

I.

HEADSTONES IN POST-REFORMATION SCOTLAND.

BY ANGUS GRAHAM, M.A., F.S.A., F.S.A.Scot.

All through the 18th and 19th centuries, and down to the present day, the headstone has been the commonest form of grave-monument in use in Scotland, and no doubt in Britain as a whole, but no one seems yet to have asked exactly when it first appeared, from what earlier type of monument it was derived, or why it came to enjoy such especial favour. It is the purpose of this paper to explore such questions as these, and if possible to place the headstone in its proper historical setting.

The subject may be usefully approached by comparing the chronology of the headstone with that of other types of post-Reformation grave-monument. For this purpose it is convenient to ignore minor distinctions, and to consider the whole of the material as falling into four main classes—(i) recumbent slabs, (ii) headstones, (iii) table-tombs, (iv) mural monuments and panels. Figure 1 shows the result of classifying 459 recorded stones under these headings,¹ by decades from 1561 to 1707; the records are taken partly from R.C.A.M. Inventories² and partly from papers published in this Society's *Proceedings*, while the terminal date for the study has been set at 1707 as this is the terminal date of the R.C.A.M. records of graveyard monuments. This method of selecting material naturally leaves something to be desired, and that for several reasons. For example, authors of discursive papers are apt to mention stones which are of interest to themselves and to omit those which are not; the figures for recumbent slabs are rather heavily weighted by the R.C.A.M. record of the stones in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, and by Sir George Macdonald's report on the collection in the Cathedral Museum, St Andrews; the wall-monuments are similarly weighted by the R.C.A.M. record of Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh; while the earliest stones of all types are naturally under-represented as a result of weathering, wear and re-use, which destroy or disguise their dating, as well as of theft and loss. A truly random selection is, however, impossible to obtain in practice, and notwithstanding its admitted failings the table does in fact bring out some sufficiently suggestive points.

The first of these is the comparatively late date at which the headstone

¹ Some of the examples of Classes I and IV are, or originally were, inside churches and not actually in graveyards, but no distinction should be drawn on this account.

² Berwickshire (revised issue, 1915); Orkney and Shetland (1946); City of Edinburgh (1951); Roxburghshire (1956); Selkirkshire (1957). Some stones recorded in *P.S.A.S.* as dating from the sixteen-twenties have been found, on verification, to date only from the sixteen-nineties, the figure 9 having been misread as 2; but the true dates have been incorporated in the table.

DECADES	RECUMBENT SLABS	HEADSTONES	TABLE TOMBS	MURAL MONUMENTS
1561-1570				
1571-1580				
1581-1590				
1591-1600				
1601-1610				
1611-1620				
1621-1630				
1631-1640				
1641-1650				
1651-1660				
1661-1670				
1671-1680				
1681-1690				
1691-1700				
1701-1710				

Fig. 1. Chronological table of post-Reformation graveyard monuments; 1560-1707.

first appears. The earliest included in the table, which occurs at Langton (Berwickshire), dates only from 1620, and an extensive examination of graveyards in East Lothian, Stirlingshire, Aberdeenshire, Kincardineshire and Angus enforces the same point. In East Lothian the earliest headstones thus found were of 1633 (Prestonpans), 1658 (Saltoun), 1666 (Haddington), 1677 (Bolton), 1679 (Humbie), 1688 (Morham), 1689 (Ormiston), 1699 (Athelstaneford) and 1700 (Dirleton); in Stirlingshire they were of 1638 (Larbert), 1640 (Bothkennar), 1650 (Dunipace), 1664 (Logie), 1682 (Airth), 1686 (Balfron) and 1702 (Muiravonside); and in the north-east they were of 1665 (Breachin), 1711 (Kildrummy), 1742 (Kemnay), 1762 (Inverurie) and 176[?] (Kintore), the great majority in this last region being of the late 18th century and later.¹ As against this late dating of the headstones, the other classes of monuments appear in the table between forty and fifty years earlier, and in fact are in line of descent from medieval prototypes. The apparent paucity of early table-tombs is perhaps to be attributed, in part, to the tendency of these structures to lose their supports, fall flat, and thus make their way into the records, wrongly, as recumbent slabs.

