

## X.

NOTE ON FRAGMENTS OF TWO SCULPTURED STONES OF CELTIC WORKMANSHIP FOUND IN THE CHURCHYARD OF TARBAT, EASTER ROSS. BY HUGH MILLER, F.S.A. SCOT., OF H.M. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY.

The two sculptured fragments here figured were dug up several years ago out of "gravel," or more correctly, dark, stony earth, in the churchyard of Tarbat, Ross-shire, at about six or seven feet below the surface. The larger fragment—a piece of greenish sandstone, bearing a handsome embossed fretwork in the form of a narrow, circular wreath (fig. 1)—was found near the eastern side of the one (northern) transept or transverse part of Tarbat church. The smaller fragment (fig. 3), with its fine ornament of divergent spirals, exquisitely chiselled in pale yellow sandstone, was dug up at a point about 4 yards from the east gable.<sup>1</sup> I had had occasion, in the course of my official survey of Easter Ross, to make inquiries about a collection of natural markings, probably the tracks of reptiles, from the sandstones of the Tarbat shore, which had been brought together by the late parish minister, and it came to my ears that the grave-digger had some "curious marked stones" in the vestry of the church. I found these sculptured fragments carefully laid on a window sill under the tower. My guide—the grave-digger—has every reason to be well satisfied with his own excellent judgment in having preserved them. His neighbours' opinion of the "curious marked stones" had, more than once, been candidly expressed to him; with the remonstrance,—“Ach, why would you be keeping them!”

The three sculptured stones of the same neighbourhood,—the famous obelisks of Shandwick, Hilton, and Nigg,—still preserved almost entire to an age that values them, have been described and figured repeatedly.—First, as it seems, they were described by the Rev. Charles Cordiner of Banff, who visited and made sketches of the Shandwick and Hilton stones in 1776;<sup>2</sup> next by Charles Carter Petley, the well-known artist, whose

<sup>1</sup> Both fragments were found by Mr William Mackay, the grave-digger,—the one in the burying-place of Ross of North Balkeith, the other in that of Roderick Bain of North Tarrel.

<sup>2</sup> *Antiquities and Scenery of the North of Scotland*, 1780.

paper, with etched plates from his own drawings, and various artistic embellishments in the fashion of the time, is in the *Archæologia Scotica*;<sup>1</sup> again, in the *First Statistical Account* (1797), in my father's *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835), in the *Second Statistical Account* (1845), and in Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (1856).

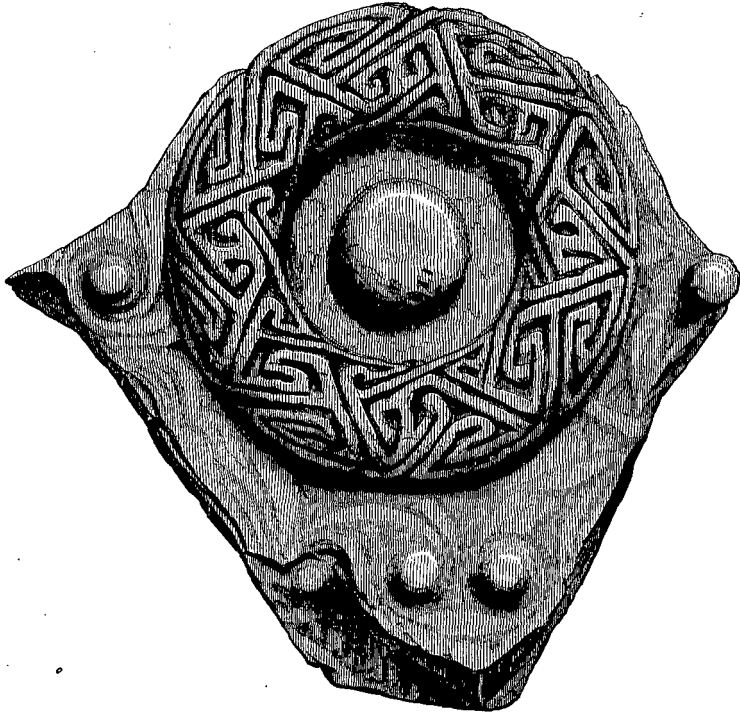


Fig. 1. Fragment of Sculptured Stone dug up in the churchyard of Tarbat  
( $14\frac{1}{2}$  by  $13\frac{1}{2}$  inches).

