

I.

A NOTE ON FOUR SILVER SPOONS AND A FILLET OF GOLD FOUND IN THE NUNNERY AT IONA; AND ON A FINGER-RING, PART OF A FILLET, AND A FRAGMENT OF WIRE, ALL OF GOLD, FOUND IN ST RONAN'S CHAPEL, THE NUNNERY, IONA. BY ALEX. O. CURLE, F.S.A.Scot.

In the month of December 1922, while certain necessary measures of preservation were being carried out in the Nunnery at Iona by the Ancient Monuments branch of His Majesty's Office of Works, there were discovered underneath a stone at the west corner of the base of the south respond of the chancel arch four silver spoons and a gold fillet. The objects lay in the soil at a depth of about 3 inches below the under side of the stone, and fragments of a coarse woven fabric of linen adhering to the outer surface of one of the spoons indicated that they had been wrapped up in a cloth before being deposited in the ground. Of the spoons only one is perfect, the three others having, through natural causes, lost portions of the ends of the bowls, while the fillet, though in two pieces, is otherwise complete. In general character all four spoons resemble one another. The stem or handle is treated decoratively in two parts—the upper portion rounded and narrow, and the lower, adjacent to the bowl, flat and expanded; the bowl, as evidenced by the complete example, is leaf-shaped, rather shallow, and distinctly pointed at the extremity. The handle of each spoon terminates in a conical knop.

Though thus in general features alike, one of the spoons, No. I. (fig. 1), is quite distinct from the other three in the detail of its ornamentation. While the stem is complete, the bowl has been badly broken, and a portion at the extremity is wanting. The total length of the spoon as remaining is $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The stem, which terminates in a plain conical knop, measures $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length, of which $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches form the rounded portion with the knop, and 2 inches the flat part. The lower, or flat portion, has a breadth of $\frac{5}{16}$ inch. In the upper end of the latter is a small panel containing an eight-pointed star formed with grooves cut in the metal, while the remaining portion contains an oblong panel of geometric design, composed of oblique bisecting lines forming lozenges enclosing small foliaceous figures, of which the lines and figures have been inlaid with niello. Connecting the stem or handle with the bowl is a grotesque animal head of archaic style, recalling the grotesque heads of Byzantine and Romanesque architecture.

The remaining three spoons in form and style of decoration are practically identical with one another, though a close scrutiny reveals the fact that the execution of the details on the spoon which we shall call No. II. (fig. 2), and which is the complete example, is markedly superior to that on spoons No. III. (fig. 2) and No. IV.

The extreme length of No. II. is $7\frac{1}{8}$ inches, of which $5\frac{1}{8}$ inches represent the length of the handle, and $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches that of the bowl. The handle, as in the case of all the others, is divided into two portions—a rounded section with a knop at the extremity, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches in length, and an oblong panel $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length, having at one end a cubical ornament with the angles chamfered off, and at the other a grotesque animal mask. The knop is a neatly executed fruit of the raspberry or mulberry type resting in a well-formed calyx. This terminal is a form known as the fruitlet knop, and was in vogue in England as late as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and was also common during the same period on the Continent.¹ On the lower part of the rounded section of the stem are four vertical rows of notches, or slight projections, as if to represent buds on a twig. The cube has in the centre a square panel placed lozenge-wise and containing a small four-petalled floret, while the triangles formed by the chamfering of the angles are each decorated with a trefoil.

The ornament which covers the oblong panel on the flat section of the handle, consists of a series of groups of concentric elliptical curves linked together by a line of inverse curves. Small foliaceous

¹ Sir Charles Jackson (*Illustrated History of English Silver Plate*, vol. ii. p. 492) illustrates a German example of 1530-40, which, in this feature, resembles the Iona specimens.

