

IV.

NOTICE OF AN ANCIENT STRUCTURE CALLED "THE ALTAR," IN THE ISLAND OF CANNA. BY REV. J. E. SOMERVILLE, F.S.A. Scot.

When I was recently in the Island of Canna, I saw a curious erection which goes locally by the name of "The Altar." The illustration (fig. 1) from a photograph will sufficiently show its appearance and character. It is built of flagstones of Torridon sandstone, laid without mortar. As the whole of Canna is basaltic, it is supposed that the stones may have been brought from the neighbouring Island of Rum. The erection contains a "cella," in which are placed a quantity of votive offerings, consisting of smooth round stones selected from the shore. As they lay, they looked much like the eggs of some large bird in a nest. I could not obtain any information as to the origin or meaning of "The Altar." It may be a relic of Pre-Reformation times, as nearly all the population of the island are Roman Catholics, but I suspect it goes even further back.

The erection forms the centre of a large circle of stones, about 100 yards in diameter, and within the circle and around "The Altar" I counted eight small cairns. There may be more, for the fern is so rank that it is difficult to be sure that one has seen them all. Near it is a flagged underground passage, about 2 feet in width, up which sick people used to crawl to a spring of water. Having done this, they were laid in a

¹ *Culture in Early Scotland*, p. 164.

leaba or bed made of stones, and left there for the night, in the expectation that cure would certainly follow.

Professor Norman Macpherson, LL.D., kindly sends the following additional particulars obtained from a former resident on the island:—
“The altar referred to at Canna is at the west end of the island, and



Fig. 1. The Altar, Canna, from a photograph.

the place is called *Sgor nam Ban Naoimh*.¹ The people held it in great veneration, and on Sundays when there was no priest on the island, the Tarbert people went there to say their prayers. They told us of the sick who used to be brought there to be cured and left in a '*leaba crabhach*.' As far as I remember, there were four or five of these beds;

¹ Rock or Peak of the Holy Women, or Female Saints.

they made some small offering, and, I think, took something away. The people of the island used to speak of nuns being there at one time. There is also a very old carved cross, with one arm off, at Keil, Canna, something like the Iona crosses. People said some soldiers came to the island and carried it off, but a storm got up and they threw it in the sea at Ardnamurchan Point, and much to the joy of the inhabitants, they found it back in its place at Keil next day. There is a hillock near, with a fine stone on top called Cnoc na Crois. Of old, anything that was to be announced to the people was proclaimed from there. The old chapel was quite near."

Dr JOSEPH ANDERSON has added the following notes on Holy Wells, and on the superstitious uses of the so-called Altar-Stones.

The structure which has been described is apparently a holy well in conjunction with a praying station. Its form is like that of Tobar Ashig, in Skye,¹ as shown in a drawing by Muir, and also like that of Tobar nam Buadh, or the Well of the Virtues, in St Kilda.² Martin, describing a stone-covered holy well called Tober More, in Gigha,³ which had the reputation of procuring favourable winds, as well as of curing various diseases, says that those who frequented it for the purpose of receiving such benefits, were accustomed to leave on its stone cover pieces of money, needles or pins, or pebbles of the prettiest variegated stones they could find.

These stones which are deposited as offerings, however, differ from the so-called altar-stones which are found in various places both in Scotland and Ireland in connection with praying stations or ancient ecclesiastical sites. The altar-stones are also pebbles, or small boulder-stones, generally of larger size than those deposited as offerings, and are usually found laid on the top of an altar-like construction of dry-built, undressed stones. Three such altars, the tops of which are covered with rounded,

¹ *Ecclesiological Notes on some of the Islands of Scotland*, by T. S. Muir, 1885, p. 34.

² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³ Martin's *Voyage to the Hebrides* (2nd edition), p. 229.

