

THE PILLAR-TOWERS OF SCOTLAND.

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Only two Pillar-Towers exist in Scotland. They have the same peculiar form and structure as those of Ireland, appear to have been built at the same early period, and are surrounded by the same mystery as to their uses; but, as they have not received the same careful description as those of Ireland,^a I trust an accurate account of their situation and dimensions, will be considered worthy of a place in your Journal.

ABERNETHY. ^b

Abernethy, in Fifeshire, was the capital of one of the Pictish Governments; but the Pillar-Tower which is situated there is not mentioned in any of our ancient histories. We only know that the people were christianised, and the town and adjacent district dedicated to God and Saint Bridget, in the fifth century (A.D. 456)^c. It is probable that, at this early period, they followed the heathen custom of worshipping in the open air (*sub dño*) at sacred stones; for we find in the eighth century (A.D. 711) that Nectan III., King of the Picts, being dissatisfied with this primitive custom of worship, and desirous to follow the Romish ritual, wrote to Ceolfred, Abbot of Jerron, in Northumberland, requesting information regarding certain disputed observances, and asking for architects to build a church, which was to be dedicated to St. Peter, the Prince of the apostles.^d The architects were accordingly sent, and the church was built of stone, in the Romish form. This, and other churches, as well as a collegiate establishment formed by the Culdees, and a priory established in 1273, have disappeared: since then another very old church has been taken down, and in the beginning of this century the present very plain building was erected. During the whole of these changes, extending over a long period, the Pillar-Tower has stood; and is still distinguished by its form, and by the admirable manner in which the material was selected and the building executed.

^a See Dr. Petrie's *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Ireland* 1845.

^b The name is derived from *aber*, confluence, of the small stream Nethy, that passes by the town to the river Earn. Abernethy is sometimes still called by the Scotch name *Invernethy*. The name which the Highlanders give to Abernethy is *Obair Neachtain*, or *Abair Neachtain*, i.e., "the work of Nectan." This was the Nectan

or Nethan who desired architects to be sent to build a church, [see Bede] perhaps that of Abernethy. "Fergustus episcopus Scotiæ Pictus,"—i.e., Fergust, the Pictish bishop of Ireland, was in the Roman general Council, A.D. 721. [Concil. t. 3, quoted by Pinkerton, *Inquiry*, II. 267; see also *Statistical Account of Scotland*, vol. x. p. 435.]

^c Innes' *Critical Essays*, vol. 1, pp. 111, 122, 137.

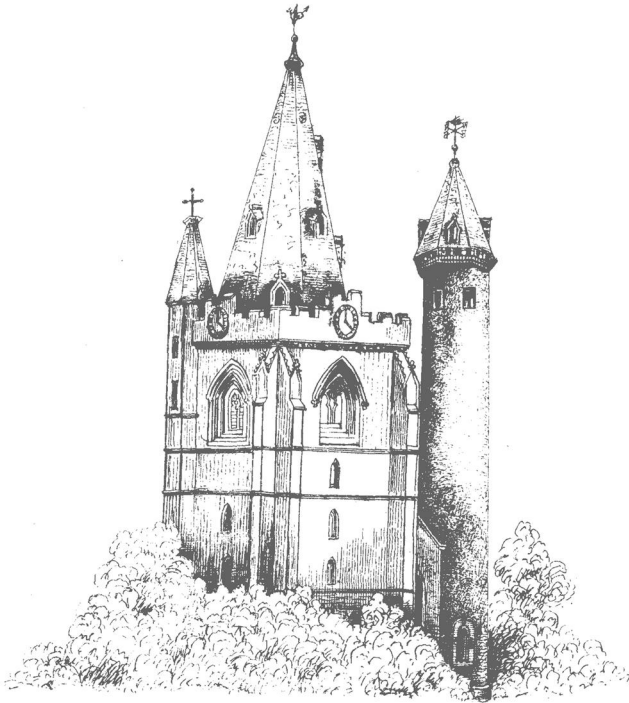
^d Bede, L. 5, c. 21.

