

IV.

THE GUTHRIE BELL AND ITS SHRINE. BY FRANCIS C. EELES,
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The Guthrie Bell is one of the most remarkable of the quadrangular bells of the Celtic period, and its recent acquisition for the National Museum adds a treasure of first-class importance to our collection. As the late Dr Joseph Anderson pointed out in the short notice he gave of the bell and its shrine in *Scotland in Early Christian Times*,¹ it is one of the only two enshrined bells that have survived in Scotland, the other being that of Kilmichael-Glassary, also in the National Museum. It is now proposed to give it a much more minute examination than has hitherto been possible, and the present writer believes that recent research has enabled a little more of its history to be unravelled than was possible when Dr Anderson wrote in 1881.

It may be worth while to recall the fact that there are two types of the quadrangular bell so characteristic of the Celtic tradition. The earlier type is made of a sheet of iron bent into a form roughly quadrangular, riveted up either one or two sides, and then dipped in copper or bronze, the handle being riveted into the top. The later type follows the same general outline, but is a complete casting in bronze or bell metal, tending to be distinctly more bell-shaped. As with most things Celtic, the home of these bells and the place where most of them exist is Ireland: there it is believed that the earlier type may go back to the fifth century, for among the greatest treasures in Dublin is the reputed bell of St Patrick himself. The later type is considered to date from after the Danish invasions and to belong to the tenth century. In Ireland some bells of this group are inscribed or slightly ornamented. About that time or a little later there appears to have arisen the custom of making rich shrines for such of these bells as had become venerated for their association with important Celtic saints to whom they belonged, and they were jealously guarded by hereditary keepers called Dewars, like the croziers or the books which had been used by these saints.

The Guthrie bell is an iron bell of the earlier type. It is enshrined. Therefore we may conclude (1) that it belonged to one of the great saints of the Celtic church, and (2) that it very likely dates from the eighth century or earlier.

The exact use of these bells is still a matter of conjecture, but the fact

¹ Pp. 208 sq.

of their being placed in costly shrines bears witness to the great value that was set upon them as personal relics of the Celtic saints whose names they frequently bear. Did these saints carry them round villages and gather people to attend services with their aid? or did they stand at the door of the church or cell ringing them? We know from St Adamnan that St Columba had one in his monastery. Or can they have been used in the service in any way? Their personal connection with the saint is clear; we cannot think they were merely church property handled only by some assistant like the bells of later days. If used in the service it must have been in some other way than the sacring bells of mediæval days, rung to warn the faithful to look up at the elevation of the Host, because that ceremony, for long so characteristic of the Latin rites, was only introduced in the thirteenth century, or the twelfth at the earliest. Perhaps some of these Celtic bells were so used in mediæval times,¹ but only as an afterthought. There is evidence that they were used in solemn cursings, but this is probably only one of their uses. That they were subsequently used in the taking of oaths, and regarded as even more sacred in this connection than the Book of the Gospels itself, is probably due to their association with great and holy saints. It is just possible that they may have been used in the service of the Eucharist to call people to receive communion, but this is a mere guess. We can only say at present that we do not really know the chief or original purpose of these bells.

The Guthrie bell is so called because of its having long been preserved at Guthrie Castle in Forfarshire, but when we examine the ornaments and figures in detail we shall find reason to believe that the shrine was in the Highlands in mediæval times, and that the bell is probably that of some western or possibly northern saint unconnected with Angus or the East of Scotland. How or when it came to Guthrie does not appear to be known.

The bell itself is of iron, 8½ inches high including the handle, 5½ inches wide at mouth in one direction and 4½ inches in the other. It belongs to the type of Celtic bell which is riveted up both sides, or rather up both ends.² There is an iron handle at the top. The shrine completely covers the four sides of the bell and is made of four plates, one covering each side. The plates overlap slightly at the corners. The front and back plates curve over the top but do not meet, being about $\frac{7}{8}$ inch apart at the nearest. The bow of the handle is encased in bronze except where the latter is worn away. Both shoulders of the iron bell adjoining the ends of the bow come outside the bronze plates of the shrine. The bell is riveted

¹ We have no evidence of this.

² Another early bell riveted up both ends was recently found near Lindores, in Fife.

to the shrine on all sides and is also fixed to it by corrosion. The shrine appears to have been reconstructed at least twice, and several holes testify to the loss of ornaments which at one time existed but are now lost.