water-worn beach-stones or boulders, are described and figured in Wakeman's *Survey of Innismurray*, an island off the coast of Sligo.¹ These altars, he says, are visited by stranger devotees on occasions of pilgrimage to Innismurray, and by the natives from time to time. So numerous are the rounded boulder-stones upon the largest altar, that it is generally believed upon the island that they cannot be twice counted to the same number. Five of them have crosses incised upon them, the rest are plain. On the other two altars the rounded stones laid upon them are generally smaller, and all are plain. O'Donovan, who visited Innismurray in 1836, says of them:—"These stones are turned, and if I understand them rightly, their order is changed by the inhabitants, on certain occasions, when they visit this shrine to wish good or evil to their neighbours." Lord Dunraven, whose magnificent work on Irish Architecture was published in 1875, says of these altar-stones at Innismurray²:—"The people say they can never be twice counted to the same number. They were used as cursing-stones, and for purposes of revenge. The aggrieved party must perform stations (that is, must make the circuit termed the way of the Cross, repeating the prayers at the different stations nine times) and then turn the stones, and it is believed that if his enemy be really guilty, he will soon die or lose his mind. Such is the account given me by the natives, and confirmed by one or two curious illustrations." Wakeman traces the custom to Pagan times, citing Sir Samuel Ferguson's poetical version of the legendary incident at the Burial of King Cormac, recorded in one of the earliest Irish manuscripts³:—

" They loosed their curse against the King,
 They cursed him in his flesh and bones ;
 And daily in the mystic ring,
 They turn'd the maledictive stones."

¹ *A Survey of the Antiquarian Remains on the Island of Innismurray*, by W. F. Wakeman, 1893, p. 59.

² Dunraven's *Irish Architecture*, vol. i. p. 51.

³ Ferguson's *Lays of the Western Gael*, p. 34. Dr Stokes, in his *Life of George Petrie* (p. 295), calls this method of cursing "a Pagan practice in use among the Lusitanian as well as the Insular Celts."

At the date of Mr Wakeman's visit to Innismurray (1894-95) he found the practice still surviving, "though now of rather rare occurrence," and thus describes it:—"During ordinary pilgrimages the usual route is round the altar from left to right in the course of the sun. When vengeance is desired, an opposite course is adopted; the stones are thrice turned, the curse being 'loosed' at each revolution, and the ceremony ends. Woe to him, however, who anathematizes his neighbour wrongly, as the curse can have no effect on the innocent, and is sure to recoil exactly as uttered on the head of the issuer!"

Another cursing-altar, called St Bridget's Stone, on the shore of Loch Macnean, in the Parish of Killinagh, County Cavan, has also been described and figured by Mr Wakeman.¹ It is an earth-fast boulder of red sandstone, with a flattish top about 5 feet in diameter, with nine basin-shaped cavities, somewhat irregularly arranged around a larger central cavity. In each of these cavities rests a rounded water-worn boulder of a size nearly filling it. Beyond the fact that it was remembered as the Cursing-Stone, Mr Wakeman failed to gather any details as to its use. But a very remarkable and highly venerated well, dedicated to St Bridget, and, until recently, covered by a stone building, exists close by the Cursing-Stone.

Dr Stokes, referring to this class of naturally-shaped stones placed on altars, or used in connection with holy wells, mentions that—"stones of this class are believed, to the present day, to be possessed of miraculous properties for healing sicknesses, and are used for swearing on, and also as maledictory stones." He adds that they are common in the Western Islands of Scotland, and proceeds to quote Pennant's account of the stones, which he calls "Clach a brath," which lay on the pedestal of a cross a little to the north-west of the door of the cathedral at Iona, which "numbers who visit this island think it incumbent on them to turn thrice round according to the course of the sun." Sacheverell, who visited Iona in the year 1688, says that originally there were "three

¹ *Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland* (Fourth Series), vol. iii., 1874-75, p. 450.

noble globes of white marble placed on three stone basins," that were thus turned round ;¹ but that the Synod ordered them to be thrown into the sea, so that the stones seen by Pennant in 1772 must have belonged to a revival of the custom which had caused them to be substituted in place of the originals. Martin, writing in 1700, says :—"A little further to the west from Dun-na-Manich lie the Black Stones, which are so called, not from their colour, for that is grey, but from the effects that tradition says ensued upon perjury, if anyone became guilty of it after swearing on these stones in the usual manner ;" and adds that when one was certain of what he affirmed, he would say :—"I have freedom to swear this matter upon the Black Stones."² Dr Johnson, in 1773, states that the place is said to be known where the Black Stones lie concealed.³ Macculloch, whose journeys took place between 1811 and 1821, mentions the sacred Black Stones as being still remembered,⁴ and refers to one of the same kind which he had found existing on Eilean Naomh, and to another at Kilchoman, in Islay, which, like those of Iona, had vanished. But his testimony is valuable as to the survival of the superstition in an altered form among the boys of Iona, who had preserved a single stone that served the same purpose as the three Black Stones, "although it seems to be forgotten that it should be turned three times round in the direction of the sun."

