

II.

ON WHITE PEBBLES IN CONNECTION WITH PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN
 BURIALS, A SEEMING SURVIVAL OF AN ANCIENT BURIAL CUSTOM.
 BY ARTHUR MITCHELL, M.D., LL.D., VICE PRESIDENT.

There is a fact revealed in the explorations of the cairns of Argyllshire to which I desire to direct attention. I refer to the repeated occurrence of white quartz pebbles, both in the chambers or cists which these cairns contain, and also in the urns which are found in such chambers or cists. It will be sufficient, I think, to show that the occurrence of white stones in these positions is not accidental, if I give briefly the relevant facts from the records of the examinations of the Achnacree cairn, the cairns near Crinan, and the cairn at Kilchoan. These examinations were made by Dr Angus Smith, Canon Greenwell, and the Rev. Mr Mapleton.

Cairn at Achnacree.

Dr R. Angus Smith, in his account of the exploration of the tripartite chambered cairn at Achnacree, given in chapter xviii. of his *Lock Etive and the Sons of Uisnach* (London, 1879), says that on entering the innermost chamber "the first thing that struck the eye was a row of quartz pebbles, larger than a walnut; these were arranged on the ledge of the lower granite block of the east side. When we looked into the dark chamber from the outside they shone as if illuminated, showing how clean they had remained. They are rounded and not broken."¹ In the loose soil at the bottom of this chamber, but above the natural surface of the ground, there was an urn with a white pebble in it like those just referred to as found on a ledge in the wall of the chamber.²

In the outermost of the three chambers in this cairn there were also found six white quartz pebbles arranged on a ledge—four in one part and

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 221.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 223.

two a little separate, and in the urn found in this chamber there were three white pebbles.¹

The burials in this cairn are accepted as belonging to the Stone Age ; and they were burials after cremation.

Cairns near Crinan.

In 1865 Canon Greenwell made a careful examination of a large chambered cairn on Largie Farm, about a mile south of Kilmartin, and he found in the south compartment, among the dark matter and burnt bones, great numbers of broken² quartz pebbles and several fragments of flint. He says—"The number of quartz pebbles purposely broken was very great;" and he adds—"They must have been placed there with some intention, and probably possessed a symbolic meaning. In other districts flint chippings are the usual accompaniments of interments, and it is possible that the flint and quartz pebbles had the same significance."³

In the same year he examined a large cairn at Duncraig, and among the clay, gravel, and sand, which nearly filled a cist in it, he found calcined bones, charcoal, an urn, and a few flint chippings.⁴ In a second cist in the same cairn he also found an urn, burnt bones, and flint chippings.⁵

In a cist connected with a cairn at Rudle, he found an urn and a thumb flint.⁶ At the bottom of several of the chambers and cists which were in or below the cairns examined by Canon Greenwell in this district, he found regularly formed pavements of small rounded pebbles.⁷

The flint chippings referred to, he says, were of the chertzose flint found in Ireland.

The primary burials in all these cairns were of the Stone Age after cremation. Later burials of unburnt bodies, however, occurred in them.

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 225.

² In the Achnacree cairn the pebbles were not broken.

³ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, vol. vi. p. 343, *note*.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, vol. vi. p. 347.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 347.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 350.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 343, 345, 349.

Cairn at Kilchoan.

This tripartite chambered cairn was examined by the Rev. R. J. Mapleton in 1864. In the first compartment, that namely nearest the entrance, he found burnt bones, manufactured flint implements, and flint chips. In the second compartment he also found burnt bones and flint flakes. In the third compartment he found in an urn seven well-finished flint implements, flakes and chips of flint, burnt and unburnt bones, and charcoal.

In all the three compartments broken quartz pebbles were found, and Mr Mapleton notes that they could hardly have come there by accident.¹

Cairn near Lochnell.

In alluding to this cairn Dr Angus Smith says that Mr Mapleton has often found quartz pebbles in urns and cists in the county of Argyll, and sometimes far from quartz rock.²

So much for the ancient burial custom which the exploration of these Argyllshire cairns seems to have revealed.

I have now to notice the occurrence in the same county of what may possibly be a survival of it.

In December last I visited the old burial-ground near Inveraray, called Kilmalew or Kilmalduff, and I noticed that eight of the graves in it had white quartz stones or pebbles on them. These stones varied in size from that of a walnut to that of the fist, and the number on each grave varied from 3 to 35. Usually there were from 8 to 12. Some of the stones were water-worn or rounded—most of them perhaps—but others were more or less angular. They were either placed irregularly in groups on the grave itself, or in a line along the foot of the stone at the head of the grave, when there was such a stone. All the graves on

¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, vol. vi. pp. 354, 355.

