

CHAPTER XIV.—THEIR PRECEDENCE OF LETTERS AND  
TRADITIONS.

In no instance have the lapidary cup and ring cuttings been found in Scotland or England conjoined in any way with any attempts at any form, however rude and primitive, of letter-cutting or letter-writing. We have no reason whatever to believe that the ring and cup cuttings are themselves, as we have heard suggested, unknown words, or hieroglyphics, for they are too few in number and too analogous in form for such a purpose;<sup>1</sup> and if any type of letters had been known to the carvers of the cups and rings, examples of these letters would almost inevitably have been found somewhere cut alongside of these sculptures.<sup>2</sup> We are

tion described some eighteen centuries ago by Ovid; the ancient heathen well-worship, which is not yet extinct in some parts of the British islands; the lighting up of Baal-fires on May and Midsummer's eve, &c., &c.

<sup>1</sup> All the cups, for example, upon the cromlechs and tumuli, figured in Plates VIII., IX., and X. are so similar—as are all the concentric circles upon Long Meg, in Plate VII.—that they offer singly no such differences as render them capable of being interpreted as individual and separate letters.

<sup>2</sup> Governor Pownall, in the "*Archæologia*" (vol. ii. p. 260), imagines the broken gridiron-looking markings at New Grange (Pl. XXVII. fig. 5) to be some old Eastern or Phœnician inscription; and Mr Du Noyer, in the *Meath Herald* for October 21, 1865, reports among the sculptured tombs of Sleive-na-Caillighe what he believes to be short Ogham inscriptions or letters. But my observations in the text apply to British antiquities, and not to those of Ireland.

not aware when a knowledge of letters reached the western shores of the Old World, and whether they came in, as some hold, with a race using bronze weapons and ornaments,<sup>1</sup>—or with a later race, using iron implements, as others maintain. At all events, they were not apparently known or employed in Western Europe for centuries after the inhabitants of Western Asia had engraved their deeds and thoughts upon rocks and stones, bricks and tablets of clay. And in regard to Britain, we are at all events fully entitled, I believe, to hold that the race or races that cut our many rude ring and cup sculptures were not, either at the beginning of the practice, or even up to the termination of it, acquainted with the use and carving of letters—or otherwise, as I have just stated, we would almost inevitably have found traces of their letters in connection with some of these lapidary sculptures.

Nor am I aware that in any spot in which the ring and cup sculptures have been found, has tradition preserved the faintest remembrance, either of their object or their presence. They are too decidedly “things of the past,” for even the most traditional of human races to have retained the slightest recollection of them.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, in the kistvaen

<sup>1</sup> Certainly not with the bronze era, for traces of writing on old bronze weapons have not been found except in a very few instances. Two of these instances consist of bronze helmets, with Greek inscriptions cut upon them. One of them—the helmet of Hiero I.—is probably of the date of 474 B.C.; the second may possibly be a century earlier. (See these helmets and the inscriptions upon them figured in Mr Franks' valuable additions to the “*Horæ Ferales*,” pl. xii.) Both of these helmets are now in the British Museum. At Constantinople there is still preserved the brazen stand of the famous golden tripod, which was dedicated by the confederate Greeks to Apollo at Delphi, after the defeat of the Persian host at Plataea, B.C. 479. On its stalk is engraved, in ancient Greek letters, a battle-roll of the Greek army, which was possibly used by Herodotus himself in drawing up his history. (See Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, vol. iv. p. 451).

<sup>2</sup> The carving of circular markings upon a kind of stone that is remarkable for the tempting facility with which it may be incised, is a practice followed in one spot of the British Isles at the present day. The rock at Fetheland Head, Shetland, is formed of *steatite* or soap-stone. It is as easily cut or whittled with a common knife as a piece of wood. Three years ago, my friend Dr Arthur Mitchell saw the herring fishermen, in a day of idleness, cutting circles with their knives in the face of the rock, without the operators being able to assign any reason for their work, except that others had done it before them. The circles were all single, round, and small,

of the large barrow which formerly stood at Carnban, in Argyleshire, some two miles west of Lochgilphead, we have seen (p. 31) a sculptured slab introduced as a loose panel, within the stone grave of the great chief or priest in whose honour the barrow was raised. Of all races, the Celtic is specially retentive of traditional descriptive appellations. But he who was buried in the cairn gives no more his own name to it—as, no doubt, he did at first for long ages; and instead of recognising the barrow by his special appellative, the neighbouring Highlanders have, from time immemorial, known it merely from the colour or figure of its stones, under the meaningless name of “Carnban,” or “the white or fair cairn.” Did the occupant of this originally great cairn, with his flint fragments buried beside him, belong to an earlier branch of the Celtic race than the present? Or did he and his brotherhood, who sculptured the rocks in the same valley with rings and cups, not pertain to a population or a race really older than the Celtic?