On one side the shrine is plain except for a small horizontal handle near the top at the right side, evidently for attaching a chain, as in the



Fig. 1. The Guthrie Bell, front of Shrine.

case of the Kilmichael-Glassary shrine, though probably a later addition. There seems to have been a second handle aligning with the remaining one on its left side.¹ The rivet-holes and the traces of the fishtail ends can still be seen.

¹ Mr Richardson suggests that two fingers might have been inserted through these two loops and that the bell could be carried, say, about the height of the bearer's head, in processions.

The opposite side (fig. 1) is loaded with ornament. At the top is a seated figure, now mutilated; but projecting above the top of the shrine and resembling our Lord in Majesty: below this is a figure of our Lord on the Cross: on either side where one would expect St Mary and St John are two bishops, each in chasuble and mitre. Only the second of these figures is a casting in relief, the others being hammered; all are separate additions. On the surface of the metal plate other ornaments are embossed of strangely varying kinds. Near the top is a horizontal row of four-leaved ornaments, each composed of four *fleurs-de-lys* radiating from a centre. The middle part of this row of ornaments is covered by the seated figure. A similar row occurs again a little lower down, just above the arms of the cross. Here the outer ornament at each end is covered by a later piece of decoration in the form of a small separate plate with settings for stones which have disappeared. These medallions are composed of sexfoils with blunt angular projections between each cusp, enclosing settings for seven stones each, one in the centre, the others round it. Below the arms of the cross, on either side of the figure, are embossed vertical strips of floral ornament resembling that on the gold fillet found at the Nunnery, Iona.¹ Two of these are between the crucifix and the bishops, the other two are behind the bishops.

Below the crucifix, at the base of the shrine, is a small rectangular plate, fixed upside down, engraved and inlaid with niello, with the inscription in black letter:

Iohannes alexan
dri me fieri feisit.

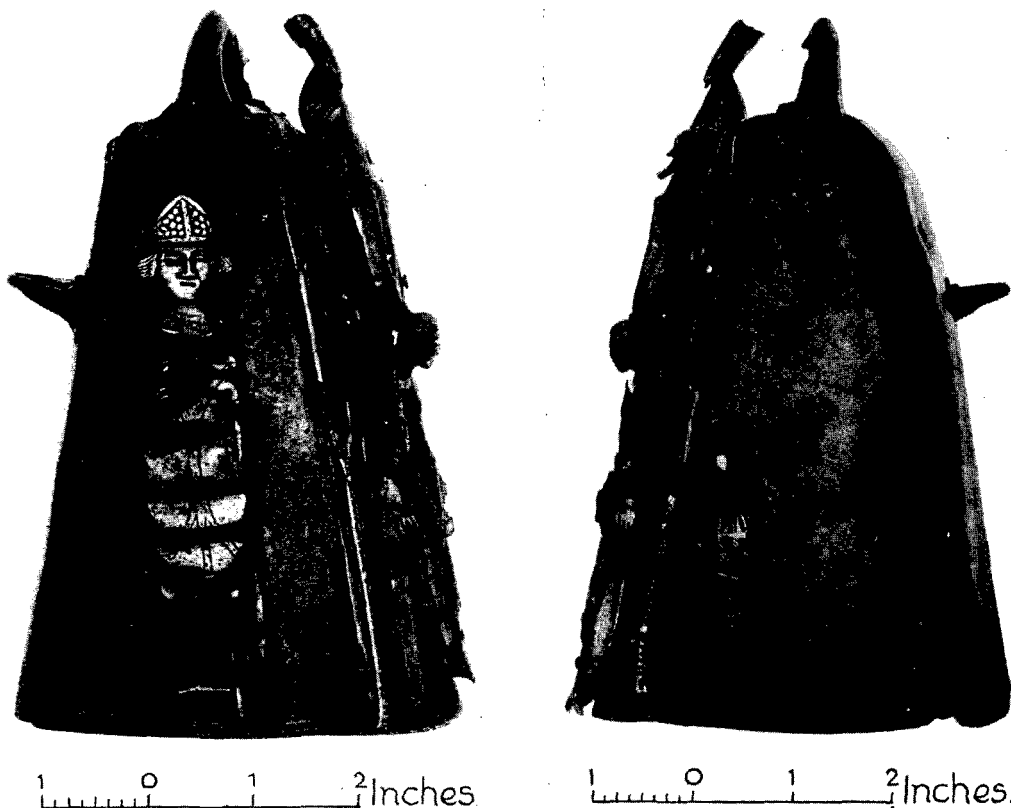
Outside the figure on the right of the crucifix and close to the edge is a vertical strip of engraved interlaced ornament, of a different character from anything else on the bell, at first sight apparently of an earlier type than the rest of the decoration, but debased in character and probably not earlier in date.

