

ART. VI.—*St. Bega's bracelet*. By D. R. FYSON.

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TRADITION ascribes the foundation of a monastic house at St. Bees on the Cumberland coast to St. Bega. If I may rely on information contained in the little guide-book to the church there, St. Bega was an Irish princess who fled from a proposed marriage and took ship for England to devote herself to the service of the Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> Her story as related in the 12th century is contained in a manuscript now in the British Museum. Her resolution to serve the Church is said to have been confirmed by the gift of a golden bracelet—symbol of betrothal—from a “mysterious stranger”. The bracelet was kept at St. Bees and revered as a relic until the Scottish invasion in the 12th century caused its disappearance.

This legend is said to be the reason for a design much used on grave-covers. Four “bracelets” at the head of a cross make the simplest form for this design, but additions of ornament and sometimes of extra bracelets provide great diversity. The church at St. Bees has two good examples, one of which commemorates an archer (fig. 1). In these, the bracelet is a plain circlet, interrupted at its outer edge, with other ornamentation added in the spaces between the circlets (fig. 2). There is another grave-cover in the porch of the church at Gosforth (Cumberland) in which four bracelets form an elegant head to the cross and a handsome floriated scroll is carved on either side of the slender shaft (fig. 3).

If the bracelet design were confined to this area, we might the more readily accept the legend that it owes its origin to St. Bega, but in fact its use is widespread.

<sup>1</sup> For the legend of St. Bega reference should be made to CW2 lii 55, *St Bega and her Bracelet* by Canon C. E. Last, M.A.



FIG. 1.

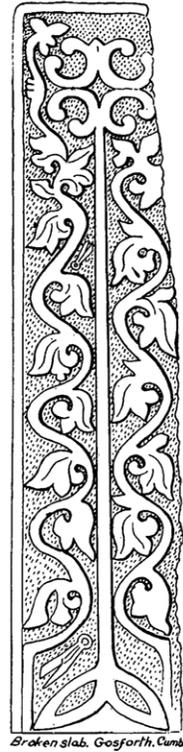


FIG. 3.

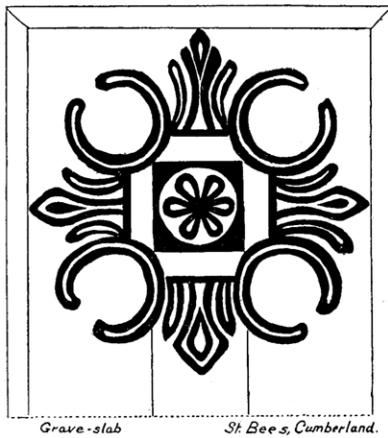


FIG. 2.

Among the numerous grave-covers in Northumberland and Durham, a great many embody the bracelet. These can be studied in the published drawings of the late C. C. Hodges,<sup>2</sup> and in my own short papers on the subject.<sup>3</sup>

Among the unpublished papers of C. C. Hodges now kept in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle upon Tyne, are two sheets of unsigned drawings of grave-covers in Cumberland. They show the bracelet design at Great Salkeld and, in an elaborated version, at Dearham. It would be of interest to compile a comprehensive list of the places where there are examples of this design, and the writer would be grateful for information about them.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Hodges, *Sepulchral Slabs in the County of Durham*.

<sup>3</sup> D. R. Fyson, *Some Northern Grave-covers* (1956), AA4 xxxiv; D. R. Fyson, A note on the work of the late C. C. Hodges, AA4 xxxv.