

REMARKS

ON THE

ANCIENT WEAPON DENOMINATED THE CELT.

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TRANSMITTED BY THE LITERARY AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY OF
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THE two articles, one of brass,* and the other of stone, presented to the Society by Mr Gillies, plainly belong to that numerous class of antiquities which have been hitherto distinguished by the name of *Celts*. Our Antiquarians have commonly ascribed them to the ancient *Celtae*; and hence have given them this unmeaning appellation. One indeed of great name, I mean Dr Borlase, has ventured to derive the word from the Latin *Cælo*, to engrave, *unde Celtis*, says he, *quasi* an engraving tool; but the implement seems very unfit for such a purpose, and therefore we must account this etymology rather fanciful than just.

For whatever use they were intended, they all partake of a wedge-like form, marked by these differences. Some are of brass, others of stone; some have a socket for a handle, others have not:

* Found in the triangle near the Roman road or causeway leading through the parks of Gask.

Nor must we omit the variety of their size; for while some are only three inches in length, there are others considerably larger.

They have been discovered in almost every county of Britain, many of them in France, in the northern parts of Germany, in Denmark and Sweden; a proof of their having once been in very general use. They have been found in mosses, in muirs, in ground under tillage, and in *tumuli*, or cairns, erected in honour of the dead.

The following is a description of one of these instruments, by Mr Whitaker of Manchester. "Its blade (says he), which is fluted "a little at the upper part, is three inches in length, three quarters "of an inch in breadth, and half an one in thickness at the fluted "end, and hence widens to the breadth of one and a quarter at "the edge." It is of old mixed brass, and was found in a morass near Manchester.

Our metal Celt (which is also of mixed brass) is larger than Mr Whitaker's, and of the subsequent dimensions. Five inches in length, an inch in breadth, and half an one in thickness; and widens to the breadth of three inches at the edge. The Manchester Celt is made with a socket to be fitted with an handle; but ours is of the sort which was not intended for the application of a helve in this fashion.

The same difference subsists among the Celts made of stone; some are perforated near the narrow end, for the reception of a handle; while others are not. The one belonging to the Society is of the latter species.

Perhaps no subject has given rise to greater variety of sentiment among Antiquarians, than the instruments under notice. Some have supposed them axe-heads for the cutting or pruning of trees, or chissels for the working of stones. Others have reck-

oned them druidical weapons for cropping the sacred mistletoe, or sacrificial implements for killing and preparing the victim for the altar. Others have fancied them the heads of halberds, or the sharp ends of spears or javelins; and others have asserted them to be a military weapon of a particular species.

While antiquarians of the first note are so much divided, it would ill become me to venture a positive opinion on the subject; because,

"Non nostrum est inter *hos* tantas componere lites."

As there are but few wrecks of information to direct our researches, we must remain satisfied with the most probable conjectures. From the narrowness of its edge, it seems unfit for the cutting of trees; and, from the softness of its metal, for the dressing of stones. From its too small size, and too great lightness, it may be judged improper for the head of an halberd; and, from the roundness of its edge, and its too great size, it would suit but awkwardly as the sharp end of an arrow, a spear, or a javelin. Such are the plausible objections brought by Mr Whitaker against the application of the celt to the preceding purposes.

There are but two other of its conjectured uses left to be considered, whether it was intended as a sacrificial instrument, or a military weapon of a particular species.

From the similar shape and size of the brazen and stone celts, there is little room to doubt that both the one and the other were designed for the same offices; those of stone belonging to the rudest periods of society, and those of brass to the more improved.

