

III.

NOTES ON THE CHURCH AND SOME SCULPTURED MONUMENTS IN THE CHURCHYARD OF SAINT MAELRUBHA IN ARISAIG, AND ON AN ARTIFICIAL ISLAND THERE; ALSO ON SOME SCULPTURED MONUMENTS IN THE CHURCHYARD OF KILCHOAN, KNOYDART. BY REV. F. ODO BLUNDELL, F.S.A. Scot.

The church of Kilmarui (St Maelrubha) is situated on rising ground about 50 feet above the bay of Arisaig, and some 200 yards from the shore. The building (fig. 1) lies almost east and west. It is constructed of random rubble, the stones not being dressed or laid in straight, but in sloping courses. The north and south walls and the west gable are still at their full height, but the east wall has fallen down and has been roughly rebuilt. At present the walls are 10 feet 3 inches high on the outside, the gable rising 12 feet 6 inches. The doorway is at present only 5 feet 6 inches high, but appears to have been filled in to the extent of about 2 feet, and presumably the interior of the church has also been filled up to that extent, as one window sash is now only 1 foot 6 inches from the ground. The main church measures 24 feet 6 inches in breadth, whilst the length of the north wall is 50 feet 2 inches, and that of the south wall is 52 feet. This unusual inequality is doubly confirmed, the interior measurement being 41 feet on the north side and 43 feet on the south, whilst diagonally, to points 20 feet from each corner, the measurement is 27 feet by 25 feet 10 inches. The church is lighted by three windows: the one on the north side has a 6 inches light by 3 feet 9 inches, with

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a deep bevel, so that interiorly it measures 4 feet 6 inches across by 5 feet high, and is at present 2 feet 7 inches from the inside floor. The window on the south side is of similar construction, but is lower in the wall, and is not immediately facing the former. There is also a window into the smaller chapel 3 feet 2 inches by 2 feet 10 inches, the opening being almost straight.

Besides the church proper there is at the west end a smaller chapel adjoining, but whether this is of the same date as the church I am



Fig. 1. The Church of Kilmarui, Arisaig.

not capable of deciding. The outside measurements of this smaller chapel are 15 feet 9 inches by 14 feet 9 inches. The doorway is on the south side, and is now only 4 feet high; the opening is 2 feet 8 inches. The walls are of similar construction to those of the larger church, though slightly higher (12 feet 6 inches). Besides the window looking into the larger church, this chapel has two others, one on the south side and one on the west, both with 7-inch lights, the opening with deep splays measuring 3 feet by 2 feet 6 inches. Below the window on the south is a peculiar recess,

measuring 2 feet by 2 feet 6 inches, and ending in a circular hole 5 inches across.

Opposite the door, again, there is a recess, the history of which it would be interesting to unravel. It now contains two remarkable stones. One of these is at present lying on the ground and just fills



Fig. 2. Doorway of Chapel on south side.

the floor of the recess; it measures 6 feet by 2 feet 6 inches. The surface of this stone appears to be all worn away except the carved border, which can still be traced. The arch of this recess is 5 feet in the centre, and springs from a straight of 2 feet. The arch is constructed of freestone, nicely dressed. The stone projects 4 inches, with a 6-inch face, and with a chamfer of 1 inch off the lower face. At present the ends of two supports project through the wall, suggest-

ing that this slab was originally not on the ground, but at the height of 2 feet 3 inches, probably therefore covering a tomb. Just at this



Fig. 3. Portion of Slab at Kilmarui (No. 1).

height there has been inserted the second stone, which bears the Macdonald arms and the date 1671.

The sculptured stones, which now all lie within the walls of the

church, were probably removed there for greater safety, though they are mentioned as "within the chapel" as early as 1700.

No. 1. A slab of slate (fig. 3), of which little more than half the length now exists. The design is divided into two panels or niches. In the right panel is the Crucifixion, and in the left an ecclesiastic, who bears the chalice in his two hands and is vested in chasuble; further, it appears that his headgear is the ancient form of mitre, thus marking him out as a bishop, whilst confirmation of this might be found in the tunicle and dalmatic which he appears to wear.

No. 2. A slate slab (fig. 4), of which, again, only half now remains. The upper portion is occupied by a foliated cross; the double-handed sword fills the centre, and above the pommel is a hunting scene, in which appear the archer with his bow, the hound on a leash, the hind and the stag. Below them, again, is another animal.

