

V.

NOTICE OF A PECULIAR STONE CROSS, FOUND ON THE FARM OF CAIRN, PARISH OF NEW CUMNOCK, UPPER NITHSDALE. By REV. KIRKWOOD HEWAT, M.A., F.S.A. Scot., Prestwick.

My attention having been called some time ago to a peculiarly shaped stone cross found on the farm of Cairn in Upper Nithsdale, I took the opportunity, while at Sanquhar recently, to pay a visit to the farm, which is situated some 9 miles from that town. The farm of Cairn, or, as it is sometimes called, The Cairn, is in the parish of New Cumnock, some 3 miles from the village of that name which lies to the north, and some 4 miles distant from the village of Kirkconnel which lies to the south. The farmhouse stands high and overlooks the River Nith. At a distance of 300 yards from the steading is the boundary between the shires of Ayr and Dumfries, the same boundary wall or dyke dividing the parish of New Cumnock from that of Kirkconnel; while not very far away on the other side of the Nith the parish of Auchinleck comes in. The Cairn farm is on the estate of the Marquis of Bute, and the present tenant is Mr James Stevenson, who received me very courteously and gave me a considerable amount of information regarding his discovery of the cross, which he values very highly. He told me that the Marquis of Bute had been informed of the find, but had not been able as yet to come and see it. He also told me that a gentleman from Carlisle had recently taken full-sized tracings of the stone, and that a stone mason, who had examined it, had no doubt that it was ancient and valuable.

The cross is not entire. Two portions have been found which may amount to one-third of the cross as it stood in its entirety. Mr Stevenson's story of the finding of the pieces is that about three years ago the little stream, which flows past his farm, came down in exceptionally high flood, and, carrying away a considerable amount of soil, laid bare one of the portions of the cross. This was pretty high up on the hillside. In the haugh below, while some large stones were being removed to make

