

### III.

#### THE SITE OF ST BLANE'S CHAPEL IN RANNOCH.

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Despite its associations, the site of St Blane's Chapel in Rannoch seems never to have been brought to the notice of a learned society, nor is the place even mentioned in the Statistical Accounts of the parish of Fortingall in which it is located. It does not appear on the inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map (Sheet 55), but it is figured on the 6-inch sheet about 20 yards south of the road from Kinloch Rannoch to Aberfeldy, just where the highway bends east of Lassentullich House at the base of the north-western slopes of Schiehallion, and about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles east of Loch Rannoch. Here is to be seen the old stone-built burial enclosure of the Stewarts of Inverhadden standing on the crown of a steep and rocky bank surmounting the road. Tall trees, which surround the adjacent graveyard on a grassy platform between the mountain slope to the south and the bank above the road, make the site a most picturesque one.

The burial enclosure is an interesting structure possessing a number of archaic features reminiscent of an early phase of ecclesiastical architecture. Considering its situation and its sacred character, there can be no doubt that it occupies the site of the ancient chapel of St Blane, even if it does not actually embody parts of the old church walls. In plan the building is a plain rectangle, measuring internally at ground-level 25 feet 6 inches by 12 feet 4 inches. It is well built of rubble masonry embedded in mortar, but in places the walling, of the average thickness of 1 foot 10 inches and uniformly 5 feet 2 inches high, is ruinous, particularly so at the south-west corner. At this part the masonry

seems to differ from that of the rest of the building, for it is suggestive of the bonded drystone of the primitive churches of Ireland and of the Scottish western islands and counties. Here possibly is incorporated a portion of the original chapel. Ground irregularities to north, east, and west necessitated a greater drop on the outside of the walls; their north-east and north-west corners rise to no less than 8 feet above grass.

It appears remarkable that this building should have been erected on uneven ground, for the choice of such a site occasioned difficulties in construction involving great labour avoidable simply by building on the level only a few feet to the south. Besides, not only was more stone required to set up the structure where it stands, but the interior had to be made up to the level of the land to the south.<sup>1</sup> Probing tells that the rock is to be met with at considerable depth in what would be irregular outcrops before they were covered. Apparently, the true reason for the selection of the position of the burial enclosure is that it was built to stand on the ground hallowed by the occupation of the ancient chapel. A parallel to this Rannoch example is found at Suie, near Luib, Glendochart, the traditional site of one of the places of contemplation of St Fillan,<sup>2</sup> in the burial enclosure of the Macnabs of Inishewan, which occupies part of the site of a chapel, now obliterated save for vague outlines of foundations. Moreover, at Suie,<sup>3</sup> other features indicate similar characteristics of ancient ecclesiastical sites and they can be paralleled at Lassentullich also.

The Lassentullich burial enclosure is more elaborate than most buildings of its class, for it is provided with three window-like openings, one being placed in each of the north, east, and west walls respectively. The aperture placed in the centre of the north wall and overlooking Strath Tummel, is round-headed. The narrow openings in the east and west ends, with the peculiar feature of an outward splay, afford an extensive view of the countryside in the directions faced. Although the building possesses nothing of a defensive character in itself, its commanding situation and the disposition of the lights make it an excellent point of vantage.

The entrance is situated in the middle of the south wall nearly opposite the large window. A single slab of schist serves for a lintel to the doorway whose jambs incline slightly toward each other from the base up.

<sup>1</sup> Advantage has been taken of this accumulation of soil for burials, some being as recent as the second half of last century.

<sup>2</sup> See my paper in *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxiii, pp. 346-7.

<sup>3</sup> At Auchlyne, 2 miles east of Suie, another chapel site, traditionally associated with St Fillan, is built upon by a family burial enclosure.

It will be observed that the narrow windows at the ends, the round-headed light in the north wall and the low doorway with its inclined jambs, all recall primitive Celtic church architecture. Evidently, those who built the stone enclosure had this early style in mind, and it may be that they sought to embody some features recalling the structure which erstwhile had stood here.