From the history of all nations, it appears that, in their most barbarous state, they have always had recourse to weapons of stone. The necessities of man naturally sharpen his invention;

and, antecedently to the knowledge of metals, the substance of stone presents itself to the savage, as the most fit to be formed into those rude and clumsy instruments; which, however, he contrives to cause answer the few purposes which his wants suggest. Conformably to this observation, ancient weapons of stone have been found in every country of Europe. Beside celts (which seem peculiar to the northern kingdoms), arrow-heads of flint, and large hatchets of the same material, have been dug up in Scotland, England, France, Germany, &c. and remain to be seen in many collections of antiquities. In the Voyages of the celebrated Cook, we are told the New Zealanders make use of stone hatchets. We are informed by Livy, in the 24th chapter of his first Book, that in the early times of the Roman state, flinty stones were used for killing the sacrifices. Describing the ceremonial observed by the Roman *Pater Patratus*, who was commissioned by Tullus Hostilius to make a league with the Albani, he has these words, "*Id ubi dixit, porcum saxo silice percussit.*" From this passage, it might not appear an overstrained conjecture, were we to ascribe the celt, both of stone and brass, to the sacerdotal office,—that of stone pertaining to times of the greatest rudeness and deepest ignorance; but exchanged for brass, as the habits of society were improved by intercourse with other nations. Thus, Cæsar tells us, in his 5th Book, *De Bello Gallico*, that at the time of his arrival in the island, the Britons imported their brass from Gaul. "*Aere utuntur importato,*" says he. But the Romans soon taught them to discover, in their own hills, the materials of which brass is composed, and to manufacture their own instruments of this metal. Nor can we doubt, that so great an improvement would make a rapid progress, and soon supersede the artless and unhandy instruments they had formerly used.

But if we suppose the celt, without a socket, to have been a sort of hatchet used by the Druids, (who, as Cæsar informs us, *Rebus divinis intersunt; sacrificia publica atque privata procurant*)—if we suppose this sort of celt to have been used by the Druids for killing the victims, an objection will occur against its bulk and weight. It may, however, be easily removed, if we imagine the implement to have been inserted in a piece of timber, of a fit size and shape, whereby it would be rendered sufficiently weighty for the conjectured purpose. This opinion is favoured by the industrious Gordon in his *Itinerarium*.

But the acute Whitaker, in opposition to almost all other antiquarians, asserts the celt to have been a military weapon of a particular species, and peculiar to our remote ancestors. He calls it the head of a small battle-axe. From the authority of Plutarch and Ammianus Marcellinus, he shews the axe to have been a principal part of the offensive armour of the Celtæ, and used by the Gauls at the siege of Rome. Also Marcellinus, describing a body of Gauls, furnishes them all with battle-axes. Within a few centuries, the Irish went constantly armed with an axe; and the American Mohawks still use a weapon of war very similar to the celt.

As the celt has been found in the sepulchres of the Britons at Stonehenge, and also in many *tumuli* in Scotland and other places, Mr Whitaker from this raises another argument in support of his opinion. He says, that none but the favourite weapons of the dead, or their personal decorations, were interred with them. This he shews from the best authorities; and hence infers, that the weapons found in these burial-places, must be either those of war or the chase, but not implements of sacrifice. He also produces

the print of a coin, proved to be British, on which are the figures of two small celts, agreeing in shape with those still preserved.

As this great antiquarian has strengthened his opinion with such authorities, we are naturally led to receive his account of this instrument as the best that has yet appeared. And, indeed, we can scarcely assign a reason for its so great frequency, on any other hypothesis, but that it was used in war by all the Celtic nations.

But while Mr Whitaker has greatly satisfied our curiosity with regard to metal celts, which are furnished with a socket, he has said very little on those which, like ours, have none, or of the celts which are made of flint. I shall, therefore, presume to subjoin a few thoughts on the subject.

Indeed, we cannot readily conceive the use of a celt, without the application of an handle in some fashion or other. But, (as I have already mentioned) when we observe the size and shape of those of brass which are socketed, and those of stone which are perforated (and evidently designed to be furnished with a handle), to be so like to those which are not, can we doubt that both the one and the other were intended for the same purposes? But we see the one in a more artless and unimproved state than the other, owing probably to a seniority of many years. It was not perhaps till after a long tract of time, that our naked and painted ancestors learned the more neat and convenient method of adapting the handle to a proper receptacle. The primary idea occurring to the untutored savage would be, to arm with a stone, selected from the brook, the massy club he bore in his hand to repel the attacks of his enemies. A cleft in its extremity for the reception of the flint, and secured by a withe from the neighbouring osier, would be the most obvious and ready method for accomplishing his design. Time would discover the inconvenien-

