



34. Rush and Straw Crosses; Ancient Emblems of Sun Worship.

Author(s): Elizabeth Andrews

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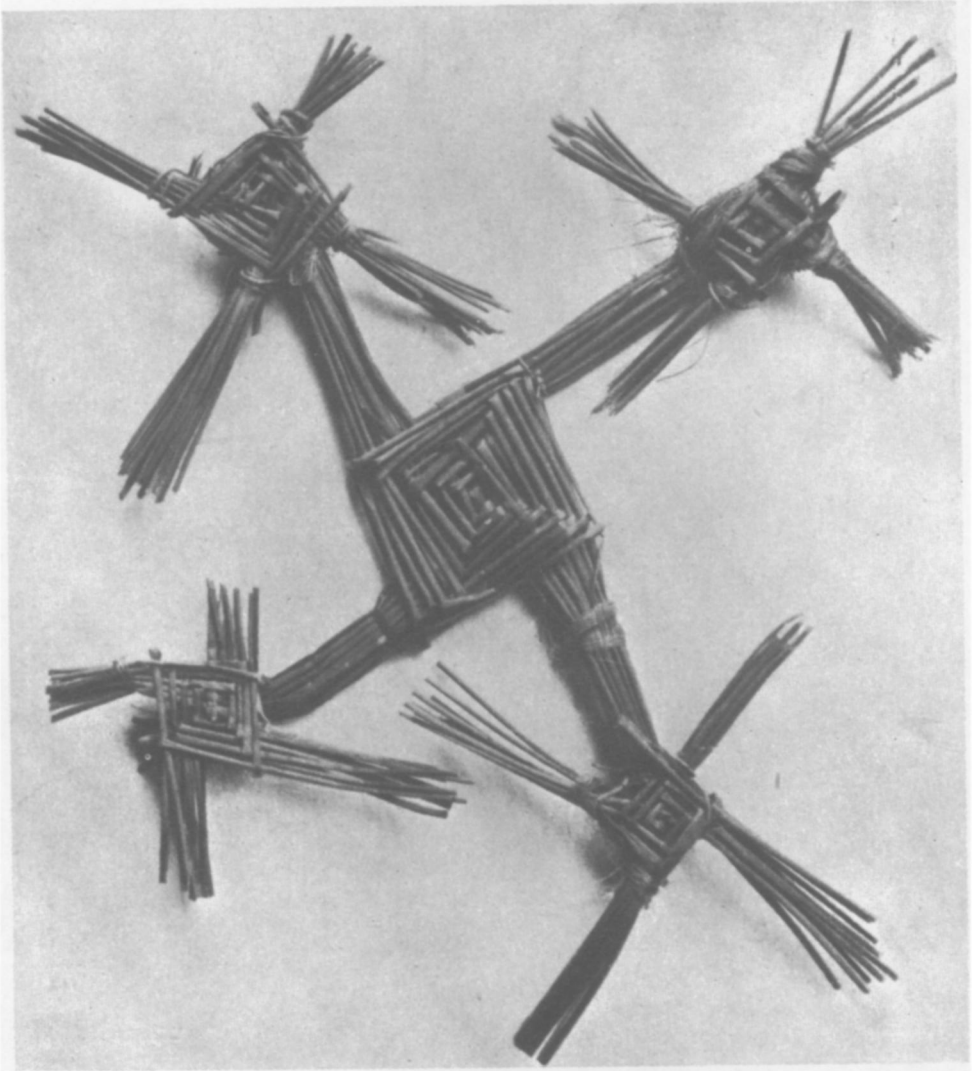
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RUSH CROSS FROM CO. DONEGAL.

ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

With Plate D.

Ireland: Folklore.

Andrews.

