

## II.

THE SCULPTURES IN ST MIRREN'S CHAPEL, PAISLEY ABBEY, REPRESENTING THE ACTS AND MIRACLES OF ST MIRIN; ALSO INCISED SEPULCHRAL SLABS, RECENTLY DISCOVERED IN THE ABBEY CHURCH, PAISLEY. BY THOMAS ROSS, ARCHITECT, F.S.A. SCOT.

The acts or miracles of St Mirin, illustrated by the accompanying drawings, are sculptured on the inside of the east wall of the chapel dedicated to St Mirin, adjoining the south transept of the Abbey Church of Paisley. The chapel, which originally opened into the transept by two wide arches, is a building of considerable importance, being 48 feet 3 inches long by 22 feet 2 inches wide, vaulted with a stone roof, imitative of groining, in the manner so frequent in Scottish buildings of the fifteenth century. It is lighted by two traceried windows of four lights each, one in the east gable and the other in the west. Beneath the east window (as shown in fig. 1), at the height of about 6 feet above the floor, are the sculptures to be described. The acts are represented in ten panels or scenes, framed at top and bottom with continuous mouldings running from side to side of the chapel. The scenes are thus all of one height, but they vary in width, and they do not cover the whole space. Beginning at the north side, or the left hand, there are three scenes occupying a space of 3 feet 11 inches, then a blank of 8 feet 2 inches, after which the remaining space of 10 feet 1 inch is occupied with seven scenes.

In the blank space the masonry is made up of two courses of polished stones, but the sculptures are cut out of single stones in the height.

What these sculptures might represent was for long a subject of uncertainty. Charles Mackie, in his *History of Paisley*, says of them: "On comparing these figures with other Catholic relics, I am of opinion that they represent the works of Charity and Mercy, which not unfrequently ornament the altar-pieces of Catholic chapels."<sup>1</sup> He further

<sup>1</sup> *Historical Description of the Abbey and Town of Paisley*, by Charles Mackie, p. 69.

