

V.

NOTICE OF ST CLEMENT'S CHURCH AT ROWDILL, HARRIS.

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The church of St Clement at Rowdill, in Harris (fig. 1), is situated at the south-east angle of the island, on a rising promontory near a land-locked bay at the eastern end of the entrance to the Sound of Harris. The church lies due east and west, and is cruciform in plan (fig. 2), measuring 61 feet in length by 15 feet in breadth, with transepts measuring 9 feet by 17 feet 6 inches, and 10 feet by 15 feet. There is a square tower at the west end, of the full width of the church, and about 45 feet high, capped with a slated roof. The church is founded on a very uneven surface, the tower being on a rock many feet above the level of the nave, but accessible from it by a stair in the wall now closed up. (See the sections, fig. 4.) The modern building is generally of very common material and workmanship, but the more ancient structure seems to have been of better material and more refined construction. Judging by its present appearance, I am inclined to conclude that the original building had become so far ruinous that only the lower portions of the walls of the nave, tower, transept, and east gable remained intact, and that the upper portion of the walls of the nave and tower had been built out of the old materials without much regard to character or design. The windows were built square for wooden sashes, and the upper portion of the tower repaired with fragments of the old moulded corners and rybats and sculptures used promiscuously, as was found convenient, so that several of the sculptured figures have been placed in most unlikely positions, as chance to some extent dictated. The positions of the figures over the door are notable examples of this. One of the figures on the south side of the tower is remarkable on account of its dress (fig. 5). The lower portions of the walls of the nave, the transept arches, and the side and end windows of the chancel are evidently of early date, as are also the tombs recessed into the walls, the arches of which are apparently of contemporary workmanship with the arches of the transepts. The arches both of the

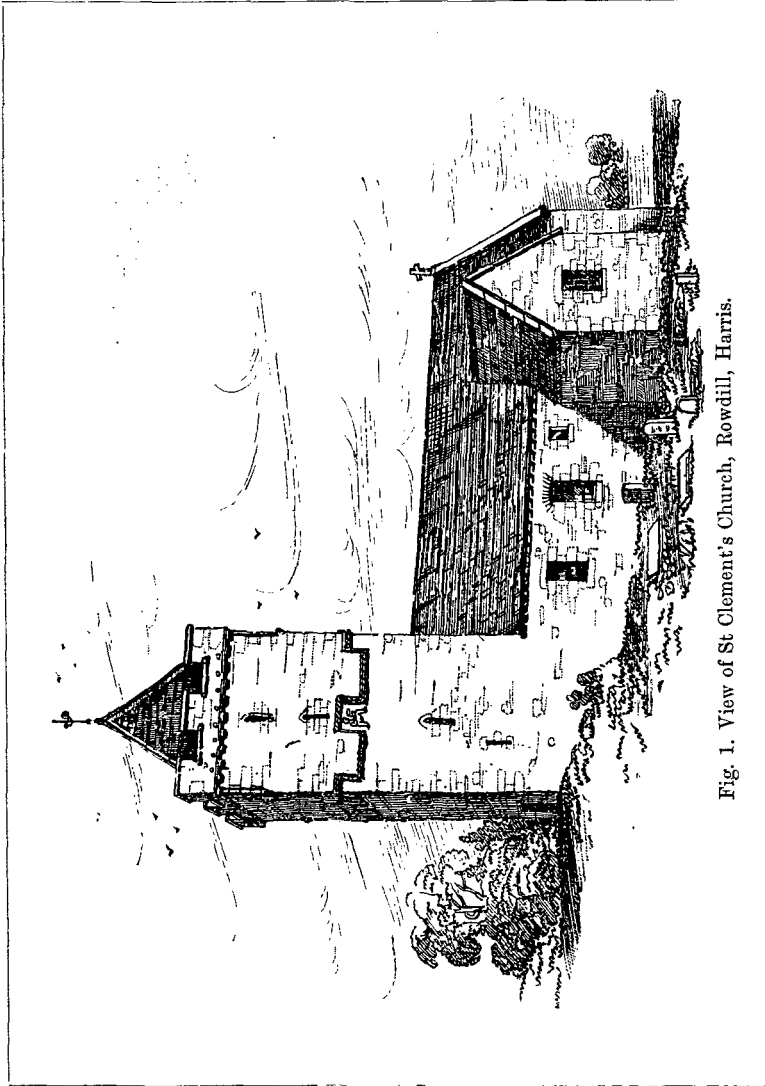


Fig. 1. View of St Clement's Church, Rowdill, Harris.