Nor is the comparative lateness of the headstone a phenomenon peculiar to Scotland. Thus inspection of six country churchyards in Wiltshire gave the following as the earliest dates for legible headstones: 1694 (Aldbourne); 1695 (Ogbourne St. Andrew); 1703 (Amesbury); 1713 (Upavon); 1732 (Pewsey) and 1736 (Ogbourne St. George). In two churchyards in the Cotswolds the corresponding dates were 1618 and 1638 (Fifield, Oxon.) and 1707 (Idbury, Glos.), while in another two in the same neighbourhood (Westcote, Iccombe, both Glos.), where all the earlier stones were illegible, there was nothing in their appearance to suggest that any antedated the middle of the 18th century. Of five churchyards visited in Berkshire, Wallingford had one stone of 1684, Little Wittenham one of 1689, Brightwell two of 1697, and the others nothing earlier than the 18th century. Finally, a record which seems to refer mainly to northern Kent states that headstones earlier than 1700 are very uncommon,² but also mentions a series of "primitive and diminutive" ones at Hatfield, Middlesex, dating from 1687 to 1700.³

A second point brought out by the table is the remarkable increase in the number of headstones that occurred after 1690. Thirty-eight are recorded for the decade ending in 1700 and thirty-four for the years 1701-7, as against fifteen for 1681-90 and thirteen for 1671-80, though even by this time some modest increase had already set in, the average per decade for the preceding six decades being three and a half. Had the record been brought down later than 1707, it would have shown that this increase marked the beginning of the vogue that the headstone has enjoyed ever since.

¹ Many other graveyards which were visited in these areas produced no relevant material.

² Vincent, W. T., *In Search of Gravestones Old and Curious*, 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 70.

A third point which appears pretty clearly is that the recumbent slab, time-honoured as it was and evidently in particular demand between, say, 1631 or earlier and 1690, declined sharply in popularity from the latter date onwards. In the decade 1681-90 twenty-six slabs are recorded, and an average of just under twenty-three per decade over the sixty years since 1631; but in 1691-1700 there are only nine, and in 1700-7 no more than four. It is interesting, too, that this falling-off coincides exactly with the increase in headstones that has just been noted. No comparable fluctuations are seen in the numbers of table-tombs or mural monuments; though the total of the former may be too small to support any inference, the latter appear to remain fairly steady throughout the 17th century.

The first question that must now be asked is whether the late emergence of the headstone, as a new type of monument, is real or only apparent. The upright cross-slabs of the Dark and early Middle Ages must naturally be regarded as headstones, but there are two reasons which make it difficult to suppose that the post-Reformation headstone is evolved directly from them. The first is to be found in the long gap in time that separates pre-Norman, or early Norman, and post-Reformation monuments, for it seems to be true that, except in the West Highlands, graveyard crosses of all sorts went out of general use by the 13th century at latest. Examples can no doubt be cited of small and crudely-made crosses or cross-inscribed stones which, though undated, may be associated with remains belonging to later periods of the Middle Ages;¹ but they are few in the aggregate and some of them occur in out-of-the-way places,² with the result that they should probably be classed as survivals rather than as links in an evolutionary chain. The crudity of their workmanship may also be due to degeneracy, and not to earliness of date. Again, it is possible that though the sites on which some of them are found were in use in the full Middle Ages, the earliest ecclesiastical establishments on those sites may have originated in pre-Norman times.³ The second reason is to be found in a difference of religious approach. The cross-slab or free-standing cross of early times had a positive religious significance, to which expression could be given by an epitaph in such a form as H(A)EC EST CRUX FAC(TA) PRO ANIMABUS (of four named persons);⁴ but the headstone of the Reformed church had a different theology behind it, and was used simply to mark the position of a grave and to record some essential facts about the dead person. It reverted, in fact, to the function of the pagan *stèle*.

A real discontinuity being thus inferred, it is necessary to deal first with a theory which is apt to suggest itself but which will not stand up to scrutiny. The headstone being essentially a monument for use out of doors, not inside

¹ *E.g.* at Monymusk, Aberdeenshire (*P.S.A.S.*, XLV (1910-11), 347 and fig. 9; LIX (1924-5), 65.

