

*Remarks made in a Journey to the Orkney Islands.*

*By Principal Gordon, of the Scots College in Paris.*

THE Orkney islands, 67 in number, 28 of which are inhabited, lie between  $58^{\circ} 43'$  and  $59^{\circ} 34'$  north latitude. The number of inhabitants, upon a calculation made 30 years ago, is supposed to be about 35,000. They are generally strong bodied, and remarkable for the *flava cesaries*, and the *oculi cesii*, assigned by Tacitus as distinctive peculiarities of German nations. That sea green colour of the eye, which I take to be the meaning of the word *cesii*, is so common in Orkney, that I never met with any person whose eyes were of a different colour. This circumstance alone would form a presumption that the people are originally of German extraction: But what puts it beyond doubt is, the great number of German names, a phlegmatic temper unknown in any other part of the Scottish dominions, and, above all, the Norwegian language, which, in the memory of man, was currently spoken by the country people. Three only of the Orkney islands I visited with some degree of care.

The first was South Ronaldsha; its length is between eight or nine miles, its greatest breadth, from Grimness head to Hoxa head, five

five miles and a half: At Hoxa head, upon an isthmus, I saw the remains of what the Orkney people call a Pictish fort, on the supposition that it and such other forts were built by the Picts; but there is little reason to think that the Picts were ever in possession of any part of Orkney. This fort has been of a circular form, with a wall round it, and perhaps two, the one surrounding the other at the distance of about three feet. Some remains were still to be seen of this double wall. The building is certainly the work of a rude and consequently early period. It does not appear that any kind of cement has been used to tie the stones together: They are laid one upon the other in their natural state, rough and unpolished, with little regard to art or symmetry. Its extent, as far as I could guess, did not exceed 20 feet diameter. The outer wall inclosed a considerable part of the small eminence on which the fort stood. This eminence has certainly been surrounded formerly by sea, and perhaps at no very distant period was still so at high water: For, to the north east of the eminence, there is to this day a small lake of sea water, which is only separated from the sea by a ridge of sand and pebbles cast up by the sea, and the ridge itself is not above twenty feet broad. At the foot of the eminence, to the north, is a small bay or landing places, and on a point of land on the north of the bay, facing the eminence, there has been another fort of the same kind with the one I have now described. This inclines me to believe, that the design of the forts has been to protect the shipping of the Norwegian rovers, who frequented these islands, and to spread an alarm by signals from the top of the fort. I was told that there were many such forts in the different islands: Some of them I saw; their situation and structure have been exactly the same with the abovementioned one. They are all upon a rising ground close to the water edge, on small points of land projecting into the sea or lake nigh which they stand. I was likewise told, that human bones were found in the ruins of some of these towers, but I saw none; it would have been necessary to have

dug up the stones and rubbish, which I had not an opportunity to do.

From South Ronaldshaw I went to Burra, formerly the property of the Stuarts Knights of Burra, now possessed by Sir Thomas Dundas. This island is separated from South Ronaldshaw by a small found of about a mile over in the narrowest place. It is about five miles long, three broad, and of an angular shape; it is thinly inhabited, but of an excellent soil. The principal farmer, a Captain Balfour, has carried on improvements with success, but has few imitators; it is hard to drive the Orkney people out of their old ways. There has been an old tower in this island, of the same kind with that in South Ronaldshaw; I was not at the pains to examine it. The knights of Burra formerly resided in this island. There now remains nothing of the old castle but part of the wall; the stones have been employed in building Captain Balfour's dwelling house, offices, and inclosures. From the quantity of stone employed in these purposes, it seems to have been a considerable building. Except the fort just now mentioned, and the small remains of the castle, there is nothing else worth noticing in the island.

