

II.

REMARKS ON THE ROUND TOWER OF BRECHIN. BY A. JERVISE,
ESQ., BRECHIN, CORR. MEM. S.A. SCOT.

In introducing the following remarks, it may be observed that the name of Brechin is first met with towards the close of the reign of Kenneth III., and at that time it appears to have been a place of some importance. It is next found about the year 1012, soon after the reputed defeat of the Danes by Malcolm II. at Aberlemno, in honour of which victory he is said to have erected a monastery at Brechin, which he inscribed to the Blessed Virgin.¹

This was probably a Culdee establishment, a system of priesthood which was then but recently introduced; for, contrary to popular belief, the Culdees are not recorded in Irish history until the 9th century, about which time also they first appeared in Scotland.

It is well known that two of the chief seats of the Culdees in this country were at Abernethy, near Perth, and at Brechin, in Angus, at both of which places chapters of them survived down to the reign of Alexander II., and the most unequivocal traces of these Christians which now remain, either in Scotland or in Ireland (in the last of which countries they existed at Armagh until the 17th century), are their round towers and their churches. So far as relates to Scotland, the round towers of Abernethy and Brechin still remain, but the *colleges* or churches of both these places exist only in name, although ruins of the houses were visible at Brechin in the time of Maitland the historian, who was a native of that place, and those of Abernethy are engraved by Captain Grose.

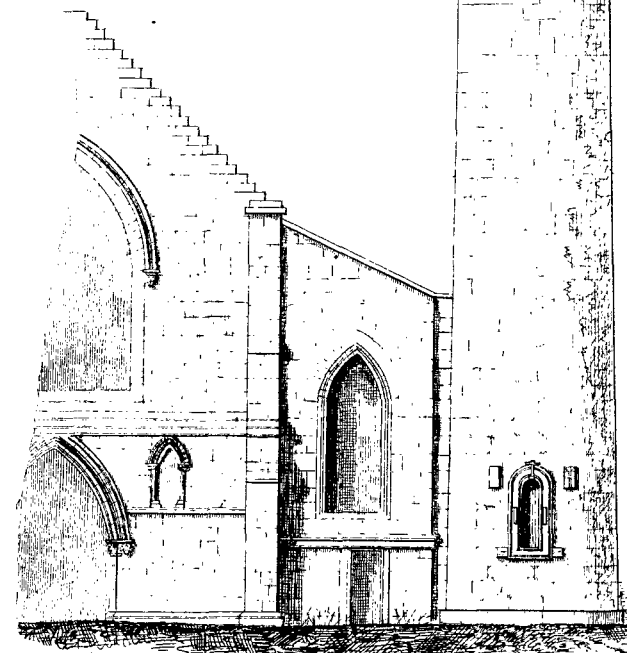
Of the two round towers in Scotland, that of Brechin is by far the finest and most interesting example,—indeed, as regards that of Abernethy, it may be doubted whether the upper half is so old as the lower; but the Brechin tower, with the exception of the spire, seems to belong altogether to one age or period. It stands in the old kirkyard, at the southwest corner of the parish church, about 34 feet south of the square *cam-*

¹ Butler's Lives of the Saints, (S. Moloc, line 25).

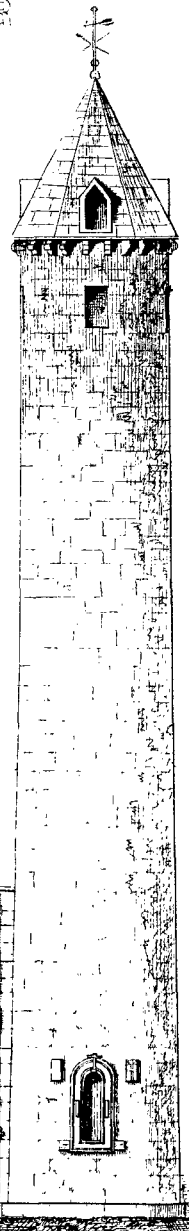
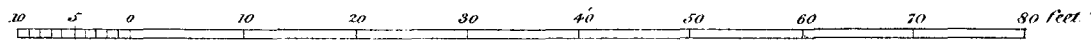
THE ROUND TOWER AT BRECHIN.

