

V.

NOTE ON THREE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SHETLAND TOMB-  
STONES. BY SIR GEORGE MACDONALD, K.C.B., LL.D., D.LITT.,  
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The tombstones which form the subject of the following Note were described to the Society in 1907 by the late Rev. W. Fotheringham.<sup>1</sup> At that time they were still in the open, on or about the mound which is all that is left to represent the old Crosskirk at Quendale, the original parochial church of Dunrossness. All three had suffered seriously from exposure and were in grave danger of further deterioration. Accordingly, Mr Bruce of Sumburgh had them removed to Jarlshof, where they were placed in a 'mausoleum' specially built for their reception. Last summer I had an opportunity of examining them there and of satisfying myself that the transcripts made in 1907 could be improved upon in respect both of accuracy and of completeness. It seems desirable that the results of this fresh scrutiny should be put on record, particularly as the imperfect version of the longest of the inscriptions has obtained further currency through being reprinted by the late Mr Gilbert Goudie in the *Transactions* of the Scottish Ecclesiological Society.<sup>2</sup>

I have to thank Lyon King, whose *Zetland County Families* is well known as a standard work, and Mr William Angus, Curator of the Historical Department of the Register House, for information on one or two genealogical points. The 'mausoleum' is so dark that it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to bring a camera to

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings*, vol. xli. (1906-7) pp. 173 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. iii. part iii. (1911-12) pp. 281 ff.

bear upon the stones at all effectively. I therefore propose to utilise the illustrations which appeared in the original paper. They will serve the purpose well enough. It should, however, be understood that they are in some respects misleading. Before the photographs for the blocks were taken, what was believed to be the lettering was in each case gone over with a chalky finger, in order to make it stand out more clearly. In this way certain readings were given a seeming authenticity to which they have no real claim.

The oldest of the three stones is the slab which once covered the grave of Malcolm Sinclair of Quendale, lay vicar of Dunrossness. It has

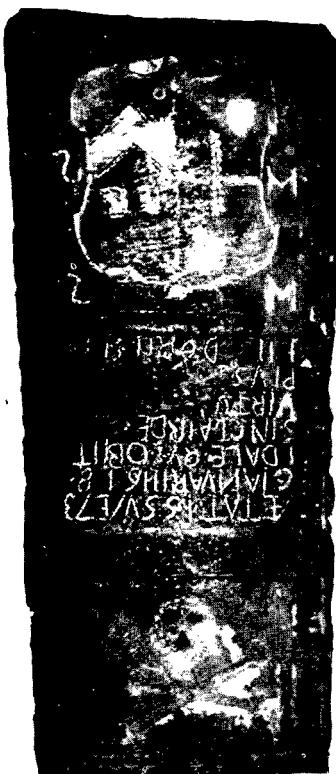


Fig. 1. Grave-slab of Malcolm Sinclair of Quendale.

obviously been carved by a wholly illiterate workman. The lowest of the three panels into which it is divided is the only one that has not been blundered, the skull and cross-bones—all that it contains—being too familiar a device to leave any room for mistakes. The uppermost is occupied by two coats-of-arms, impaled and flanked by the letters M and S, which are repeated immediately below. The letters are plainly the initials of Malcolm Sinclair and his wife, Margaret Sutherland of Forss, and the arms are presumably those of their respective families. But reference to the illustration (fig. 1) will show that arms and initials are alike reversed. As was pointed out to me by Mr J. S. Richardson, who first directed my attention to these monuments, this effect has been produced by the workman laying face downwards the sketch that had been given him to copy, and transferring its outlines to the surface of the stone by some mechanical means in order to supply his chisel with a guide.

The treatment of the central panel is still more suggestive of illiteracy. The inscription of seven lines which fills it is intelligible enough, but its arrangement is extraordinary.

While the lines follow one another in their proper order, each of them is turned upside down. The outcome is that, to understand what it is all about, one has to take one's place at the head of the stone, look

towards the foot, and read from the bottom upwards. Mr Fotheringham's transcription is as follows:

AETATIS SVÆ 73  
6 IANVARII 1618  
DALE QVI OBIIT  
SINCLAIR DE [QVEN]  
VIRTV  
PIVS.