Rush and Straw Crosses; Ancient Emblems of Sun Worship.*By Miss Elizabeth Andrews.***34**

In MAN, 1920, 45, Mr. Armstrong has described a gold solar disc found at Lattoo, Co. Cavan, which he connects with sun worship in the bronze age in Ireland. I should like to draw attention to the rush and straw crosses put up in many parts of that country, which are, I believe, a survival of this ancient cult.

The significance of the rush cross was first pointed out to me by the late Lady Huggins, who showed me one, saying it had come from Ireland, and was a very ancient symbol of the sun. I replied I possessed a cross of similar shape, which came from Portglenone, Co. Antrim, and had been given me by Mr. Robert Bell, a member of the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club. A little later I visited Maghera, Co. Derry, and obtained a number of rush crosses and harvest knots; some of these I sent to Lady Huggins, and, in acknowledging them, she wrote:—

"Regarding the dried rush cross I
"showed you, and which came from
"Ireland, it is exactly the same in
"form as those you have sent me.
"You thought my cross like what you
"had seen. I thought they would turn
"out *identical*, and they have. There
"is no doubt in my mind that in
"these crosses we have a form of the
"swastika, among the most ancient
"of symbols. A Greek coin connects
"the swastika with the sun. I hope
"before long to put into shape my
"views and notes on early sun
"worship amongst us in these
"islands." In a later letter, Lady
Huggins wrote:—"The astronomical
"side of the rush and straw crosses
"I hope, some day, if I live long
"enough, to say something about
"myself." I greatly fear that this
intention was never carried out: this
was the last letter I received from
Lady Huggins before her death.

Dr. Schliemann found a sign identical with the Indian swastika in great abundance on the pottery of the third or burnt city at Hissarlik, as well as on the two subsequent prehistoric cities.* He believed it was a sign of the sun, and represented a wheel in motion. This conclusion was endorsed by Dr. Max Müller,† and Mr. Edward Thomas has elaborated it in "The Indian Swastika and its Western Counterparts."‡

The round circle may be seen on a cross at one of the pilgrim stations in Glencolumbkille. This cross is simply a pillar stone, with these markings on

*R. Welch, Photo*

FIG. 1.—CROSS AT CHURCH, GLENCOLUMBKILLE, EAST SIDE.

* *Ilios*, p. 346, also n.p. 350.† See letter in *Ilios*, p. 348.‡ Quoted by Dr. Schliemann in *Ilios*, p. 353-4.

it, and I may mention that all the crosses in the Sean Glen, as it is called on the spot, are of this type, although the markings on them vary. In one, for example, squares are shown, but no circle (Fig. 1).

In this valley, which is interesting from so many points of view, rush and straw crosses are still used to guard the home from harm. A peasant woman writes to me that they are made on the night of 1st February and hung up on the following day. This would mean that they were made on St. Brigid's Day and put up on Candlemas, and I understand from Mr. Bell this is also the date on which they are made at Portglenone. In other places I have been told the rush crosses are made on St. Brigid's Eve, 31st January.* The discrepancy is very slight.

In the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* for 1892,† Dr. W. Frazer gives a note on "Rude Crosses made from Twigs with interlaced Straw or "Rushes." He mentions having been informed that in certain remote parts of Donegal a primitive custom was observed "of preparing small square crosses of "straw or rush which were suspended within the house for good luck, and as a "preservative against misfortune." He had been informed that these crosses were prepared about St. Brigid's Day and that it was customary before making crosses to hold a description of festival, the food being laid out upon the rushes or straw intended to be employed.

This custom is not confined to Donegal. At Maghera, Co. Derry, the supper is laid on the top of the rush crosses. At Tobermore, Co. Derry, it is eaten after the rushes have been brought in, but before they are made into crosses. The whole ceremonial is religious. At Maghera, when the rushes have been gathered, not cut, the head of the house stands outside and says in Irish: "Go on your knees and "open your eyes and let St. Brigid in." And the family reply: "She is welcome, "she is welcome, she is welcome!" I have heard of the same practice at Tobermore, and in both places prayers are afterwards said before the supper is eaten.

