

# PROCEEDINGS

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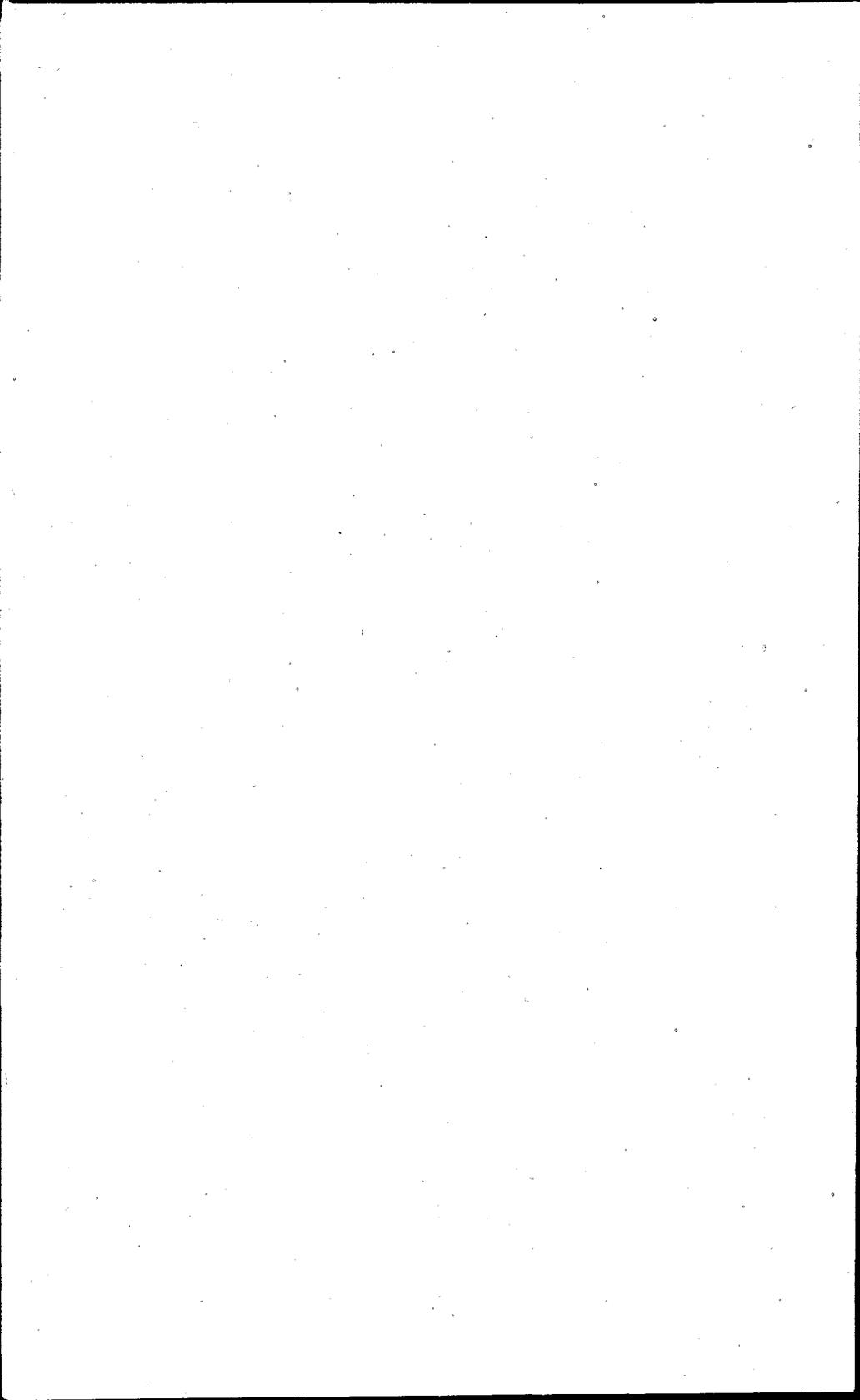
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### III. ON A STONE BELIEVED TO BE THE OLD ALTAR-SLAB OF THE CHURCH OF ST BENEDICT, CAMBRIDGE<sup>1</sup>.

