XVIII.—*On Basket-work Figures of Men represented on Sculptured Stones.* By
REV. G. F. BROWNE, B.D.

Read May 20, 1886.

I BEG to invite the attention of the Society of Antiquaries to the occurrence of human figures sculptured on stones at Checkley and Ilam, in Staffordshire, the bodies being represented as formed entirely of interlacing bands, and producing the effect of wickerwork images. As far as I know, attention has not hitherto been called to this remarkable and suggestive feature, which seems to throw us far back into the past, and reminds us of the earliest descriptions of the land of Britain.

The stones in the churchyard at Checkley, near Uttoxeter, are mentioned by Camden,^a in Plot's *History of Staffordshire*,^b and in a letter on the Penrith pillars in *Archaeologia*, vol. ii. p. 48. Gough makes Camden say (A.D. 1607), "in the churchyard of Checkley stand three stones like pyramids, two of them adorned with figures, but the middlemost is highest. The inhabitants say here was fought a battle between two armies, one armed and the other not, and three bishops fell in it, in memory of whom these were erected. The historic truth concealed under this tradition I have not yet been able to trace."

Dr. Plot says of them (A.D. 1686) that they are certainly Danish, and that "the inhabitants report them to be memorials of three bishops slain in a battle here about a quarter of a mile E.N.E. from the church, in a place still called *Naked Fields*, because the bodies lay there naked and unburied for some time after the fight." This tradition still remains, only the bishops have been made into kings. The stones are called the Battle-Stones. Dr. Plot gives an engraving of the stones, curiously inadequate and incorrect, but still very interesting. The stone

^a Gough's *Camden*, vol. ii. p. 49.

^b Ch. x. 63, 64.

I call No. 2 was then (1686) nearly twice its present height, and at the top a projection is shown, as if the commencement of an arm of a cross or a "wheel."

The writer in *Archaeologia* (Dr. Lyttelton, then Dean of Exeter), writing in 1755, says that he was informed several years before, by an ancient inhabitant of the place, that the present plain pillar was placed there in the room of one of the old ones, thrown down and broken by accident.

They are figured in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. xxxiii., and in Redfern's *History of Uttoxeter*. In neither case has the artist detected the special features to which I desire to call attention, nor indeed do the illustrations profess to represent the patterns on the panels. At the same time it should be said that Mr. Lynam's illustrations, in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, are very careful and interesting, and valuable as shewing the general appearance of the stones.

The larger of the two stones, which I will call No. 1, is about 4 feet 8 inches high; its four faces are shown on Plate XXII. The east and west faces are 20 inches wide at bottom and 16 inches at top, the corresponding dimensions of the north and south edges being 10 inches and 9 inches. Stone No. 2 is about 3 feet 8 inches high; its east and west faces are 18 inches wide at foot and $14\frac{1}{2}$ inches at top; the north and south edges 9 inches and 8 inches. Each of the stones is the lowest part of a loftier pillar, being broken abruptly at the top but coming to an unsculptured termination at the bottom. It is said that they stand in stone sockets, sunk some little distance in the ground.

No. 1 has on the north side two panels. In the upper is a figure of a man, with good legs and feet and with a staff in each hand. His head is gone, the stone being fractured at the neck. His body is composed entirely of one band, interlacing with itself, the two ends projecting at the shoulders and grasping the two staffs. The lower panel, which has an arched head, is filled with a double row of Stafford knots, formed by an endless band. On the south side are three panels. At the top is another basket-work body, with no head and with two staffs. In the place where the legs and feet would come, there is an interlacing pattern composed of two narrow ovals crossed, intersected by a broader oval. The lowest panel is filled with Stafford knots. On the east face there is at the top a pattern composed of three concentric circles, intersected by four semicircles formed by endless bands which pass on to a second system of concentric circles, of which only the lower half is left, the rest being broken off by the fracture of the pillar. Below are three basket-work bodies, side by side, with heads and legs, the central figure being the tallest and the figure on the observer's right the

SCULPTURED CROSS-SHAFT AT CHECKLEY, STAFFORDSHIRE.

