

II.

SOME SUGGESTIONS AS TO OUR MURAL ANTIQUITIES. By ANDREW GIBB, Esq., F.S.A. SCOT., ABERDEEN. (PLATES VII., VIII., IX.)

The rapid changes which are effected at the present time by the progress of agriculture in the country, and architectural and other improvements in towns, result in bringing to light relics, long hid from observation, in greater numbers, perhaps, than they ever were before. There is, no doubt, also more intelligent attention paid to these "finds" now than ever there was; nevertheless it is to be feared that in too many instances a very partial observation, ending perhaps in a casual paragraph in a local newspaper, is all that comes of it. And many an important relic discovered in this way, after being looked upon as a local curiosity for a brief space, is thrown aside, forgotten, and destroyed before any adequate copy or description of it has been made for preservation.

This is more or less true of all classes of archæological objects, but it is specially so of that class which has principally come under my observation, namely, Mural Antiquities—sculptured memorials about old churches, whether specially interesting for their architectural or artistic value, or as monuments of historical events either of national, local, or family interest, and that class of antiquities peculiar to our north-eastern counties, known as "Sculptured Stones." In too many instances, when examples in either of the former of these classes are discovered, after doing duty in satisfying vulgar wonder for a very short time, they are broken up

without hesitation, sometimes into road metal, and at others to be wrought as common rubble into some neighbouring building. Should they escape this speedy fate, they are generally "restored" in a manner that destroys half their value, or are placed in such a position for "preservation" as ensures their speedy destruction.

The feeling of veneration for the "Sculptured Stones," and their uncouth and as yet unexplained symbols, which has always been a characteristic of the agricultural people of Scotland, has hitherto tended to their greater protection than that of any other class of our mural antiquities. When any new stone turned up it was generally consigned to the nearest graveyard, or put up with its face exposed beside some farm dyke or country road, where it might be reasonably well seen. In this way many examples have been preserved that have been specially valuable to workers desiring to elucidate this class of monuments. But notwithstanding this popular and praiseworthy veneration, often fostered by traditional legends, many examples have been but lately lost sight of. I have on several occasions spent days, without avail, in search of stones which had been seen by persons still living, and partially described in the statistical accounts, or other works, published during the last eighty or a hundred years. And it is within my knowledge that the same destructive influences are at work around us still, though operating beyond the range of antiquarian knowledge and influence. This is deeply to be regretted at such a time as the present, when so much attention is paid to all remains of unquestionable authenticity, by which theories may be tested, corrected, or thrown aside, and when so many opportunities are afforded for collecting and storing those fragments of material, the real value of which can only be known when they are wrought by skilful hands into the structure to which they belong.

One reason why many antiquities which are casually brought to light slip out of existence without being properly recorded, is the difficulty often experienced by provincial observers in having anything which they think deserving of note to say about the object found or its history. Being away from the centre of literary knowledge, they have not the means of readily informing themselves about what is generally known of the class to which it belongs, or they distrust what they do know; and they therefore defer bringing the object under the attention of such a Society

as ours, in the hope that something may turn up for them to say about it worthy of the occasion. This something seldom does turn up, and the object is laid aside, and lies till all interest in it is gradually lost. Thus the existence of many valuable relics is never brought under the notice of those capable of judging of their real worth till it is too late, the objects being either lost altogether or mutilated beyond the power of recognition. It sometimes also happens that an antique, really valuable in its own place, is raised by the local possessor into an importance that does not properly belong to it, and it is belauded and "restored" in a manner that proves as fatal to it as neglect would have been. A speedy fate then awaits it. A change of fashion takes place, or the owner of the object comes to the knowledge of its true worth, which he had before over estimated; a revulsion of feeling is the consequence, and it is thrown aside as a piece of worthless lumber, when in reality the article might be of considerable value to those who knew how to use it.