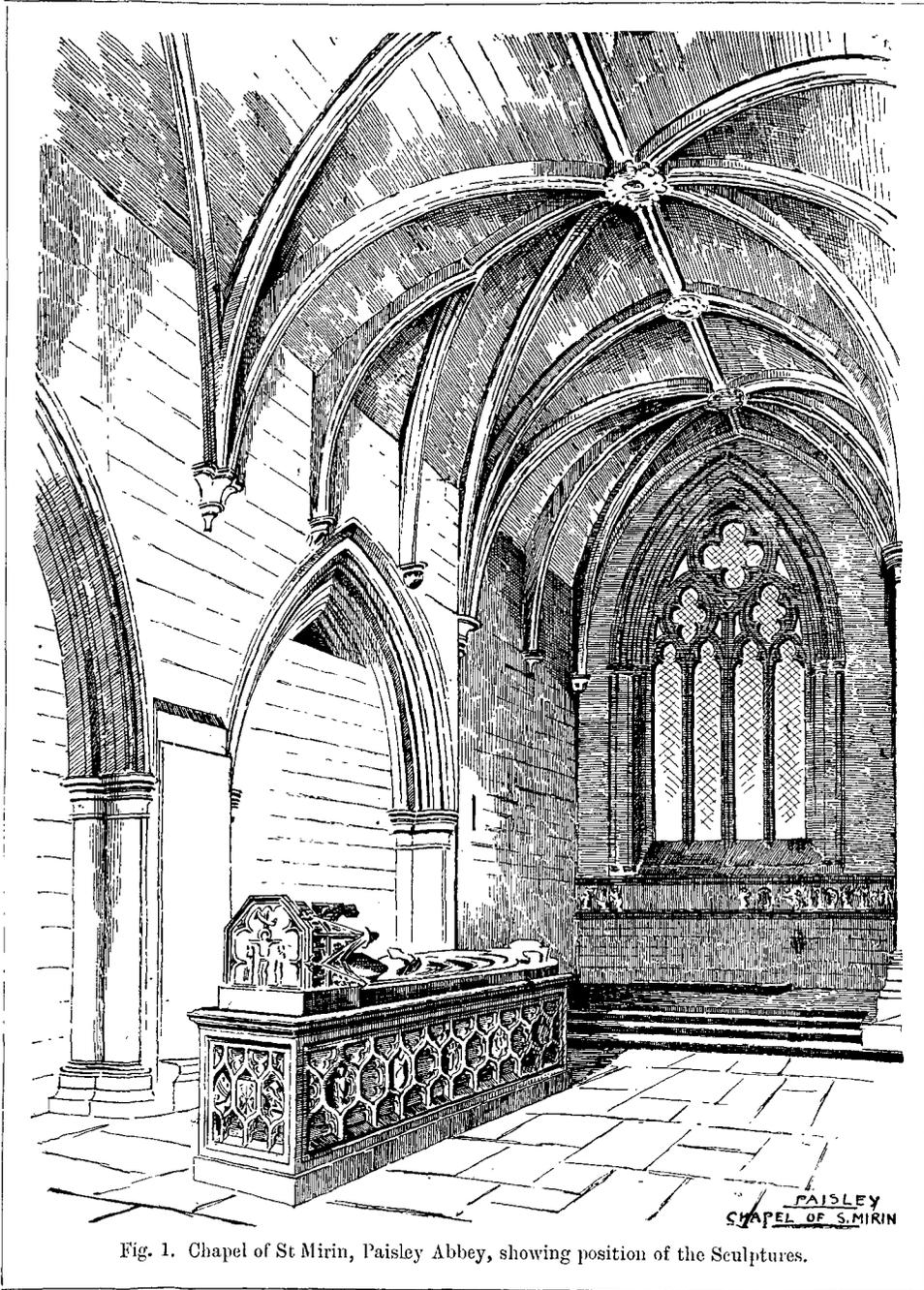


Fig. 1. Chapel of St Mirin, Paisley Abbey, showing position of the Sculptures.

quotes a detailed description of each scene from Crawford, the Renfrewshire historian, who saw in them scenes from the confessional, priests administering extreme unction, a priest pardoning a transgressor, a man holding by the horns of the altar, the holy family, etc.

The writer of the notice of the abbey in the *Baronial Antiquities* failed to discover what they represented, even although he refers to the miracles of St Mirin as recorded in the Aberdeen Breviary. He characterises them as the work of "an ancient and rude age," and "probably," he says, "they existed before the chapel itself, and were fragments of an earlier edifice."

To the Very Rev. Dr Cameron Lees belongs the credit of first detecting the real meaning of these sculptures by showing that they illustrate the legend of St Mirin as narrated in the Aberdeen Breviary,<sup>1</sup> compiled by Bishop Elphinston about 1484.

The history of St Mirin (Merinus or Meadhran) has grown very dim, but from what is known, mostly wrapped up in fable, from the lives of some of his better-known contemporaries, and from the topography of Scotland, some idea can be obtained of the man; but we need not dwell much on this, as, beyond what is told by Dr Lees<sup>2</sup> and Cosmo Innes,<sup>3</sup> there is nothing to add. Suffice it here to say that St Mirin was of noble birth. While still a youth he was taken by his mother to the Monastery of Bangor, in County Down, and placed under the care of St Congal, its abbot and founder. In course of time St Mirin became prior, and the date of this is approximately fixed by the following circumstance. St Finian of Moville, County Down, visited Bangor, and in the absence of St Congal was received by St Mirin, then prior. St Finian died in 578, so that St Mirin was prior before this date. It is supposed that he came to this country about the end of the sixth century, and there are six places bearing his name in Scotland—viz. (1) Inchmurrin, an island on Loch Lomond; (2) St Mirin's Well, Kilsyth; (3)

<sup>1</sup> *The Abbey of Paisley*, by J. Cameron Lees, D.D., p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26, and Appendix IV.

<sup>3</sup> *Registrum Monasterii De Passelet*, p. iv.

Knock Mirren, Coylton Parish, Ayrshire; (4) Kirk Mirren, Kelton Parish, Kirkeudbright; (5) The Burn of Mirran, in the Parish of Edzell; (6) Paisley; where, according to the Breviary, "At length, full of sanctity and miracles, he slept in the Lord at Paisley, in whose honour the church there is dedicated to God." His day is the 15th September.

Coming now to the sculptures and beginning at the left hand, and identifying them as Dr Lees has pointed out, we have (fig. 2) in the centre of the panel St Mirin's mother presenting her little son to St Congal; her rank and importance are indicated by a crown or coronet on her head, a richly embroidered cloak and some four attendants behind. St Congal has only one attendant.

The subject of the second panel is St Congal putting the religious habit on St Mirin (fig. 3). St Mirin is represented on his knees before the mitred saint, who is about to put the habit over his shoulders. Behind St Congal is a monk bearing a crozier and another reading the office from a book; behind Mirin is a monk as if in the attitude of saying Amen, and between him and St Congal there is a reliquary or ambry divided into small compartments. Three other figures fill up the background.