From Burra I went to Pomona, the largest island of the whole cluster, and called on that account the Mainland, by the inhabitants of Orkney. From Dearness, to the brough of Birza, it is 23 miles long; from Skeil to Rendal, its greatest breadth, about 10 miles, but in some places not above three or four. The Capital of Orkney stands in this island, on a neck of land not above two miles broad, between two bays; that to the south, named Bay of Scapha, the other to the north, called Kirkwall road. Kirkwall, the name of the capital, lies admirably situated for trade; ships of any burden may ride in safety, in all kinds of weather, in either of the two bays. Besides these two, there is another to the north east, called Inganess-bay, equally safe.

Nothing

Nothing has been done to improve these bays by art; they continue such as nature made them. Kirkwall has several old buildings, a cathedral, a college, and the remains of four castles. The cathedral was built partly by Bishop Stuart, partly by Bishop Reid, both Roman Catholics; but the addition made by Bishop Reid, to the old building, has spoiled its proportion. With this addition it is by far too long for its breadth, being about 245 feet long to 45 broad. As Bishop Stuart left it, it was almost in the shape of a cross; now it is a narrow stripe, damp, ill aired, and ill lighted. Indeed, the moisture is not altogether owing to the narrowness of the building, but to its situation. Kirkwall stands nigh to the sea, and so low that in high tides the sea washes the walls of some of the houses. The want of light and air arises principally from the ill judged fancy of condemning most of the old windows. It would seem, by the darkness into which this and some other old churches have been reformed, that the first apostles of protestantism in Scotland were much afraid of outward light, considering it, no doubt, as a great enemy to inward light. But this apprehension, with the no less ill judged one of cleanliness, has made the house of God in Kirkwall such a house as no man would chuse to receive a friend in, much less take up his own habitation. The *loca senta situ* of Virgil may, with great justice, be applied to most such places in Scotland. With regard, however, to the cathedral of Kirkwall, it must be owned that, to the honour of the Rev. Mr Yule, present minister of Kirkwall, no one minister, nor all the ministers together, of that place, have done so much as he has done for keeping this venerable building in repair, and that without laying any considerable burden upon the parishioners. It is alledged, with what justice I cannot say, that the Scottish clergy in general, are at more pains to keep their manse than their churches in repair; but I can say with the greatest justice, that Mr Yule is an exception, for his manse is one of the meanest buildings I have seen of the kind.

In this cathedral I found thrown aside, a piece of carved wood, which attracted my notice. It is a board of a foot and five inches long, and ten inches broad. On this board are carved the hands and feet of our Saviour, in the form of a St. Andrew's cross. The upper part of the cross is composed of the hands, the lower of the feet, a foot being opposed to each hand. In the center, where the hands and feet meet, there is a crown of thorns; in the center of the crown, a heart pierced on the left side. In the vacant space on one side, are three nails and three dice; on the other, a scourge: The whole was overtopped by an Earl's coronet; but it is now broke off from the board, and the board itself is rent through the middle, vertically. I was informed that this piece of carving stood formerly on the fore part of the old pulpit, which falling to decay, a new one was erected in its place, in 1689, but without the ornament affixed to the old one. How this remnant of the Roman Catholic religion escaped the zealous eye of the first reformers, is to me a mystery; but, since it is come down to our times, though in a shattered condition, it were some pity to allow it to perish by neglect. On my hinting something of this kind to the present minister and Provost of Kirkwall, they promised to get the pieces put together by clasps, and framed.

On the floor of the church there are several tomb-stones, that, by the Saxon characters inscribed on them, seem to be of considerable antiquity; but to read these inscriptions was impossible. They are on some stones almost totally effaced, and on others they are so overlaid with filth, that it would be no easy matter to clean them, without rubbing off the letters with the dirt, which seems to be thoroughly ingrained.