Architectural and ecclesiastical remains are subject, however, to destruction from far other causes. In many parts of the country such remains, whatever their artistic excellence, are associated with superstitious practices and beliefs which are considered characteristic of a Church that has been superseded, and no respect is paid to them. Besides this, they are sometimes, from motives of economy or greed, ruthlessly thrown down and destroyed whenever occasion occurs. "There has," says Mr Billings, "been more destruction among this class of antiquities within the last hundred years, in Scotland, than ever there was before; and her own children, from no religious or party prejudices, but from sheer motives of gain, have been the despoilers."¹ And no one who has travelled much, and been observant of the architectural "bits" that remain to grace the ruins of our older churches, or the monuments and slabs that lie broken and neglected about our burial grounds, will be inclined to doubt his assertion. Nor is this destruction confined to Scotland. It is, unfortunately, as prevalent, if not more so, in England, at least in the northern counties. I have in several places seen crosses and monumental slabs that had been but lately smashed into fragments lying among the rubbish in the rector's garden, or set up as meaningless ornaments in his shrubbery, any one of which would have made a

¹ Antiquities of Scot., vol. i. p. 4.

Scottish graveyard famous. We learn, from published information, the sad havoc that has been made among the English brasses and the old sculptured slabs, but it is satisfactory to know that of most of the former, at least of those now lost, more or less perfect rubbings or copies have been preserved.

It is with the view of suggesting whether something of this kind could be done for the somewhat similar class of antiquities in Scotland that I have brought this subject before the Society. The slabs and crosses of Argyllshire are well known to be unexampled, in several respects, among the antiquities of any country, and we have remains of slabs, fonts, aumbrays, and kindred objects, scattered over the whole country that are too much overlooked, and are so fast going to waste, that it would be well for the Society to endeavour to preserve copies of them before it is too late.

The Spalding Club has done much for one class of the sculptured stones in Scotland. Captain White and others have done good service among other classes; but much remains yet to be done. There is plenty of talent and will, no doubt, in the Society, if the work was allocated and understood. If those who can use the pencil in correct sketching, or the burnisher in the way of rubbings, would, during their summer wanderings, do a little, season by season, for the "Proceedings," or publication in any other form that the Society might deem expedient, we should soon have a collection of materials, the value of which it would be difficult to over-estimate.

There are, I understand, some members who have already sketches of this kind lying uselessly beside them that could readily be made available if the proper mode of issue could be resolved on. In my wanderings, in the work of the Spalding Club and otherwise, I have collected a good many such, which might be of use to inquirers could they have access to them, and I would be glad to place them at the disposal of the Society for this purpose, along with such others as I may pick up, from time to time, within the range of my observation.

I select, at present, a few specimens, which have been recently gathered, leaving extended remarks on them to be made by members better qualified for this than I am.

The illustrations Nos. 1 and 2, Plate VII., are of stones from the old

church of Tullich, near Ballater, on the Dee, Aberdeenshire. Tullich is a very old ecclesiastical site. The first church there is said to have been founded by St Nachlan, who flourished about 450, and it used to be termed the mother church of the district. The inhabitants still commemorate the anniversary of the saint by holding a meeting on the 8th of January¹.

Stone No. 1 was discovered by the Rev. Mr Michie in 1875. It was lying with its sculptured face downwards, on the top of a recess formed by the building up of a door in the north wall of the old ruin.

Stone No. 2, which shows simply an incised Calvary cross, has been long seen forming the outside lintel of the south door of the church. There is another stone with a cross, less entire, forming a back lintel to the same door.

There are known to have been other two sculptured stones standing in this locality till a very recent date, which have been destroyed, and of which we have no account or reliable description. One of them stood on the market stance of the old village of Tullich, and was known as St Nachlan's Cross. It is said to be about 12 feet in height, and was removed to make way for a turnpike road, and broken up for building stones. The other stood about half a mile east of the old church on a mound, till it had to be displaced during the formation of the Deeside Railway, when it also was destroyed. No drawing of it has been preserved, but a reliable authority—Mr Jervise—says it bore a considerable resemblance to the Skeith stone of Kilrenny, figured in the "Sculptured Stones of Scotland," vol. ii. plate 124.

Illustration No. 3, Plate VII., is from a small fragment found by the writer in the old churchyard of Fetterangus, in Buchan, during last summer. Fetterangus is an old ecclesiastical site. What was the old parish forms a detached part of Banffshire, and was formerly a part of the parish of Lungley, where St Fergus is said to have established a cell in the sixth century, previous to taking up his residence in Angus, where he died.² There are records of its having been granted to the monks of Arbroath by Bishop Adam of Aberdeen in 1207, which grant was confirmed by William the Lion, between the years 1212 and 1214,

¹ Ant. of Aberdeen and Banff, vol. i. p. 133.