W & A K Johnston Lith. Edin^r

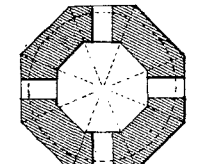
*The Church not done from
Measurement.*



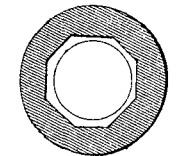
EAST ELEVATION



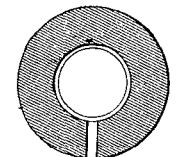
SECTION
from East to West



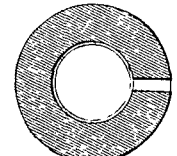
Plan at e_e



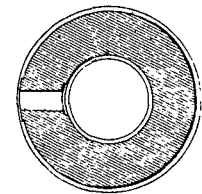
Plan at d_d



Plan at c_c

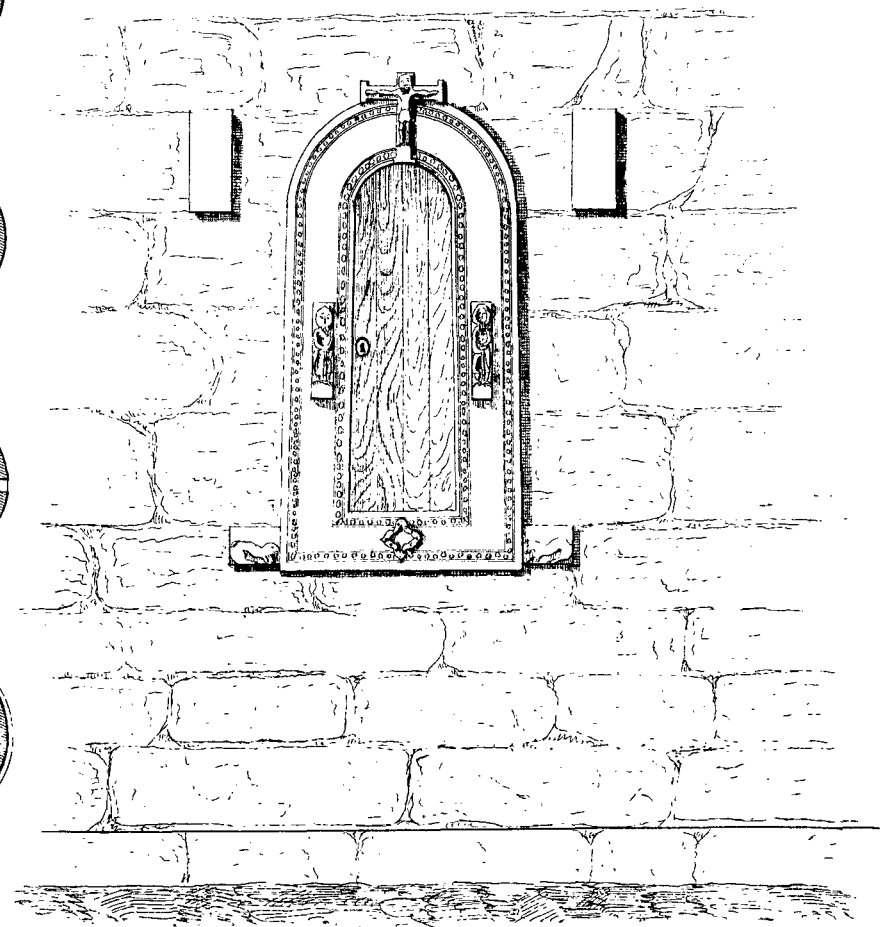
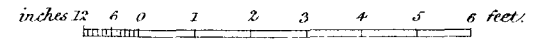


Plan at b_b



Plan at a_a

*N.B. The Stone framing of the door and the two
slabs on either side are of red sandstone, while
the wall of the Tower is of dark grey.*



ENLARGED DRAWING OF DOOR

*Measured Oct 1855
William Armiston.*

panile or tower, and is a spiral freestone building of 85 feet in height, with the stones neatly dressed, and joining with one another, in some parts resembling the twistings of a screw. It gradually tapers from an *external diameter* of about 15 feet to 12 feet 4 inches, the walls being 3 feet 8 inches thick near the bottom, and 2 feet 5 inches near the top; these measurements being, in each case, taken from the sills of the door, and those of the upper windows of the tower.

