

APPENDIX G GRAVE SLAB REPORT

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Four slabs are described and discussed. Two are clearly late medieval, the third is seventeenth century and the fourth is of uncertain date, but probably medieval.

1.0 CROSS-SLAB GRAVE-COVER FROM EAST END OF TARBAT OLD CHURCH

Description

Tapering cross-slab grave-cover (of coarse sandstone?) with chamfered edges and a low relief design.

The main feature is a cross-head with 8 fleur-de-lys terminals springing from two interlaced or overlapping diamonds. In the centre of the cross head is a circular ring whilst at the upper corners of the slab are two further circles, one (left) with a hollowed centre, the other with six petal-shaped depressions. The cross head is supported on a broad shaft with two incised lines running its full length. These incised lines do not continue into the large fleur-de-lys at the upper junction with the cross head nor into the uneven three-step base.

Flanking the shaft are two shields (left) and a sword (right). The upper shield has a beast, probably intended to be a lion rampant. The motif or charge on the lower shield is too indistinct to hazard a suggestion. The sword has a broad tapering blade with a rounded point (perhaps indicating a scabbard), a guard of slightly down-turned quillons, a hilt of concave sides and an unusual pommel of two uneven lobes in the form of a Y. On the blade just below the quillons is a sunk concave diamond, which also might indicate decoration on a scabbard, though no sword belt is shown. The outer (right-hand) quillon overlaps the chamfered edge of the slab, as do two of the fleur-de-lys terminals of the head. The chamfer has chevron ornament formed either of lanceolate leaves or (at base and lower right of slab) of simple incisions.

Discussion

The design of the cross head can be readily paralleled in northern England. There has been far less recording of this monument type in Scotland, but Northumbrian patterns extend into the Lothians and Fife. The interlaced diamond design occurs in 4 churches in Cumbria: Barton (Ryder 2005, 135, slab 1), Warcop (op. cit., 46, slab 1), Isel (op. cit., 127, slab 1) and Dearham (op. cit., 172-4, slabs 4, 8 and 9). In Northumberland the same design occurs in 3 examples: Bywell St. Andrew and Stamfordham in the central Tyne valley, and at Knaresdale in the south Tyne (Ryder 2000, 56 and 85 fig. 7, slab 3; 71 and 101, fig. 23, slab 2; 76 and 108, fig. 30, slab 1; Ryder 2003, 113, fig. 6). In county Durham the diamonds are more clearly interlaced and the motif is set within a circle though the fleur-de-lys heads remain outside the circle: e.g. Aycliffe slab 3 (Ryder 1985, 12-13 and fig. 1 (p. 16), design 13). Sometimes the entire design may be placed within a sunk circle. A few slabs show a central ring (Brancepeth slab 3) or a plain disc (Medomsley slab 5), whilst the majority enclose a central rosette (14 examples). On 4 other slabs the central zone is damaged. This same design of head also occurs just south of the river Tees within north Yorkshire.

The roundels in the upper corners occur sporadically in the northern counties of England north of the Trent-Mersey line, sometimes as a sun and a crescent moon, sometimes as stars and sometimes as rosettes of 6 or 8 petals. The steps at the base are also a common feature in northern England though many slabs with the interlaced diamond design at the head have a base of a plain semi-circular mound or a cusped ogee arch.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the sword guard with the down-turned straight quillons is as common as the sword with a straight guard. However the pommel is more usually leaf-shaped either plain or five-lobed (Ryder 1985, p. 19 and Fig. 2). The notched Y-shaped pommel occurs in only two examples: Dearham, Cumbria (Ryder 2005, 172, slab 2) and Hamsterley, Co. Durham (Ryder 1985, 92, slab 1).

There are slabs with incised and with low relief designs showing shields in the three northern counties of England. In Cumbria there are 15 slabs clearly showing heraldic arms and a further 7 slabs with plain shields which might have been painted. In Northumberland there are 14 slabs with heraldic charges and 6 with plain shields. In co. Durham there are 4 shields with heraldic charges and plain shields on 6 slabs.

The running leaf pattern on the edge chamfer occurs in Cumbria at Appleby St. Lawrence, Morland and Crosscanonby (Ryder 2005, 25-6: slab 2, 38: slab 2, 170: slab 2), but not in Durham and Northumberland.