² Book of Deer, p. 3.

and by Pope Honorius III. in 1220.¹ The foundations only of the old chapel remain. The stone is, no doubt, a mere fragment of what it once had been. It is of hard whitestone, water-worn rather than dressed, similar to the others of its class so frequent in Aberdeenshire. It, as well as No. 1, is interesting as showing examples of the symbolic figures which have been exercising the ingenuity and research of the learned for the past half century to discover their meaning. It is difficult to say as yet from what quarter a satisfactory solution of the enigma of those symbols may come, and therefore two such examples on such sites may prove to be not without their value.

Nos. 1 and 2, Plate VIII., represent the two sides of a stone which for long lay loose in the old chapel of Kinkell on Donside. It has now been placed on a pedestal for better preservation. The inscription on No. 1 sufficiently shows the date and original purpose of the monument; but it is interesting to notice, from the inscription on the other side (No. 2), how soon such a memorial—to one who must have been eminent in his day, and who died in all probability on the battlefield of Harlaw, in the neighbourhood—should have been cut down, desecrated, and appropriated as a tombstone for another, a member of a different family altogether, and that family one of wealth and standing in the county. It is perhaps more interesting still, as an example of the incised slab, in the style of the monumental brasses of the Middle Ages, a class of work very uncommon in the north of Scotland.

In the church of Kinkell there are some other sculptures of considerable elegance, which may be attended to hereafter.

The stone figured on Plate IX. is from a memorial slab found, along with some others of the same type, under the floor of the cathedral of Old Aberdeen, during the progress of recent repairs. It is noticeable, as illustrating the style of mural monuments that succeeded the one last mentioned, and is not perhaps without its value, as giving a sample of the professional robes of a dignitary of that age. The slab has, along with the others found, been placed on the pavement of the church to walk upon, and will therefore soon be effaced.

Stone No. 4, Plate VII., belongs to a class of sculptures which should not perhaps be altogether overlooked by the Society. They turn up now and

¹ Ant. of Aberdeen and Banff, vol. i. p. 419; vol. ii. p. 394.

again, and sometimes cause no little trouble. I have been frequently induced to take journeys to out-of-the-way places to see some of these spurious antiquities. Sometimes markings on what had been at one time earthfast stones, were taken for letters—Runes or Oghams—or designs, while to an experienced eye they resolved themselves into accidental lines caused by natural fractures of the stone or ruts made by the plough in passing over them in the usual routine of farm work. At other times it was unmistakably tool-carving, but of no age or interest, and doubtless done thoughtlessly, like the example here shown, without any purpose to deceive.

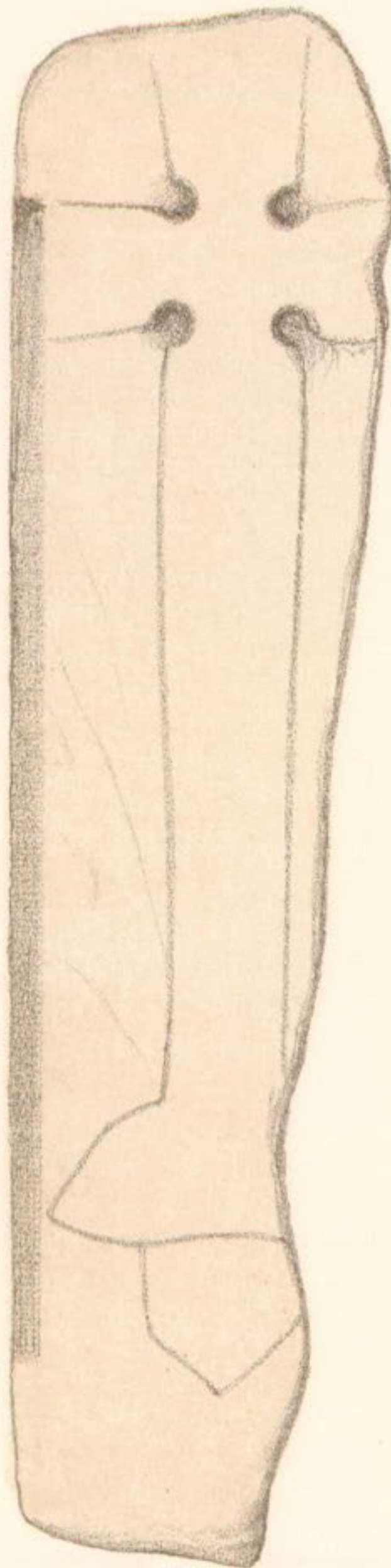
This stone (Plate VII., No. 4) I found at the ruins of “Macduff’s Castle,” near East Wemyss, Fifeshire. It was beautifully cut, and in a complete state of preservation, having been but recently done; and in case it might come into notice at some after period as an antique, I made certain on the spot that it was cut by an ingenious mason, who was employed at the building of a spinning mill in the immediate neighbourhood, as a piece of practice in letter-cutting, or as a frolic to while away idle time that may have hung heavy on his hand.

