

IV.

NOTICE OF A CELTIC CROSS-SHAFT IN ROTHESAY CHURCHYARD.

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For many years there lay almost unnoticed, except by those who had a patrimonial interest in it, covering a grave in the Parish Churchyard of Rothesay, a rudely carved tombstone.

Up till the present time an interesting vestige of the clan system lingers in the custom which old native families of Bute retain in having their relatives buried in sections of the churchyard allocated to their names, such as the Neills (Macneils), Stewarts, MacAlisters, Mackurdys, MacGilchiarans, MacConachys, Bannatynes, M^cGilchatans, M^cGilmuns, and other families whose antique interesting names have unfortunately been Anglicised; and even incomers bearing any of these names have maintained some traditional right of sepulture with their clans there.

On the clan (or family) grave of the MacAlisters the slab was lying, and amid the profusion of grass the now worn traces of its beautiful interlaced ornamentation were scarcely visible. It appeared to be only a rough, crooked, silver-grey stone split from the finely-grained mica-schist in which the northern part of the Isle of Bute abounds. So far, fortunately, it was the *reverse*, or less carved side of the slab which lay exposed to the weather, and thus left it unnoticed; but when I had it cleaned and turned over, its elaborately sculptured face indicated that it was none other than the shaft of a cross.

Lengthwise the stone measures 5 feet 7 inches; in breadth, tapering from $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the base to 13 inches at the top; and in thickness, varying from $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches to $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches. It also retains the slight natural curve of the bed from which it has been split.

The most remarkable, if not unique, feature of the cross-shaft, however, is the existence of a tenon at its upper and broader extremity, indicating that the capital had been a separate piece, fixed by means of a mortice-joint, so as to form—along with two quadrants below let into carefully bevelled sockets, still visible in the sides of the shaft—a high

cross, somewhat like that of Tuam (M. Stokes, *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, p. 138). This tenon measures 8 inches long, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch high,



Figs. 1 and 2. Obverse and Reverse of Cross-shaft Rotheday.

and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. The socket on each side is cut $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the

base or neck on which the cross-head rested. Each socket measures $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch long, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch broad, and is cut with a bevel 2 inches deep.

The *obverse* of the shaft (fig. 1) is divided into three compartments—the traces of a plain, flat moulding, about 1 inch broad round each panel, being still visible. There may have been formerly a fourth compartment, where the base is now fixed into a built foundation, but no trace of carving existed on the lowest part when examined by me. Each of these three panels contains a subject carefully carved in relief, despite the hardness of the quartz and mica field. The lowest panel appears filled with a Latin cross, rising out of a cushion or base, and is surmounted by two well-shaped crested birds, which resemble doves. The finials of this cross terminate in oval bosses.

The middle panel displays a grotesquely shaped, cat-headed quadruped in the impossible attitude of walking in a forward direction with the club-hoofed forelegs of an animal, and in the opposite direction with the legs of a man. Vestiges of eye-sockets remain. Three upright ears (unless they form a crown) complete the head, and match the three prongs of a tail which flourishes over its rounded back.

The uppermost panel, which is much wasted by lamination caused by the weather, contains the figure of a horse, or more likely an ass, walking, and ridden by a man. When first exposed, the delineation seemed to be that of a rider in the act of falling from or leaning upon the haunches of an ass. Since exposure the figures have become less distinct.

The *reverse* of the shaft (fig. 2) is considerably weathered and worn by passing feet. It has been divided into three panels, the upper and under being filled with interleaved ornamentation of a simple character. The middle panel displays, cut in relief, a well-shaped horse, with a rider evidently carrying a spear.

No inscription, in any characters, is visible on the stone.

When I had the cross turned over, it was found to be broken into two pieces. After receiving the consent of the family who have a patrimonial interest in it, I had it securely re-united, set firmly into a substantial socket, and re-erected on the spot where it was uncovered in November 1886.

I have since had some difficulty in tracing its history out of conflicting

traditions. It is, apparently, a pilgrim. The most trustworthy account of its migration is that "a MacAlister of Ascog brought it from 'the other side' to Ascog Farm, and desired it to be laid on his grave after his death."