In the third scene (fig. 4) we see St Mirin taking oversight of the Monastery of Bangor. He is represented with a nimbus, standing beside the west front of a handsome Gothic church, with a lofty canopied doorway, on which the iron straps of the hinges and the large lock are wrought with minute care. In the gable, which is surmounted with a carved finial, is a large traceried window. A carved finial terminates the line of buttresses on the one side, and on the other side in the corresponding place a head crowned with a mitre looks out from the church. Above the clouds over St Mirin are two angels, and behind him a monk stretching his arm to St Mirin. Between these two there is a most curious figure—the grotesque bust of a man standing on a pedestal. May this be the representation of a heathen god, or of the heathendom which the Church was to overthrow?

The blank space occurs here, and then we have certain sculptures



Fig. 2. The Mother of St Mirin presenting her little Son to St Congal.



Fig. 3. St Congal putting the religious habit on St Mirin.

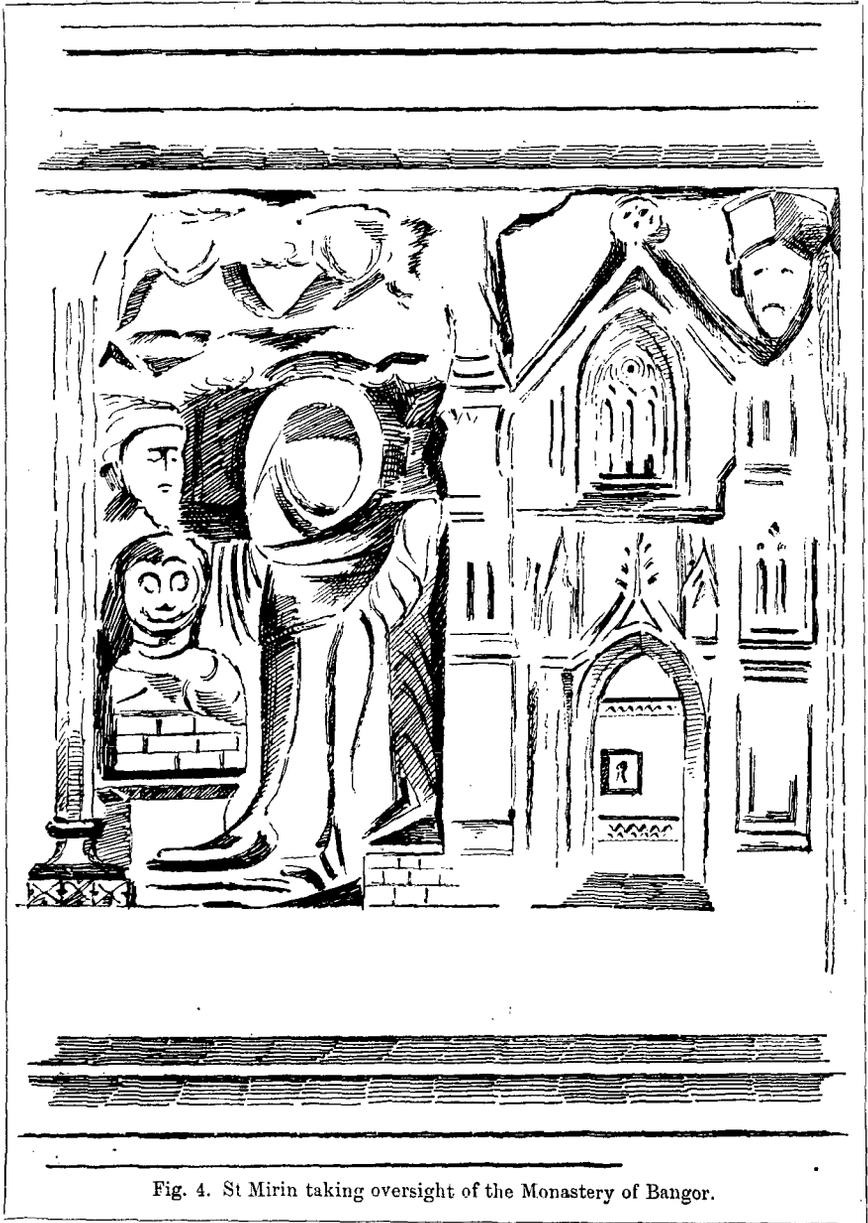


Fig. 4. St Mirin taking oversight of the Monastery of Bangor.

relating to St Mirin's encounter with an Irish king, which forms the fourth lesson of the Breviary, and is thus translated by Dr Lees:—

“Mirin afterwards proceeded to the camp of a certain king of Ireland for the purpose of establishing the Catholic faith upon a firmer footing, where the wife of the king, at the time being near her confinement, was sorely distressed by various pains and sufferings. The king having heard of Mirin's arrival, would not permit him to enter his camp; but (on the contrary) treated him with utter contempt; which the blessed Mirin perceiving, he prayed God that that accursed king might feel the pains and pangs of the suffering wife, which immediately happened, as he had besought the Lord; so that for three days and as many nights he ceased not to shout before all the chiefs of his kingdom. But the king, seeing himself so ignominiously humbled by God, and that no remedy was of any avail, sought Mirin's lodging, and most willingly granted all that he had previously desired. Then blessed Mirin by his holy prayers freed the king entirely from his pains.”

