

NOTES

I. A RECUMBENT GRAVE-SLAB FROM BRECKON, ESHA NESS, SHETLAND

THE memorial, which lies in the churchyard of Cross Kirk, is a flat slab measuring barely 2 ft. in width and 5 ft. in length to a rounded broken end. Around the border on the face side there is an incised marginal inscription which is indecipherable for the most part owing to weathering and the fracturing of the edges but here and there a word or a few letters are intact and clearly discernible.

In his *Tour*¹ the Rev. G. Low refers to the stone as follows:

'In the churchyard observed a gravestone about 5 feet long, with a shallow carving on it, much defaced, both by the wearing and splintering of the stone. An inscription runs round the edge of it in (to me) an unknown language, seems from the few characters that were entire a mixed Runick.'

In the *E.C.M.*² J. Romilly Allen mentions the notice by Low but states that the stone is now lost. He describes it as 'a rectangular sepulchral slab, 5 feet long, with an inscription, in late runes round the border of the broad face, part of which has been read by Professor Munch as follows:

BIFI FIRIR SOL
"Pray for the soul".'

Actually the stone still survives and its supposed loss was evidently due to the concealment of its features under a growth of grass and moss. In this state it was again observed and noted during the survey of the monuments of Shetland by the Royal Commission,³ but the illegibility of the inscription and the type of slab prompted only a misleading guess at the wording and the dating. The Commission reports that 'The stone . . . appears to have been a 17th century tomb-slab with a marginal inscription, illegible but probably beginning in the dexter top-corner with the usual formula HEI[R LIES] or HEI[C JACET]'.

A re-examination of the stone, cleared of its vegetable covering, enabled a rubbing to be made and allowed a close visual inspection of what letters were left. This revealed that the inscription was in fact an incomplete bi-lingual composition probably in Latin and in Norse and consisted of two distinct sets of alphabetical characters, respectively Lombardic and Scandinavian Runic. In letters $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. high in the upper left-hand margin the Lombardic portion bears a few letters here and there as shown in the drawing, fig. 1, and the inscription continues along the top after a break of three or four spaces with IR·PATE·RN. It finishes immediately thereafter in the top right-hand corner in an equal-armed cross wrought with serifs as also is the lettering. In this position the cross may also be said to start the Runic portion which runs down the right-hand margin and a translation of the runes into the equivalent modern letters is shown alongside in the drawing.

The carving of both forms of lettering suggests that each was cut by the same craftsman but the disfigurement and scarcity of complete words renders a sensible interpretation virtually impossible. At all events the fact emerges that two languages were employed in the commemoration of the individual concerned and this notice together with the trans-

¹ *Tour through the Islands of Orkney and Shetland in 1774*, 136.

² *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, III (1903), 18.

³ *Inventory of Shetland*, III (1946), 89, art. 1351.

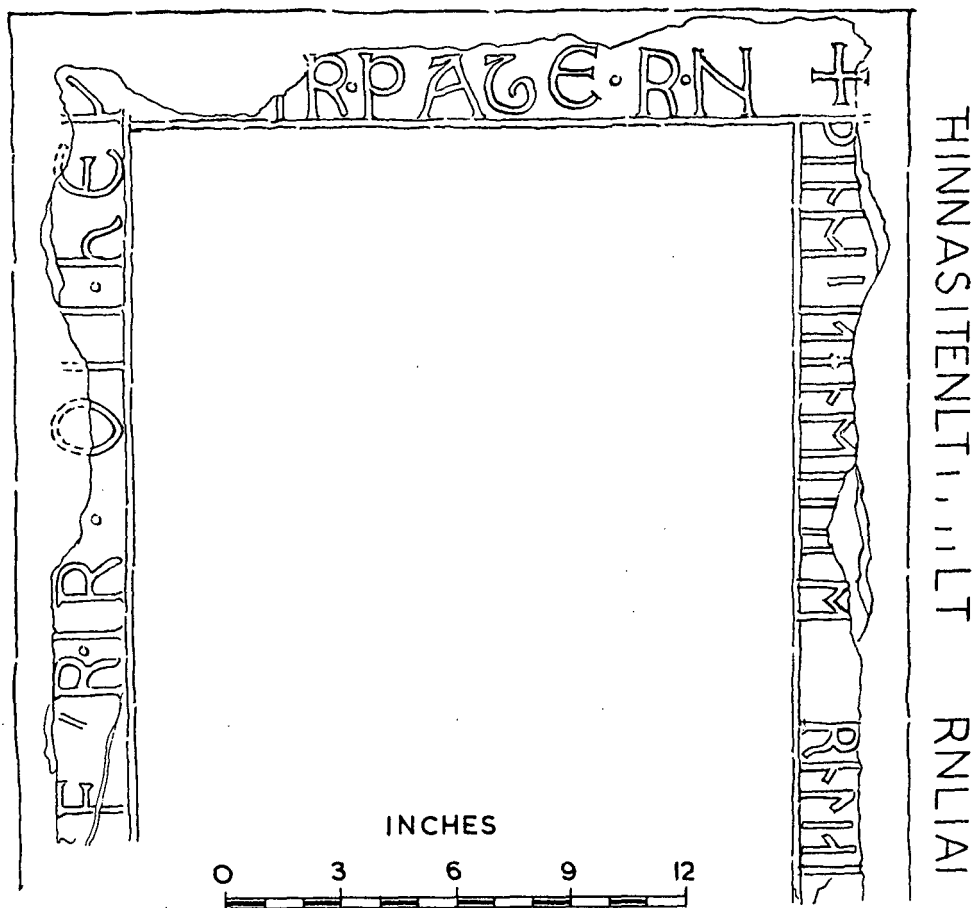


FIG. 1

cription illustrated may serve to settle some points of confusion that have arisen from the earlier reports on the subject. The type of the slab and the style of the Lombardic characters point to a late medieval period for its execution. The memorial inscriptions would seem to express a late use of runes and their combination with another language furnishes a rare example of the kind.

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