Dr. Frazer refers to the sacred fire, which for ages was kept perpetually burning at the shrine of St. Brigid. He mentions a cross he had obtained from Donegal, and adds: "I am disposed to regard the cross now exhibited as another survival "of an early traditional reverence for the great visible centre of light and heat—"the sun, and the smaller crosses as symbols representing the four seasons of "the year."‡

There is no figure of the cross shown in Dr. Frazer's memoir, but in a paper published in the same journal in 1908,§ Mr. Crawford has an illustration of straw crosses from County Roscommon, and points out that the shape of one of them agrees with Dr. Frazer's description. I was so fortunate as to obtain a rush cross near Buncrana, Co. Donegal, which also agrees with Dr. Frazer's description. It is shown in Pl. D.

Straw crosses are sometimes associated with St. Brigid's Day, but are more frequently made at the time of harvest, and put up as a thank-offering. I have been told that at Maghera they are not made on any particular day. According to Daniel McKenna, to whom I am indebted for much information, "When the "people brought home the meal from the mill they made the straw cross and put "it in the bottom of the barrel or ark, and tramped the meal in the ark." The ark is a strong wooden box made for holding meal, and many of them are still to be found in old houses.

* A plate of a rush and a straw cross is given at p. 17 of *Ulster Folklore* by the writer.

† Pp. 185-6.

‡ P. 186.

§ Pp. 394-6.

We thus see that the straw crosses are frequently associated with the fruits of the harvest, while the rush crosses belong to the early spring festival of St. Brigid. In an old pamphlet of 1691* we have, however, another date given. The writer says: "I went abroad into the country (near Newry), where I found the houses "deserted for several miles. Most of them that I observed had crosses on the "inside, above the doors upon the thatch; some made of wood, and others of straw "or rushes, finely wrought; some houses had more, and some less. I understood "afterwards that it is a custom among the native Irish to set up a new cross every "Corpus Christi day; and so many years as they have lived in such a house as "many crosses you may find. I asked a reason for it, but the custom was all "they pretended to."

Mr. Bell tells me that near Portglenone and Toome the old cross is not taken down when the new one is put up. On the other hand, in one locality in County Down, I have heard of the old cross being burnt.

In County Kerry these crosses are put up on St. Bridget's Eve. Miss Delap, who lives on Valentia Island, writes that she has heard of them in the neighbourhood of Castlemaine and Kells and believes that they are also used in the west of Valentia Island. They are sometimes made of wheaten straw, but oftener of rushes, and are nailed over fireplaces, windows and doors, and put on the ends of the spars or scallops which hold the thatch in position.

It is the custom in Kerry for any children called after the saint to go round collecting pennies for the "Biddy" (a bundle of rags or an old doll), and with these pennies candles are bought in honour of the Saint.

We see the association of St. Brigid with fire and light. She had a pagan predecessor, Brigit, mentioned in Cormac's glossary, who may be regarded as a female Apollo, and who is referred to by Keating† as a poetess of the Tuatha de Danaan.

This ancient race probably began their year in May. According to Sir Norman Lockyer, this May Year, which he calls the Agricultural or Farmers' Year, preceded the Solstitial Year, and was in use before the erection of Stonehenge, whose megalithic structures represent, in his opinion, "a rededication and a reconstruction "on a more imposing plan and scale of a much older temple, which was originally "used for worship in connection with the May Year."‡

This very early year appears to have had four great festivals, which were observed in Ireland long after the introduction of Christianity. Cormac,§ Archbishop of Cashel, in the tenth century, states "that in his time four great fires "were lighted up on the four great festivals of the Druids, viz., in February, May, "August, and November." These festivals are probably older than even the Celtic Druids, and a passage in Keating's "History of Ireland" connects the August festival with Lugh, King of the Tuatha de Danaan.

