

## III.

NOTICE OF CROSSES FOUND AT ST NINIAN'S CAVE, GLASSERTON,  
WIGTOWNSHIRE. BY CHRISTOPHER N. JOHNSTON, ADVOCATE.

Some two miles to the west of Boroughhead, in the parish of Glassertou, Wigtownshire, the steep line of cliffs which girds the coast is abruptly broken by the slopes of a wooded valley. The spot is a lonely and picturesque one; and from the heights above the prospect includes the cliffs of the Cumberland coast, the slopes of the Isle of Man, the distant mountains of Ireland, and the savage rocks that gird the Mull of Galloway. On the east side of the creek, which is known as Port-Castle, there is a recess amongst the rocks, where, says a weird tradition—the origin and significance of which have always been to me equally mysterious—the devil hanged his mother. The tourist's path, however, lies to the west, where the slopes of the valley again give place to precipitous rocks. A scramble of two or three hundred yards over the stones, and then a climb of some twenty feet above high-water mark, brings him to the mouth of the famous cave of St Ninian, the patron saint of Galloway. The cave is a fissure in the rocks, broadest at the mouth, and with walls sloping inwards and upwards, so that both at the end and the roof they meet at an acute angle.<sup>1</sup> The entrance looks towards the south, directly facing the sea. The floor of the cave, which slopes a foot or two downwards from the mouth, is covered with stones and rubbish. Some ten years ago, when I first knew the place, the remains of an old wall across the mouth of the cave were clearly discernible, but these have since fallen down inwards into the cave. A few names and dates are carved upon the walls. A date of the seventeenth century is only about a foot from the ground, and from this circumstance some natives of the district have concluded that at that time the floor of the cave

<sup>1</sup> The exact dimensions of the cave I did not ascertain, but I think that I am not far from the mark when I give its breadth at the mouth as from 8 to 10 feet, its length about 25 feet, and its height 10 to 15 feet.

must have been much lower, and that the cave has since been filled up with rubbish. I should much doubt this, however, for, even to the very end of the cave, the floor is covered with large and heavy stones, which could hardly have accumulated there by chance, even in the course of two centuries, and it is difficult to see what purpose it could have served any one to bring them there. I examined a large number of these stones, and on several of them I found inscriptions, amongst others one bearing to be of the seventeenth century.

Until recent years there was nothing except the name of the cave, and a vague tradition current in the district, to suggest that it had ever afforded shelter to a worthier guest than the rock pigeon. But the tradition which ascribed ecclesiastical associations to the place received a few years ago singular confirmation, by the discovery of a small cross carved upon a rock a few yards in front of the cave. When I first knew the spot, this cross, which, from long exposure to the weather, had become somewhat indistinct, was the only relic of antiquity known in connection with the cave. But a few months ago it occurred to a gamekeeper on the Glasserton estate to dig down a foot or two in the ground at the base of the rock. His enterprise was rewarded by the discovery, at depths ranging from a few inches to a couple of feet from the surface, of three more crosses, all very similar to each other and to the first-mentioned cross. The central and largest of these three crosses is so clearly chiselled, that it is difficult to believe that it is a relic of an almost forgotten age. This cross is perhaps the most perfect of the four, but unfortunately its lower limb is marred by a fissure or other geological movement in the rock. The third cross, which is on the south or sea-board side of the large one, is also very clearly chiselled. The fourth, on the cave side, is imperfect, and in part wholly untraceable. Whatever be their history, these crosses must all be of very considerable antiquity, for, although two of them show no signs of wear, the earth which formerly covered them had acquired all the consistency of ordinary soil. To the formation of this deposit we no doubt owe the preservation of these two crosses in their present form; indeed, these two contrast singularly, in regard to

their state of preservation, with the first discovered cross, which must have been exposed to the weather ever since it was chiselled. The fourth and imperfect cross must have been the best and longest sheltered from the weather of the four, and it is therefore difficult to account for its present state. I can only conjecture that if it were more than a rudimentary cross, it has been defaced by detrition of the rock through friction. I should have noted that whilst the three last discovered crosses are all nearly on the same level, and within a few inches of each other, the first mentioned is directly above them, a few feet from the ground. Whether the removal of the whole bank of earth, which has accumulated near the mouth of the cave, would reveal the presence of other crosses or relics of antiquity, it is difficult to conjecture. At all events, I was not so successful as the gamekeeper, for although I more than doubled the size of his excavation, I found nothing more.

The crosses are all more than six inches, and less than a foot in length, and the general design of all four is the same. I may explain that design thus. Describe a circle, accentuating the centre by a clearly indented dot. Then divide the circumference into eight equal segments, and on each alternate segment inscribe an arc of a circle, and obliterate the segment upon which the arc is so inscribed. We thus get a complete cross with four equal limbs. The shaft or lowest limb is then produced to double its length, and the work is complete. In all of them the complete cross, with the four equal limbs, is clearly traceable. This is particularly marked in the large central cross, which is a perfect cross without the extension of the lowest limb.