Of this list of authors, the first and the two last give some notice also of sculptured fragments on Tarbatness. Cordiner, after describing with pleasant, old-fashioned enthusiasm the "very splendid obelisk opposite

<sup>1</sup> Vol. iv. p. 345.

to the ruins of the castellated house called Sandwick," and the "other very splendid monument" "near to the ruins of a chapel in an early age dedicated to the Virgin Mary," adds furthermore, "Mr M'Leod of Geanies conducted me to several fragments of other obelisks lying on Tarbatness, which to all appearance had not been inferior to either of those that have been specified, but they are so shattered to pieces that their connection is lost."<sup>1</sup> Their sculpture included "serpents with two heads meeting," and "several circular ornaments."<sup>2</sup> Singularly enough, Cordiner, an author apparently rather minute in his *localities*, makes no reference to the churchyard within which actually the stones were lying. To any one who intimately knows the district,—the long, narrow, spindle-shaped promontory jutting far out into the North Sea, and swept by every wind, and who can imagine it as "brown, sterile, solitary, edged with rock, and studded with fragments of stone," as it must have been in Cordiner's time,<sup>3</sup>—his imperfect description of these fragments, "lying on Tarbatness" suggests some more unsheltered locality than even that of the churchyard, and some point nearer the *Ness*. Topographical writers, it would seem, do not always say what might be expected of them. The serpents with their heads interlocked and tails convolved, duly appear in one of two fine stones afterwards figured from this churchyard by Stuart (plates xxx. and xxxvi., vol. ii.). The fragments lay in the churchyard until the middle of the present century, when they were collected and brought to Invergordon Castle by the late Mr M'Leod of Cadboll. According to the *Second Statistical Account of Tarbat*, written in 1845 by Mr George Denoon, parochial schoolmaster there, "fragments of what is said to have been a Danish Cross" were then still to be seen scattered among the grass in the churchyard; "and a low, green mound adjoining the eastern gable of the church was still pointed out as the site on which it stood."<sup>4</sup> "It stood," says Stuart, "in the centre of the churchyard. About fifty years ago it was knocked down by the grave-digger and broken up in grave stones." He then refers, somewhat inconsequently (if there is no

<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, p. 280.

<sup>4</sup> *Stat. Acc.*, xiv. p. 461.

misprint in his figures), to Cordiner's description of the stones which he had seen lying shattered in the churchyard eighty years before.<sup>1</sup> Of *Stuart's figures*, plate xxx. represents a half slab, with "the same border (I here quote a description kindly given me by Dr Anderson) as the slab at Hilton,—a running, foliageous scroll, with birds feeding on the fruit, a favourite motive in early Christian art, occurring on the Ruthwell Cross, on the cross at Bewcastle in Cumberland, and on stones at Jarrow, Tynemouth, and Jedburgh."

The Hilton stone, together with this half slab, are now in the American garden at Invergordon Castle. The other broken stone, plate xxxvi., is (as my friend Dr Sutherland of Invergordon has kindly ascertained for me) preserved in the tower of the castle, in a small museum formed by the late lamented Cadboll. It presents us with a long, central panel of interlaced work, of great beauty; to one side are Cordiner's "heads of serpents meeting," besides several small bosses, like those that have been studded around the wreath-shaped circle figured with this paper. Dr Sutherland also finds in the museum three fragments of similar, greenish, mica-spangled stone, not figured by Stuart, one of which (fig. 2), I am informed, bears the best example yet known in Scotland of the peculiar diaper which Professor Westwood distinguishes by the name of the Z-shaped pattern.<sup>2</sup> Of the two more recently obtained fragments, that of wreath-shaped design (fig. 1) is cut in this same pale olive-green sandstone speckled with mica,—a stone similar to certain tough flags associated with the shale and fish-beds of the Old Red Sandstone on the southern side of the Tarbat promontory, chiefly near Geanies. Petrologically it is identical with both of the two fragments figured by Stuart, but its design seems to assimilate it to that with the bosses and the heads of serpents interlocked. The wreath, indeed, is probably one of the several circular ornaments mentioned by Cordiner. Its pattern is

<sup>1</sup> The site of a "Danish Cross" is indicated upon the 6-inch Ordnance map. The site of a "Sculptured Stone" is placed 30 yards farther east, near the ornate tomb known as "Dingwall's Tomb." The positions allotted to them were no doubt guess-work.

