

III.

NOTES ON DISCOVERIES IN ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL, KIRKWALL.

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When the restoration of St Magnus Cathedral was begun by Sheriff Thoms' Trustees, a hope was entertained that many relics would be found in the course of the operations. That expectation has not been fully realised; but if the relics discovered have not been numerous, it cannot be said they are uninteresting or unimportant. Of chief interest was an oak case containing human bones found on 31st March 1919 in one of the pillars. Another interesting "find" was made in the first week of February this year by workmen engaged in excavating tracks for pipes in connection with the installation of an organ. Four skeletons buried in a row, heads to the west, were found in the choir between the two lines of pillars, right on the main axis of the church; and in one of the graves the upper portion of a crosier and what appears to be a chalice and paten were also found. It may be as well to give particulars of these graves and the relics mentioned before dealing with the bones in the wooden case, as the latter have been supposed to form part of the skeleton of St Magnus, and cannot be satisfactorily considered without special references to bones found in another pillar last century.

It is necessary to keep in view the extension of the Cathedral eastward, which was not completed until probably at least 150 years after the death of the founder. The accompanying ground-plan of the choir (fig. 1) shows the termination of Rognvald's building about the

middle of piers D and L;¹ but Dryden, Meyer, and Dietrichson give good reasons for believing that an apse extended from the original eastern portions of those piers. No certain trace of an apse was found during the restoration works. The original high altar would have stood

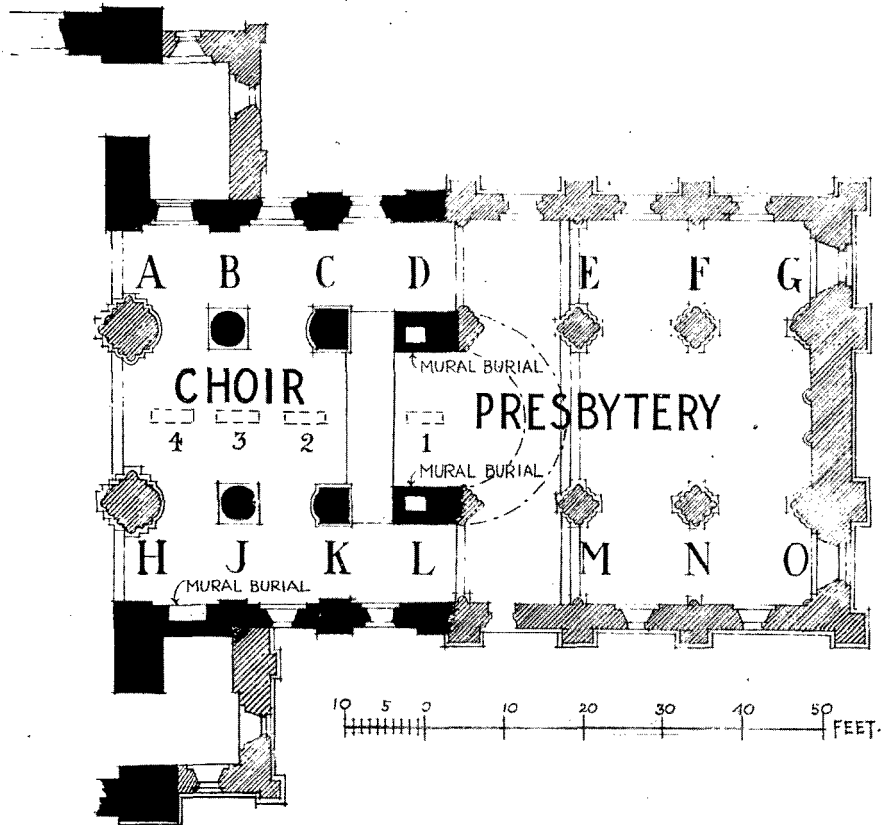


Fig. 1. Plan of Eastern End of St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall.

between piers D and L, and after the extension of the choir, between G and O, or between the farthest east bays.

It will be seen that the four graves found last February were all in the oldest part of the Cathedral. The skeleton nearest the site of the first high altar had been buried with the head about 18 inches from a line flush with the western ends of piers D and L. The

¹ The letters used by Dryden for distinguishing the pillars are followed in this plan so as to facilitate references.

wood of the coffin was not greatly decayed; and, from the appearance of the bones, this grave, which may be called "No. 1," must have been the latest of the four, made undoubtedly at a date subsequent to the removal of the high altar from its original position.