No. 3. A slab of freestone (fig. 4), 64 inches long, of uneven breadth; the upper portion is occupied by a foliated cross, then comes the sword filling the centre, completely surrounded by the foliated design which starts from the tail of the beast.

No. 4. A slab of freestone (fig. 4), covered with interlaced work. It is now broken in half.

No. 5. A slate slab (fig. 4), apparently never finished.

No. 6, a fragment of a slate slab (fig. 5), is very interesting. The uppermost figure represents apparently a martyr,¹ whilst in the lower panel are a hind and a hound. Along with this is another fragment representing an archer, and this was complete until quite recently, when it was broken. In connection with this last remark, it may be mentioned that the practice exists of placing one of these stones over any recent interment, so that one wonders that they are still in such good preservation. In order to stop this custom, two of the stones have been set in cement, so that these will not be moved about so much in future.

Within the chapel are also preserved the ancient baptismal font,

¹ Or probably a conventional emblem of mortality.

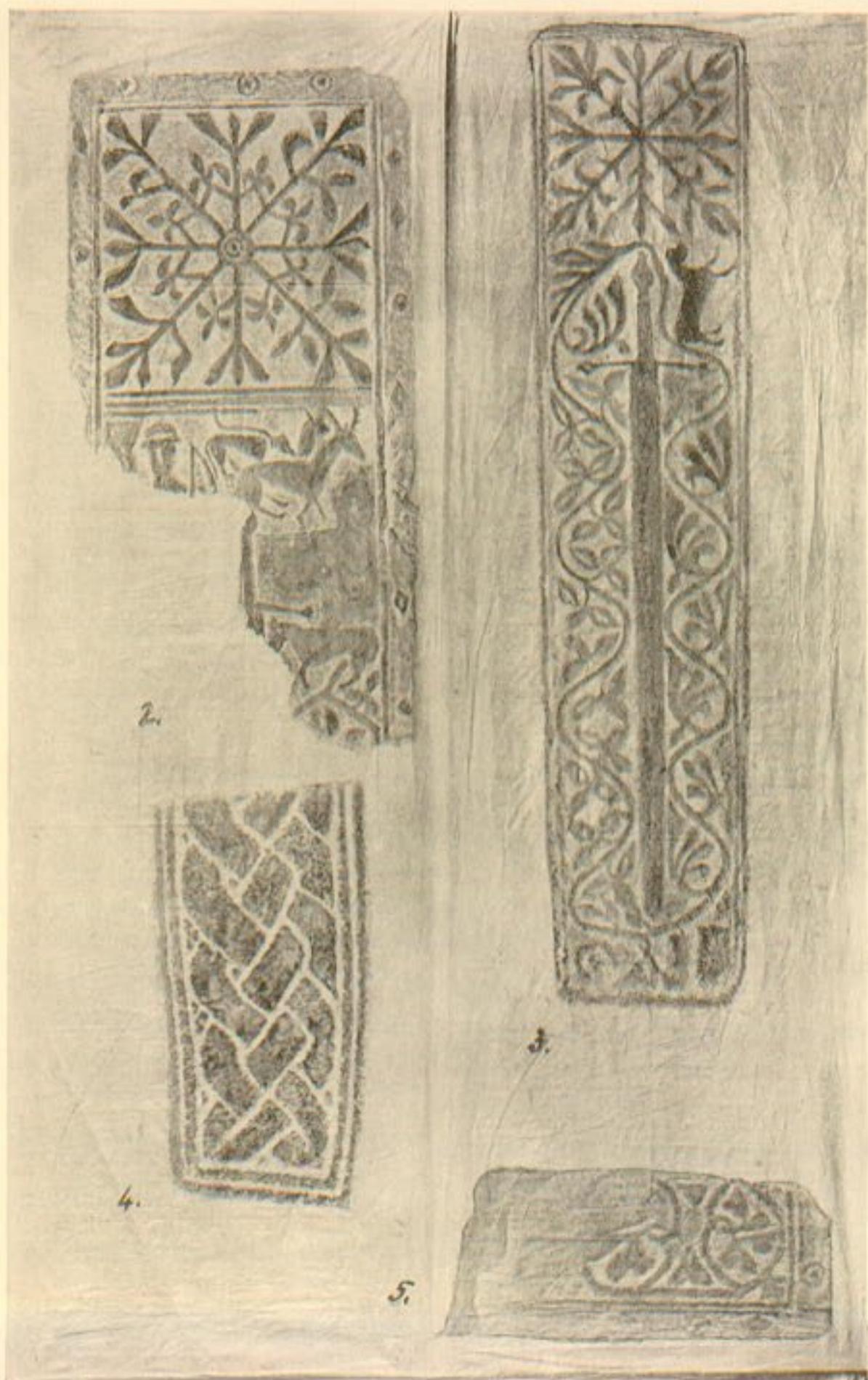


Fig. 4. At Kilmarui (Nos. 2, 3, 4, and 5).

and a smaller stone, probably used for holy water. The last remark I have to offer in connection with this chapel is the fact of its being ascribed to Allan nan Creach, the celebrated freebooter, who vowed, if he recovered from a mortal illness, to build seven churches. Portions of these churches are still extant, and it would be an interesting work to compare their construction, and so confirm the tradition.

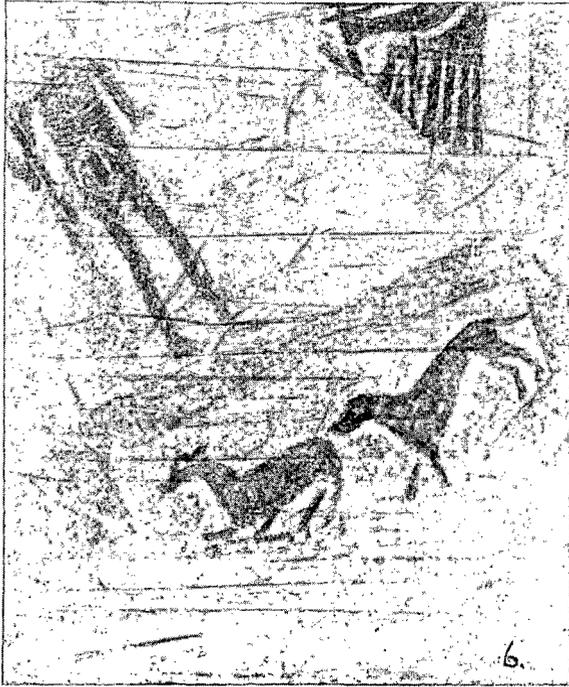


Fig. 5. At Kilmairi (No. 6).

ARTIFICIAL ISLAND IN LOCH NAN EALA.

At the invitation of Mr Nicolson, C.B., of Arisaig House, an investigation was made of the artificial island in Loch nan Eala (The Lake of the Swans). This loch is situated half a mile from the shore

