

II.

THE SCULPTURED STONES OF CLATT, ABERDEENSHIRE.

By JAMES RITCHIE, F.E.I.S., CORR. MEM. S.A. SCOT.

The parish of Clatt lies along the upper waters of the Gadie, a tributary of the Ury, flowing round the "back o' Bennachie." Its southern side touches the parishes of Tullynessle and Forbes, and slopes up to the watershed, which separates it from the valley of the Don ; while it is bounded on the north by the parishes of Kennethmont and Rhynie, on the east by the parish of Leslie, and on the west by Auchindoir. The district at one time contained a great deal of moorland, but much of this has been broken up and is now under cultivation. Though the railway does not touch the parish, the almost central Kirktown, the village of Clatt, is only about three miles distant from Kennethmont station on the Great North of Scotland Railway. The parish church, which was originally dedicated to St Moloch (Moluag), stands within the graveyard, close to the village, but so often has it been repaired and altered that probably none of the original structure now remains. That the churchyard has been in use from very early times, however, no doubt accounts for the presence of the three incised sculptured stones which have been found in it. In addition to these, two others—five in all—have been found in other parts of the parish, but unfortunately all of them are somewhat damaged in consequence of their having been used for building purposes.

The largest and most complete of the five stood from time immemorial in the old wall of the churchyard. On the demolition of this the stone

was removed, and was built into the wall of a cottage close at hand ; but again a new site had to be found for it, for the extension of the playground of the neighbouring parish school in 1890 necessitated the destruction of the cottage. As the stone was in danger of being damaged, Mr Fellowes Gordon removed it to his residence at Knockespock, fully a mile from its original site ; and there it now stands close to the south wall of the mansion.

It is a slab of whinstone (fig. 1), 4 feet 6 inches high, 2 feet wide, and about 1 foot thick, with three incised symbols on one side. These are the triple ring and bar, the double disc or "spectacle," and the "mirror" symbols. The triple ring occupies the upper part of the stone, and consists of a large central ring, flanked by a smaller one on each side, the whole being crossed by a horizontal bar, which passes through the centres of the three rings. This symbol occurs 12 times in Scotland, 7 times with incised and 5 with raised lines. Three of the simple inscribed examples are found in Aberdeenshire, at Clatt, Kintore, and Fetterangus ; and two of the more elaborate, and probably later form, having raised lines and circles filled in with ornament, are found in the same county, at Dyce and Monymusk. The two latter examples, however, lack a bar traversing the circles.

The double disc or "spectacle" is placed below the triple rings, and towards the left side of the stone. It consists of two circles, each having an inner ring with a hollowed dot in the centre, the circles being connected by two curved lines crossed by a Z-shaped rod. This symbol is of very frequent occurrence, being represented in inscribed form, with or without the Z-shaped rod, no less than 17 times in Aberdeenshire alone. Of the 17 examples, 13 are in a horizontal and 3 in an upright position, and it is remarkable that the upright examples are situated near each other, one in Clatt and the other two in the neighbouring village of Rhynie ; nor are there in these two places any examples that can with certainty be classed as horizontal. A fourth upright "spectacle" once existed at Rhynie ; but, although a drawing of it appears in Dr Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, the stone on which it occurred is



Fig. 1. Sculptured Stone now at Knockespock.

now so defaced that no design is visible on its surface. There is also a fragment at Clatt churchyard exhibiting a portion of the double disc symbol, but it is too small to show whether the figure occupied a horizontal or an upright position.

The upright double discs are all somewhat similar in design, and this, together with their unique orientation, suggests that they may be contemporaneous, all being the work of a single artist. On the other hand, the similarity may simply indicate that an original pattern had been copied by succeeding local designers.

The third symbol on the Knockespoek stone is the "mirror," situated to the right of the double disc. Unfortunately, a fragment of the face of the stone has scaled off, carrying with it, in addition to part of the double disc, a large portion of the mirror; but enough remains to show that it had an inner circle and that the handle was attached to it by a small ring. Owing to the flaw in the stone it is impossible to say whether or not the mirror had been accompanied by a "comb." The mirror symbol also occurs very frequently on the incised sculptured stones of Scotland, 32 times in all, 19 with and 13 without the comb. In Aberdeenshire alone it has been recorded 15 times, 7 with and 8 without the comb. In addition to these, a fragment with the mirror but lacking the comb once existed at Rhynie, but it has now been lost.