In the first scene of this grotesque and laughable incident (fig. 5) we have a youth stepping briskly out of the palace door with a birch in his hand to beat St Mirin away, who is kneeling in front of him. There are two mutilated figures behind; over what has been the head of one of them there appears something like a crown.

In the next scene (fig. 6) we have the king crowned and arrayed in a splendid robe; he is contorted with pain and dancing with despair, so that there is no doubt as to what is the matter with him. On his left hand a man with grave face administers what comfort he can, and on the other a robust figure with rounded face, from which the features are gone, seems tickled with the absurdity of the incident. The whole of this scene is represented within and beneath the palace gate, a really fine piece of architecture, most beautifully wrought out in all its details. This panel is separated from those on either side with pilasters of a renaissance character, and most carefully and minutely executed in the foliage and the mouldings.

The sixth of the series (fig. 7) contains two scenes. In the lower part we have first the queen lying in bed occupying the whole length of the panel, with a nurse bending over her administering comfort, and in the upper part we have the child lying in its cot and the mother giving her breast. Two guardian angels with outstretched wings occupy the upper portion of the panel.



Fig. 5. St Mirin being driven from the door of the Palace.



Fig. 6. The King suffering the pains transferred to him by St Mirin's Prayer.



Fig. 7. The Queen Mother and her Child.

This picture recalls two other Scottish mediæval sculptures—that of the Birth of Christ on the Rood Screen of Lincluden (fig. 8), where Mary is shown lying on a bed with the Infant in a separate cot beside her. The drapery of the bedclothes is carefully wrought in both cases, and disposed in very much the same manner. The other is a sculptured stone in the Museum (fig. 9), found in excavating the foundation of a house at the foot of Mary King's Close in Edinburgh when Cockburn Street was being

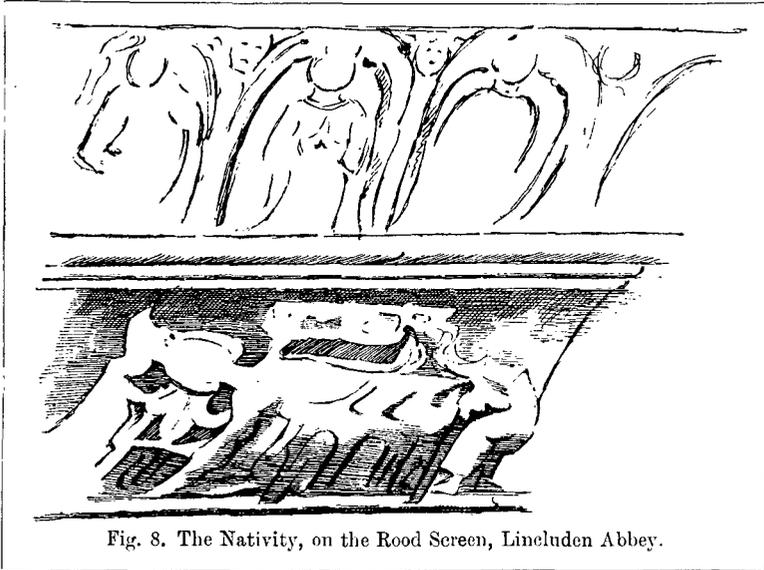


Fig. 8. The Nativity, on the Rood Screen, Lincluden Abbey.

made.<sup>1</sup> It represents a man lying in bed to whom the last sacrament is being administered. We have in this fine sculpture an ambry in the background from which the mediciner is taking out something. This suggested that the large object in fig. 3 was an ambry or reliquary.

In the seventh scene (fig. 10) we see the king, with the crown on his head, on his knees before St Mirin imploring relief. He is being assisted in his movements by a man behind. There is an ecclesiastic beside St

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. viii. p. 48.



Fig. 9. Death-bed Scene—Sculptured Panel from a house in Mary King's Close, Edinburgh.



Fig. 10. The King supplicating St Mirin.

Mirin, with a cloak having clasps across the breast, and he seems to be holding a book; other figures of the king's party are in the background. On the right is St Mirin's lodging, a richly-battlemented building of two storeys, with three traceried windows above, and an arcade of four arches below, with a very massive projecting base. A pilaster separates this from the next scene.

