

I.

NOTICE OF THE EXCAVATION OF ST NINIAN'S CAVE, PARISH OF GLASSERTON, WIGTOWNSHIRE. BY SIR HERBERT EUSTACE MAXWELL, BART., M.P., F.S.A. SCOT.

There is a cave on the shore of Glasserton, about three miles from the Cathedral of St Martin at Whithorn, and an equal distance from the chapel at the Isle, which is supposed to occupy the site of the original building raised by St Ninian, who brought masons from Tours,¹ A.D. 397. To this cave local tradition has long assigned the honour of having been the retreat chosen by St Ninian for purposes of prayer and meditation. Symson² refers to it; and in the *Lives of the Saints* (Toovey, London), pp. 131, 132, the tradition is mentioned.

The general aspect of the cliffs and shore is westerly, but the cave opens to the south, in an angle formed by the projecting cliff with the shingly beach which stretches across the mouth of Physgil Glen. It is situated about 25 feet above the present high-water limit, and has been excavated in the Lower Silurian greywacke rocks by the action of the

¹ "Beatus Ninianus a sancto (Martino) cementarios sibi dari postulavit, propositum sibi esse asserens, sicut sancte Romanæ ecclesiæ fidem, ita et mores in construendis ecclesiis, ecclesiasticisque officiis constituendis, imitari."—"Vita Niniani," *Historians of Scotland*, p. 143.

² *A Large Description of Galloway*, by Andrew Symson, Minister of Kirkcubright, 1864, p. 15.

waves of a sea which, in a bygone geological period, washed a raised beach, of which portions remain in various places along the coast of Wigtownshire. The cave is hollowed out in a line of fault in the contorted bedding of the rock.

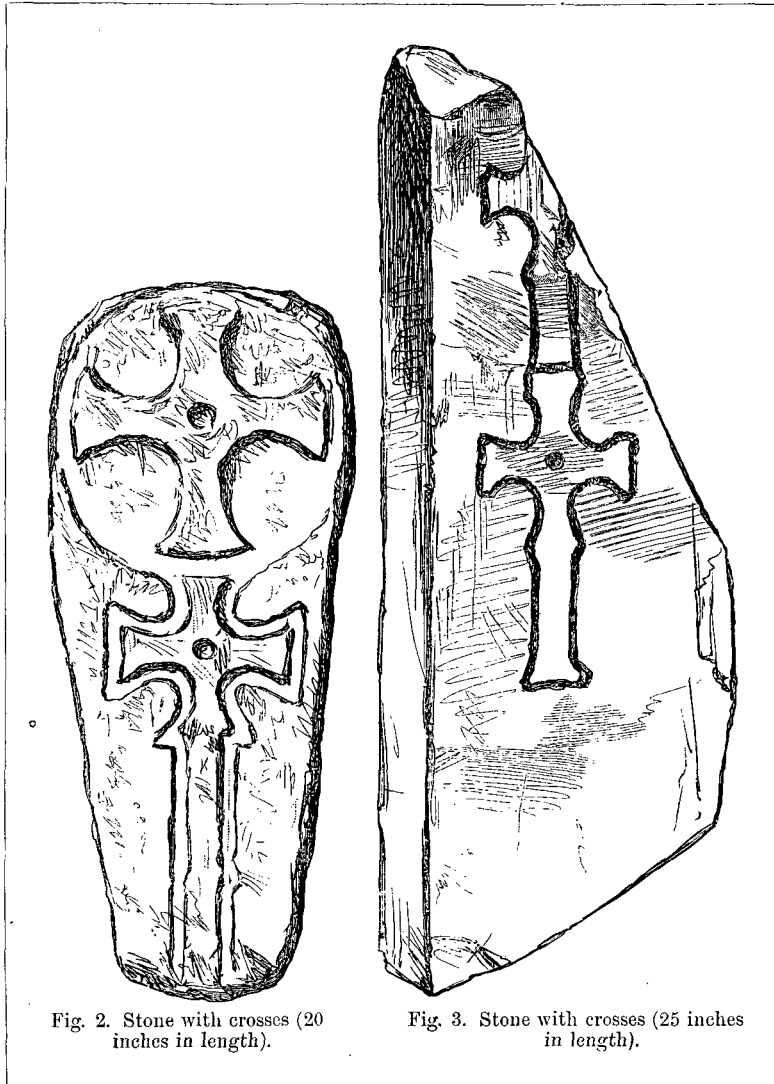
In 1871, it was visited by the late Dean Stanley of Westminster, who was then on a visit at Monreith, and was preparing his *Lectures*