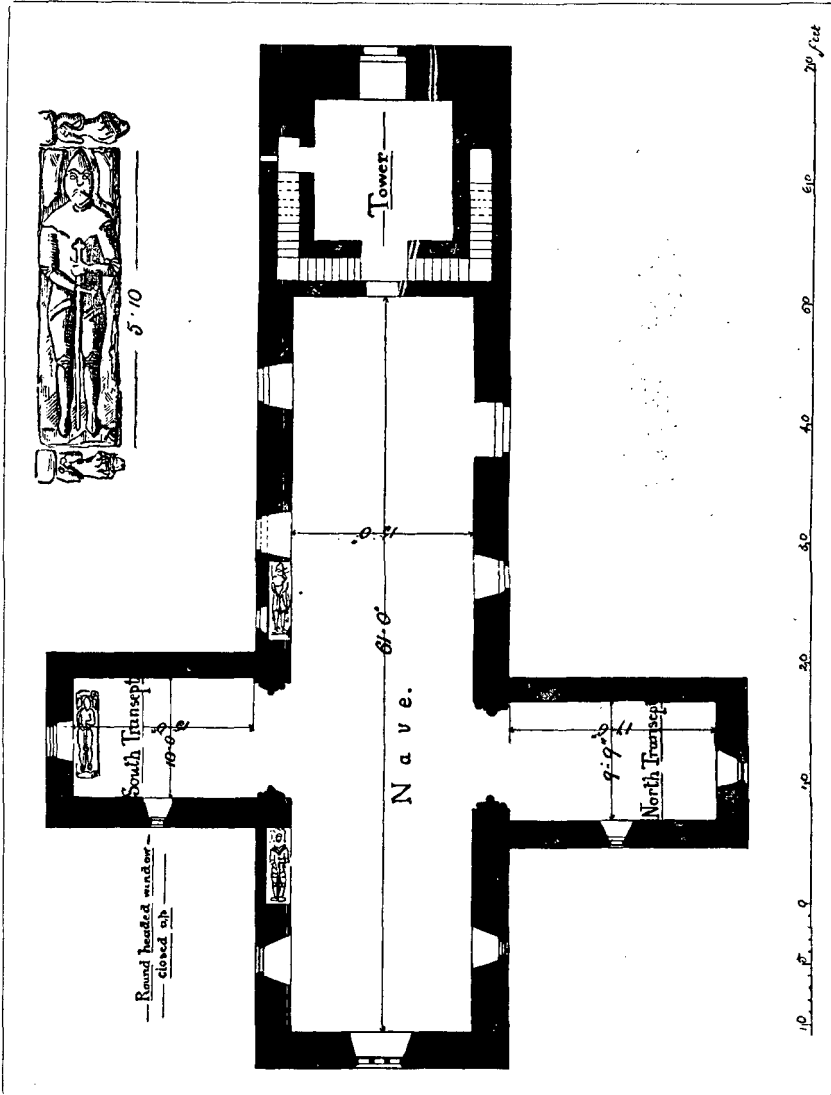


Fig. 2. Ground Plan of St Clement's Church, Rowhill, Harris.

tombs and of the transepts are cast in a pale yellow freestone with alternate bands of hornblende schist, but the filling in of the panels at the back of the tombs appears to suggest possibly a later date or a subsequent adaptation. The impression conveyed by the general character of the work—the mouldings, transept arches, and arches of tombs—is that of the work of an amateur, who having seen good work, was trying to imitate it; for while the forms indicate the class of moulding intended, they fail to give it expression with mathematical accuracy.¹ The east window is cut out of hornblende schist, and is a

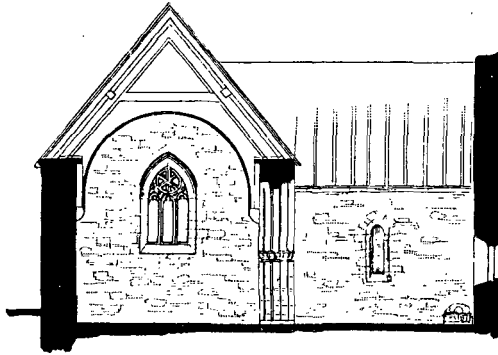


Fig. 3. Section through Nave and South Transept of St Clement's Church, Rowdill.

very remarkable piece of work of its kind. It is of three lights, with a circle or wheel over, divided by six straight spokes. The mouldings are decorated with rows of nail-head ornaments, as are also the labels on the windows and tombs. A plain font (fig. 7), or holy-water stoup, it is not easy to say which, lies on the floor of the nave.

