THE CROFTER SYSTEM OF THE WESTERN ISLES OF SCOTLAND AND THE CALLERNISH STONES OF LEWIS.

By Alfred Neobard Palmer.[1]

I. The Crofter System of the Western Isles of Scotland.

I have to begin by making an apology. The title of the Paper I am about to read was announced in the syllabus of the session as "The Western Isles of Scotland regarded from a Welsh standpoint," and I had intended to deal therein with several distinct facts which I had noticed during two successive journeys to the West of Scotland. But when I came to reflect on the first rough account of those facts which I wrote, I found there were several points whereon I had touched concerning which further investigation was desirable; while for an adequate description of other objects I had noted (vitrified forts, rude stone monuments, and the like), the verification of some of my memoranda was absolutely necessary. I therefore felt compelled to restrict myself to giving an account of "The Crofter System of the Western Isles of Scotland," as I observed that system during a visit in the summer of 1889.

Whether there be any truth in the supposition that there is a sort of correspondence between the crofter townships of the Western Isles and the *pentrefi* of Wales,

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and in the further supposition that these *pentrefi* represent the hamlets of the *taeogion* or serfs of the old Welsh social system, a description of these crofter-townships, still existing, which have been least affected by modern changes, will, I think, be interesting to the student of ancient Celtic social systems, especially as in my account of these townships and of various other facts connected with the crofter system I only describe what I saw with my own eyes, or what I was told on the spot, and have not been influenced by what others have written on the subject.

The huts of the crofters of Lewis are arranged in rows at about equal distances apart, forming what is called "a crofter-township," or collection of towns (pronounced "toons"), or houses. The huts stand along a road or way, and often on the other side of the road is another row of similar huts. Each hut is placed in a small enclosure which contains the other buildings, if any, belonging to the crofter, his stacks of peat, of oats, and so forth. From this enclosure, and having an equal width with it, stretches the croft, which is a long strip of land, wherein the crofter grows his oats, barley, and potatoes; for these are the chief, if not the only, crops grown. Often a part of the croft, having the same width as the other part, is on the other side of the road. Near at hand is the turf moor, over which the crofters, as well as all the parishioners, have rights of turbary. And, finally, there is the summer-pasture or hill-pasture, of which more will be said hereafter. The whole settlement, or collection of huts and crofts, is generally surrounded by a rude stone wall.

Having given the foregoing general notice, by way of introduction, I will now descend to particulars.

And I will begin with the crofter's *hut*. Most of the inhabitants of Lewis with whom I conversed told me that this hut had no special name, but was simply called *Tigh*

('house'), but one person said it had, in fact, a specific name—*Tigh Dubh* ('Black House'), and as this name is not likely to have been invented, the houses not being *externally* black at all, it seemed to me worthy of being recorded, though I have the authority of one man only for it. I saw a crofter's hut being built. Two parallel trenches for each wall were dug in the ground, leaving a core of earth between them. In these trenches big stones were laid, without mortar, for a foundation. The two parallel walls were then continued upwards, the spaces between the big stones used being filled up with smaller stones, leaving a hollow space between, which was filled with soil until a height of five, or at most six, feet had been attained, and the walls of the building, with their inner core of earth, had been completed. These walls are often three feet thick at the surface of the ground, but become somewhat thinner as they get higher. Whether the inner core of earth is continued to the top of the wall, I do not certainly know, but I suppose it is. The roof timbers are then placed all round, with their lower ends resting on the inner edge of the walls, while their upper ends are lashed to the ridge-pole. As the latter is shorter than the length of the building, and the roof-timbers are placed all round the walls of the latter, at its ends as well as at its sides, there are no gables, the ends of the roof being made to incline at the same angle as the sides. The roof-timbers having been fixed, rude cross-pieces are placed upon them, and the whole roof is, not thatched, but simply covered, with a thin layer of straw, which is removed once a year, and used as manure. This covering of straw is held together on the roof by knotted ropes, the ends of which are weighted with stones. As the roof-timbers start from the *inner edge* of the walls, the greater part of the top of the latter is exposed. On this flat top sods are placed and

a kind of shelf formed, on which the chickens feed, and whereon the horse, standing on the ground below, essays to graze. No poles support the roof inside the house, so far as I know.

