

IV.

NOTICE OF A CHARM-STONE USED FOR THE CURE OF DISEASES AMONGST CATTLE IN SUTHERLANDSHIRE. BY A. HUTCHESON, F.S.A. SCOT., BROUGHTY-FERRY.

The use of charm-stones is probably coeval with human superstition. The brilliant colours of gems and crystals doubtless early impressed the imaginative faculty which endowed them with suggestions of occult powers and potentialities, but long ere man had reached the stage of polishing gems so as to bring out their lustre and brilliant colours, mere form and natural colour had arrested his attention and led him to associate with the water-rounded stone a special quality of power and influence over human affairs. The frequency with which the simple water-rounded pebble of white quartz is found associated with early burials¹ points to an underlying significancy so highly esteemed as to have rendered it not unfrequently to all appearance the only relic thought worthy of preservation among the ashes of the dead; and the child of modern days who collects from the gravel beach his hoard of little white pebbles is probably only following out a tendency evinced by prehistoric man, and inherent in the human race.

But noteworthy as is the frequency with which the white pebble recurs in ancient burial sites, it seems probable that a significance attached to water-rounded stones of any kind. Their smoothness, regularity of rounded outline, and, when wet, their pleasing colours must have soon marked them out for notice and suggested to early man's infant powers a mysterious origin. Hence, doubtless, the reason for the paving of the bottoms of many burial cists with such water-rolled pebbles, brought in some cases from a considerable distance.

There is an early literary reference to a mystic stone which illustrates in a remarkable manner this tendency of superstition to

¹ Sir Arthur Mitchell has gathered together and commented on a number of instances in ancient and modern times of the association of white pebbles with burials. See *Proc.*, vol. xviii. pp. 286-291.

regard certain stones as endowed with healing powers. It occurs in Adamnan's *Life of St Columba*,¹ where it is related that in the country of the Picts the saint took a white stone from the river and blessed it for the working of certain cures, saying, "Behold this white pebble, by which God will effect the cure of many diseases among this heathen nation." It is further related that when the Druid Broichan, foster-father of King Brude, stricken with sickness as a punishment for his refusal to liberate at the request of Columba a certain female slave, sent to the saint expressing his willingness now to set the maiden free, St Columba sent two of his companions to the King with the pebble which he had blessed, and said to them, "If Broichan shall first promise to set the maiden free, then at once immerse this little stone in water and let him drink from it, and he shall be instantly cured; but if he break his vow and refuse to liberate her, he shall die that instant."

Needless to say, after such a warning the captive was liberated and delivered to the saint's messengers. "The pebble was then immersed in water, and in a wonderful manner, contrary to the laws of nature, the stone floated on the water like a nut or an apple, nor, as it had been blessed by the holy man, could it be submerged. Broichan drank from the stone as it floated on the water, and instantly returning from the verge of death, recovered his perfect health and soundness of body. This remarkable pebble which was afterwards preserved among the treasures of the King, through the mercy of God effected the cure of sundry diseases among the people, while it in the same manner floated when dipped in water. And what is very wonderful, when this same stone was sought for by those sick persons whose term of life had arrived, it could not be found; thus on the very day on which King Brude died, though it was sought for it could not be found in the place where it had been previously laid."

This story serves to illustrate what was doubtless at that early period

¹ *The Historians of Scotland*, vol. vi. pp. lxxxv, 4, 59-60.

a widespread and deeply-rooted belief in the use of charms for the cure of diseases. It is not to be wondered at if stones possessing special peculiarities of form or colour should have been selected as endowed with mysterious influence. Doubtless in this way many charm-stones that have come down to recent times may have originated. Nay, some of them may have—if their history could be traced—a quite remarkable antiquity.¹

Of such is probably the stone which is the subject of this notice.

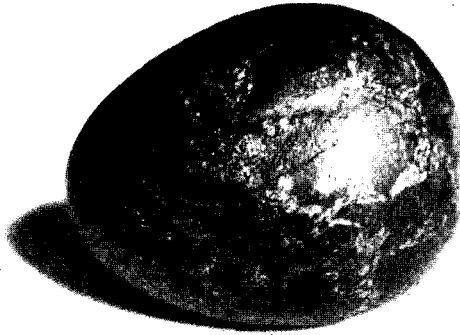


Fig. 1. Charm-stone used for the cure of diseases of cattle in Sutherlandshire. (†.)
(From a photograph by Mr J. B. Corr, Dundee.)

It is impossible to contemplate this stone without being struck by its peculiarities. Its form, if natural, and remarkable colours are precisely such as illustrate and enforce the origin for which I contend, and fortunately its history can be traced back for several generations. Before, however, giving its history so far as that is known, it will be well to describe the stone. (See fig. 1.)

¹ For much interesting information as to charm-stones, see a paper on "Scottish Charms and Amulets," by George F. Black, in the *Proceedings*, vol. xxvii. pp. 433-526, and Mackinlay's *Folk-Lore of Scottish Lochs and Springs*, pp. 241-262.

In form it is egg-shaped, approximately symmetrical, rather flatter on the apex than the true egg-form, and distinctly ovate in the short section. It measures two inches in the longer diameter and rather over one and a half inch in the shorter, weighs exactly four ounces, and has a specific gravity of 2.666, or almost that of Aberdeen granite. The stone exhibits a beautifully mottled cream and liver coloured surface, with delicate touches and streaks of pink here and there on the cream colour. It is difficult to designate a stone so evenly smoothed and polished and exhibiting no fracture, and this difficulty is increased on account of its surface being more or less greasy from long or frequent handling.