As shown in the sectional drawing (see Plate III.), it is divided into seven unequal apartments or storeys, exclusive of the spire, or upper portion, by strong courses, or corbels of hewn stone. Each of them project about 5 inches, varying in depth from 8 to 9 inches, and upon these rest the wooden floors, and ladders by which the top is reached. The fourth and fifth storeys are lighted by a window or aperture on the east and south respectively, each of these apertures being 22 by 9 inches in size. The seventh storey contains four windows, which face the four Cardinal points, each 37 by 22 inches. Unlike the windows in some of the Irish towers, which incline to taper more or less towards the top, there is no such difference in those at Brechin, and the lintels in every case are formed of four single stones.¹

A comparatively modern spire of 25 feet covers the top of the tower, making a total height of 110 feet. The spire is octagonal in form, and contains four angular-headed windows, each of which measures 2 feet 6 inches by 2 feet. The time the spire was added is unknown; but, touching the history of this portion of the building, it is worthy of notice, that, on the 8th of November 1683, the records of the kirk-session bear that a sum was ordered to be given "for repairing the head of the litl steeple [which was] blown ower" on the 5th day of that month.

The entrance door, which is perhaps one of the most interesting parts of the tower, has an arched top, and is 6 feet 6 inches from the ground. The mean height of the door is 6 feet 7 inches, the width at the sill 22 inches, at the spring of the arch 19 inches, and the arch itself is 10 inches

¹ There are two mason-marks within the round tower of Brechin, engraved in *Archæologia*, vol. xxxiv. plate iii. These marks, one of which consists of a plain horizontal line, crossed by a perpendicular line, and the other of two lines crossed obliquely, are often repeated, particularly about the middle of the tower, and are generally cut along the whole depth of the face of the stone.

high. The south lintel of the door still exhibits the hole or sheath for receiving the bolt, which is hewn out of the same stone which forms the lintel.

Apart from the representation of Christ upon the Cross, which surmounts the doorway, two ecclesiastical figures are sculptured near the middle of the imposts of the door. These are considerably mutilated, and, as a diversity of opinion exists regarding their appearance—Mr Gough supposing them to represent the Virgin and St John, and Dr Daniel Wilson, St Serf and St Columba,¹ (conjectures for which there is no foundation)—they are here represented as they now appear. It will be seen that both are habited in loose garments: the figure on the left grasps a crozier or pastoral staff with both hands, while that on the right has a cross-headed staff, on which rests an open book held by the left hand.

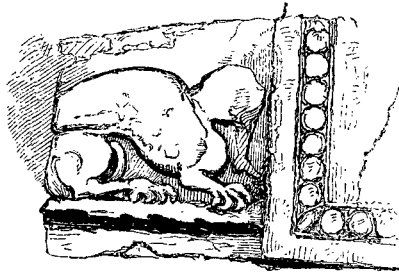
These figures, which are cut out of the same stones as form the side lintels of the door, are in bold relief, resting upon pedestals which project about 4 inches, and each of the figures are about 18 inches high. Both appear to have had beards, and something like a nimbus or glory had perhaps surrounded the head of the figure on the right, which is altogether of a more portly mould than its fellow. There are two unembellished blocks in the tower, one on each side of the crucifixion, but *outside* the sculptured part of the doorway, upon which it may have been intended to engrave some incident, probably illustrative of the life of the founder of the tower, whoever that had been.

There is also a diamond or lozenge-shaped figure, cut in low relief, on the front and middle of the door-sill, bearing an illegible centre ornament, from which possibly a fleur-de-lis had issued, in four points, as one point of that figure is faintly visible in the north-east angle of the diamond. Perhaps the addition of this symbol—whether it is to be recognised as an escutcheon, or merely as an ornament—had been an afterthought, for the stone is slightly indented at that place.

¹ Archæologia, vol. ii. p. 85; Prehistoric Annals, p. 597; also Pennant's Tour, p. 162.