In some cases the crofter's dwelling-house is distinct from the byre: in other cases the dwelling-house and the byre form a single building. When the dwelling-house and the byre are under one roof, there are sometimes separate entrances for the cattle and the inmates of the house, and sometimes there is but one entrance. The building with only one door for the cattle and the family we may regard as the older type of crofter's hut. As representing this older type also we may mention those huts which have no chimneys, and in which the peat-reek finds its way through a hole left for this purpose in the roof, through various accidental crevices, and through the open door. When there is no chimney, the hearth is sometimes, though not generally, made in the middle of the floor, away from the walls. This again we may suppose to be a more ancient arrangement than that according to which the fire is built up against one of the end walls. The dwelling-house is generally divided into two apartments, called in English "the but" and "the ben," that is, the outer and the inner room.

I have now to speak of *the croft* which pertains to the crofter's hut, and is inseparable from it. This is often called by the English word *Lot* (pronounced "Lote"), but oftener by the Gaelic word *Cruit*,[2] which I fancy to be merely a variation of the English *croft*. I was told the true Gaelic name for the croft, a name seldom used, but I could not venture to reproduce it, as few of the Gaels with

[2] Also spelt *croit*, whence *croitear* 'a crofter,' we are informed by a Gaelic scholar to whom we are indebted for other information given in the footnotes to this article.—ED.

whom I conversed could spell or write the language which they spoke.

The crofts, putting on one side the question of their subdivision, are of equal area in the same township, but vary a great deal in different townships. Nor is there any constant relationship between the length and breadth of the crofts. The latter are divided one from another by low banks or by ditches. The crops are grown on what are called "lazy-beds" (as in Ireland, and, I believe, in Northumberland), "lazy-beds" being narrow butts upon which the soil from the hollow reans which separate the butts is annually heaped. As this soil receives the drainage from the "lazy-beds," it is regarded as a form of manure. There is, as a rule, no rotation of crops in the crofts, and the soil is forced by the application of compost. The crofts vary in area in different townships from two acres, or under, to about six acres.

The women do nearly all the agricultural work, and if they do not dig the turf (as to which I can say nothing, most of the men at the time of my visit to Lewis being away at the fisheries on the eastern coast), they certainly carry it from the moor to their houses. The women tramping in single file, bending patiently under their loads, form indeed one of the characteristic sights of Lewis. They work, in fact, in every way inordinately hard. When they have nothing else to do, they knit stockings, or other articles of dress, which they sell at Stornoway, where there is a fair demand for them. When working, they wear short skirts, and dispense altogether with boots, and generally with stockings also, though they sometimes wear stockings *that have no feet.*[1] I did not see a single shop in any of

[1] Called in Welsh *bacsau.* In Llanbrynmair and thereabouts blue bells (*Scilla nutans*) are called *bacse'r gôg.*—ED.

the crofter villages, though I read of one in a crofter township which I did not visit. Speaking generally, whether the women want to buy or sell, they must go to Stornoway, and when they do this, they don their best garments, and very comely they then look. A short blue skirt, a coloured bed-gown or bodice, and a cap of pure white—such is their attire, while their legs and feet, if not bare, as is generally the case, are encased in home-made stockings and yellow shoes. When their creels are empty, they knit as they walk along the roads. Until the time of the late Sir James Matheson, who built mills in different parts of the island, the women ground their own corn by hand.

