

THE BEGINNINGS OF OUR HISTORY.



N the history of the ancient world some vague and fragmentary references are made to our islands, but from these little real knowledge of them can be gathered. As early as the time of Alexander the Great we come upon some notices of certain northern islands, which must be either Orkney, or the Hebrides, or Shetland, or the Faroes, but we cannot determine which. The Phœnicians, who were the great sea-traders and explorers of the early world, seem to have had a little knowledge of these northern archipelagoes.

In the time of the Roman occupation of Britain we have definite mention of the Orcades, but nothing which shows any real knowledge of them. They were visited by the fleet of Agricola after his invasion of Scotland, as recorded by Tacitus. About three centuries later, the poet Claudian sings of a victory by the Emperor Theodosius, who, we are told, sprinkled Orcadian soil with Saxon blood. We are not told, however, who the people called Saxons really were, or whether they were the inhabitants of the islands or not. They may have been early Viking raiders who had fled hither and been brought to bay among the group.

Early Church history has also some references to Orkney. After St. Columba had left the shores of Ireland to carry the message of Christianity to the Picts and Scots in Scotland, another Irish missionary, Cormac, went on a similar voyage among the Orkney Isles. Him, therefore, we may regard as the apostle to the northern heathen. St. Adamnan, the biographer of St. Columba, tells the story, and the name of Adamnan himself is still commemorated in the name of the Isle of Damsay.

After the visit of Cormac, the Culdee missionaries established themselves in various parts of Orkney, as the place-names given by the Norsemen show. In several of these names we find the word *pápa*, a form of *pope*, which was the name applied to the monks or clergy of the Culdee Church. Like Columba himself, who made the little island of Iona his headquarters, his followers seem to have preferred the seclusion of the smaller islands. To this habit are due such names as *Papa Westray* and *Papa Stronsay*. Other Church settlements have left their traces in names such as *Paplay* and *Papdale*.

Another place-name which records an old-world mission station is that of *Deerness*. At first sight this name seems rather to indicate that abundance of deer were found there; and some writers tell us, by way of proving this, that deer's horns have been found in that parish. But as deer's horns have also been found in many other places in the county, the proof is not convincing. We must remember that the Norse invaders were likely to name the place on account of its appearance from the sea. They may, of course, have noticed a chance herd of deer near

the cliffs; but one thing is certain to have caught their eye—the unusual sight of a building of stone on the Brough of Deerness. Some remains of this building, and of a later one on the same site, still exist; and it was long regarded as in some way a sacred place, to which pilgrimages were made. This building was in fact one of those outposts of early Christianity—a Culdee monastery. When the Norse invaders came, they doubtless found it occupied by some of the Culdee clergy—*diar*, as they would be called by the strangers—and so the headland was named the Priests' Cape, or Deerness.

It is quite possible that deer existed in Orkney down to the Norse period, but they were much more likely to be found in the hilly regions of the west Mainland, which was the earls' hunting-ground. We read of an Earl of Orkney going over to Caithness for the chase of the deer, which seems to suggest that they were then scarce, if not extinct, in Orkney.

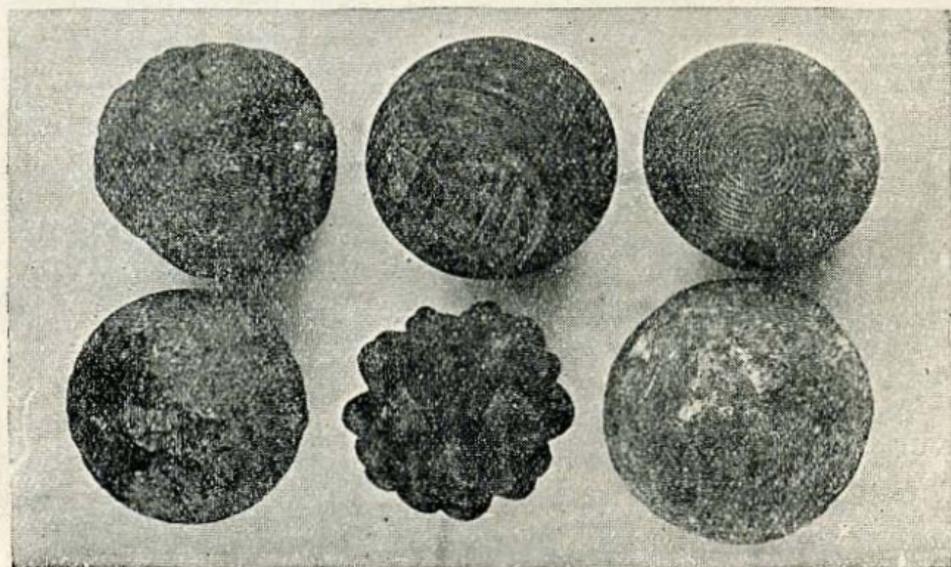
Among the remains of the Culdee settlements which are still found are monumental stones with Christian emblems inscribed on them, or with Irish Ogham writing, and ancient bells, probably used in the churches. The curious round tower which forms part of the old church of St. Magnus in Egilsay is of a type common only in Ireland. The name of that island is probably derived from an earlier church which the Norsemen found there, and heard called by its Celtic name, *ecclais*. It has been supposed by some that the name *Egilsay* means Egil's Island, so called after some man named Egil; but the probability is that it meant the Church Island.

All that we can learn, then, from the ancient relics

of its first inhabitants, and from the brief references to the islands by old historians, amounts to very little. We know that Orkney was thickly inhabited by some ancient people, living at first the primitive life which is indicated by the use of stone implements. We may suppose that they had at one time a religion in some way connected with sun-worship. We know that they built earth-houses somewhat like the snow-houses of the Eskimos, many of which still remain, and that, in some cases at least, these have been used as places of burial by later inhabitants. We know that at one period strong circular towers were built, probably as fortresses, by a people of some degree of civilization. We know that in the time of St. Columba Christian missionaries or monks visited the islands, whose inhabitants were then probably of the race known as Picts, and whose chiefs are said to have been subject to the Pictish king of Northern Scotland. Some at least of those Culdees we may suppose to have been hermits rather than missionaries, although they may have combined the two characters. How many centuries of time are covered by these facts and suppositions we do not know, but they sum up all that can be said with certainty regarding Orkney before the coming of the Norsemen.

There is one very curious fact about the beginnings of the Norse records: they make no mention whatever of any inhabitants being found in the islands. The place-names afford evidence, as we have seen, of the presence of Culdee monks, but of other population there is no trace. The new-comers seem to have settled as in an uninhabited land, each Viking selecting and occupying his land without let or hindrance.

If there had been a native population, and if these had been either expelled or exterminated by the invaders, we should surely have been told of it by the Saga writers, who would have delighted in telling such a tale. It has accordingly been supposed that at the time of the Norse settlement the islands were uninhabited save by the hermits of the Culdee Church. When or how the former Pictish inhabitants disappeared it is impossible to say. Possibly some early Viking raids, of which no history remains, had resulted in the slaughter of many and the flight of the rest to the less exposed lands south of the Pictland or Pentland Firth. Whatever the reason may be, the chapter of our Island history which opens with the Norse settlement is in no way a continuation of anything which goes before, but begins a new story.



Carved Stone Balls.