The Abernethy Tower stands on a sloping bank, at a short distance from the Ochill hills, and a mile south of the river Tay, near where it joins the Earn. The view from the tower is contracted towards the south by the proximity of the hills, where a beautiful valley stretches southwards; while to the north, there is an extensive prospect of a rich and undulating country, the granary of Scotland, in which direction the entrance of the tower is situated. The building is 75 feet in height, and 48 feet in circumference; and its extreme diameter at the top is 13 feet 9 inches, tapering to the bottom, where it is 15 feet 6 inches; the thickness of the wall at the top being 2 feet 9 inches, and at the bottom 3 feet 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The tower is now without a roof, and the coping over the wall is probably modern. It is divided into five stages at unequal distances, each supported by stone abutments. The tower is built of sand-stone, which is now in many places much disintegrated, except on the lower and western side, where there are twelve courses of grey free-stone, little changed by exposure to the weather. The stones are all carefully dressed, rectangular and convex on the exterior, tapering inwards, and concave on their inner surface, to give a circular form to the tower; and they are accurately adjusted in regular courses with little lime or cement. The door-way is six feet above the base of the tower; but, in consequence of the graveyard adjoining having become greatly elevated above the general surface of the soil, the door is now only two feet above the ground. This entrance is 7 feet 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches high, 29 inches in width at the spring of the semi-circular arch, and 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the base. Four windows near the top of the tower face the cardinal points: they are 3 feet 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches in height, 1 foot 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches in width above, and 1 foot 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches below, and seem to differ from each other in their architectural form. Gordon, in his *Itinerary*, mentions that, at the beginning of last century, "each window is supported by two small pillars;" traces of which are still very evident in one or two of them. Those in the west window are entirely gone. Dr. Wilson supposes^e the windows may be modern; but after a careful examination, on the spot, I was satisfied that they were prepared at the same time with the rest of the tower. Besides the four windows, there are three small openings to give light to the interior.

The tower of Abernethy was repaired thirty years ago, when seven human skulls were found within it, lying together. Some of them were of a dark colour, as if they had undergone some process of embalming. Along with these, several long bones were found, some of which had been so recently deposited that they had still their ligaments attached to them.^f The tower stands about twenty yards to the S.W. of the modern parish church, being now used as a belfry; and the beadle informed me that it is "pretty well" adapted for this purpose. It also contains the village clock; and the ancient Joug, or pillory, is attached to it.

^e *Pre-historic Annals*, p. 595.

^f *Small's Roman Antiquities of Fife*, p. 154, and Appendix F.



Brechin Cathedral and Pillar-Tower.

BRECHIN. §

This Pillar-Tower is distinguished for the beauty of the workmanship, and the elegance of its form. It is supposed to have been built in the ninth century; or a century or more earlier than the old church of Brechin, which is supposed to have been founded by Kenneth, IV., A.D. 990.^b The present church, to which the tower is attached, was added long afterwards.

The Tower of Brechin is built on a gentle elevation to the north of the old Castle of Brechin, and of the river Esk. It has a contracted view of a fruitful valley on the west; while on the east there is a rich and wide plain, terminating with the Bay of Montrose and the German Ocean.

The stones of which this tower is built have been carefully selected, and formed into rectangular shapes, so tapering inwards as to give the circular form to the building; and they are so placed and fitted to each other, for 20 feet from the ground, and in patches, particularly on the east side, as

§ From the Gaelic name Breachnain, a "brae," or sloping bank.

^b Hic est qui tribuit magnam civitatem Brechne do-

mino chr. Pict.—Kenneth died by treachery (per dolum.) Ulster Annals, A.D. 994.

to give a *spiral rising* to the tiers or courses, thus throwing the pressure of the superincumbent mass upon an inclined plane. I am not aware that this remarkable circumstance has ever been observed before; nor does it occur in any of the Irish Round Towers now existing. Very little cement had been employed in the building; but the nature of this cannot readily be ascertained, as the tower has been thoroughly repaired, and a modern octagon roof erected over it, with angular-headed windows at each of the spaces, to give it the same architectural character as the modern church, which it joins, forming the south-west corner. The old tower, previous to the repairs, was eighty-five feet in height: it is now increased eighteen feet, the height of the new roof. Its extreme circumference at the top is 38 feet 6 inches, sloping outwards to the bottom, where it is 50 feet; the interior diameter at the top is 7 feet 8 inches, at the bottom, 8 feet; the thickness of the wall at the four upper windows is 2 feet 10 inches, and at the door-way 4 feet, including the projection of the door-lintels, which is 2 inches.

There are seven openings in this tower. One of these is the door-way, which faces the west; and there are two oblong openings facing the south and east, to afford light to the interior; and four oblong rectangular windows, near the top, facing the cardinal points. Over all these openings are large stones, and the one over the door of the tower is scooped out, so as to give it an arched form. Those which surround the door-way are large blocks of sand-stone, more prominent than the other stones of the building, and sculptured with bas-reliefs. The one over the door is the crucifixion; and those on the lintels are the supposed figures of St. John and the Virgin Mary. At the bottom of the door-way, are sculptured, on one side, a crouching animal, and on the other, a monstrous griffin;¹ and the lozenge ornament in the middle of the door-sill appears to have been filled with tracery. The double rows of button-looking ornaments surrounding the door-way bear a resemblance to those upon the Inch-brayoc and Brechin sculptured pillar-stones.² All these figures and ornaments are now much defaced by time.³ The other stones used in the building of the tower are grey-coloured freestone.

