

III.

DESCRIPTION OF SIMPLE INSCRIBED CROSS OBSERVED IN THE CHURCHYARD OF TARBAT AND NOW DESTROYED. By JAMES RITCHIE, M.A., D.Sc., ROYAL SCOTTISH MUSEUM, EDINBURGH.

HISTORY.

During a summer holiday in 1914 at the old, and once famous, fishing village of Portmahomack in Easter Ross, I made several visits to the parish churchyard of Tarbat—well known to antiquarians on account of the sculptured stones, coins, and such like, which have been unearthed there from time to time. On an early visit, there was observed, leaning against a boundary wall, a dressed slab of sandstone, on one face of which was inscribed a simple cross, the arms of the cross standing, as it were, between a series of circles symmetrically arranged. The incisions were exceedingly faint owing to the wearing of the stone surface, and had not been observed by the gravedigger, who, on being asked, explained that the stone had been recently disinterred owing to the removal of a recumbent tombstone which he indicated, and under which the cross-stone had been buried. The recumbent tombstone was examined, and bore the date 1778; since when, we may assume, the cross-stone had remained in the safe keeping of the grave, an accident to which it probably owed its preservation. A subsequent visit was paid to the churchyard for the purpose of taking a photograph, or, failing such means of portrayal, of making a rubbing or sketch of the cross. The stone had disappeared from its place against the wall, and, although careful search was made throughout the churchyard, only a few broken fragments, evidently belonging to it, were found on a heap of rubbish, consisting of portions of other broken tombstones. It was clear that the cross-stone had been irretrievably destroyed—a fact since confirmed by appeal to Mr John Mackay, the gravedigger, who writes that “the slab was broken up and built in as part of the foundation for a monument that was put up in the cemetery about the date you mention, *as is always done to old gravestones that are laid aside by the owners.*”¹

On this account I venture to send a short description of it, with a sketch made from memory immediately after the destruction was discovered. I am encouraged the more to do so as it is unlikely that during its short resurrection many or any antiquarians could have seen it in its remote station, 9½ miles from the railway; and since, moreover, subsequent examination has shown that the cross belonged to a type exceedingly rare in Scotland.

¹ The italics are mine!

DESCRIPTION.

The stone (fig. 1) on which the cross was incised was a thick slab of sandstone some 3 feet 4 inches long by 2 feet broad and 7 inches thick.¹ The sandstone was reddish in tint, of moderately fine grain, and may well have been obtained from such a local quarry as that at Port Chasteil

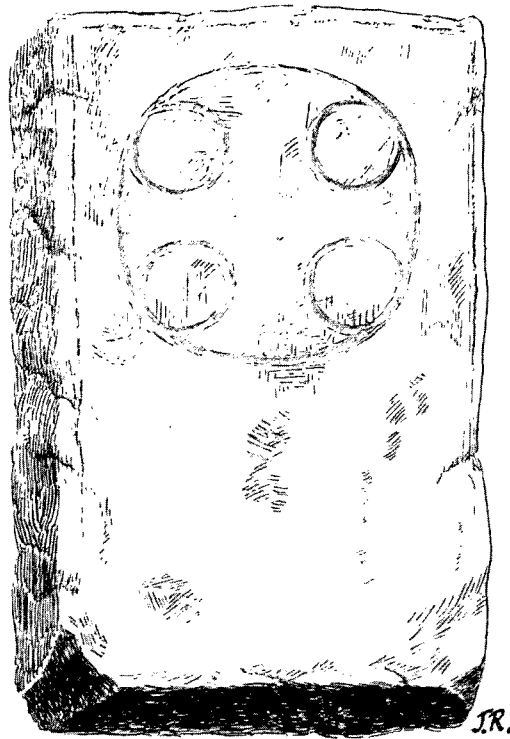


Fig. 1. Simple cross at Tarbat, now destroyed.

towards Tarbatness, whence much of the recent building stone of Portmahomack village has been obtained. The slab was tolerably well dressed on the front surface, but roughly cut on the back—evidence that on the latter side no ornamentation had ever existed. On the face of the stone, the ornament, though its general features were perfectly plain on examination, was much less evident than the artificer had designed, owing to the wearing or weathering of the surface.

¹ These measurements were made from the impress of the stone left in the turf upon which it had rested.

The design was confined to the upper half of the face of the slab. Here four simple incised circles were carved, standing in relation to one another as the four corners of a square. These were contained in a larger circle which at the points of contact blended with their grooves. This simple design gains its significance not from the circles but from the interspaces between them, which form a well-defined and graceful Maltese cross, with arms gradually widening towards the circumference. So far as I could see, the centre of this cross was perfectly plain and free from ornament, and there was certainly no trace of a shaft. It seemed to me, however, that an artificial incision ran along the border of the dressed face a short distance from the edge of the stone, but owing to the serious erosion of the surface I could not state this as a definite fact in view of the impossibility of subsequent examination. In the figure I have considerably exaggerated the clearness of this supposed line, as well as of the details of the cross itself, as compared with the actual appearances on the stone.

GENERAL REMARKS.

The simple cross described above most nearly resembles—amongst the types of crosses recorded from Scotland—the “circular cross with expanded ends to arms, and arms of equal length, without shaft,” catalogued as No. 107 in Allen and Anderson’s *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 1903, part ii. p. 55. Crosses somewhat of this type have been found at Millport, Cumbrae (see Stuart’s *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, pl. 26, fig. 10), and at Bressay in Shetland (see Allen and Anderson, *op. cit.*, part iii. p. 7, fig. 4). But obvious differences distinguish the present from former examples. For instance, the spaces between the arms are here quite circular, whereas at Bressay they are pointed oval, almost lozenge-shaped, and at Millport polygonal. Most striking, however, is the simplicity of the Tarbat cross. It contrasts strongly with the rather feeble attempts at elaboration in the incised Millport cross, and still more strongly with the highly ornate relief work which fills in the interspaces in the Bressay example. It is possible that between the Bressay design and that described here there may be some geographical relationship; but on account of its simplicity both of design and execution it seems to me that the Tarbat cross belongs to a much earlier period, and that it stands to some extent by itself amongst the early crosses of Scotland. History is not at variance with the idea of the great antiquity of the cross, for at Tarbat one of the earliest of Scottish Christian settlements was established by St Colman, after whom the neighbouring village of Portmahomack is named.