It has been suggested that it is a volcanic tuff, but its specific gravity would seem to preclude such a conclusion, even if Sutherland were a volcanic county geologically, which it is not.

The history of the stone so far as known is as follows. It is said to be one of three charm-stones which belonged to a reputed witch in Sutherlandshire. Her story is thus related in the Statistical Account of the parish of Farr.¹

“Connected with the antiquities of the Parish of Farr, in Sutherlandshire, there is a loch in Strathnaver, to which superstition has ascribed wonderful healing virtues. The time at which this loch came to be in repute with the sick cannot now be ascertained. It must, however, have been at a time when superstition had a firm hold of the minds of all classes of the community. The tradition as to the origin of its healing virtues is briefly as follows:—A woman, either from Ross-shire or Inverness-shire, came to the heights of Strathnaver, pretending to cure diseases by means of water into which she had previously thrown some pebbles which she carried about with her. In her progress down the strath, towards the coast, a man in whose house she lodged wished to possess himself of the pebbles, but, discovering his design, she escaped and he pursued.

“Finding, at the loch referred to, that she could not escape her

¹ *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. xv. p. 72.

pursuer any longer, she threw the pebbles into the loch, exclaiming, in Gaelic, 'mo-nar,' that is, shame, or my shame. From this exclamation the loch received the name, which it still retains, 'Loch-mo-nar,' and the pebbles are supposed to have imparted to it its healing efficacy. There are only four days in the year in which its supposed cures can be effected. These are the first Monday, old style, of February, May, August, and November. During February and November no one visits it; but in May and August, numbers from Sutherland, Caithness, Ross-shire, and even from Inverness-shire and Orkney come to this far famed loch. The ceremonies through which the patients have to go are the following:—They must all be at the loch side about twelve o'clock at night. As early on Monday as one or two o'clock in the morning, the patient is to plunge, or to be plunged, three times into the loch; is to drink of its waters; to throw a piece of coin into it as a kind of tribute; and must be away from its banks, so as to be fairly out of sight of its waters before the sun rises, else no cure is supposed to be effected." The writer adds that even at the time he wrote many still came from the shires already mentioned and say they are benefited by these practices, but adds his opinion that such patients being mostly persons affected by nervous complaints, are probably benefited by the journey and the healthful air of the hills and glens through which they have to pass.¹

So far the story as given in the Statistical Account, but while tradition claims this as one of the stones thrown into Lochmonar, it fails to record by what means one of the stones was rescued from the waters. What seems to be certain is that at some time in the end of last century this particular stone was in the possession of Lord Reay; that his lordship was much annoyed by people coming from far and near to procure water into which the stone had been dipped, and gave it away to an ancestor of its present owner, Mr Eric Ross, Golspie, to whose courtesy I am indebted for the following particulars and for

¹ Dr Gregor, in the *Folklore Journal* for 1888, quoted by Mr MacKinlay, gives a somewhat different version of this tradition, which makes mention of only one stone, and that a white one, possessed by the witch-woman.

permission to exhibit this very interesting relic to the Society. Mr Ross's notes are as follows :—

"The Witch's Stones.—The story of the three magic stones thrown by the witch into Loch Mon-aar, and the subsequent healing powers of that loch, is to be found in the Statistical Account of the County of Sutherland, written by the ministers of the different parishes towards the end of last century. This stone, which had been in the possession of the Reay family for generations, was highly esteemed by the country people, who came from all parts of Sutherland, when their cattle fell ill, for a small bottle of water, in which the stone had first been immersed. This water was faithfully administered to the ailing animals. Lord Reay was so bothered by these visitors that he gave the stone to my father, who in his turn was often called upon for the magical water. My father bequeathed the stone to my elder brother, who dying about three years ago, the ancient stone became my property. I remember well in my young days, the people coming for the water; and their anxious faces as they watched the stone being put into the bowl of water. It is to be regretted that no particulars of the early history of the stone are known, except the fact that it was once the property of a notorious witch. History is silent also regarding the recovery of the stone from Loch Mon-aar, how it came into the possession of the Reay family, and the fate of its fellow-stones. The stone was never used except for the purpose already mentioned. If the stone dried quickly after being taken out of the water, the sick animal would get well rapidly; but if slowly it would be a lingering recovery: so the poor people believed. What the stone was used for in ancient times, it is impossible to know. The loch, however, into which the witch-woman threw the precious stones, was ever afterwards regarded as a place of healing; and hundreds of people have been known to journey from far to the loch for the sake of plunging into its dark waters to heal some real or imaginary ills. The plunge had to be taken at midnight and the bather out of sight of the loch before the sun rose and shone upon its waters, or else the charm would fail to work."

It will be observed that in his interesting narration Mr Ross refers to the story of the witch as given in the Statistical Account, which story so given, it must be confessed, may have helped to perpetuate the tradition in modern times. Be this connection as it may, the stone has a history all its own. The belief of its efficacy in the cure of diseases among cattle in the present generation is doubtless but the survival of a more extended influence in former times, when, as ascribed to the Loch Monar stones, the cure of human ills linked it, as we have seen, with a superstition at least as old as the days of St Columba.