

X.

NOTES ON THE ANTIQUITIES OF THE ISLAND OF TIREE.

By J. SANDS.

Crotagan.—All around the coast of Tiree, wherever there are rocks about, or a little above, high-water mark, groups of cup-shaped cavities catch the eye, and excite the curiosity of the stranger. On inquiring their purpose, I was informed that they were made in old times for pounding limpets in, that the latter might be thrown into the sea to attract sillocks to the spot. It is altogether incredible that people who had no more important end in view than to prepare a lure for sillocks, would have undertaken the enormous labour of making so many holes in rocks of such excessive hardness. The gneiss of Tiree is so tough and unworkable, that a mason was occupied for eighty-five hours in dressing one of the outside stones of the first course of the Skerryvore lighthouse, and after four courses were laid, the Tiree gneiss was abandoned for the granite of Mull.¹ Besides, many of the holes, even when situated on rocks suitable for fishing, are to be found in most inconvenient places for pounding limpets,—on awkward heights, and in out-of-the-way corners. Some of the *crotagan* are, moreover, to be seen on rocks beside the sea, but high and dry, and where no sillocks ever come. I have no doubt that some of these cups are often used for the humble purpose mentioned; but I have come to the conclusion that the *crotagan* are a relic of the ancient Celtic mythology—that they belong to the period of the sculptured stones, and probably embody all that was known of astronomy in that time.

Crotagan are in the vast majority of cases to be found on rocks projecting into the sea, or on rocky islets close to the shore, and probably had some connection with fishing. Fish appear, judging from the sculptured stones, to have played an important part in old Celtic mythology. But *crotagan* are to be seen, although rarely, at a considerable

¹ Stevenson's *Skerryvore*, p. 125.

distance from the sea, and in that case they are, so far as I have observed, close to streams and to old burial-grounds. At a place called Forincair, two miles from the sea at least, there is a rocky hillock on which is a group of crotagan. There is one so situated at Hynish. It is about 200 yards from the sea. Adjacent to a brook and to an ancient burial-ground at Soroby, two points of a rock crop through the grass, each displaying a cup-shaped or basin-shaped cavity.

With some remarkable exceptions, which I may on some future day make the subject of a paper, crotagan are formed of threes placed in straight lines.

Duns.—There are twenty duns, or ancient forts, in Tiree, it is said, but I have only seen eight, and examined two. I spent days and weeks in digging at the dun called the *Cleit* and at that called the *Dun 'a Nighean*, or fort of the girls. The former is situated on a craggy eminence, and the latter on a peninsulated rock. In both I found relics of similar character. Bones of small sheep, short-horned cattle, and of swine were abundant. I found many tusks of boars—one of them measuring, although the point seems to have been rubbed off, seven inches in length. Large quantities of limpet and periwinkle shells were amongst the rubbish, which lay to a depth of four and five feet on the floors of the citadels, and on the sides of the rocks. I found a *crotag* and pestle which had been used for grinding (as I infer from the smoothness of the cavity), and not for pounding grain. This shows that the ancient tenants of those forts used meal to a certain extent. Probably they subsisted principally upon fish, as the inhabitants of Tiree do at this date; but of course no proof of this remains. In both forts I found pieces of the bones of a whale bearing the marks of a tool on the ends. I found no implements of bronze or of iron, and I think if such had been used, I could scarcely have failed to discover a specimen. Iron, when in a state of corrosion, here enters into combination with the sand, and forms a strong sheath which would last to eternity. I found innumerable flakes of stone—many of them ground flat on one side, which had apparently

been used as saws and knives; I found a stone hammer, and two pieces of bone that may have been the heads of spears. Fragments of pottery were innumerable. Every dish seems to have been decorated, and some with great taste and delicacy. The patterns are various, although the zigzag predominates. I found three clay whorls in the *Dun 'a Nighean*. In the *cleit*, and near the surface, I found a bit of a deer's horn, with a cross rudely cut upon it. It looks as if it had been made to hang from the neck.

These duns, in the popular imagination, are all connected with Ossian's heroes, and I have had some difficulty in convincing the people that I am not in search of gold. There is a rhyme which says that Fionn left his gold in *Dun Shiatar*, which is situated near Hynish.

