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AN ATTEMPT
TO EXPLAIN THE ORIGIN AND MEANING
OF THE EARLY INTERLACED
ORNAMENTATION

FOUND ON THE

Ancient Sculptured Stones

OF

SCOTLAND, IRELAND, AND THE
ISLE OF MAN.

BY

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AN ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN,

&c.



ANY reasonable and honest attempt to explain the origin of the singularly elegant interlaced ornamentation, familiar to archæologists as the very earliest style of artistic decoration known in the British islands, must be entitled to, and I feel assured will receive, favourable consideration. Even should the attempted explanation fail to obtain entire sanction, it will at least lead to attentive and accurate observations upon an interesting subject, which may at some future time refute or establish the theory which I venture to propound.

The style of interlaced ornament to which I refer is found in an infinite variety of devices on the earliest sculpture, whether of stone or metal, and in the oldest manuscripts and illuminations of Britain and Ireland. It retained its peculiar distinctive character throughout the Roman occupation of Britain, slightly modified by, and often mixed with, classical ornaments. These, however, in a great measure disappeared during the Saxon period, a circumstance which induces the belief that, whatever its origin and purpose, interlaced ornamentation was equally familiar to the Saxon invaders and to the British aborigines. It entered largely into Norman

architecture; but from the time of the Conquest it gradually became less used, though traces of it are to be met with at nearly every period in the history of British art. Thus it was revived with the introduction of printing, when many beautiful capital letters, copied from ancient manuscripts, were reproduced as wood-cuts. It reappeared in the strap-work peculiar to the architecture and ornamentation of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. It is found in the bone-lace patterns of this country and of Northern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was retained in almost its original purity for the decoration of the dirks, targets, brooches and powder horns of the Scottish Highlanders within the last hundred years.⁽¹⁾

Very striking examples of interlaced ornament are met with on the ancient sculptured stones and crosses so plentifully scattered over our islands. They have been of late brought into prominent notice by three invaluable publications which graphically represent and accurately describe these interesting relics of ancient art as they are now found in Scotland⁽²⁾ Ireland⁽³⁾ and the Isle of Man⁽⁴⁾. It is to be regretted that those of England and Wales — though many of them have been separately engraved — have not yet been collected in a well-edited volume, since a careful comparison of their details would prove an immense assistance to antiquaries, bringing before them a new and delightful chapter, richly full of pre-historic suggestions.

My remarks are confined to sculptured stones only, though the subject would be greatly elucidated and my argument enforced by references to manuscripts and metal ornamentation. This ground, however, is so well occupied by gentlemen who

(1) *Archæological and Pre-historic Annals of Scotland*, pp. 221, 504, 505.

(2) *The Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, privately printed by the Spalding Club, and liberally presented to many antiquarian societies.

(3) *The Sculptured Crosses of Ancient Ireland*, by Henry O'Neill.

(4) *The Runic and other Monumental Remains of the Isle of Man*, by the Rev. J. G. Cumming.

have made palæography and metallic art their peculiar study that I decline intruding upon it, even had it been possible to treat it satisfactorily within the limits of this paper.

The aborigines of this or any other country of corresponding climate, after discovering some natural cave, or making for themselves a rude hut, would probably take their next step in constructive art by attempting to form such utensils as might contain, and enable them to preserve, the fruits and-seeds necessary for food. Assuming that they were then unprovided with even the rudest tools, — for we refer to a time before our far-off ancestors knew the use of bronze or iron, — they would form these utensils by twisting together the long, pliant osiers with which the land abounded, and of which, by the unaided action of the fingers, they could form baskets excellently adapted for the required purpose.

No other branch of art is even now so independent of tools, and none has been so universally diffused or so long and uninterruptedly practised as basket making. It is the humble parent of all textile art, the most elaborate tissues produced by the loom or the needle being but progressive developements proceeding from the rude wattle-work of unclothed savages. Basket making is the first natural step in the path of civilization. To this day the earliest effort of infantile ingenuity among the rural population is directed to making (as it were by intuitive instinct) personal ornaments of plaited rushes, and that, too, in patterns, some of which are identical with the devices engraved by our pre-historic ancestors on their old sculptured stones.