I have now to describe a larger, and, as it seems to me, a more interesting piece of sculpture. Two crosses were discovered carved on a common sea boulder lying on the floor of the cave, which had probably hitherto escaped observation through the boulders having been built into the old wall across the mouth of the cave to which I formerly referred. On the discovery of the crosses, a couple of years ago, the stone was removed to Kidsdale, a farmhouse in the neighbourhood, where it is now preserved. It is common flat sea boulder, in shape somewhat like a coffin,

and about 20 inches in length, 4 to 8 in breadth, and 2 to 4 in thickness (see fig. 1).

On the upper portion of the stone there is a cross similar to those already described, but without the prolongation of the shaft. The artist here, too, has revealed his design, for the cross is inscribed within a complete circle cut in the stone. Within the circle the cross stands in high relief, having been formed by chiselling out portions of the stone, thus differing from the other crosses already described, which are mere outlines. Beneath the circle, and in contact with it, so that they have one line in common, is a cross almost exactly similar to those carved on the rocks, but with a longer proportional shaft. This cross is simply traced in outline, and does not stand out in relief as does the cross above it.

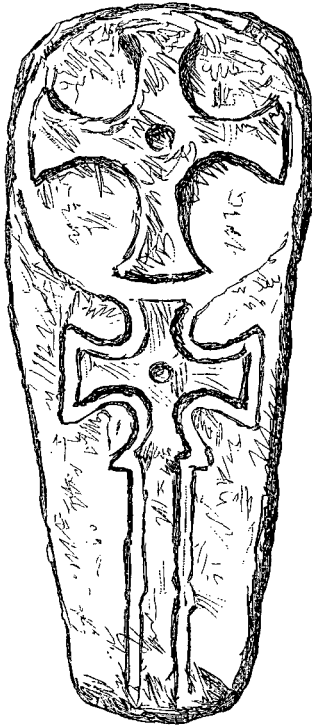


Fig. 1. Stone with Incised Crosses from St Ninian's Cave, Glasserton (20 inches in length).

Another stone (fig. 2), similarly sculptured, was discovered some time ago, and has fortunately been secured for the National Collection in the Society's Museum, having been presented by Robert Johnstone Stewart, Esq. of Glasserton, through Arthur Mitchell, M.D., LL.D., Vice-President of the Society, on the occasion of a recent visit by the latter to the cave.

This stone measures 25 inches in length,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches in greatest breadth, and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches in thickness. It presents the peculiarity of having two crosses incised on one of its faces, which have a general resemblance to the two on the other stone, except that the upper cross is not contained in a circle. Unfortunately a portion of one side

of the upper part of the stone is broken away, and the upper cross is thus incomplete.

I may note that in none of the crosses, either upon the rocks or upon the stone, was I able to detect the *chrisma*, although in two at least of the former there was a faint line which seemed to suggest it.

In conclusion, it is perhaps not irrelevant to remark, that in the discovery of these crosses we have a very striking confirmation of what was hitherto only a popular tradition. That St Ninian had anything to do with the cave which bears his name, or that the place had any historical associations, there was previously no evidence whatever. The story of the saint's retirement to this cave was merely a popular legend, unworthy to be credited by the critical antiquarian. Now, however, the rocks themselves have supplied conclusive evidence, not certainly that the cave was once tenanted by St Ninian, but at all events that the spot has ecclesiastical associations of high antiquity. That being clearly established, popular tradition ascribing those associations to St Ninian, who undoubtedly resided, and built a church in the immediate neighbourhood—and there being no evidence to the contrary, we are, I think, warranted

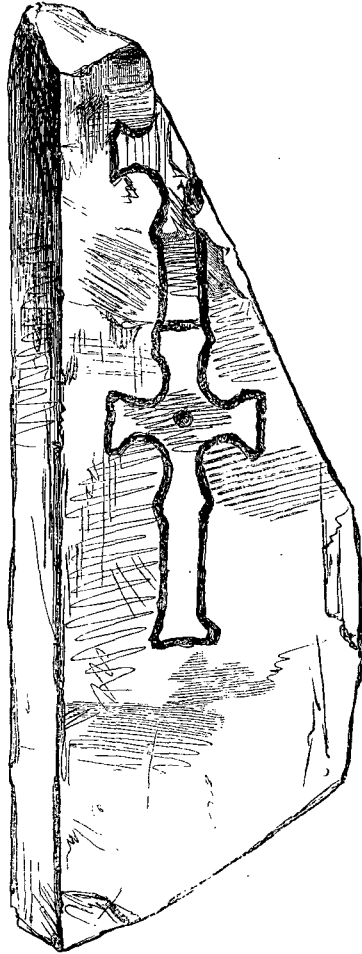


Fig. 2. Stone with Incised Crosses, from St Ninian's Cave, Glasserton (25 inches in length).

in concluding that in some way—to us unknown—this cleft in the jagged rocks which now bears his name was associated with the life's work of the great saint of Galloway.