One sepulchral monument I particularly regretted, that of Bishop Tulloch, a man whose memory was much respected in Orkney, for his sanctity and love of justice. It was a plate of copper full length  
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of the grave: It was customary among the inhabitants of Orkney, even after the change of religion, to lend money payable such a day at Tulloch's tomb. The name of Tulloch, and the circumstance of the money being payable at his tomb, were considered as a security to the lender. A party of soldiers sent by Cromwell to Kirkwall, in order to be a check upon the inhabitants, robbed the tomb of the copper, as a shred of the whore of Babylon. By the bye, I must here mention, that the soldiers sent by Cromwell, though on the whole severe and troublesome enough guests, were of some advantage to Orkney. They taught the people the use of locks and keys, which till then had never been heard of; and the first spinning wheel seen in Orkney, was one a soldier's wife brought with her.

The old house the bishops dwelt in is still standing, at least in part, and is now a private house. The names and arms of Bishops Stuart, Maxwell, and Reid, are still to be seen over the door to the street. James V. who is said to have been twice in Orkney, and who was there once for certain, in 1540, resided in the Bishop's house. Till within these thirty years, the bed on which he lay was preserved. It was of wainscot gilded over; but some Gothic gentleman thought proper to convert it into a gate to an inclosure. This I had from a friend who saw the bed in its first and last state.

Bishop Reid, who was fond of building, erected a new palace for himself and successors; it stands nigh the cathedral: There are still considerable remains of it; and his statue is to be seen to the right as you enter. The stone this house is built with is of a reddish colour, and of a bad kind; it is decaying fast.

The Earls of Orkney, Robert and Patrick, built a palace opposite to the Bishop's; it is of a better stone, and in a better stile of building:

ing: The walls are still standing. When episcopacy was restored by James VI. it became the Bishop's property and place of residence.

The college, which I mentioned as one of the old buildings to be seen in Kirkwall, was never finished, Bishop Reid having died before he could complete his design. He left by his will L. 8000 Scots to carry it on; but the Regent Morton seized the money and banished the Bishop's executors.

Besides the cathedral, the Bishop's palace, and the college, there are some remains of another building, which was the habitation of the ancient Earls of Orkney. The rude appearance of these remains bespeak a barbarous age. Lord Patrick, however, sustained a siege in it, in James VI.'s time, against the King's forces.

The houses in Kirkwall are, many of them, of an old standing; the years they were built in are commonly cut out on a stone over the door; several of them are upwards of an hundred years old, and one, I saw in particular, of the year 1574. They have no doubt been repaired; but it is visible, that, even at first, and before these repairs, they were much better built houses than were then to be found in most towns of Scotland of a greater size.

From Kirkwall, I went to Stromness, and, in my way thither, visited the Semicircle and Circle of Stones, near the lake of Stenhouse. This lake is of fresh water, and runs into the sea at Stromness. It extends for about ten miles south east; at Stenhouse, is almost divided into two separate lakes by a neck of land, where the water is so shallow, that it may be passed at any time, even when the tide flows.

From this neck of land, the lake runs north west for about six miles, leaving an intermediate space of dry ground, which, from one eighth

eighth of a mile, widens to about a mile towards the Manse of Sondwick.

The Semicircle stands opposite to the place where the lake begins to wind to the north west. The stones have been originally seven, four of which are still standing, and seem to be about 14 feet high; one, however, is 18 complete; their breadth about five feet; their thickness varies. This Semicircle has been formed with some degree of art; for, were we to form it into a complete circle, the diameter would be 104 feet; and, upon examination, the diameter of the Semicircle, as it was at first designed, is exactly 52; a clear proof that the planners of this Semicircle were not unacquainted with mathematical proportions.

At some distance from the Semicircle, to the right, stands a stone by itself, eight feet high, three broad, nine inches thick, with a round hole on the side next the lake. The original design of this hole was unknown, till about twenty years ago it was discovered by the following circumstance: A young man had seduced a girl under promise of marriage, and she proving with child, was deserted by him: The young man was called before the session; the elders were particularly severe. Being asked by the minister the cause of so much rigour, they answered, you do not know what a bad man this is, he has broke the promise of Odin. Being further asked what they meant by the promise of Odin, they put him in mind of the Stone at Stenhouse with the round hole in it, and added, that it was customary, when promises were made, for the contracting parties to join hands through this hole, and the promises so made were called the promises of Odin.