<sup>2</sup> The theory and methods of setting out these patterns are explained by Mr J. Romilly Allen in the *Proceedings*, vol. xix. (1884-85) p. 235. Fig. 2 is from a "squeeze" obtained by Dr Sutherland.

distinct but worn, as if by the weather or hard usage. Its condition reminds us of the fragments of the Ruthwell Cross, which, broken up in compliance with the ecclesiastical edict of 1642, lay in that Dumfriesshire churchyard for a century, and its fate may have been nearly the same. "The pattern of the fret on the wreath," Dr Anderson writes me, "is uncommon"; as also "the application of this rectilinear ornament to the decoration of a raised and rounded surface."

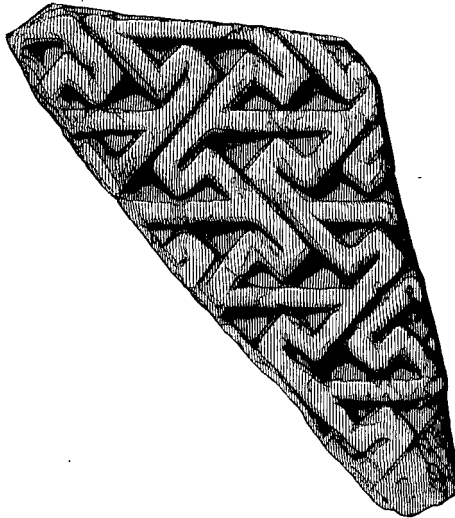


Fig. 2. Fragment of Sculptured Stone at Invergordon Castle ( $10\frac{1}{2}$  by  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inches).

The stone and the condition of the smaller fragment (fig. 3) are entirely different. The stone is the warm yellow sandstone of the tall coast cliffs near Rockfield village, and of the secluded, cliff-bound site marked Hermitage on the Ordnance map, known among the older people as the Temple or "Teampull." The superbly clear chiselling of this fragment has undergone no weathering, and has scarcely suffered any bruise. It has evidently lain long buried. It is oxidised to a more glowing yellow to the depth of nearly a quarter of an inch into the stone, as if by contact with the rust which pervades the gravels of the "hundred-feet beach," of which the churchyard occupies the terrace;

we note especially that the oxidation extends to the same depth both on the sculptured face and on the fractured. The form of the fragment is such as suggests that it was broken off by something like wanton violence. From these particles of evidence I infer that it was probably part of a cross or obelisk destroyed at some early age. Of this stone it is the sole vestige yet recovered; and while the other fragment doubtless formed a part of the stone (pl. xxxvi. of Stuart) seen by Cordiner, which may have found its way into an open grave, and so down to the level

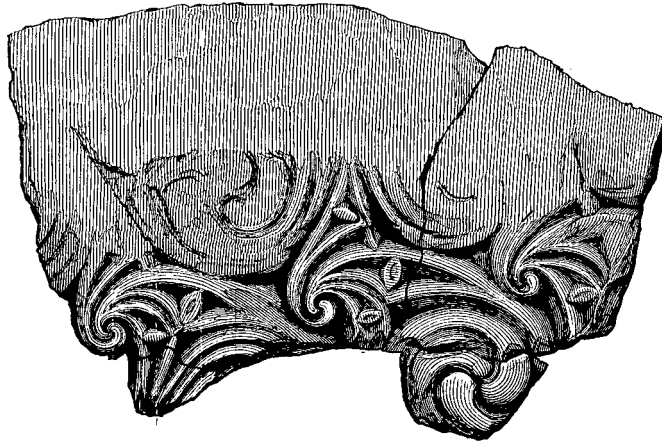


Fig. 3. Fragment of Sculptured Stone dug up in Tarbat Churchyard  
(10 by  $6\frac{3}{4}$  inches).