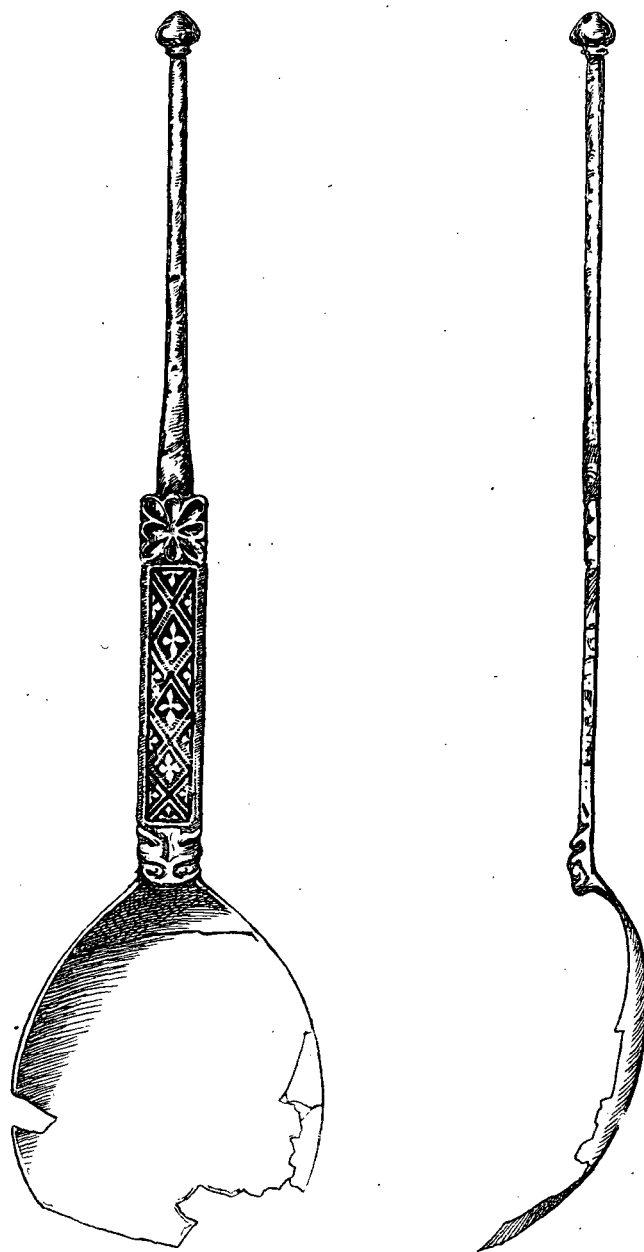


Fig. 1. Silver Spoon (No. I.) from Iona. (1.)

