

## III.

## NOTE ON EARLY CROSS-SLABS FROM THE FAEROE ISLANDS.

By P. M. C. KERMODE, F.S.A.Scot.

On my way to Iceland last summer and again on my return I was able to spend an hour at Thorshavn, the capital town of the Faeroe Islands. It was an unexpected pleasure to hear that there was a Museum there, and on visiting it I was surprised to find some slabs bearing crosses of early form. As I had but little time, I asked Mr M. A. Jacobsen, the Curator, to make rubbings of these and send them on to me. This he willingly did, and added a set of photographs which showed also the general character and appearance of the basaltic rock of which they were made. On the boat I had made the acquaintance of Mr J. Patursson of Kirkjubö, from whom I learned that similar cross-slabs had been found there. Later on, he was good enough to send me a rubbing of one of these.

On my return home I got into communication with the National Museum, Copenhagen, expecting that they would have a record of these monuments and of their history. Dr Nörlund replied, however, that he only knew of them from photographs, and that they had not been published; but he told me of two others now in the National Museum, of which he sent photographs, with permission for me to make use of them for this note. He kindly sent me also a copy of his most interesting account of excavations and the discovery of the buried Norsemen at Herjolfsness, in the S.W. of Greenland.<sup>1</sup> This included the figure of a large granite slab which he thinks would date from not earlier than the thirteenth century. It bears an incised cross enclosed within an elliptic figure, on the upper portion of which are faint remains of an inscription. The main inscription, in two vertical lines down either side of the cross, is almost perfect, but the last letters broken off, and reads,—HERHUILIR: HRO(AR) KOLGRIMSS(ON) [*Here rests Kolgrimsson*]. The Cross shows in form the upper limb rather longer than the arms, and the shaft about two and a third times the length of the head. The limbs expand in a sharp curve at the ends, the lower one now broken. In a footnote this is compared with a cross "on a tombstone from Frodebö in the Faeroe Isles (now in the National Museum, Copenhagen)."<sup>2</sup> Two small headstones are also figured showing crosses of very primitive

<sup>1</sup> *Meddelelser om Grönland*, Bind lxxvii. pp. 193, 194, and 196, figs. 138, 140.

<sup>2</sup> With respect to this reference, Dr Nörlund writes to me that Frodebö had been quoted in error, and he finds that it should have been Skuö.

form; together with a remarkable series of small wooden crosses found in the graves.