The earliest authentic records of Britain refer to its inhabitants as expert basket makers; their houses were made of willows and reeds; their fences and fortifications were living trees, with intertwined branches; their boats were baskets, covered with skins; their domestic furniture, defensive armour, even the images employed in their erroneous religion, were each of wicker-work; and though we have no

absolute proof that such was the case, it is at least probable that those famous chariots so formidable to the Roman invaders were similarly constructed, for it appears altogether impossible that the feats recorded of these celebrated charioteers could have been performed with carriages of wood and iron; though if we can suppose them to have been of small size, constructed of elastic wicker-work, and placed upon low wheels, the accounts of their marvellous movements become reasonable, and within the bounds of credibility.

The monastic historians of the succeeding ages continue to mention wicker-work as the principal architectural material used in Britain and Ireland, not only for the rude dwellings of the inhabitants, but also for their more important public edifices and churches. Thus we find that so late as the sixth century Dermot MacKervel assisted "the Abbot St. Keyran to make a house to dwell in" by "thrusting down the peirs or wattles" of which it was made.⁽¹⁾ The monastery founded by St. Columba in the same century, though of much theological repute, must have had little material grandeur, as it is known that the great apostle of the Scots "sent forth his monks to gather twigs to build their hospice," and the abode of St. Woloc, a bishop of the same age, was "a simple hut of wattles." Glastonbury, supposed to have been the earliest Christian church in England, was, on the authority of William of Malmesbury,⁽²⁾ "a mean structure of wattle-work;" and there are numerous other references to churches and monasteries constructed altogether or in part of the same material. Vestiges of such structures are now occasionally met with, which verify the records of the Roman and Mediæval historians. Recently, on the Etive in Argyleshire, the progress of agricultural improvement has uncovered rough pavements of stone,

(1) *Annals of Clanmacnoise*, quoted in notes to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, vol. i. p. 181.

(2) *William of Malmesbury*, book i. c. 20.

bearing marks of fire strewed with charred ashes, surrounded with the remains of hazel stakes, the relics of the frame-work of ancient Caledonian hearths, which have been concealed for centuries under a cover of eight or ten feet of moss.⁽¹⁾

Many of the purposes to which the ancient Briton applied his manufacture of baskets were singularly useful, and so well were they adapted to their peculiar purposes that they are employed almost unchanged even to the present day. The coracle of basket and hide is still used by sportsmen and poachers on the waters of North Wales.⁽²⁾ The bothies of the Scottish Highlanders are yet constructed of wattles; and even in the cottages of a better kind the doors and sleeping cribs are frequently of the same fabric: so also are their rude little sledges and carts; and until of late their horse harness also.⁽³⁾ Modern civilization does not now disdain to use for drags, dog-carts, and German waggons the same strong yet light and elastic materials which the ancient Briton probably employed for his formidable war-chariot; and our ancestors of the last century knew well the value of the stage-coach "*basket*" as a convenient means of conveyance over their rough roads.

"Hanapers (or hampers) of twyggys" were long the official receptacles for certain documents connected with the Court of Chancery, and the name is still, or was recently, applied to an officer of that court.

The firm hold with which long-established customs, combined with convenience, fix themselves upon the reason of men, and the pertinacity with which nations cling to their old habits, refusing, for the sake of old associations, alterations of the most obvious utility, is altogether marvellous. Speaking of this power and permanency of custom, Lord Bacon curiously illustrates this subject by an anecdote

⁽¹⁾ *Pre-historic Annals of Scotland*, p. 76.

⁽²⁾ Information from Mr. Hughes, of Chester, 1858.

⁽³⁾ M^cTan's *Highland Clans* — M^cNiel.

• pertinent to the matter before us. "I remember, in the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's time, of England, an Irish rebel condemned, put up a petition to the Deputy that he should be hanged in a withe, and not in an halter, because it had been so used with former rebels."⁽¹⁾ Another author, in his version of the same story, says that this "favour of being hanged in gads (twisted withes, so called after the manner of the country), was not refused."⁽²⁾ This, though probably an extreme, is by no means an unique prejudice in favour of ancient modes of execution, a prejudice which extends beyond life, influencing nations in their adherence to old-established sepulchral customs.