Grave "No. 2" extended westwards from opposite the middle of pillar κ.

The foot of grave "No. 3" touched a point in line with the east side of the base of round pillars Β and J.

The position of "No. 4" grave was to the west of those pillars. There were slight traces of what may have been coffins in graves 2, 3, and 4, a sort of black dust being visible. The distance between Nos. 1 and 2 was 10 feet, and between the others 2 feet 6 inches.

The western portion of the choir, where those skeletons lay, had been outside the lines of excavations when the Government restoration and repairs were carried out in 1848; and so, too, during the alterations and refitting of the choir by the Heritors and Town Council in 1855-6. In the eastern part of the choir the bones of bishops and earls had been removed wholesale at the time of the latter operations, but the four graves described above had been undisturbed.

Nothing further need be recorded of Nos. 2 and 4, but No. 3 calls for special notice. In this grave, the bottom of which was only 2 feet 3 inches below the surface, the crosier and other relics referred to were found (fig. 2). The crosier lay on the breast of the skeleton. It is made of pewter or lead, and has a socket (part of it broken) of the same material. The diameter of the circular head is $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and not over $\frac{1}{16}$ inch thick. Round the edge are two concentric parallel lines less than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch apart. About $\frac{3}{8}$ inch from the inner of those lines are another pair of parallel lines, within which is a curvilinear Maltese cross, having the inter-arms cut out. Parallel lines also run along both sides of each arm of the cross. It was not unusual to place in the grave of a bishop a rude imitation of his pastoral staff.

Near the foot of this grave were found what cannot be other than a chalice and paten, made of metal similar to that of the crosier. Small portions of the chalice have been broken off. Its diameter at the top is 4 inches, and the depth about 1 inch. A rent runs from the broken part to the centre. On the lower side are indications that it had been fixed to a stand.

The paten measures 5 inches in diameter. It, too, has a border of double parallel lines similar to those on the circular head of the crosier. The inner pair of lines enclose a circle in which are inscribed four small circles, separated by straight lines intersecting each other at right angles. A portion of the edge has been broken off.

In addition to the chalice and paten some gold threads were found in the grave, near the breast of the skeleton; the gold threads were, no doubt, remains of vestments. The crosier, the gold threads, chalice, and paten can lead to only one conclusion—that the skeleton is that of a bishop. The position of the grave—in the oldest part of the