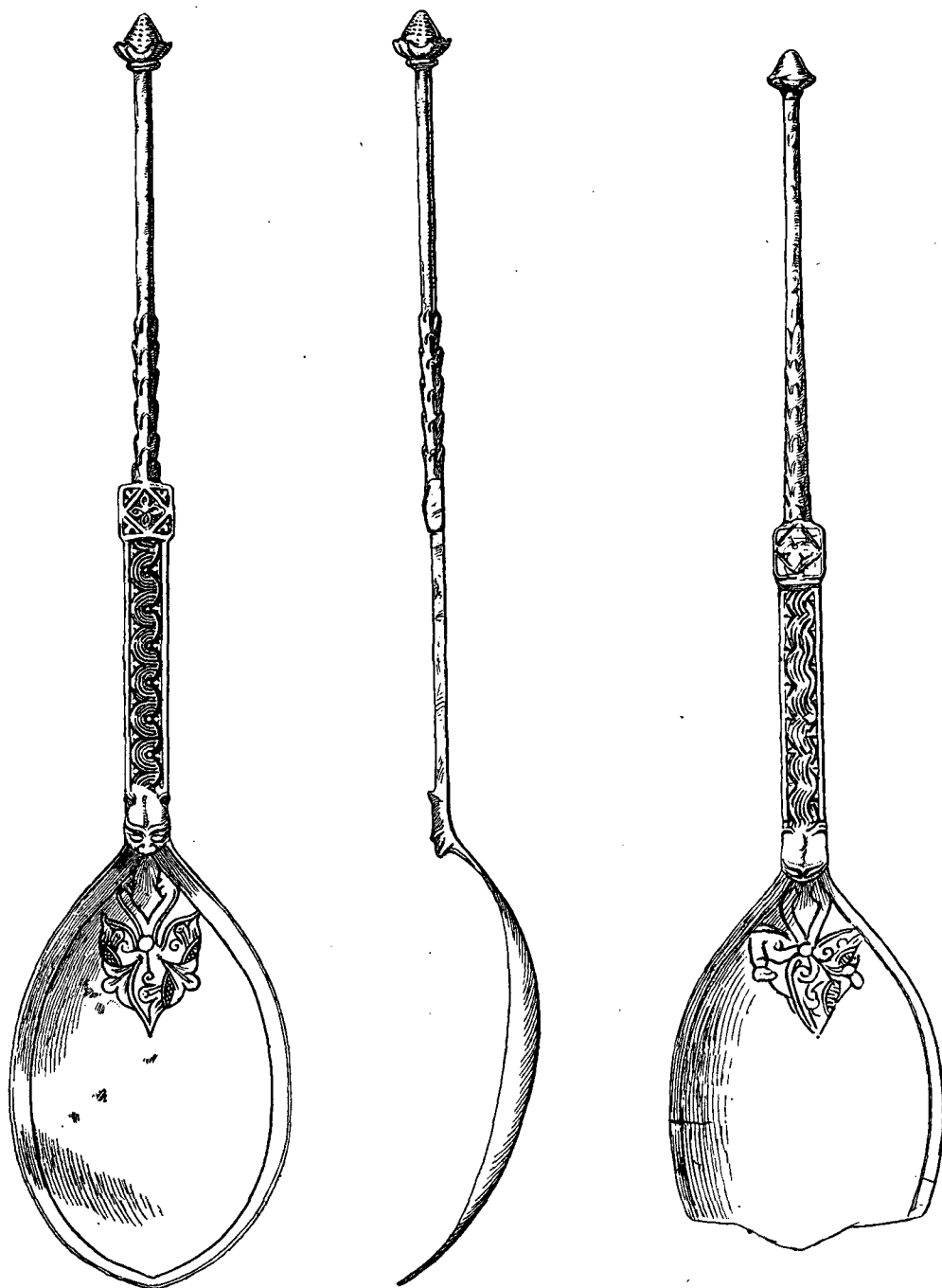


Fig. 2. Silver Spoons (Nos. II. and III.) from Iona. ($\frac{7}{8}$.)

details fill the angular spaces made at the points of junction of the respective curves. The grotesque head with which the handle terminates is treated as if grasping the bowl of the spoon. The bowl itself is leaf-shaped, rather shallow, much curved longitudinally, and fashioned with a distinct point at the extremity. Around the edge on the inside is a gilt border demarcated by an incised line. Chased at the base on the inside is a somewhat elaborate fleur-de-lis, or acanthus flower, of Gothic character, also gilt. A comparison of this spoon with the two others shows clearly that the latter are copies executed by a workman of inferior skill. The curved ornament is debased, and the lines of the fleur-de-lis weak in drawing and in execution; one can almost imagine a Celtic tendency in the suggestion of interlacing and of diverging spirals, with which the details on the surface of the petals of the acanthus have been elaborated, and which is completely absent on what may be regarded as the original spoon. As these two spoons, moreover, have perished to some extent, they were probably made of baser metal.

To what period must these interesting examples of early silver work be attributed? The history of the building in which the spoons were found, the form of the spoons themselves, and the style of the ornamentation with which they are enriched, are the factors which we have to consider in order to reach a conclusion on this point.

In the year 1203 Reginald, Lord of the Isles, introduced Benedictine monks into the Island of Iona, and at the same time a convent of Benedictine nuns was founded, of which Beatrice, sister of Reginald, was the first abbess. In the Vatican the deed of confirmation in connection with the erection of the nunnery is said to be still existing, and to be dated 1203.¹ The date of deposit of the spoons is obviously, therefore, subsequent to this.

