

IV.

NOTE ON A SCULPTURED STONE AT THE PARISH CHURCH OF BIRSE,
ABERDEENSHIRE. BY F. C. EELES, F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A. Scot.

The parish church of Birse is situated near the south bank of the Dee, nearly three miles S.E. of Aboyne railway station. Dedicated in the name of St Michael,¹ it was in mediæval times the prebendal church of the Chancellor of the Chapter of Aberdeen Cathedral. The present building was erected in 1779, and there are no remains of the old church. With the exception of an interesting ornamental belfry, dated 1779, of the quaint type which so long survived in Aberdeenshire, the church is devoid of interest, although it retains a certain amount of the refined simplicity characteristic of eighteenth-century work in the north-east of Scotland. Nothing seems to be known about the previous church except that it was thatched with heather. When it was pulled down, a sculptured grave slab was discovered in the foundations, and was built into the outside of the south wall of the churchyard for preservation. It is practically in the manse garden. The accompanying illustration is reproduced from a rubbing (fig. 1). The stone is 5 feet



Fig. 1. Sepulchral Slab at the Church of Birse.

¹ Keith, *View of the Diocese of Aberdeen*, in *Collections for the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, Spalding Club, Aberdeen, 1843, p. 634. See also Jervise, *Epitaphs and Inscriptions in the North-East of Scotland*, vol. ii., Edinburgh, 1879, pp. 43-49, for a good account of the church and churchyard.

4 inches long by 1 foot 6 inches wide at the top, roughly sloping to about 8 inches wide at the base. As it has been built into a wall with cement partially overflowing the edges, these measurements are not exact, and only represent the size of the exposed part. The surface is rough and uneven, and there has been little or no attempt made to dress it smooth; the carving may be described as partly incised with rough broad lines, partly in relief; it represents a sword by the side of a small cross with another similar cross in an inverted position at the other end of the slab. The sword is of a common type; the blade is wide, with a groove in the upper part, the quillons and handle rather small, the pommel (of which only part remains) large. The blade is 35-36 inches long, the quillons $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches across, the handle 4 inches long, excluding the pommel. The crosses are small, they have expanding arms, straight at the ends, each arm being about $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 inches long. In each case the incised lines forming the shaft end off, or rather disappear into, the uneven surface of the stone, at a distance of 10 or 11 inches from the intersection of the arms. If the inside line of the shaft of the cross next the sword were produced, it would meet the outside line of the shaft of the cross at the other end of the slab; this cross, being at the narrow end of the slab, occupies most of it, but the shaft may be said to be nearer the sinister than the dexter side of the slab, if we reckon the cross at the top end as being situated upon the sinister side of the sword.

From the fact of the crosses facing opposite ways, we may assume that the slab was recumbent. Slabs bearing a cross and a sword side by side are of course exceedingly common, but the writer cannot recollect another example where there is a second cross in an inverted position. In his paper on "Some Old Crosses and Unlettered Sepulchral Monuments in Aberdeenshire" in the *Proceedings* of this Society for 1910-11, p. 342, Mr James Ritchie illustrates and describes a rude recumbent slab at St Medan's (parish of Fintray) which bears a small

sword with a cross at each end. But in this case both sword and crosses are of a different type, and as the crosses are equal-armed, neither could be described as inverted.