Other stones of a similar kind exist in several places, two of which I lately saw near Dunecht House, Aberdeenshire, one with an inscription, at Easter Culfosie, and the other, cut with a basin-like cavity, at Upper Mains, in the same locality. I am sorry I cannot at present show adequate sketches of these. They were done by an industrious “herd loon,” to enliven the monotony of his dull occupation. They are quite rude enough to deceive an inexperienced eye.

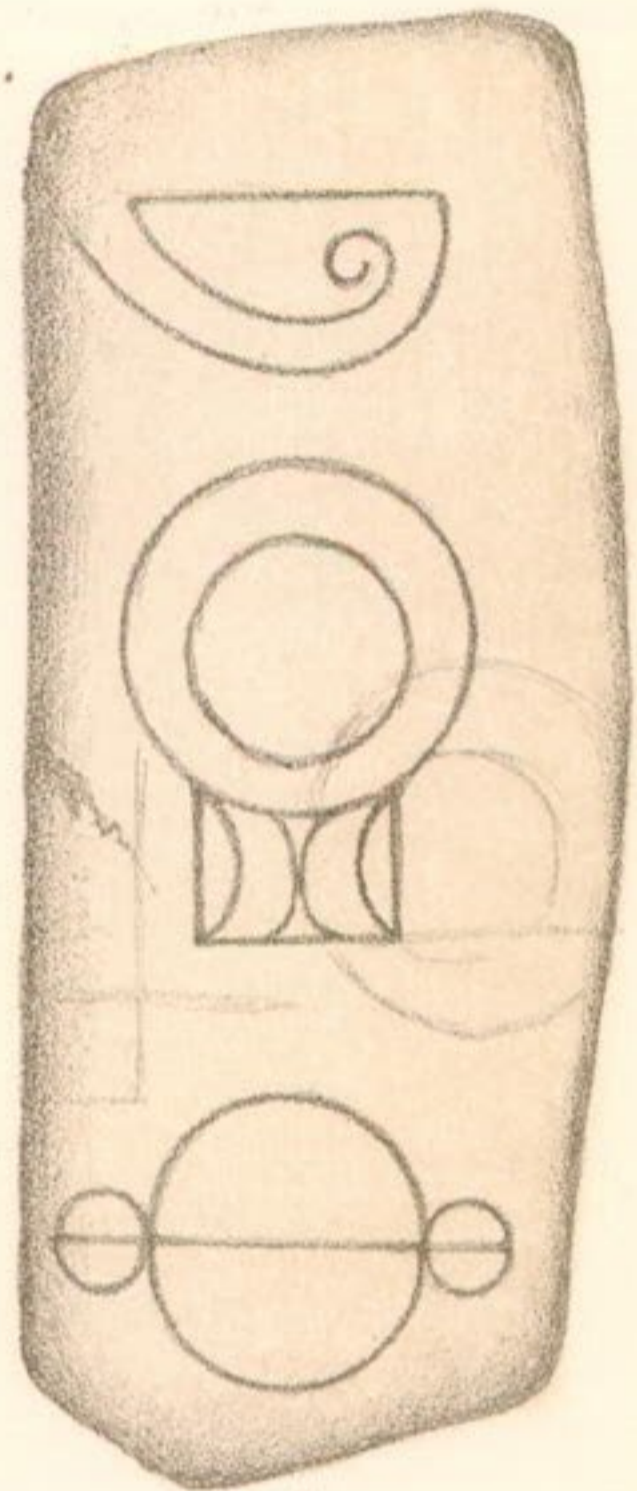


1.