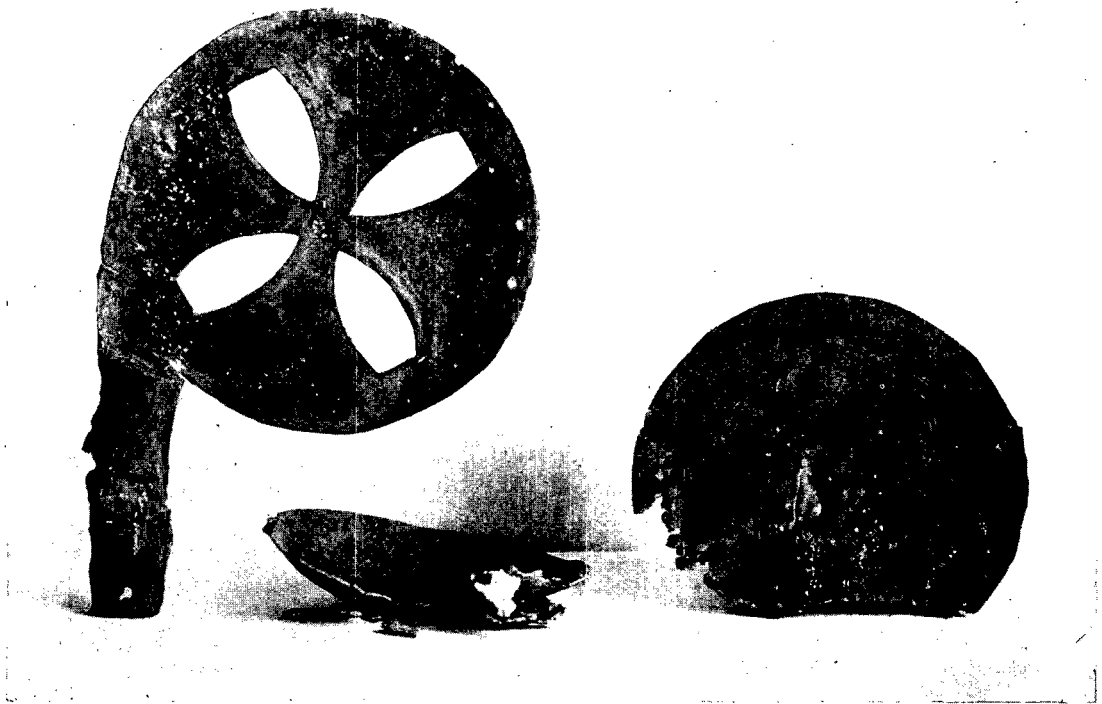


Fig. 2. Head of Crosier, Chalice, and Paten of Lead or Pewter from Kirkwall Cathedral.

Cathedral, which was untouched by the alterations and excavations in 1848 and 1855—suggests that these are remains of a bishop who died before the high altar was shifted from its original place. Bishop William the Old would have been buried close to the first high altar, but, as we know, his skeleton had been exhumed and re-interred near the new high altar. There is no record where William II., Bjarni, Jofreyr, Henry—the first four bishops who succeeded him—were laid. If, as Meyer suggests, it was Henry who built the extension to the

choir, he also may have been buried near the later high altar. As to whether the skeleton in grave No. 3 was one of the others, no proof is available. The crosier head and the lines of ornamentation of the paten indicate, however, a period long prior to the Reformation, possibly the thirteenth century.

Of pre-Reformation bishops buried in the Cathedral evidence is altogether lacking, except as regards two—William the Old and Thomas de Tulloch. Robert Maxwell apparently died in Orkney, but there is no record of his burial. It is known that Robert Honeyman and

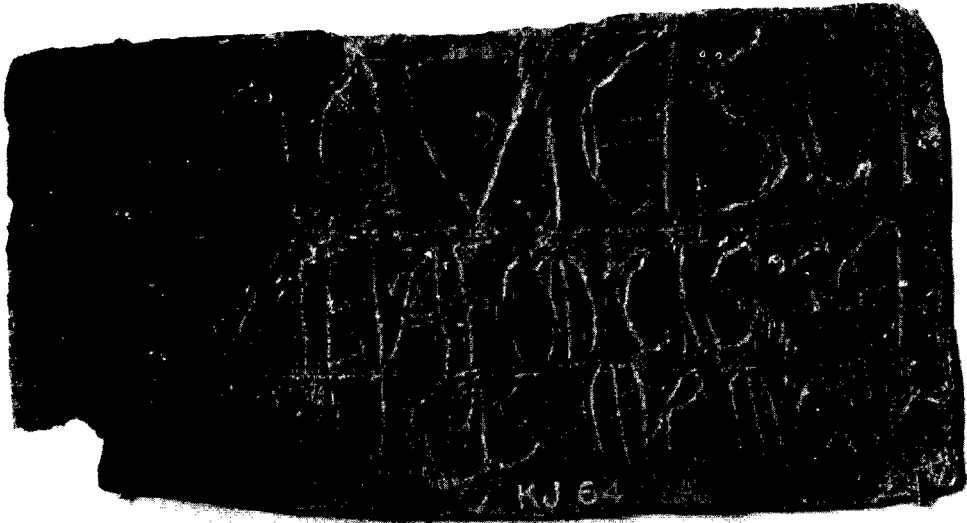


Fig. 3. Plate of Lead from Kirkwall Cathedral. (4.)

Murdoch Mackenzie—post-Reformation bishops—found a resting-place there, the former near bay M and N, the latter in the south transept chapel.

The Government repairs on the Cathedral in 1848 led to the discovery of the remains of William the Old in a stone cist between pillars E and F. Among the drawings by Sir Henry Dryden, now in the possession of Thoms' Trustees, are those of two slabs which covered that grave. In the cist was found the leaden plate (fig. 3) described in the *Proceedings* of this Society, vol. v. p. 217, with the inscription H. REQUIESCIT: WILIAMVS: SENEX FELICIS MEMORIE on the front and PMVS EPIS on the back. The plate and a relic of bone

and iron, supposed to be the head of a staff,¹ were presented to the Society on 8th February 1864 by the Lords of H.M. Treasury.

The Society received from the same source, on the same date, the crosier of oak (fig. 4), with chalice (fig. 5) and paten of wax, found in 1848 in a tomb supposed to be that of Bishop Thomas Tulloch (1422-55). This tomb had been between pillars M and N.

