

CHAPTER IX.—IMPORT OF THE RING AND CUP SCULPTURES.

Of the real objects or meaning of these stone-cut circles and cups we know as yet nothing that is certain. They are archæological enigmata which we have no present power of solving; lapidary hieroglyphics and symbols, the key to whose mysterious import has been lost, and probably may never be regained. But various doctrines and hypotheses which have been proposed as to their origin and object necessarily require more or less consideration on our part.

They have been supposed, for instance, by the Rev. Mr Greenwell, Sir Gardner Wilkinson, Dr Graves, and others, to be archaic maps or plans of old circular camps and cities in their neighbourhood, telling possibly of their direction and character—"such (observes Sir Gardner Wilkinson) as are traced in time of danger by the Arabs on the sand to guide the movements of a force coming to their direction" (*Journal of British Archæological Association* for January 1860, p. 109). But I believe this idea has now been abandoned as untenable by some, if not by all, of the antiquaries who first suggested it.

The carvings have been held by some as intended for dials, the light of the sun marking time upon them,—or upon a stick placed in their central cups,—and its shadow corresponding with one of the central radial grooves; but they have been found in localities which neither sun nor shadow could reach, as in the dark interiors of stone sepulchres and underground houses. Others have regarded them as some form of gambling table; but they occur on perpendicular and slanting, as well as flat rocks; and besides, if such were their use, they would scarcely have been employed to cover the ashes of the dead.

I have heard them spoken of as rude representations of the sun and stars, and of other material and even corporeal objects¹ of natural or Sabeen worship; but all attempts to connect the peculiar configurations and relations which they show with any celestial or terrestrial matters have as yet confessedly failed. Nor have we the slightest particle of evidence in favour of any of the numerous additional conjectures which have been proposed,—as that these British cup and ring carvings are symbolic enumerations of families or tribes; or some variety of archaic writing; or emblems of the philosophical views of the Druids; or stone tables for Druidical sacrifices; or objects for the practice of magic and necromancy.

My friend Mr Dickson of Alnwick has, in some archæological observations relating to the incised stones found upon the hills about Doddington, Chatton, &c., “suggested that these carvings relate to the god Mithras (the name under which the sun was worshipped in Persia), that about the end of the second century the religion of Mithras had extended over all the western empire, and was the favourite religion of the Romans,” a system of astrological theology; that in the sculptured Northumberland rocks the central cup signifies the sun, “the concentric circles, probably the orbits of the planets;” and the radial straight groove “the way through to the sun.” In consequence, Mr Dickson holds these rock sculptures to be “the work of the Romans, and not Celtic,” having been cut, he supposes, as emblems of their religion by Roman soldiers near old British camps, after they had driven out their native defenders. But if they were of Roman origin, they would surely be found in and around Roman stations, and not in and around British localities—in Roman graves, and not in old British kist-vaens. The fact, however, is that they abound in localities which no Roman soldiers ever reached, as in Argyleshire, in Orkney, and in Ireland. And possibly even most of them were cut before the mythic time when Romulus drew his first encircling furrow

¹ Two archæological friends of mine—both dignitaries in the Episcopal Church—have separately formed the idea that the lapidary cups and circles are emblems of old female Lingam worship, a supposition which appears to me to be totally without any anatomical or other foundation, and one altogether opposed by all we know of the specific class of symbols used in that worship, either in ancient or modern times.

around the Palatine Mount, and founded that petty village which was destined to become—within seven or eight short centuries—the Empress of the civilised world.

Some archæologists have attempted to carry back the lapidary cuttings to the influence of an eastern race, who appear to have known the west, and perhaps the north, of Europe, for several centuries before Rome even was founded, and who are imagined to have cut the lapidary rings, not for the worship of the Persian god Mithras, but of the Phœnician god Baal. From its novelty and peculiarities this theory requires a more detailed consideration from us than any of the preceding suggestions.