

## X.

NOTICE OF A CASKET OF CETACEAN BONE, CARVED WITH INTERLACED PATTERNS IN PANELS, EXHIBITED BY MISS DRYSDALE, KILRIE HOUSE, KIRKCALDY. BY JOSEPH ANDERSON, LL.D., ASSISTANT SECRETARY AND KEEPER OF THE MUSEUM.

The casket which is now exhibited, through the good offices of Mr Alexander Dowell, F.S.A. Scot., is the property of Miss Drysdale, Kilrie House, Kirkcaldy. It is interesting as being a very characteristic example of carved work in that style of interlacing ribbon patterns, which is chiefly exemplified in the later stages of Celtic art, before it gave way to the foliaceous work of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. The casket measures  $8\frac{3}{4}$  inches in length, 5 inches in width, and 3 inches in depth, the lid being slightly rounded and rising in the centre to about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch more than the depth at the four corners. It is constructed of six separate pieces, the top, bottom, ends, and sides being each formed of a single slab apparently of the dense outer table of some large cetacean bone. The top, the two sides, and the two ends, which have been slightly stained with a reddish colour,<sup>1</sup> are all of one age, and in the same state of keeping; the bottom is apparently of a different period, the bone being whiter, and having the outlines of a geometrical pattern rudely scratched on one portion of its surface.

The different parts of the casket are bound together by strong mountings of brass, about  $\frac{1}{8}$  of an inch in thickness, and somewhat more in depth, four of which,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches apart, are carried round it from front to back, where they are hinged for the opening of the lid, and then carried across the lid, the two middle ones being prolonged as hinged straps falling over the lock plate, which is also of brass, but

<sup>1</sup> In the work of Theophilus, the artist monk of the eleventh century, there is a recipe "De Rubricando Osse," for colouring bone with the root of the herb *rubrica*, by which "the bone of the elephant, or fish, or stag is made red."—Hendrie's *Translation of Theophilus*, London, 1847, p. 385.

roughly fastened to the front by rude iron nails. One of these hinged straps covers the keyhole, the other has carried the staple for the bolt of the lock. The brass mountings are riveted to the casket by round headed brass pins passing through flattened circular expansions at intervals of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches. The ends of the lid and the four corners of the casket are also protected by marginal slips of thin brass ornamented with a cut-out pattern suggestive of the style known as "egg and dart." One of these marginal endings on the lid is a plain slip of brass with iron pins.

By the arrangement of the mountings which hold the different parts of the casket together, the front, back, and cover are each divided into five oblong panels, the surfaces of which are covered with patterns of interlaced work carved in low relief. On the front of the casket (fig. 1), the four patterns are all different, three being angular and two curvilinear in the arrangement of the interlacing bands. Of the three

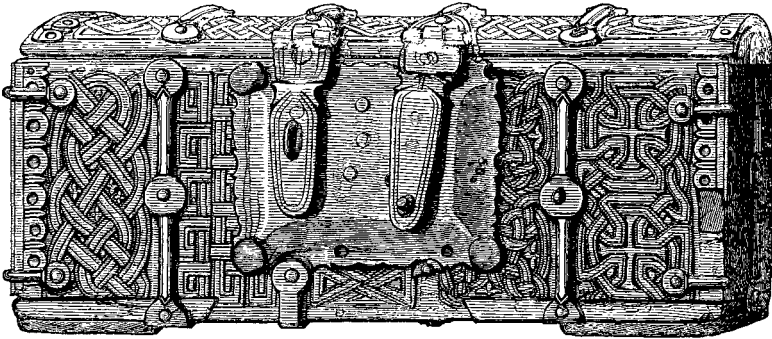


Fig. 1. Front of the Casket.

angularly disposed patterns, one has its loops in the form of rectangles placed parallel to the sides of the panel,<sup>1</sup> another (in the central panel) has its loops in the form of triangles, four of which are made to fill the rectangular space answering to a repeat of the completely involved knot

<sup>1</sup> Such rectangular interlacements are common in early Celtic MSS., as in the Book of Durrow, and they also occur on the twelfth century stone-work of the Isle of Man Crosses.

or figure in the pattern,<sup>1</sup> and the third has an octagon interlaced into the involutions of an endless band surrounding an equal armed cross with expanded ends.<sup>2</sup> Of the two curvilinear patterns, one is a simple plait-work of six strands, the other is a very complicated piece of knot-work partially hid by the edge of the lock plate.