Though spoons must have been of almost universal use in the Middle Ages, as a rule they were made of wood, or horn, and probably it was only in the houses of the wealthy that silver spoons were to be met with. Bequests of such, however, occur in certain English wills of the fourteenth century,² details of which are published, and it is interesting to note in these that they existed in sets of a dozen or half-dozen. Of such spoons few examples have survived until our time. Probably the oldest, and at the same time that which in some respects most nearly resembles the Iona specimens, is the British Coronation spoon, which has been employed probably for many hundreds of years to hold the oil poured from the ampulla for use in anointing the sovereign. There has existed some

¹ MacGibbon and Ross, *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, vol. i. p. 421.

² Jackson, *op. cit.*, vol. ii. pp. 435 ff.

doubt as to the great antiquity of this spoon on the ground that none of the old Regalia survived the Commonwealth, but Sir Charles Jackson,¹ after due consideration, gives it as his opinion that "the weight of evidence clearly indicates the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century, rather than the seventeenth, as the date of the fabrication of this important item of our Coronation Regalia."

The resemblance to the Iona spoons is, however, more general than particular. The stem of the Coronation spoon is in three sections, whereas that of our type of spoon is in two. The upper sections of the former, nevertheless, in respect that they are rounded and flat, suggest an analogy. Moreover, grotesque animal heads divide these sections, and terminate the stem where it joins the bowl, exactly as occurs on the Iona spoons, and not on any of the other surviving mediæval spoons in this country. Further, the rich decoration of the bowl with an arabesque pattern, in detail resembles the single acanthus flower in the bowls of our Scottish spoons. The form of the bowl differs essentially, but that has been specially constructed with two lobes suitable for the fingers of the prelate performing the anointing ceremony. But the form of the bowls of our examples is also evidence of an early date, for the pointed leaf shape gives place to a round-ended bowl in later times. A spoon with a bowl having a pointed end, but in base metal, was found in Westminster, and was illustrated by Mr Hilton Price,² who considered that it belonged to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Another of silver, and French in origin, but with the point rather less pronounced, is illustrated by Sir Charles Jackson,³ who dates it to about 1400. A silver example in our National Museum of Antiquities, also rather obtusely pointed, was found in a grave in the churchyard of Brechin with a hoard of silver pennies of the reigns of Alexander III., Edward I., and Edward II., thus indicating a date for the deposit in the first half of the fourteenth century.

As the style of the handles of the Iona spoons bore some resemblance to that of certain Scandinavian spoons of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I thought it worth while to send a photograph to Stockholm and inquire of the director of the Northern Museum if any similar spoons of an early date were under his charge. In reply he sent me an illustration of a spoon, part of a treasure found at Dune, Dalhems-Socken, in the Island of Gotland, and now preserved in the National Historical Museum at Stockholm. This treasure is supposed to have been concealed on the occasion of a Danish invasion of Gotland in 1361, but the spoon and other objects composing it were attributed by Dr Hildebrand⁴ to the

¹ Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 481 ff.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 487, fig. 579.

³ *Old Base Metal Spoons*, p. 21, fig. 4.

⁴ Hildebrand, *Sveriges Medeltid*, Tome i., pt. 188.

thirteenth century. Though the bowl is rounded and not pointed at the end, there is a certain resemblance in the style of the handle to the Iona spoons. In the first place, it is in two sections, the upper rounded, and the lower flat. A rosette divides the two parts, and at the lower termination of the handle, as it were gripping the bowl, we again find the grotesque head.