The tomb bearing the inscribed panel is situated to the east of the transept, and exhibits the full-length effigy of a knight in armour of

¹ The character of the work appears to indicate an Italian or Spanish school, and probably the designer may have obtained his knowledge in one or other of these countries.

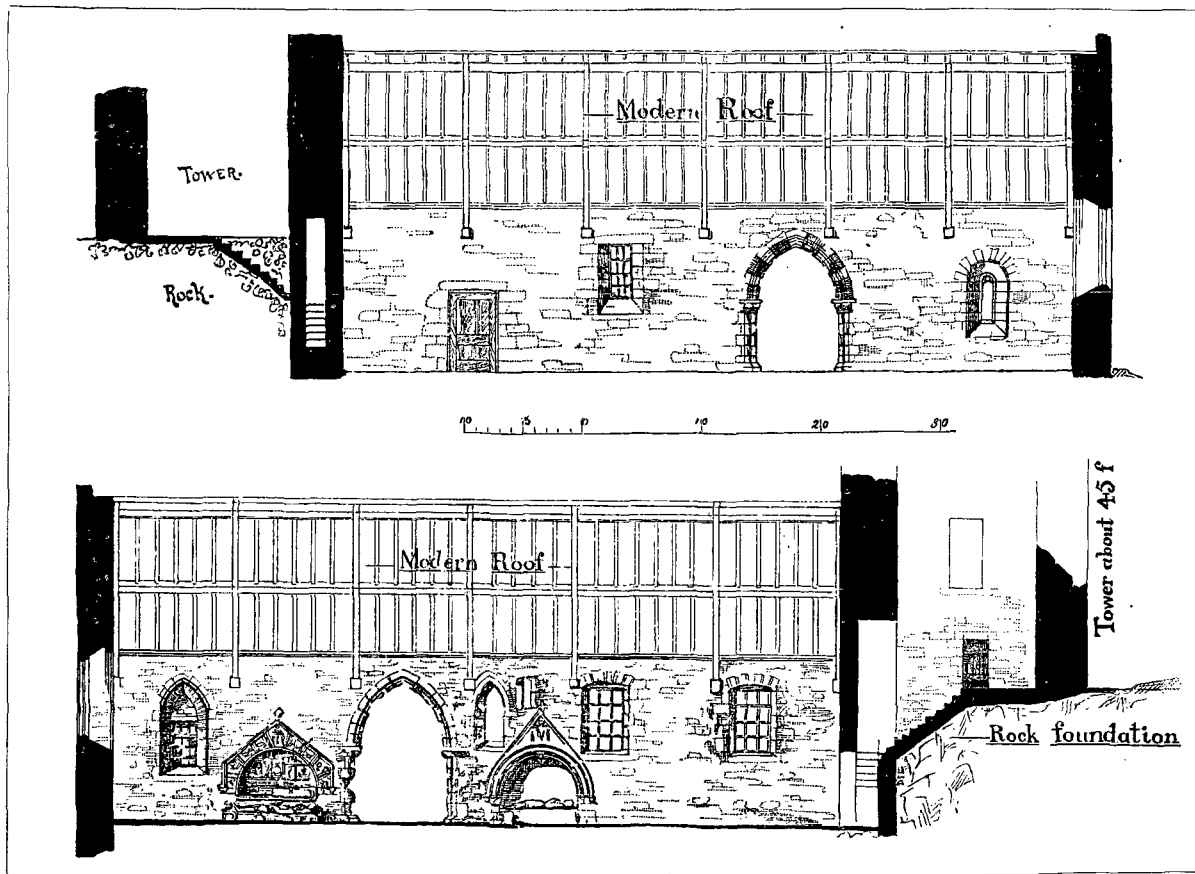


Fig. 4. Longitudinal Sections of St Clement's Church Rowdill, looking north and south.

