# XII.—SOME EARLY NORTHERN GRAVE COVERS —A REASSESSMENT.

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In the 1956 volume of *Archæologia Aeliana* Mrs. D. R. Fyson[1] drew attention to a group of grave covers in the northern counties and traced in them a continuous theme suggesting a common artistic origin. This origin was located at the Priory of St. Bees in Cumberland and the inspiration for the theme, a broken circle, was the Holy Bracelet enshrined there. From its design was derived the pattern of many tombstones in the North of England and possibly further afield.

The purpose of this article is to assess the probability of this suggestion. To do this it is proposed first to examine the trade structure of this branch of monumental art, then to consider the implications of the wider field in Cumberland and Westmorland, and finally to decide whether the Bracelet did actually provide the artistic inspiration claimed for it.

Evidence for the trade organization of mediæval stonemasons is mainly documentary, based on royal and monastic building accounts.[2] At the major quarries bands of hewers extracted the rough blocks of stone and "scapplers" or cutters dressed it to the approximate shape required. At a workshop within the quarry, or centrally placed if a group of quarries was in use simultaneously, as at Purbeck, the masons carved the architectural details, statues, effigies and

[1] *Arch. Ael.*, 4, XXXIV, pp. 213-16.
[2] D. Knoop and G. P. Jones, *The Mediæval Mason* (1949), chs. II, III. L. F. Salzman, *Building in England* (1952), pp. 1-68.

gravestones.[3] As with effigies so with gravestones the masons used set patterns, changing them slightly to keep up with fashion or with the wishes of the client, who might be bishop, prior or priest, earl, clothier or forester.

The products would be transported to their destination in a finished state usually with an accompanying stone coffin. Sometimes, if the grave cover was of an expensive marble, the coffin would be of a humbler freestone from a nearer source.[4] On other occasions in areas where good stone was scarce and the coffin was intended to be sunk in the ground, a wooden chest or a coffin made from rough stone slabs was used.

At the minor quarries a handful of workmen were employed in picking down rubble for church and, later, cottage building. Occasionally a good slab would be set aside for a door sill, a lintel or a grave cover and this work would be done on the spot. The roughest, least artistic coffin lids were either of this nature, or else were re-used slabs fashioned by a village mason in the churchyard.

The more important quarries would attract the most competent carvers and from them would come distinctive products easily identifiable over a wide area. In stoneless regions the style of an important "school" using the same characteristic patterns can be traced for a considerable radius from the quarry or workshop centre. An example of this is Barnack, near Peterborough, from which grave slabs were distributed throughout East Anglia along the fenland river system and inland from St. Albans in the south to South Leverton (Notts.) in the north.

In those areas plentifully supplied with building stone the workshops were more numerous; the interchange of ideas and rapid development of new styles meant that there are far fewer "schools" and only those with distinct individualities can be recognized.

[3] In the later middle ages the workshop was more often situated in the nearest town.

[4] As at Carisbrooke, Isle of Wight: a coffin lid of Purbeck marble covers a coffin of Quarr limestone.

The four northern counties, whose churches house the ten examples illustrated by Mrs. Fyson, definitely fall within the latter category. The number of quarries worked in mediæval times is too great to be counted: few were of sufficient significance to assume a more than local importance. When they did, it was for the particular quality their stone possessed, such as the smoothness of Huddleston or the "marble" of Frosterley.

At the time of the Norman Conquest the whole Northern region found common artistic expression in the monumental field more in the erection of standing crosses than in recumbent grave covers. As Collingwood has shown,[5] the pre-Conquest patterns were not uniform throughout Northumbria. The relative strength or weakness of Danish or Norse penetration can be detected from the tenth and eleventh century sculpture. In this tradition the monumental stonemason was reared and it is important not to neglect the continuity between Anglo-Danish and Norman work. The earliest post-Conquest gravestones are simple essays, often reproducing the cross-head of the standing churchyard cross. They can also be identified by the use of current architectural forms, as of chevron patterns or round-headed arcading, and by characteristic types of sword, shears and chalice where these symbols are included. Gradually these plain geometric designs became more ornate and changed to the fleur-de-lis with its many ornamental variants. However when such changes came the North often lagged behind the styles of Westminster and the Court, and the carver might include both new and old styles on a single slab.

Some few tombstones as those to Godfrey of Ludham and Walter Kirkham[6] must certainly have come from the impor-

[5] W. G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* (1927), ch. XV and p. 152.