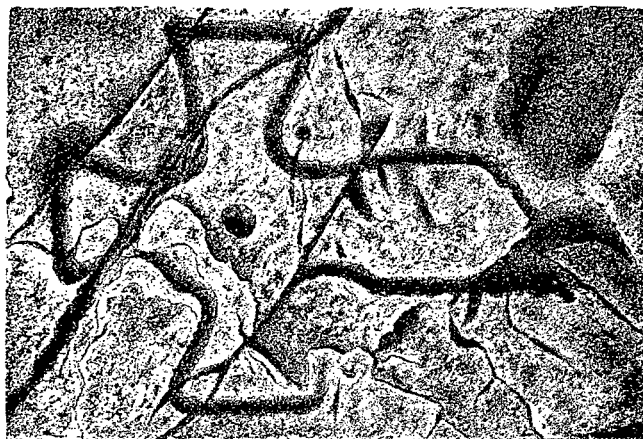
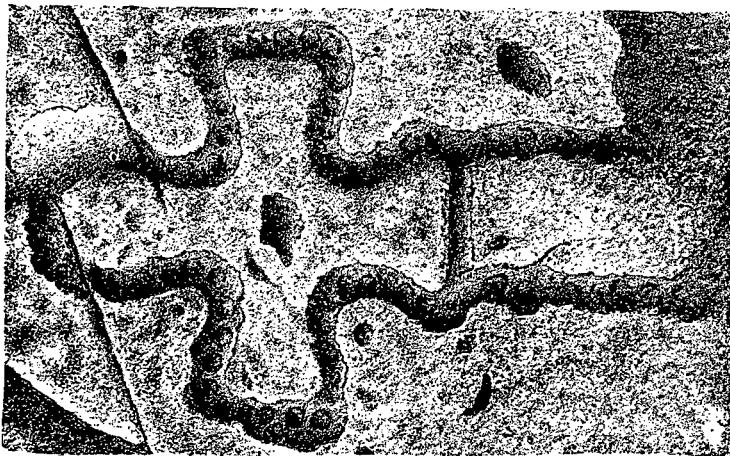
Fig. 1. Incised Cross on the west side of the entrance to St Ninian's Cave.

on the *History of the Church of Scotland*. On that occasion Mrs Maxwell of Carruchan, being of the party, detected an incised cross (fig. 1) upon the rocks (at A on the ground plan, see fig. 7), at the west side of the entrance.¹ Since then no further traces of Christian work were

¹ "We can explore the cave called by his (St Ninian's) name, which opens from beneath the samphire covered cliff, undermined by the waves of Glenluce Bay; and on which a rudely carved cross still marks the original sanctity of the spot, where, following the practice of his master, St Martin of Tours, he may well have retired for his devotions."—Stanley's *Lectures on the Church of Scotland*. John Murray, London, 1872.



Figs. 2, 3. Stones bearing each a double incised Cross, found in St Ninian's Cave.



Figs. 4, 5. Crosses incised on the west side of St Ninian's Cave.

observed until last year (1883), when some members of Mr Nicholson in Kildale's family discovered, in or near the ruined wall which at some period had been built across the mouth of the cave, a stone bearing two incised crosses (fig. 2). This fresh discovery led to further desultory search by various persons. One other carved stone (fig. 3), also bearing two incised crosses, was found, and was presented by Mr Johnston Stewart to the Museum of Scottish Antiquities.¹ Then Mr Andrew Kerr, gamekeeper, dug away some of the cliff débris immediately under the cross discovered by Mrs Maxwell, and exposed two others (figs. 4, 5), of similar shape to the first, and a third imperfect, 2 feet 4 inches below the first, and in a horizontal line with each other, measuring 11 inches from centre to centre of each cross.