The eighth scene (fig. 11) represents the reconciliation of all parties. We have the king seated beside his palace; a projection of its cornice forms a canopy over his head; St Mirin kneels in front of him; both stretch out their arms in sign of mutual forgiveness, and overshadow the queen, who is seated on the ground between them with her infant on her lap. There are three other conspicuous figures. One has probably had a book on his knees.

The ninth scene forms the fifth lesson of the Breviary as follows:—

“On a certain occasion the blessed St Mirin, remaining in his cell past the usual time, the brother who waited upon him went to ascertain the cause of the delay. On approaching the cell he instantly stood in rapt amazement, for through the chinks and fissures he beheld a celestial splendour. That night the blessed St Mirin did not join the brethren at the psalmody in the church according to their wont. But understanding by Divine inspiration that the brother had been witness to such stupendous wonders, he took him apart in the morning, and charged him to tell no one during his life what he had seen on the previous night, and that in the meantime he should not presume to approach his cell.”

This subject is rendered with unmistakable fidelity. In the panel shown as fig. 12, a monk stands with bowed head in front of an arched doorway, at the top of which there is a chink to which he is applying his eye. On the other side of the door we find St Mirin (unfortunately very much mutilated), seated behind a huge open book which rests on a richly-carved arched stool. He is seated in an oratory, the roof of which is indicated in a distinctly architectural manner. Over the monk there is a conventional representation of a cloud with rays of light proceeding from the celestial regions, which penetrate the walls of the oratory and rest on the head of St Mirin. Behind the monk there is another representation of a church front.



Fig. 11. The reconciliation of the King and Queen with St Mirin.

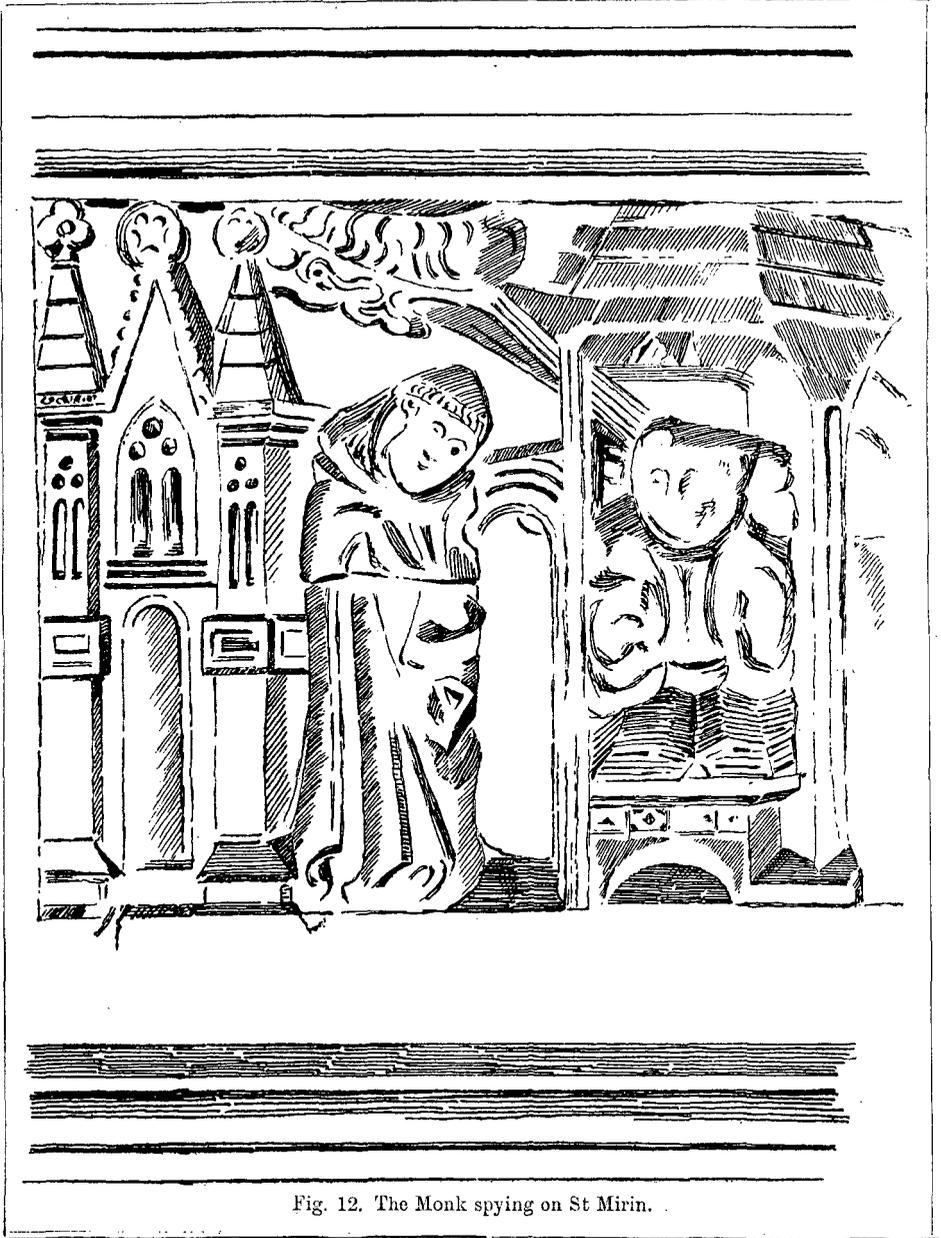


Fig. 12. The Monk spying on St Mirin.