The outlines of the graveyard, of which the building just described forms the northern limit, suggest that they are very ancient, although the appearance and condition of the moss-covered drystone dykes enclosing the cemetery are not necessarily indications of age. But however deceptive these walls may be, and even if (as they appear to-day) they are not extremely old, it may yet be presumed that they rest on ancient foundations: therefore, in shape the sacred area cannot have changed materially. It may be useful to compare the irregular quadrilateral with certain graveyards known positively to be of great antiquity. As a close study of early church sites in the West of Scotland almost necessitates comparison with Irish ecclesiastical remains, it will not be out of place at this juncture to state that the old kirkyard at Lassentullich closely resembles the enclosure within which is situated the "Priest's House," or Mortuary Chapel, at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow.<sup>1</sup>

Of the antiquity of the site, then, there can be no doubt, but as there are no traces of a cashel or domestic buildings, nothing exists now to show that it can be assigned to a very remote period. That the site itself, as a Christian station, is ancient, however, is proved by the presence of a schistose slab with two faces set nearly east and west respectively. The monolith stands in the churchyard at a distance of 50 feet to the south-west of the ruin and 10 feet north by west of the gate leading into the cemetery. The stone is 6 inches thick and is higher on one side, the greater height (to the north) being 4 feet 6½ inches; on the other it measures 4 inches less. Carved in relief upon the west face is an exceptionally fine and well-preserved example of cross, with long shaft and round hollows at the intersection with the short arms.

The shaft is 3 feet 7 inches long and 6 inches wide. Across the arms, which taper very slightly at their ends and extend over the greatest width of the monument, the measurement is 1 foot 6 inches. The cross may be included in the category typified under the number 101 A in *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, part i. p. 51.

An interesting feature occurs on the reverse or east face. This takes the form of three circular hollows near the middle of the slab. The

<sup>1</sup> *Historical and Descriptive Notes, etc. of the Ecclesiastical Remains at Glendalough* (Extract from the Eightieth Annual Report of the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland, 1911-12, Revised 1925), pp. 13-14, and Drawing 17a, p. 13.

symmetrical disposition of the cavities shows that an attempt was made to produce a cross on this face, similar to the symbol on the other. No doubt, the schist so scaled that the sculptor had to abandon his purpose, but the depressions remain to indicate what was intended (fig. 1).

Search was made for other early Christian monuments or mediæval stones bearing carvings, but none was discovered. On one slab only was there detected a small Latin cross of common type comprising

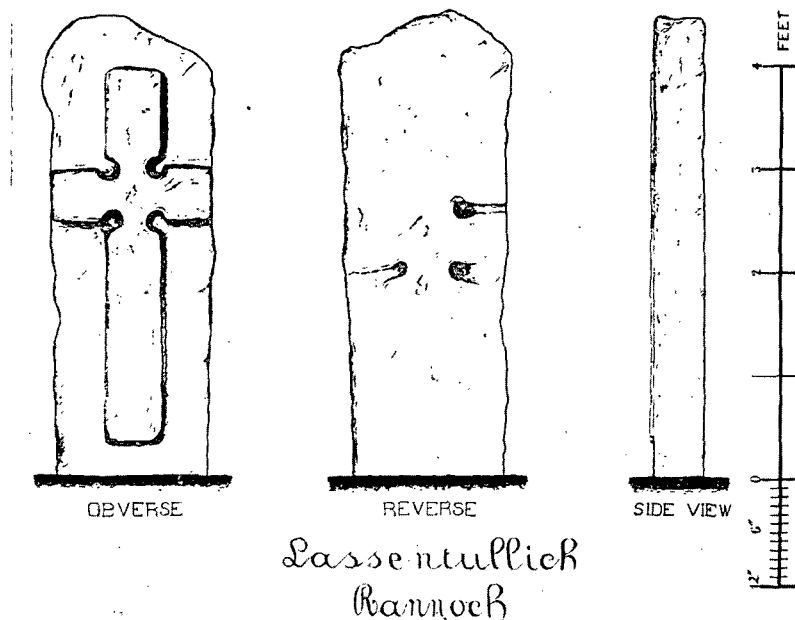


Fig. 1. Cross-slab at Lassentullich, Perthshire.

narrow lines deeply incised. The symbol does not seem to differ in respect of age from the eighteenth-century lettering which is also cut on the sepulchral stone.