The ornamentation on the flat panel of spoon No. I. does not help much in fixing the date, as that particular geometric design with four-leaved foliaceous forms contained within lozenges occurs over a long period of time; the motive, however, which has been employed to fill the flat panel of the original spoon of the set of three is more restricted in the period of its occurrence. A search through numerous English illuminated MSS. in the British Museum did not reveal it, but close analogies occur in various examples of continental enamelled metal work. These designs take the form of repeating arcs with, usually, some small foliaceous detail within the curves, or between them. An example may be seen on the enamelled movable altar of Saints Felix and Blasius at Paderborn in Germany, dated about 1118.¹ Another occurs on the borders of the reliquary of Saints Gondulf and Candidus, preserved in the "Musée de Cinquantenaire" in Brussels,² of date 1165. An ornament of the same character may be observed employed to fill a small oblong panel on the shrine of Charles the Great at Aix-la-Chapelle, and attributed to the year 1213.³ But probably the closest analogy occurs in the border, both at the base and on the dexter side as well as on the front of the arch, on the enamelled plaque from the tomb of Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Maine, made in the year 1151, and preserved in the Museum at Le Mans. In one respect the analogy with these examples falls short. In none of them does there occur the series of inverse curves connecting the groups of elliptical curves at their bases. This feature might lead one to suppose that the ornament under discussion had no real connection with the foregoing examples but was derived from a wave motive. It is hardly likely, however, that the continuous, easily produced, and comprehended lines of a mere undulating design would be degraded into an ornament consisting of a series of distinct groups of concentric curves, whereas the contrary process can be clearly seen on the handles of the two other spoons. On these we have this peculiar design copied by unskilled craftsmen, ignorant of the significance of what they were copying, and thus producing a series of undulating lines rendering it as a simple wave pattern. They have still retained, however, at either edge of the panels the small foliaceous details.

¹ *Deutsche Schmelzarbeiten des Mittelalters*, pl. 14.

² *Ibid.*, pl. 80.

³ *Ibid.*, pl. 97.

As the earlier of our known spoons, excepting the Coronation spoon, show the bowl with a slight point at the extremity, and those following with a bowl completely rounded at the end, we may assume that the pointed variety is the more ancient. And in respect that the Iona spoons have a much more pointed form than the example in our National Museum found with coins, the latest of which belonged to the reign of Edward II. (1307-27), we may infer that the former is even more ancient, and thus possibly a product of the twelfth or thirteenth century. The curious curved ornament from the analogies quoted seems to point to the same conclusion, and tends even to weight the scales in favour of the earlier century.

The fillet of gold (fig. 3) which accompanied the spoons is in two pieces, but measured when complete 13 inches in length, $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in breadth at the centre, tapering to an obtuse point at either end. Its weight is 129.7 grains. It is formed of a thin plate of beaten gold, and is ornamented in repoussé with a foliaceous design in repeating divergent scrolls, with a border of small pellets around the entire edge. At each extremity there is a small perforation for a thread to draw the ends together when being worn. The ornament is of a character that would be quite consistent with a twelfth- or thirteenth-century date for its employment—in fact, almost the identical pattern may be seen forming one of the inner borders on the plate of Limoges enamel, mentioned above, from the tomb of Geoffrey Plantagenet.

Subsequent to the foregoing discovery, while the representatives of His Majesty's Office of Works were engaged in removing a quantity of loose earth from the south-east corner of St Ronan's Chapel, within the precincts of the Nunnery, on 29th September 1923, they made a further find of treasure. This consisted of a finger-ring, a large and a small portion of another fillet, and a small fragment of wire, all of gold. These objects were closely associated, inasmuch as the portion of the fillet was found folded up within the circumference of the ring, and kept in position by the fragment of wire used to wedge it in.

The finger-ring (fig. 4) measures $\frac{29}{32}$ inch in diameter, weighs 84.9 grains, and consists of four wires intertwined so as to form a plait, with the ends welded together and fashioned into a small lozenge-shaped bezel.

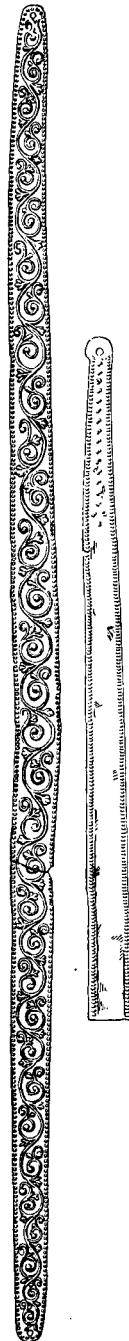


Fig. 3. Gold Fillet and part of another from Iona. (1/2.)

Rings of this type, of which there are already several in the National Museum of Antiquities, are generally attributed to the Viking period, say from the eighth to the tenth century, but the circumstances under which one of those in our Museum and another in the British Museum have been found, point to their continuing in use to a later date. The specimen in our Museum was found at Plan, in the Island of Bute,¹ with three gold fillets and coins of David I. of Scotland and of Henry I. and Stephen of England, while an example in the British Museum² was found with coins of Edward the Confessor, Harold, and William I. in a vessel of red earthenware at Soberton, Hants.