plate, placed under a recessed arch. The feet of the effigy, which are to the east, rest upon an animal, and over the head is a panel with the following inscription in black letter :—

Hic : locvlvs : cōposit̄
 : Allēxāder : filiūs : bilm̄i
 Mat̄ : Clod̄ : dnō : de dūbegan
 Anno : dñi : m° : ccc° : xxviii°

The first word of the second line is partly illegible, and the inscription is so ungrammatical that it cannot be strictly construed, but its meaning appears to be that Alexander, son of William Macleod of Dunvegan, made this tomb, A. D. 1528.

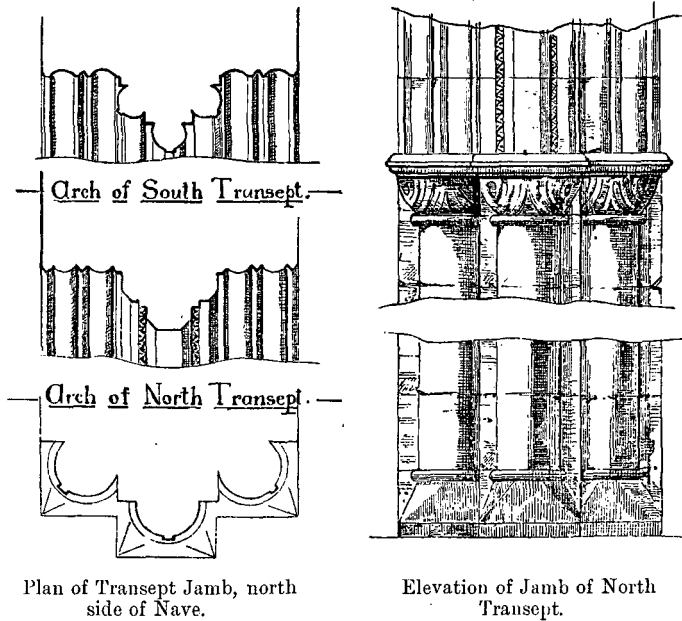
It is somewhat difficult to account for the erection of such an elaborate monument to a Highland chief in the remote Western Isles at that period. But the peculiar character of the monument, with its sculptured panels filling up the back of the recessed arch, is not unknown in the Hebrides. There is a recessed monumental arch, similarly decorated on the back with sculptured panels, in the church of Kildonan, in the island of Eigg,¹ and among the many churches throughout the islands there may have been others of similar character. The effigy of the person commemorated by this elaborately sculptured tomb at Rowdill (figs. 8, 9) is represented in armour of plate corresponding to the period. The conical bassinet is surrounded by a jewelled wreath; the camail short, the military belt confining the lower part of the close-fitting jupon worn over a hauberk with vandyked



Fig. 5. Figure of a Man built into the upper part of the wall of the Tower, Rowdill.

¹ Described and figured by Professor Macpherson of Eigg, in the *Proceedings*, vol. xii. p. 583.

edge, the thigh-pieces curiously hinged, the knee-pieces peaked, and the sollarrets short and obtusely pointed. The sword, which is cross-hilted, is held by both hands in front of the figure, the pommel reaching to the breast, and the point of the sword placed between the feet.



Plan of Transept Jamb, north side of Nave.

Elevation of Jamb of North Transept.

Fig. 6. Details of Arches and Jambes of Transepts.

The decoration of the panels forming the back of the recess is very peculiar (see fig. 10). On the left and over the feet of the effigy there is a hunting scene, in which a huntsman on foot, armed with sword and spear, is followed by two attendants, each with two hounds in leash. In the panel immediately in front, is a group of three stags. The panel adjoining the inscription bears a representation of St Michael weighing souls, the devil sitting by, and evidently taking a practical interest in the

operation. In the second row of panels, beginning again at the left, we have first the representation of a castle, then three panels with canopied niches, of which the centre one represents the Virgin crowned and seated on a throne, and bearing in the right hand a sceptre, while with the left she supports the Holy Child upon her knee; the two panels on either side represent abbots—the one on the left with mitre and crosier, and the right hand raised in the attitude of benediction; the one on the right presenting a skull, as the emblem of mortality, in his right hand, and holding the crosier with his left. The last panel in this row shows a galley in full sail, and the side pierced for seventeen oars, not borne heraldically upon a shield, but represented

