

VII.—A POSSIBLE MEANING FOR PRE-HISTORIC CUP-MARKED STONES.

BY G. ROME HALL, M.B., M.S.

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THE constant occurrence of these stones in places where human remains have been laid to their last rest, points to their having some definite meaning in the funereal rites.

To quote the Rev. Wm. Greenwell, F.S.A. (*British Barrows*, p. 343), they suggest "the notion that they are, or may have been, figures, after a very rude and conventional manner, of some object embodying an idea that involved the deepest and most esoteric principle of the religion held by these people." In other words, the primitive people who used these markings meant them to be the outward and visible sign or symbol of something relating to the spiritual future of their departed. This is, of course, assuming that they believed in a future state of existence, and I believe it will not be hard to prove that they did so believe. I think no human race is known, however ignorant and debased, that does not hold that belief.

Primitive races, who live most of their lives in the open air, and who see the constant changes in the face of nature, on earth, in sky and sea, some of which changes are terrible, awe-inspiring, and grand, but the majority beautiful, get imbued with the idea that there exists an unseen and mysterious world around them. Probably the longing that exists in almost all human hearts for immortality, and also the remnants of some of the first traditions of the human race, cause such races to take for granted the existence of an immortal essence that is set free by the dissolution of the body. Up to a certain point, the more ignorant the individual the more firmly is this idea implanted. It is only when men are aggregated together, so that they have no time or opportunity to be impressed and schooled by thought-giving changes in the aspect of nature, that they loose the idea of this unseen world, and of the future state of existence that comes almost as a corollary to that idea. Races to whom there had been no revelation

would draw their religious ideas from, firstly, any traditions they might have preserved; and secondly, and chiefly, from the ordinary phenomena of nature.¹

That this is true is shown by the many points of resemblance in the mythologies of the principal divisions of that family of the human race to which these early Celts belonged, to whom the pre-historic burial mounds containing the mysterious cup-marked stones are ascribed.

In the Greek, Brahminical, Norse or Scandinavian, and Druidical religions there are many similar points of belief and worship, especially if we make allowance for the different phases of thought that would be developed as different sections of the Aryan race entered upon new methods and habits of life, caused by fresh skies and climates.

I say Druidical religion instead of Celtic religion, as it is uncertain whether the Druidical order was developed from the Celtic race alone, and obtained all or part of their knowledge from the East, or whether they were immigrants from the East, and ascended to the position they held by virtue of their knowledge. In the first place, these religions each have a number of major deities, which are evidently corresponding, although invested with different attributes, according to the different temperaments of their worshippers.

In all the above religions, except to some extent the Norse, we have an infinite number of minor deities presiding over the hills, groves, and streams, and also over the various passions of men, and over the various phases of nature. The Norsemen, instead, peopled the aspects of nature chiefly with fays and goblins.

Another feature is that of their belief in a future world, into which the spirit passes at death, into the Annwyn of the Celts, the Hades of the Greeks, the Valhalla of the Norse, the Swarga of the Hindoos.²

Another common feature is that of snake worship, but that has not occurred merely among those of the Aryan stock, but also in those as far removed from them as Mexican and African tribes. This would seem to show a common source for this worship, possibly from some tradition connected with the fall of our common parents. The

¹ Professor Max Müller is one of the principal exponents of this idea.

² Swarga or Swerga, the abode of Judra, is described as the most splendid and glorious abode that the human mind can conceive.—*Cf.* Percival's *Land of the Vedas*, p. 160.

sun was deified in the Grecian, Norse, and Brahminical religions; and the Teutonic, or northern, and Hindoo, and Singalese races name the first day of the week in his honour. But when we compare the mythologies of the Celtic and Hindoo races, which are the most emotional of the four races named before this, and on account of that the more easily impressed by the phenomena of nature, we find the likeness greatest.

Both races believed in the transmigration of souls, with the intention, as Caesar mentions concerning the Druids of Gaul, that men should be encouraged to lead a good life, since the number and character of the phases of existence after death, before they attained to a place among the gods, would depend on that life.³

The orders of Druids and Brahmins attained to positions of almost absolute power by virtue of their knowledge and education.

We find that both races practised human sacrifice for great purposes, and a kind of Sutteeism was probably practised among the earliest of the Celtic races (*British Barrows*, p. 120).

In some places in the East we find remains that are suggestive of the places in which the Druids worshipped in the West. The following quotation refers to a Buddhist temple and its surroundings in the district of Hambantota in the south-east of Ceylon:—'The traveller, as he approaches the Great Dagoba, sees group after group of upright granite blocks, ranged in lines, and recalling, at the first glance, the Druidical remains met with in Western Europe.'⁴

So far I have merely tried to show that these early Celtic races, who inscribed these cup-marked stones, believed in immortality, and therefore attached a meaning to these stones, probably connected with the future of their dead. That they were most probably Celtic is shown by the remains of skeletons found in burial places where these stones occurred, and that they were primitive or early is shown by the contents, or rather absence of contents of their tombs.

