

II.

NOTES ON THE DISCOVERY OF A COPED MONUMENT AND AN INCISED CROSS-SLAB AT THE GRAVEYARD, ST BONIFACE CHURCH, PAPA WESTRAY, ORKNEY. BY WILLIAM KIRKNESS, F.S.A. SCOT.

With the exception of North Rognvaldsay, Papa Westray is the most northern of the Orkney Islands, a beautiful little island 4 miles in length and 1 in breadth. It still commemorates in its name the zeal and devotion of the Celtic Anchorite fathers, and it is famous in Norse history as being the burial place of Earl Rognvald in the winter of 1046.

This island possessed at least three churches. At the southern end is a fresh-water loch, which extends almost half across the island. On a projecting point at the eastern margin of the loch there are the remains of a chapel, erected on the site of a broch, and dedicated to St Tredwall.

Near the north end of the island there was another church. Gorrie states that in 1868 the ruin could be seen,¹ but the building has now completely disappeared.

The Established Church, dedicated to St Boniface, is situated on the shore at the west side of the island. It is an old church, probably pre-Reformation, as it has a chancel which has been used as a vault by the family of Traill of Holland. Fragments of masonry which break through the natural grass, growing in great abundance in the vicinity,

¹ *Summers and Winters in the Orkneys.*

show that the church has been built on or near the site of much older buildings. The extent and purpose of these buildings are impossible to determine, as no thorough excavation has been done.

THE COPED STONE.

At the east side of the church in the graveyard there is a coped stone of not uncommon type (fig. 1). It measures 5 feet 1 inch in length, and has a base about 14 inches in width at one end, and 16½ inches at the other; the height at the ends is 8 inches and 10 inches respectively. The sloping sides, which taper from 12 inches to 10 inches on either side, are covered with three rows of well-defined tiles, or shield-shaped scale-



Fig. 1. Coped Stone at Papa Westray, Orkney.

like ornamentation. Along the ridge, which is flat, there is a deeply-cut channel. The stone, which is of red freestone much covered with lichen, lies due east and west, the broader end to the west.

Tradition has it that over a hundred years ago, on her deathbed, a woman asked that someone be sent to Heartie Goe (a small bay near the church) three days after she had died. She told that this stone, which she described, would be found there and asked that it be put on her grave.

On hearing this story, the writer came to the conclusion that the stone had either been discarded and thrown over the cliff; or that it had been considered sacred and held in veneration by the people of the island, and that some priest, to get rid of it, had thrown it into the water. But, after seeing this small bay lashed by the breakers of the Atlantic, and with no possible place of shelter for such a stone, he could not see the possibility of its ever having been there.

This is the only story associated with the stone, which is the third

to be reported from Orkney. George Low, in his *Tour thro' Orkney and Schetland*, 1774, describes two such stones—one in the parish of Deerness, and the other in Rendall. Both are in the island of Pomona. The Rendall stone has since disappeared, but I am able to show a photograph of the Deerness stone (fig. 2). It measures 5 feet 7½ inches in length.

In the *Proceedings* of the Society, vol. xxxviii. p. 422, Dr Thomas Ross has compiled a list of twenty-one coped and hog-backed stones found in Scotland. In addition to that number and the one here described, three at Nisbet, Roxburghshire,¹ two at St Helens on the Lea, Berwickshire,² and one at Dornock, Dumfriesshire,³ have been found. Four

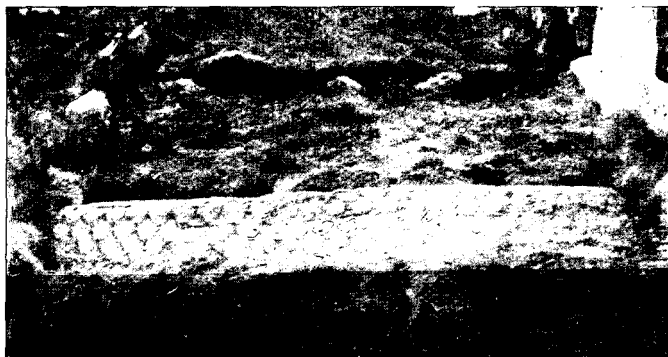


Fig. 2. Coped Stone at Deerness, Orkney.