A manufacture which was probably progressing for many centuries before the Romans invaded Britain, must necessarily have acquired a certain amount of refined ornament as a result of so much experience and practice. We have, indeed, direct evidence that the Romans greatly admired the ornamental baskets of the British, which were exported in large quantities to Rome, and became fashionable appendages among the extravagantly luxurious furniture of the imperial city. Juvenal, writing about A.D. 120, mentions the popularity of these baskets;⁽³⁾ and that they were productions of the British islanders is distinctly stated by the epigrammatist Martial,⁽⁴⁾ who wrote about the end of the first century. It is not improbable that these British baskets were enriched with colour, and even gilding. The former we know was profusely and permanently applied to the persons of the aborigines; the latter—probably one of the earliest discovered metals—was used in the middle of the

(1) *Essay on Custom and Education*.

(2) Thomas Dinley's *Journal of a Tour in Ireland: Proceedings of the Kilkenny Archæological Society*, vol. i. p. 180, New Series.

(3) *Adde et bascaudas et mille escaria.*

Juvenal, Sat. 12, v. 46.

(4) *Barbara de pictis veni bascauda Britannis*

Sed me jam mavult dicere Roma suam.

Martial, lib. 14, epig. 99.

fifth century for so common a purpose as decorating the roofs of important buildings.⁽¹⁾ It is not, therefore, likely that they were denied as additional means of ornament to these highly valued baskets.

When the aboriginal Briton had made his first step in domestic civilization by constructing useful baskets, he would still be subjected to a great inconvenience from the absence of any suitable vessel of sufficient size to convey or store a supply of water. Nature in this country did little to assist him, denying even the slight aid of the gourd and calabash common in warmer climates. To invent a water vessel would thus become to him a necessity; without it he must have been compelled to reside on the bank of some river or brook, in which he and his family could quench their thirst in the same manner and as frequently as the wild animals of the surrounding forests. Nor is it improbable that many generations of people were restricted to such localities for this reason.

There appears at first sight to be no possible analogy between baskets and water vessels; yet I apprehend that they are in reality almost twin inventions. The same reasoning which induced the naked Briton to line the wicker walls of his hut with clay for the purpose of excluding cold, would, after some experience, lead to an application of the same material as a coating to the inside of his baskets, which, when dried in the sun or hardened by fire applied to the inside, would then be enabled to retain liquids at least for a time, and consequently permit the desired migration from the immediate margin of a river. This is of course a gratuitous assertion, of no value without proof; but it is also a reasonable induction, and one which is, I venture to think, worthy the considerate attention of archæologists.

(1) In the Saxon poem *Beowulf*, translated by the late Mr. Kemble, there occurs this passage:—"He went to the hall, stood on the steps, and beheld the steep roof with gold adorned." Line 1844.

Fortunately vessels of this description have been preserved in the ancient burial places of the Britons, and are occasionally exhumed in a state of tolerable preservation. They are for the most part not turned on the potter's wheel, but moulded by the hand, and marked on the exterior by ornaments, not in relief, but always depressed or incised, having the appearance of indentations made in the soft clay by plaited osiers, rushes, or strips of hide, more or less distinct, but, so far as I know, all referrible to such an origin.⁽¹⁾ In some the coating of clay appears not to be carried to the mouth of the basket, but the plaited rushes seem to have been folded inside, and thus the interior of the urn is on its upper portions indented with the same pattern of basket-work as that on the outer side. All British urns are, comparatively with Roman or with Saxon examples, wide-mouthed, a condition essential to their being made by hand on an exterior frame-work of plaited rushes or willows; and some appear to have been constructed on two separate baskets, one inverted over the other. There is rarely any attempt at *ansation*, the nearest approach to handles being heavy perforated knobs placed a little beneath the mouth, for the evident purpose of attaching to them the twigs, withes, or thongs, which served both to protect and to suspend these fragile vessels.