shortest. On the west face there are at the top what appear to be the trunks of three men, side by side, in pleated dresses, without feet, the upper part being broken away. Below this are three basket-work bodies, side by side, with heads but no legs. Lower still, in a panel with an arched top, are three more basket-work bodies, side by side, with heads but no legs, and below them again a like trio. Thus there are on this stone portions of 21 human figures, 18 of which are represented as formed of wicker-work. In some cases the ends of the interlacing band, which emerge at the shoulders, are shewn as arms; in other cases they pass up on each side of the face and look like a nimbus; or they pass across into the system of the wicker-work figure standing next to that to which they belong. The nimbus arrangement is more evident in the case of the Ilam stone to be described later. The division of the panels is at the same height on each side of the stone. The west face, which is in several respects the most remarkable, is a good deal obscured by lichen, and it is almost close to the railings of a huge tomb, so that it is impossible to do justice to it. This is unfortunate, especially as it appears to be in better preservation than the other sides, owing something perhaps to the protection which the tomb has afforded for many years.

No. 2 has on the north side at the top a panel filled with interlacement, and below two figures face to face; probably some kind of nondescript monster. This side is so much perished that comparatively little can be made of it. On the south side there is at the top a well-executed serpent-dragon head downwards, with its own tail in its mouth, and its body tied in triquetrae or Stafford knots, and below are two human figures of basket-work. On the east face, the upper panel is filled with Stafford knots, enriched by the interlacement of a second band, and shewing a sharp turn and doubling back of the band which is very unusual indeed on English stones, but is found in manuscripts and embroidery of the Carolingian period, in sculpture at Ravenna, and in Roman pavements. The lower part of this face is occupied by four large triquetrae; this arrangement being very unusual on English stones. On the west face there are at the top a pair of bird-dragons, only decipherable by comparison with an almost identical panel on a stone at Ilam, and below this are two rows of three human figures. Thus there are on this stone portions of eight human figures, and while No. 1 has no representation of a dragon or other monster, there are dragons on three of the four sides of No. 2. But nothing can be built on diversities of this kind, for neither stone is complete.

The two stones in the churchyard at Ilam, at the mouth of Dovedale, are figured in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. xxxiii. on the

plate already referred to. One of them may be passed over on the present occasion, as it has not the special feature to which I am calling attention.

The other stone is almost complete, only the head and arms of the cross being broken off. It is 7 feet 6 inches high, from the socket, and has been about 8 feet. The east and west faces are 17 inches to 18 inches wide at the foot, and 8 inches at the top; the north and south edges $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches at foot, and 6 inches at top. The east face has four panels. The panel at top has an interlacing pattern, the two ends of the band passing up beyond the shaft of the cross and following the curves towards the arms, where no doubt they formed interlacing patterns and passed away in like manner into the uppermost key of the cross. The panel next below has six Staffordshire knots, enriched by the interlacement of an additional band. The panel next below this has two concentric circles above and three below, with bands interlacing in semicircles. The lowest panel has two bird-dragons, with forepaws crossed and their bodies or tails interlaced; this interlacement I could not decipher, on account of the presence of an upright gravestone close by, but that hindrance has been removed since my second visit, and I should think the pattern can now be determined. In that case, the corresponding panel at Checkley will probably be decipherable also. The upper panel of the west face has been much the same as the corresponding panel on the east, but it has perished too much to say with certainty. The two panels below this are practically the same as those on the east face. The lowest panel has three basket-work human figures, much perished and undecipherable except by the experience of Checkley. The arrangement is much the same as at Checkley, the central figure the highest, the figure on the observer's left the next highest, and that on the right the lowest; they have legs, and the bands more decidedly form a ring round the head than in some of the Checkley instances. On the north and south edges the uppermost panel has in each case an interlacing pattern, and the panel next below a system of plain Staffordshire knots. The lowest panel on the north has some very clear interlacements, but for their pattern and meaning I have no solution, except by a somewhat forced explanation; that on the south has a basket-work man with a staff, all much perished.