of Arisaig bay, the northernmost part of it coming close to the railway station. At present the loch is of small size, but at the time when Clanranald fished therein from the windows of his residence the loch extended up to the present house, called Glen Cottage, and measured $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile from N. to S. and $\frac{1}{3}$ of a mile from E. to W. The cause why the waters of the loch receded so much was that the late Mr Astley cut a deep canal from the loch to the sea in order to use the loch water to drive a mill at Mains farm. When the mill was abandoned, the waters of the loch were given free passage to the sea, with the result that the loch was reduced in size, and what had been good trout fishing, according to the tradition already mentioned, became excellent grazing. It is now many years since the woodwork of the artificial island was noticed, but the present is the first occasion when any account of it has been presented to the public.

The first step towards investigating the island was to clear away the long grass and rushes, and to remove the moss and lichen which had grown upon the uppermost layer of trees. After a careful workman had been engaged on this for a couple of days, the party, including the present writer, Mr and Miss Nicolson, Dr Campbell, and Mr Kerr, the factor, met on the island, and were at once surprised at the great amount of the structure still to be seen. The autumn having been very dry, the circumstances were most favourable for the inspection. At present the island is little more than 1 foot above the surrounding land, but it is evident from what has been said as to the waters of the loch being originally some feet higher, that the island also was 3 to 4 feet higher than at present. This is little surprising, in view of the fact that the surrounding peat bog is very soft, and would easily yield to the weight of the stones and wood packed together.