Fig. 6. Small Cross incised on the west side of St Ninian's Cave.

Twelve feet farther out, on the same side, there is a small cross of a different character (fig. 6), cut on the rock face.

On Monday, 2nd June 1884, in company with Mr Nicholson and Dr Douglas of Whithorn, I visited the cave, having with me also three working men. At that time the floor of the interior, though perfectly dry, was covered with rubbish, shingle, ashes of kelp-burning and picnic fires, pigeon and rat droppings, &c.

The wall at the mouth was partly exposed, but much dilapidated.

Between the group of incised crosses and the wall at the mouth of the cave, a distance of 27 feet, lay a huge mass of débris, earth and rocks, fallen from the cliffs above. In deciding where to commence operations we had to consider the relative probability of this mass having fallen before or after St Ninian's occupation. The fact that three

¹ These two stones with incised crosses were figured in the *Proceedings*, vol. v. (new series), pp. 320, 321, in a paper entitled "Notice of Crosses found in St Ninian's Cave, Glasserton, Wigtownshire," by Christopher N. Johnston, Advocate.

crosses had been exposed on the rock face by digging into this mass, proved that part of it, at all events, had fallen since the days of the saint.

Accordingly, we determined to commence a cutting through the mound and along the rock face, starting from the group of crosses above mentioned at A (see the annexed ground plan, fig. 7).

The first day's labour took us to B, where we reached a depth of 7 feet, without having gone down to the old cave floor. We had, however, reached a level, standing upon which a person could have cut the three lower crosses at A. At all depths, from 4 feet to 7, we found traces of fires, with wood cinders, bones, and limpet and whelk shells; showing that this part of the former cave had been occupied before and after successive falls of earth and rocks from the roof. This roof no longer exists beyond the limit marked by the old wall.

After proceeding 13 feet inwards at C, at a depth of 3 feet 6 inches, the end of a built stone drain was laid bare. A round stone lay at the mouth; the drain was carefully formed and packed, and water still ran freely through it. Its dimensions were—length, 14 feet 7 inches; width, 8 inches; depth, 6 inches.

Recommencing next morning, we followed this drain to its commencement at the mouth of the cave D. Here it was wider, built with larger stones, and covered with a heavy flag of greywacke. Resting on a large flat stone at E, buried under 18 inches of débris, and close to the upper end of the drain, was a large water-worn boulder, 19 inches longest horizontal diameter, 14 inches high, in which was cut a circular basin, 7 inches wide by 5 inches deep. A small rill, which falls over the mouth of the cave, descended straight upon this basin. The waste water, which otherwise would have run back into the cave, was carried away by the drain DC. Near it at F, 2 feet below the surface, a stone with incised cross was turned up.

The wall GG, was next cleared, and found to be built of dry stone, 28 inches thick. In clearing the rubbish some of the stones were so large that they had to be broken before being removed. Unfortunately, two large rectangular blocks were so treated and wheeled away before it was discovered that they were the two upper steps of a stair (H),