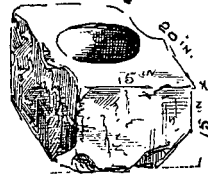


Fig. 7. Font or Holy-Water Stoup in St Clement's Church, Rowdill.

pictorially, as if it formed part of the symbolism with which it is surrounded. The three upper panels immediately underneath the crown of the arch contain figures of angels. In the centre panel are two angels face to face blowing trumpets, and on either side a single angel with a censer. The fronts of the voussoirs of the arch are also decorated with a series of sculptures, the centre-piece over the crown of the arch representing God the Father seated, crowned with a tiara, and holding between the knees the figure of the crucified Saviour nailed to the cross, with angels on either side. Of the eight panels bordering the sides of the arch, one on each side is filled with the figure of an angel holding a censer, and three on each side are filled with pairs of figures holding inscribed scrolls which are now illegible. There are traces of a nimbus surrounding the heads of some of the figures which are best preserved. Sir Walter Scott regarded them as figures of the twelve apostles; but they seem more likely to be merely emblematical.

Of the other two effigies, the one in the nave to the west of the transept (fig. 11) represents a man in armour with high peaked bassinet and camail over a habergeon reaching to the knee. The nature of the defences of the feet and legs is not indicated. He holds a long straight cross-hilted sword in front, the pommel reaching to the breast and the point placed between the feet. A dagger hangs at his left side, but the



Fig. 8. Front View of Effigy under recessed Arch of Tomb to east of Transept.

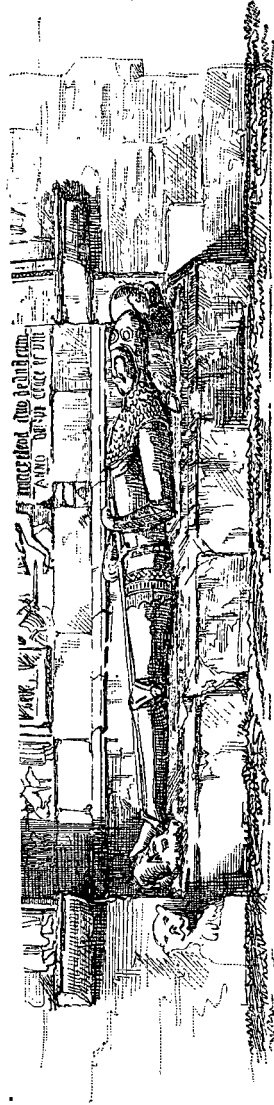


Fig. 9. Effigy under recessed Arch of Tomb (fig. 10) to east of Transept.

