

RELIC AT SEAHAM.

CUP-MARKED STONE IN ST. MARY'S CHURCH.

By John Hall, F.R.I.B.A.

There is, at St. Mary's Church, Seaham (though it is not generally known), a large stone slab with somewhat unusual markings depicted upon its upper surface. In dimensions it is 6 feet by 8 feet 1 inch by 7.5 inches thick. It is of local limestone, and at present forms one of the pavement slabs within the altar-rail, being placed at the north-east corner of the chancel, one of its long sides against the north wall.

This stone was thoroughly examined and measured during the renovations and excavations carried out within the Church in 1908, when evidence of Saxon foundations and Saxon windows were opened to view. Upon the surrounding earth being purposely removed from the slab it was found that two of its edges and probably a third are moulded, whilst that of the long side, facing south, was plainly chiselled. From this evidence alone we are almost certain that this slab was originally the altar-stone used in the Church during pre-Reformation days.

In attempting to decipher the symbols, I believed, at the outset, that they had the appearance of cup-markings of pre-historic times; but owing to their neatness of execution, and the unlikelihood of Christian authorities sanctioning and adopting an altar-stone showing pagan symbols, I abandoned the idea. It is well-known, of course, that pagan stones have been frequently used as walling-stones in Christian buildings, but is there anywhere an example of pagan symbolism appearing upon a Christian altar ?

A Probable Solution.

Feeling certain that the markings are of an astronomical nature, I then attempted another method of arriving at a solution, namely, by using the theory discovered by the late Sir J. N. Lockyear, at the same time deriving sympathetic support from Bede's Ecclesiastical History, I finally arrived at a probable solution of this difficult problem.

A long line seen on the stone is a representation of the Eastern horizon. A large circle below it, the sun before dawn, and small circles, some upon and others above the line, are the risings and settings of the herald stars at the times of the Vernal and Autumnal Equinoxes, respectively.

I considered that this diagram of the Equinoxes, particularly that of spring time, might have been engraved upon the altar as a permanent reminder to the clergy with regard to the canonical time of holding the Easter festival. This festival, as we know, is of the greatest importance in the calendar of the Church, and since Easter 669, Easter Day has been celebrated on the first Sunday after the full, or Paschal, moon following the Vernal Equinox.

It was about this time, we are also informed by Bede, that Archbishop Theodore, the parish maker, taught the arts of poetry, astronomy and arithmetic in England.

I concluded that three circles arranged triangle wise, as seen on the diagram, were a lithic representation of the Trinity, and were so placed upon the slab as to permanently remind the brethren of this great doctrine of the Christian's faith.

Authorities' Views

Having completed the article briefly summarised here, I submitted it to several authorities for their consideration. Some of them in their reply, I gathered, were sceptical, while others, more sympathetic, declared that there may be something in my conclusions. All agreed in stating, however, that markings of this nature they had never seen before, particularly upon a Christian stone altar.

Finally, through the assistance of Mr Reginald A. Smith, of the British Museum, a rubbing and drawing of this stone was submitted to Mr Ludovic MacLellan Mann, of Glasgow, an acknowledged authority upon cup-marked stones, who is about to publish a book upon this interesting subject.

This author now informs me that these markings are of an astronomical character, and are undoubtedly pre-historic. "They represent in the most exact manner certain events which have happened within one lunar year of 354.36 days." He also states that similar markings have been found all over the globe. Mr Mann has further stated that he hopes to include a full account of the Seaham stone in his forthcoming book on the subject of cup-marked stones.

As the method of deciphering these prehistoric characters is at present a secret known only to Mr Mann it is impossible to give further detail regarding this unique stone at Old Seaham Church, probably ranking, in the County of Durham, second only in importance to that of the date stone of Jarrow Church,

In conclusion, I would like to make a suggestion. This stone is now lying on the damp earth, and is thereby liable to be trodden on by pedestrians, thus causing the markings to be obliterated. In fact, a portion of the line and one group of the small dots have already suffered injury from this cause. I, therefore, venture to suggest that the slab should be removed from its present position in the chancel, and be re-fixed upon suitable stone supports in altar fashion, placed at the west end of the Church, where this unique relic of combined pagan and Christian craftsmanship may be readily inspected by all visitors to this interesting Saxon Church at Seaham.

Newspaper article, date and source not known

The stone described can still be seen in St Mary's.