

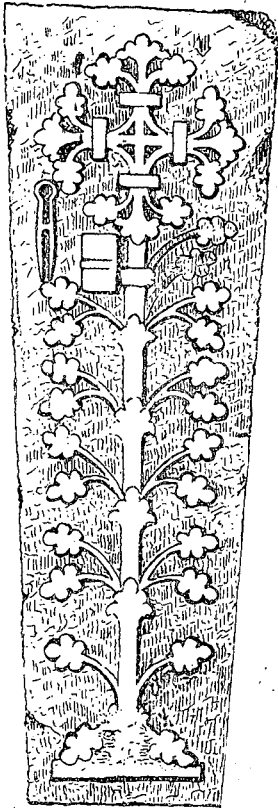
VI.—REMARKS ON TWO MEDIAEVAL GRAVE COVERS  
FROM ST. NICHOLAS'S CHURCH, DISCOVERED IN  
JUNE, 1886.

By C. C. HODGES.

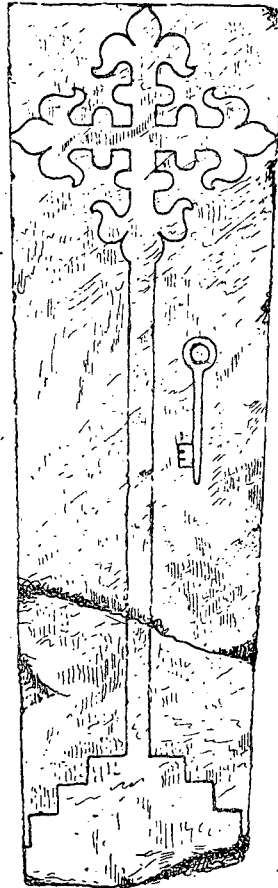
[Read on the 28th day of August, 1886.]

NEWCASTLE is rich in examples of the interesting memorials of the dead of past ages. Of the horizontal slabs which were used to cover the graves, as lids to stone coffins and as laid in the pavements of the churches to mark the resting places of the dead during the middle ages, a considerable number of examples remain. Our Society is the fortunate possessor of the majority of these, which it has saved from destruction and oblivion, by having them placed in the Castle. They are from various sources, the greater number having been derived from the destroyed Hospital of St. Mary Magdalene. At St. Andrew's Church are three fine examples; and three others are built into the garden wall of the Hermitage, Gateshead. These came from the Franciscan Friary which stood in Pilgrim Street. In St. Nicholas's Church is a fine collection of grave covers, which are preserved in the Bewick Chapel. Twelve of these we have long been familiar with; but two more examples are now happily added to the list. They were discovered in making some alterations which had become necessary, in order to provide better accommodation for the gas meters, which are placed on the south side of the choir; and we are indebted to our member, Mr. Samuel B. Burton, the contractor who carried out these works, for the very careful manner in which he has exhumed, cleaned, and transferred them to the Bewick Chapel without injury. I lay drawings before you, from which you will see how beautifully these two slabs are designed and executed, and how well they have been preserved. They were found lying under one of the buttresses on the south side of the choir, and, as they were turned face downwards, we know that they had been moved from the graves on which they had been laid, in order that they might occupy their

recent position. The choir was erected about the middle of the fourteenth century, and these large stones were made use of by the builders for its foundations. The one bearing the key is probably very few years earlier in date than the choir, but the other cannot be much later than 1250, and may be some years earlier.



C. 1250



C. 1350

I will now say a few words about the crosses and symbols carved upon these slabs, taking the earlier example first. This bears a design of the most exquisite beauty, and, though not the largest, it is by far the finest and most perfect of all the remaining mediaeval

sepulchral slabs in Newcastle. It is the more valuable and instructive, as it belongs to a period of which we have so very few examples remaining in any part of the country, coming, as it does, at the time when the conventional foliage, so largely used during the earlier years of the thirteenth century, was being changed and refined into those exact copies of natural foliage which adorn the works executed at its close. The trefoil form of the terminations was introduced before the end of the twelfth century, and received little variation in its intrinsic character for nearly fifty years, though its multiplication and disposition over the surface of the slab was carried to the utmost limit of the designer's skill. Between the years 1240 and 1250, we find the stiff conventionality of the earlier period suddenly and rapidly changing into natural forms, till, at the close of the thirteenth century, the artists copied the foliage of the trees and plants with which they were surrounded, as well as flowers, birds, and insects, with the utmost exactitude.