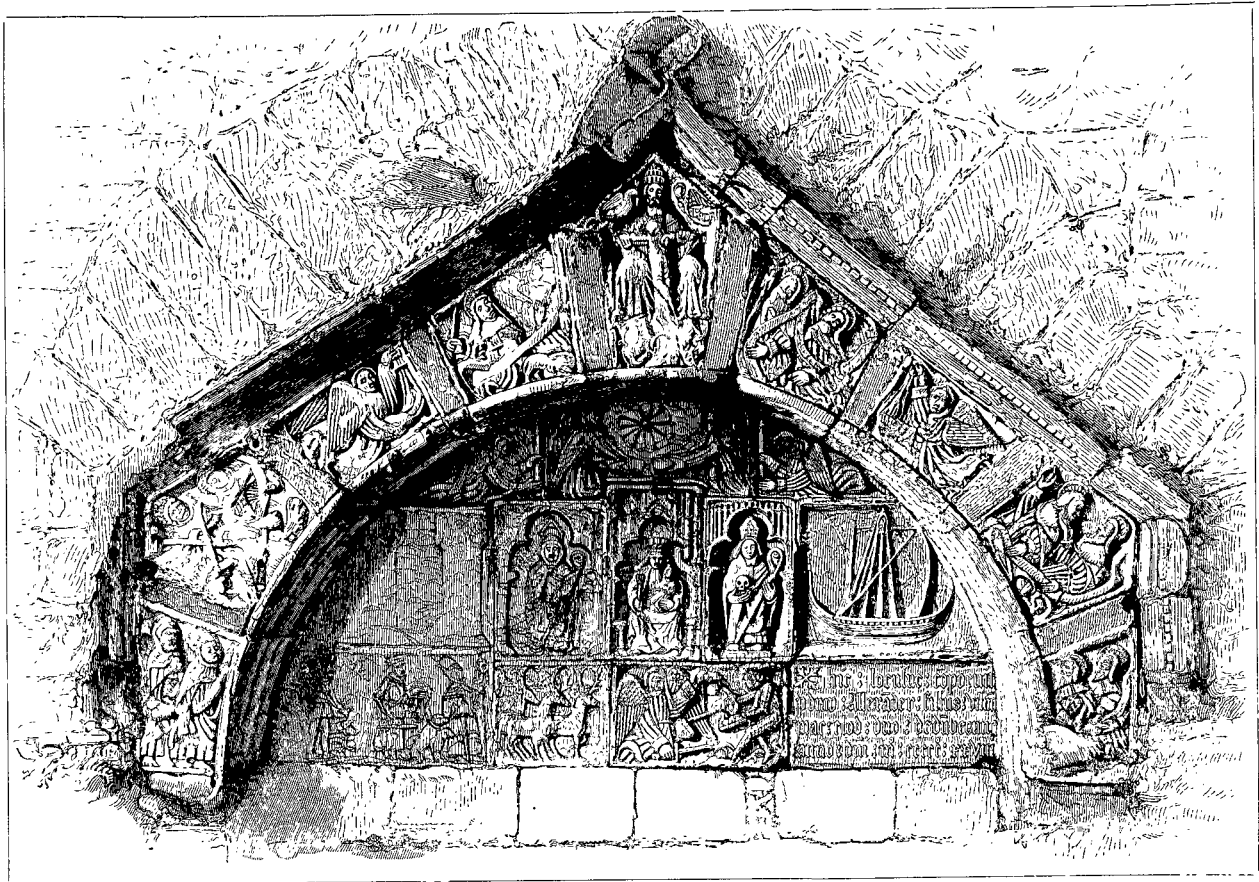


Fig. 10. Recessed Arch over Effigy (fig. 9) to east of Transept, showing sculptured panels and voussoirs.