The second stone in the churchyard of Clatt is the small fragment to which reference was previously made. It was discovered by the late Mr James Macdonald of the Farm, Huntly, and at present lies, along with some loose stones, among the tall grass at the base of the western gable of the church. It is of a somewhat triangular shape, measuring 1 foot 3 inches in length by 10 inches in greatest breadth, and exhibits a small portion of the double disc symbol with the Z-shaped bar (fig. 2, lower left corner). The discs, which have an inner circle without a central dot, are connected by two straight lines, in place of the curved lines which are usually found associated with them on similar Aberdeenshire stones, and which are shown, but erroneously, in the figure in



Fig. 2. Sculptured Stone (hitherto undescribed) built into the wall of the Churchyard of Clatt, and portion of another (No. 2) showing part of the double-disc symbol.

Mr Allen and Dr Anderson's monograph.¹ Though search has been made, no further portion of the stone has been found; but as it was probably broken up for building purposes, the remaining parts are most likely hidden in the walls either of the church or of the churchyard.

The third stone, also shown in fig. 2, is built into the exterior of the west wall of the churchyard, near the middle of the wall and close to the ground. It was discovered in January 1905 by Mr Wm. Stewart, J.P., Schoolmaster of Clatt, whose house adjoins the churchyard. The stone was uncovered on the removal of an accumulation of earth from the base of the wall, and although at first, owing to its being disfigured by soil, its significance was not recognised, the later appearance of some faint lines indicated to Mr Stewart its true nature. It is a whinstone block, 27 inches along one long edge, 33 along the other, and averaging 14 inches broad. It is built into the wall with its long axis horizontal, its top pointing to the south; so for the present its thickness cannot be ascertained. The exposed surface bears two figures, the arch or horse-shoe on its upper portion, and below it the long-jawed or "elephant" symbol. The surface of the stone is so worn that the figures are faint, and it is only in a good light that the details, particularly of the horse-shoe, can be deciphered. It may be that before the stone was built into the wall it had been lying in the churchyard exposed to traffic, and that thus its surface became wasted. The horse-shoe appears only 12 times on the inscribed stones in Scotland, and although 6 of these examples are in Aberdeenshire, no two of the carvings in that county are alike in detail. The "elephant" symbol, on the other hand, occurs no less than 35 times in Scotland, 17 with incised and 18 with raised carving. Of the 17 incised examples 12 are in Aberdeenshire, while only 1 raised one, that on the Maiden Stone, occurs in the county. It is very seldom, however, that these two symbols, the horse-shoe and the elephant, are found together, for, in addition to the present example at Clatt, they are associated only at

¹ Allen, J. Romilly, and Anderson, Joseph, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1903, p. 158, fig. 165.

Congash near Grantown in Inverness, and at Bruceton in Perthshire; and in all three instances the horse-shoe is placed above the elephant. This stone has evidently been broken up before being built into the wall, for the hind legs of the elephant are missing. Mr Stewart has examined carefully all the exposed surface of the churchyard wall for additional portions of the carving, but he has found none, though several fragments apparently of the same stone are built into the wall in the neighbourhood of the sculptured parts. Yet since it may be, as in the case of the Brandsbutt Stone at Inverurie, that the carved surfaces have been carelessly turned inwards, there exists a possibility that some day the remainder of the stone may be recovered. The fragment discovered by Mr Macdonald is not part of the stone found by Mr Stewart, for the grain of the former is rather coarser and the carving is considerably deeper than in the latter.

This stone has not been described or figured hitherto.

Those three stones are all that are known to have existed in or near the churchyard, but as in two cases they have been damaged for building purposes, it is possible that others may have suffered the same fate and may turn up when the churchyard wall has to be rebuilt. At present it is in good condition, and appears likely to stand for many a long day.

The fourth stone belonging to the parish, the Percylieu Stone (fig. 3), has had a chequered career. It was found about 1838, when some rough land was being brought into cultivation, close to a number of tumuli on the farm of Hillhead, which lies near the old road leading past the churchyard of Clatt to Rhynie. Not far from the place where the stone was found there formerly existed a stone circle, no part of which now remains on the original site, though some stones which probably belonged to it are built into a dyke close at hand. The writer of the *New Statistical Account of the Parish of Clatt*, the Rev. Robert Cook, M.A., says that the sculptured stone was dug up from a depth of about 6 feet. It is difficult to understand how a stone which must originally have stood on the surface, in order that its symbols might be visible, came to be buried to such a depth, unless it had been

used as a cist cover. Mr Cook, however, does not mention that it was so used, though he mentions the discovery of several cists in the neighbourhood. Perhaps the 6 feet included a considerable depth of rough heathery surface.