After working out this stone, I was taken to see a fragment some little distance off, in the Ley, a piece of ground lying below Ilam Hall, above the place where the Manifold and Hamps rivers flow out of the rock after a subterranean course of some miles. This is a very massive stone, about 5 feet high, standing in a socket on two steps formed by two ancient stones of large size. It is a rectangular shaft, about 18 inches by 16 or 17. It was taken from the foundations of an old

cottage, when Mr. Scott Russell was transforming Ilam into a model village, but its memory had not been lost during the time of its service as building material, and it was known as the battle-stone. At first sight it was hopeless to make anything of it, worn, battered, and covered with lichen and moss. But, after a sound scrubbing with a stable-brush, one basket-work man after another stood revealed to an eye instructed by the decipherment of the Checkley stones. On the south side there are three large basket-work men in the upper panel, and three in the lower. On the north side, three basket-work men in the upper panel, and three concentric circles in the lower, interlaced with four semicircles, large bosses being used to fill up vacant places, as on some of the Checkley panels. The east side is worn away at the lower part, it is said by the wheels of carts when it stood in the village; the upper part has a system of Staffordshire knots, enriched by the interlacement of an additional band. The west side also has almost perished, but the upper part has two large basket-work men, and the lower has the remains of four very bold triquetrae, arranged as at Checkley.

Thus these four remarkable stones in Staffordshire, two at Checkley and two at Ilam, ring the changes on basket-work images, Staffordshire knots, concentric circles, and interlacements, with a few dragons and triquetrae. There are on them thirty-eight human figures, eight panels of Staffordshire knots, seven sets of concentric circles with four systems of three circles and three of two, and six panels of simple interlacement; two panels of triquetrae, four of dragons or beasts, and one which is as yet a puzzle, but may mean three serpents, complete the inventory. Three of the four stones, it must be remembered, are only the lower parts of shafts, which, from the squareness and massiveness of these portions, may have reached to a very considerable height.

The only example of a human figure formed of basket-work which I have found on a stone other than these four is at Sandbach, in Cheshire. On one of the stones placed upright, round the platform on which the two magnificent sculptured shafts in the market-place at Sandbach stand, is the figure of a man from the waist upwards, the body made of an interlacing band, and the head being, as at Checkley and Ilam, an isolated oval. The Sandbach stone has the peculiarity, that round the neck, as it were, is a separate collar, partly hid of course by the head, which presents the full face to the observer, and emerging from behind the head about half-way up the cheeks. The ends are tucked in at the top of the interlacing band which forms the body, and cross in front like a "comforter." It may be that there has been such an arrangement in some of the Checkley and Ilam figures, but I have not detected any signs of it. Other figures

at Sandbach give me the impression that they have had basket-work ornament on them which has now perished.

On one stone in Scotland (Brodie) the characteristic and unexplained "elephant" has its body covered with an interlacing band, and on another (Glenferness) there are remains of interlacement on the "elephant"; but in neither case is the body formed of the interlacing band, it is merely an ornament covering the body, which has the usual complete outline.

In manuscripts of the Hibernian type, serpents and other creatures have their bodies ornamented sometimes with interlacements, as in the case of the Brodie "elephant," but the only figure really formed of basket-work which I have found in a manuscript is the figure of Our Lord, in the "Irish" Psalter at St. John's College, Cambridge. In that case the whole of the trunk is basket-work, the legs, arms, shoulders, and head being shown by ordinary outlines; the beard, too, is a variety of the triquetra, with an interlaced ring, but it has an ordinary outline besides.

It will be clear to any one who knows the very great variety of patterns on sculptured stones, and the remarkable manner in which the early artists contrived to make each stone unlike others, that between the Checkley and the Ilam stones there must have been some unusually close connection. The only key which tradition gives to this connection is the fact that the Checkley stones and the stone in the Ley at Ilam are called battle-stones. Looking to the three accounts of the Checkley tradition, Camden's, Plot's, and the one now current, we see that besides the three important persons, accounting for the number of stones, there is probably another feature in common. The idea of one of the two armies being unarmed is unreasonable, and we may fairly suppose that one army fought in defensive armour, and the other fought without such protection; perhaps the battle was sufficiently early for one of the armies to have but little clothing of any description. This would give us a meaning for the "naked fields." The basket-work trunks of the figures on the stones might represent the appearance of coats of armour, or it is possible that it may have been an attempt to indicate a naked figure in which the bones shewed prominently. Chain armour, when reproduced in stone, has something the air of interlacement, as on the effigies in the Temple Church; one of the finest shields there is covered with "basket-work."