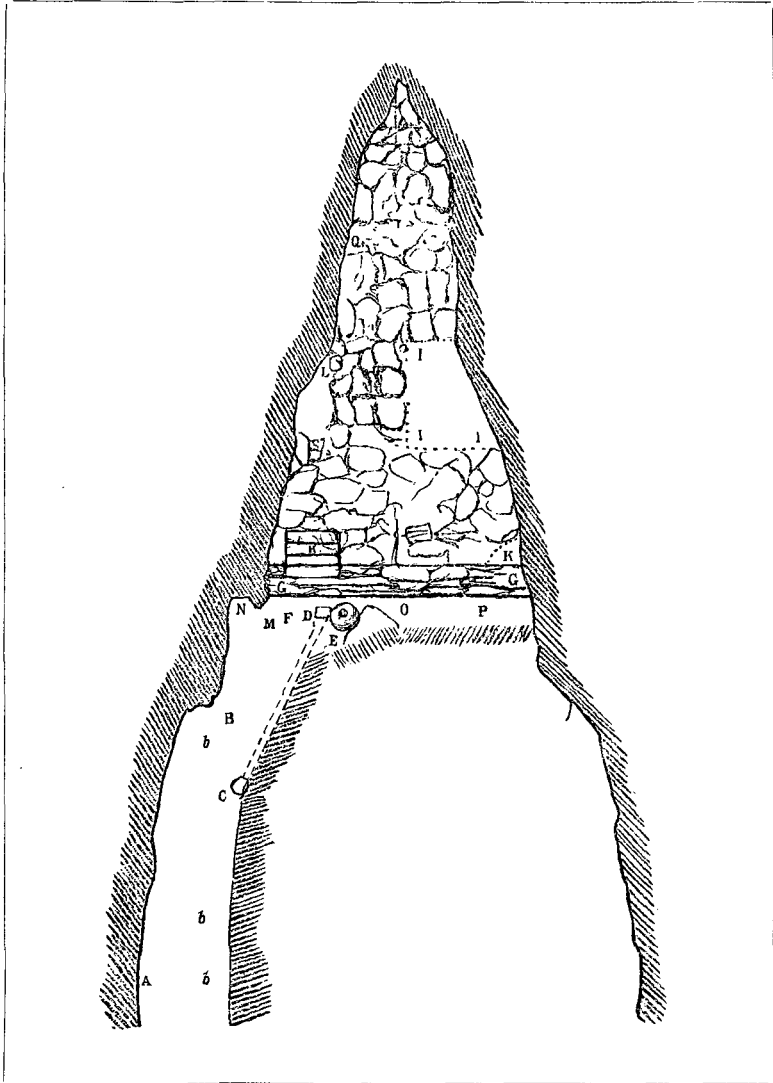


Fig. 7. Ground plan of St Ninian's Cave (scale, 10 feet to an inch).

descending into the cave. The two lower steps were kept *in situ*; the descent from the old threshold to the inner floor being 3 feet. On the rise of the lowest step, which is 2 feet 4 inches long, 1 foot 6 inches wide, and $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, there are three incised crosses, each surrounded by a circle (see fig. 12).

On the lowest step of the stair lay a rudely-carved stone, showing crosses of a peculiar shape (fig. 8), and farther, towards the inside, lay another stone engraved with a cross.

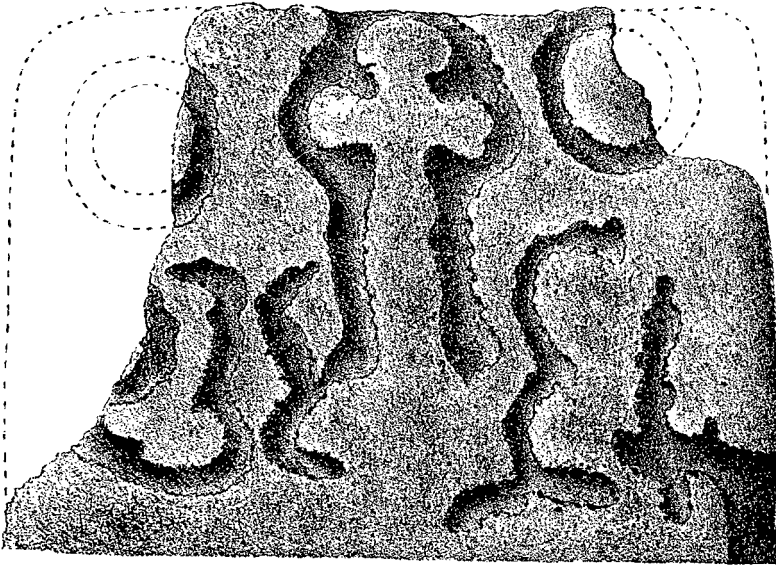


Fig. 8. Stone with incised Cross, found in St Ninian's Cave.