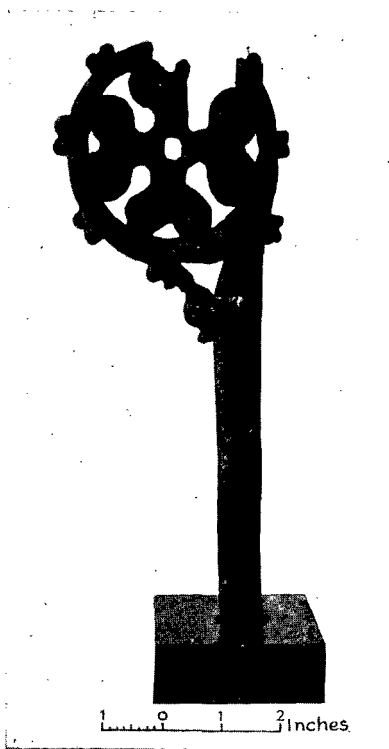


Fig. 4. Crosier of Oak from Kirkwall Cathedral.

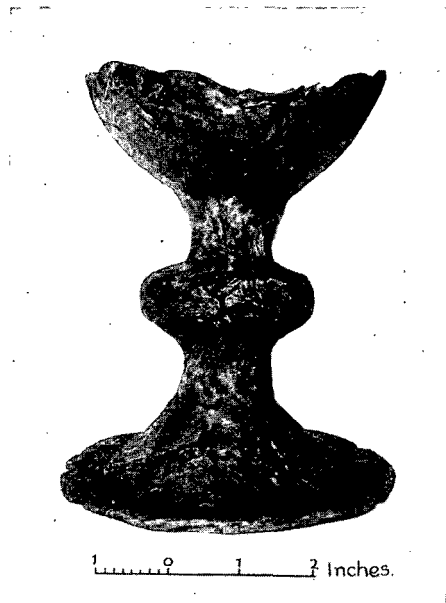


Fig. 5. Wax Chalice from Kirkwall Cathedral.

Wallace, in his *History of Orkney*, refers to the tomb which must have been this one, although he says it was William Tulloch's. "This Bishop builded a stately monument for a burial-place to himself in the Cathedral Kirk, which continued a great decorement till about the year 1660, when it was pulled down" (p. 64, Small's edition). Was it then that Cromwell's soldiers robbed the tomb of its copper ornamentation, as

¹ Dr Craven said this type of staff had been used by bishops of the early Greek Church. It may have been brought from the East by the Bishop when he accompanied Earl Rognvald to Constantinople and the Holy Land (*Orkneyinga Saga*, pp. 179-81, Rolls Edition).

recorded in Hossack's *Kirkwall in the Orkneys*? Fragments of the tomb were found in 1890 in a wall surrounding the old Town Hall, and some pieces are still preserved with other carved stones in the room above the south transept chapel.

In the wall of the south choir aisle a grave containing a skeleton was found, 3 feet 9 inches from the floor, immediately under the dark cell known locally as "Marwick's Hole." It is opposite the bay H J. This grave is covered by a lintel, 5 feet 8 inches long, and protected in the front by six blocks of red freestone. The length of the grave is 4 feet 8 inches. The bones were in a good state of preservation. The back of the skull had a fracture. The jaw was thought to be of a prehistoric type. Dryden, who had seen the skeleton, regarded it as that of a young man.

Some have imagined that this is the skeleton of Earl Erlend who was killed in a fight at Damsay; he could hardly have been out of his twenties when he met his death. The grave was undoubtedly that of a person of rank. The *Orkneyinga Saga* states that Erlend's body was brought to St Magnus Church. Torfæus is more definite, and says (*Torfæana*, p. 156) "the Earl's body was buried in the Cathedral." There is, however, no real clue as to whose grave this is.