As to the construction, the upper layer is composed of oak trees laid side by side, the longest measuring 53 feet in length and 30 inches in circumference. Under the first layer are two more lying in the

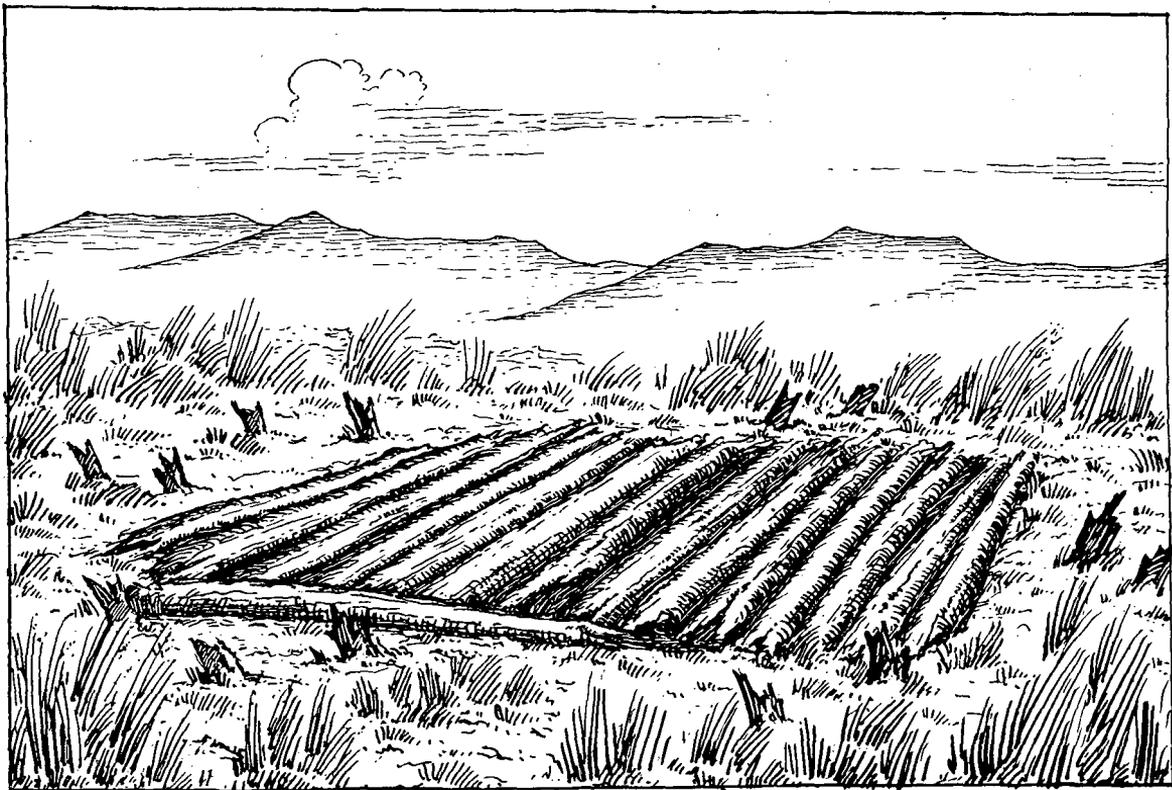


Fig. 6. Platform of logs on Island in Loch nan Eala.

same direction, but these are of birch; under these, again, are two or three layers at right angles to the former, all the lower layers being of much lighter timber. The whole mass of wood was more than 4 feet deep. It was interesting to find that the birch had the bark still on and looked quite fresh. When cut, the wood had a pinkish colour, which rapidly changed on exposure to the air to a bluish grey.

In view of the fact that the canal cut by Mr Astley was through solid rock, there is little hope of lowering the water any more, unless it be by clearing out the canal, which might lower the water a small amount. It would thus appear that our investigations went as far as could easily be done. It was somewhat of a disappointment to learn that some years ago the farmer at Mains carted away a quantity of ashes from the island and used them for some purpose connected with his holding. This was undoubtedly the ancient ashpit, of which only traces can now be found, though the site upon the island is well remembered.

The main platform of logs is enclosed by sloping stays, which still stand up at an angle of 45 degrees, while, some 6 feet further out, is another line of stays, sloping at the same angle. Two of these stays were taken out and were found to be roughly pointed, evidently with an axe, whilst the larger timbers also seemed to have been subjected to the axe. The island at present measures 50 feet from N. to S., and almost exactly the same from E. to W., whilst the outer line of stays are about 6 feet beyond.