We then proceeded to clear out the rubbish in the cave, which, level with the top of the wall at the mouth, diminished to an average depth of 18 inches or 2 feet over the rest of the interior. The floor was found to be completely paved with flags throughout its entire length, 27 feet, except at one place, I I I, where there is a space, 6 feet by 3 to $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet, unpaved, but floored with hard beaten earth; and at K, near the

entrance, where there is an open depression for the escape of rill water which runs down the cave wall at this place, depositing stalagmite.

The pavement near the stair was fire-marked, and covered with wood ashes, bones, and shells.

Within the cave, at L, carved on the rock 3 feet above the pavement, is a faintly incised cross, similar in design and size to those at A outside.

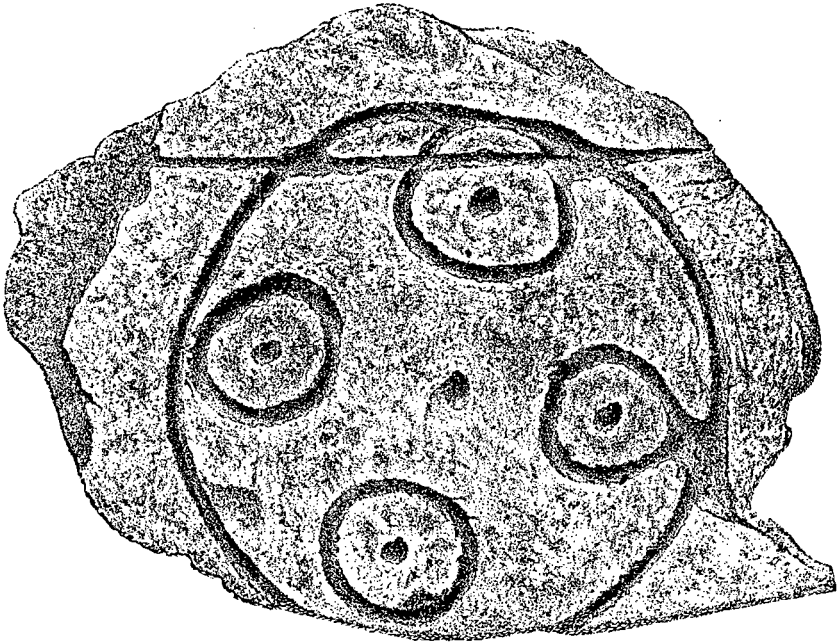


Fig. 9. Stone with incised Cross, found in St Ninian's Cave.

Upon the flagstone immediately beneath it is a rudely cut inscription, of which only the letters

S	A	N	C	T
N	I	P		

 can be traced. Farther in the cave, on the same side, a young lady, visiting the cave some days afterwards, descried another cross.

After sweeping the floor of the cave we returned to the excavation

outside. At a depth of 3 feet a stone with incised cross (fig. 9) was found at M. The angle in the solid rock at the entrance N had been used as a fireplace, and was filled with cinders, bones, and shells, covered with 2 or 3 feet of loose débris. Another stone (fig. 10) broken, with crosses incised, was turned up outside at O.