The lowest or seventh—really the first—line is so distinct even in fig. 1 that its omission here must surely be an accidental oversight. However that may be, there is little or no doubt as to the true reading, the only uncertain letters being those within square brackets:

ÆTATIS · SVÆ · 73 ·  
6 · IANVARII · 1618 ·  
DALE · QVI · OBIIT ·  
SINCLAIR · DE · QVE  
VIR · MALCOLMVS ·  
PIVS · AC · [BO]VS ·  
HIC · DORMIT ·

“Here sleeps a devout and good man, Malcolm Sinclair of Quendale, who died 6th January, 1618, in the 73rd year of his age.”

The next of the memorials in chronological order (fig. 2) is the grave-slab of James Sinclair of Quendale, who was the son of Malcolm, and who married Barbara Stewart of Graemsay. It has suffered damage through fracture, and at the lower corner on the dexter side portions of the edge have been broken away altogether. Nevertheless its decipherment presents no very serious difficulties. The initials in the uppermost of the three panels into which it is divided, and presumably also the impaled arms which appear beside them there, are those of husband and wife. The lowest panel contains a skull and cross-bones, surmounted by the legend MENTO MORI, a typical example of a blunder due to what is technically known as haplography. The centre is described by Mr Fotheringham as displaying “the fragments of an inscription beginning with JUSTITIAM UTOR.” In point of fact, the surviving letters are distinct enough, and the blanks are easily filled:

IVSTITIE · FA  
VTOR · VERE ·  
PIETATI[S · A]LV  
MNVS · PACIC ·  
AMAS · INOP  
VM · DVLCE  
PATRO[CI]NI  
VM

If it be noted that (as always on this stone) E is used for Æ, that PACIC is an error for PACIS, and that AMAS is an abbreviation of AMASIVS, it will be seen that what we have here is an elegiac couplet such as is common on seventeenth-century tombstones:

*Justitiæ fautor, veræ pietatis alumnus,  
Pacis amas', inopum dulce patrociniûm.*

"A friend of justice, a man who cherished true piety and ensued peace, a much loved champion of the poor."

The main inscription runs round the outer margin of the whole, its

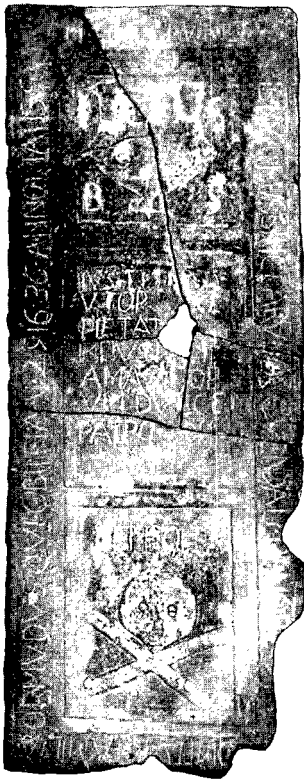


Fig. 2. Grave-slab of James Sinclair of Quendale.

beginning being marked by a hand, with the index finger extended, near the top corner on the sinister side. Here Mr Fotheringham's reading, so far as it goes, leaves little room for criticism: HIC JACET VIR ILLUSTRIS JACOBUS SINCLARUS DE QUENDALE DE NOBIL . . . . COMITUM FAMILIA . . . . QUI OBIIT . . . . JAN. 29, 1636, ANNO AETATIS 56. But it may be well to give what seems to me to have been the full text: HIC · JACET · VIR · ILLVS | TRIS · IACOBVS · SINCLARVS · DE · QVENDALL · DE · NOBILI[SSIM | A · C]OMITVM · FAMILIA · | ORMVDVS · QVI · OBIIT · IAN · 29 · 1636 · ANNO · ETATIS · 56. "Here lies a man of good repute, James Sinclair of Quendale, a scion of the most noble family of the Earls, who died Jan. 29th, 1636, in the 56th year of his age." The Earls referred to must be the Earls of Orkney, from whom the Shetland families of Sinclairs were wont to claim descent. I accept Mr Fotheringham's suggestion that ORMVDVS is a mistake for ORIVNDVS, and I have so translated it. On the other hand, I could see nothing to justify his conjecture that "the word COMITUM may have been VICECOMITUM." Four letters would not be sufficient to fill the lacuna.

