

ART. XVII.—*Maybrough and King Arthur's Round Table.*

By the Rev. ARTHUR JOHN HEELIS, M.A.

*Read at the sites, July 13th, 1911.*

THE following remarks are based on two papers already printed in the *Transactions* of this Society, viz. : by our member, C. W. Dymond, F.S.A., in 1890, and by W. Atkinson in 1883. The former contains an exhaustive survey by a civil engineer. The latter is illustrated by a drawing by the Rev. W. Stukeley, showing "A view of the circus of the Britons on the banks of the Lowther, August 15th, 1725."

Atkinson and Stukeley agree in considering that Maybrough and the two circles, viz. : the Round Table and another now barely traceable, close by the entrance to Lowther Park, mark the site of a religious festival accompanied by games. Originating in remote antiquity, the festival might continue under changed conditions. Roman, Scandinavian, Saxon, as they used the site in turn, may have modified it to suit their particular requirements. The Round Table itself may have been a later addition,\* and to the eye that observes to-day its well-preserved contour, it has the appearance of being, in its present form at least, comparatively quite modern. It is fair to state, however, that one Bushby, owner of the Crown Inn in the later eighteenth century, deepened the ditch, and threw the earth upon the banks. This was shortly before the outer surroundings of the Table were encroached upon, as we see to-day, in the making of the road to Yanwath, and the widening and straightening of the Clifton road.

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\* Probably of later date than the prehistoric circle on Moor Divock. Ferguson, *History of Westmorland*, p. 15.

One would suppose that during its long existence the Round Table has been put to various uses. Was it the scene of the "Holmgang," the trial by combat of the Norsemen? \* Was it the meeting-place of the Steadmans and Lowdens of days long past, or of renowned pugilists? † It is admirably adapted for such purposes. A thousand spectators and more could find place within the spade-formed ring, while the ground in the vicinity forms a natural grand-stand, commanding a general view of the arena. Atkinson, reasoning from signs of peculiar excavations, thought that he found the starting point of chariot and horse races on the other side of the Eamont, on the lower slope of Wethericks. On this supposition, the passage of the river added interest for the spectators, and we form a vivid idea of the scene when we consider that the course lay the full length of the present village, on round the circle within the Lowther Park gates and back again.

The latter circle has been called the "Little Round Table." It has never been so elaborated as the Round Table proper, and its shallow eminence has been ploughed to the level of the surrounding ground.

Other smaller circles were once visible, and we have to remember that this spot was, at least once, the camping-ground of an army, for Charles II. halted here on his way to Worcester; while "Northerner" of the *Penrith Observer*, omniscient on such matters, has drawn attention to the fact that, in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the Round Table was used as a mustering place for military levies. ‡ A regular encampment on a large

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\* The Rev. Eric Robertson, in his *Wordsworthshire*, suggests that the Round Table may have been an artificial island, the Holmgang having originally been a contest on an island (Worsaae, *The Danes*, p. 161). Mr. Dymond thinks that the ditch could not have been kept full of water, as it is above the river level.

† The suggestion that it may have been used as a cockpit seems negatived by its size.

‡ See Historical MSS., Fleming Papers, pp. 31, 127, 135, 329, 389, 393, 398, 403.

scale, if such was needed, might find more suitable place further away on the open common, but here would be a convenient parade ground, with an effectual background for musketry practice. Some few tents would be required on the spot, in connection with the mustering of troops, or for the sports and shooting competitions known to have been held here. Faint circles from the ditches would be visible for generations. I observed the other day two such circles by the side of the road not far from Lowther Church, which I took to be traces left by the erection of large circular tents.\*

The diameter of the "Little Round Table" was about 80 yards. It had a single entrance, as distinct from the two opposite gangways of the "Greater Round Table," whose original extreme length outside the embankment is given by Dymond as 365 feet, the longest diameter of central raised platform being 78 feet, and the shortest 72 feet. The main point to notice is that the configuration is the very opposite to that usual in a fortified post, for the ditch is within the rampart, and the general arrangement is that of a theatre.