AT TULLICH.



2.



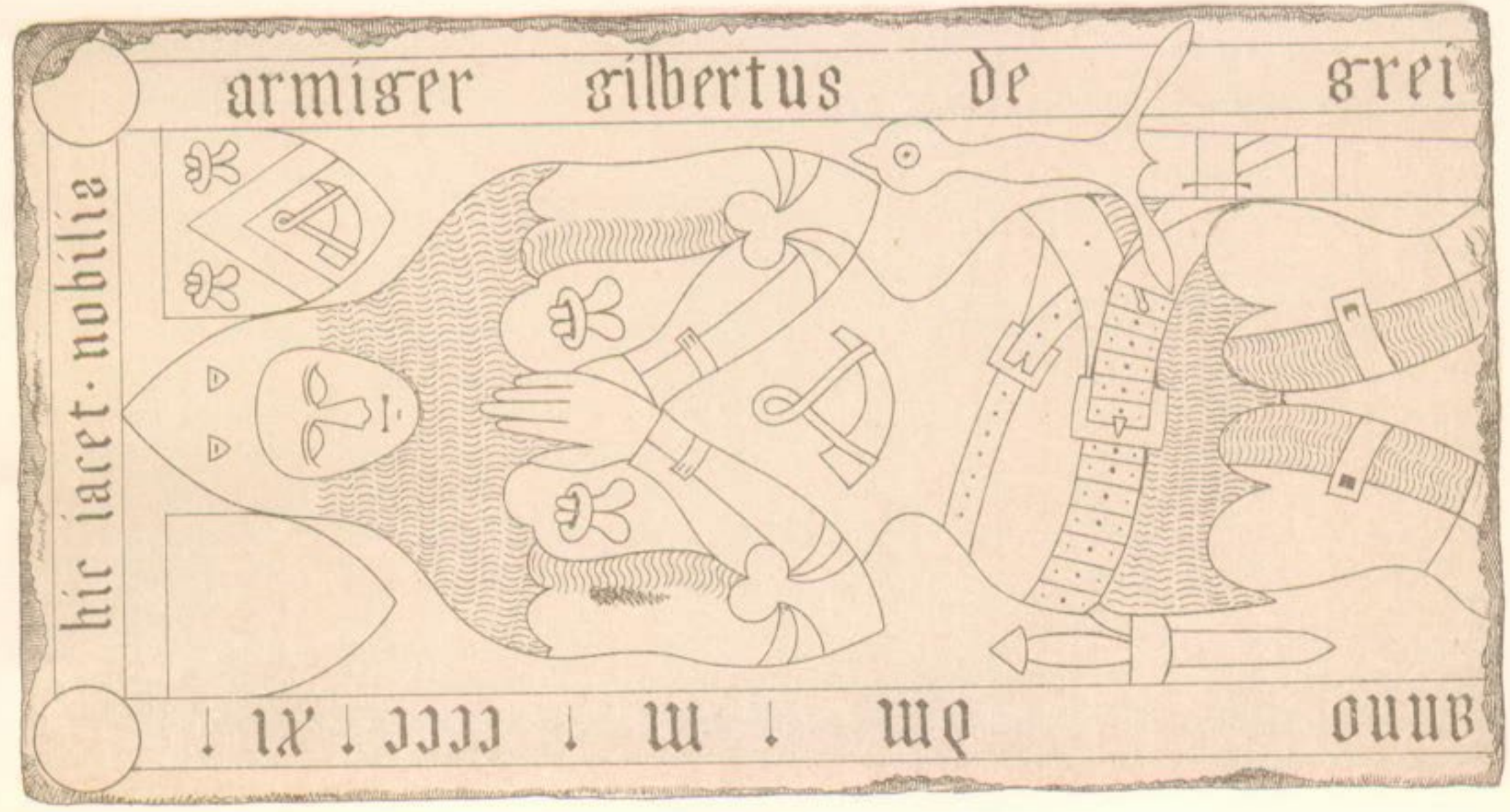
3.