When St Benet's Church was restored in 1873—74, a stone believed to be the old altar-slab was found in the floor of the chancel, in two halves, which were afterwards lost sight of. In the course of the present summer the organ was being moved, and in the floor beneath it a slab of Sussex marble was found, 34 in. by 30 in., with two early crosses (*pattée*) and a portion of a third cross, all flush with the surface and marked out by rude incisions, giving the effect of a cross in a circle (fig. 1). One of

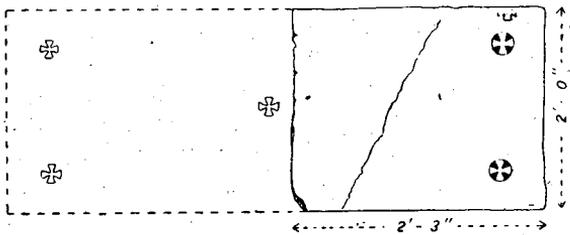


FIG. 1. Altar-slab of St Benedict's Church.

the crosses is in one corner, another near the other corner on the same side, and the portion of a cross is between the latter and the edge, where the stone seems to have been broken in two. Supposing that the rest of this cross was hidden by cement, Mr Browne suggested as a possible explanation that the usual five crosses were in this case in unusual positions, being disposed in a straight line near the front of the slab, one in each corner, one in the middle, and the other two on either side the central cross and near it. But Professor Middleton had pointed out to him that the portion of a cross had apparently never been completed, so that it was probable that this was the end, and

<sup>1</sup> See also *The Antiquary*, N. S., Vol. I, 1890, p. 2.

not the front edge of the slab, and the unfinished cross had come too near the wall, or the super-altar, and had been replaced by one 6 in. further forward.

Dr Westcott had discovered that in the case of one of the crosses the spaces between the arms were inlaid with something of a darker colour, of the character of cement (fig. 2). The other

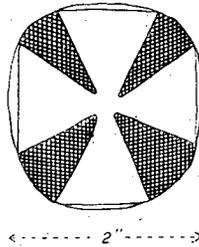


FIG. 2. One of the crosses on the slab.

had no doubt been similarly treated. Mr Browne believed that the form of the cross and the other indications were consistent with the idea that this may have been the original *mensa* of the altar in the Romanesque eastward *porticus*, or rectangular apse, of the church of St Benedict when first built. He mentioned two examples he had found in Switzerland last year of an arrangement differing from that usually noticed in altar-slabs with crosses. At Romainmotier, a very large church probably of the 9th century, where in 1537 the Bernese committed sacrilegious ravages, the images being burned and the altars *desrochés*, so that the Prior Théodule de Ride died of chagrin, one of the old altar-slabs survived the process and is now used as a communion-table by the Swiss. It is 6 ft. long and nearly 3 ft. broad. The ancient crosses have been carefully erased by re-dressing the marble, except one in one corner and another which is central so far as the length of the stone is concerned, but only 10½ inches from the front. On the very ancient altar-slab at Coire, only two crosses are to be seen, one about the

middle of each end, the other three being covered by the present large super-altar; an interesting evidence that the celebrant formerly faced westward and used only the eastward half of the altar. The five crosses in these cases were placed symmetrically at the corners and centre, not of the whole slab, but of the part actually used.

Mr Browne expressed some doubt whether the symbolism of the "five wounds" had anything to do with the original practice of cutting five crosses on altar-slabs. In the pontifical of Eggerht, Archbishop of York in Bede's time, the bishop was to make a cross with his finger dipped in the hallowed water on the four *cornua* of the altar. He was then to pour oil on the altar, make a cross in the middle and at the four *cornua*, and proceed round the walls of the church making crosses with his thumb with the chrism. Whatever symbolism there was in the one case, there would seem to be in the other. And the surface of the altar thus crossed was not to remain visible. The relics were brought, a veil was stretched between the bishop and the people, he made a cross within the *confessio* and at the four corners, put into the *confessio* three portions of the consecrated Host, three pieces of incense, and the relics, and then the *tabula* was laid on the altar, and one cross was made with chrism upon the *tabula*. Thus there is no mention of five crosses, even in chrism, on the *tabula*, which is our "altar-slab." *Tabulae* were in early times frequently portable and quite small, and in accordance with the artistic spirit and practice of the time they were in some cases naturally ornamented with a cross, dividing the field into four spaces; these spaces might naturally receive the ornament of a smaller cross. An examination of the portable altar found in St Cuthbert's tomb at Durham (6 inches by 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ ) made it clear that in that case the central cross, of the same character as the great cross on the page at the commencement of St Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels, and as the crosses on some of the smallest of the Anglian and

Irish sepulchral stones, could not be meant for one of five crosses representing the "five wounds." He thought the reason for placing the five crosses on the front half of the slab, instead of symmetrically on the slab as a whole, was perhaps that the crosses marked the points at which incense was burned at the consecration of the altar; and that the crosses on altar-slabs originally were cognate with the dedication crosses on the walls of churches, which marked the places where the anointing oil was applied at the consecration of the church.

Professor MIDDLETON agreed in the opinion expressed of the early character of the stone and its crosses, and remarked that though inlaying was not unusual on altars in Italy, this was the only example that he knew in England.

Mr LANG (Vicar of St Benet's parish) begged leave to thank Professors Browne and Middleton for the interest they had shewn in the altar-slab, and promised that the greatest care should be taken of it, and of the other half, if it should fortunately be found.

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