In the inn yard, hard by, there is a circular tank of red sandstone, 38 inches in diameter by 36 inches in depth, which has been called "King Arthur's drinking cup." There is no record of its origin.

The chief interest of this group of antiquities lies in Maybrough. This is a rude, almost circular enclosure, formed by a vallum composed of small stones for the most part "not much bigger than a man's fist." The generally received idea is that these stones were brought from the beds of the Eamont and Lowther, though Mr. Goodchild, of H.M. Geological Survey, held the opinion that Maybrough may have been originally one of those

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\* I have since learned that these circles are on the site of old Lowther village. My informant (Miss Noble of Beckfoot) suggests bull-baiting as their origin. The rings may well date from a period subsequent to the removal of the village, all traces of which have been deleted and the ground levelled.

great mounds of glacial drift known as eskers, "the centre of which has been cleared out, and the larger stones placed round the margin." The large stone in the centre he considered to have drifted from the Lake District, and to have been found in the centre of the esker. Dymond, for reasons which appear sound, rejects the theory of an esker, but accepts the drifting of the stone. The height of this stone above ground is 9 feet 2 inches, and the greatest girth 18 feet. The diameter of the enclosure is nearly 100 yards. Dymond estimates that 1000 men, working continuously for eight hours a day, the condition of the river beds being always favourable, and using baskets for carrying the stones, would require at least six months to complete the work.

The large stone now remaining is the survivor of eight\* known to history, four of which stood within the enclosure to form a square (including the present one), and four more at the corners of the entrance. Some were blasted to clear the ground for corn-growing. Probably we owe the preservation of this single stone to its convenience as a rubbing-stone for cattle. Much stone has been taken away from time to time, for road metal and for building purposes. Camden says that Penrith Castle, in the reign of Henry VI, was repaired out of the ruins of Maybrough, and, though doubt is thrown on this, it is thought that many megaliths may have been used in the rebuilding of the Eamont Bridge, for which an indulgence was granted by Bishop Longley in the same reign. A more probable source of stone for Penrith Castle, if not for the bridge, would be the stone circles known to have existed on Wethericks, on the further side of the Eamont, and some

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\* Accounts differ as to the number of great stones which have disappeared. Dr. Simpson (*Transactions*, o.s., iv., p. 545) mentions two. Clark, in 1789 (see Appendix) gives four as the number blasted. Stukeley, some fifty years earlier, speaks of "Two circles of huge stones." Four of the inner circle had lately been blasted. At least one of the outer circle remained at the edge of the corn; and others lay about the entrance. (See *Transactions*, o.s., vol. vi., p. 455.) Hutchinson quotes Pennant as his authority for "eight" stones.

large stones in the foundations of the retaining wall on the left hand of one ascending Kemplay may have come from there. Moreover, Penrith Castle is almost entirely built of red sandstone.

The etymology of the name Maybrough has been variously interpreted. According to one view, it is tantamount to Maidens' Fortress, and it is known that, in time of war it was customary to place women for safety in fortified posts. Another derivation points to its connection with the tomb of some great personage. A third makes it a place of study and contemplation. Fourthly, there is derivation most interesting from its possible historical connection, according to which Maybrough would be the "Fort of Alliance." Dymond hazards a guess of his own, combining the Welsh "ma" a place or space, with "bwr," an intrenchment.

The purpose of Maybrough is a matter of conjecture. It has been called a "Danish Temple," a "great British Temple," a "supreme consistory of Druidical administration," while Hutchinson quotes, but disallows, the traditional account that it was a "Roman theatre, where criminals were exposed to wild beasts, and that those stones were placed for the refuge of the combatants." Mr. John Ward, F.S.A., in *The Roman Era in Britain* (1911), p. 93, quotes "Maryborough near Penrith" (*sic*) as a Roman amphitheatre. James Fergusson thought that its origin was that of a sepulchral memorial. Dymond does not accept this conclusion, while he thinks that Maybrough is not such a monument as would be raised in memory of some great victory. Our late president, Chancellor Ferguson, in his *History of Westmorland*, states that "Maybrough once no doubt, sheltered a community of Neolithic men."\*