SCULPTURED SLABS AT KILCHOAN IN KNOYDART.

It may not be out of place here to mention that the first information regarding the sculptured stones at Kilmarui was contained in a letter of the year 1700, written by Bishop Nicolson to his correspondent in Rome. Bishop Nicolson had recently travelled through great part of the West Highlands, and his letter contains some

most interesting details. In connection with our present subject he says: "Kilmarui (the cell or church of St Malrubha) is close to Keppoch in Arisaig. In this chapel there are several tombs of a hard bluish stone, on which there are some ancient figures very well carved, but without inscription for the most part. One would not have thought that the people of these countries had as much skill in sculpture as these tombs show them to have had. There are some on which a priest, wearing the ancient form of chasuble, is engraved; others have only figures of arms, such as large swords, or else figures of birds and other animals. There are similar tombs on Eilean Finnan (where the lairds of Moydart are buried), in Eigg, in Uist, Barra, and in several other islands off the north of Scotland. In this respect Icolmkill, anciently called Hy, is very noteworthy. The tombs of the ancient kings of Scotland and of all the chief families in the Highlands were there; and the Highlanders think, with considerable probability, that after the decadence of religion, when the abbey had been profaned and ruined, the chiefs each brought back to the churches on their own lands some of the tombs of their forefathers. I also saw two stone crosses, well carved with strange figures, one in the cemetery of St Columba, in the Isle of Canna, and the other at Kilchoan (*i.e.* church of St Comgan) in Knoydart, where is the burial-place of the lairds of that country. The tradition of these carved stones having been brought from Iona I have found still to exist in three of the above-mentioned places, whilst one ingenious suggestion has been made to the effect that stones such as these were carved in great numbers in Iona, where, to use a modern phrase, they were kept in stock, and provided on demand to the different applicants. There is certainly a great similarity of design, especially in the hunting scenes."

The stone cross (fig. 7) mentioned in the foregoing letter is still standing in the cemetery of Kilchoan. Although at present only 2 feet

10 inches above the ground, the men of the place assured me that they had, even quite recently, seen 3 feet and more under the ground. The cross is 4 inches thick, and measures 2 feet across the arms. Through the centre is a strange hole 3 inches square, around which there is interlacing of a not uncommon pattern. At the head of the cross on the one side is a horse and rider, and on the other side a galley. I am glad to say that arrangements are being made to raise this fine

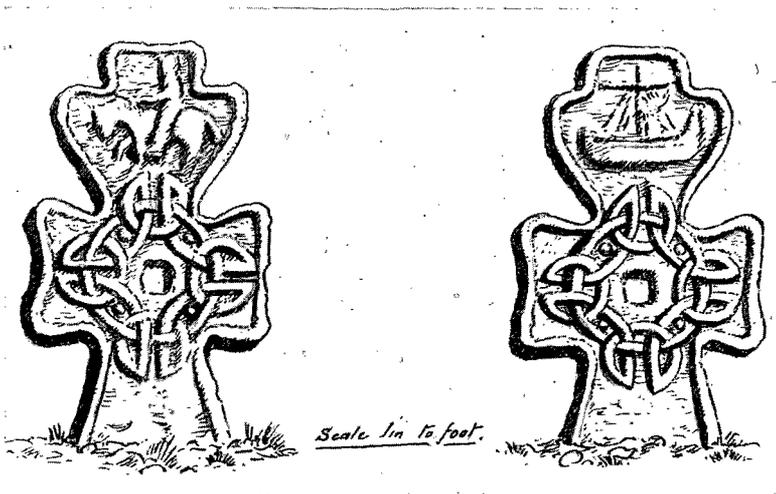


Fig. 7. Stone Cross at Kilchoan.

cross to its original height. Situated as it is on a little hillock in the centre of the churchyard, it will then form a really imposing monument.

