

IV.

NOTICE OF "THE LAW," AND OTHER ANTIQUITIES IN THE PARISH OF
URQUHART, NEAR ELGIN. BY THE REV. HENRY WALKER, MINISTER OF
THE PARISH.

In the spring of the year 1857 a bundle of gold armillæ was turned up by the plough on a farm in the parish of Urquhart, Elgin. One of the armillæ accompanies this communication, and is presented to the Society of Antiquaries for Scotland. Before the value of these relics was known, many of them had been destroyed or lost; and the accompanying armilla was picked up by a neighbouring farmer at his stable door, having been thrown away by one of his herd boys. On being shown the armilla, the minister of the parish immediately set inquiries on foot as to the fate of the rest; but by this time their value had been ascertained, or his inquiries had raised suspicion, and the most perfect ignorance was pretended as to what had become of the remainder; or it



was averred that they had all been given away, or lost, or stolen. There is, indeed, from what can be learned, a very strong probability that the latter averment is very near the truth, and there seems very little hope of any more of them being recovered. It was ascertained, however, that a good large "gowpen" full had been found, amounting in number to more than three dozen (one of which is here figured), enough to have made the fortune of the ploughman, had he known their value, and he now bitterly regrets that he ever told any one of his discovery. It is much to be feared that, owing to the present law, which (without meaning any disrespect to the law in general) must be called iniquitous, should any trove hereafter turn up in the parish or district, nothing will be heard of it except by the goldsmith. It was ascertained also that all the armillæ were of the same style and pattern as the one now presented to the Society, except that some of them had a knob at the end of each of the hooks.¹ The farm on which the armillæ were found is called "The Law," so called from a conspicuous tumulus on the farm. The tumulus appears to be of the usual bowl shape, and is encircled at the base by a level space resembling a pathway, the width of which cannot now be accurately ascertained, owing to the encroachments of the plough, but could not have been less than 4 or 5 feet. It is about 15 feet high, and 150 feet in circumference, excluding the pathway. The summit commands an extensive view, comprehending portions of nine counties. About 40 yards from the foot of this tumulus the armilla were found; a small cairn had previously marked the place of their deposit, but had been removed when the land was brought into cultivation some years ago. There is a local tradition that a golden cradle is buried in "The Law." No other remains of antiquity have been found on the farm so far as is known; but on the neighbouring farm, and about a quarter of a mile distant from "The Law," a cist of the usual description was exposed in trenching, and, on being opened, was found to contain a complete skeleton in a sitting posture, and along with it was a necklace of jet, exactly similar to that figured in Dr Wilson's book on the "Prehistoric Annals of Scotland," p. 294. The skeleton and part of the necklace immediately crumbled into dust on exposure to the air, and the remaining beads of the necklace are now in the Elgin Museum. About half a mile to the south of "The Law" another tumulus was opened about twenty years ago in the course of improvements, and a cist discovered, containing a skeleton, but no other remains; the skull was complete, and took two or three "gey hard chaps" with a hammer to

¹ [Several of these armlets were subsequently brought to Edinburgh, each being formed of a spirally-twisted file of gold, the extremities of which terminated in hooks. Of these, three specimens were also acquired for the Museum of the Society, one of which is figured on the opposite page. All those examined, though varying considerably in size, were found to be almost exactly of a similar weight—viz., 8 dwts. 18 grs.—ED.]

break it. The parish schoolmaster at the time was sent for, and pronounced it incontinently to be the skull of a Dane, because of its hardness ; which explanation being quite satisfactory, and confirmatory, moreover, of the learning of the dominie, the skull, being of no further apparent use, was shovelled away, and lost for ever.

Some years ago the Elgin Scientific Society was seized with an antiquarian fever, for which Mr Cosmo Innes must in a great measure be held responsible. It did not last long, but was very violent so long as it lasted. When it was at its height an excursion was made to the parish of Urquhart, for the purpose of exploring a barrow on the farm of Viewfield, which is adjacent to "The Law." Mr Donald, the tenant, kindly lent the aid of his servants, much to the contempt and disgust of his grieve, who was heard to grumble that it was the "feelishist work his master had ever set him to." The barrow (of the bowl shape) was opened, and afterwards carted away by the tenant, but nothing found except a few pieces of charcoal. A short time afterwards, however, on the removal of some large stones, which had been heaped together at the foot of the barrow, an oval space was disclosed filled with clay, quite different from the surrounding soil, and at the depth of about a foot and a half a deposit of ashes and charcoal some inches deep. It was evident that a hole had been made, the charcoal and ashes deposited at the bottom, and the space above filled with clay. On the same day an attempt was made to open "The Law," but was desisted from, in consequence of the request of the tenant, dictated either by superstition or by fear of the displeasure of his landlord, as he himself averred. Another barrow in the same district of the parish was also opened with a like result ; it was surrounded with several concentric circles of standing stones, but contained no remains. Other barrows have been opened in the parish : one contained a cinerary urn, of rude workmanship ; another contained the fragments of an urn, and exhibited marks and traces of having been previously disturbed.

"The Law" and all the adjacent barrows occur on a ridge of high ground. On the west side of the parish, at the foot of this ridge, is a flat, which is very little above the present high-water level of the sea, and the drainage of which is carried into the sea at half tide. There is evidence that this flat had been under water at no distant period in the eras of geology, and had been shut out from the sea by raised beaches of shingle. The occurrence of these traces of human life and energy, and their absence from the low ground, appear to fix this period within the occupation of the country by man ; and the additional facts, that the ancient seat of the Inneses, and present residence of the Earl of Fife, which stands in the midst of this flat, is called Inis (island), and that on

the ridge on the opposite side of the flat there are still to be seen heaps of the shells of oysters, mussels, and other shell-fish, which had in all probability been used for human food, or as bait by the fishermen, serve to indicate that, where now the plough drives its furrow, and corn grows, and cattle graze, the solitary Caledonian once guided his frail canoe, and sought to compel the waters to give up their tenants for his sustenance.