The hill or *summer pastures* remain now to be dealt with. About the end of May or beginning of June the women drive the cattle and sheep to the hills, taking their creels, and often their churns also, with them. Here, I was told, they remain, on and off, for about six weeks. Here the sheep are shorn. Here the women make butter, and take it down to Stornoway to sell, or, if the summer pastures are not too far from their homes, take down the milk thither two or three times in a week, and make butter there. While at the hill pastures they live in a hut called in Gaelic an *airidh*, and in English a "summer shieling." It corresponds, of course, to the *hafod* of Wales, which was the hut used when the Welsh herdsman formerly in summer drove his cattle to the hills. This custom exists also in Switzerland, the Scandinavian peninsula, and elsewhere. I crossed some of the hill pastures in Lewis, and visited a summer shieling, where I was hospitably received. The walls of the shieling are wholly built of turf; a rude framework of wood covered with turf rests upon these walls, and forms the roof. The doorway of the shieling is so low that one has to cronch in order to enter it.

I learned that, according to the theory of the proprietor

of Lewis, no crofter should keep on the hill pastures more than one cow and six sheep for every pound sterling of rent paid, but that the crofters now persistently disregard this regulation, and keep thereon what stock they please.

There is also, I was informed, "a wintering," or winter pasturage, a sort of links, or grassy sand-hills, the Gaelic name of which I cannot give. In some townships this pasturage is open only to one cow for every croft; and if a crofter grazes thereon more than one cow he has to pay 2*s*. 6*d*. a head for the extra beasts he puts on the pasture into a general fund, which is afterwards divided among those who have rights over the winter pasturage. This arrangement has been made by the crofters themselves, and leads to endless dissensions among them.

When a large district is cultivated or dealt with in the manner I have described, it presents a curious spectacle to one who has been accustomed to the sight of a country in which no such conditions exist. The long lines of strange-looking huts; the many and variegated strips of cultivated land; the black turf-moor, with its stacks of turves; the bare, treeless hills—together make up a picture which, though interesting rather than beautiful, can never be forgotten by one who has noted its main points.

The foregoing observations relate to Lewis. In connection with the crofter townships in the neighbourhood of Portree (in the Isle of Skye), several of which I visited, two points were noticed. *First*, the rows of huts were often down by the sea-shore, the crofts then stretching upwards from them to the main road, and being divided from each other by broad paths leading down to the huts. *Secondly*, the huts were in many cases not arranged in rows at all, but scattered promiscuously about; and the crofts also varied a great deal in area and shape, and were pieces of land which the crofters or their wives had industriously cleared

of stones, leaving, however, often great masses of rock projecting from the ground, presenting thus a state of things very similar to that which I have understood exists in Ireland—especially in Kerry. I should add that there were crofts which were unequal in area, while the huts to which they pertained were arranged all together in a row, representing thus a class of holdings intermediate between the two classes first named.

I saw from the steamer several crofter townships along the sea-coast of the mainland in Ross-shire. Here a state of things was noticed similar to that which exists in Skye. But I observed that in two or three instances, when the houses were arranged in a row with crofts of equal size and shape, these latter were separated from one another by lanes flanked by stone walls.

I am not ignorant of the part played by the Norsemen in Western Scotland, and especially in the Isles; but I imagine them to have been merely a military aristocracy, ultimately absorbed or assimilated by the mass of the population, and that the crofter townships in particular represent the habitations of the Gaelic-speaking people whom the Norsemen found in possession, whom they left practically undisturbed, and whose customs they on the whole respected.

II. The Callernish Stones of Lewis.

I should have preferred, for the reasons given in the first paragraph of this paper, to have said nothing of *The Callernish Stones* in Lewis until I should have been able to make a second visit to them. But as the probabilities of such a visit seem very remote, I will give here the best account I can of this wonderful collection of *meini hirion*. The Callernish Stones are situated immediately adjoining the crofter township of Callernish, in the parish of Uig, about

two miles from the well-known inn called "*Garra na hine*,"[4] and sixteen miles from the town of Stornoway. They do not appear to have been described, except very imperfectly, in any book that is easily accessible. Fergusson's *Rude Stone Monuments*—a very unsatisfactory book, by the way—contains merely a passing allusion to them.[5]

If you inquire of such people in the island as are supposed to be learned in local antiquities, you will be informed that the stones, as a whole, are Druidical, and that on the top of the cromlech, beneath the cairn within the circle, human sacrifices were once offered. Indeed the drain was pointed out to me which was provided for carrying off the blood of the victims! The Gaelic name of the stones was stated to be a perpetual witness of their former purpose. This name was *Torsachen*, or rather *Tuirsachen*, which is said to mean "Houses of Mourning."[6] But a crofter told me that this is really the name, not of the stones, but of a hill a little to the south of them.