The complete Circle stands upon the intermediate space betwixt the two branches of the lake, and this space or promontory being a rising

rising ground, which forms at last into a plain of some extent, is seen at a considerable distance. There are sixteen of the stones standing, eight more are fallen to the ground; the original number is uncertain. Their height differs from nine to fourteen feet above the ground; the diameter of the Circle is 336 feet. Round the Circle is a ditch 35 feet broad, from nine to 14 deep; round this ditch, at unequal distances from one another, are eight small artificial eminences. The entrance is from the east, with an opening of equal size to the west. The altar stood without the Circle, to the south east; to the left of the Circle, looking eastward, you perceive a solitary stone, and two or three more such in a direct line with it on to the Semicircle. There is no inscription upon any of the stones either of the Circle or Semicircle.

Different reasons have been assigned by different persons for the circular and semicircular form of these Scandinavian temples, for such they certainly have been, as appears from the explication given above, of what is called in Orkney the promise of Odin. Some have pretended, that the Semicircular temple was in honour of the moon, and the Circular one in honour of the sun. Others, that the Semicircle and Circle were emblems of the different phases of the moon. Pocock, Bishop of Offory, who visited Orkney several years ago, found out, in the different stones composing the Circle and Semicircle, a very minute astronomical description of the various motions of the sun, moon, and planets; but these fancies have no foundation, as far as I could see, either in the arrangement of the stones, or in the Scandinavian mythology. It does not appear from the Edda of Iceland, where we have a very full account of the Scandinavian divinities, that either the sun, moon, or stars, had any place among them. I do not pretend to give a better reason for the circular or semicircular shape of these temples, than what has been given by others. Indeed, it is impossible to give any good one at this distance of time; however,

however, we see, that in different nations the circular shape was a favourite one in building temples; witness the Rotunda at Rome, and many others on a smaller scale in other parts of the heathen world.

After satisfying my curiosity here, I passed on to Stromness, where there is nothing very remarkable, except the bay, which is a good one, and more frequented by shipping than Kirkwall road.

From Stromness, I went over to Hoy in the Custom-house boat, which Mr Stuart, Collector of the customs at Stromness, was so good as give me the use of for the whole day. In Hoy there is a very remarkable stone, called by the inhabitants the Dwarf Stone. It is a large fragment of a rock, which seems to have tumbled from the hill into the plain below. It has been cut out into a cell, which consists of a bed on the east end, a resting place on the west end, and an intermediate space between both. The stone is about 28 feet long; the breadth unequal, and cannot easily be measured. The resting place, to the west, is four feet three inches long; the breadth two feet two inches; length of the bed, to the east, five feet two inches, breadth three feet; the height of the cell, from the floor, four feet. The bed has its pillow cut out of the stone, and the mark of the pick axe is visible in every part of the cell. The entrance to it is two feet nine inches broad, and two feet six inches high. Near to the door of this cell is a stone four feet high, and two feet and an half broad; the stone is supposed to have been employed as a door. On the top of the stone, corresponding to the middle of the cell, is a round hole, the diameter of which is two feet nine inches. What was the original use of the cell, or by whom it was made, is unknown. There is, however, in Orkney, a tradition, that a monk from the Western Isles came to Hoy, where he led a recluse life; and it may be supposed

posed he is the person who hewed this stone into the form of a cell.