The most useful survey of memorial sculpture in northern Scotland has been that by Steer and Bannerman (1977). In the West Highlands, as on Iona, Oronsay and Kintyre, it is easy to find parallels on grave-slabs for the type of sword but not for the design of pommel (*ibid.*, 167-170, fig. 19). Sometimes the sword is shown within its scabbard. The sword is placed to the right-hand side of the cross shaft (as here at Tarbat), whilst the left-hand side has panels of floral design. It is interesting that these floral panels have been linked to Northumberland (by Lamont 1968, 34-5, discussing Islay) as being inspired by a slab at Hexham in the central Tyne valley. The cross heads in the West Highlands do not closely parallel the design at Tarbat. Where there are well-defined bases (Class I slabs on Iona and Islay: Steer and Bannerman 1977, 17-18, plates 1-2), they have a floral design within a semi-circle.

There are no roundels or rosettes, and heraldry only occurs on late 14th century low-relief military effigies. These show a warrior in a quilted surcoat carrying a shield on his left arm, holding a lance in his right hand and wearing a sword, usually with drooping quillons and an elaborate pommel, prominently displayed in a waist belt (*ibid.*, 22-26, plate 8).

The English examples of this cross design and sword type suggest a date in the early fourteenth century, but for this example in Easter Ross so far north from Northumbria it is probable that the central decades 1340-1370 may be more likely.

2.0 CROSS-SLAB GRAVE-COVER FROM INTERNAL WEST END OF TARBAT OLD CHURCH

Description

Cross-slab grave-cover, broken into two equal pieces. Similar red sandstone to above.

There are two designs on this slab, an incised sword and four initials, the latter are likely to be a later inscription. The sword is similar to that on slab 1, but originally it was the only design on the slab. The sword has a tapering blade ending in a rectangular scabbard chape. The quillons are straight and down-turned with each arm ending in a diamond shaped terminal. The hilt has a slight taper in its width and ends in a plain round pommel. The sword design is common in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Steer and Bannerman 1977, 167-170).

The four initials A M R M are in relief within a sunk rectangular panel to the right of the sword's hilt. The style of the lettering suggests a seventeenth-century addition, perhaps to two members of the Munro family.

Discussion

Although there are a number of examples in northern England where the sword is the only carving on the slab, these usually have the sword in the centre of the slab so that the four arms of the sword can substitute for the cross of the Crucified Christ. At Tarbat the sword is close to the left-hand margin of the stone in its present condition, but the left-hand margin appears to have been deliberately cut whilst the right-hand margin is more worn and tapering.

3.0 SLAB REUSED WITHIN BLOCKED DOORWAY OF TARBAT OLD CHURCH

Description

Probably a grave cover but with irregular edges. The stone appears to be metamorphic and not sandstone.

The only design which can be discerned is an incised triangular shape with another line(s) near the apex to create a diamond shape. Three possibilities may be suggested. The first is that this is a shield with the heraldic charge of a chevron. The second is this is intended to show an object suspended by a cord, such as a hunting horn. The third is that this is a letter A. For the last two suggestions the broken edge is at the bottom of the slab, but for the first suggestion the broken edge is at the top. There are faint suggestions of a rectangular object near the opposite margin: this could be a book with a fastening clasp, usually interpreted as the Gospels indicating the symbol of a priest. There are no diagnostic features, but a late medieval date is likely.

4.0 FRAGMENTS OF GRAVE-COVER SLAB REUSED IN BLOCK ED DOORWAY

A slab either broken in three pieces or, more likely, shown on three separate photographs. It is a coarse red sandstone.

This slab has three main elements. Around two sides are the incised letters of a border inscription within a frame. Although individual capital letters can be identified, the full text cannot be recovered; the inscription appears to be in English not Latin. The second element is a sunk roundel at the head of the slab in which is an ornate shield. This has an upper margin of half-round crenellation, straight sides and a bottom margin of two concave bases meeting at a point. The heraldic charge is of a stag and tree (?for Mackenzie). Below the roundel is a sunk rectangular panel which has in low relief a skull and cross-bones at the centre (as originally designed), a sexton's bell, an hourglass and either a miniature spade or an arrow at the top of the panel. For this design a seventeenth-century date is most likely.

References

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