On one of the end plates is a hammered bronze statuette of a bishop somewhat larger than those on the side (fig. 2). The plate itself is plain. On the other end of the shrine is fixed a very small cast statuette, smaller than any of the others, apparently representing an apostle, perhaps the St John originally belonging to the Crucifixion scene (fig. 3). Beside it to the right are two rivet-holes which suggest that there may have been a second figure here.

We must now examine these ornamental features more closely. We notice first that the plate or side of the shrine which now contains the figures was not intended to have all the figures which are there at

¹ *Proceedings*, vol. .viii. p. 109, fig. 3.

present, but only the Crucifixion scene. A cross is indicated by embossed lines slightly widening at the ends: above the arms are the two horizontal rows of embossed ornaments already described. Below the arms of the cross are the pair of vertical bands of floral decoration, with room



Figs. 2 and 3. The Guthrie Bell, ends of Shrine.

between them for small figures of St Mary and St John. We thus find a fairly consistent scheme of embossed decoration for one side of the shrine.

Originally it would seem as if the bell, when enshrined, was simply encased in four plates of bronze, that on the front side bearing a large cross with its outline embossed. Attached to it was the crucifix, with, perhaps, the *Manus Dei* above and the figures of St Mary and St John below, these attachments being of cast bronze. The case and the mounts were all gilded.

The first reconstruction probably consisted of removing the mounts from the front, applying a thin plate of silver embossed with various

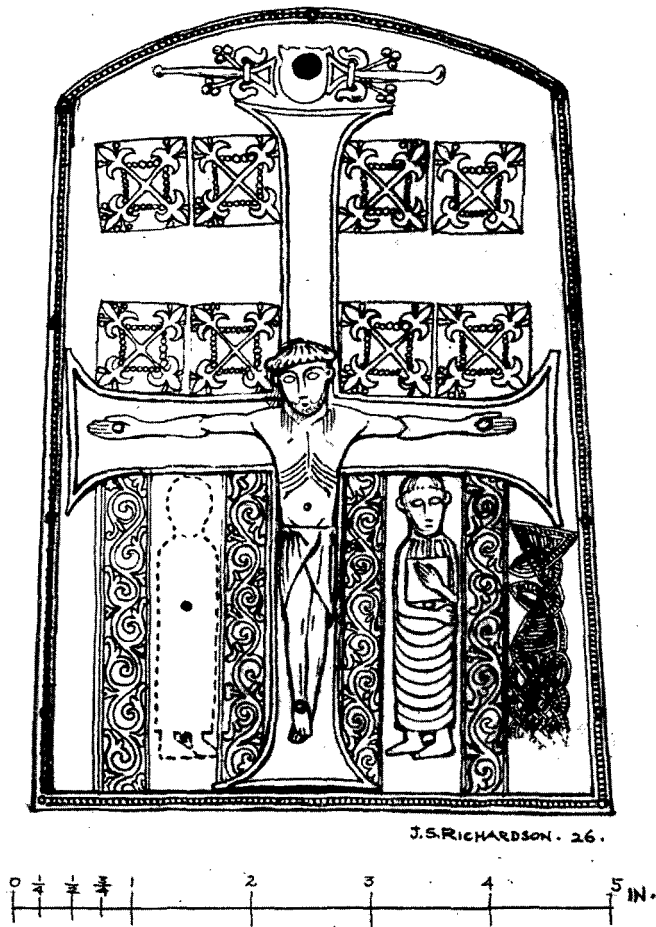


Fig. 4. Plate of Silver applied to front of Shrine at first reconstruction.

designs, and replacing the figures which had been removed (fig. 4). The large cross slightly widening at the ends of the arms on the silver plate, and the shaft, embossed in outline in the centre, are similar to the one on the original bronze shrine.