AT FETTERANGUS.

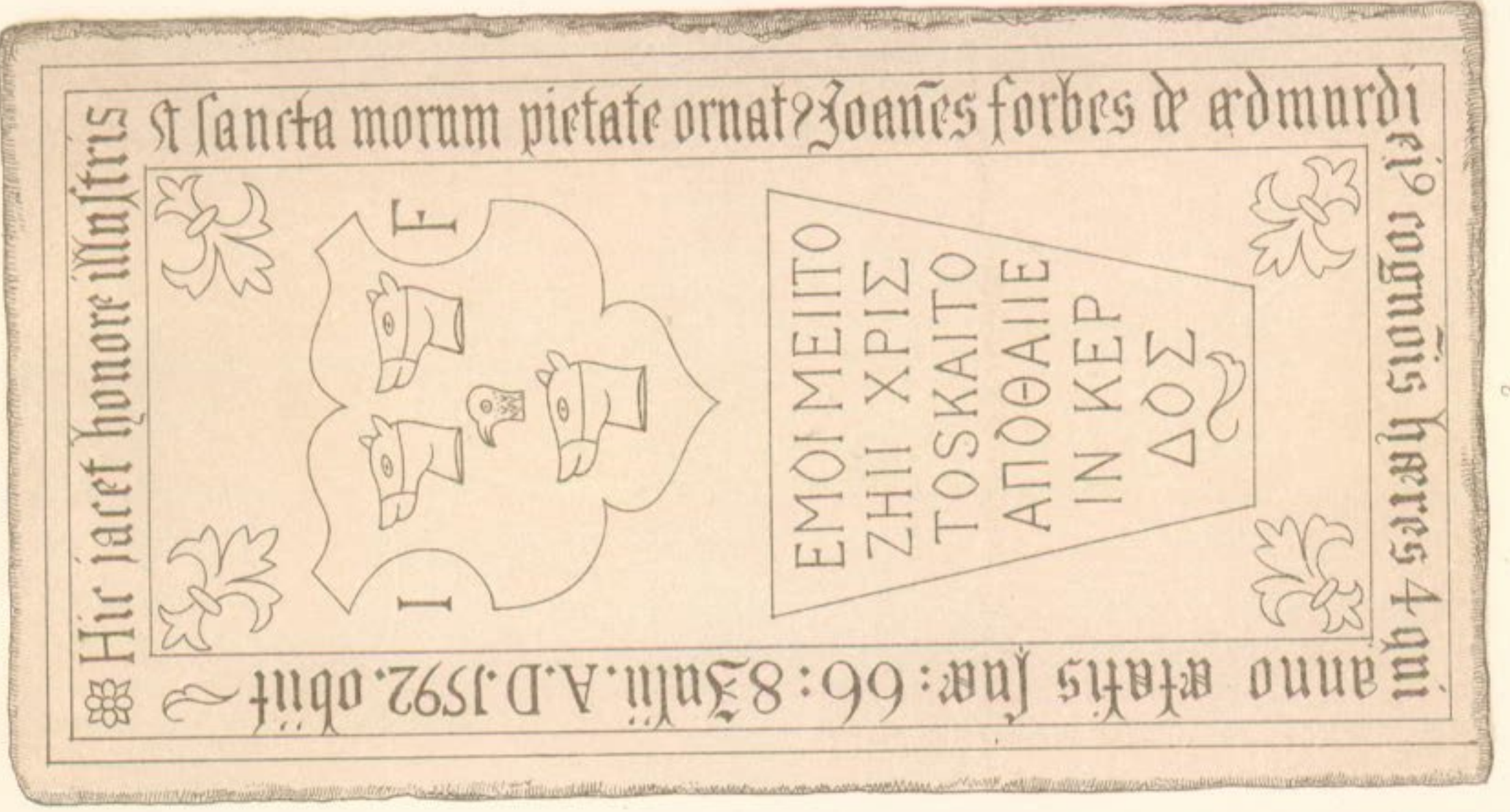


7.

AT EAST WEMYSS.



AT KINKELL.



2



IN OLD MACHAR CATHEDRAL, ABERDEEN.