others have to be added to the list of six at Govan. Including the stone seen in Rendall by Low, in 1774, we have a record of thirty-three of these monuments in Scotland. The ten stones at Govan⁴ are hog-backed or curved on the top. At Abercorn there is a hog-backed stone besides the three coped examples; at Nisbet two hog-backed stones in addition to the flat-topped coped stone, and at St Helens on the Lea one coped stone, while the other is only a fragment. The three stones at Dornock, the three reported from Orkney, and the one at St Vigeans, Forfarshire, are all coped. Those at Brechin, Inchcolm, Meigle, Luss on Loch Lomond, and Kirknewton are hog-backed. The two found at St Andrews are only fragments.

These monuments are also fairly numerous in England, and if the Gosforth stone found under such unique circumstances is typical of hog backs we can ascertain their date approximately. On the removal

¹ *Proceedings*, xxxix. p. 363.

² *Ibid.*, xlviii. p. 217.

³ *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments Commission (Scotland)—Dumfries*, p. 45.

⁴ *Sculptured Stones at Govan*, plates ii. to vi.

of part of the north wall of Gosforth Church, Cumberland (this wall dating from the early part of the twelfth century), the stone was found under its foundations. It had been put in as rubbish at the north-west corner. The stone measures 5 feet 6½ inches in length, 26 inches high, and 11 inches across the centre of the base, and cannot date much later than the year 900.

THE INCISED CROSS-SLAB.

Within the memory of living man no one had been buried on the north side of the church at Papa Westray. I was unable to obtain a reason for this, but lack of space has evidently broken down the prejudice against this custom, as last summer a burial took place on this side of the church. When opening the grave, a stone was encountered about three feet from the surface. To carry on the work the stone had to be removed; it was broken, and part of it thrown out of the grave. On being cleaned it was found to show incised designs, the combination of which is believed to be unique in Scotland.

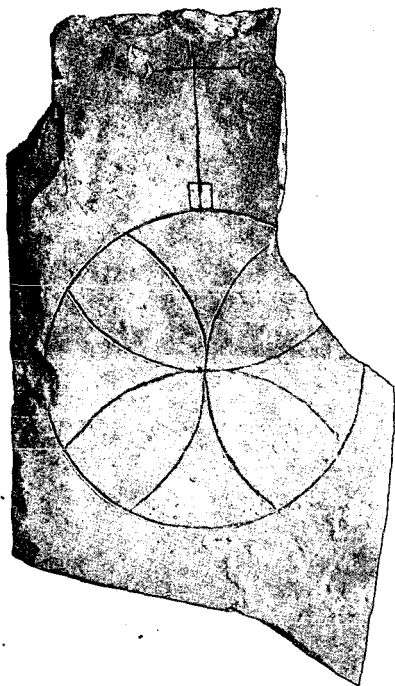


Fig. 3. Cross-slab at Papa Westray, Orkney.

The stone measures 23 inches long and 12½ inches wide, and from ⅞ inch to 1½ inch in thickness. It is apparently an unshaped slab, but is smoothed on one side. Incised on the latter face is a geometrical four-armed cross within a circle, the diameter of which is 10½ inches. This cross is surmounted by a small equal-armed cross, the top arm being imperfect. It has a single step at the foot, and to this extent it resembles a Calvary cross. Each end of the side arms terminates in a crescent, a very unusual occurrence. The incisions are all

made with masterly precision: some tool, used as we do compasses, has been utilised to form the arcs and circles.

This stone was rescued by the writer some months after its removal from the earth. For obvious reasons the part left in the ground could not be obtained.

It is interesting to note that a portion of a coped stone and a cross-slab in some ways similar were also both found at St Helens on the Lea, Berwickshire.