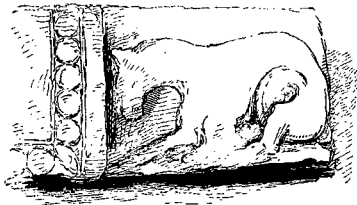


The two recumbent animals by the sides of the door-sill, which have also been variously described, are much worn, and here engraved. Woodcut No. 1, which represents that below the left-hand figure, has (despite the laughter that Mr Gough's averred credulity has furnished to succeeding writers) much of the form of the skull and *proboscis* of an elephant; for certainly the portion called a *proboscis* by Mr Gough has no resemblance whatever to "a fish in the animal's mouth," as suggested by Dr Wilson, while it is apparent that the head and fore-quarters



No. 1.

of the object (No. 2) have much the appearance of a horse. But it is idle to speculate on the sort of animals which these represent — most probably they are only objects of the artist's own creation, and there can be no doubt that No. 1, which is on the north side of the door, has feet and claws pretty similar to those of some of the nondescript animals figured upon sculptured stones at the church of Meigle, and in other parts of the country.



No. 2.

A button-shaped border surrounds the doorway, a part of which is shown in the above woodcuts. This portion also resembles the character of ornaments found upon some of the ancient sculptured monuments, particularly that on the Farnell Stone, and the fragment which was found in a garden within the old boundary of the kirkyard of Brechin, upon the latter of which are the Virgin and Child, and St Peter, and allegorical representations of the Four Evangelists. The carvings on these stones, however, are greatly inferior in execution to those upon the doorway of the tower, for in these a good knowledge is shown of proportion, and of the joints and extremities, both in the human and animal figures,

while the others are the squat and unshapely productions of untutored genius.¹

Whether the old Sculptured Stone Monuments and the Round Towers of Scotland are coeval I shall not attempt to determine, the age of the former being as uncertain as that of the latter; but it appears to me that both the Towers and the Monuments had not only a common origin, but also a common use. The similarity in the architecture of the towers in Ireland to those in Scotland goes far, I think, to prove this point, and some of the mystical and Christian symbols on the sculptured stones of both nations are quite alike.

It may also be added, that the clergy called Culdees were, with the exceptions of England and Wales, also peculiar to Scotland and Ireland, and that they first appeared in the latter country, and then passed over to the former. Taking all these facts into account, I cannot help thinking that both the Round Towers and the Sculptured Stone Crosses of Scotland were the work of native artists who had been educated in convents under the eye of the primitive abbots and canons who came from Ireland to instruct the youth in the useful and ornamental arts, among which, doubtless, had been that of building and carving in stone.

These secular canons, as before shown, are first recorded in the 9th century; but written evidence shows that some of the Irish towers have a much more remote antiquity. Dr Petrie supposes that the Brechin tower was built some time about the year 1020,² or during the reign of Malcolm II. Such may be the fact; and without presuming to fix any period as the date of its erection, we may be allowed to remark, that thirty years prior to that date, and only four years before the murder of Kenneth III., that king is recorded to have given the great city of Brechin to the Lord—"Hic est qui tribuit *magnam* civitatem Brechne Domino."³ May it not therefore be feasible to suppose that, in doing this, the king had commanded some lasting and stately memorial, in the form probably of a tomb or mausoleum to himself, to be erected at the place for which he showed so great favour? Nothing could have been better devised for such a purpose than the erection of a round tower, which the Culdees,

¹ Sculptured Stones of Scotland, plates lxxxvi. and cxxxviii.

² Round Towers of Ireland, p. 406.

³ Innes' Critical Essay, vol. ii. p. 788.

who had received this favour from the king, would naturally suggest, in imitation of the monuments in their mother country.

Within the tower of Abernethy, and in most of the Irish towers, sepulchral remains have been discovered;¹ but although, in 1842, that of Brechin was searched, and excavated down to the original soil, no such traces were found. This fact, however, perhaps rather tends to favour the supposition that the tower of Brechin was raised as a mausoleum to King Kenneth; for historians agree that he was assassinated in the open fields, and, according to Wyntown, by members of his own court; but as to the burial of the body, all record is silent—most probably it was interred in some clandestine spot, which may never be discovered.²

The round tower of Brechin is still popularly called *the Little Steeple*, and until about the beginning of this century the small bells were kept and rung in it. The church being quite close upon the tower, an entrance, recently built up, had at one time been made from the church to the bottom or lower flat of the tower. This part was long used as a prison for “the drunken and disorderly,” and some of the old inhabitants remember of a prisoner breaking through the floor, and ringing the bells at midnight, to the great alarm of the citizens.