[6] Godfrey of Ludham, Archbishop of York (1258-64): grave slab in south transept, York Minster; Walter Kirkham, Bishop of Durham (1249-60): grave slab in south transept, Howden, Yorks.

tant quarries and possibly from the same workshop as the earliest effigies at Pittington and Hurworth.[7] The majority would be produced by masons at a small quarry using as their models architectural work of finer quality and on a larger scale which they had seen at the great abbeys and minsters or at the castles and baronial halls.

To understand fully the whole field in this branch of art, a complete survey needs to be made of grave covers existing in the churches, religious houses and castle chapels within the region. Charles Hodges started a collection of drawings of all coffin lids visible throughout County Durham, but he died before he could complete the work.[8] He did not attempt to group the slabs according to their probable date or to their source of stone. Until this can be done, the situation of local schools, their methods of transport and the origin of uncommon patterns will remain uncertain. That local schools did exist is shown by the homogeneous character of the grave covers in Durham Cathedral cloisters and in St. Oswald's in that city, or by the unusual group with sprayed shafts at Warcop, Great Musgrave and Ormside in Westmorland.[9]

In the matter of technique the practice of shallowing out a circle in which the cross-head is carved in relief seems to be a northern peculiarity and has been noted only rarely south of the Trent. Raised and incised patterns are both well dispersed and no especial advance in craftsmanship is indicated by a preference for relief designs. Except on the grander monuments, edge mouldings are either simply done or not attempted, in marked contrast to the marblework from Purbeck and Tournai.

Lines of trade would follow river valleys since where a stream was navigable and reasonably direct, the problem of

[7] C. H. Hunter Blair: *Arch. Ael.*, 4th ser., vol. VI, pp. 1-4.
[8] C. C. Hodges, *Sepulchral Slabs in the county of Durham.*
[9] For Durham: R. H. Edelston, *Trans. Archit. and Arch. Soc. of Durham & Northumberland,* vol. 10. For Warcop: R. Bower, *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, New series vol. VII (1907), pp. 171-2.

transport would be eased. With ample supplies of stone both sides of the Pennine ridge and in most valleys along it, there would be little reason for carting stone over high moorland. As an example of this localism the patterns of upper Weardale, as at Stanhope, differ slightly both from those at Blanchland, Edmundbyers and Lanchester and from those in Teesdale as at Barnard Castle or Wycliffe.

The general conclusions must be that certain designs would circulate throughout the regions, certain techniques would be commonly practised, but there would also be pockets where an outstanding pattern has developed or where, due to the physical isolation caused by moor and forest, some designs are never found. From the printed material on grave covers[10] such observations appear sound, but until a full survey is made any consideration of early coffin lids must assume that development was parallel to that encountered in areas more thoroughly studied.

The fairly complete material from Westmorland does give an indication of how the evidence from the pre-1300 tombstones may be interpreted. The earliest grave covers seem to be those at Brougham (fig. 1*a*), Brough and Lowther, all near early castles, and at Shap Abbey, founded *c.* 1200. From the simple fleur-de-lis and the use of cross-crosslet, these may be dated to the period 1175 to 1225. Cross slabs at Cliburn, Milburn and Warcop (fig. 1*b*) are of mid-thirteenth century date. Then towards the end of the century the Eden valley is filled with coffin lids of the fleur-de-lis type: the stepped base has trefoiled openings, the shaft often

[10] For Cumberland and Westmorland: Canon R. Bower, *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, N.S. vols. VII (1907), pp. 165-84, IX (1909), pp. 1-23, XII (1912), pp. 86-98; *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: Westmorland* (1936); for Durham and Northumberland: C. C. Hodges, *op. cit.*; the publications of this society, *Trans. Archit. & Arch. Soc. of Dur. and Northd.*, and *Arch. J.* have papers on slabs in individual churches; also general ecclesiological works: J. Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments in England and Wales* (1786), E. L. Cutts, *Sepulchral Slabs and Crosses of the Middle Ages* (1849), C. Boutell, *Christian Monuments* (1854), W. Brindley and W. S. Weatherley, *Ancient Sepulchral Monuments* (1887).

sprouts foliage and the cross-head is enclosed in a circle (fig. 1*c*). The quarry or workshop responsible for this increased output would seem to be near Warcop. Slabs at