¹ Sacheverell's *Voyage to Icolmkill*, Manx Society's Publications, vol. i., 1859, p. 107.

² Martin's *Description of the Western Islands* (2nd edition), p. 259. His statement that Macdonald of the Isles was inaugurated upon the Black Stones is contradicted by the account of the inauguration ceremony given in a manuscript *History of the Macdonalds*, written about 1660, from which it appears that the inauguration always took place at Finlaggan, in Islay, upon a stone with the mark of a man's foot cut on it. *Collectanea de Rebus Albanicis*, p. 296. See also a paper on "Dunadd, as the Place of the Inauguration of the Dalriadic Kings," by Capt. Thomas, in the *Proceedings*, vol. xiii. p. 28.

³ *A Journey to the Western Islands*, Glasgow, 1817, p. 232.

⁴ "We were much amused to find here (Eilean Naomh) that singular piece of superstitious observance, the *Clach-na-brath*, once thought peculiar to Iona." "I cannot, however, dismiss Iona without noticing the *Clach-na-brath*, which are still remembered here as in the Garveloch Isles. In former days there was also one at Kilchoman in Islay, but I believe it has vanished."—Macculloch's *Highlands and Western Isles*, vol. ii. p. 127, and vol. iv. pp. 158, 181.

This ceremonial turning from left to right, or in the course of the sun, was an ancient Celtic custom, commonly known both in Scotland and Ireland as *Desiul*. Martin describes this movement as being performed with fire in the right hand three times round fields and homesteads, round women before churching, and infants before baptism, and round their benefactors by way of invoking blessing and good success. On the other hand, the unhallowed turn withershins or from right to left, the contrary way of the sun, was universally regarded as presaging misfortune, and maledictory.

The stones that were turned at Kilchoman appear to have lain in basin-shaped holes or depressions in the four angles of the upper stone of the pedestal of the cross which stands there. The latest notice of them is given by Mr R. C. Graham,¹ who states that "at the four angles of the upper member of the three-stepped pedestal of the cross are four depressions varying greatly in depth, as one is only a slight hollow, while another goes through the entire thickness of the stone. A pear-shaped stone, which, tradition says, was used to form these depressions, is kept at the manse. At one time it lay in one of the holes." Like the Iona stones, it had been renewed, for Mr Graham goes on to say that "once it was thrown into the sea, but in a short time was found again lying on the shore. At another time it was buried in a grave, but before many years had passed, it had found its way to the surface."

Another example of such basin-shaped hollows in the upper surface of the pedestal of a cross occurs at Kilberry in Knapdale. Captain White describes it as having a large circular hole (basin) in one corner, and all along the edge a series of well-rounded indentations, believed to be the marks worn by the knees of successive generations of penitents, though it was stated to him that the cavities were scooped out, pestle-and-mortar fashion.² Muir came nearer to the true explanation.³ He says—"in a corner of the plinth is preserved the now tenantless basin of the prophetic

¹ *The Carved Stones of Islay*, by R. C. Graham, F.S.A. Scot., 4to, 1895, p. 54.

² Capt. White's *Archæological Sketches—Knapdale*, p. 41.

³ Muir's *Old Church Architecture in Scotland*, p. 101.

clach a-brath." The stone that had lain in it, and had doubtless been turned for the same purpose as those at Iona, Eilean Naomh, and Kilchoman, had been made away with before Muir's visit, some time previous to 1860.

The original idea of turning the stones sunways for blessing, or withershins for malediction, seems to have become obsolete, for the later tradition at Kilchoman was that the holes were made by expectant mothers anxious to secure male offspring. The superstitious use of such stones by turning them in the holes in which they lay, to secure the good fortune desired by the person turning them, had various objects. Martin states¹ that in St Ronan's Chapel, on the Island of Rona, there lay upon the altar a plank of wood 10 feet long, and with ten holes, and in every hole a stone, to which the natives ascribe several virtues. "One of them is singular, as they say, for promoting speedy delivery for a woman in travail."

¹ Martin's *Description of the Western Islands* (2nd edition), p. 21. Martin, who was not in Rona, says he had this from Rev. Daniel Morrison, Minister of Barvas, in whose parish the island was, and who had more than once visited it. Compare the superstition of the Cradle-Stone at Burghead, described by Sir A. Mitchell, *Proceedings*, vol. xii. p. 645.