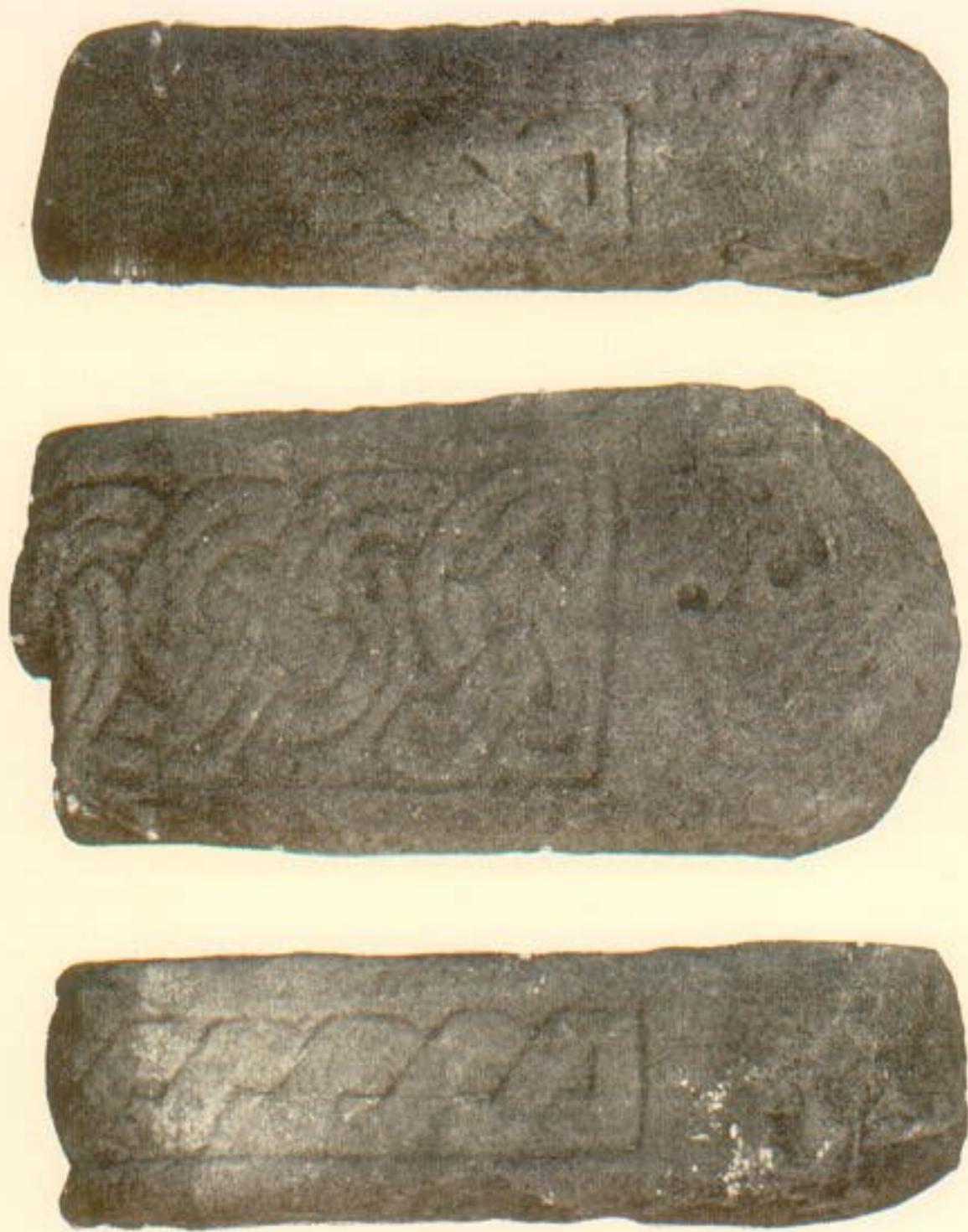


Fig. 1. Front and right and left sides of broken Cross-shaft found at Cairn, parish of New Cumnock.
(From a photograph by Mr J. Mack Wilson.)

way for the plough, the other portion was discovered about the same time. Doubtless in some previous flood (or in the same flood) it had been carried down the stream.

The two portions of the cross thus found are apparently the base of the shaft and one of the arms. The base of the shaft measures 22 inches in height by 15 inches in breadth and $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches in thickness. The front (fig. 1) is ornamented with an interlaced pattern which has doubtless extended all the way up to the head of the cross. The lower part of the shaft is plain, the ornament beginning about 9 inches from the bottom, this part having been probably sunk in a socket. The sculpture is incised, the background of the panel and the spaces between the strands of the interlaced-work being merely picked out with a pointed tool, and the pattern thus left in semi-relief. The pattern is an interlacement of two strands, each strand duplicated by a line along the middle, with a loop at the bottom, and rings interlaced round each crossing of the strands upwards. The photograph fails to show the pattern of the reverse face clearly, but it seems to have a square of four triangles, made by double diagonals interlacing in triangular loops at the bottom, and over that an interlacing pattern of double triangular knots facing to right and left. The edges of the cross-shaft have each a simple plait of two undivided strands running upwards from a square-ended loop at the bottom.

The arm (fig. 2) shows a rope moulding round the margin on both sides, the obverse and reverse faces having each a double triangular loop of interlacement of two strands not divided along the middle.

If the arm and shaft are parts of the same cross, it must have been a cross of the form which has a large shaft carrying a proportionally small-sized and equal-armed cross-head of the sections found.

But how came such a cross to be in this part of the country? Tradition says that a chapel, or religious house, stood where the larger portion of the cross was found. At New Cumnock, 3 miles further up the Nith, there stands the ruins of a pre-Reformation church, and near Kirkconnel, 4 miles further down the river, there are the ruins of another pre-Reformation church. Stuart, in the second volume of the *Sculptured Stones of*

Scotland, figures a cross-slab with interlaced-work found near Mansfield House, and the finding of this sculptured cross at Cairn shows that there were ecclesiastical sites in the district of older origin than even these ruined pre-Reformation churches. Possibly some pious monk or priest of the early Church, or some chief of the tribes owning the land here,

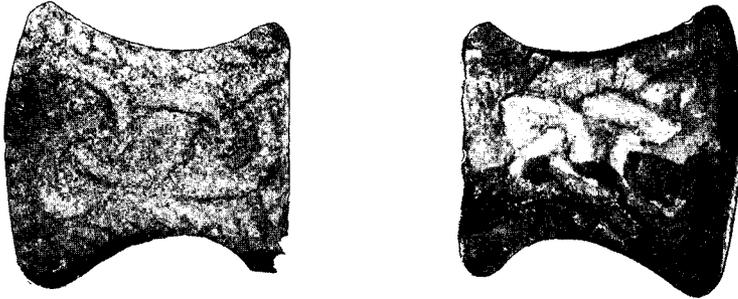


Fig. 2. Arm of Cross found at Cairn, New Cumnock. (From a photograph by Mr J. Mack Wilson.)

may have set up the cross to mark a spot specially sacred, or to mark the boundary of church lands, or the limits of a sanctuary girth. But without theorising any further, we may conclude that these carved stones have come down from a far remote past of which we have now no other record.