The subject of the tenth and last sculpture (fig. 13) is the sixth lesson of the Breviary, which tells us that on another occasion, whilst the brethren of St Mirin were at work near the valley of Colpdasch, one of them quite overpowered by fatigue and thirst, falling down upon the ground, expired and lay lifeless from noon till none. But blessed St Mirin was very much grieved that the brother should have been removed by such an untoward and sudden death. He besought the Lord, and immediately the dead man was restored to life. Here we have the dead man apparently resuscitated and lying in a comfortable attitude. Behind him is a monk on his knees with outstretched hands thanking and praising St Mirin, who stands bending over him. The head of the saint has, unfortunately, been quite obliterated. Four monks looking on in wonder fill up the background.

There can be little doubt but it was the intention to fill up the whole space of the wall with the acts of St Mirin, as there are more incidents recorded in the Breviary, but as they have not been illustrated they do not concern us.

The chapel of St Mirin was founded and built by James Crawford of Kylwynet, a burgess of Paisley, and his wife Elizabeth Galbraith. The foundation deed provides an endowment for a chaplain who was to reside in the chapel, and his house still exists in a storey above the chapel, consisting of a curious long, narrow, stone arched apartment provided with a fireplace; and a window in the east and west walls with a stair leading down to the chapel. The charter of endowment is dated 1499, but, as pointed out by Dr Lees,<sup>1</sup> the building was probably finished before this year.

As to the date of the sculptures, there is no reason for supposing with Billings that they existed long before the chapel was built; indeed, it may be asserted with confidence that they belong to the same period. The dress of abbots and monks remained very much the same for centuries, so that little guidance is obtained from these, but it was quite different

<sup>1</sup> *The Abbey of Paisley* (1878).