² *E.g.* the series in Unst and Yell (*R.C.A.M.*, *Inventory of Shetland*, Nos. 1536, 1541, 1712 (3)).

³ *E.g.* at Dyce, Aberdeenshire (*P.S.A.S.*, XLV (1910-11), 334, fig. 1).

⁴ At Kilchoman, Islay (Graham, R. C., *The Carved Stones of Islay*, 57).

a building, it is tempting to associate its introduction with John Knox's ban on burial inside churches, which figures in the Book of Discipline.¹ However, the fact that the headstone appears in England at much the same time as in Scotland is enough in itself to rule out an explanation which would, in strictness, only be applicable to Scotland—whether or not the mere force of public opinion had any comparable effect in England. It should also be observed, firstly, that burial in churches went on long after Knox had pronounced his ban,² and secondly, that when the General Assembly desired, in 1597, to put an end to the practice, the measure approved by the King was that noblemen should be made to build themselves “sepultures”³—*i.e.* presumably private burial-enclosures, which immediately suggest wall-monuments and recumbent slabs—and not that they should take to burying at large in the graveyards, the natural setting for headstones.

The origin of the headstone is much more probably to be found in the practical necessities of the graveyard. Until a graveyard becomes so badly overcrowded that no new grave can be dug without disturbing old ones, whoever is in charge of it has an interest in preserving some kind of orderly arrangement,⁴ and for this reason, if for no other, grave-markers of a kind must have been used at most places and periods. It is true that in the 16th century there may have been something to seek in Scottish funerary practice—for example, Knox found it necessary to enjoin that some “secret and convenient place, lying in the most free air” should be appointed for burials, “the which place ought to be well walled and fenced about, and kept for that use only”;⁵ while in 1563 the General Assembly had to make detailed provision for the burial of the poor,⁶ and in 1576 decreed further that “in every parochin, ther be persons appointed to break the earth, and to make sepulchres, that sall notifie the names of the persons deceissit to the Reidars.”⁷ Even as late as 1645, in an out-of-the-way district, “many poore people” were “oftintymes buried in the feildes haveing none to carie them so farre as twelve mylles to their buriall places.”⁸ But it is nevertheless to be supposed that, once a gravedigger was appointed, as required by the decree of 1576, he would have been likely, if only for his own convenience, to mark graves in some way even if the dead persons'

¹ Dickinson, W. Croft, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, II, 320.

² Some members of my own family were in trouble on this account in 1602 (unpublished Register of the Presbytery of Glasgow, quoted by Graham, J. E., *The Grahams of Tamrauer*, 1895, for private circulation, 18 ff.); and I am indebted to Dr G. Donaldson for a reference to permission being granted as late as 1663 for burial in the choir at Elgin, though with the proviso “that no more graves be made in that quire hereafter.” (*Records of Elgin*, New Spalding Club, II, 302).

³ *The Booke of the Universall Kirke of Scotland*, Bannatyne Club, III, 938.

⁴ Note, for example, the comparatively regular alignment of the graves even in so early a cemetery as that at Parkburn, Midlothian (*P.S.A.S.*, LXXXIX (1955-6), 252 ff., fig. 3).

⁵ Dickinson, *loc. cit.*

⁶ *The Booke of the Universall Kirke of Scotland*, Bannatyne Club, I, 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁸ *Acts Parl. Scot.*, VI, pt. 1, 1645, 397b.

relatives were not interested in doing so themselves. No point of theology was involved.

Markers for graves or lairs which fall short of the status of headstone are quite commonly in use today, and generally take the form of short pillars or small blocks inscribed with initials or a number. To carry back a series of such objects through past centuries is, of course, impossible, but some examples may be quoted which show that they are not things of yesterday. Thus at Spott, East Lothian, there may be seen a small, squared block of red sandstone, 13 ins. high, $7\frac{1}{2}$ ins. wide and $4\frac{1}{2}$ ins. thick, which is inscribed JAMES/IACKSON/AGE 42/1704. Again, at Ettrick, Selkirkshire, some of the graves are marked with uninscribed natural boulders, some of which are said to have been brought from the older graveyard at Over Kirkhope;¹ and with these may be compared the uninscribed and unshaped splinters of rock that are found in many country graveyards.² Broken fragments of early monuments, and even dressed blocks from the fabric of a ruined church, are also frequently appropriated and marked with a name or initials. An interesting variant of this practice occurs at Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, in the use of roofing-slates, of which seven examples may be seen; one of these, commemorating a certain George Wyne who died in 1778, carries, in spite of its small size (13 ins. by $7\frac{1}{2}$ ins.), a full epitaph drawn up in the regular contemporary style (Pl. II). The same graveyard also contains a wooden marker, evidently of no great age.