At this stage mention should be made of bones found in a cavity on the east side of pier D, 8 feet 6 inches above the base, more than seventy years ago. A minute description was given by the late George Petrie, and is printed by Dryden on pp. 62-4 of his *Church of St Magnus*. These bones were regarded by many at that time as relics of St Magnus. The skull had evidently received a wound which was described by Petrie as follows:—"There was an indentation $1\frac{3}{8}$ inch long, $\frac{7}{8}$ inch broad, and about $\frac{3}{16}$ inch deep, on the top of the skull, commencing at the point where the sagittal suture joins the coronal suture and extending backwards." It was perhaps this scalp wound which led to the supposition that the skull was that of St Magnus who met his death by a blow from an axe. On the other hand, Petrie's description adds:—"The wound had not apparently been the cause of death, but seemed to be an old one." The late Marquis of Bute (see Hunter-Blair's *Biography*) was not convinced that those were St Magnus' bones. They were carefully examined in his presence by two local doctors. The Marquis paid another visit to Kirkwall in 1886, and although the relics were popularly regarded as those of St Magnus, he believed they were not those of "St Magnus at all, but probably those of Earl St Rognvald." The bones were, after each examination, replaced in the pillar, and the entrance to the cavity filled up.

What may prove the most interesting find in the Cathedral are the bones in the north face of pillar L (on the south side of the choir),

They were contained in an oaken case with a loose cover, in a cavity somewhat similar to the one in the corresponding north pier, at a height of 9 feet $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the floor of the choir. On 2nd April 1919 these bones were carefully examined by Dr Heddle, Kirkwall, under the direction of the Provost and Magistrates (Thoms' Trustees). The following is Dr Heddle's report:—

DESCRIPTION OF BONES FOUND IN THE NORTH FACE OF THE LARGE PILLAR ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE CHOIR OF ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL. (The pillar is marked "L" on the plan on p. 25 of Dryden's description of the Church. The bones were found in a wood casket. Supposed to be those of St Magnus.)

Skull.—Diameter between occipital protuberance and nasal eminence, $7\frac{3}{8}$ inches.

Surface measurement between above points, $11\frac{5}{8}$ inches. Transverse diameter between temporal bones, $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Measurement between ears over apex of skull, $12\frac{1}{8}$ inches. The bones of the skull were of average thickness.

The skull showed a clean-cut hole in the parietal bones, which had evidently been done by a sharp instrument, such as an axe; the hole showed a sharp perpendicular cut through both layers of the bone; the instrument had then turned and glanced backwards off the skull, removing a piece of the outer layer of the bone.

The upper jaw had been cut from before, backwards, by a sharp instrument, probably a sword, slightly above the junction of the crowns and the fangs of the teeth, leaving the jaw with a clean, smooth-cut appearance with all the roots of the teeth still in their sockets. This cut extended backwards through the eminentia articularis on the one side, but not on the other, showing that the head had not been severed from the body by the blow.

The hole in the skull and the cut through the jaw still showed distinctly, even after the long time that had elapsed, showing that they have been done while the bones were in their living state.

There were other holes in the skull, the result of decay; but their appearance showed a striking difference.

Other Bones found along with the above.

Right and left femur, 19 inches in length.

A small portion of a patella.

Right and left tibia, $15\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length.

Right and left fibula, 15 inches in length.

Right and left humerus; these had their lower ends decayed away.

Right and left radius.

One ulna.

Right and left acetabulum, with small portion of the os innominatum surrounding it.

A part of the right scapula, showing the glenoid cavity, acromion, and coracoid processes.

The acromion process of the left scapula.

Left astragalus; two cuneiforms; one cuboid; right os calcis.

Left scaphoid; first left metatarsal, and seven other metatarsals.

Two pieces of rib, 2 inches and 1½ inch respectively.

Also a spinous process of a vertebra.

The old idea that the bones of St Magnus were those in the north pier was now abandoned. The skull in the south pier had wounds which correspond more closely with the account given in the *Sagas* of the blow (or blows) that caused the death of Magnus; and it was imagined these were the relics of St Magnus, and the others in the opposite pier must have been St Rognvald's.

In the *Saga* account of the murder of Earl Rognvald, it is stated that "the Sword came on the Earl's chin, and that was a great wound." It should be noted that Petrie says, "A lower human jaw-bone was found with the other bones, but it evidently did not belong to the skull beside which it lay, but to a much older person than the skull indicated." The absence of a jaw-bone with the indication of a wound does not prove that the skull was not that of Earl Rognvald.