I must not be supposed to assert that the ornaments found on British, occasionally on Anglo-Roman, and abundantly on Anglo-Saxon urns, were in all cases real impressions of basket-work; but merely that the use of that style of ornament probably originated in the manner I have described, and that it was continued after the introduction of the potter's wheel by force of habit and long-continued custom. This induced the potter to stamp or incise on the surface of the vessels he made ornamental devices similar to

⁽¹⁾ See on Plate No. 6, examples of British urns, copied from Plate iii. of the *Archæological Index*, by J. Y. A. Kerman Esq., F.S.A.

those on the honoured urns of an earlier people; for that they were honoured and held in high estimation is apparent from the sacred purposes to which they were applied as receptacles for the ashes of the dead. In absence of all direct proof of this assumed origin of urn ornamentation, I have thought it right to test the possibility of the process; — with a result entirely satisfactory. Taking such small baskets as I found used by my family for ordinary domestic purposes, I have roughly coated them inside with different clays, subjecting some to the action of fire in the kiln, while others I have left exposed to the sun, and to a few I have applied heat inside only. On all the indentations of the basket-work are sufficiently marked; but they are best defined on the sun-dried specimens, since the shrinking of the clay under the action of fire in the kiln obliterates some of the more salient ridges. A comparison of these jars with ancient British urns will, I apprehend, be more satisfactory and convincing than any elaborate argument, leaving little doubt that both have been produced by similar processes, and that the British urn is, in truth, a secondary application of the British basket.

Mr. Birch, in his learned and most valuable *History of Ancient Pottery*, applies the term "*bascaudæ*," employed by Juvenal and Martial, not to baskets but to sepulchral urns with basket-like ornamentation.⁽¹⁾ Though most unwilling to hazard a contrary opinion, I still cannot avoid suggesting that such urns, judging from the specimens which have been preserved for our inspection, were not likely to be acceptable ornaments on the tables of the luxurious Romans, accustomed as they must have been to elegant products of high art in the plastic manufactures of Etruria, Greece, and Egypt. It is, I think, greatly more probable that ornamental baskets to contain fruit or flowers were indicated by that name.

(1) *History of Ancient Pottery*, vol. ii. pp. 381-384.

Though there is good proof that the Britons had acquired much skill in the art of basket making at the time of the occupation of this island by the Romans, it is equally certain that they were ignorant of the art of constructive masonry; for when the legions left the British to their own resources, they advised them to build a wall between the two seas across the island, to keep off their northern enemies. They, indeed, "raised the wall as they had been directed," but "not of stone *as having no artist capable of such work*, but of sods [which] made it of no use."⁽¹⁾ From this it is apparent that the British people at that time, and probably for some centuries afterwards, were unaccustomed to the use of building materials of a kind more permanent than wood, wattle-work and clay. Such an arrangement quite accords with the manners of the people and the state of the country at that period, covered as it was with extensive forests, and swamps abounding with osiers. A people of migratory habits, occupied in perpetual warfare, and depending in a great measure on the chase for their food, must have had little inducement to build residences of great durability; and this would happily lead to the more rapid clearing of the country, and consequently to its earlier civilization.

Such was the condition of art in Britain and Ireland at the time that the first Christian missionaries commenced their labours in these countries. So signal was their success that Tertullian, writing of his own time (the third century), tells us that "some countries of the Britains that proved impregnable to the Romans are yet subjected to Christ." It was the custom of those earnest and indefatigable men (so pious in their lives that after their death they were usually honoured with the title of Saint) to place crosses in every place where they succeeded in making converts, or in which they planted a church, chapel, or monastery; and it becomes

(¹) Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, book i. chap. 12.

a question of some interest to ascertain the materials of these early symbols of the Christian faith, which must have been extensively spread over the land.

Clearly they were not of stone, since we know that even after the Romans left England the natives had not sufficient skill to build a wall of that material; nor have we any reason to believe that they had the ability or the tools requisite for the construction of a cross of timber, which would demand the use of cutting instruments with finer edges than those necessary for stone. Under these circumstances it is only natural that the British convert would dedicate to the glory of God the products of that talent which had acquired for him a continental celebrity. The basket-work, so prized at Rome, was the most valuable oblation that the pious ancient Briton could offer to the services of his new religion, and thus it was that the first emblems of Christianity erected in England were (almost necessarily) constructed of basket-work.

The perishable nature of the materials forbids us to expect almost any other than inferential evidence that crosses of basket-work ever existed, but happily this is not denied to us. A careful examination of the admirable engravings of the sculptured stones of Scotland, the ancient Irish crosses, and the curious monumental remains of the Isle of Man, together with many existing carved crosses in England and Wales, cannot fail to convince any unprejudiced observer that the beautiful interlaced ornamentation so lavishly employed on these sculptures derived its origin from the earlier decorations of that British basket-work which the Romans had learned to value and admire.

