

ART. XXIII.—*Shrine-shaped or Coped Tombstones at Gosforth, Cumberland.* By the REV. W. S. CALVERLEY, F.S.A., Vicar of Aspatria.

*Communicated at Shap, July 15th, and at Penrith, Sept. 23rd, 1897.*

GOSFORTH Church, Village, Old Hall, and Rectory, stand on a plateau at the foot of the southern slope of the fell. To the east flows the river Bleng on its way to join the Irt running from Wastwater; beyond rise the great Cumberland mountains about Styhead Pass, over which the traveller must pass on his way from the coast to Derwentwater and Keswick. The great Roman coast road lies to the west with Ravenglass Camp and the junction of the inland road over Hardknott to Ambleside and Kendal, less than five miles to the south, and the camp at Moresby above Whitehaven, twelve miles to the north-west. Hardknott Camp is twelve miles away a little south of east. The sea rolls three miles to the westward, the favoured spot lying sheltered by low trees from the western winds, and away in the distance rise the peaks of the Isle of Man, Ramsey being thirty miles only from Whitehaven, whilst the point of Ayre is but twenty eight miles distant and Douglas forty two.

In the month of June, 1896, when the north wall of the church was taken down in order that an aisle might be added, a large stone was found embedded in the foundations at the north-west corner. The illustrations\* shew

---

\* All the illustrations are printed from most admirable photographs taken by W. L. Fletcher, Esq., of Stoneleigh, Workington, who very kindly accompanied me on several occasions, and for whose assistance in the matter of photographs and rubbings, I am grateful. Our thanks and gratitude for help and hospitality are also due and are heartily tendered to the Rev. Rees Keene, M.A., the Rector of Gosforth, whose reverent care for all the relics in and around the church is so apparent.

two sides and one end of this stone. It is of the red sandstone of the neighbourhood, and is 5 feet 6 inches long, 1 foot thick at the base, tapering upwards to the ridge, and 2 feet 4 inches high in the centre, being slightly curved along the top so that the ends are only about 22 inches high. It is much weathered, and was broken into two by the blasting of the foundations at the taking down of the wall.

The stone is shrine-shaped, having the appearance of a house with almost perpendicular sides and a tiled roof, the tiles being cut away to a width of about 1 inch at the lower ends. On the sides of the shrine or walls of the house, beneath the tegulated roof, and on the ends, are sculptures. On one side (see Plate I) is depicted a truce-making between two parties of warriors. To the left is seen the conquering force with circular shields, and spears pointed upwards, their leader with outstretched arm accepting surrender or dictating terms to the weaker force, who, smaller men with smaller circular shields and with spears downpointed, the butt ends appearing behind their shoulders, attend their leader bearing the flag. One may count fifteen men and shields to the left and ten to the right; there have been more on both sides, the perishing and breaking of the stone having almost obliterated the traces of them. The points of the spears of the men to the left hand reach nearly to the eaves, whilst the butts of those to the right are a greater distance below. The flag bearer holds the flagstaff in his right hand: the flag floats out in triangular shape towards the opposing company: the shield is on the left forearm, whereas the shields of the opposite party are carried on the right arm: thus the legs of the men are not seen, the shields overlapping each other and completing the lower part of the design throughout.

On the other side (see Plate II) five interlaced rings are seen to the left; a single ring is seen to the right, with



PLATE I. COPED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. I.



PLATE II. COPIED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. I.



PLATE III. COPED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. I.

with a small boss within the centre of a triquetrous form which on meeting the ring, at each of the three places of contact, divides and passes under it, folding back over the circle on either side and joining again beneath the arm of the triquetra. Between these two designs appears knotwork amongst which is a serpent form with great head near the five rings, and in the lower part nearer the single ring a fine specimen of ring and bandwork, apparently complete in itself, and only marred by the break in the stone done in the blasting of the wall at its taking down.

On one end of the stone is the figure of a man (see Plate III) possibly the chieftain, champion, or warrior who was buried beneath the stone. He is bareheaded, bearded, clothed in short tunic, and belted, and may carry in the left hand a spear or battle axe, the shaft of which seems to appear below, but the ends of the stone are much weathered and broken away; beneath the left arm are traces of ornament. On the other gable, in spite of the weathering, &c., are also traces of interlaced ornament.