If it had not been for this tradition, I should have looked no further than the well-known fact that wicker-work was very extensively used from the earliest times in this island, times which we may call prehistoric so far as our predecessors here are concerned. And I cannot help thinking that, notwithstanding the special

tradition of the battle-stones at Checkley, and the connection with them which the identity of ornament and of name gives to the Ilam stone, it is to this use of wicker-work that we must look for our explanation. But then there remains the question, to which I confess that I have no answer ready, to what age must we go back to find artists who could design and execute these elaborate monuments contemporaneously with a familiar use of basket-work images? The Sandbach stone, I may remark in passing, seems to me to account, by the collar it gives to the figure, for the high-shouldered appearance presented by early ecclesiastics when shown in profile on sculptured stones. The collar may represent the hood, or it may represent a special part of a priest's dress, something of the nature of an amice.

Mr. G. F. French's paper in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, vol. xv.,^a in which he argued for a wicker-work origin for the interlacing ornamentation, at that time supposed to be all but peculiar to the British Islands, brought together a considerable amount of information on the subject. It is rather a fashion now to laugh at the Druids, but I for one quite believe Cæsar's story of their basket-work images of monsters or of men. No theory accounts for the paneled interlacing ornamentation of our English sculptured shafts, and of the crosses sculptured on Scottish stones, so well as that of its being the descendant of early representations in stone of perishable crosses of wicker-work made by the first British Christians. Even if the early inhabitants had not been in the habit in Pagan times of erecting wattle-work pillars in places where monoliths could not be got, we may take it as certain that, when they were told by Christian missionaries to erect crosses as a symbol of their new faith, they would employ for the purpose the beautiful art which had made their manufacture famous at Rome. That wicker-work crosses were made in the Middle Ages is certain; the last example on record, so far as Mr. French's researches went, indeed the only example on record, was in 1630, when Lord Dillon found on "S. Patrick's altar" on Lough Derg (the "altar" being a heap of stones at the east end of the church) a cross made of interwoven twigs.

The parts of these stones which are not occupied by human figures call for the remark that there is nowhere any approach to a foliage scroll. I am accustomed to attribute the superposition of this scroll upon interlacing ornamentation to Wilfrith, and there is a good deal to be said for its being somewhat of a party badge at the end of the seventh century. The Staffordshire knot is not a wicker-

^a A.D. 1859, pp. 63—80.

work pattern, and it is found sculptured at Ravenna. The concentric circles, with semicircles interlaced, could be made in wicker-work, no doubt, and as we are dealing with "battle-stones" it may be that they are the descendants of the representation of a wicker-work shield, in which case the bosses would be something more than a mere device to fill a void space. Concentric circles of this character are uncommon on English stones; there is an example on the fine shaft at Hope, in Derbyshire. Of the dragons and other creatures it is unnecessary to speak.

It is probable that, when once attention is called to these basket-work figures, other examples will be found; indeed, I shall not be surprised if other examples are known already, for the field of sculptured stones is so large that no one need be ashamed not to know them all. However that may be, I feel that their presence requires some special explanation, which I am not at all satisfied that we have as yet got, and I am not without hope that they may open a new and unexpected chapter in historical archaeology.

I may say, in conclusion, that we have examples from Peru and elsewhere of men and animals on metal plaques with their bodies formed of reticulated work, of spiral work, and of an "Etruscan" pattern. The curator of our Cambridge Museum of General and Local Archaeology has two remarkable specimens. But I imagine on the whole that the sole object in that case is to provide receptacles for pigments or enamel, and that the presence of these patterns within the outline of the man's or the animal's form is not the survival of wicker or cable work. No doubt the other side of the question can be argued.

It may be worth adding that Checkley lies geographically between Stafford and Ilam, so that St. Bertram, who, according to the tradition, left Stafford and settled at Ilam in Mercian times, and whose name is connected specially with the Ilam district, and with the shrine at Ilam, and with these stones, may have halted at Checkley, and put up both sets of stones, or may have seen the stones at Checkley and put up those at Ilam. The font at Ilam is very ancient, but there are ages of difference in style between it and these stones, and, curiously enough, the same is true at Checkley. Whether it is possible that there is any connection between the name Battle-Stone and the name Bertram, Bertolin, Bartolin, or whether, as the dedications about Ilam are to Bartholomew, Bertram, Bartolin, Bartholomew, Bartlemy, Battle, have anything to do with one another, I cannot say.