As has been computed by others,⁵ their arrival in Britain was probably several centuries before the Christian era. We have also

³ *De Bello Gallico*, Lib. VI. cap. 14, 'hoc maxime ad virtutem excitari putant,' *et seq.*

⁴ Cf. *Kusa Tata-kayā*, a Buddhistic legend, translated by Thomas Steele, Ceylon Civil Service, p. 236.

⁵ Cf. Fergusson's *Rude Stone Monuments*, chap. ii. p. 42.

seen that the Druidical religion resembled that of the first Aryan inhabitants of India more than that of the Greeks; and that appears to me to be proof that these races obtained their religious ideas from a common source, and that the Druids were not indebted to the Greeks for all their ideas and knowledge. This would do away with the argument that the first Celtic immigrants did not hold the same religious fundamental ideas as did their descendants in Caesar's time.

We know what the religion of the Greeks had developed to about 500 B.C., and we also know the condition of the Brahminical religion then, which was just about the time that Buddha, 'the enlightened,' lived and taught. So we may suppose that even several centuries before the Christian era this first branch of the pioneer race of the Aryan stock, called by some the Goidels,⁶ believed in immortality, and attached a specific meaning to these marks. For reasons I shall afterwards give, I think it is probable that the custom of using these stones at the funereal rites started before reaching Britain, under brighter and less cloudy skies, and the original meaning may even have been forgotten or altered before they arrived here.

We are now in a position to enquire what might the meaning be that was attached to these stones? We know that a primitive race takes its religious ideas from natural phenomena and from objects of nature. The sun and moon in all ages have been worshipped by such races, but I do not know that these are regarded as symbolic of anything connected with the future life. But to a nation of shepherds, as was the early Aryan race, and also to a nation of hunters, there is another feature in nature that was always present, and would be the cause of deep thought and wonder, namely, the aspect and expanse of the heavens, especially to a race that would have to watch their flocks by night. To us, who live under roofs, and under more or less leaden skies the greater part of our life, the profundity of the heavenly expanse is not a common sight or thought.

Now, these markings are mostly cup-shaped or hemispherical. Although there are variations of shape we may take the hemispherical hollow as typical, and may account for the variations as being either unfinished or purposely made so to show some variation from the

⁶ The Gaelic in Ireland, the Isle of Man, and the Highlands of Scotland. See *Celtic Britain*, by Prof. J. Rhys, M.A., chapter i. p. 3, *et passim*.

original meaning. On a clear, cloudless day, with perhaps a slight heat-haze on the horizon, the appearance of the sky is that of a vast dome, perfectly hollow and regular. The appearance is the same, under similar conditions at night, if even it be not intensified, especially if there be a new moon low down on the horizon.

That this was the conception that the ancients had, we have proof in the Ptolemaic theory of the heavens, that was taught in the Egyptian schools in the second century A.D., and although a more correct view had been propounded before, notably by Pythagoras, we may well suppose that it was the original idea.

The Ptolemaic theory was, and is what illiterate and unthinking people may still hold, that the earth was the centre of the universe, above and around which were the heavens; which had a definite and, as it were, a solid boundary, which revolved daily round the earth. In this boundary or shell were fixed the heavenly bodies.

Our expressions even now often show the idea of hollowness, as, the 'profundity' and 'depth' of the heavens, the former word having in itself the idea of anything cut, or dug, or hollowed out.

We have further proofs in the words *κοῖλος* and *coelus*. Also probably in the Teutonic word *himmel*,⁷ probably connected with *hemmel*, a word used in northern England and southern Scotland to denote an oblong or sometimes a circular, dome-shaped roof to be met with in many farm-yards on the Anglo-Scottish borders. We also have proof that another idea came into existence—the idea of a heaven beyond that definite visible boundary which they thought was existing. It is seen in such phrases as 'the windows of heaven,' 'the gate of heaven,' 'the heavens opened.'⁸

It was into this unseen world that the ancients considered that the spirits of their departed ultimately would arrive, and the modern idea is not dissimilar, although we have juster conceptions of the universe. If we consider what slight and rude means a primitive race would have of representing their ideas, it will not seem very far-fetched reasoning to say that *these hollows were symbolic of the expanse of the heavens and the unseen world beyond*, where they consider their tribeman's spirit will ultimately be, and where they hope it will be well with him.

⁷ The Teutonic word *hemmeln* means to surround, enclose, or encompass, *Eng. to hem in*. 'Himmel' would therefore mean 'that which covers in or surrounds the earth.'

⁸ These phrases are taken from the Bible, and are still in use.

That the ancients had a glimmering of another world superior to and mightier than their religions taught is shown by the facts of the altar that the Athenians erected to the Unknown God; that Brahma, the chief of the Hindoo deities, was himself created by a Greater Creator; and perhaps also by the fact that the Druids considered that their deities were too high and mighty to be worshipped except under the expanse of the heavens.

In the same way as we place floral or other crosses on the graves and memorial stones of our departed, in the hope and with the meaning that they may participate in the future that belongs to true followers of the religion of which those symbols are the highest emblems; so these partially civilised races of ancient Britain may have fashioned these hollows in the stones of their burial places to symbolise the unseen world, and to express the hope that the souls of their departed might now or ultimately attain to that heaven or haven, which even in their rude mythology, as in that of the Hindoos, was a haven of rest and comfort, and, therefore, desirable and wished for.