Notwithstanding George Wyne's epitaph, it is clear that a wide typological gap exists between the earliest of the known post-Reformation headstones and a mere grave-digger's marker. Nor does it seem likely that the former developed from the latter through gradual, undefined stages, as no examples attributable to such interim stages can be quoted and, in particular, no evidence has been found for a phase of wooden construction, such as might reasonably be expected to have formed part of the hypothetical process. The horizontal boards supported on a pair of pickets, which are often seen in English churchyards, are not relevant to the question; and though wooden headboards of "headstone" form have been used in the United States until quite recent times,³ these seem to represent a translation of stone monuments into wood, practised by rural communities in regions where timber was plentiful. Such translation is clearly implied by the headboard of 1875, from Colorado, that is illustrated in fig. 2. Further evidence against the idea of an evolutionary stage, in any material, is to be seen in the fact that the technical quality of the earlier headstones is not

¹ R.C.A.M., *Inventory of Selkirkshire*, 34.

² *E.g.* at St Mary's Chapel, Selkirkshire (*ibid.*, 35).

³ Mr Louis C. Jones, Director of the New York State Historical Association, writes (3rd February 1958): "I have been picking up . . . more and more evidence that the wooden tombstone . . . was commonplace in the 17th century in the east and well into the 19th century in the middle and far west." *Cf.* also the allusion to a wooden headboard in Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, IX, which reflects conditions in Missouri in the eighteen-forties.

necessarily inferior in any way to that of the later examples; to take a single instance, the stone at Tranent, East Lothian, that is now only identified by the initials A S and I C, dates from as early as 1635 but will bear comparison with the best contemporary work on any other type of monument (Pl. I).

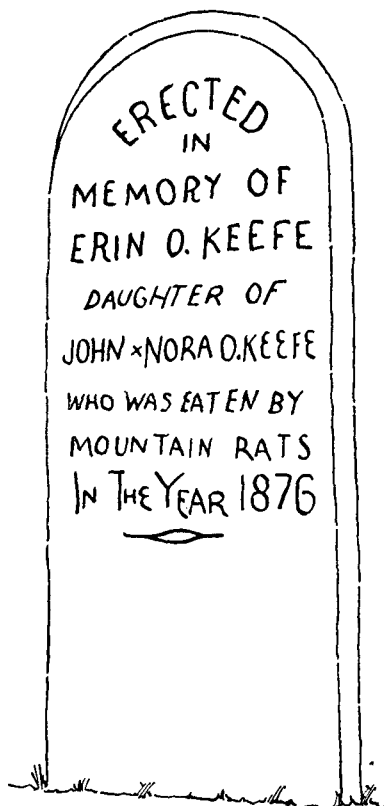


Fig. 2. Wooden headboard from Pike's Peak, Colorado. The inscription is believed to have been made with a red-hot iron. (From a photograph, by courtesy of the New York State Historical Association.)

It is thus to be inferred that the headstone came into being through the adaptation, to this new form, of something else which was already fully developed.

On this hypothesis three possible exemplars may be suggested—(i) the recumbent slab, or the "table" portion of a table-tomb, turned from the horizontal to the vertical plane; (ii) the upstanding end-pieces that are sometimes attached to a slab-built sarcophagus; (iii) the mural panel, either plain or as adapted to form the core of a more or less elaborate wall-monument. Of these alternatives the first is quite improbable, on account both of the