This is a most interesting example of this class of monument—of which a dozen are known to exist in the diocese of Carlisle, and very few in the more southern dioceses. The curious patterns of rings interlacing and interpenetrating and worked in with interlacing bands may have been intended to represent the great wealth and munificence of the buried dead, “the bestower of rings,” “the ring scatterer,” as the chieftain, according to the speech of the day, might be called; whilst the central part of the design, so weather worn that it cannot all be made out, represents the great dragon sprawling over and guarding the treasure, the evil power which must always be overcome before any good can be attained. The Svastika may be seen at the intersections of the rings and the symbol of the Holy Trinity within the circle and amongst the knotwork, as if to draw the mind away from  
temporal

temporal things to thoughts of the eternal treasure house and the abode of the blessed. The question may well be asked ' what great warrior leader lies buried here ? ' The same question may be asked at many a place between Duddon and Derwent. The land between the mountains and the seaboard is full of the fragments of the memorials of our early fathers and their faith, and of the Saints of the old British Church, often almost the only record left to us of the doings of that time.

A second shrine-shaped tombstone (see Plates IV, V, and VI) of which we give illustrations of two sides and one end, has been lately found under the north-east corner of the nave, as the warrior's shrine was found beneath the north-west corner. This second find we shall call the Saint's Shrine. Both stones had been placed under the foundations of what we believe the architect, Mr. C. J. Ferguson, F.S.A., considers to be a twelfth century wall. The wall between the north aisle and the organ chamber was being taken down in order to provide a recess in which to place the warrior's tomb and other sculptured stones found during the work of restoration, when this second marvel was revealed and finally removed. It is 5 feet 1 inch in length and 2 feet 9½ inches high. It is house-shaped or shrine-shaped and broken into three pieces by the weight of the wall built above it. A large piece had been broken away from one of the upper ends long before the tombstone was made use of as a foundation stone—the chief corner stone—for the new part of the church built (possibly) in the twelfth century, and when the tomb stood in the Kirk-garth, bedded in the turf and surrounded by a rank growth of grass and herbage, which had so protected the lower part of it that the marks of the inch wide chisel which the masons or sculptors of those early pre-Norman times used upon the flat surface, are quite clearly visible now, though plainly the upper parts have suffered by the weathering of centuries.

The



PLATE IV. COPED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. II.



PLATE V. COPED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. II.



PLATE VI. COPED TOMBSTONE AT GOSFORTH, No. II.

The flat top of this broken part has been used by the natives of those days as a whetstone on which to sharpen their weapons, and besides the smooth surface so caused, appear narrow grooves, made by the sharpening of some very small and pointed weapons, such as arrow heads of fine steel. The warrior's tomb has a rounded or bulged-out roof, as well as the somewhat circular or 'hog-backed' form of its ridging. The newer find, the Saint's tomb, has a steep, straight, high pitched roof, though the ridging is slightly curved. The earlier find appears to follow more closely the lines of the ordinary builder of the time: the new find appears more nearly to approach the rigid lines of the artist who would design an ornamental shrine. The main idea is the same no doubt in both, but in the new discovery we have the more ornamental roof, with its varied designs, its ornamental gabled ends, and its characteristic treatment of the ridge. The ridge is slightly curved and sinks down at either end (one end being now broken away) into the huge toothed jaws of the monster—death or hell. Along this curve, on either side of the ridge, lies a wreathed serpent form apparently moving swiftly with open mouth towards the great toothed maw awaiting it with hook or hooked tongue protruding, suggesting the thought, "cans't thou draw leviathan with a hook or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down," *Job* xli, v. 1. Up each side of the roof, along either edge, appears a serpent form, whose head upwards disappears beneath the throat of the monster jaws forming the ends or corners of the ridge.

The roof—it may be intended to represent one of beaten gold, or of bronze, or of silver, and may once have been made brilliant with colour—is a highly decorated one, with lozenge shaped designs, and takes our thoughts at once to the patterns seen in the illuminated MSS. of the Celtic period. Indeed there is nothing on this stone which might not have been wrought, though perhaps rudely

rudely done, after the designs seen in these MSS. It would be difficult to believe that the designer had not seen some such MS.