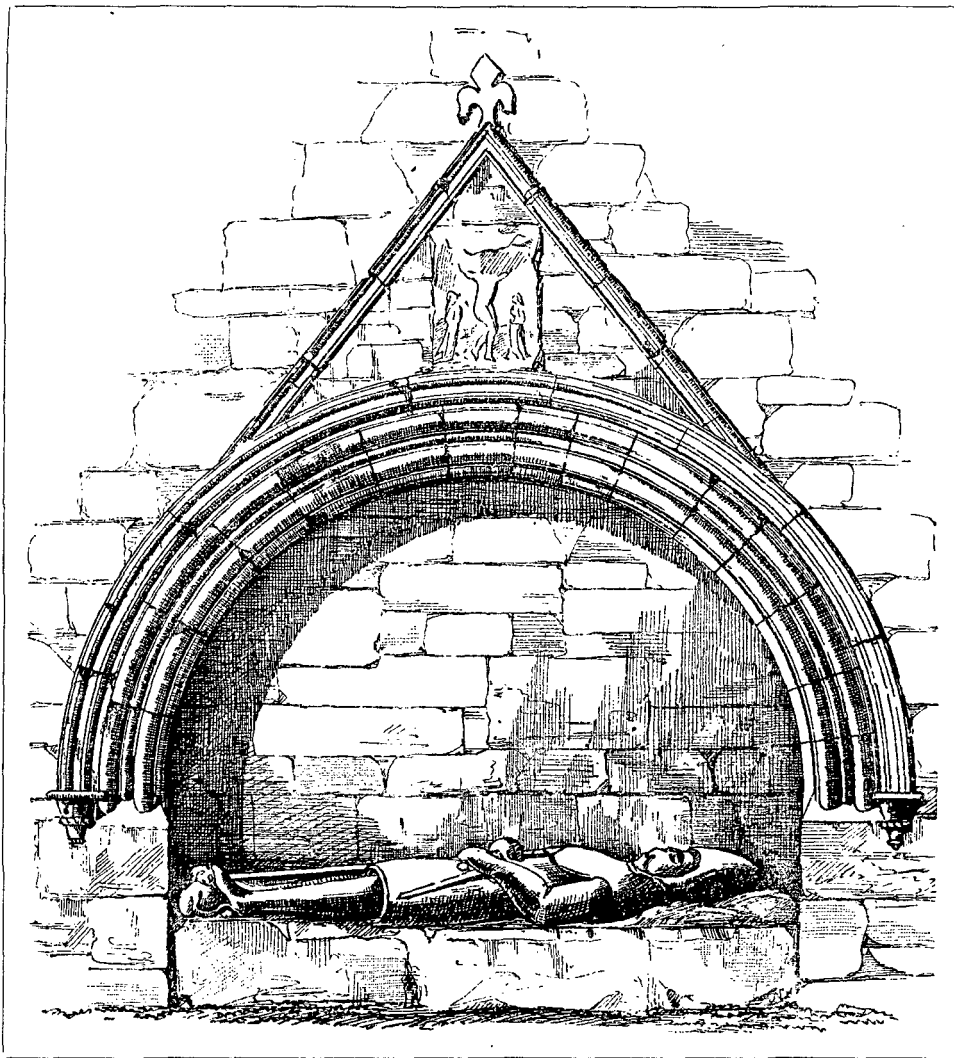


Fig. 11. Effigy in recessed Arch to west of Transept.

military belt is wanting. The third effigy, which now lies at the end of the south transept (see fig. 2), is apparently in armour of plate, with low conical bassinet and camail, but the details are much worn, and difficult to make out. He holds the long sword in the same fashion as the other two effigies, with the pommel on the breast and the point between the feet; but in this case the sword has the reversed guard, so commonly seen on many of the West Highland monuments.

Mr Thomas S. Muir, author of the well-known work on the *Characteristics of Old Church Architecture in Scotland*, who visited Rowdill in 1866, has the following remarks on the architectural features and probable date of the church, in his recently issued work, entitled *Ecclesiological Notes on some of the Islands of Scotland*:—

Excepting some curious sculptures built into the tower, there is nothing in the exterior of the building deserving much notice. Within there are some very interesting features, viz., the peculiarly moulded arches and jambs of the side chapels; an armed effigy recumbent on a stone coffin in the south chapel; the upper portion of a small cruciform pillar of the Argyleshire pattern bearing the crucifixion on one of its faces; and two sepulchral recesses in the south wall of the church, one of them eastward and the other westward of the transeptal chapel. The eastern recess contains a mailed effigy recumbent on a low tomb. Behind, the wall of the recess is composed of twelve sculptured panels, each panel forming a distinct subject in bold relief. The recess westward of the chapel was probably adorned in a similar manner, but now the only sculpture is a crucifix, with the usual figure on either side, placed in the spandrel of the canopy. Respecting the age of the building, it would be venturesome to say anything positively, for besides the uncertainty created by the anomalous character of some of its details, nothing at all satisfactory has been recorded touching the date of its erection. Judging from the shape of most of the windows, and the kind of *tooth* and *nail-head* ornamentation carried under the label moulding and along the spokes and monials of the east end one, somewhere about the thirteenth century might be supposed; and very likely the greater part of the shell of the building, and the smaller windows in it, belong to that date, though certainly not the chapels, which it is just possible were not comprised in the original plan, for notwithstanding the resemblance to First Pointed, and even in some parts to Romanesque, observable in the arches and jambs, the work is evidently imitations only of these styles, and in all probability not earlier than the fifteenth century. Donald Monro, High Dean of the Isles, says (1594):—"Within the south part of this isle (Harris) lyes ane

monastery with ane steipell, quihlk was foundit and biggit by M'Cloyd of Harrey, callit Roodill." Who this particular Macleod of Harris was, and at what time he lived, it is impossible to say ; but as in the early part of the sixteenth century a Sir Alexander Macleod was rector of Harris, it is likely that he is the person referred to by the Dean. In the Old Statistical Account the minister of Harris also speaks of, apparently, this Alexander, and of his being the putative founder of Rodill, but asserts that he only repaired the building ; and this I am disposed to believe was all that he did, as, though by no means ancient, it must have been standing long before his time. Not *very* long however, for the whole character of the structure bears the impress of a period late in the practice of ecclesiastical architecture ; and although in the mouldings of the arches, east window, and monumental recesses in the side walls, there are ornamentations peculiar to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these an eye at all tutored will readily detect as merely imitations of the primitive types, just as we find such forms to be so in other comparatively modern buildings whose dates of erection are matters of history.