Churches.—There are now only four ancient churches in Tiree, all of them in ruins, although some others have been demolished within the memory of man.¹ The existing churches are as follows:—

1. Teampull Pharig at *Ceann-a-mhara*, of which only part of the east gable and a foot or two (in height) of the walls and west end remain. Externally it measures 32 feet 6 inches in length, and 17 feet 8 inches in breadth. A stone, with a cross incised upon it, which has been built into the east gable, is somewhat remarkable, as it has not been placed erect, but on its side, and probably marked a grave before it was incorporated into the wall of the chapel. Two stones with crosses lay amongst the ruins. Nine paces from the Teampull, a building that looks like a fort rises about 3 feet high amidst a jungle of weeds. A cavity in a rock some 50 yards from the chapel is called the *Dabhach Pharig*, or Patrick's Vat. It is about 2 feet in diameter, and tradition says that

¹ The Rev. Archibald M'Coll, when writing the account of his united parish of Tiree and Coll, for the Statistical Survey in 1794, says:—"There are fifteen remains of old chapels or churches, at some of which are burying-grounds and crosses still to be seen." The Rev. Dr. Reeves, in an elaborate account of the ecclesiastical remains of Tiree, printed in the second volume of the *Ulster Journal* (pp. 233-244), enumerates the sites of thirteen churches in Tiree, one in Gunna, and ten in Coll.

when the water is baled out of this reservoir, a shower immediately and miraculously falls and fills it again.

2. Cilcoinneach, or Kenneth Church, is situated at the west side of the island. It measures externally 33 feet in length and 18 feet in width. It is in pretty good preservation. The two gables are almost entire, and the two side walls, although much shattered, are nearly the original height. It has been rudely but strongly built. The lime, mingled with coarse sand and gravel, is as hard as iron. None of the stones have been dressed, and the rounded arch of the doorway shows the most primitive masonry. The winds of winter play mischievous tricks with the sand here, which has been thrown up into hillocks some 15 feet in height, and scooped out into proportionate hollows; and human bones, mingled with shards of rough pottery, are scattered about in all directions. Cartloads of bones have been removed to pits at a distance.

3. Kirkapoll.—Here there are two ancient churches, called the Big Church and the Little Church, within a hundred yards of each other. Both look very old, and both are in a state of wonderful preservation. The Big Church measures externally 45 feet 9 inches in length, and 24 feet 5 inches in width. The walls are 3 feet 9 inches thick. A huge gap like an arch has been made in the east end, and attempts have been made to quarry the stones on the south side. This church has two windows and a door on that side, and there is another door at the west end. The arches of the door and windows have been formed with stones shaped by nature only, and the result is more picturesque than elegant. The Little Church differs little from the big one. The masonry is equally rough and strong, and the arches alike artless. It measures 29 feet in length, and 16 feet 5 inches in width externally. It is lighted by two small windows on the north and south sides near to the east end. There is a low and narrow door, only 1 foot 10 inches wide, on the south side near the west end. This little chapel is built upon a rocky hillock. The floor is just as it was made by nature, ridges of gneiss rising several inches above the level.

Soroby.—Within the memory of man, the walls of a church stood in

the churchyard of Soroby, but it was razed to the ground, and the stones were used to build the churchyard wall. There are five fine old tombstones in this burial-ground. About fifty yards south-west from this graveyard is a more ancient one, which was used until lately for the interment of suicides and unbaptized children. Here the two symbols referred to in my remarks on crotagan are to be seen. But about a hundred yards to the south-east, a still older cemetery was discovered about ten years ago. Some men engaged in excavating the ground for a road found a number of cists containing bones and clay vessels. I spent a day in digging at the same spot, but only found two cists with a little bone dust in them.

At Hynish there is a meadow still called the *Cladh beag*, or little burial-ground, where a chapel once stood; but the last farmer was a practical man, and used the church and tombstones to build stables and byres with. A stone with a cross on it is still to be seen forming part of the pavement at the farm-steading. On digging I discovered some of the mortar and stones of this ancient chapel.

At *Cnoc-a-Cloich* (mentioned by Dr. Reeves) I dug and found part of the east gable of a chapel. The wall is $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick, and it is at least 3 feet high. I shall refer to this ancient cemetery in a future paper, as some important inferences are to be drawn from it. It helps me to guess the date of an adjacent prehistoric stratum—if exposed by the blowing away of the sand.