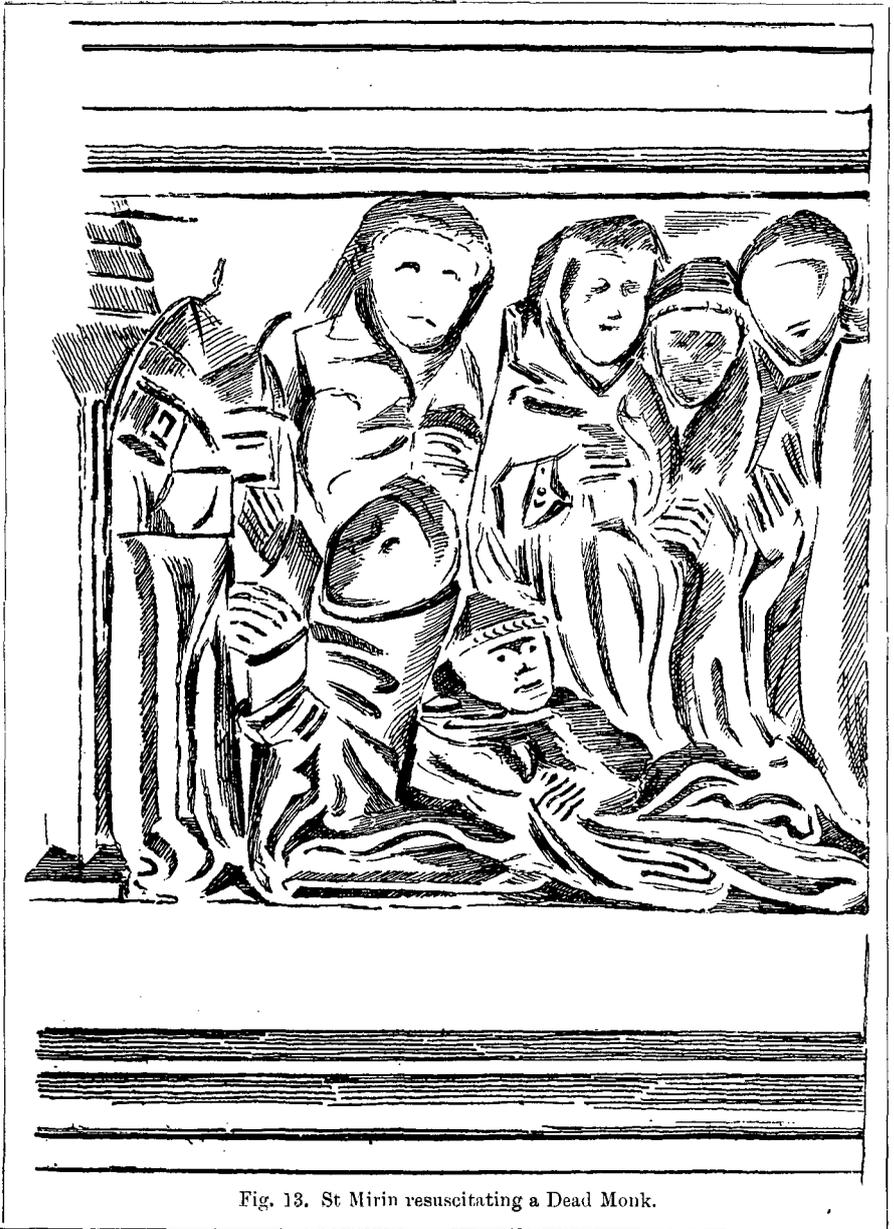


Fig. 13. St Mirin resuscitating a Dead Monk.

with architectural details, which changed from age to age, and we have a considerable amount of this kind of evidence here. The church represented in the third scene (fig. 4) in its upper part is a reminiscence of what is to be seen in the west front of the Abbey Church, which was certainly built in part, about the middle of the fifteenth century. Also the church shown in the ninth scene (fig. 12) is of quite a late type. The interesting gateway introduced into the fifth scene, and beneath which it takes place, cannot be earlier than the end of the fifteenth century. The palace in the eighth scene (fig. 11), with its small window divided with astragals, must also belong to this period. Taking all these indications into consideration, there is good ground for attributing these works to Thomas Hector, sculptor to the abbot of Paisley—of whom there are two notices in the Rental Book of the Abbey,<sup>1</sup> and to whom certain sculptures in the Abbey Church are attributed.<sup>2</sup> The first notice of Hector is in a lease to him of the place and land of Crossflat adjoining Paisley, which he received “with the subjoined condition, that the said Thomas will hold himself ready and prepared to the said abbot and convent in all that concerns his art as a sculptor, and shall receive no other work pertaining to his art without obtaining leave of the abbot and convent, and while he is required by the abbot and convent to perform the work of a sculptor at the monastery, he shall entirely lay aside whatever he has in hand and come back within a month to the work at the monastery, under pain of forfeiting this, his lease, and, besides, a penalty of a hundred shillings.” This lease between Abbot Henry Crichton and Hector is dated in 1460. And the next notice that we have of him, forty-two years later, is in the lease to his successor of the same land, probably sometime after his decease. It begins: “Crossflat, that Ald Hector brukyt,” and proceeds with details to someone else.

From the precise terms of the first lease, and the affectionate “Ald Hector brukyt” of the second, it is evident that his ability as a sculptor was fully appreciated by the abbot and convent of Paisley, and it

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix, pp. lxi., cxx., p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

is not likely that between these years any sculpture at the abbey was undertaken without his assistance or advice at the least.