One more relic connected with the place has to be recorded. Eight feet south of the north-east corner of the graveyard is a small recess (18 inches by 14 inches by 12 inches) open to the west and situated low in the wall. Until recently this space housed a well-preserved but extremely crude holy-water stoup made from a rough block of schist, 14 inches long, 9 inches wide, and 8 inches high, with a cavity 8 inches by 6 inches, tapering toward the bottom to a depth of 4 inches (fig. 2).

Not many mediæval holy-water stoups have been recorded as such in Scotland, but from time to time basined stones, recognised as having

served for church uses, have been noted. Frequently these have been referred to as fonts, apparently without proper study of the subject. Examination might show that some of them, dismissed under this indiscriminate designation, are stoups and not baptismal basins. It will suffice to say here that Scotland furnishes innumerable examples of stones with artificial cavities. Various suggestions concerning the purpose of these vessels can be adduced. Some may be domestic as querns or mortars, commercial or utilitarian as grain-measures, and others ecclesiastical as fonts, stoups, or piscinæ. But the truth is that in the last class few have survived.



Fig. 2. Holy-water Stoup from St Blane's, Rannoch.

Use of holy-water in places of Christian worship goes back to the early centuries of this era, and is a survival of practices of classical antiquity. But the small fixed vessels to contain the liquid in churches do not seem to have been general even in continental countries until the eleventh or the twelfth century. For long after this stoups usually took the form of a capital with a small trough in the top surface.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately they assumed a variety of forms as regards external outlines and shape of basin. Sometimes stoups are found elaborately ornamented according to the style and taste of the period to which they belong; generally, however, they are comparatively plain. Fixed holy-water stoups probably did not appear in Scotland until a fairly late date.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, rude as is the small stoup at St Blane's, it

<sup>1</sup> Abbé Paul Bayart in *Liturgia*, p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> The term "fixed holy-water stoup" is used to distinguish it from the movable or portable receptacles, which were placed on a column or in a recess near church doors, after the disappearance of the *atrium* in larger basilicas provided with basins containing water for cleansing the hands before entering the church. The portable holy-water carrier came to be used, as now, solely for certain ceremonies.

must not be assumed that it is of great antiquity, as, say, the cross-slab in the kirkyard, although both are of the same kind of stone (fig. 2).

This stoup, possessed of a rectangular cavity and compared with other mediæval specimens and modern examples, is not of uncommon type. It is likely that the old stone vessel occupied a position not far removed from where it had stood for centuries; its immunity was doubtless due to the isolation of the site. That it was deemed worthy of local regard is proved by the presence of the recess which held it. Though its present situation and fate are unknown, it is fortunate that the holy-water stoup can be placed on record in the Society's *Proceedings*.

Cognate to these notes, a typical example of a well-executed mediæval



Fig. 3. Holy-water Stoup from Fail, Tarbolton, Ayrshire.

holy-water stoup came to my notice in 1927. It may be usefully compared with the crude piece from Lassentullich, for both are very similar despite disparity of craftsmanship.

While driving near the scanty remains of the monastery of the Red Friars at Fail, near Tarbolton, Ayrshire, Mr James Shaw, County Clerk, Ayr, noticed in a farmyard what he recognised to be a church relic being used as a drinking-trough for poultry. Securing it, he took it to his home, where it is now carefully preserved. Knowing my interest in these matters, Mr Shaw kindly drew my attention to the stoup, and through his courtesy I am able to show an illustration (fig. 3).