Turning to the *Saga* report of what transpired when Earl Magnus and his cousin, Earl Hacon, were face to face, and the executioner had received his orders to slay Magnus, we read (on p. 81, Rolls edition) that Magnus said to Lifolf, "'Stand thou before me and hew me on my head a great wound, for it beseems not to chop off chiefs' heads like thieves.' . . . After that he signed himself with the cross and bowed himself to the stroke." The *Short Magnus Saga* uses almost the same words, but concludes:—"He bowed him under the stroke, and was smitten in mid-forehead with a single blow." The account in *Saga the Longer*, differs from the others:—"Lifolf hewed him on the head a great blow with an axe. Then Earl Hacon said, 'Hew thou a second time.' Then Lifolf hewed into the same wound. Then St Magnus the Earl fell on his knees, and fared with this martyrdom from the wretchedness of this world." Obviously there is an inaccuracy in the *Longer Magnus Saga*. After Magnus had received "a great blow on the head" with an axe, it

cannot be conceived that he could have remained standing till Hacon gave instructions for a second blow to be dealt, which latter blow brought him to his knees. It may be noted that Vigfusson, in his preface to the Icelandic text of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, says:—"The Short Life is the best representative of the primitive text, and the best authority." The part of Dr Heddle's report which might lead us to doubt whether the skull was that of Earl Magnus is the following: "The upper jaw had been cut from before, backwards, by a sharp instrument, probably a sword, slightly above the crown and the fangs of the teeth, leaving the jaw with a clean, smooth-cut appearance with all the roots of the teeth still in their sockets." But if a second blow was given, the Earl must have been on the ground, and the cut in the upper jaw could have resulted from the position of the head at the time the weapon descended. The wounds in the skull, Dr Heddle's report, and the *Saga* references may, or may not, prove the relics to be those of St Magnus. The object of this paper is merely to communicate data. While that is so, there are other points than those we have already considered which may guide us in our investigations.

We know that St Magnus was buried in the Cathedral. "Earl Magnus was borne to Hrossey (Mainland) and buried at that Christ's Church (in Birsay) which Earl Thorfin made them make" (*Orkneyinga Saga*, p. 83). "After that the Bishop sent to fetch him the most noble men in the Orkneys, and made it plain to them that he was ready then to search the tomb of Earl Magnus. . . . And when it was dug into, the coffin was taken out of the ground. . . . Then the body was laid in a shrine and set over the altar" (p. 91). In the *Short Magnus Saga* we have the following:—"After that William fared east to Kirkwall with a worthy company and brought thither the halidom of Earl Magnus. The shrine was set over the altar in the church that is there"—St Olaf's. This was before the building of the Cathedral was begun. There had been gold ornamentation on the shrine of St Magnus when it lay on the altar of St Olaf's Church, Kirkwall, for we read in the *Shorter Magnus Saga* that "two men broke off gold from the shrine of Earl Magnus the Saint: one was a Caithness man, but the other was an Orkney man" (p. 299). This is also stated in the *Longer Saga*.

When sufficient progress had been made with the building of the Cathedral, we learn from the same chapter of the *Shorter Saga* that "the halidom of Earl Magnus was brought thither." The Orkney Sagas thus record the burial and enshrinement of the remains of St Magnus in Christ's Church, Birsay, their translation to St Olaf's Church, Kirkwall, where the costly shrine lay for some years, and their subsequent transference to the church erected by Earl Rognvald. In the *Saga* of

Hakon Hakonson it is told that the King, while staying in the Bishop's Palace, entered the Cathedral in 1263 and walked round the shrine of St Magnus.

Earl Rognvald, too, found a resting-place in the Cathedral. *Orkneyinga Saga*, p. 219:—"Earl Harald and his men fared with the body away thence (from Caithness) out into the Orkneys with a goodly company, and bestowed burial on it, in St Magnus Church in the choir; and there he rested until Bishop Bjarni caused his halidom (relics) to be taken up by the Pope's leave."

This was in 1192. It should be noted that Torfæus says "that the corpse of Earl Rognvald was brought to Orkney and buried in the Holy Virgin's temple till it became famous for miracles, and then it was taken away from thence by Biarnius the Bishop, and by order of the Pope of Rome Earl Rognvald was canonised in the year 1192, and then the body was buried in the Cathedral." The *Saga* is the earlier authority and should be considered the more trustworthy. Earl Harald, who undoubtedly instigated the murder of Rognvald, may have at first prevented the burial in the Cathedral of its founder. That seems the only explanation why the body could have been placed elsewhere if the Cathedral was not the only place of his burial.