from which it was lately disinterred; *this* stone was more probably recovered from the level at which it originally stood, before centuries of slow accumulation of churchyard mould and grains of blown sand from the neighbouring sand dunes had raised the general level to what it now is.<sup>1</sup> The divergent spiral ornamentation which occurs upon this and on all the Ross-shire stones (as Dr Anderson informs me) occurs also on stones at St Vigeans, Monifieth, Meigle, St Andrews, Glenferness, Dunfalland, St Madoes, Dupplin, and Iona. A characteristic fragment

<sup>1</sup> For evidence that the general level of this churchyard has been raised to the amount of 6 or 7 feet, see p. 316 of this volume.

from Strathmartine (fig. 4), in lower relief than that from Tarbat, is here figured for comparison.

There is thus evidence of the existence of at least three sculptured stones within this one churchyard, to all appearance not inferior (in Cordiner's words) to those of the neighbouring plain. It cannot be doubted that the Easter Ross group of sculptured stones is itself really only fragmentary. We now know of six; in the base or pedestal of the Shandwick stone I recently detected a slab, much worn by the feet of



Fig. 4. Fragment of Sculptured Stone from Strathmartine (15 by 6½ inches).

visitors, which shows distinct traces of sculpture, resembling generally the anthropomorphic sculpture of one margin of the stone beside which it is placed. This brings the number up to seven. It is of a warm, reddish stone different from all the others.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Four of the group are of greenish stone, namely, the Shandwick, the Hilton, and two of the Tarbat stones; one is pale yellow; another red; and the seventh, the Nigg stone, I have not recently seen.

Often as the Shandwick stone has been described, justice has not yet been done to the admirable life and spirit which characterise its sculpture of the animals which occupy two of its panels. The chief design is a hunting scene. You see the strong, free gallop of the foremost horse; the thin flanks, short tail, and branched antlers of the stag in front; the artist has even caught, what was much more difficult, its aspect of rapid movement. Just below this there is a fox, Reynard all

All these stones are associated with the sites of old chapels or burying-grounds. The reputed site of "the cross," in the churchyard of Tarbat, is a green spot, a few yards in diameter, and some 20 paces from the eastern gable. Until of recent years, no grave had been opened within that small, green spot. There was a tradition that the plague had been buried there; and so rooted was the aversion to disturbing it, that it was not until the late parish minister took spade in hand and actually threw off his coat to dig *in propria persona* that the grave-digger could be induced to break into ground accursed by the presence of the plague. There are still no grave-stones. The place is allotted to a community of poor fishers on the outskirts of the parish. It was found to be thickly covered with pieces of sandstone.<sup>1</sup> The Hilton stone stood beside a chapel, "dedicated from an early age to the Virgin Mary," the site of which seems to have received its last consignment of dead during the cholera pestilence of 1832. The Shandwick Stone stands a few yards from the site of a burying-ground which was ploughed down by the tenant of the farm some four years ago, and which also was utilised during that time of terror. The Nigg Stone is in the churchyard of Nigg parish.

over, *Reynard the fox*, even to his stealthy gait. He carries his brush daintily,—stuck nearly straight out, but with a pliant air. Still further below there are a pair of belligerent bulls, facing each other with brutal gravity. The rest of these spirited pictures, which would delight the author of "The Two Paths" or the ill-fated author of "The Gamekeeper at Home," are scarcely so well preserved. In one there is a man drawing a bow upon a deer which turns upon him; in another, a man holding a deer by the horns, while his comrade, from behind, plunges something resembling a knife into the body of the animal, with downward stroke. There are also one or two birds, heavy creatures, with large bodies, thick, short necks, flat feet, and a droop at the point of the bill. In a higher panel are two horned animals facing each other, their horns curved over their shoulders,—probably goats. Considering the small scale upon which they are drawn, their low relief, and the centuries during which they have stood in the open air, they are not less wonderful in their own way than the exquisitely designed interlacements, frets, and scrolls of foliage from the same hands. Clearly, these early artists were at close touch with nature.

<sup>1</sup> It may not be accidental that a similiar tradition is preserved regarding the neighbouring churchyard of Nigg. "In a central part of the churchyard of Nigg there is a rude, undressed stone near which the sexton never ventures to open a grave"—(Hugh Miller, *Scenes and Legends*, p. 245).