Before attempting to describe the method by which such crosses may be, and probably were constructed, I beg to call attention to the fact that basket-work and the earlier Pagan or Druidical religion were closely connected.

Cæsar, writing of the Druids, states that "they have

images of enormous size, the limbs of which, formed of wicker-work, they fill with living men, which being set on fire, the men perish enveloped in flames⁽¹⁾;" and Strabo says, "having prepared a Colossus of hay and thrown wood upon it, they burn together oxen, all sorts of wild beasts, and men."⁽²⁾ It has been assumed that these wicker-work images were in the human form, but I apprehend that there is nothing in either text to warrant this conclusion. The word colossus implies a figure of large size, which may quite as probably have been that of some enormous animal.

On the Shandwick stone,⁽³⁾ one of the most interesting of the Scottish series, figures of men, horses, stags, birds, and other animals are carved with much spirit, and with more than usual attention to their relative proportions. The animals are represented in life-like attitudes, as if moving about. But there is one remarkable exception,⁽⁴⁾ a colossal four-legged creature, of a form peculiar to these Scottish stones, differs from the others as much in figure as in size. Compared with two sheep and a dog which occur on the same panel,⁽⁴⁾ its height, if erect, would be about thirteen feet, its length about eighteen feet, while its ungainly leaning posture is singularly suggestive of its being a sculptured representation of some huge beast built up of wicker-work. Certain marks on its surface warrant this supposition, which is strengthened by the fact that other representations of a similar animal, which occur on the same series, have the most distinct indications of a basket-work origin. Well marked examples are to be found on the stones at Brodie and at Glenferness.⁽⁵⁾ Resembling no known animal, these curious figures — which are represented above twenty times on the Scottish stones and are nowhere else to be met with — have a general likeness to each other; they are all in postures

(1) *De Bell. Gal.*, lib. vi.

(2) *Strabo*, lib. iv.

(3) Plate xxvi. *Sculptured stones of Scotland.*

(4) Plate No. 3.

(5) Plate No. 4.

by no means indicating life or motion, and all distinguished by the striking peculiarity of having no feet; the limbs terminate in long wands rolled up after the manner of volutes, obviously suggesting the idea that if opened out they would serve, on being thrust deeply into the ground, to keep the colossus in a standing attitude. Similar volutes are represented terminating the base of the well-known cross at the gate of St. Michael's church yard in the Isle of Man. They were probably used in the same way to fix to the ground an earlier cross of wicker-work, of which the existing monument is a copy engraved on stone.

I dare not of course take it upon me to assert that there is any positive connection between the huge animal on the Shandwick stone and the colossal images mentioned by Cæsar and Strabo, as being employed by the Druids in their human sacrifices, but the coincidence (if indeed it be not something more) is sufficiently curious and interesting to demand a passing notice. It is supposed that these and some other as yet inexplicable devices found on the same stones are symbols of a religion prior to Christianity; a circumstance by no means improbable, as it is known that convents among the Saxons and probably the Britons also, clung with much pertinacity to some of their Druidical and Pagan customs long after they had assumed the outward emblems of Christianity. This may account for the juxtaposition of the cross with devices of unknown meaning, and explain in some degree the remarkable circumstance that Pagan and Christian emblems both derive their ornamentation from the same source — basket-work.

Having shown that at the time when Christianity was introduced into Britain the native population, totally unacquainted with practical masonry, were yet expert and experienced manufacturers of highly ornamental baskets; and suggested the reasonable probability that they would employ their best talents in the service of their new religion, as

they had previously devoted them to their earlier Pagan or Druidical superstitions, I proceed to offer some reasons for believing that the first crosses erected by Christian missionaries in Britain, Ireland, and the Isle of Man, were constructed of plaited osiers.