Beneath the eaves, on the sides of the stone, are serpent forms plaited, with great heads and eyes, and with jaws prolonging themselves and intertwining with their bodies, and evolving other heads of themselves, so that the whole serpentine design reveals a conception of the several incarnations of the evil power treated as a whole; and amidst it all, at one end on the one side of the sculpture, and at either end on the other, the human form appears naked in combat with the beast. "Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return thither. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." *Job* i, v. 21.

In each lower corner of the side on which appear two human figures pushing back the wreathing monster, seems to be a human head.

On either gable and each end of the shrine, the crucified and risen Saviour of mankind appears with arms outstretched, clothed, and girded beneath a double arch on the one end, and ungirded and beneath a triple arch on the other end. Above the arches is the great symbol of the Holy Trinity.

Man's home is here for a time beneath the arch of heaven. The Holy Ones dwell in the higher heavens. All the powers below trend towards the great battle. Even mighty Thor himself must some day go forth "to meet the wolf." But there is an incarnation of the Holy One who will slay the monster and overcome death and open the jaws of hell, and through him, His children, even the faithful dead shall conquer and the righteous with Him "for ever dwell in Gimil gold bedecked," and so each end of the shrine shews forth the Lord Christ beneath the arches, and above is the great double triquetra issuing from a single upper angle, to set forth for ever

ever the great doctrine of the ever glorious Trinity and the revelation of God unto man, even as the purpose of every temple or church, or indeed the shrine of man's heart should be to set forth the Lord's death until He come.

At Aspatria the triquetra appears in each alternate division of the highly ornamented roof and the design in this respect, and also as to the ornament along the eaves is nearly identical with that of the representation of the temple (Jerusalem) in the book of Kells, saving that the ornament which runs up the edges of the ends of the roofing of the temple, lies along the eaves at Aspatria. Beneath the eaves in the representation of the temple runs interlaced work, and in the very centre of this, the narrower bands are made to form a knot (a small triquetra like knot) in exactly the same manner as is done in this Gosforth sculpture, where a similar knot has been broken away by the cracking through of the stone. The piece is safely kept and was shewn to me by the clerk and may be affixed. There are no human figures in this Kells band of interlacing. Two great heads stand up above the upper corners, their jaws interlacing and forming a square sided knot or fret.

At Plumbland, the very ornamental triquetra is seen on the gabled ends, and the sides are composed of intertwined serpent forms.

The Penrith "hogbacks" resemble the warrior's tomb.

At Heysham, Lancashire, the very remarkable "hogback" has huge heads at either end over the upper corners, and the four legs of the beast, made small but quite appreciable, appear on either side of the ends of the stone.

At Crosscanonby the "hogback" is all roof and the ends are raised as though intended to represent the great heads.

There is a very rich later specimen of the shrine-shaped  
coped

coped stone (the so-called tomb of Abbot Hedda) in Peterborough Cathedral, with full length figures of the Apostles and by some believed to be the tomb of S. Kineburgha.

At Lowther, there was a few years ago, lying about the churchyard, a portion of a coped tombstone, with figures of the Apostles rudely carved and much weathered, and the only fragment of such work in this diocese known to me. A drawing appears in the *Transactions* of this Society.

At Bondgate, Appleby, Crosscanonby, and Bromfield, the late Norman workmen placed the coped tombstones, of the former lords of the land, as lintels over their doorways.

Speaking of the burial of S. Chad in the seventh century, the Venerable Bede says: "The place of the sepulchre is a wooden monument, made like a little house, covered, having a hole in the wall, through which those that go thither for devotion usually put in their hand and take out some of the dust," &c.

---

NOTE.—In November, 1897, a part of a cross head was found in the churchyard, and proves to belong to one of the fragments already preserved in the church, completing the head of what Dr. Parker believes to have been the cross destroyed in 1789 (Jefferson's History) and whose stump was then made into a style for a sun dial. This newly found part is said (*Gentleman's Magazine*) to have been kept in the parson's garden in 1799; it is now fixed in the wall of the church, for which let us be thankful.

---