

XVII.—SOME EARLY NORTHERN GRAVE COVERS.

By MRS. D. R. FYSON.

Northumbrian churches often contain stone slabs which once covered graves or stone coffins. Most have long since been separated from the tombs they covered and are now often built into the walls, or into the porch, or left lying loose, inside or outside the church. The ornamentation on the slab is usually some form of cross, simple or elaborate, and a personal emblem to signify the sex, rank or occupation of the person commemorated.

C. C. Hodges studied a large number of these slabs. He made beautiful drawings, to scale, with an architect's trained precision. He intended to publish them in a series of plates but the work was never completed. One published volume¹ and some loose drawings are in the Black Gate Library. He arranged his figures in alphabetical order according to their present location, numbered consecutively, and I shall refer to them by those numbers. He did not attempt to assign dates, or to compare and relate the designs to one another.

I propose here to describe one particular type of design which has manifold variations in this district. My attention was drawn to it when I visited St. Bees in Cumberland in 1955. The guide book in the church there gives the story of *St. Bega* as told in a thirteenth-century manuscript now in the British Museum. She was the daughter of an Irish king and a marriage had been arranged for her. She, however, wished to devote herself to the Church, and on the eve of her

¹ C. C. Hodges, *Sepulchral Slabs in the county of Durham*.

wedding she fled from her home, sailed across to England and settled at St. Bees. Later she moved to Scotland, but she left at St. Bees a gold bracelet which was revered as a relic. The tale is that it was given to her by a mysterious stranger in token of her devotion to the Church. A bracelet at that time was equivalent to a wedding ring in our own day. The guide book continues: "There is a design peculiar to St. Bees and to places which were influenced by it which incorporates the bracelet (a broken circle, indeed almost like a horseshoe), and a good example can be seen on two stones set in the western wall of the north transept of the church."

In both these stones the so-called Bracelet-design is clear (fig. 1 and fig. 2). The tall slab has an additional interest in the portrait of an archer. Portraits on grave covers are rare.

I now began to look with more care at grave slabs. I went to Gosforth (Cumberland) to see the famous Cross and "Fishing-stone". In the church porch is a handsome slab (fig. 3), with a well carved design. The four bracelets form the head to a slender shaft, on either side of which is a foliated scroll, and the personal emblem of scissors, said to signify a woman. This stone has two pairs of scissors. On an earlier occasion I had made a drawing from a stone at Chester-le-Street because I liked the design. On my return home I looked at this drawing and realized that here again was the Bracelet (fig. 4). C. C. Hodges records seven of similar pattern at Chester-le-Street.² In his collection the Bracelet occurred over and over again, with great variety of detail, but always based on that broken circle. Could St. Bega's influence have extended over so wide a field? Three slabs are recorded from Movilla, Co. Down,³ which might be associated with St. Bega's Irish origin, but what of one in Chester,⁴ one in Derbyshire,⁵ some in Yorkshire and many

² C. C. Hodges, Plates 21, 22, 23.

³ *Belfast Naturalist's Field Club*. March 18, 1869. W. H. Patterson.

⁴ *Building News*. Jan. 19, 1877. Theophilus Smith.

⁵ Dale Abbey. C. C. Hodges, unpublished.

among the churches of Durham and Northumberland? In the crypt under the dormitory at Durham Hodges drew nine variants of the Bracelet.⁶ Could all these be ascribed to St. Bega or has the design some other origin? Be that as it may, clearly the design was popular.

For examples in Northumberland I have drawn one in the church porch at Warden, a plain form with a stepped base (fig. 5), and several at Bywell St. Andrew's, where they are built into the exterior of north and west walls. It must be remembered that the bracelets form the head of a cross though often the shaft has been broken away. Bywell has a complete cross with steps at the base very similar to that at Warden, but the sculptor has omitted to break the circles and has left them whole in his very simplified design (fig. 6). Another good slab has the four bracelets well carved in their most usual form, connected by bands to each other and to the arms of the cross, and the whole set in a circle. This stone has also two flower-heads, a baldrick and horn, and a sword. The shaft is shaped like a chalice where it supports the circular head (fig. 7). Bywell has several slabs too small or too worn away to be of much account, but one in excellent preservation shows the stepped base again, and a modification of the bracelet, more widely spread, with foliate ends, and interlaced (fig. 8). C. C. Hodges records this type at Monkwearmouth,⁷ with the addition of a circle to the interlacing and a flower to the central boss.

Another example of interlacing occurs at Simonburn, where eight bracelets are interlocked. The emblems are a hammer and an indeterminate knobbed staff (fig. 9). Compare one at Bishop Middleham⁸ and a very elaborated form at Barnard Castle.⁹ We can see from these examples the great variation from complex to simple forms. Simonburn has one of the simplest, a small cross in the porch (fig. 10). No two are exactly alike.

⁶ C. C. Hodges, Plates 36, 37, 39.

⁷ C. C. Hodges. Unpublished drawing.

⁸ C. C. Hodges, *op. cit.*, Plate 15, No. 41.