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\* In an old *History of Westmoreland*, 1730, the identity of Maybrough with "Eamotum" is affirmed on the authority of "St. Dunelmensis," as quoted by "R. Hoveden." Neither in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (evidently the original) nor (as I am told by Mr. Collingwood) in the account by R. Hoveden,

A historical allusion to Maybrough might be supplied, if our Eamont could be identified with "Eamotum," where, in the year 926, Athelstan made a treaty of peace with Constantine, king of Scotland, and others.† Camden holds that the meeting took place in Cumberland, but Yorkshire has a rival claim. Again, a place, "Dacor," is also mentioned as the scene of this treaty-making. Dacre in Cumberland is but a mile from the river Eamont, and may be the place referred to.‡

I must not pretend to throw light upon this obscure problem, but would merely say, that, whatever the origin of these interesting remains, Maybrough, in its long history, has doubtless been put to various uses, and that, in its earlier history, it was in all probability a place of note over

do the alleged words "now Mayburgh" occur. The notice continues:—"The very name of Mayburgh extremely favours this opinion; for our Dr. Hicks observes upon the Saxon word Mago, Magu, etc. that it signifies Affinitas, Kindred, and Juricus adds, Ab hoc nexu, etc. From the relation of blood, the word came by degrees to be transferred to any intimate union or Friendship among men, or Societies; and so Mayburgh seems to have been (upon the occasion of the fore-mentioned treaty) so called; as if one should say, 'The fort of Union or Alliance.'" According to Hutchinson, this derivation has the support of Camden.

† Few finds, such as might help to fix a date for Maybrough, are recorded. A "brass celt" had been found in Stukeley's day, and in 1879 or previously, there was found a "broken unfinished stone celt," which Prof. Harkness considered to "lead towards the inference that this circular enclosure perhaps protected a settlement of Neolithic men and in this respect it has its analogue in Cissbury Camp" (*Archæologia*, xlii.; these *Transactions*, o.s., iii., p. xvi.). This seems on the whole, the most likely theory of the first purpose of Maybrough, though the fact that two celts only have come to light is evidence rather against than for. The Neolithic surface, however, must be at a depth of some feet. Proof can only be got by digging. Not only is Maybrough, including its megaliths to be accounted for, but also the other features in its neighbourhood. Singly, the Round Table may be explained as a "Jousting Place," erected at a comparatively late date. Hutchinson connects it with the presence of royalty in Penrith, or the residence there of the Duke of Gloucester. Still there is the "Little Round Table." Clarke's theory of the Maybrough circle might be transferred to this, viz., that it was appropriated to the sports of those below the degree of knight. The features noticed by Atkinson beyond Eamont, are less certainly connected with our problem. Mr. Dymond, however, does not believe that the Round Table was a tilting-ground (these *Transactions*, o.s., xi., p. 218).

‡ Mr. Collingwood, however, in agreement with Mr. J. F. Curwen, considers that if the Dacor and Eamot of the Chronicles were in Cumberland, and if King Owain of Cumbria entertained Athelstan within the walls of a fortress, it is more likely that Dunmallet was the scene of the treaty, being near Dacre Church, a site with a monument of the period, where the baptism of Constantine's son might have been performed. In this case Maybrough is sufficiently near to have had connection with the occasion.

a wide area, whose inhabitants assembled here for parley and to settle important questions. Religious rites would have a prominent place in the proceedings. The Round Table may have been a place for trial by combat. Athletic contests were held, as befitted warrior races. There must have been training in martial exercises, and practice in combined action for war even in early British days. Why not here, in the place which seems to have kept its character as a mustering ground for troops, and a usual rendezvous for shooting matches, long after the invention of gunpowder had minimised the advantage of powerful physique? It had perhaps never ceased to be the spot men turned to when occasion brought a call to arms. Though not primarily a fortress, Maybrough would, in troublous times, serve the purpose, just as our church towers, have, time and again, afforded sanctuary to the neighbouring inhabitants. The Romans, finding such an amphitheatre ready at hand, would naturally make use of it for some of their habitual sports, whose lineal descendants we see in the Spanish bull-fight of to-day. The religious, and, shall we say, parliamentary character of this site would die out naturally. Its use as a place for sports and military exercises continued into quite modern English history; and, as Atkinson remarks, "It becomes an interesting question how far the modern north country games are descendants of those formerly practised here, and whether the local wrestling, pole leaping, and present strong tastes for athletic sports are as real and important links handed down of the condition of our fore-elders as are the more tangible, but less easily read remains of Maybrough and the Round Table."