A greater puzzle than any for which the stone-cutter can be blamed has been provided by the author of the inscription. James Sinclair cannot have died on 29th January 1636, for he was alive on 30th November of that year, when he executed a charter of the lands of Quendale in favour of his son Laurence, the sasine being recorded in the Register of Sasines

for Shetland on 9th December 1636. Lyon King has kindly verified this for me, while from Mr Angus I learn that, although the Parochial Registers of the parish of Dunrossness for the seventeenth century are no longer extant, the Register of Testaments for Orkney and Shetland proves that James Sinclair of Quendale died on 25th December 1637, or nearly two years later than is stated on his tombstone. It is for genealogists to clear up the inconsistency. But, as a layman, I cannot help wondering whether James Sinclair was predeceased by his wife. If so, the date of her death may have inadvertently been substituted for that of his own, possibly because the original intention was to commemorate them both on the same monument.

The third tombstone is that of Barbara Sinclair, granddaughter of James, who became the wife of Hector Bruce of Mouness. It is by far the handsomest and most interesting of the group. Unlike the two others, which were grave-slabs, it had stood erect, and was indeed so standing when it was removed from the Crosskirk, albeit it had even then lost both the cap and the plinth, which seem to be amissing. The part which is left (fig. 3) is about 8 feet high by 4 feet broad, and is very elaborately carved in a style reminiscent of the work one sees in the Low Countries. I propose to restrict my observations to the inscription in the centre, except for a warning that in the legend beneath the coat-of-arms on the dexter side the penultimate letter of the last word is A, not E as the illustration would suggest.

On the two grave-slabs the lettering is incised. Here it is in relief, so that sad havoc has been played with it by weathering. On most people it leaves an impression of utter illegibility, and Mr Fotheringham deserves great credit for the immense pains which he must have devoted to its reconstruction. As we shall see, he has made mistakes, some of them serious. In the circumstances, however, the surprising thing is not that these should be so many, but that they should be so few. Most of them, by the way, are the direct result of a failure to realise how consistently the artist has adhered to the somewhat peculiar forms of A and U, good examples of which will be found in the concluding lines as they appear in the illustration.

It is to the illustration that we must turn for Mr Fotheringham's own rendering, which is in some respects more correct than the transcript printed in his text. The latter represents the fruit of consultation with others, notably Mr Gilbert Goudie and the late Dr Morland Simpson. Apparently Dr Simpson was chiefly responsible, for in the Ecclesiological Society's *Transactions* the transcript is spoken of as "the product of his elaborate study, with such emendation and reconstruction as the