No. 2 (fig. 8) is a freestone slab at present almost embedded in soil, and appears to have remained unmoved for a long time; it is, in fact, in perfect preservation. The centre of the stone is occupied by a large double-handed sword, round which the tail of a beast is carried, with foliated variations. At the foot of the stone is a whole hunting

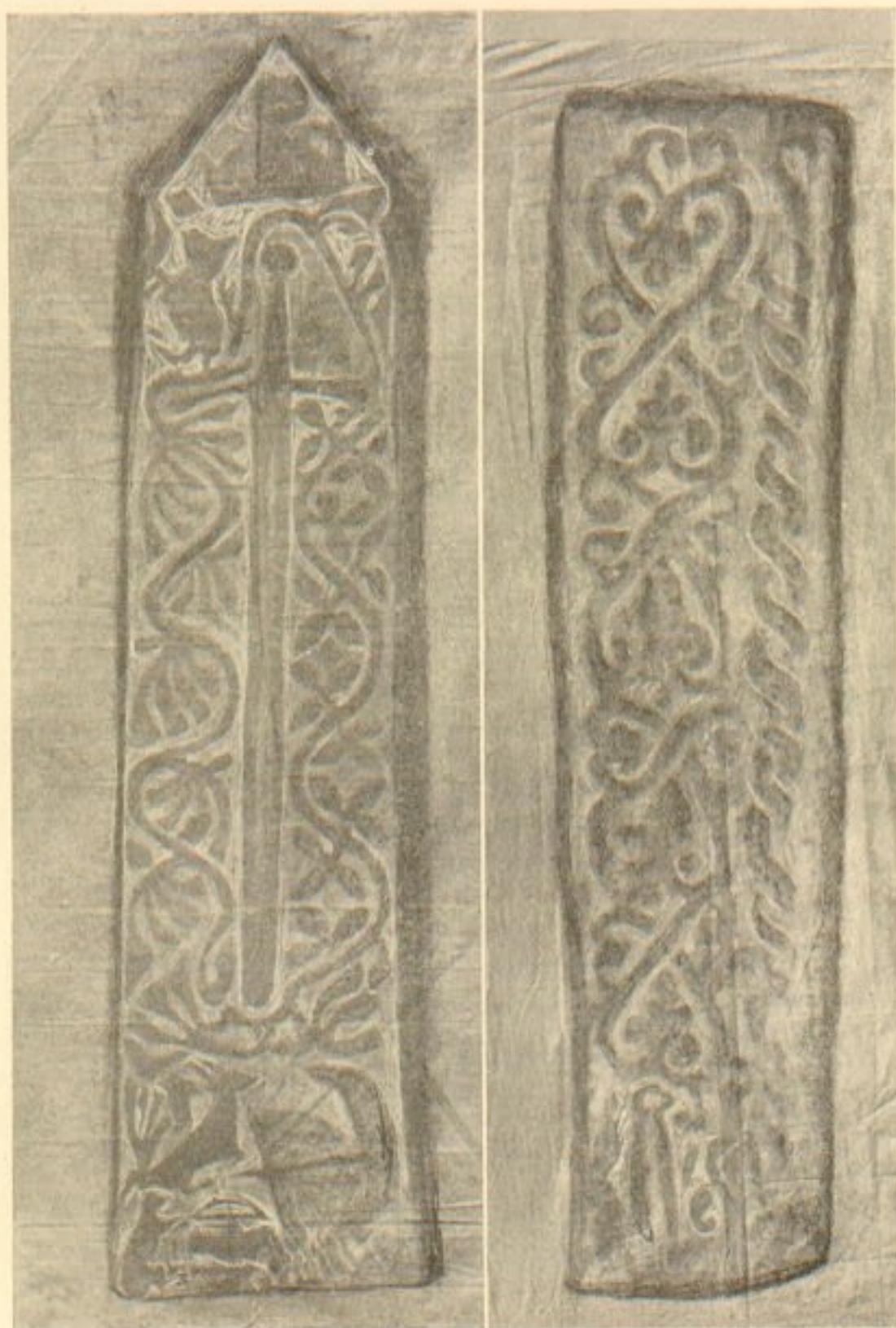


Fig. 8. Slabs at Kilchoan (Nos. 2 and 3).

scene—hunter with bow and arrow, hound and quarry of stag and hind together. Opposite to this is a galley.

No. 3 (fig. 8). A very rough slab, apparently of schist, which has evidently proved hard to work. There is a scroll down one side and foliated decoration down the other. In the right-hand corner is a pair of shears.