Tradition asserts that the tower was begun and completed in one night by a Lilliputian race of builders, to whom both a locality and a name have been ascribed by fable; and it is a common belief at the present day, that the tower possesses such a degree of elasticity as makes it vibrate in high winds. This idea seems to have originated in the fact, that the lime or cement frequently gives way, by which it is bound to the corner of the church, to the height of about 30 feet. Although the latter is a story of mere hearsay, it may not be altogether unfounded; still it can with much greater truth be affirmed that, in 1807, when it was proposed to make the present unshapely alterations upon the cathedral, an Edin-

¹ Small's Roman Antiquities in Fife, App. p. 12; Betham's *Etruria-Celtica*, vol. ii. 211–24.

² Tytler says that King Kenneth was killed at Stracathro, near Brechin; and some years ago, on opening a mound called the *Re or Rye* Hillock, near that church, a carefully constructed stone coffin was found about two feet below the surface. It contained human remains, and also, according to the peasantry, “the figure of a fish, made of gold, and of about the length of a person's finger.”

burgh architect, who submitted plans for that purpose, gravely suggested that the round tower be demolished, and the stones used to assist in building the new walls!

It is difficult to say what would have been the consequence of this monstrous suggestion but for the prompt interference of the late Lord Panmure, and the late eccentric Mr Skene of Carriston, who both felt so indignant at the spirit which dictated the outrage, that they not only rejected the plans of the architect, but vowed to hang the first man from the top of the tower that dared to remove a stone of it! Thus it was to those gentlemen (be it spoken to their honour and good judgment) that Brechin and Scotland were saved the disgrace with which posterity would justly have branded them, had they acted on the suggestions of the architect.¹

Note.—Since the first portion of this paper was printed, I have had the tower measured more minutely, and find that some of the measurements given at page 28 are erroneous. The following are the correct measurements, viz. :—The tower itself is 86 feet 9 inches high, and including the spire (which is from 15 to 16 feet), the total height is about 102 feet. Diameter at door-sill is 15 feet 2 inches, and at sill of upper windows of tower 12 feet 8½ inches. The door-sill is 6 feet 8 inches from the ground. I also make the following slight corrections on the measurements given in Plate III. :—In compartment 3d from bottom, 11 feet 11 inches high, 7 feet 8¼ inches diameter; in 4th, 13 feet 8 inches high, 7 feet 5 inches diameter; in 5th, 10 feet 10 inches high, 7 feet 1 inch diameter; in 6th, 17 feet 11 inches high, 7 feet 1 inch diameter. The upper corbel upon which the floor rests is not more than 6 inches deep, and the next below not more than 8 inches; the others average 9 inches each. The difference in the height of the 6th compartment appears to have been caused by including one of the corbels. (Re-measured 18th Feb. 1860.—A. J.)

It is proper to add, that the Society is indebted to Albert Way, Esq., M.A., of Wonham Manor, Secretary to the Archæological Institute of

¹ An account of the round tower of Brechin will also be found in "Memorials of Angus and the Mearns," a work now in the press.

Great Britain, and one of our Members, for the accompanying drawings of the Round Tower at Brechin. They were prepared for Mr Way by William Ormiston, at that time a pupil of Alexander Christie, Esq., F.S.A. Scot., Director of Architecture, &c., School of Art, Edinburgh, and have been carefully reduced as Plate III. of the Proceedings.

Mr JOSEPH ROBERTSON communicated to the meeting the substance of a letter addressed to Sir John Watson Gordon, in reference to an ancient piece of ordnance which the writer supposed to have been used by the Spanish Armada, and which he wished to be brought under the notice of the Society. The gun is at present in the sea, off the coast of Buchan; and the Society, in the belief that it was a specimen of ancient artillery, encouraged the proposal for having it raised, in the hope that it might be added to the collection of ancient cannon already in the Museum.