Many of the Mediæval biographers narrate with much minuteness the particulars of stone crosses set up by Christian bishops; but no such notices occur before the sixth century, and from the great importance attached to them by the monastic historians, it is evident that they were objects of extraordinary interest, and moreover, of *exceptional material*. Such crosses were erected by St. Columba, St. Oswald, St. Cuthbert, Bishop Ethelwold, and other holy men. Of St. Kentigern—better known in Scotland as St. Mungo—it is said that, among many crosses which he put up, one in the city of Glasgow was taken from the quarry by his orders, and, by the united efforts of many men, erected in the cemetery of the Church of the Holy Trinity, in which his episcopal throne was set up. That this particular cross was of more than usual importance may be inferred from the statement of his biographer, that it was the custom of St. Kentigern to erect a cross in any place where he had converted the people, or had for a time resided. Such crosses, therefore, must have been executed by some less laborious process than was used for the one which he erected near his cathedral about the end of the sixth century, and which is said to have still marked the spot where the original edifice stood, when the Cathedral of the West was reconstructed five hundred years afterwards.

But St. Kentigern erected one other cross, which demands the attention and consideration of archæologists. We are informed that at Locherward, a parish in Mid-Lothian now called Borthwick, he set up a cross constructed of *sea sand*. There is no hint of any miraculous assistance in the erection of this cross, and therefore we are constrained

to look for some mechanical appliance by which sea sand could be made to cohere in the form of a cross.⁽¹⁾

But first I may be permitted to suggest a possible motive for the adoption of a material so unstable, and apparently so little fitted for the purpose.

Locherward (now Borthwick) is a considerable inland property in the east of Scotland, and for some reasons, not requisite to be inquired into here, this parish was appended to the Western Diocese of Cumbria, which comprised the valley of the Clyde and much of the west coast of Scotland during the episcopate of St. Kentigern. It is not improbable, then, that this cross-rearing Bishop would commemorate so important an event, in his accustomed manner, by sending to Locherward a cross of baskets made of the osiers and filled with the sea sand of his western diocese, which, having been sanctified by his episcopal benediction, would be appropriately set up in his new territory as a visible sign of the transfer, and a practical assertion of his accession to the property. Here again, however, I am compelled to say that I have not a shadow of proof to offer in support of my surmise. St. Kentigern may have set up the sea-sand cross by other means, and for another purpose. I have only endeavoured to suggest a reason in accordance with possibility and the customs of the times in which he lived.

Before asking you to believe that the earliest existing stone crosses were reproductions of still earlier crosses of twigs, I may well be expected to offer some evidence that any such basket-work crosses ever existed.

Of all the superstitious legends of the middle ages, none was more widely popular than that of St. Patrick's purgatory. The little island in gloomy Lough Derg, in which it was believed that both the pains and advantages of purgatory could be anticipated, and the duration of its torments abridged, was

(1) *Pinkerton's Vitæ Sanctorum Scotiæ*, pp. 286-7, quoted in the preface to the *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, p. 5.

visited by great and powerful pilgrims, who enriched its clerical guardians by their offerings. Suppressed at the Reformation, and its rude buildings more than once demolished by the orders of government, it nevertheless still retains so strong a grasp on the superstitious feelings of the poor and ignorant of the present day, that, actuated by religious enthusiasm, crowds of such pilgrims at certain seasons pour themselves upon this miserable little islet, consisting of three roods of barren surface; and so numerous are these visitors that the tenant pays the landlord a yearly rent of £300 (the greater part in sixpences), derived from a small charge imposed on them at the ferry toll.⁽¹⁾

In this place, where ancient superstitious practices still linger, the remembrance of its founder and his imputed miracles would naturally be longest retained, and any relics appertaining to him preserved with pertinacious care. None such can now be found; but it is recorded that about or before the year 1630, a certain Lord Dillon visited the island, accompanied by a government surveyor, and they gave a detailed description of the place, which was published by the then Bishop of the Diocese. In their report it is stated that "at the east end of the church there is a heap of stones, on which there is *a cross made of interwoven twigs*; this is known by the name of St. Patrick's Altar, on which there do lie three pieces of a bell, which they say St. Patrick used to carry in his hand," &c.⁽²⁾ This is the only record I have met with of any actual cross of twigs or basket-work. It was probably the last of innumerable crosses of the same kind, and was found in the place where, of all others, the latest example was likely to be met with. Doubtless it was a many times

⁽¹⁾ *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. v. p. 81.