Let us now examine the statuettes. These are quite clearly of two distinct dates at least. The figure of the Crucified and the small apostle now on one end are of a much earlier period than the seated figure and the three bishops. The figure of our Lord is roughly of the type that preceded the bent-kneel figures of the thirteenth century. The arms are straight and the legs are straight. The head is fairly erect and only slightly inclined to the right. A short and curly beard and whiskers are indicated by circular punch marks. The head is covered with hair arranged like a circular flat cap with lines radiating from the centre of the top of the head. The loin cloth hangs very close to the body. All these are early features. The feet are over one another and fastened by a single nail: this is not a very early treatment. And the head is not crowned. Had the feet been separate, or the head crowned, we might have been inclined to ascribe the figure to the later days of the Celtic church. Taking the evidence together, the most probable date would seem to be about the beginning of the twelfth century. Originally no doubt the *Manus Dei* or hand of God in blessing was represented above the Crucifixion, as in the Kilmichael-Glassary shrine.

The figure on the cross on the Kilmichael-Glassary shrine is crowned, but it is probably a little later notwithstanding: it is less stiff and archaic, and the loin cloth is disposed in an entirely different manner. The Kilmichael figure probably dates from towards the end of the twelfth century. The whole of the Kilmichael shrine is a more refined piece of work than the shrine must have been to which these earlier Guthrie figures belonged.

The small apostle, which is very probably the St John belonging to this Crucifixion group, is represented in the pallium over the tunica in the traditional manner, but very crudely, and the close-fitting arrangement and the straight folds agree with the treatment of the figure of our Lord. The figure holds a book.

While the figure of our Lord on the Cross is in full relief, and in the round, the later figures are so flattened as to be in almost half-relief. They are in silver, but are more clumsily modelled and belong to a much later period. The seated figure and the two bishops, now on the same side as the Crucifixion, are not in their original position, and may have come from some other object.

The seated figure, already referred to as resembling one of our Lord in Majesty or enthroned, is bearded and has very prominent hair on either side of the head, which has a low crown. The beard is formed by lines like that of the left-hand bishop below, not made by little round punch marks like that of the figure of our Lord crucified. The pallium is disposed in a curious way, leaving an almost equal amount on each shoulder,

and there is what appears to be the girdle of a smooth undergarment, the pallium being draped over the knees. The right arm is gone: it was probably raised in blessing, but there are some remains of the left arm, now outstretched in a rather meaningless way. Mr Richardson suggests, no doubt rightly, that this figure is really that of the eternal Father, from a Trinity of the type in which the second Person is represented on the cross, held by the first with the shaft of the cross between the knees, the holy Spirit being in the form of a Dove higher up. Such *imagines Trinitatis* became very frequent in the later mediæval period, and were much disliked by theologians of the Reformation movement. This might, perhaps, account for the mutilation.

From this examination we gather that we still possess the original shrine itself, but that the figures of our Lord and St John are the only survivals of its decorations, re-used when further reconstructions were made, first perhaps in the fourteenth century, then again a hundred or a hundred and fifty years later. The inscription *Iohannes alexandri me fieri feisit* bears witness to the extent of the second reconstruction. This was very likely carried out late in the fifteenth century or early in the sixteenth, perhaps after there had been some mutilation. It was then determined to concentrate the decorative features as far as possible on one side: probably the *Manus Dei* had gone; they took St Mary and St John away and placed them on one end which had apparently lost its figures: they placed the Trinity above the Crucifixion in spite of its being far too big and overlapping the top, and they put two bishops where St Mary and St John had been, on either side of the figure of our Lord.

The chasubles in which the bishops are represented hang very straight and flat without folds: they are narrow, they are not pointed, and they only just cover the shoulders. The whole of the forearms are free of the chasuble, and there is no indication of any folding back of the vestment or of its being creased by the elbows. Each chasuble has a narrow orphrey of the Ψ form, branching at the top over the shoulders, and also branching like an inverted ∇ on the lower part of the vestment. The field or ground is diapered or powdered with *fleurs-de-lys* and spots in varying proportions. Each figure holds up the right hand in blessing and has probably held a crozier in the left hand; in the case of the right-hand bishop on the side of the shrine a little depression can be seen at the bottom of the chasuble where the crozier crossed diagonally. The two bishops on the side of the shrine appear to have apparels in the skirts of their albes, but there is no attempt to represent the maniple.