In my fig. 1, I give outline drawings made from the rubbings received,

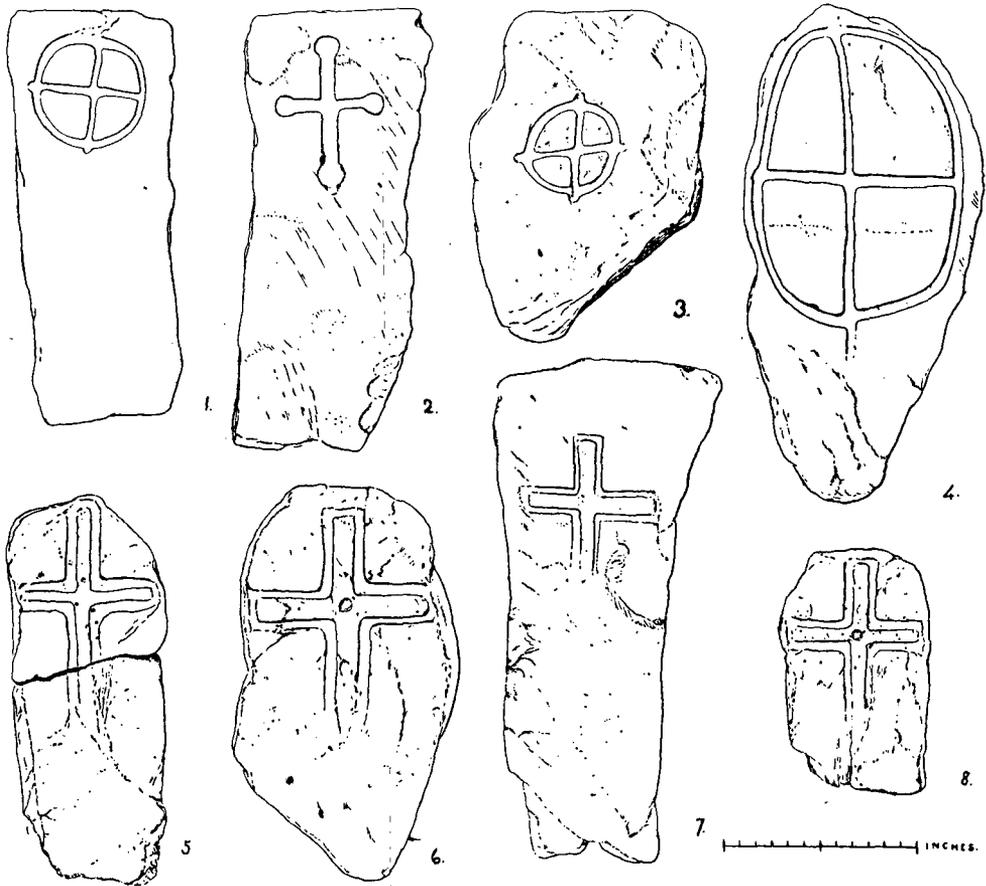


Fig. 1. Cross-slabs from Skuö, but No. 1 from Kirkjubö.

and here reduced to about one-twelfth the original size. All are headstones made of the local basaltic rock and, excepting for the design which appears on one face only, undressed and untouched by a tool. Four of the crosses are linear, the rest drawn in outline with shallow lines, U-shaped in section, about half an inch wide, but, in two examples, reaching a width of one inch. The largest slab, No. 4, measures about 31 inches by 14 inches, the smallest, No. 8, 15 inches by 9½ inches. The thickness averages 3 to 4 inches. No. 1 is from Kirkjubö; the others, now

in Thorshavn Museum, are from Skuö. Their general character is that of early cross-slabs in the British Isles.

Fig. 2 shows the one from Skuö, now in Copenhagen, a rectangular



Fig. 2. Cross-slab from Skuö, Faeroe.



Fig. 3. Cross-slab, locality unknown.

slab having the corners broken off, bearing an outline cross with expanded ends to the limbs, a form recalling early slabs at Clonmacnois and Hartlepool. Fig. 3 is that of uncertain provenance in Copenhagen, with a plain Latin cross in outline encircled by a linear ring. These, like the other Faeroe slabs, are of basalt.

For comparison, I add as my fig. 4 the recumbent slab of granite figured in *Meddelelser om Grönland*, the measurements of which are given by Dr Nörlund as 114 cm. by 48 and 14 cm. in greatest thickness; together with the two small headstones referred to.

I am indebted to Mr Patursson and Mr Jacobsen for particulars of

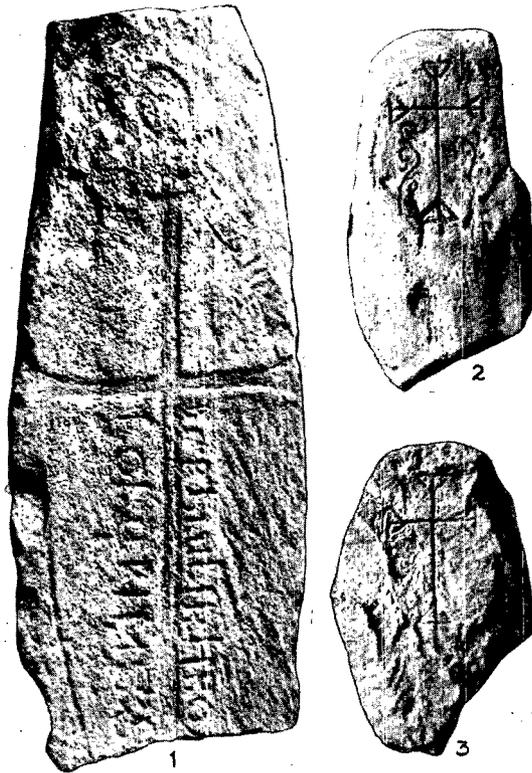


Fig. 4. Recumbent Grave Slab and two Head-stones from Greenland.

the finding of these interesting relics. Kirkjubö, where the slab No. 1 was found in the cemetery, close to the oldest church-wall, is at the southern end of the large island of Stromo, and about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles south of Thorshavn. Here was the seat of the bishopric established in the islands in the twelfth century. By the end of the century the building of a cathedral was begun; but before it had been completed a change in religion caused it to be abandoned, and the unfinished walls remain to this day. The site was evidently convenient for the purposes of a cathedral, but the question suggests itself whether there was no other

reason for its choice. Could it have had Christian associations with an earlier period? Possibly further excavation may yet reveal an inscription or some definite clue to its original foundation and the date of the first Christian burial.