Of the five panels on the exterior surface of the lid (fig. 2), the patterns in the first, third, and fifth are the same, but with slight modi-

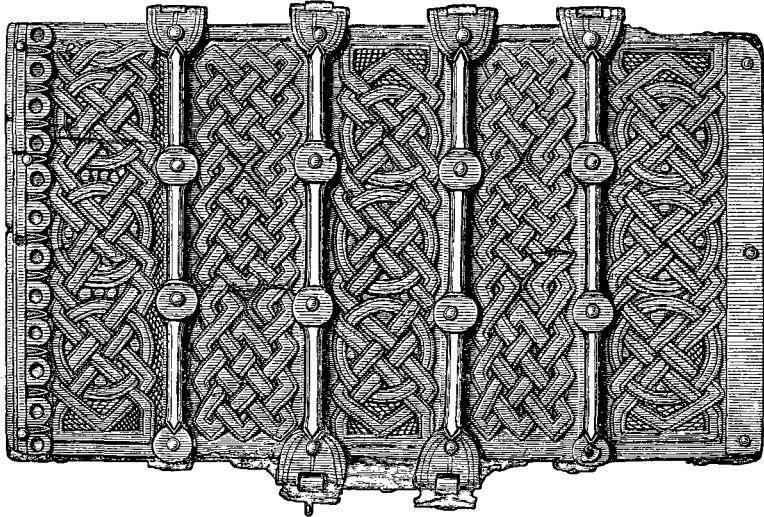


Fig. 2. Lid of the Casket.

fications, and the second and fourth are also similar to each other. Fundamentally, however, the designs are similar combinations of the interlacements of four strands, two on each side, crossing each other diagonally, with a circle interlaced round the crossings, which in the second and fourth panels is replaced by a square.

<sup>1</sup> These angular interlacements arranged so as to fill rectangular spaces are common on the Sculptured Stones of Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> This pattern is so uncommon that I do not remember to have seen it before. Mr J. Romilly Allen, to whom I sent the drawings of the casket, says:—"The most peculiar ornament which it presents, and one which I do not remember seeing elsewhere, is that with octagonal rings on the front."

Of the five panels on the back of the casket (fig. 3) the first and third are the same; while the second, fourth, and fifth are similar to each other, but not identical. They are all simple plaits of six strands; in the first and third panels the plait-work is open and curvilinear on the margins, with circles interlaced round the crossings where these are not marginal; in the other three panels the plait-work is close and angular at the margins.

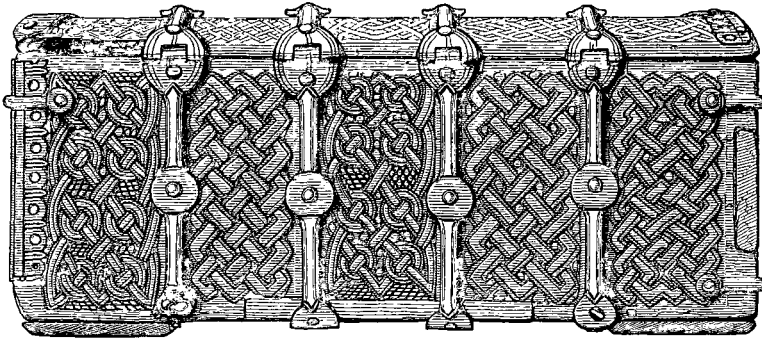


Fig. 3. Back of the Casket.

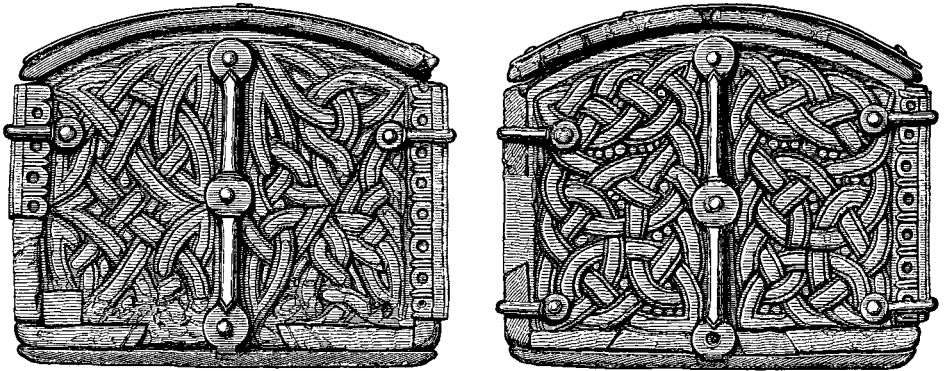
The ends of the casket (figs. 4, 5), each present two panels of curvilinear knot-work of complicated character similar to each other in the general design, but differing in the manner in which the interlacements are worked out.