⁽²⁾ From *Patricius His Purgatory*, attributed to Spottiswood Bishop of Clogher, and also to his successor Bishop Jones, quoted in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. v. p. 71, and in Carleton's tale of "The Lough Derg Pilgrim."

repeated copy of some ancient cross attributed originally to the hands of the patron saint of Ireland.⁽¹⁾

The devices sculptured on a majority of the Scottish and Manx monoliths must have been executed before the artists possessed such skill or such tools as would enable them to cut the outline of the stone itself to any required form; they do not appear at that time to have *set up* crosses, but they engraved representations of that symbol on the surface of huge stones many of which were already fixed in an erect position and most probably had been for a long series of years employed in the services of an earlier religion. Upon such stones they imitated the ornamentation of wicker-work by innumerable reiterated blows of their small celts of flint, bronze, or iron, working out the design in low relief, and showing one half of the round, or as much only of the osier wands as could be seen when plaited together. It is only in the later examples that the outline of the stone assumes the form of the cross; and this change is accompanied by a considerable alteration in the ornamental details, the interlacings become less elegant but more complicated, and terminate in the heads, tails, and limbs of various animals, often grotesque in expression; or, the wands burst into buds and leaves, or give place entirely to sculptured representations of men and animals of the rudest execution. It is a curious proof of the earlier use of the interwoven ornamentation that it may be found in elegantly arranged and highly-finished devices on the same

(¹) Though a poetical authority is of no weight in antiquarian argument, it would be wrong to omit quoting Sir Walter Scott's account of the famous fiery cross formed of twigs.

“The grisly priest, with murmuring prayer,
A slender crosslet framed with care,
A cubit's length in measure due;
The shaft and limbs were rods of yew.

* * * * *

The cross, thus formed, he held on high,
With wasted hand and haggard eye.”

The Lady of the Lake, canto iii. stanza viii.

stones with representations of the human figure so rudely carved as to appear to be the work of mere children.

It may be objected, that the British or Saxon artisan, when working on a new material, would adopt a style of ornament appropriate to it, and discard the totally irrelevant system of decoration which had been used by his ancestors; but it must be remembered that he had many inducements to adhere to the ancient patterns. The force of custom and education would be a powerful motive, and no other style of ornament was then known to the people, who were accustomed to and well understood these endless intricacies which appear to us a mass of confusion; probably, however, the best reason was an earnest desire to perpetuate in durable material those crosses of perishable basket-work, before which he and his ancestors had bowed themselves in worship in the depths of their primæval forests,—crosses, which had been sanctified by the holy men who at first erected them, and to many of which miraculous powers were undoubtedly attributed.

A majority of the Irish examples differ from those of Scotland and the Isle of Man, in being elaborately carved in their outline to the form of richly ornamented crosses. This argues either an earlier developement of art in Ireland, or a later execution of the work; but the plaited ornaments are found to prevail in each locality, though they probably gave place to sculptured representations of men and animals somewhat earlier in Ireland than elsewhere. The usual form of these crosses is fairly expressed by the example engraved⁽¹⁾ representing the interesting Irish cross at Kilklespeen.

It may at first sight be supposed that crosses of timber would precede those of stone, the material being abundant and the workmanship apparently more easy; but a little consideration will show that timber required tools of a higher order than stone; the blunt celt would be far from efficient as an instrument to carve wood, and sharp-edged tools were

(¹) Plate No. 2.

not then attainable. Irrespective of this, the superior durability of stone would of itself induce the choice of that material.

There is a common arrangement in most of the Scottish and Irish crosses to which I desire to call attention; whether sculptured into true crosses, or merely engraved on the surface of the stone, they are divided into irregular compartments, each for the most part ornamented with a different device of interlaced work, or, in late examples, subjects in sculpture. These compartments are usually broad at the base and gradually decrease in size towards the apex of the cross, as would be the case with a series of baskets piled upon each other, and then firmly bound together by continuous bands of twisted withes. A wheel or ring, connecting the horizontal with the perpendicular limbs almost invariably accompanies the interlaced ornamentation on these early crosses. This ring I long supposed to represent a nimbus or glory, but remembering that that usual symbol of divinity is of Eastern origin, and that it is commonly met with on crosses where there is no representation of the figure of our Lord, I was induced to seek for some other meaning, and have now no hesitation in saying that its original purpose was not symbolical, or even merely ornamental, but that it was a necessary appliance in the construction of the earlier wicker-work crosses, reproduced on the stone crosses for the same reasons which induced the retention of the interlaced ornaments.