The Fires of Beltaine in the month of May are well known, and the sports of Hallow Eve, which ushered in the winter season, are not yet dead.

St. Brigid's Day and Candlemas correspond with the February festival, the end of winter and the beginning of spring. We see that fire and light played an important part in these festivals, and I think we may infer that in the rush cross we have a very ancient symbol used in pagan times to represent the sun emerging from the darkness of winter. The straw cross is often small, but one fine specimen

* Quoted in *Ulster Journal for Archæology* for 1857 (Vol. V., p. 166). This passage is referred to by Dr. W. Frazer, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries for Ireland*, 1892, pp. 306-7.

† "History of Ireland," Book 1, Chap. XII.

‡ "Stonehenge and other British Stone Monuments," p. 95.

§ See "Stonehenge," p. 181.

from Toome measures twenty-two inches. In it we may see another ancient symbol of the sun at the August festival, the season of harvest. The Newry cross put up on Corpus Christi Day probably represents a midsummer festival, after the solstitial or June year had been established.

This ancient symbol was no doubt consecrated by the early Christian missionaries and given a new significance—we find it on the reverse of the shrine of St. Patrick's Bell.

I may mention that these straw and rush crosses are used in very many parts of Ireland. We hear of them in Counties Roscommon and Clare, as well as in Kerry, Down and Donegal. Probably we shall find similar emblems in other countries, and indeed in the Welcôme Historical Medical Museum in London, there is a cross of St. John's wort from the Landes. I am told that in this part of France similar crosses may be seen on almost every cottage, and that the peasants put them up to prevent the entrance of evil spirits that bring ill-luck and disease. The resemblance to our Irish crosses and the customs connected with them is obvious.

I have spoken of the connection of the Tuatha de Danaan with the early May year. Notwithstanding the myths which have gathered round their history, I believe that these Danaans were an early primitive race, and may be identified with the short Danes, who are said by the Ulster peasantry to have made the raths and *souterrains*. In tradition these Danes are always short men, and their name seems to come from Danaan. I asked a woman near Carrick, Co. Donegal, the Irish name of the Danes who built the forts, and her reply was: "Whether we speak Irish or English we call them Danes." Dane is not the Irish for the mediæval sea-rovers who came from "Lochlann."

We may, I believe, conclude that we have in these rush and straw crosses an emblem which has come down to us not only from pre-Christian, but from pre-Celtic times.

I will not attempt to conjecture the date. I may state, however, that the late Mr. J. Gray, Treasurer to the Anthropological Institute, would identify the small Danes and Pechts with a short, round-headed race which migrated into the British Isles about 2000 B.C.

ELIZABETH ANDREWS.

Europe: Archæology.

Moir; Peake.

The Ice-Age and Man. A Note on Man, 1922, 5. By J. Reid Moir, **35**
with a Note by H. J. E. Peake.

There can be no question as to the importance and interest of the relationship of Palæolithic Man to the glacial period, and all those who realise this will feel indebted to Mr. H. J. E. Peake for his note published recently in MAN. In this matter of the correlation of the palæolithic flint implements with the glacial deposits of England, all of us engaged upon this work are merely extending the admirable researches of Continental geologists and others, of whom Professor Albrecht Penck may, perhaps, be regarded as the foremost authority. Professor Penck's well-known work, "*Die Alpen im Eiszeitalter*," sets forth his conclusions as to the succession of the glacial episodes in the Alpine regions, and it remains for us in this country to try to ascertain if our glacial deposits are amenable to the Penckian classification. The late Professor James Geikie ("The Great Ice Age") was, I believe, one of the first investigators to attempt to solve this question, and, latterly, several English archæologists are devoting their attention to its possible solution.

In the *Geological Magazine* (Vol. LVII., pp. 221-4, May, 1920) I published my views as to the relationship of the East Anglian palæolithic and pre-palæolithic flint implements to the glacial beds of this area, and I would refer those