

CHAPTER XI.—THEIR PROBABLE ORNAMENTAL CHARACTER.

Without attempting to solve the mystery connected with these archaic lapidary cup and ring cuttings, I would venture to remark that there is one use for which some of these olden stone carvings were in all probability devoted—namely, ornamentation. From the very earliest historic periods in the architecture of Egypt, Assyria, Greece, &c., down to our own day, circles, single or double, and spirals, have formed, under various modifications, perhaps the most common fundamental types of lapidary decoration. In prehistoric times the same taste for circular sculpturings, however rough and rude, seems to have swayed the mind of archaic man. This observation as to the probable ornamental origin of our cup and ring carvings holds, in my opinion, far more strongly in respect to some antique stone-cuttings in Ireland and in Brittany than to the ruder and simpler forms that I have described as existing in Scotland and England. For instance, the cut single and double volutes, the complete and half concentric circles, the zig-zag and other patterns, which

¹ See Holmberg's *Hällristningar*, p. 15, and Tab. xliv. fig. 162, &c.

cover almost entirely and completely some stones in those magnificent though rude Western Pyramids that constitute the grand old mausolea of Ireland and Brittany, appear to be, in great part at least, of an ornamental character, whatever else their import may be. The great curb-stone, for example, at the entrance of New Grange, covered with double volutes (see Plate XXIX. fig. 1), and many of the lapidary cuttings in the interior of that gigantic barrow, the granite blocks forming the props of the passage into the sepulchral chamber at Gavv Inis (see Plate XXX. fig. 1), and some other Brittany stones, seem to present patterns of ornamental lapidary carving.

In some of these, and in other instances, the stones are densely covered with various and endless rock-cuttings, with curved, spiral, and angled lines, like the face of a tattooed Polynesian, and possibly somewhat like the faces of our British forefathers in those distant days when they stained their skins with woad. The surfaces of the stones in the Irish and the Brittany instances I have referred to in the preceding paragraph, and the surfaces of the tattooed Polynesian faces, are indeed so much alike in general character, as to suggest a possible general origin—in the one instance as well as in the other—in that craving which naturally exists, even among the rudest people, for decoration and embellishment; and, after all, an elaborately tattooed stone is not, perhaps, to our ideas at least, so strange as an elaborately tattooed skin. In far later and mediæval times we see the old sculptured stones and crosses of Scotland and Ireland decorated in a more perfect but yet analogous way—and for an analogous object too—by endless and elegant scrolls, circles, volutes, chevrons, and other interlaced and ever-varying patterns cut upon their faces and sides.