As to the exact parts of the Cathedral where the relics of the two island saints were first laid, there is no authentic record. Seeing the shrine of St Magnus had been placed on the altar in Christ's Church, Birsay, and in St Olaf's, Kirkwall, would not a similar honour have been accorded to him in the great building erected in his memory? At all events, the bones of both St Magnus and St Rognvald, the builder, would have been held in great veneration, and we cannot conceive of their having been placed anywhere but near the altar (if the shrine of St Magnus did not lie on the altar). It has been seen that the bones of Bishop William had been removed with the altar to the east end of the extended choir. The skeletons of the saints would, undoubtedly, have been removed at the same time to the vicinity of the high altar in its new position. Why and when were they again disturbed and placed in secret chambers apparently prepared for them, and out of reach of the people? Was it to hide them from possible destruction at the hands of iconoclastic reformers? Whatever answers we may now give to such questions, it is obvious the bones had been preserved with special care. The attention given them by enclosing them high up in a pillar without any distinguishing mark cannot fail to suggest to many the possibility that they were the relics of the Orkney saints, hidden away at a time of religious revolution. The skeletons certainly must be those of highly important personages having a special connection with the Cathedral.

Who more likely than St Magnus and St Rognvald? If the relics are not theirs, whose can they be? Both were murdered and were buried in the Cathedral built by one of them and dedicated to the other, and with the exception of the Earl Erlend (whose bones are supposed by some to lie in the mural grave in the south choir aisle), no other Orkney Earls since the time of St Magnus met a violent death.

Grateful thanks are hereby recorded to Provost White and his colleagues of the Thoms Trust, for permission to use Dr Heddle's report on the supposed St Magnus' bones, and for access to the notes and drawings by the late Sir Henry Dryden, which the Trust recently acquired; also to Mr J. Graham Callander, Director of the National Museum, and to Mr William J. Heddle, Town Clerk of Kirkwall, for valuable suggestions. The ground-plan of choir of St Magnus Cathedral (fig. 1) was prepared by Mr James S. Richardson, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland, and the illustration of relics (fig. 2) is from a photograph by Mr T. Kent, Kirkwall, to both of whom our indebtedness is acknowledged.

Since this paper was set up, the Thoms' Trustees (the Provost and Magistrates of Kirkwall) have had the cavities in the rectangular pillars D and L re-opened, and the skulls and bones taken out, so that these supposed remains of St Magnus and St Rognvald might be subjected to an exhaustive anthropological examination by Professor R. W. Reid, M.D., F.R.C.S., Regius Professor of Anatomy in Aberdeen University. When it is remembered that the Professor is a member of the Council of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and late President of the Anatomical Society of Great Britain and Ireland, it will be realised that the Trustees have been well advised in selecting such a distinguished expert to report to them as to the identification or otherwise of the supposed remains of the Orkney Saints. The re-opening of the pillars has afforded an opportunity of obtaining measurements of the wooden case which contained the bones in pillar L, and of the cavities in it and in pillar D—particulars which were not available when the paper was read.

The following are the dimensions of the wooden case: Outside measurements—length, $29\frac{1}{4}$ inches; breadth, $10\frac{1}{4}$ inches; depth, $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Inside depth, $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Thickness of wood, 1 inch. The wood was not oak, as had been supposed, but common Norwegian redwood. Pins made of wood, not iron nails, hold the boards together. When first discovered it was thought the case had been gnawed by rats

at one of the corners, but now, on being closely examined, it was seen that natural decay was responsible for its present condition.

Dimensions of cavities or chambers. In pillar D—length, 36 inches; breadth, 18 inches at west end of cavity, and 16 inches at east or inner end. Height varies from 13 inches to 16 inches. In pillar L—length, $31\frac{1}{2}$ inches; breadth, 12 inches; height, $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches. These internal measurements are not absolutely accurate, for the sides, tops, and bottom are somewhat irregular, and not uniform and smooth, as the chambers would have been if made at the time the piers were erected. Rubble stones in the interior of the pillar had been torn from their places in the masonry until the holes were made sufficiently large to hold the human remains. First of all, some of the dressed blocks of ashlar freestone which form the external facing of the pillars had been removed, and when the bones were deposited in their lofty graves, the blocks (averaging from 6 inches to 8 inches thick) were replaced. The chamber in pillar D therefore extended to within 6 or 8 inches of the west face of the pillar, and to the same distance from the *south* face, while that in pillar L also extended to 6 or 8 inches from the west face, and as near to the *north* face of pillar L. It will thus be seen that both chambers extended lengthwise, east and west.

It will be interesting to learn when Professor Reid's report is published whether his investigations have tended to confirm the identification of the human remains in the two pillars of the choir as those of St Magnus and St Rognvald.