It is obvious that the horizontal arms of a basket-work cross must require some extraneous aid to enable them to retain that position even for a short time. For this purpose the ring seemed to me to have been adopted; but I was quite unable to discover the manner in which it was applied, until on application to a practical basket-maker I was at once told that he could not construct a cross of willows without the ring, which he must make first, and then work the cross upon it. That such was its use is confirmed by the arrange-

ment of some of the rude crosses in the Isle of Man. On the sculptured stone in the church-yard of Kirk Michael⁽¹⁾ is a cross of interlaced work without any ring; but to compensate for its absence another contrivance has been adopted. The horizontal arms are sustained by a series of plaited twigs hung over the top of the upper limb, and interwoven with the arms. On the reverse of the same stone⁽¹⁾ the cross has a ring composed of one thick and two slender stems, which last appear to pass through and fasten together the limbs and the ring by a curious and ingenious knot. Another example of a similar fastening may be observed on the fragment of stone also at Kirk Michael⁽²⁾ sculptured with a rude representation of the crucifixion. These knots are doubtless the origin of the richly ornamented bosses often covered with basket-work, so frequently met with in exactly the same positions on the Irish and Scottish crosses.

Some of the human figures sculptured on the Scottish and Manx stones, are so executed as to suggest that they also are reproductions from originals formed of twigs. This is particularly the case with a fragment at Forteviot,⁽³⁾ the ancient Celtic capital of Scotland, on which four men, some animals and a cross are carved with curious rudeness; and with a portion of another crucifixion from the Isle of Man.⁽⁴⁾ Both of these have a considerable resemblance to the rustic work of rough twigs with which many gardeners of the present day delight to ornament their summer houses and garden seats. These examples suggest a common origin with the extraordinary illuminations which Mr. Westwood has reproduced from ancient manuscripts, particularly with those engraved

(1) Plate No. 5. I am indebted to the Rev. George Cumming M.A. for permission to re-engrave this and plates Nos. 6 and 8 from his interesting work on the crosses of the Isle of Man; and to my nephew and assistant, Mr. W. E. Brown, for drawing all the illustrations of this brochure on stone.

(2) Plate No. 6.

(3) Plate No. 7. From *The Sculptured Stones of Scotland*.

(4) Plate No. 8.

in the *Journal of the Archaeological Institute*,⁽¹⁾ it being remembered that the sculpture and the illuminations were both probably enriched with colour and gilding.

I have made careful copies of very numerous examples of ancient interlaced ornaments, and placed them in the hands of various artisans, particularly basket-makers, straw-plaiters, wire-workers, and plaiters of ornamental hair. They all inform me that with a few exceptions the devices may be worked out in their respective materials, and several thanked me for putting new patterns before them, which they said would be useful in their business. Some of these drawings I gave to my own workpeople, who reproduced the devices very effectively in braid-work and embroidery. They tell me they could, with time and patience, copy many of the most elaborate devices.

I must guard myself, however, against being supposed to assert that *all* the interlaced devices found on the old crosses may be reproduced in modern plait work; such is not the case. Many of them may claim some other and very different origin, and there are others which the sculptor has doubtless modified and altered. The first Corinthian capital is said to have been modelled from a flower-pot covered with a tile between which the leaves of an acanthus had forced themselves, an arrangement which skilful architects have varied a hundred different ways, though retaining still the expression of the original idea. In the same spirit the ancient Briton treated the panels of basket-work, when he reproduced them on his crosses of stone.

There are many other branches of British and Irish art which may have been influenced in their origin by the long established basket-work of these islands, such as the early enamelling of metals, the Norman arcades, especially those found on very early fonts, the branching arrangement of the oldest window glass, as well as the reticulated manner of

(¹) Vol. vii. pp. 17-19, 23, 24.

placing glazing quarries, and very numerous varieties of mediæval diapering; but I omit farther notice of these. My purpose in this paper is merely to call attention to the probable origin of one branch of ancient art which I believe to have escaped previous notice. If I have in any degree established my position, or even excited curiosity respecting it, it will doubtless induce further inquiry and discussion, since it is beyond doubt a subject of very considerable interest.

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