It was at the time that the carvers were beginning to grow tired of conventionality, and adopting the forms of nature in their work, that the beautiful slab under our consideration was produced. There is no trace left of the trefoil ornament, and yet it would be impossible to say what natural leaf had been laid under contribution to furnish the motive of the design. That natural forms were as closely followed in the designs of these sepulchral memorials as they were in the carved details of the churches, erected during the last forty years of the thirteenth century, we have abundant evidence.

At Sedgefield is a most beautiful example, covered with delicately sculptured oak leaves and acorns, and bearing on a shield the cross *moline* of the Fulthorpes. At Corsenside and at Soëkburn are other specimens of the same type.

The design of the cross in our example is an elaboration of the crude and early form, formed by placing four circles more or less closely together. This form had its birth contemporaneously with the introduction of Christianity into these islands, and is used in most of the beautiful sculptured crosses of the Celtic period. It appears again on the incised and sculptured grave covers of the Norman period, and, after running through a large number of variations, develops into the beautifully floriated head, of which the well-known "vine leaf" slab

at Hexham is our finest northern example. In the slab before us, the head is formed by placing four semi-circles in the angles of a cross, and floriated all the terminations, so that the leaves appear in clusters of three. Four bands cross the arms, and seem to bind the semi-circles to the cross. The stem is interrupted by leaves, from which spring branches bearing pairs of leaves, and at the base two leaves spread over the roots. Thus, the idea of a tree, of which the cross forms the chief flower or head, is fully carried out.

On the dexter side of the cross are carved two symbols, a pair of shears and a book. It is now generally accepted that where the shears occur on one of these grave covers the individual buried beneath was of the female sex, but what was meant when a book was placed in conjunction with them it is very difficult to determine.

Two other northern examples may be cited, as proving that the book is sometimes used in conjunction with the shears as a female symbol. One of these is at Chollerton, and is illustrated in the *Archæologia Aeliana* (4to series), Vol. III., p. 76. It is a fine double slab of about the middle of the fourteenth century. It bears two crosses of bold design, both alike. The middle of the stem of each is overlaid by a shield; that on the dexter bears the arms of SWINBURNE *three cinque-foils impaling chequy* for DE VAUX\*. Above the shield on the dexter side of the cross, is a book. The shield on the sinister cross bears the SWINBURNE arms only; to the sinister of the shield is a long sword, so cut as to appear as lying behind the shield.

The other example is at East Harlsey, Yorkshire. It is also a large double slab, laid in memory of a man and his wife, probably not later than 1300. It bears two crosses, which are both alike. Overlying the stem of the dexter cross is a shield bearing *three cocks*, the arms of Salcock of Salcock (*hodie* Sawcock), a hamlet in the parish of East Harlsey. Behind the shield is a fine long sword lying *in bend dexter*. On the dexter side of the stem of the sinister cross is a pair of shears of the spring type, and on the sinister side a book. I have met with many examples of books occurring in conjunction with shears on grave covers, but the two foregoing double slabs clearly prove that the book was used to signify a woman, as it was likewise to

\* Sir William de Swinburne married Alicia daughter of John de Vaux in 1306. The slab no doubt was laid over the grave of these two persons.

signify an ecclesiastic when placed in conjunction with the chalice and paten, or the hand raised in benediction.

Our other Newcastle slab bears a cross, with *fleur de lis* terminations. It is represented by incised lines cut in the stone, instead of the whole surface of the slab being lowered and the ornamental parts left in relief as in the example which we have just been considering. The form of the cross is an exceedingly common one, and was used over a very long period; in fact, it was in vogue during the whole of the period of mediaeval architecture which has been styled "Perpendicular," or, in other words, from the middle of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century. The bands, or binding straps, which appear in the earlier and more beautiful cross survive, but the lines representing them are no longer carried across the arms, but stop at them. The key incised on the sinister side is supposed by our most learned ecclesiologists to allude to a married woman in her capacity as housewife. It is frequently found in conjunction with the shears, and many examples bearing two keys may be cited; but an example bearing the key in conjunction with any symbol alluding to the male sex, such as the sword, fleshing knife, shepherd's crook, blacksmith's, or mason's tools, etc., is unknown.