The pattern of each panel has been worked out by itself separately, and in those cases in which the same pattern has been repeated on other panels, the spaces and measurements are not exactly the same, and occasionally there is even a slight difference in the arrangement of the interlacing bands. The spaces are sometimes filled up by small circular knobs or bosses, sometimes by hatched work, and occasionally by small trefoil-like ornaments which I have not seen elsewhere.

The special features of this casket are—(1) its material, (2) its mounting, and (3) its ornamentation. The material, cetacean bone, was frequently employed in the manufacture of caskets ornamented with

carved decoration in the Middle Ages. It was a good substitute for ivory, which was then rare and costly. Besides it afforded slabs of a much larger surface and more easily worked.

A casket in the Ducal Museum at Brunswick,<sup>1</sup> is also made of the bone of some cetaceous animal.<sup>2</sup> It is of the form common to many reliquaries, and specially characteristic of the shrines of the early Celtic Church—a rectangular box with a roof-like lid. The rectangular part measures 5 inches in length by  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches in width and  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height, the open of the lid rising to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches above the level of the opening. The casket is made of slips of bone fastened in mountings of bronze. Its use appears to have been that of a receptacle for the careful preservation of a small-sized MS., probably a Psalter. The decora-



Figs. 4, 5. Ends of the Casket.

tion of the exterior of the casket, which is in relief, is arranged in panels, the front showing fourteen, the back nine, and each of the ends one rectangular panel in the under part and a triangular panel in the gable of the roof-like lid. The lower panel in the middle of the front shows a pattern of the escaping and diverging spirals so characteristic of early

<sup>1</sup> *Stephen's Old Northern Runic Monuments*, vol. i. p. 378; *Kilkenny Arch. Journal*, vol. iv., New Series, 1863, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> *Kilkenny Journal*, vol. v. p. 16.

Celtic art; the others are filled with interlacing convolutions of nondescript beasts. A Runic inscription on the bottom of the casket seems to say that it was made by Nethi for St Eloi. The name Nethi is Old Irish. It occurs in the MS. Book of the Gospels which belonged to St Columba's Monastery of Durrow, on one of the blank leaves of which "Naenian, son of Nethi," has entered a prayer for himself. It occurs also in the Book of Dimma. Both these manuscripts are attributed to about the seventh century.

The now famous Northumbrian Casket,<sup>1</sup> presented to the British Museum by Mr Franks, is also of this material—"bone of a whale." This casket was used as a work-box by the ladies of a house in the department of Haut-Loire, in France, till it fell in pieces, and the carved top and three sides were then given to a local jeweller in exchange for a finger-ring. The casket measured 9 inches in length,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches in width, and  $5\frac{1}{8}$  inches in height. It bears on one end a carving in relief of Romulus and Remus suckled by the She-wolf. The other end is wanting, except a fragment. The front bears a curious representation of what has been styled the Delivery of the Head of John the Baptist to Herodias, and on another panel an equally curious rendering of the Adoration of the Magi. On the back are a series of representations around which are written in Runes the titles of the incidents portrayed—"Here fight Titus and the Jews. Here fly from Jerusalem its inhabitants." There is also a Runic inscription of four lines commemorating the capture of the whale from whose bones the casket was made.

The brass mounting of the Kilrie casket, however, indicates a considerably later date than that which has been assigned to some other caskets constructed in the same material. There is in the South Kensington Museum a casket, said to be of Byzantine workmanship of the twelfth or thirteenth century, which is similarly mounted with square rods of brass, having circular expansions at intervals for the rivets. Its ornamentation presents no interlaced work, consisting of figure-subjects only. Another casket of French workmanship of the fourteenth century, carved with scenes from mediæval romances, in the same museum, is

<sup>1</sup> Stephen's *Old Northern Runic Monuments*, vol. i. p. 470.

similarly mounted, and has a lockplate of the same construction as the Kilrie casket.<sup>1</sup>

In its decoration the Kilrie casket differs from all the known caskets of the same construction and material, inasmuch as it is ornamented with interlaced work, and that exclusively. The designs of the ornament are for the most part identical with those on the monumental stones of the Celtic area, and where they differ from the stone-work their counterparts are found in the decoration of Celtic manuscripts and metal-work.