Alexander Macleod of Dunvegan, better known as Alaster Crotach, or Humpbacked, had in 1498 a charter from King James IV. of the lands commonly called Ardmanach, in Herag of the Lewis, which had belonged hereditarily to his father William Macleod, and had been held by him *in capite* of John, the late Lord of the Isles, by reason of whose forfeiture they were then in the king's hands. The *realdendo* of the charter is the ordinary service of ward and relief, together with the attendance of a galley of twenty-six oars and two galleys of sixteen oars when required, the king reserving the eyries or falcons' nests within the said lands. The inscription assigns the erection of the elaborately ornamented tomb to the year 1528, and hence it would appear that it must either have been erected in honour of William Macleod by his son Alexander, or alternatively by Alexander (son of William) in his own lifetime for himself. Alaster Crotach was alive in 1539, for in that year he had a charter of the lands and barony of Glenelg, which Hugh Fraser of Lovat had then resigned. He is mentioned as dead in a document, dated 10th January 1546-7, which conveys to the Earl of Argyle a gift of the ward of the lands which belonged to umquhile Alexander Macleod of Dunvegan. Alaster Crotach was succeeded by his eldest son William, who died without male issue in 1553, leaving an infant daughter Mary, sole heir to the old hereditary possessions of

the Seill Tormod or Macleods of Harris. These possessions included the lands of Harris, Dunvegan, Manganish, Bracadale, Duirinish, Lyne-dale, and Glenelg, but he was also the vassal of the Crown in the lands of Trouterness, Sleat, and North Uist, which made these extensive estates a male fief.¹ The contention which arose over the succession in consequence, and the subsequent fortunes of the heiress Mary Macleod, as one of the four Maries, famous in the Court of Mary Queen of Scots, are matters of history, and need not be further referred to, as we are at present more specially concerned with the history of the fabric itself.

Buchanan states that the church of Rowdill was built by Alexander Macleod of Harris—the Alaster Crotach already mentioned, who first appears in possession of Harris in 1498, and was dead in 1546. The “personage of Roidill in Hereis” appears among “the teinds and personages pertaining to the Bishop,” in the rental of the Bishopric of the Isles and Abbacy of Icolmkill drawn up in 1561. The writer of the notice in the Old Statistical Account states that the church had fallen into a ruinous condition, and was repaired in 1784 by an Alexander Macleod, then of Harris.² After it was roofed and slated, and while the materials for furnishing it were within it, the church caught fire through the carelessness of the carpenters, and the new roof was destroyed. It was again repaired, and though left unfinished in consequence of the death of the zealous proprietor, it continued to be used as one of the preaching stations in the parish. About fifteen years ago it

¹ Alaster Crotach had obtained a charter of the bailiary of these lands 15th June 1498; but a fortnight after, on 28th June, another charter made the same grant to Torquil M'Leod of Lewis. In 1528 Alexander, the laird of Harris, brought an action before the Lords of Council against John MacTorchill M'Leod and others, for dispossessing them of the bailiary of Trouterness and lands annexed to that office.

² The following inscription on a tablet on the west wall of the church commemorates this restoration:—

“Ædes Has sacras + Atavorum suorum pietate + Deo et S. Clementi + olim dicatas + postquam + mutatae religionis furor + omnia undique miscens et vastans + adjuncta fratrum et sororum Cœnobio + solo æquasset + Ipsisque his muris + jam plus cc. annos nudis et neglectis + vix pepercisset + Restituit et ornavit + et postea igne fortuite haustas + iterum restauravit + Alexander Macleod de Harris + A. D. MDCLXXXVII.”

appears to have again fallen into a very dilapidated condition, and required extensive repairs and roofing. Fortunately it was at that time taken in hand by the present Dowager Countess of Dunmore, who had it re-roofed and secured from the weather, and later on the writer of these notes had the pleasure of having the walls cleaned down and re-pointed, the old carvings and mouldings uncovered and cleared of rubbish, and the church seated with movable benches for service.