⁹ C. C. Hodges, *op. cit.*, Plate 8.

The dates of these memorials are uncertain, but probably most are of the Norman period or later. The slab with interlocked bracelets at Simonburn (fig. 9) has an edging of dog-tooth moulding, indicating the thirteenth century. Most of the slabs have a plain bevelled edge.

In conclusion I would endorse Mr. Hodges' opinion "that they may fairly be considered worthy to take a high rank as specimens of medieval art" and to hope that an additional selection of his drawings may be published.



FIG. 2.

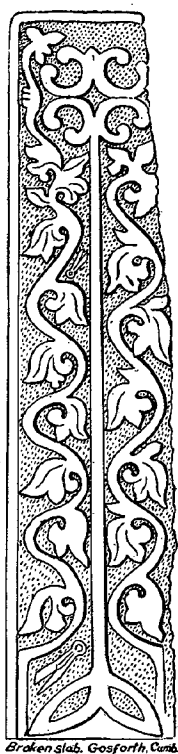


FIG. 3.

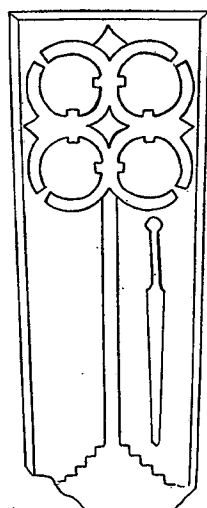


FIG. 5.

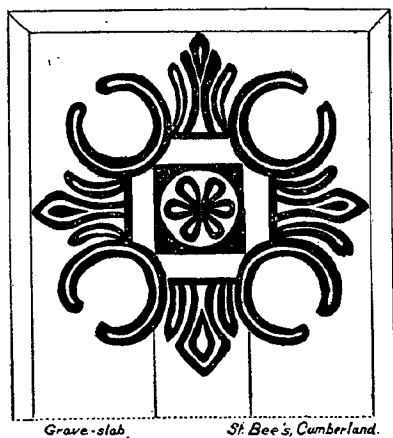


FIG. 1.

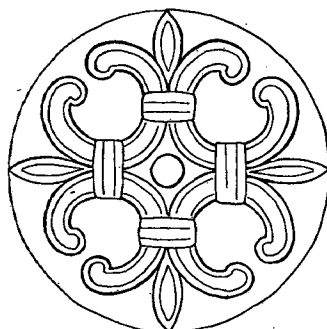
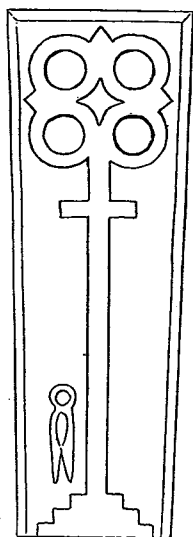
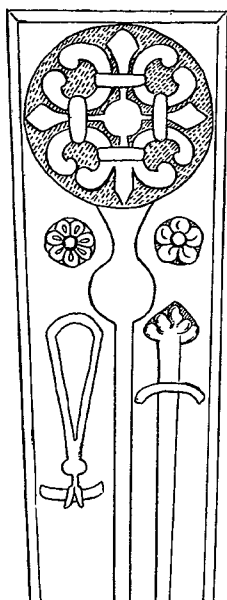


FIG. 4.



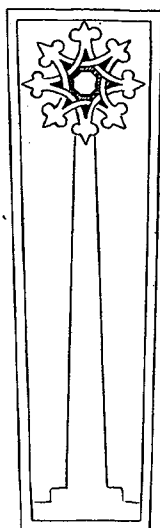
Bywell St. Andrew's

FIG. 6.



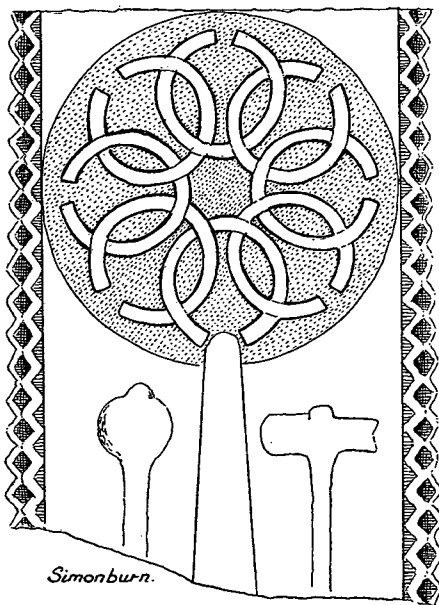
Bywell St. Andrew's.

FIG. 7.



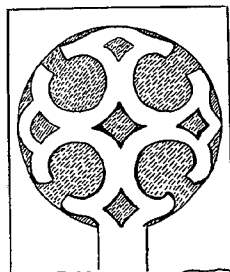
Bywell St. Andrew's.

FIG. 8.



Simonburn.

FIG. 9.



Simonburn, in church-porch.

FIG. 10.