If we now compare the vestments in which the little figures of bishops are depicted with other mediæval representations, we shall find that they

exhibit some of the peculiar characteristics of those on the stone figures in low relief of West-Highland ecclesiastics peculiar to the mediæval grave slabs of that district, and not apparently found elsewhere. The investigation of their date and place of execution raises the whole problem of these West-Highland vestments. This has been to some extent dealt with by the present writer in former volumes of our *Proceedings* when discussing vestments represented on monuments at Oathlaw, Forfarshire,¹ and Parton, Kircudbrightshire.²

The figures are mitred and are in the eucharistic vestments of bishops with chasubles over albe and amice. To what extent the rest of the vestments may at one time have been indicated it is hard to say: there has been some engraving but it is now much worn.

The rest of the vestments would of course be girdle, fanon or maniple, stole, tunicle, and dalmatic, with buskins, sandals, and gloves. The common forms taken by these vestments in the different centuries and in most countries is well known to students, but the chasubles on West-Highland figures are very puzzling. In the North of France, in England, and in the mainland of Scotland, the large full chasuble of the mediæval period was ornamented with what is known as the Y cross or Ψ cross, viz. narrow bands of another material, no doubt originally covering seams, but customarily crystallising into forms like these letters. At the end of the fourteenth century and at the beginning of the fifteenth embroidery began to get stiffer, the chasuble came to be made rather less full, and the orphreys were differently arranged. They were made wider, and they took the form of a large Latin cross on the back of the vestment and a broad stripe up the front. All the English fifteenth- and sixteenth-century chasubles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, are ornamented in this way, and we gather from Scottish inventories that the same was the case here. In France and the Low Countries a wider form of Ψ cross also became prevalent. Now in the sixteenth century embroidery became still stiffer and the chasuble began to be made still smaller, the sides being more or less reduced. With the Renaissance this process went much further, producing the more or less sandwichboard-like forms of the vestment common on the Continent to-day. Of these stiff Renaissance chasubles there are several clearly defined forms, characteristic, *e.g.*, of French, Italian, or Spanish practice. Most of the mediæval vestments which have survived have been cut down and re-made in Renaissance times so as to assimilate them to the forms which had then become customary. The Department of Textiles at South Kensington exhibits notices beside the vestments warning the public that this went on and that most of the older vestments are not

¹ Vol. xliii. pp. 311 sq.

² Vol. xliv. pp. 364 sq.

in their original shape. It is exceedingly difficult to know how far the cutting down of the chasuble was carried in this country or in England before the Reformation or what was the exact form that it took. That it went on to some extent is certain, for in an Inventory of Aberdeen Cathedral, 1549, more than one old set of vestments is described as *veterum more ampla et lata*.¹ A contrast with current usage is here implied, but it cannot be assumed that the more recent vestments had necessarily taken the forms that are familiar in continental vestments after the end of the sixteenth century. A thirteenth-century chasuble might be *ampla et lata* when compared with the still full-sided chasuble of the fifteenth century. We know that Flemish vestments were imported into Scotland at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, and we know fairly well what these were like at that time; as in the case of the contemporary English vestments, they were wide, and of the definitely Gothic tradition, though somewhat curtailed in size.

Now the West-Highland effigies show a chasuble that is cut away at the sides almost as drastically as seventeenth-century chasubles on the Continent, though the rest of the vestment is by no means the same shape. The stones, moreover, which show these vestments are incontestably mediæval; they are not archaic survivals in general design made in the seventeenth century. These West-Highland chasubles retain the pointed base and the narrow Ψ cross orphreys of the chasubles of the earlier Gothic tradition. Further, they often show a form of this orphrey with an additional inverted ∇ cross below which is seldom found elsewhere after the fourteenth century. The assigning of a date to West-Highland slabs is notoriously difficult because of the late survivals of older forms of ornament. But even making such allowance there are slabs which can hardly be later than the middle of the fifteenth century, and are probably earlier, which show a form of chasuble with the sides cut back almost to the shoulders, a front lying flat without folds, but with the narrow Ψ cross orphreys of a period earlier rather than contemporary with the probable date of the stones.