The truth is, that apart from the cruciform character of

[4] Supposed to stand for *Gearradh na h-aimhne*, 'the cutting of the river,' i.e., the ravine through which the river has forced its way, from *gearradh* 'cutting or to cut,' and *aimhne*, gen. sing. of *amhainn* (Welsh *afon*). There is also a Gaelic word *garradh* 'a dyke or rude wall.'—ED.

[5] Misled by the incompleteness of the index to Mr. Fergusson's book, I had quite forgotten, until the above sentence was in type, that there was in that book not only the "passing allusion" on p. 52, but also an actual description, at pp. 259–60, of the Callernish Stones, illustrated by a small-scale plan of them taken from Sir Henry James' work. But the description in question is very much wanting in detail.—A.N.P.

[6] The Gaelic *tuirseach* means 'sad, mournful;' its plural would be *tuirseachan*. *Na tuirseachan* would mean 'the mourners,' i.e., the relatives and friends who mourn for a deceased person, and would therefore seem to be a name originally applied to the stones. 'Houses of mourning' would be *tighean bróin*.—ED.

the group and the question as to its builders, there is nothing unusual about the Callernish Stones to those who have seen and studied similar monuments. We have here a cairn, covering a two-chambered cromlech, with the entrance (the "drain" before mentioned) pointing as usual to the east, and a tall *maen hir*, or monolith, which we may for distinction call "the stylus," at the western edge of the cairn, all enclosed within a circle of tall monoliths, from which circle radiate to the four points of the compass four rows of standing stones, of which one row (that to the north) is double, and forms a broad avenue, and the other rows are single.

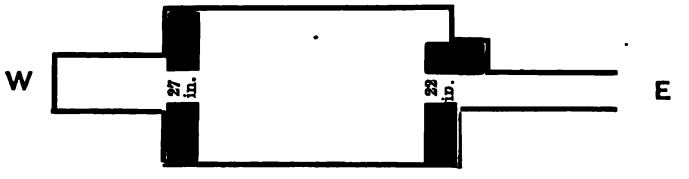
There are, however, certain peculiar points of interest about the Callernish Stones which it is important to notice.

First of all, the cromlech within the circle was covered with stones, a fact which would have gladdened the heart of the late Rev. E. L. Barnwell, who always stoutly contended that cromlechs were never intended to be exposed —an opinion with which I am disposed to agree. I talked with a crofter who witnessed the removal of the stones composing the cairn with which this particular cromlech was covered. A great part of the cairn, indeed, still remains.

It is interesting to remark how the tall *maen hir*, the stylus, the tallest of the group, occupies *approximately* the centre of the stone circle, and forms a kind of western headstone to the cairn which stands between it and the eastern edge of the circle.

The *cromlech* also is peculiar in many ways. The larger chamber within the cairn has at each corner a low upright stone, these four stones supporting the capstone (now displaced), and forming the cromlech. But these four stones stand at the corners merely, and are, besides, so narrow as

to leave the sides of the cromlech quite open. *The whole has, therefore, been built in,* enclosed so as to form a chamber, constructed of flat stones regularly laid with an even face inwards, which chamber is oblong, opening westwards into a smaller chamber (which I forgot to measure), and eastwards into the passage which, when open, led from the outer air into the cromlech. The whole has, in plan, *roughly* the appearance of the following sketch.



I measured the chamber, but being ill at the time and unspeakably exhausted, found on my return home the dimensions given in my pocket-book hopelessly confused. I therefore give only those measurements of which I am certain. The western chamber is very small and built in the same manner as the eastern, except that it encloses no standing stones as supports for the capstone.