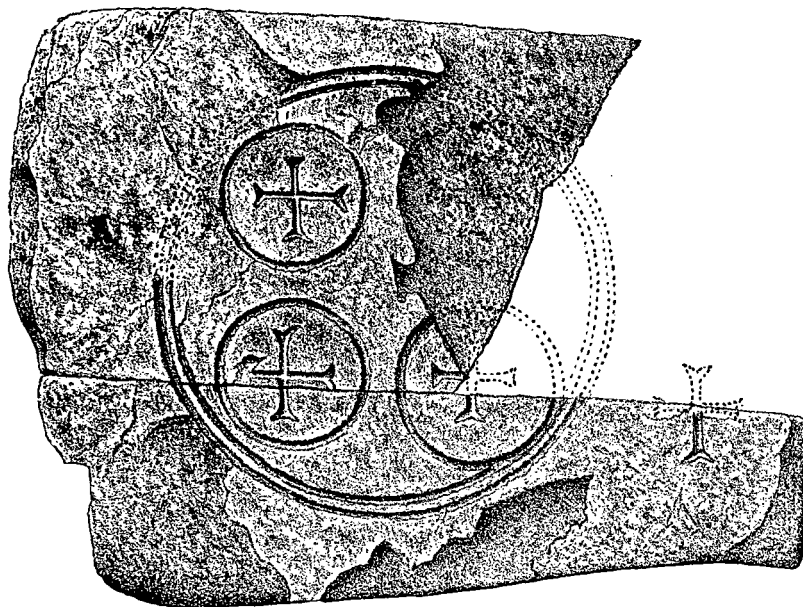


Fig. 10. Stone with incised Cross, found in St Ninian's Cave.

The following morning I had to go to London, leaving Mr Cochran-Patrick (who had joined us the previous day) and Dr Douglas to superintend the work. The outside of the wall was laid bare, but no trace of pavement corresponding to that inside was found. Fireplaces, bones, and shells continued to be noticed. Immediately outside the wall at P, 6 feet deep, below a large block of stone, human remains were discovered.

The skull was first noticed, then the right femur, left femur, scapula, clavicle, and tibia. The greater part of the skeleton was recovered.

The bones were much decayed, and the body was doubled up, the skull lying between the legs. No signs of regular interment, clothing, or weapons accompanied the remains.

Next day, June 6th, Mr Cochran-Patrick having left, Dr Douglas superintended the removal of the wall. Two stones were found built into it as material, showing that, at all events, the wall was a more modern structure than the date of the original use of the cave as a place of Christian retreat.

The wall was then carefully rebuilt, and subsequently Mr Johnston Stewart caused an iron railing with locked gate to be placed across the mouth of the cave. The carved stones are all deposited inside, and the place now forms an interesting object to visitors, the key of the gate being kept by Mr Nicholson at Kildale.

No manufactured relics other than the carved stones were found in the cave, except a copper farthing and some iron bolts and nails, the remains of recent temporary occupation. A small whetstone, 4 inches long, of water-worn sandstone, similar to several discovered in crannogs in the district, was also found.

Also Mr William Galloway, when engaged in executing the drawings which accompany this paper, found a water-worn beach stone, engraved with a small cross.

Whatever opinion may be formed as to the date of the pavement, the tradition connecting the cave with St Ninian has received notable confirmation by the discoveries made. Mr Cochran-Patrick was inclined to view the pavement as of a date long subsequent to St Ninian's occupation, and to infer from it the use of the cave as a chapel in mediæval times. There appears, however, to be a direct connection between the pavement and the crosses on the live rock, as shown by the inscribed stone in the pavement *immediately* under the cross within the cave. These crosses are all of an early design, and have been executed with a rude-pointed instrument. The fact that the wall contained several stones carved with crosses shows that it was built, or at least reconstructed, by persons regardless of the sacred emblem.¹ The slab form-

¹ Since writing this I have seen the head of an early Christian cross taken out of the wall of the chapter-house of the Abbey of Luce, where it had been used by

ing the lower step of the stair, carved with a triple cross (as shown in

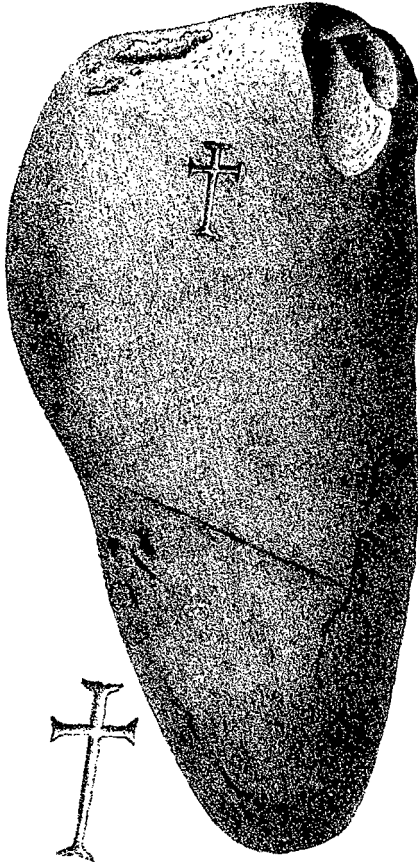


Fig. 11. Small Boulder with incised Cross, found in St Ninian's Cave.

the annexed illustration of the interior of the cave after excavation,

fourteenth century masons as ordinary building material. Later instances of such desecration of course are common enough, but this is an interesting instance of neglect of pristine sacred art in an ecclesiastical edifice.