It is probable that these all are the sites of Culdee chapels. The present church of Tarbat dates only from 1756. The tower, shaped somewhat like a square bell, but with a more open and much finer curve atop, is of solid masonry and effective exterior, although rough in its interior workmanship. Along with the stone-work are built in several transverse beams of massive oak, said to be the timbers of a ship, one of which is perforated by small holes like the sockets of belaying pins. The bell, as its inscription informs us, was made in Edinburgh by John Walker, for Tarbat Church. This by the way ; it is just possible that some tradition or traditionary reminiscence of an earlier architecture is preserved in the design of the tower. For this building, according to the *Origines Parochiales Scotiæ*, was preceded by a much older church, dedicated, as it appears, to "St Colman the Bishop." The name of some other saint seems to be preserved in the name of the adjacent bay and fishing village of Portmahomack, formerly Portmaholmack, in old charters, we are told, *Portus Columbi*. "Near Tarbatness," says the Rev. William Taylor, in his paper on the place-names of Easter Ross, "is Portmahomack, in Gaelic, *Port-ma-Chalmac*, the harbour of St Chalmac. *Ma*, whether we suppose it to be a contraction of the Gaelic *Maol*, "bald," or of *Mæl*, "servant," is found in many names derived from Culdee saints in other parts of Scotland. Calmac, then, we presume to have been a Culdee saint, who landed at Portmahomack, in order to evangelise Easter Ross. It quite accords with this, that the parish church of Tarbat, which is close to Portmahomack, is in old documents called the church of St Colman ; for in not a few Gaelic words, final *n* or rather *m*, is dialectically interchangeable with *c* or *g*. There is, not far from Portmahomack, a fine natural cave called *Teampull Earach* (or *Eirich*), entered by a "noble porch, which conducts the explorer along a corridor to three successive chambers."<sup>1</sup> Whether the word "Temple" indicates the employment of this cave for Christian worship by St Calmac (Colman) or some other evangelist, or whether it tells of heathen worship in still older times, we are unable to say. St Calmac apparently did not confine his preaching to the sea coast ; a name *Kilmachalmag*, "the cell

<sup>1</sup> There appears to be some mistake on the part of Mr Taylor's authority. There is no cave at the Teampull.

or chapel of St Calmac," in the heights of Kincardine, indicates that his evangelistic labours extended into the heart of the county."<sup>1</sup> These are strong philological grounds for the antiquity of Tarbat Church as an ecclesiastical site. In the opinion of the Rev. A. D. Mackenzie, of Beauly, the termination *ag*, indeed, refers rather to a small stream—the streamlet beside the churchyard; as in many other Gaelic place-names, such as *Arkaig*, "barren water;" *Kirkaig* or *Carraigaig*, "rocky water;" and others, including the Tay and the Tagus. Omitting this terminal syllable, then, the derivations of *Port-ma-homack* is, he thinks, probably *Port-maol-cholum*, the port of the servant of Columba. Colman, according to Joyce,<sup>2</sup> is radically the same as Colum or Columba.

I have had the satisfaction of presenting the sculptured fragments which form the occasion of this paper to the National Collection.

[Since these pages have gone into type I have had an opportunity of re-visiting Invergordon Castle and seeing the sculptured stones there. Of the two unfigured fragments referred to on page 438, one bears a wreath closely resembling fig. 1 of this paper, fretted with a cord of the same thickness, in a pattern very slightly different. But the wreath is considerably larger,—nearly a foot in diameter; within its circle are seven bosses of equal size, one marking the centre, the others encircling it; around them all is the twining of indistinctly serpentine cords. The other fragment carries a small boss, richly fretted, like a knot of young adders interlaced. Like fig. 1, they are both of the olive-green sandstone. I may remark that the fret of the central panel in Stuart's plate xxxvi., and to some extent that in fig. 1 of this paper, too much resembles a flattened band. It is really a rounded line, more or less flattened by exposure.]

<sup>1</sup> *Names of Places in Easter Ross*, by the Rev. William Taylor, M.A., author of *Researches into the History of Tain, &c.*; *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, vol. ii., 1886.

<sup>2</sup> *Irish Names of Places*, vol. i. p. 314.