The circle is composed of thirteen monoliths, from nine to ten feet high. They are at widely different intervals apart. Nor is the circle accurately circular. The internal diameter, east and west, is 34 feet 7 inches, and the internal diameter, north and south, 39 feet 2 inches; the external diameter, east and west, 37 feet 3 inches, so that the *calculated* external diameter, north and south, would be 41 feet 10 inches. I must explain that the diameter, east and west, was measured from the edge of a stone on the west side of the circle along the southern edge of the stylus, to the edge of a stone on the east side of the circle, all three stones being in line, not merely with each other, but very nearly with the eastern

and western limits of the cross also; while the diameter, north and south, was measured from a stone on the north side of the circle, along the eastern side of the stylus to an *imaginary point* in a wide gap on the south side of the circle, where, it was supposed, a stone would have stood, if a stone had ever been there placed to complete the circle. This diameter pointed in a direct line to the southernmost stone of the southern arm, and the distance between this stone and the imaginary point just mentioned (giving the length of the southern arm) was measured, but this measurement I afterwards most unfortunately lost. It can, however, as will presently be seen, be approximately recovered.

At the point at which the two diameters of the circle crossed each other, I made a mark in the turf. From this point (nearly the true centre, and somewhat south of the stylus) to the southernmost stone of the south arm of the cross is 105 feet 10 inches. From this same point to the middle of a line connecting the two northernmost stones of the northern double arm, or avenue, is 296 feet 8 inches. The total length, across the circle of the longer limb of the cross, is therefore 402 feet 6 inches. Subtracting from 105 feet 10 inches half the diameter north and south of the circle (20 feet 11 inches), we get 84 feet 11 inches as approximately the length of the southern arm (measuring from the outside of the circle), and 275 feet 9 inches as, in like manner, the length of the northern arm, or avenue. The northernmost stones of the latter abut upon a crofter's garden, and I am by no means sure that this avenue was not, aforetime, longer than it now is.

There is a *maen hir* outside the circle ranging with the first stone westward of the western arm of the cross, which looks like the beginning of a second circle outside the first—an important observation, if we hold, as

I am inclined to do, that groups of this kind were formed gradually.

The eastern and western arms of the cross consist each of four monoliths, and the measurements relating to them are as follow:—

	ft.	in.
Length of western arm to inner edge of circle	43	8
„ across circle (internal diameter east and west)	34	7
„ of eastern arm to inner edge of circle	48	4
„ of transverse limb of cross	126	7

As to the *avenue*, or northern arm, which consists of two parallel rows of standing stones, there are in the western row ten, and in the eastern row nine stones, the interval between two stones being in no single case the same.

I have unaccountably left unrecorded the number of stones in the southern arm, but, according to my recollection, there were six in a direct line, and a small one apart from the rest, which might be the first of a second row designed to form, with the row already existing, an avenue similar to that which forms the northern arm. It should be said, however, that the six stones of this arm (if six there be) do not run truly north and south, but trend gradually westward, so as to mar in some measure the cruciform appearance of the group. The stones of this arm are five or six feet high.

Indeed, the members of the group are disposed very much at haphazard, and the stones as a whole are so irregularly arranged, there being neither a true circle nor a true cross, that it is impossible to believe that any definite measures of length are involved in it. Nor am I convinced by the quasi-cruciform arrangement of the Callernish Stones that they were set up in Christian times, or have any Christian significance.

As the measurements above given were made with a cord, which was liable to stretch, and as I lacked assistance, some of the longer lengths may be somewhat out of the true, but the shorter measurements may be absolutely trusted.

Until the time of the late Sir James Matheson, the Callernish Stones were so hidden with the turf-moss which had grown up around them that some of them were wholly covered, and of others only the tops appeared. Sir James had the moss cleared away to what seemed to be the original level of the ground. But the marks of the moss level, before this unearthing was effected, are still evident on the stones. I found in the case of one of the stones that the moss had grown up about it to the height of 51 inches.

On returning from the Callernish Stones to the Garra na hine Inn, I noticed on a slight elevation, a little to the right of the road, a double circle of monoliths, there being four in the inner circle, and ten (of which two were prostrate) in the outer circle.

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