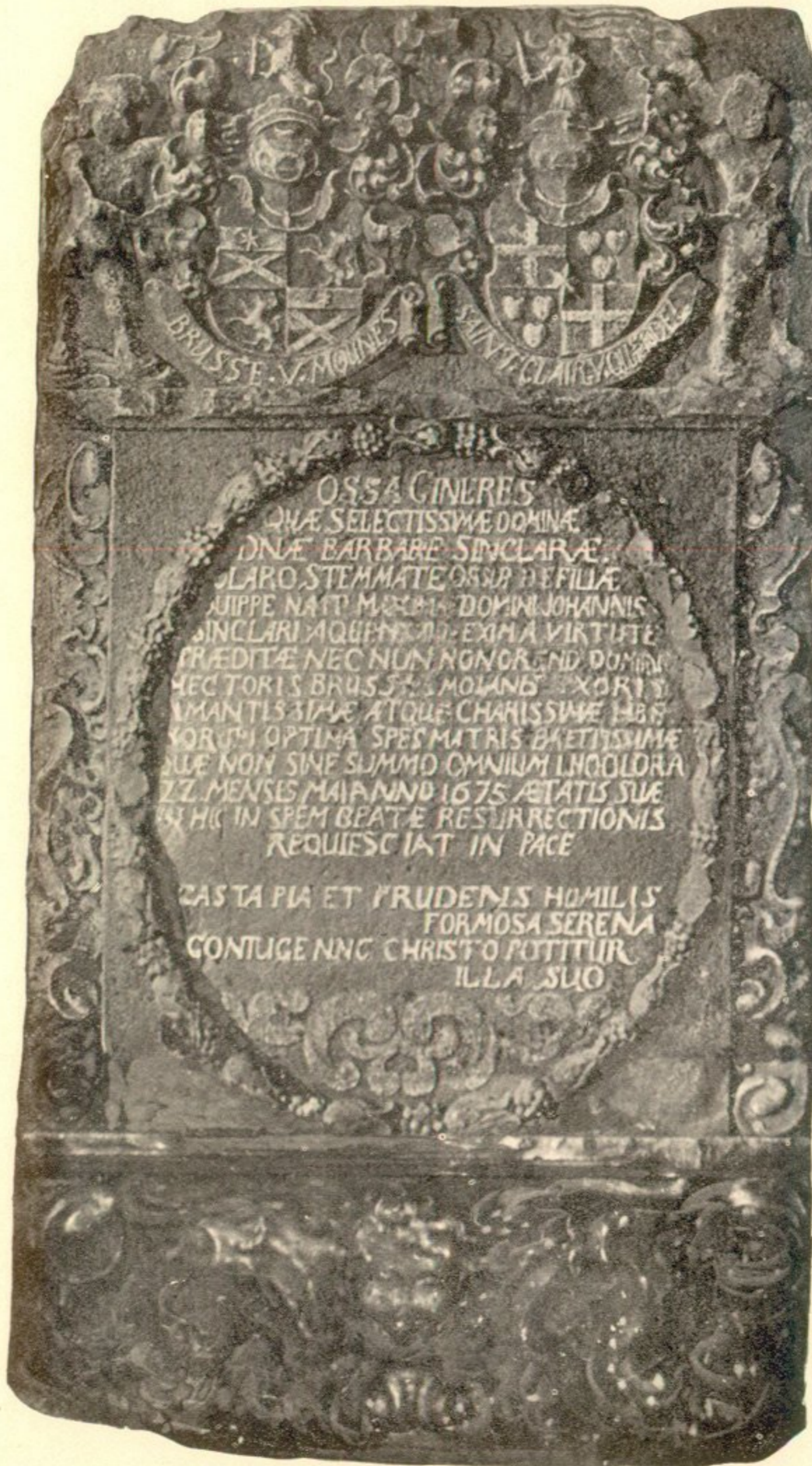


Fig. 3. Tombstone of Barbara Sinclair, wife of Hector Bruce of Mouness.

THREE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SHETLAND TOMBSTONES. 59

difficulties of the case seemed to suggest." He was, of course, a thoroughly competent Latin scholar. The likelihood is that, if he had seen the stone for himself, this paper need not have been written. But, so far as we know, all that he had to go upon was the photograph reproduced in fig. 3, and he had perforce to make the best of it. In reprinting his version it will be convenient to underline the words and letters which have failed to stand the test of a close comparison with the original:

OSSA CINERES  
 QUÆ SELECTISSIMÆ DOMINÆ  
 DNÆ BARBARÆ SINCLARÆ  
 CLARO STEMMATE . . . . FILIÆ  
 QUIPPE NATÆ MAXIMI DOMINI JOHANNIS  
 SINCLARI DE QUENDALE EXIMIA VIRTUTE  
 PRÆDITÆ NECNON HONORANDI DOMINI  
 HECTORIS BRUSSI DE MOUNES UXORIS  
 AMANTISSIMÆ ATQUE CHARISSIMÆ . . . .  
 UXORUM OPTIMA SPES MATRIS BEATISSIMÆ  
 QUÆ NON SINE SUMMO OMNIUM INDOLORE  
 22 MENSIS MAI ANNO 1675 ÆTATIS SUÆ  
 [64] HIC IN SPEM BEATÆ RESURRECTIONIS  
 REQUIESCIAT IN PACE