large size of the slabs and also of the fact that, in the earlier examples at least, the inscription tends to run round the margin—an arrangement unsuitable for a headstone and in fact never attempted. For the second there is little to be said, as no early examples have been met with,¹ and any adaptation which occurred was more probably in the contrary direction. The mural panel, however, whether actually existing in stone or copied from the kind of architectural assemblages that figured on title-pages or in such works as Tobias Fendt's *Monumenta Sepulchrorum cum Epigraphis, etc.*, the first edition of which appeared in 1574, has very strong claims to be regarded as the headstone's ancestor. The table in fig. 1 shows that, in Scotland, the mural monument was well established before the headstone's appearance, and the relationship between the two is brought out by numerous points of similarity. The inscription, for example, is arranged in the same manner on both—in horizontal lines, as on a written page. The type of headstone, very commonly seen, that possesses angular shoulders and a rounded top reproduces the outline of a Classical panel with a scallop ornament at its head. Innumerable headstones copy the basic architectural design of the great Renaissance wall-monuments, having half-shafts or pilasters and a pediment framing a space which bears inscription or decorative emblems; and it is worth noting that the very early headstone at Langton, Berwickshire, which dates from 1620 (Pl. I), shows this design in a form which is already completely degraded, shafts and cornice being represented by meaningless half-round mouldings. Many panels of the simpler kind only differ from headstones in virtue of their mural setting; to refer again to *Monumenta Sepulchrorum*, it will be seen that its Nos. 55 (Pl. II) and 75 would immediately look like the above-ground portions of headstones if the corbel-members on which they rest were removed. An interesting example of this relationship may be quoted from England, in the shape of a panel, dated 1612, which is set in the wall of the church at Iccomb, Gloucestershire, and a group of four headstones, one of which is dated 1618, standing in the churchyard at Fifield, Oxfordshire, about three miles distant. The panel and the above-ground portions of the headstones match very closely, and have pretty clearly been copied from one and the same exemplar—no doubt by the same local mason. It is unnecessary, however, to labour this point further, as the comparison of a number of headstones and wall-monuments will make it sufficiently clear.²

If it be asked why the supposed simple grave-marker should have blossomed out, in the course of the 17th century, into the elaborately decorated and carefully inscribed headstone, the answer is almost certainly

¹ Slezer shows several in his view of the graveyard at Melrose Abbey. (*Theatrum Scotiae*, Pl. 52.)

² Particularly useful comparisons may be made of the following figures in *P.S.A.S.*: XLII, 26, fig. 6 with XLV, 147 fig. 30; XLV, 132, fig. 14 with XLV, 134, fig. 16 and 135, fig. 17. It will also be noted that the stones shown in XLII, 32, 34, figs. 11 and 13 might equally well be small wall-monuments or headstones set in the wall for preservation.

to be found in increasing wealth and improved education in the lower ranks of society. If and when the less fortunate classes began to find themselves possessed of improved means, they may well have wished to copy the practice of their betters in the matter of memorials to the dead, though still unable to afford the large and finely carved slabs affected by the gentry and richer merchants. The probability that economic conditions played some part in the process is supported by the data from Aberdeenshire quoted above, as the country districts in which these graveyards are situated are known to have been poor and depressed until the effects of the agricultural improvements of the 18th century had begun to make themselves felt. At the same time, with expanding literacy, more and more people would have valued a written record of their relatives' earthly careers, and would also have been able to savour choice texts and spiritual admonitions. The vertical position of the headstone may likewise have been thought to guard decorations and inscriptions from the wear and tear to which the recumbent slab is subject. Whether the decrease in the numbers of recumbent slabs that seems to have occurred after 1690 is also to be ascribed to an economic cause, or simply to fashion, or whether, again, as the date might be thought to suggest, contemporary religious changes may possibly have had some effect, are questions which outrun the scope of the present paper.

In conclusion, I desire to thank the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland for permission to make use of some unpublished data, and likewise all those who have helped me in the course of the enquiry—particularly Mrs Collingwood, Mr C. A. Gordon, Mr Louis C. Jones of the New York State Historical Association, Miss Janet MacFarlane of the Albany Institute of History and Art, Mr M. R. Dobie, C.B.E., Mr C. S. T. Calder and Mr G. B. Quick.