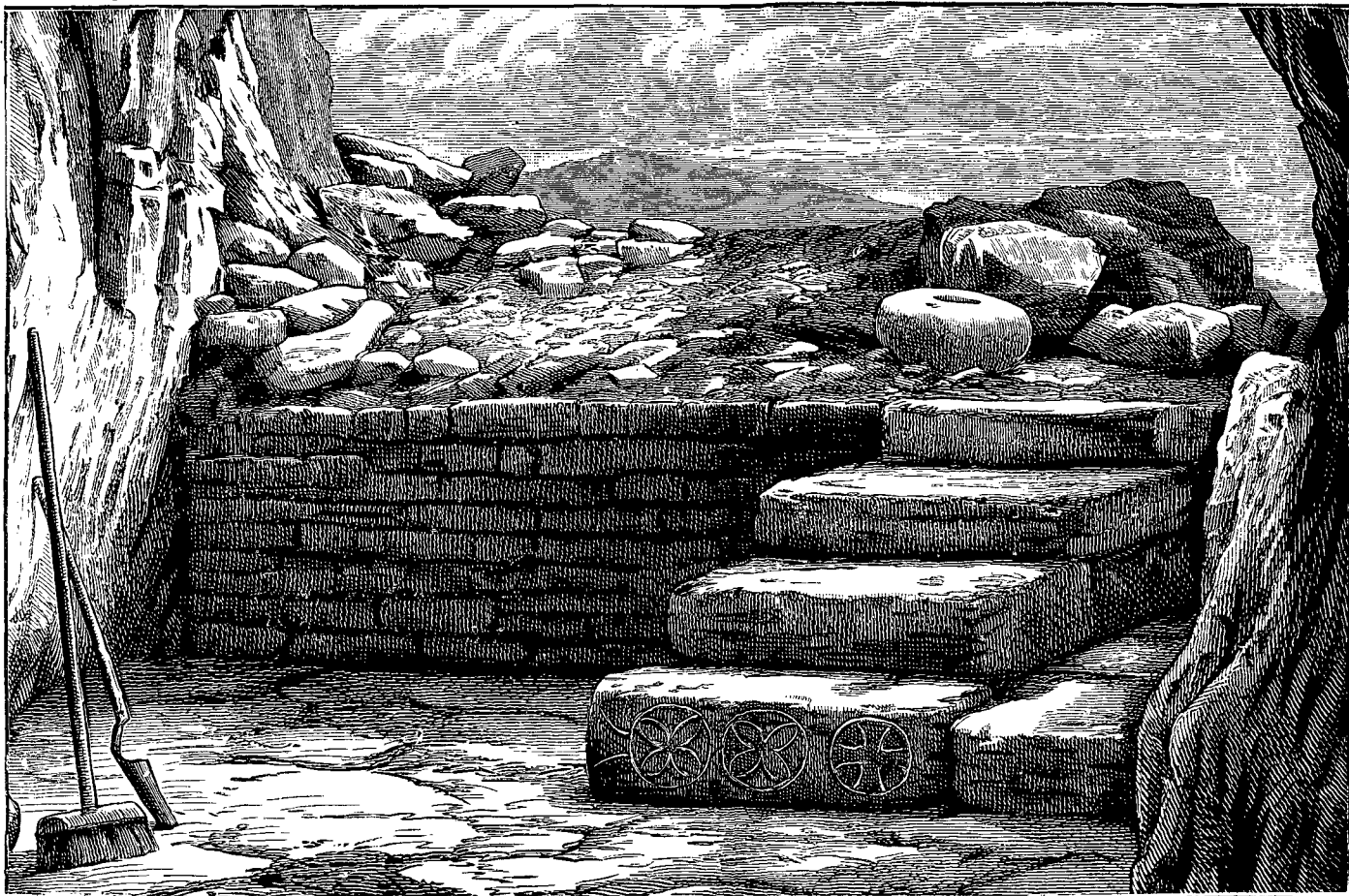


Fig. 12. St Ninian's Cave, Glasserton, Wigtownshire (*Interior View, looking outwards, after excavation.*)