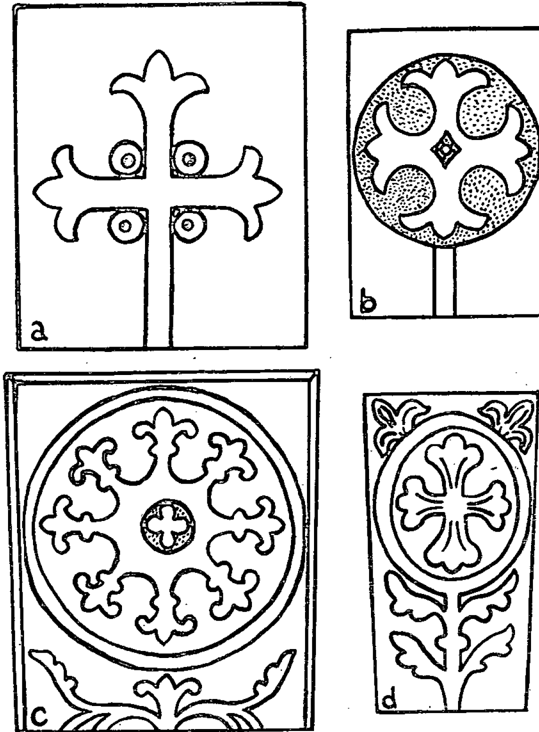


FIG. 1.

(*a*) Brougham. Incised. (*b*) Warcop. Incised with sunk head. (*c*) Warcop. Raised design. (*d*) Morland. Raised design.
Scale: (*a*) 1 in. to 1 ft.; remainder 2 in. to 1 ft.

Orton, Shap and Ravenstonedale are derived from the Warcop group, but do not come from quite the same hand. An unusually fine gravestone may be seen at Morland: it is of the late thirteenth century, but with a floral pattern

distinctly not of the Warcop type (fig. 1*d*). Separated from the Eden valley by high fells, the slabs at Kendal (fig. 2*l*), Mansergh and Kirkby Lonsdale are treated rather differently, although similar patterns are used.

Despite a lack of early material this rapid account shows continuous activity at the local quarries into the red sandstone. From them masons supplied tombstones for the immediate locality; though following the normal train of development, the grave covers also reveal the masons' own individualisms.

Turning to Cumberland to examine the coastal strip between the rivers Esk and Ellen there is ample evidence of tenth and eleventh century sculpture. Miss Fair's article[11] has isolated this group. The character of the cross-shafts varies considerably, but some series are discernible. Examples of the late tenth century at Dearham, Gilcrux, Hale and Muncaster have a common pattern. An Irish key motif of the eleventh century appears at Workington, Glassonby and St. Bees. From a Carlisle cross-shaft are derived the patterns of eight crosses between Bromfield and Beckermet St. John as well as one at Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland. After examining these examples Collingwood[12] thought the use of white freestone indicated a school of native carvers taking inspiration from more highly trained sculptors' work but producing crosses according to their own ideas and interpretation.

This then was the economic background to monumental art throughout the eleventh century: on the one hand highly accomplished, itinerant sculptors were working at the major churches, abbeys and castles, and on the other self trained quarrymen were quite capable both of erecting churches and of carving details for them. The slabs at Beckermet St. John, Cross Canonby and Egremont with their use of zigzag ornament as a debased interlace must occupy the overlap

[11] *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, N.S. vol. L (1950), pp. 91-8.
[12] W. G. Collingwood: *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, N.S. vol. I (1901), p. 292.