The stoup from Fail is of grey sandstone and rectangular. It stands  $6\frac{3}{4}$  inches high and is 11 inches long and 9 inches wide. A groove  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch deep runs round the stone vessel 1 inch below the top. Flat-based and with rounded edges and corners, it bears a semicircular compartment  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch deep, 7 inches long, and 2 inches high on each side, the sunken area being furnished with a round moulding along the upper and

straight outline. The ends are similarly treated, but the hollows are deeper although not outlined at their bases. One measures  $6\frac{3}{4}$  inches across and 4 inches in height, and the other, more weathered than its fellow, is  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches by 4 inches. Each arc is ornamented with rounded dentels, the curved surface below being made up of a continuation of the same pattern, consisting of twenty-three teeth. A rectangular cavity, flat-bottomed and with straight sides, 2 inches deep, is cut out of the stone, providing a receptacle for water,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches long and  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide. Vandal initials, "J. S.," have been deeply scratched on the surface of one compartment.

These holy-water stoups may be compared with two examples which approach them closely in similarity. One, the carved stone vessel from Dunottar Castle, was exhibited to the Society on 13th February 1911 by the Rev. D. G. Barron.<sup>1</sup> The other, an even closer parallel, is the small, plain stoup still in its niche near the door of the parish church of Pylle, Somerset.<sup>2</sup>

In common with other ancient church sites, St Blane's Chapel, Lassentullich, was situated near a spring of water. West of the building on the rocky promontory, at a distance of 100 yards, on the south side of the road, is a horse-trough deriving its constant and copious water supply from a well within the curtilage of Lassentullich House. Inquiries were made in the locality with the view of obtaining some folklore connected with the spring, but nothing was gleaned from conversation. Indeed, none of those whom I interrogated was even aware of the presence of any well in the neighbourhood, and this despite the fact that the spring in the grounds of Lassentullich figures as St Peter's Well on the 6-inch Ordnance Survey map (Perthshire, Sheet 37, N.E.).<sup>3</sup>

The relation between Blane and Peter is obscure, as the name of the Apostle connected with a site in so remote a Highland district is unexpected. Theories could be advanced to reconcile the two saints' names, but such theories, necessarily bringing in their train much controversial matter, do not come within the scope of this paper. Sufficient is it to mention that the cult of St Peter was not established in Scotland before the first quarter of the eighth century.<sup>4</sup> Not many

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. xlv, pp. 223-4.

<sup>2</sup> John Henry Parker, *A Concise Glossary of Architecture*, pp. 270-1.

<sup>3</sup> Doubt arises in regard to the source of water at the site, as 100 yards south of the graveyard there is a low escarpment of rock with trees overhanging a spot constantly wet and marshy. Mr Thomas M'Laren tells me that the dripping-place under the trees was pointed out to him as being St Peter's Well. This information, contradicting the revised large-scale survey of 1900, appears, nevertheless, to stand on reasonable ground, for many reputedly sacred springs are associated with rocks and trees, especially the latter.

<sup>4</sup> Jas. M. Mackinlay, *Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland (Scriptural Dedications)*, pp. 218-9.

Scottish ecclesiastical foundations bear the name of Peter, but wells called after him are fairly numerous, while not a few place-names show that his cult enjoyed a measure of popularity. St Blane, who died in A.D. 590, is enshrined in a number of place-names. Previous to the reading of this notice, two Perthshire foundations have been recorded as being connected with St Blane. These are respectively at Dunblane, and in the scanty ruins of a chapel bearing his name on the southern shore of Loch Earn in the parish of Balquhidder.<sup>1</sup> Analogous instances occur of the linking of Blane with another saint, as, for example, in Dunblane Cathedral, where he is coupled with Lawrence the Deacon; Blane, in his early years, is associated with his foster-father and tutor, St Chattan.<sup>2</sup> Professor W. J. Watson, to whom I am once more indebted for advice, tells me that none of the local Gaelic place-names embodies either of the saints connected with the Lassentullich site.

My warm thanks are due to Mr Thomas M'Laren, F.S.A.Scot., Burgh Surveyor, Perth, for most kindly placing at my disposal, not only draft plans and notes, but his knowledge of the site and region. His assistance so freely given has been of the utmost service to me.

<sup>1</sup> *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxi. pp. 132-7.

<sup>2</sup> Jas. M. Mackinlay, *Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland (Non-scriptural Dedications)*, p. 111. According to a Bute legend Blane was mysteriously begotten of a water-sprite (*ibid.*, p. 111).