## APPENDIX,

From Clarke's *Survey of the Lakes*, 1789.

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This account is printed as not generally accessible, and as giving the opinion of an independent observer in the eighteenth century. It contains interesting information, while its "fancies" are of little value. The allusion to Marienburg shows a curious coincidence of names.]

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Near to Emont Bridge is Mayburgh, or Maybrough, a singular and astonishing piece of antiquity, nothing similar to it appearing either in this or any other country that I can hear of. This curious monument is a circle, consisting of a mound of loose detached stones (none of them of any great size) containing an area or circus of 90 yards in diameter: the rampart is about 5 yards high, and its external bound comprehends about 5 acres. In that part that fronts the east is an entrance about 20 yards wide; and near the centre stands a single stone of prodigious magnitude, being upwards of 12 feet high. Some years ago, there were four other stones, though not so large as this which remains; of these, two were placed like door posts at the entrance, and two in the amphitheatre. These smaller stones were blasted and removed by order of a person who seems to have been at that time the farmer of this place: one of the men employed in the work having hanged himself, and the other turning lunatic, has given a fair opening to vulgar superstition, to impute these misfortunes to their sacrilege in defacing what they suppose was formerly a place of eminent sanctity.

The origin and design of this singular structure are so uncertain, that nothing more than mere conjecture can possibly be adduced concerning them; it is, according to some, a temple of the Druids, according to others it is a fortress. It may be "the circle of the terrible Loda, with the massy stone of his power" (so often named in those sublime, pathetic, and unequalled poems attributed to Ossian); it may, in short be whatever learning guided by fancy can dictate.

Among the rest, permit me to lay a conjecture before my readers. The famous Round Table is universally acknowledged to be the scene where the "brave of other days" vindicated their knighthood by feats of arms. May not this in some measure prove a key to this mysterious structure? Their vicinity argues