Many years ago a second entrance was made leading to the adjoining church, by removing a number of stones from the tower, which weakened it, and may perhaps account for "the large mass, in storms of wind, being seen visibly to sway from side to side."⁴

There are six unequally sized stories, with platforms of wood, resting upon abutments or supports of hewn freestone, which project from six to ten inches each, upon which strong timber floors are laid. The top of the tower is reached by a series of six ladders. The only "mason-marks" yet discovered in Pillar-Towers are in the interior of this building, and have been delineated by Mr. Chalmers.⁵ They are often repeated, particularly about the middle, and are generally cut cross-ways

¹ Perhaps symbolical of evil. See Eusebius' Life of Constantine, B. 3, ch. 3.

² See *Sculptured stones of Scotland*, (Spalding Club,) plates 86 and 138.

³ Black's *History of Brechin*, p. 259.

⁴ This opening was built up in 1847, by order of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests. I am indebted

to the accurate Mr. Jervis for this and other particulars.

⁵ Mr. Chalmers, of Aldbar, was so kind as to allow me the use of a drawing of the doorway, which is here lithographed on a reduced scale, and which was intended to illustrate a posthumous work of his late able and lamented brother, prepared by the distinguished antiquary, Cosmo Innes, Esq.

along the whole length and breadth of the face of the stone. Unfortunately the stones of the Abernethy Tower are so much disintegrated that, if any such marks ever existed on them, they are not now to be found. They have not been noticed in the Pillar-Towers of Ireland.^a At the time the adjoining church was built, two bells were placed in the Tower; but the situation was found inconvenient, and they were removed.

As the Picts are the most ancient people of Scotland we are acquainted with, and as Abernethy, the site of one of the Pillar-Towers, was the capital of one of their petty governments, it has been concluded that these towers were built by this people. This is by no means probable; for, had they been built for any great national purpose, they would be found in other parts of Scotland and likewise in England and Wales, which is not the case: not a trace of such erections is found in these countries. That they were built by the Danes, to give an alarm in time of danger, is a still more untenable opinion, as they are not well placed for this purpose; and they are found neither in Denmark nor in the North of Scotland where these people had powerful colonies; while again similar structures are found in countries where the Scandinavian races never penetrated. Besides, the Danes did not possess such an intimate knowledge of architecture as these structures exhibit.

There is no distinctive appellation for Pillar-Towers in the Gaelic dialect of Scotland; or it has gone into entire disuse, owing to the parts of the country in which they are situated having been so long detached from the Gaelic-speaking districts of the country: they are now merely designated by the Gaelic name for a tower (*tur, tor, turaid.*) The Irish name *cloitheach, clogas*, bell-house, or belfry, has no equivalent in the Gaelic of Scotland, and is probably modern, as bells were introduced comparatively at a recent period into Ireland;^o nor can we suppose that the priests would erect such elaborate buildings to hold the ancient small bells. The ingenious suggestion as to the use of Pillar-Towers, proposed by Peter Colleson,^p and adopted by Penmant,^q cannot be considered more reasonable—that they were prisons for penitents to expiate their sins, by remaining for a certain time of probation in the upper stories, after which they descended to the next story, and so on, till at length they were purified, once more released, and returned into the bosom of the church. It is not likely that Christians would build such structures for penitents, when they were incapable of building churches in honor of the Deity they worshipped.

Some authors have supposed that these Pillar-Towers were intended for burying the dead; but as the tenets and forms of the Pictish religion, and their mode of sepulture, were the same as those of the Caledonians and Britons, it is not likely that such a change would be made at two places alone, without an adequate reason: nor indeed did the Picts possess a sufficient knowledge of architecture to build such structures. Besides, in some of the towers in Ireland no bones nor remains have been found; and in those towers in which they have been found (including Abernethy) they were in considerable

^a *Archæologia*, vol. 34, p. 33.

^o Betham's *Etruria Celtica*, v. 2, p. 210.

^p *Archæologia*, vol. 1, p. 307.

^q *Tour through Scotland*, vol. 3, p. 162.

quantities, and often comparatively recent; they were distinguished by none of those marks of consideration that we should expect to find surrounding the sacred remains of the mighty dead; nor were they accompanied by those articles of value that were supposed to be so useful to the deceased in another world.*

There are antiquarians who suppose that the Pillar-Towers, being found near to, or connected with churches, were built for Christian purposes. On examining the Scottish examples, however, we find that the churches are modern; and it is by no means improbable, that they may have been placed near the more ancient sacred structures; particularly as we find that the early Christians were in the habit of placing their churches on the sites of pagan temples, to reconcile the inhabitants to the new faith, and to increase their reverence for it.

This reasoning may apply to the Abernethy Tower, upon which no Christian emblem has been discovered; but not to the Brechin Tower: here we have the crucifixion, and other Christian ornaments, sculptured upon stones prepared obviously at the time of building.

*Dr. Smith's *Roman Antiquities*, p. 154, and Appendix F. • Wilson's *Pre-historic Annals of Scotland*, p. 69.



Door-way of Brechin Pillar-Tower.