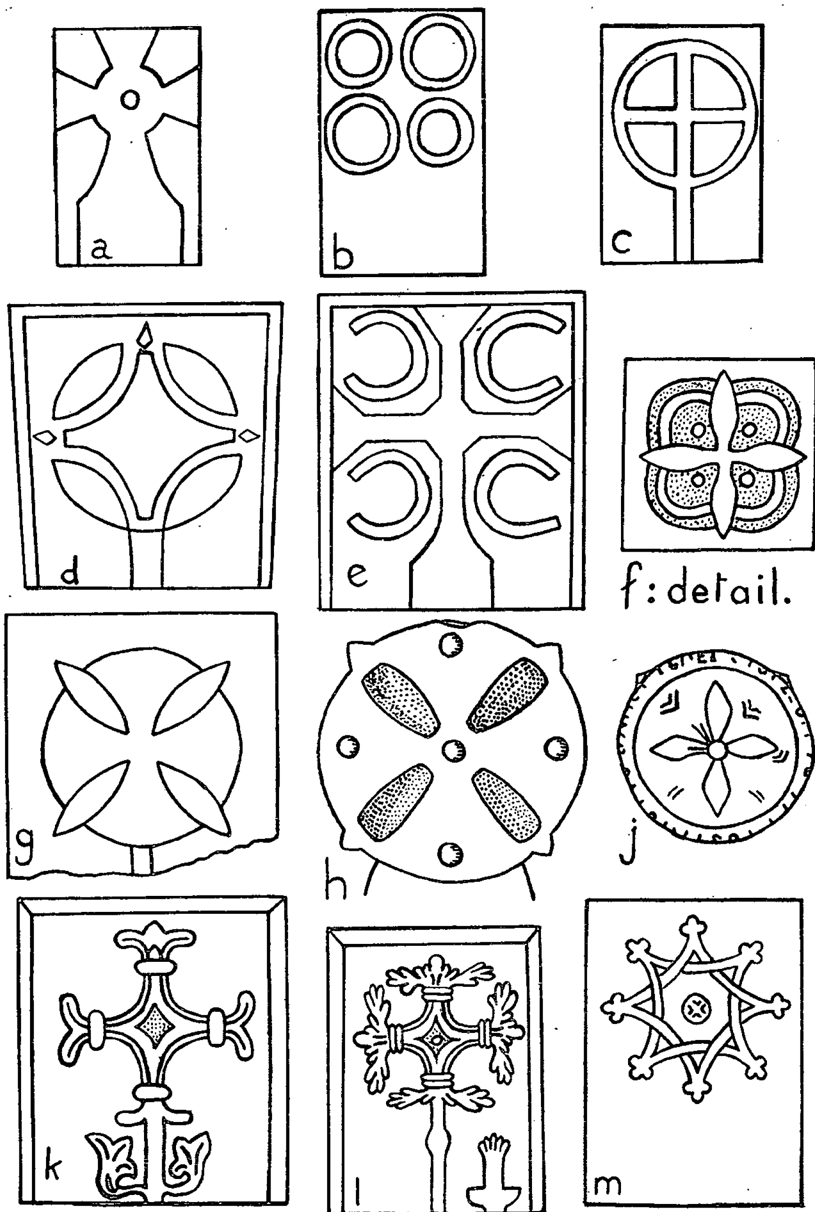


FIG. 2.

(*a*) Cleator. Incised. (*b*) Dalston. Incised. (*c*) Bromfield. Raised. (*d*) St. Bees. Incised. (*e*) St. Bees. Raised. (*f*) Egremont. Sunk head. (*g*) Bridekirk. Incised. (*h*) St. Bees Resting cross. (*j*) Priory seal. (*k*) Arceldon. Raised. (*l*) Kendal. Raised. (*m*) Isel. Incised.

Scale: (*j*) approx. twice actual size; remainder $^1/_6$ actual size.

period within the eleventh century. The Latin cross form of head, as at Arceldon, Bridekirk and Gilcrux, the Anglian type of splayed-arm cross at Cleator (fig. 2*a*), and the four circles as a head at Dalston (fig. 2*b*), must date from the early years of Norman rule. The Latin cross within a circle at Ireby, Harrington, Hale and Bromfield (fig. 2*c*), or the rough cross-heads at Aikton and Distington are later developments. Towards the end of the twelfth century certain variations upon the geometric theme are found: figures 2*d*, *e*, *f*, *g*, show the four circles contained in a larger one at St. Bees, or freed from the enclosing circle, at St. Bees, Moresby and Egremont, or the circle bearing leaf-like incisions at St. Bees and Bridekirk. The end of the twelfth century saw the early fleur-de-lis at Egremont, as at Brougham (fig. 1*a*), and a development of the geometric cross-head with multiple lines within the containing circle at Arceldon (fig. 2*k*), Beckermet St. John, Corney, Egremont and St. Bees. The thirteenth century brought a development of the floral patterns, though often retaining the inset circle, and a change was also made from the simple step base to the rough semicircular calvary mound of Bromfield, Brigham and Ireby. During this century floral designs grew from the simple flowered shaft at Torpenhow to the richly decorated slab at Gosforth, and in bases from the rough attempts at trefoil, as at Dearham, to the finely traceried work at Dovenby and Harrington.

The patterns therefore develop as a well-defined sequence: the local characteristics are the containing circle sunk at the head and the early rejection of the step base. The fourteenth century would introduce a florid diamond pattern (fig. 2*m*),[13] but this is beyond our study.

