The growth of the peat must at some spots have been comparatively rapid.

The root and part of the trunk of a birch (*Betula alba*) are exposed in a section on the "black moor," lying upon coarse gravel and sand, the thickness of the peat above them being 3 feet, yet the bark is still white.

A word, in conclusion, as to cairns. A general impression prevails that these heaps of loose stones have always been made to cover the remains of the dead, and when these are not found, it is often concluded that the cairn has been rifled. But there is abundant proof in this district, that they may have only been heaps commemorative of the day of burial and in honour of the dead. It is still customary, when the distance between the home of the deceased and the burial place necessitates one or more halts, for the mourners to raise heaps at the halting places, the size of the heap being in proportion to the local estimate of the worth of the departed. A good illustration of this occurs near Auchindall, on the roadside between Fort-William and Spean Bridge.