We gather from this evidence that there actually began in the West Highlands in mediæval times much the same cutting down and stiffening of the chasuble as went on one hundred and fifty to two hundred years later on the Continent, but with the difference that the earlier forms of orphreys and decoration and that the pointed ends of the vestment still remained, the result being to produce a form of the vestment peculiar to the district. If we ask the reason we shall probably find that a stiff form of embroidery or ornamentation of the fabric developed in the West Highlands, or survived from the days of Celtic art, which made

¹ *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis*, Edinburgh, 1845, vol. ii. p. 189.

the vestment so stiff that the introduction of the elevation of the chalice made the cutting away of the sides of the vestment a matter of practical necessity. For we must remember that the elevation of the chalice came in after the elevation of the Host, and it would quite probably be late in the fourteenth century before it reached the Western Isles. We know little or nothing of the ornamentation of Celtic ecclesiastical textiles, but if masses of interlaced work or of its later derivatives, or any kind of similar massing of heavy pattern was customary in embroidery or applique, the results of stiffening the fabric would be much the same as the heavy work of the early Renaissance abroad.

On the whole it seems that we cannot connect the contrast connoted by the "*veterum more ampla et lata*" of the Aberdeen Inventory of 1549 as indicating the use in the East of Scotland of anything but the rather more abridged form of chasuble commonly used at the time. It cannot be read as proving that West-Highland chasubles were used in Aberdeen, any more than the architectural detail of the sixteenth-century work of the north-east of Scotland is at all like the contemporary sculpture of Argyllshire monuments.

It remains therefore that, as far as we can deduce from the evidence at present available, these figures may be taken as representing a West-Highland tradition and not as representing the early sixteenth-century practice of the East of Scotland.

Further evidence pointing in the same direction results from a study of the mitres. They are of a comparatively early shape, characteristic of the last part of the thirteenth century or the first part of the fourteenth. They are small and low but rather sharply pointed and not elongated or bulbous. The later tradition is well exemplified in Scotland by a fine head of a fairly late episcopal effigy at St Andrews, by the effigy of Henry de Lychtone, bishop of Aberdeen 1422-1440, in the north transept of his cathedral church (a remarkably high mitre for his time), and above all by the sixteenth-century mitres in the contemporary portraits of the great bishops of Aberdeen, William Elphinstone, 1485-1509, and Gavin Dunbar, 1518-32, in the possession of the University there. These exhibit a good deal of variety, but not the survival of the earlier form shown in these little figures.

There is another noteworthy characteristic in the amices of these statuettes. Here again we find something unusual, and not a peculiarity of treatment that might be due to carelessness in execution. The apparels are very prominent and stand up with peculiar stiffness. This again is to be paralleled in West-Highland figures, although it is not so pronounced: the West-Highland figures at times show the amice apparel in such a way that it appears to rise above the amice as if fastened to

it in such a way as to project above it. The amice is a rectangular piece of linen tied over the head like a hood; when not used as a head covering it is pushed back and encircles the neck; in the early days of its existence it became customary to ornament it with an oblong piece of coloured silk or stuff fastened to it more or less like a collar. In Italy at Milan¹ at the present day it is only attached at one edge so that it falls flat over the shoulders. In Spain it has long been altogether detached and is fastened with cords. But in the north of Europe of old, as also in England to-day, *e.g.* at Westminster Abbey, it was tacked on to the amice all round, and therefore would stand more erect. If it were made much deeper and were allowed to project above the amice, the West-Highland effect would be produced.

To sum up.

The bell itself is probably the relic of some important saint whose fame came down till late in the mediæval period. It may well date from before the ninth century.

It was probably enshrined early in the twelfth century, to which period the figure of our Lord crucified and the small apostle, probably St John, belong.

In the fourteenth century the silver plate with its embossed decoration was made and the crucifix and attendant figures were remounted upon it.

Late in the fifteenth century or early in the sixteenth, John the son of Alexander made a second reconstruction, changing the position of some of the figures and adding others.

In the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries the loss of some figures may have occasioned a further re-arrangement of the rest in the manner in which they now exist, including the refixing of the inscription plate upside down.

The vestments of the bishops present peculiarities which it is difficult to explain save on the hypothesis that the figures were made in the West Highlands. Such evidence as they afford also points to the fifteenth century as their date.

While their form is broadly that which we know in the West Highlands, there are certain slight differences between them and the vestments as shown on the Argyllshire stones. It may therefore be found that the bell and its shrine come from elsewhere in the definitely Highland area.

In conclusion I wish to express my great indebtedness to Mr J. S. Richardson for the large amount of time and trouble given towards helping to elucidate the difficult problems connected with the different reconstructions of this bell shrine, and for the drawing which is reproduced in fig. 2.

¹ In Rome and in the Roman use generally apparels have disappeared.