*Sepulchral Slabs with Crosses at Paisley Abbey.*

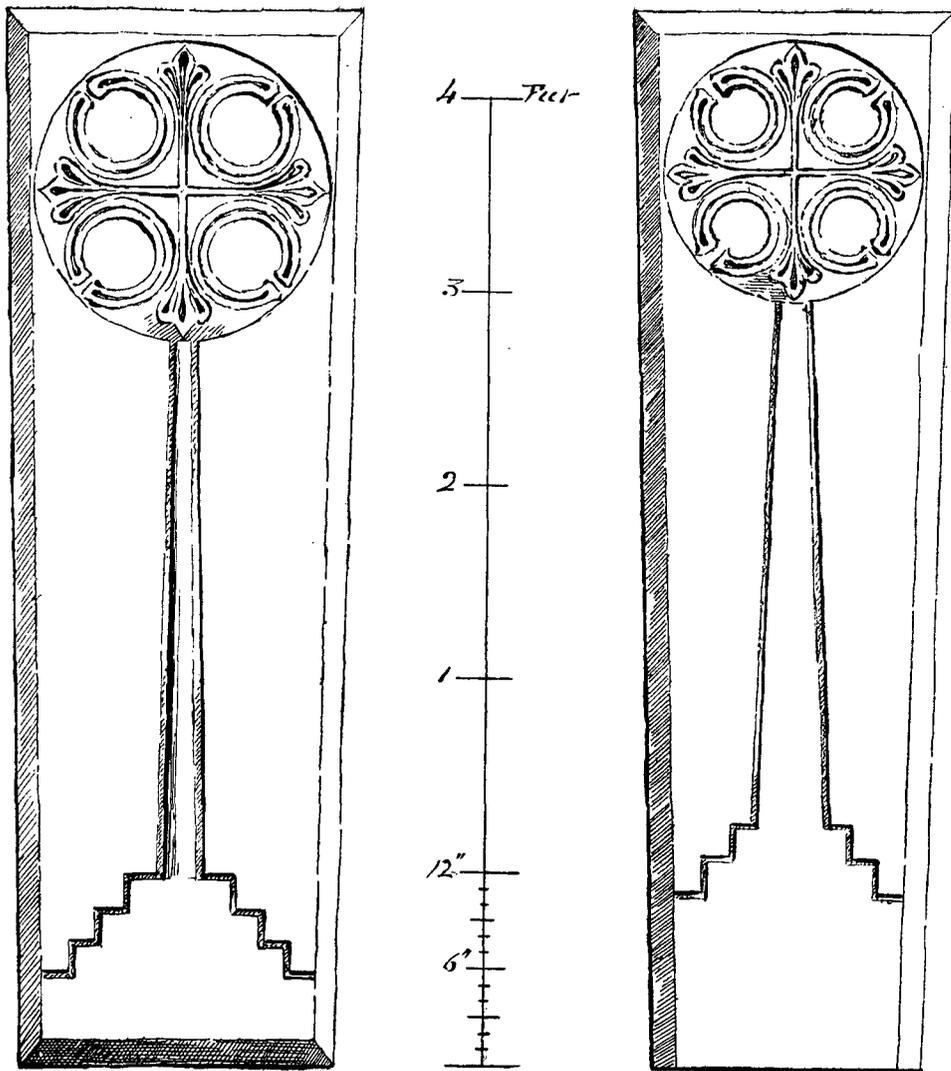
The work connected with the restoration of the tower, the transepts and the choir of Paisley Abbey was begun at the beginning of the year 1900. New foundations were put in for the four piers of the crossing to support the new central tower, and in the course of this operation the two sepulchral slabs, now to be described, were found forming part of the lowest course of masonry of the old south-west pier. They were lying at a depth of 12 feet 6 inches below the level of the nave floor, on a bed of sand face downwards. The smaller stone was first lifted, and no special care was taken with it, nothing being expected to be found on it, so that it was broken into five or six pieces, but when it was found to be carved, the larger stone was carefully taken up, but notwithstanding it was broken in two about the middle.

The larger slab (fig. 14) measures 5 feet  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches long by  $22\frac{1}{4}$  inches at the head, and  $19\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the foot, by 12 inches thick.

The smaller slab (fig. 15) is the same length as the other, by 20 inches at the head and  $16\frac{3}{4}$  at the foot, 11 inches thick.

The large one is bevelled along its four sides, the smaller on three sides only; the cross heads, enclosed in a circle, occupy the full space of the flat surface; and are exactly alike in design. Their stems differ; the large one has a narrow tapering stem, slightly rounded on the surface, enclosed by incised lines, with three steps at the base; the smaller one has a broad tapering stem flat on the surface, enclosed with incised lines, and has two steps at the base.

The design of these crosses is in no way remarkable. They are chaste and beautiful, and resemble many examples of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to be found figured in the *Proceedings* of the Society, and elsewhere. Nor is there anything singular in the use to which they were put, as examples of sepulchral slabs being taken and used as building material are of frequent occurrence. This was done



Figs. 14, 15. Sepulchral Slabs at Paisley Abbey.

with several stones in the foundations of St Andrew's Cathedral in the twelfth century, and at Torphichen Church, probably in the fifteenth century, a cross slab was used (and can still be seen) as a window lintel. In each of these cases the appropriated stones are of much earlier date than the building in which they are found, and in a manner it may be said that they had served their purpose. But here at Paisley it seems to me to be somewhat different: having seen the stones shortly after they were found, I formed the opinion that they must have been placed, face downwards, on the bed of sand shortly after being wrought, as over the whole surface there was the freshness which recently-wrought stone has. The stones themselves are typical examples of grave slabs.

In conclusion I have to thank the architects employed on the restoration of the Abbey for giving me every facility in preparing this note, and the drawings of the cross slabs.

### III.

NOTICE OF ARCHAIC SCULPTURINGS OF CUPS AND RINGS, ETC., ON  
ROCK SURFACES ON THE STRONACH RIDGE, NEAR BRODICK,  
ARRAN. BY REV. J. E. SOMERVILLE, F.S.A. Scot.

[This paper is postponed to a subsequent part of the volume.]