CASTA PIA ET PRUDENS HUMILIS FORMOSA SERENA  
 CONJUGE NUNC CHRISTO POTITUR ILLA SUO

The translation, presumably also from Dr Simpson's hand, runs:

The bones and ashes of that most excellent lady, Barbara Sinclair, sprung from an illustrious race, a daughter of the most potent lord, John Sinclair of Quendale, endowed with every virtue, and the most loving and most beloved wife of the worthy Hector Bruce of Mounes. The best hope of a most happy mother, to the greatest grief of all [she died] on the 22nd of the month of May, in the year 1675, in the (64th ?) year of her age. Here, in the hope of a blessed resurrection, let her rest in peace.

Chaste, pious and prudent, humble, comely, placid, now she has obtained Christ for her spouse.

Probably this was about as good sense as could be extracted from a rather unsatisfactory text. And that the text was regarded as unsatisfactory is obvious from the comment: "It will be noted that

the peculiar wording of the last two lines is due to an attempt at verse in Latin, and also that the spelling of some words appears inaccurate." As a matter of fact, the last two lines, when correctly read, form a quite passable elegiac couplet, while there are only two real inaccuracies in spelling. In the second line QUÆ has been cut instead of QUE, and in the last line the vowel of NUNC, though inserted in the transcript, has been omitted on the stone. For the rest, the unsatisfactory features, whether of text or of translation, all alike have their root in misreadings. To take but a single instance, Mr Goudie was unhappy about "most potent lord." He thought that *maximus dominus* here could only mean "Reverend Mr." But in the original there is no such title. With a single exception, to be mentioned presently, I can vouch for the correctness of the following copy, my alterations being underlined:

OSSA CINERES  
 QUÆ SELECTISSIMÆ DOMINÆ  
 DNE BARBARÆ SINCLARÆ  
 CLARO STEMMATE ORIGINE FILIÆ  
 QUIPPE NATU MAXIMÆ DOMINI IOHANNIS  
 SINCLARI A QUENDAL EXIMIA VIRTUTE  
 PRÆDITÆ NECNON HONORANDI DOMINI  
 HECTORIS BRUSSI A MOUNES UXORIS  
 AMANTISSIMÆ ATQUE CHARISSIMÆ LIBE  
 RORUM OPTIMÆ SPEI MATRIS BEATISSIMÆ  
 QUÆ NON SINE SUMMO OMNIUM LUCTU OBIIT  
 22 MENSIS MAII ANNO 1675 ÆTATIS SUÆ  
 38 HIC IN SPEM BEATÆ RESURRECTIONIS  
 REQUIESCUNT IN PACE

CASTA PIA ET PRUDENS HUMILIS FORMOSA SERENA  
 CONIUGE NNC CHRISTO FRUITUR ILLA SUO

It will be seen from the translation that the differences are not unimportant:

Here, in hope of a blessed resurrection, there rest in peace the bones and ashes of one of the best of women, Mistress Barbara Sinclair, sprung from a famous stock, as being the eldest daughter of Master John Sinclair of Quendale; graced with exemplary virtue; also the most devoted and dearly loved wife of the worthy Master Hector Bruce of Mouness and the thrice-happy mother of a family of the richest promise; who died amid grief



### THREE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SHETLAND TOMBSTONES. 61

profound and universal on the 22nd of the month of May in the year 1675, the 38th of her age.

Pure in heart, devout and prudent, meek, fair to look upon and tranquil-minded, she has now entered into the joy of Christ, her true spouse.

The one doubtful point, referred to above, is the lady's age. The figure on the stone is exceedingly obscure. But, on the whole, "38" seems to me to accord most closely with such traces as are left. Certainly the figure tentatively suggested in the earlier transcript is altogether impossible. If she were in her 64th year in 1675, she must have been born not later than 1612, when her father, John Sinclair, was a mere boy—he was not married till 1628—and her grandfather, James, not very much more than thirty. Another awkward consequence would be to postpone her marriage, which took place in 1662, until she was fifty, and yet she became the mother of several children. It is unfortunate that the precise date of her birth appears to be no longer ascertainable.