fig. 12), may probably have been designed for special use of another kind ; at all events the pedestal or short shaft, indicated in the lower cross, appears to point to an intention of placing the stone erect. No doubt the cave was used from time to time by smugglers, kelp-burners, and others ; and some of the materials would be rearranged, though the general features remain the same.

It is natural, considering the sacred character of the place and the numerous sacred emblems displayed in it, to assign to the stone basin the function either of a baptismal font or a holy water stoup. Carefully arranged so as to receive the rill falling over the cave mouth, and with the drain provided to carry off the overflow water, it is difficult to disregard the possibility of its having been designed and used as a font. On the other hand, the convenience of a reservoir of pure water for domestic use would be apparent to any person inhabiting the cave. In the rocks surrounding St Medan's Cave in Kirkmaiden, on the opposite side of the Bay of Luce, there are several round pot-holes, in which the people used to bathe on the first Sunday in May at sunrise, a process which was considered an infallible cure for sundry diseases, but especially in the cases of "back-gane bairns." In these the water, being salt, would have been useless for domestic purposes, but may possibly have been used for baptismal purposes by the missionaries of the primitive church, an end for which this artificial basin may have been prepared by the successors of St Ninian. It must, however, have been placed in the position in which we found it *subsequently* to the fall of the greater part of the cliff débris ; the drain from it is cut through this débris, the bulk of which appears to have fallen *since* the three lower crosses at A were carved. If St Ninian used it as a font, which is at all events not impossible, it must have been rearranged in its present position during subsequent occupation. It is to be remembered that Galloway relapsed into paganism after St Ninian's day.

The traces of fire and organic remains, under and through the mass of fallen cave roof *outside* the existing cave, indicate that this cavern has long been used as a human habitation. No doubt, if the pavement were lifted, further similar remains would be found, but its destruction for such a purpose is much to be deprecated. The numerous caves,

some of them abounding in stalagma, which occur at the raised beach level all round the adjoining coast, form an interesting field for pre-historic research. No conjecture can be made as to the history of the human skeleton outside the wall; whether it was the subject of an ordinary contracted burial, without cist, and with the huge block of stone intentionally rolled over it, whether it belonged to a person accidentally killed by a fall of rock from above, or whether he was the victim of a long-forgotten outrage, is equally undeterminable. Only this is certain, that he died sufficiently long ago for all trace of clothing to have disappeared.

Our thanks are due to Mr Johnston Stewart for the facilities he readily afforded for exploration, and to Mr Nicholson for his hearty co-operation and assistance in the work.

Dr John Cleland, Professor of Anatomy in the University of Glasgow, has made the following report upon the bones found in the course of the excavation:—"These consist mainly of small portions of large bones, probably all of the ox. There is a distinct head of a right scapula of the ox, and a less characteristic fragment which may be from the same bone, also a right os calcis and portion of right ulna of ox. There are also a tail bone and a portion of lower part of humerus belonging to a smaller animal, probably sheep or goat. Lastly, there are a femur and part of a tibia of a small bird, possibly a jackdaw; and a portion of a shaft of femur (?) and part of a tibia of a larger bird, possibly a fowl or pheasant."¹

¹ Professor Cleland has recently made an interesting discovery among some bones forwarded to him during the present summer from St Medan's Cave above referred to. He pronounces one of them to be the lower two-thirds of a human tibia, "highly platyenic." The platyenic tibia is characteristic of a race of men light of frame and exceedingly swift of foot.