Skuö is the little island off the S.W. of Sandö, and about twenty miles S. of Thorshavn. At Olansgardur was a landing-place and a cemetery supposed to date from the end of the tenth century. It was here that Sigmund Brestesson had his homestead. Sigmund's father had been murdered by Thronð of Gata and himself escaped as a boy to Norway. He was persuaded by Olaf Tryggvason to be baptized, and, upon his agreement to christianize the Faeroes, was supported by him and confirmed in his title to the lordship of the isles. About the year 1000 he built a church close to his homestead. But Thronð opposed the introduction of Christianity and the interference of Norway in the Faeroes. In 1002 he attacked Sigmund, who only escaped with his life by swimming, with his cousin Thore, to Sudrey, six or seven miles to the south. Thore died from exhaustion and Sigmund was found on the shore and killed in his sleep. Some years later, when this became known, his murderers were hanged by Thronð and the bodies of Sigmund and Thore brought for burial to Skuö, where their graves are marked by a large stone bearing a cross. After the terror of the "Black Death," which, in the middle of the fourteenth century had reached Norway and the Faeroes, the place fell into disuse. In 1909-10 a new cemetery was made on its site, and an area rather smaller than the original was walled around. In the clearing and draining loose stones were met with and old coffins with wooden nails, at a depth below the surface of about 18 inches. These graves were in the east section and lay N.W. to S.E. Here two of the slabs were met with, No. 3 at the S.E. corner inside the old wall and about 4 feet deep, and No. 4 in the middle of this section.

In 1921-2, when digging in the west section close to the wall and near to Sigmund's stone, four more slabs were brought to light, lying face upwards in the clay subsoil at a depth of about 18 inches E. and N. of Sigmund's stone. Further north other slabs were found, which are not yet in the Museum.

Fig. 2, from Skuö and now in Copenhagen, measures about 34 inches by  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches; one face bears an incised outline cross having expanded ends to the limbs, the upper end broken off. Fig. 3, the other slab in Copenhagen Museum, measures about  $22\frac{1}{4}$  inches by 16 inches, tapering below to a bluntly pointed end. Of this Dr Nörlund informs me, "We do not know anything about it with certainty." Fig. 4 is taken from his illustration of the Greenland Slab inscribed with the name Kolgrimsson, here shown for comparison as exhibiting a form of cross

of the same general type, and I add his figures of the two very primitive-looking headstones from Greenland.

The first of the slabs seen by me were those on fig. 1, numbered 2, 3, and 4. Their rude simplicity impressed me at once with their general Celtic character, and suggested the possibility of relics from the time of the first Christian missionaries to the Faeroes. The Greenland pieces, however, dated as late as the thirteenth century, show that when the Norse folk had become Christian, they were conservative in their regard for that early sepulchral art with which they had come into contact in the British Isles; and the question arises whether those now figured may not be as recent as the time of Sigmund Brestesson's re-introduction of Christianity. Some more certain evidence of date may yet come to light. In the meantime it seems worth setting these on record, and is of great interest to find that the sepulchral art developed in our Celtic Church should have extended beyond our borders so far to the north and have been practised by a people of a different race.

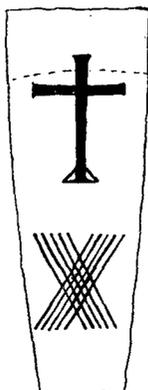


Fig. 5. Cross-slab from Svinö Church, Norderey.

Since the above was written I have received from Dr Nörlund a copy of a drawing, dating from 1828, recently found by him in the archives of the National Museum. This he gives as "representing a slab from Svinö Church, Norderey, Faeroes." Here given as my fig. 5, it is interesting as an addition to the series, and particularly as introducing yet another site.

Attention might be drawn to *Proceedings*, vol. lv. p. 134, where Mr Kirkness figures an incised slab from Papa Westray, Orkneys, bearing a simple linear cross, in which, however, the expanding ends take the form of crescentic terminations to the arms.