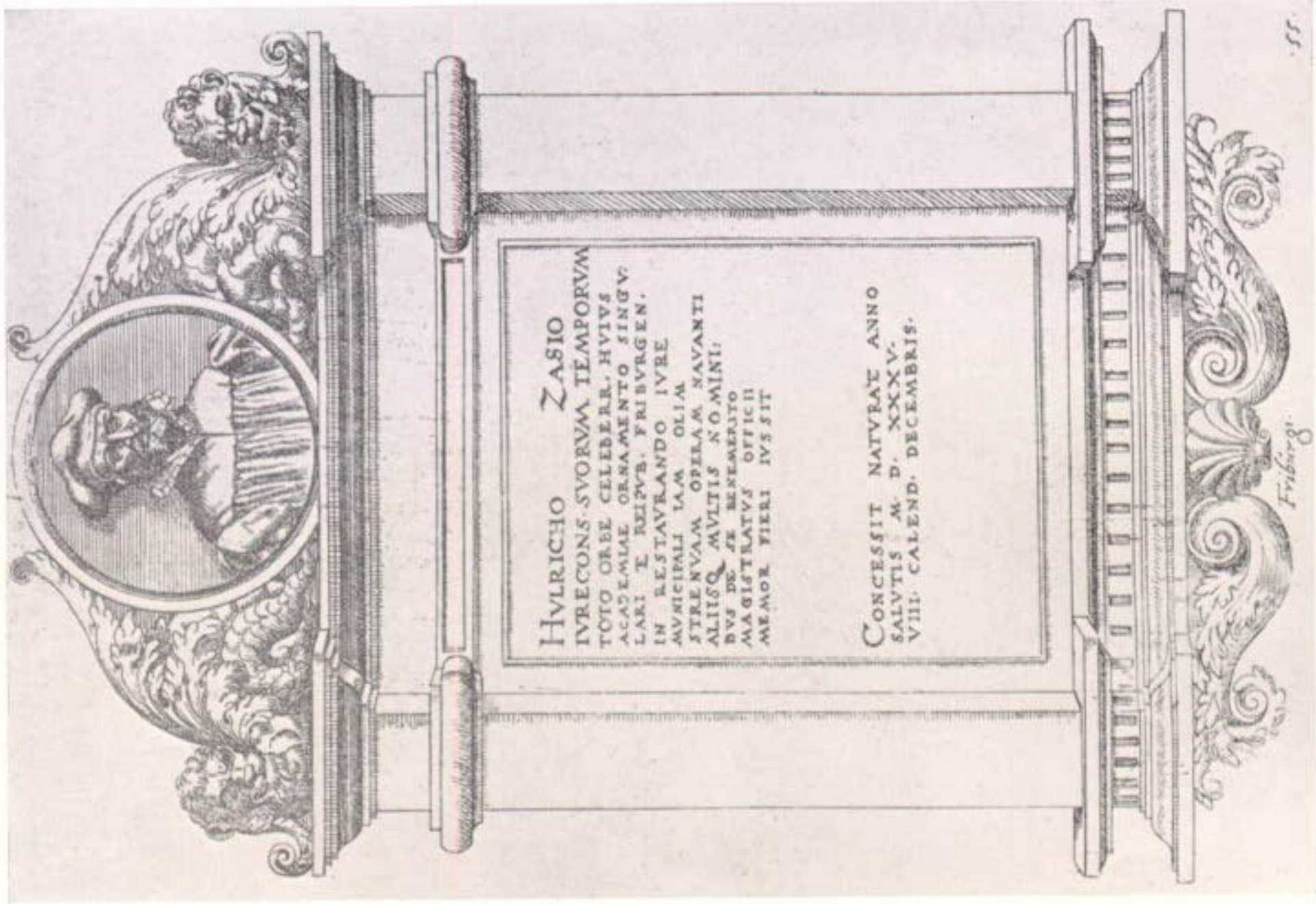


Headstone at Tranent (1635).



Waugh headstone at Langton. Of the present height (2 ft. 10 in.) at least 5 in. should be underground.

ANGUS GRAHAM.



Feudt, T., *Monumenta Sepulchrorum cum Epigraphis* (1574), Plate 55. (Photo B.M.)



Grave-marker at Inverurie (1778), made of a roofing-slate. 13 in. by 7 1/2 in.