At Stromness, whither I returned from Hoy, I met the ingenious Mr Low, minister of Birza parish; he conducted me to Eastnaby, where I saw a phenomenon in nature that cannot be accounted for upon any principles of philosophy I know. On rocks, which rise perpendicular from the western ocean several hundred feet above the surface of the water, are found stones marked with figures of all shapes, but mostly triangular and oval. They seem to make a part of the rocks, but separate from them by degrees, and form into thin strata of different thicknesses: When fully detached from the rock, they are often, in a tempest with a strong westerly gale, washed away by the billows, which rise above the summit of the highest parts of the rock; but new strata of stones, figured as the former, succeed those carried away by the sea. A very remarkable circumstance is, that, though the side of the stone which lies exposed to the air is constantly figured, the side lying next the rock has no figure at all; but, if you raise it so from the rock so as to give the air admission, or if you turn that side uppermost, it gradually takes the same figure that was already formed on the other side. The figures represent no determined object in nature; they look as if they had been cut out of the stone, and of various shapes. Another circumstance is, that, removed from this spot before they are figured, the stones take no figure at all, more than any other stone; and if removed after they are figured, they retain the same figure without any alteration; whereas, when left upon the rocks at Eastnaby, the impression becomes always stronger. This inclines me to think, that the sea air must give the stones these impressions, but in what manner it operates, and how it comes to operate here and no where else, is to me inexplicable.

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I have now given an account of what occurred to me most worthy of notice during my short stay in Orkney; had I had more leisure, my curiosity would have led me to examine in a particular manner the Tumuli, or heaps of earth and stone, so often to be met with in all parts of the country. These tumuli are for the most part burying places, which, if dug, might enrich the museum with valuable remains of antiquity. I would beg leave to recommend it to any future traveller in those places, to pay a particular regard to the tumuli.

I shall conclude this paper with a short description of the weights and weighing instruments used in Orkney. It never entered into my mind that they were of a different nature from those used in other parts of the British dominions; judge then how great my surprise was, when I heard Pundlers and Bysmers mentioned as weighing instruments. But my surprise increased on seeing them; not that they are of an unusual figure, for they are purely the *Statera Romana*, but because they are so ill constructed, there being no fixed standard to make them by, that they are visibly designed for the purposes of iniquity and oppression. One would hardly believe that 35,000 souls being under the British government, a government whose peculiar object seems to have been to secure the property and privileges of individuals, have no fixed standard to regulate their weights by; yet any one who pleases, may have at Kirkwall ocular demonstration of this fact. He has only to desire a sight of their standard weights, and he will see produced a parcel of bones, stones, and pieces of lead tied together. It is needless to observe that there is, in such a standard, ample field for subtraction or addition, just as it may be convenient, and without the possibility of detection. This is not the only disadvantage attending such weighing instruments, granting they were made by a fixed standard; yet, are they, through indolence, neglect, or design, so miserably ill constructed, that I myself saw the

same quantity of grain weighed three different times upon the same pundler, and each time a different weight. A third disadvantage is, that a mark, which is the original weight, is not ascertained, that is, it has not yet been determined how many ounces make a mark: In all other parts of the world, where marks were ever used, a mark was equivalent to eight ounces, but not so in Orkney. At different periods the Orkney mark has been at 12 ounces, 15 ounces, 20 ounces, 24 ounces, and 28 ounces, where it stands at present; but how long, no body knows, for it is in the power of a single man to make it what he pleases. Yet the people, who labour under this gross oppression, bear it so tamely, that their voice has been hardly heard.

One main design of the Society of Scots Antiquaries, is to promote the good of their country; may it not be expected, therefore, that the different members will, upon a proper opportunity, contribute what lies in their power to free the inhabitants of Orkney from the oppression of unjust weights and measures, which, by the highest of all authorities, are rightly called the abomination of the Lord, and of every honest man. The inhabitants of Orkney have a claim of justice on every well-wisher to his country, for support. In the last war they supplied the navy with upwards of 2000 seamen, and in the present with upwards of 1500. Let any of the gentlemen present inquire of their acquaintance in the navy, who have or had any of the Orkney men on board their ships, what kind of seamen they are, and I am confident they will be told, as I was, that they are surpassed by none in docility, patience, boldness, and activity.

*A Description*