cies attending this mode of annexing the stone to the handle; and suggest the surer and more compact manner of inserting it in a transverse bore made in the solid wood. He would also make trial of fixing the helve in a hole pierced through the flint; and hence we meet with stone celts thus perforated. The savage could now fetch a stroke with greater confidence in his weapon; but still he durst not place a full dependance upon the brittle stone. As soon as he became acquainted with the durable nature of metals, and the variety of shapes into which they may be moulded, a substitution of brass for stone would be justly esteemed a great improvement. In loading his bludgeon, he would now apply the piece of metal as he had formerly done the flint, by fixing it in the body of the timber; with an assurance, soon taught by experience, that where the one had failed his sturdy arm, the other would prove more trusty to his blow. And we observe the shape of the earlier celts to agree with these speculations; those of stone tapering to the obtuse end, for their more convenient and firm insertion into a body of wood, previously bored; and those of brass, gradually thinned from a little above the middle, and sharpened to an edge at the narrow extremity; thus fitted, to be firmly driven into the solid and unperforated timber. And on examining the brazen celt before us, we will observe a small cross ridge on either side, at the place where the swell of the instrument is greatest, which I imagine was intended as an additional security, to prevent the narrow end from penetrating too deep into the handle, from the violence of a stroke. In process of time, when national experience and foreign intercourse had introduced some ideas of neatness and propriety, the celt would be fabricated with a socket for receiving the handle, and thus assume a more agreeable and commodious form; and, as a refinement upon the whole, there was added a small

brazen loop at one side, for admitting a cord or thong of leather, whereby the weapon might be slung across the shoulder, or suspended at the side.

Thus gradual would be the improvements of the celt in the hands of our savage progenitors ; and, amid the ruins of time, some of each species are still preserved, to mark its progressive stages. Nor are we to wonder that this instrument, simple as it still appears, required perhaps a succession of ages to mature its construction. On a superficial view, we may hesitate to believe the fact, because we do not sufficiently consider the deplorable ignorance and vacancy of intellect peculiar to the savage state ; and thus are apt to form a hasty judgment, unsupported by truth. But we learn from the history of nations, how slowly the genius of improvement has advanced in the rude periods of society. Even in more enlightened ages, observe with what dilatory progress our modern fire-arms have been brought to perfection. Let us recollect the cannon constructed of iron bars, and the musket discharged by the application of a match. These were some of the early attempts to appropriate gunpowder to the uses of war ; nor can we date their greatest improvement farther back than last century. May we not suppose, then, the improvements of the celt to have proceeded in a similar manner ?

From the preceding account, I think it a probable conjecture, that the small instrument, commonly denominated a celt, was a weapon of war, peculiar to, and very generally used by, our Celtic ancestors ; at least this seems the most plausible opinion we are warranted to form from the remaining light of antiquity.

Perhaps it may be objected, that the brazen celt, which gives occasion to this short discussion, was discovered near some works,

undoubtedly Roman ; and, therefore, may be presumed to have belonged to that people.

In answer to this, I need only observe, that celts of stone, as well as of brass, have been frequently found in the vicinity of Roman stations, as appears from the *History of Manchester*, and other treatises of British Antiquities. But from this we cannot infer that that polished people made use of so rude and clumsy a weapon as a stone celt, in the most improved periods of their state. The truth seems to be, that the barbarous Britons, who joined the standard of their conquerors, and thus were admitted into their camps and stations, still retained their national weapons, at least for some time, till they learned to handle the Roman arms. Thus, the American savage, though fighting under the ensigns of the civilized European, refuses to renounce his favourite tomahawk. Or perhaps these small battle axes have been left upon the ground, many years before it chanced to be occupied by the legionary soldiers. In this manner, we may naturally account for the discovery of the British celt in the neighbourhood of Roman roads and stations.