Varying versions associated its stance with Crossmore, a prominent cross-site about one mile south of Rothesay Church; with Kildavanan,¹ the site of a Celtic church in North Bute; and with Meikle Kilmory farm, which for generations has been partly tenanted by MacAlisters. No traces of a connection of this family with the two sites first mentioned are discoverable by me.

The Rev. William Lyttele, when prosecuting his philological studies in Bute for his *Landmarks of Scottish Life and Language* (Edinburgh, 1877), noted in his journal, at date April 3, 1873: "Cross-shaft from Ascog farm. . . . It is about two hundred years since it was found on Ascog. It lay at Ascog farmhouse for about one hundred and fifty years." This author kindly appended to the extract this note: "The Journal makes mention of the figure of 'a man on horseback,'—'of a sword,'—'2 birds, I think,'—'something like a mythical animal or 'dragon,'—'something like a deer at the foot.'"

This form of the tradition does not coincide with the other that it was brought from "the other side," meaning the west side of Bute, which was well supplied with Celtic chapels and cemeteries.

The clearest tradition asserts that it was transported to Ascog. I

¹ Kildavanach has been referred to in *The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (April 14, 1890) in connection with the "Fragment of a Rune-inscribed Cross-slab" found in Inchmarnock, as the name given in Bleau's Map to the island of Marnock. But Bleau does not give Kildavanan Point, farm, hill, nor chapel, which lie a little north of the Inch upon the Isle of Bute. I am inclined to think that there may have been a mistake in attaching Kildavanach to St Marnock's chapel and cemetery. Blain (*Hist. of Bute*, p. 398), an observant antiquary, who died in 1820, states that a chapel stood at Kildavanan. The Ordnance Survey marks a "chapel" upon Knocknavannan. This ruin is oriented, and its stone foundations, 19 feet by 16 feet, are still visible. The Survey also notes on the shore beneath this hill, "MacAllister's Gun." Who Davanan was has puzzled hagiographers. The word may be a corruption of Adamnan. About one mile and a half away stood Kilmachalmaig Chapel, open till after 1591 ("Killumcogarmick"), the only relic of which is the Cross of Colmac figured in Stuart's *Sculptured Stones* (vol. ii. plate LVI.).

know of no traces of oratories or cemeteries near that farm. And there appear to have been fittings from Meikle Kilmory farm to Mid Ascog, and *vice versa*, in past times, by tenantry named MacAlister. Last century there was a family of that name in Crioslagmhoire, another at Stewarthall, another at Kilchattan, &c. On Meikle Kilmory Brae (Blain, p. 92), "a small circular spot formerly enclosed (was) known by the name of Cil-keran, inducing a belief that it had been used as a place of sepulture." This was probably the little church of Ciaran, whose name was last century preserved by over forty large families (*especially in this quarter of the isle*), viz., the Mac-Gill-Chiarans, now Sharps. Kilmory is in the Kerryfern quarter, formerly the possession of an ancient family, the Neills, or Nigels, of Bute. On an adjoining farm is the ruin of Kilmory Chapel, on another the site of Kilwhinleck Chapel.

Every place-name near savours of early Irish history. Over this whole district towers Barone Hill. According to Blain (p. 86):—

"Near the roadside (going towards Kilmory), at the foot of Barone Hill, is shown a spot where a pillar, 9 feet high (was) erected several ages ago as a monument of a barbarous murder committed there on a laird of Kilwhinleck, by one Nicol Mackeown, commonly known by the name of Willie Nierbal, who took the laird's widow to wife, expecting by that means to secure to himself the estate also." Nierbal himself met a foul end; and a posthumous son was born to the murdered laird, so that "the estate descended by that circumstance in the right line." We are told Nierbal's body was buried after his death at the place where he murdered Kilwhinleck. The monumental stone was removed by the late James Stewart,¹ proprietor of that place, and laid by way of a bridge over a brook at Rothessay. There had been some rude carving on one side; the figure of a griffin was visible, but it is not known whether there was ever any inscription."²

¹ The James Stewart mentioned here was the eccentric minister of Kingarth from 1740 to 1755, for whose convenience that parish was kept vacant for sixteen years. He was laird of Kilwhinleck, and died about 1780. His manse for the new kirk at Mountstuart was situated on an eminence over half a mile beyond Ascog, and in proximity to the farm of Mid-Ascog, in Kingarth parish, the residence of the MacAlisters. After being deprived of his charge, James Stewart came to reside at Kilwhinleck, in the new mansion he erected there in 1760, called Stewarthall.