² *Loch Etive and the Sons of Uisnach*, p. 225. Dr Smith tells us that Dr Wilson mentions twenty-five urns having been found on the Cathkin hills, each with its face downwards and a quartz stone under it.

which I found them had been recently opened, that is, there had been interments in them at periods varying from a couple of years to a month or two.

When I noticed what I have described, it brought to my mind what I have stated about the exploration of the Argyllshire cairns. An intelligent old fisherman lives near the burial-ground, and I took him to it, and showed him the stones on the graves. He at once said that it was still, and had been as long as he remembered, a customary thing with Inveraray people to place white stones on the graves of their friends. He did not know if it was customary in other districts, and he did not think it was done with any definite meaning. It was just a practice, and that was all he could say about it. I afterwards heard that this old man's daughters had placed white stones on the grave of their mother.

I am far from asserting that the burial custom which I found at Kilmalew is a survival of the old pagan custom revealed on the exploration of the Argyll cairns; but I am safe to say that many things are accepted as survivals with less probability.

It is quite possible that these white pebbles are placed on graves simply because they are regarded as pretty, just as they are placed for that reason on the window sills of cottages, round garden walls, or on garden rockeries. Flowers are planted on graves and wreaths laid on them as the result of the same feeling. It gives pleasure to survivors to decorate the graves of those they loved in life—of those whose memory they cherish; and they do this in various ways according to their position and culture. The presence of the white pebbles in urns and cists may also have its origin in these human feelings. Their being put into graves, instead of on them, makes little if it makes any difference. Indeed, we bury flowers with the dead, as well as plant and lay them on their graves. This view of the matter would still leave what I saw at Kilmalew as a survival of an old custom, but not as a survival in the way that term is commonly understood. It would merely mean that, while in many things great changes have occurred since the Stone Age, human nature has survived with its essentials unchanged. It would only mean that the pagans—the so-called savages—who in the remote Stone Age burnt their dead and

buried them in the great cairn at Achmacree, had feelings of affection for their departed friends, like those of the Christian and civilised people who in our day bury their dead without cremation in Kilmalew ; and more than this, it would mean that they took very much the same way of expressing those feelings of affection.

I do not wish to press the view I have now propounded as correct, I merely suggest it as a possibly correct view, but I add with confidence that it would be very difficult to show that it is not possibly correct.

It is, of course, a more interesting or rather a more sensational view, which finds in the Kilmalew custom a survival, in the ordinary sense, of the pagan custom, that is, a continuation of it without any knowledge of such a connection on the part of those who practise it. Many of the generally accepted survivals of this class rest on a weaker basis of probability.

The first view involves no symbolism in the custom. In the second, however, there may have been a symbolism in it in pagan times, which is lost now. A possible symbolism may easily be imagined. Guesses in such matters are not often of much use, but it will show what I point at if I indicate some directions in which such stones in connection with burials might become symbols. For instance, from the fact that a spark can be obtained from a quartz stone, a symbol may easily enough have been evolved. This quality of the stones chosen for burial with the dead appears to have been desired, if we may so conclude from the fact that flint flakes seem sometimes to have taken the place of, and at other times to have been associated with, quartz pebbles in Stone Age cairn burials both in Argyllshire and elsewhere. The whiteness of the quartz stone, again, could easily become symbolic. White shells might yield that symbolism, or there may possibly have been some custom among our pagan ancestors like that among the Greeks which made the white pebble a token of innocence or acquittal.

The present custom, however, may in no way be tied to any ancient custom ; that is, there may have been a complete break between the pagan and the Christian practice, and the Kilmalew custom, as I saw it, may have been Christian from its outset. And there may have been

a deep and well-acknowledged symbolism in it at its starting, though there is no symbolism in it now. Is it not possible, for instance, that long ago, or as late perhaps as the days of *the Kilmalew Prophet*, that the quartz pebble was placed on the Christian's grave as the white stone, with a new name written on it, which is to be given to him that overcometh (Rev. ii. 17)?

With this I conclude. A great deal has been written about survivals—a great deal that is interesting and useful. But in the discussion of them a marvellous credulity is often shown, and something like a voluntary blindness to all explanations except that which suits some theory.