The evidence of these two particular areas is typical of the development in Northumberland and Durham. That area was also well supplied with quarries and had a similar

[13] Slabs at Bassenthwaite, Brigham, Dearham, Dovenby, Isel. Similar stones at Bywell St. Andrew (*Arch. Ael.* 4, XXXIV, p. 218) and Middleton St. Lawrence (*Proc. Soc. Ant. Newcastle-on-Tyne*, 3, IV, pp. 232 and 244).

tradition of pre-Conquest art. It is not surprising then if these Anglian crosses and grave covers inspired patterns similar to those around Appleby and St. Bees, or even, turning to other areas of parallel development, around Wakefield and Bakewell (Derbys.).[14] The same themes were present throughout the whole northern region, roughly grasped and poorly reproduced in backward areas, quickening and flowering elsewhere under skilful masons.

Into this framework it is difficult to fit the suggestion that from St. Bees flowed a steady stream of carvings to adjacent churches and that the Bracelet relic at the priory was an artistic inspiration to the surrounding district of Copeland and to places further afield.

Legend[15] relates that St. Bega was an Irish princess who escaped from an unwelcome suitor by sailing to Cumbria and landed near the place now known by her name. The gift of an arm ring or bracelet from a handsome stranger before her voyage was understood as a sign of divine guidance or espousal. For many years she lived a hermit's life until pirate raids drove her from the district, possibly to seek greater solitude on the isle of Little Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde. A ninth century background has been suggested for these events by Canon Last.[16] Either before her departure, the traditional story, or as a gift after her death the settlement near her cell received her holy Bracelet. A nunnery may have arisen round her cell, but, if it did, the Danes destroyed it before 950. Since only a memory persisted a hundred and fifty years later, the Bracelet may have

[14] For Wakefield see W. G. Collingwood, *Yorks. A. J.*, vol. 23 (1915), pp. 129ff., on pre-Conquest stones. There is no adequate account of mediæval grave covers. For Bakewell see T. E. Routh and W. G. Clarke-Maxwell, *Derbys. A. J.*, vol. XCIV (1937), pp. 1ff. on pre-Conquest stones; and *J. B. A. A.*, vol. XX (1847), pp. 256-8 and p. 304, and Cutts, *op. cit.*, for mediæval grave covers.

[15] *Vita et Miracula Sancte Bege Virginis* in *The Register of the Priory of St. Bees* (Surtees Soc. vol. 126), 1915, pp. 497-520. This account seems to come from the last quarter of the twelfth century.

[16] *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, N.S. LII (1953), pp. 55-66.

been one of ancient Christian workmanship found in the area after the refoundation and about it a "legend" invented.[17]

The influence of the first foundation must have been limited. None of the pre-Norman crosses bear any symbol which can be positively identified as the Bracelet. Unlike St. Ninian and St. Bridget with many church dedications to hallow their names, St. Bega is only remembered at St. Bees or Kirkeby Bechoc, and three place-names further afield cannot with any certainty be connected with her stay on Little Cumbrae.[18]

The refoundation by William Meschin in about 1120 was a domestic affair of the barony of Copeland. The church already existing on the site and the legend attached to it dictated a joint dedication to St. Mary and St. Bega. In its early years the priory was largely dependent on the founder and his feudatories for its success, but at the outset the scheme was blessed by Archbishop Thurstin by whose advice the house was given as a cell to St. Mary's Abbey at York. In the next hundred years the priory both consolidated its estates in Copeland and added land from further afield. It drew rent from a mill and owned salt-pans on the south coast of Scotland; by virtue of its possession of Eschadale given by Godred, King of Man, it held a spiritual barony in that island, and from John de Courci received as a dependent foundation in 1178 Neddrum on an island in Strangford Lough.[19]

These possessions overseas did little to increase its importance. The nine "miracles" recounted in the *Vita* as evidence of the efficacy of the *pax sancte Bege* could be com-

[17] First mention of the Bracelet is in a document of 1203-28 (*Reg. St. Bees*, pp. 95-6). A further invention makes the saint journey over the Irish Sea on a clod of earth. This later legend may be compared (or confused) with the crossing from Ireland to Brittany by St. Feock, Veho or Vougas on a limpet-covered rock.

[18] Kilbagie (Clackm.), Kilbegie (Argyll), Kilbucho (Peebles); see also *Place Names of Cumberland* (1950), Part II, p. 430.