In 1884 the late Mr James Gurnell read a paper on the sculptured stones of the district to the Huntly Field Club, and in it he stated that the Percylieu Stone stood for a time beside the Salmon Well on the farm of Hillhead of Clatt, the name of the well being no doubt derived from the figure of a salmon carved on the upper part of the sculptured stone. It did not remain there long, and perhaps for that reason the "Salmon Well" is now quite forgotten in the district, so that I have been unable to identify it. Probably it was situated near the site of the now destroyed circle, at the springs where the water supply for the Established Church Manse is collected. The stone was removed, about sixty years ago, to Percylieu, where it appears to have been trimmed for use as a flagstone at the door of the threshing mill; for while it originally measured, says Mr Cook, 4 feet by 2 feet, now it measures only 3 feet by 1 foot 6 inches. It is about 4 inches thick. The greater part of the salmon on the upper part of the stone has been lost, only the lower line of the body with two fins remaining. The stone was lifted from its lowly position at the mill door by Mr Green, a tenant of the farm, and for a long time it stood against the wall of the mill. It was removed many years afterwards to Cransmill—a farm on the banks of the Kirkney Burn on the north side of the Tap o' Noth—for exhibition to the members of the British Association who, on 17th September 1885, visited the vitrified fort on the top of the hill and the collection of antiquities which belonged to the late Mrs Knight of Cransmill. There it remained till Mr Knight, leaving Cransmill for the farm of Mytice, took the stone with him to the latter farm, which is situated some three miles west of Gartly Station on the Great North of Scotland Railway; and there it still remains.

The fish symbol appears 13 times on Scottish sculptured stones, and twice in the caves. Of the 13 examples 8 are inscribed, and

4 of them are in Aberdeenshire. One is on the stone at Kintore churchyard; another on the stone found in the Don near Port Elphinstone in 1853, and removed to a site near the mansion-house of Keith Hall; the third on the Percylieu Stone; and the fourth on the Crow Stone in the neighbouring parish of Rhynie. The Aberdeenshire examples thus fall into pairs, each member of a pair being about three



Fig. 4. Top of the Tofthills Stone (hitherto undescribed).

miles distant from the other, while the pairs themselves are separated by a distance of about twenty miles.

The other symbol on the Percylieu Stone is the arch or horse-shoe, which, as has been mentioned, appears 6 times on the Aberdeenshire stones, but in no other case, there or elsewhere in Scotland, is it associated with the fish symbol.

The fifth and last sculptured stone in the parish is that at the farm of Tofthills (figs. 4 and 5). It was discovered in the foundation of the

barn when it was being rebuilt in 1879, and was removed to the garden dyke for preservation by the late Mr Wm. Bisset, who all his life long took a great interest in such objects of antiquity. Where it originally came from is not known with certainty, but it was Mr Bisset's opinion—



Fig. 5. Cup-marked side of the Tofthills Stone.

based upon the available information—that it had been removed from the site of a dismantled stone circle which stood within a short distance of the farm buildings. Not a stone of the circle now remains, but the site is known in the neighbourhood by the name of “The Sunken Kirk.” The local tradition concerning the origin of the name is that in ancient times an attempt was made to build a kirk there, but that the attempt

was frustrated by the devil, who caused the daily task of the workmen to sink out of sight during the night, till the builders gave up in despair. (It is curious that a somewhat similar tradition clings to the site of another now almost destroyed stone circle called Chapel o' Sink, at Fetternear, about five miles west of Inverurie.)

The stone itself has been broken, and what now remains is only the upper portion of the block of grey granite. On what had originally been the top, and down the sides, are numerous cup-marks, rather larger in diameter than the average and set so closely together as almost to touch one another. Although all the cup-marks cannot be seen owing to the position of the stone in the dyke, there are at least thirty; but no circles or spirals surround such as are visible, nor are they connected by lines or hollows of any kind. The present top of the stone (fig. 4), originally its "face," bears the incised carving. This consists of a cross, formed by two lines intersecting in the centre at right angles, and surrounded by a circle 6 inches in diameter. From the lower part of the circle two diverging lines (3 inches in length, 2 inches apart at the top, and 4 inches apart at the bottom) are drawn to form the shaft of the cross. This figure is surrounded by another circle 12 inches in diameter, the lower portion of which, with the bottom of the shaft, has been broken off. The design thus forms a simple kind of wheel-cross enclosed within a circle, but I am not aware that any other cross of exactly similar shape occurs among the early Christian monuments of Scotland.

As was to be expected, the cup-marks had been formed before the cross had been carved on the stone, for the larger circle which surrounds the cross passes through two of them, cutting the edges of the cups while remaining itself unbroken. Curiously enough, there are two cup-marks of rather smaller size within the inner circle which surrounds the arms of the cross, but they are not quite symmetrically placed, for both lie on the left side of the cross, the upper one not directly above the other. They do not appear, therefore, to have had any essential connection with the cross itself.

It is a matter for regret that these sculptured stones are not more carefully looked after, and that means have not been taken to preserve them from the action of the elements and the danger of ultimate loss. That the latter danger is a very real one is plain from the history of the stones, not only in the parish of Clatt but in many other parts of Aberdeenshire.