² Reid, in his *History of Bute*, p. 32, adds to this account a sentence, apparently taken from a MS. of Blain's *History*, that the Kilwhinleck stone was "afterwards put to a similar use as part of the covering of a sewer going off from near the well in

The indefiniteness of the above narration leads me to suspect that Blain had neither seen the monument, nor knew its resting-place. There is a small brook crossing the road to the parish church, which is covered over with schistose flag-stones, which is the only likely place for its being utilised. Had it been accessible, Blain would have inspected it. So I would assume that it had been removed before Blain came to Bute in 1760, and that he only narrates the hearsay on the subject.

From the Rev. Dr Maclea's Parochial Visitation Books for 1774-1776, it appears that at or near Kilwhinleck resided Robert M^cAlester, his wife, and a family of four girls, designated as from "Kingarth." A John M^cAlister, who is credited with being born at Ascog, before this had a brother Robert, who latterly resided at Kilchattan Bay. Now it is very improbable that any M^cAlister would remove a large monument from a farm he was vacating, say Meikle Kilmory, far, in Bute especially. As instances prove, there was a superstitious dread of molesting such memorials, and such an act would not only have been deemed sacrilegious, but, as in the case of the spoliation of St Marnock's Chapel in 1718, would have subjected the offender to the discipline of the Kirk-Session. On the other hand, if a similar stone was removed from his estate at the instance of the reverend and ambitious laird of Kilwhinleck, who had long been a source of irritation and trouble to the Kirk-Session and Presbytery of the bounds, and who, anxious to found a great house, neither relished being childless, as he was, nor yet the romance, likely mythical, connected with that monolith,—then who would be so likely to be asked to remove it as this Robert M^cAlester, who, to his own credit be it said, with rare good sense, conserved this antique relic? Through him it might reach Ascog. Speculation aside, the Kilwhinleck monolith has not been traced since it was removed a hundred years ago. Yet there is nothing incompatible between the con-

the High Street, opposite the entry to the New Vennel, where it may possibly still remain." But, as if doubtful of this, he proceeds to show some similarity between this stone and the cross-shaft now in Rothesay Castle. The latter, however, was brought from the Chapel of St Mary when repaired in 1816, according to Dr Stuart in his *Sculptured Stones*.

nection of this relic of the Celtic Church in Bute with its subsequent monumental usefulness in relation to the murdered laird, be he a subject real or mythical.

Being a cross, and with a circle connecting the arms, it must be enumerated among the High Crosses ; and its Celtic art and symbolism would, from their execution, lead us to date the work, not too early, say, the eleventh century. But it might be earlier still, since the position of Bute, between Dalriada and Northumbria, made it susceptible of all new influences. The dedications in the island, such as to Ninian, Brioc, Catan, Marnoc, Blane, and many others, illustrative of the influence of British and Irish Churches, prove the favoured situation of Bute.

The church of Kilwhinleck, now obliterated, may indicate the influence of the famous Irish Finnian of Moville, teacher of Columba, but who, as a pupil of Nennio at Whithorn, was better known to the Cymric Britons, who preserved his name in Kilwinning, in its Cymric form, Wynnin.

In the "Grant by James IV. to the landholders in the Island of Bute, dated 16th August 1506 (*Reg. Mag. Sig.*, xiv. 300), we find mentioned, 'Johanni Makgylqubhynnych, terras de Cawnoch.'" This family name, Mac-Gill-Whinnich, like Mac-Gill-Chatan, Mac-Gill-Chiaran, Mac-Gill-Mun, Mac-Gill-Mhichell, and others in use here till the beginning of this century, prove the connection of Butemen with the early Celtic Church.

But in the absence of historical records, our survivals, like this interesting cross, can only be the subject of happy and reasonable speculation.