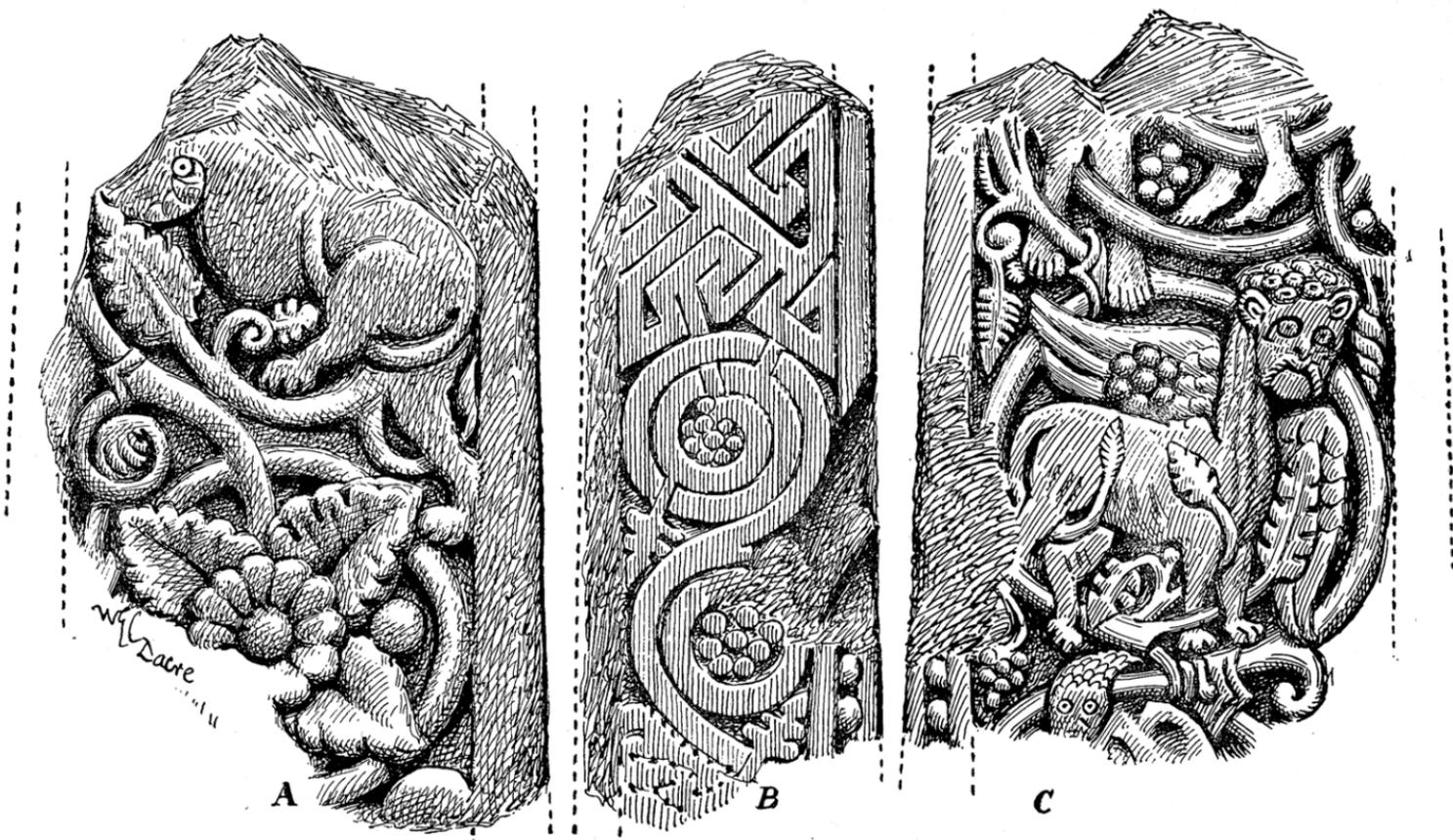
for it, and nothing makes against the idea, that *this* is the Gymnasium where the wrestlers, the racers, and others, not of the degree of knights, performed their exercises; exercises not yet forgotten among the plain, uncultivated mountaineers of this country.

That it has been no place of worship belonging to the Druids I think very evident: we no where learn that they had either temple or altar. They prophesied, it is true said, from the intrails of human victims laid upon stones; but they resided, they worshipped, they taught their pupils in the woods. Their principal seat was in the Isle of Anglesey among the oaks, whence they had their name; and their chief festival was on the first day of the vernal new moon, when they went with great solemnity to gather the sacred missletoe, to which they attributed many miraculous effects.

A farther and stronger argument of Mayburgh having been built about the same time with the Round Table, is drawn from a very well-known piece of history. The knights of King Arthur, the Teutonics, Hospitallers, and Templars (who were nearly the same) having built Marienburgh in Prussia (which differs little in sound from Mayburgh, and had its name from a large oak which stood there), were afterwards banished Germany; many of them then came into England, where considerable possessions were allotted them. That these domains were in this neighbourhood the name and privileges of Temple-Sowerby plainly evince, as it enjoys to this day the immunities of these knights, viz. exemption from land-tax and all tolls in every market, and freedom from the jurisdiction of the Bishop; the Lord thereof acting both as Bishop and Chancellor in his own Lordship.

Dr. Burn and some others say, that Penrith Castle was built of the stones which were taken from Mayburgh; but as neither the stones are of the same kind, nor were the roads in those times practicable for carriages, they must surely be wrong informed.





ANGLIAN CROSS-FRAGMENT AT DACRE.