[19] A fuller history will be found in *V. C. H. Cumberland*, vol. II, pp. 178-83, and in *Reg. St. Bees*, pp. i-xxix.

pared with those in many other monastic histories. Whatever influence the priory exerted locally, its geographical position denied it greater fame. It was overshadowed in wealth and importance by the monasteries at Carlisle, Furness and Holme Cultram; its bounds of sanctuary were no more extensive than those at Wetheral; in 1380 the number of monks there was smaller than at Cartmel, Conishead and Lanercost. Lying as it did on the extreme west of the archdeaconry of Richmond and far distant from the centre of the diocese, it is not surprising that only three members of the house occupied the abbatial chair at St. Mary's in York. Ready access to the priory from that direction was only possible over wild mountains and down the bare Duddon valley, or over treacherous quicksands. The region of Copeland was avoided by justices and archdeacons alike because of its intemperate climate.

This hardly gives the impression of an artistic centre capable of influencing monumental sculpture beyond its immediate locality, and when Prior Thomas of Cotyngham in the late fourteenth century ordered for himself a figure slab to be erected at St. Bees he turned to a Yorkshire workshop to supply it.

Although the cult of the Bracelet "with the sign of the cross plainly visible on the top" is reported to have been considerable, this symbol does not appear in any local art form either before or after its presumed loss in a Scots raid of 1216.[20] The priory's coat of arms incorporates only the Meschin and Lucy bearings. One of the two remaining seals bears a cross (fig. 2*j*): it seems to be a prior's personal mark but the legend upon it is illegible. The crosses which marked the priory bounds have all disappeared, including one carved with *signum Sancte Bege inscupltum in lapide.* It is a matter for conjecture whether the sign was a special type of cross or a representation of the saint. Certainly the Resting Cross (fig. 2*h*) which stood on Chapel How near St.

[20] Canon Last's article (see footnote 16), p. 65.

Bega's Well exhibits no unusual design.[21] In character it is like the Cross Lacon and in decoration like slabs at St. Bees, Bridekirk, Bellingham (Northd.) or Bakewell (Derbys.).

It is difficult to know whether St. Bega was conventionally portrayed with her Bracelet, since I can find no reference to any representation of her in manuscript, carving or ancient stained glass.[22] The only two mediæval dedications are at Ennerdale and Bassenthwaite, the former within the original parish, the latter just outside it, and these indicate a saint of little more than local veneration.[23]

The only other representation of her symbol may be on the local grave covers, but the survey already made suggests that this is not the case. For the theory of the Bracelet to be correct the early slabs at St. Bees should considerably antedate all others with the same patterns and the more distant coffin lids appear slightly later than those nearer the common centre. However the St. Bees grave slabs are more likely to have been derived from the Latin cross with a circle around it as the development of cross-heads on figure 2 shows. A similar stage to the Gosforth cross-head was reached in the mid-thirteenth century by the Mansfield (Notts.) carvers, whose patterns came from a four circle cross-head, or by the Barnack school stemming from the geometrical type of head.[24]

It is possible to find widely scattered parallels to all the ten slabs illustrated by Mrs. Fyson to emphasize the point that the development which she proposes as the prerogative of St. Bees, was really a common inheritance from Anglian

[21] For boundary crosses: *Trans. Cumb. and Westm. A. & A. S.*, N.S. vol. IX (1909), pp. 104-119.

[22] The writer would welcome any information on this point. No symbols are known to R. L. P. Milburn, *Saints and their Emblems in English Churches* (1949), but St. Beya of Little Cumbrae holds a book and a scourge on the seal of the collegiate church of Dunbar.

[23] Three chapels within the parish and six churches which were vicarages of the priory were not dedicated to St. Bega. Her popularity as the patron of side-altars is unrecorded; perhaps that at the priory church was the only one.

[24] Gosforth slab: illustrated by Mrs. Fyson (fn. 1); Mansfield school: *Thoroton Soc. Trans.*, vol. LVI (1952), p. 25, pl. 1; Barnack school: *Proc. Camb. Ant. Soc.*, vol. L (1957), pp. 90-2.

cross patterns throughout Northern England. The two dozen coffin lids at the priory may well suggest a quarry centre nearby, but none of the patterns is sufficiently primitive or unusual that it might be claimed that here was the origin of the "broken circle" on all early Northern grave covers. The origin for this abundantly found design must be sought from region to region where it differs according to the character of earlier sculptural tradition—a picture less of unity than of diversity.