Fig. 4. Gold Finger-ring from Iona. (†.)

The period of the erection of St Ronan's Chapel is not known, but certain architectural details suggest a thirteenth-century date.

The portion of a fillet (fig. 3) amounts to about one-half, and measures $7\frac{1}{16}$ inches in length, tapering from $\frac{7}{16}$ inch at the fractured end to $\frac{3}{16}$ inch at a point just short of the perforated disc which has formed the other extremity, and weighs 84.9 grains. A border of minute repoussé pellets runs along each edge, and the end of the fillet is ornamented for a distance of $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch from the circular termination onwards, with a row of double-struck pellets, which at the inner end, by the arrangement of two pellets in a lateral position, takes the form of a small cross. The second portion of this fillet measures only $\frac{11}{32}$ by $\frac{3}{16}$ inch, and weighs .5 grain.

The fragment of wire is of circular section, measures $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in length, $\frac{3}{32}$ inch in diameter, and has a weight of 15.4 grains.

The fact that these two groups of objects were found in sacred buildings prompts the suggestion that they have served some ritualistic purpose; or, in the case of the fillets, that they have been used for the embellishment of some holy image. Though spoons were certainly used in pre-Reformation Churches, and are still to a limited extent so employed in Roman Catholic services, there is nothing about these spoons either in their form or in their ornamentation, for they bear no sacred emblems, that would indicate a purpose restricted to religious uses. The very fact of their similarity and number seems to point to their being rare surviving examples of choice domestic spoons of the Middle Ages.

As for the fillets, such objects were in use as part of the female *parure* worn in the hair from early times, and the resemblance of at least one such object belonging to the Mycenaean Age found in Ægina, and preserved in the British Museum,³ to those from Iona is striking.

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. v. pp. 235, 373.

² *Catalogue of Finger-Rings*, p. 36, No. 215.

³ *Catalogue of Jewellery in the British Museum*, p. 51, No. 691, pl. vi.

Such ornaments are also occasionally represented as adorning the heads of women on Greek vases of the fourth or fifth century B.C. But more germane to our inquiry is the existence of the fashion in the second half of the thirteenth and in the fourteenth century. During this period the hair was worn gathered into protuberances above the ears and covered with a net, or the light linen veil known as a wimple. Above such a covering, and to keep it in position, was placed a fillet or chaplet.¹ But we may conclude that such fillets were worn even earlier than the second half of the thirteenth century from the finding of three, as previously mentioned, at Plan, in the Island of Bute, in 1863, at a spot some 300 yards distant from St Blane's Chapel, with twelfth-century coins and the gold ring before referred to, circumstances which point to a date for the deposit somewhere in that century.

How these various objects came to be within the walls of the Nunnery it is hard to say. It seems unlikely that such vanities as gold fillets and rings were permitted to the nuns, or that the domestic spoons employed in the convent were of such a costly character. There is a possibility that they were part of the treasure of the Nunnery, the worldly possessions of some sister relinquished by her on taking the veil.

What do the circumstances of the find disclose as to the purpose of concealment? In the one case, we have the spoons carefully wrapped up in some material, and the fillet in two pieces, probably with the intention of reducing its length and so rendering it more easily wrapped up with the spoons. In the other case, we find the half fillet actually crushed into small compass and jammed inside the ring. Had these objects been merely concealed on the threat of some hostile raid, to be brought forth again after the danger had passed, there would have been no need to mutilate them; but treatment so obviously regardless of form and appearance suggests that they have been the booty of some thief hidden with a view to ultimate disposal. That the rascal met his fate and lost his ill-gotten gains is the obvious conclusion.

The spoons and other objects were acquired through the King's Remembrancer for the National Museum of Antiquities.

¹ Camille Enlart, *Manuel d'Archéologie Française*, Tome iii., Le Costume, p. 184, figs. 183 and 184.