

REPORT

BY

MR GEORGE BUIST

ON THE

Silver Fragments in the Possession of General Durham, Largo,

COMMONLY CALLED

THE SILVER ARMOUR OF NORRIE'S LAW.

TO THE

FIFESHIRE LITERARY AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

CUPAR:

PRINTED IN THE FIFESHIRE JOURNAL OFFICE.

1839.

HAVING been for some time engaged in inquiries in reference to an extraordinary set of Monuments prevalent in various parts of Scotland, commonly called cross-stones, and for the most part, but without, as it appears, any sufficient authority, ascribed to the period of the Danish invasions, my attention was called to some fragments of silver armour, in the possession of General Durham of Largo, one of which in particular was marked with a symbol characteristic of the cross-stones, and to be found, so far as I am aware, on no ancient relics besides. Hoping that I might now be in the way of obtaining some light where nothing but obscurity had before prevailed, I immediately set on foot the inquiries which have elicited the information contained in the subjoined report; which, meagre and unsatisfactory as it may appear, will, in the form of a printed record, be saved the risk which till now has hung over it—of perishing altogether by the deaths of the individuals by whom it has been orally communicated; and may also, when put in a form fit for dissemination, be the means of expiscating other facts, or occasioning the recovery of other fragments of these extraordinary relics; both of which, I have every reason to believe, are still accessible, did we know where to inquire for them. With the same objects in view, I have, by permission of General Durham, caused *fac-simile* copies in mixed metal to be made for the collections of the Scientific Societies at Cupar and St Andrews. It must be stated, as an instance of the importance of this inquiry, that the symbol-marked plate and bodkin (Nos. 4 and 5 in Drawing I.) were, in consequence of it, recovered from hands from which they might, like so much of what preceded them, have passed into the crucible of the silversmith, and have been added to the collection of General Durham, in connection with which they will hereafter be noticed without further distinction from the others.

It does appear to me, that a great boon would be conferred on antiquarian science, were the various learned societies simultaneously to press the Legislature for the repeal of the absurd law in reference to treasure-trove, which has occasioned the secretion and destruction of so many valuable relics—in no case in our time more to be deplored than in that under review—the individuals into whose possession gold or silver fragments may fall being aware, that unless secured from detection by their immediate committal to the crucible, they may be wrested from them by the Crown Exchequer, which, while in this way occasioning the destruction of innumerable relics, does not derive so much from them in pecuniary return as will cover the cost of carrying the law into effect.

For the information in regard to the lost portion of the Norrie's Law Armour, I have been indebted to Mr R. Robertson, jeweller, Cupar, or to individuals to whom I have been by him referred.

Mr Robertson first made a purchase of L.5 worth, subsequently two of L.10, and knew of another made by some one about Edinburgh to the amount of about L.20, and is under the belief that perhaps as much as that here accounted for may have been carried away and bestowed on various uses. This, by rough computation, may, together with what remains, be reckoned not much under 400 ounces of pure bullion. Mr Robertson has, as may readily be supposed, a peculiarly distinct recollection of the forms of the various portions of the armour procured by him, and gives a most vivid description, in particular, of the rich carving of the shield, the helmet, and the sword handle, which were brought to him crushed in pieces to permit convenient transport and concealment.

The drawings of the cross-stones, given for the sake of illustration, have either been taken by me from the objects themselves, and are now for the first time laid before the public, or copied from prints in the *Archaeological and Antiquarian Transactions*, by Mr Logan of London, and Professor Stewart of Aberdeen. Numerous drawings of similar subjects will be found in the works of Gordon, Cordiner, Pennant, and others—these, however, being for the most part, especially in the cases of the two former, very little to be relied on as correct copies from the originals.

The Largo cross represented in Plate III. is destitute of the usual symbols, but is, from its other sculptures, easily identifiable with the others of its class. Its fate, from the intelligence and attention of the Largo family in such matters, has been more auspicious than that of many of its fellows. It was many years ago found in several separate fragments, which, being properly placed together, were, by the late proprietor of Largo, placed against a wall for protection. General Durham, with that intelligence and good taste for which he is so greatly distinguished, has this season had it erected in his pleasure grounds on a handsome and suitable pedestal, and has had the present, and many other plans and drawings made of it, for illustration and distribution.

R E P O R T, &c.

THE fragments of the Norrie's Law Armour, now in the possession of General Durham (and of which a few of the principal pieces only are represented in the subjoined drawings), consist of two circles or armlets (figs. 1 and 2), rather rudely formed, and in indifferent preservation—of two bodkins of the most exquisite workmanship (figs. 5, 5, and 5, represent different aspects of one bodkin, of which the other, except on the back, is an exact copy)—of two lozenge-shaped plates (figs. 3 and 4), marked with the symbols of the cross stones—a beautiful finger-ring, in the form of a coiled serpent (fig. 6)—a small sword hook (fig. 7)—of the mouth-piece and tip of a very large sword-scabbard—an ornamented circular plate—and various other lesser fragments not here represented, and whose uses have not been precisely determined. They contain 24 ounces troy of fine silver. They appear to have been found about the year 1819, in or near a stone coffin in an artificial heap or tumulus of sand or gravel, called Norrie's Law, on the boundaries betwixt the estates of Teasses and Largo. They formed part of a rich coat of scale-armour, the pieces of which consisted of small-sized lozenge-shaped plates of silver, suspended loosely by a hook from the upper corner. The helmet and shield and sword-hilt, were, when found, quite entire, as were some portions of the sword-sheath. This seems to have been a large cross-hilted weapon, such as were commonly used with both hands. No parts or relics of the blade were discernible. No bones, ashes, or human remains, appear to have been found near. The pieces of armour were withdrawn, piecemeal, and sold by a hawker for what they would bring, and to whomsoever chose to purchase them. The uses of the plates (Nos. 3 and 4) are unknown, as also the meanings of the symbols so emphatically engraved on them. The circles resemble certain mysterious gold ornaments found in many parts of Ireland, and which have so entirely perplexed the most minute profound Irish antiquarians. It cannot, however, be pronounced that the similitude amounts to any distinct measure of identification; though it is not to be overlooked, when we keep in view that the symbols of the plates are identical with those of the stone crosses, that these, again, are peculiar to Ireland and to Scotland, in both of which countries they abound. The remarkable beauty of the workmanship of the two bodkins, rivalling in perfection the finest workings of modern silversmiths, is perplexing, and contrasts strongly with the roughness of the artistship of the circles, and some other parts of the arms. The symbol (No. 4) is engraven on the back of one of the bodkins, but it has the appearance of not having belonged to it originally, the work being more rude and more recent-looking than that of the other parts of these fragments. A considerable number of coins, now wholly lost sight of, and said to have borne these symbolic markings, were found along with the armour at Norrie's Law, and about forty of the same kind were found in an earthen pot at Pittenweem in 1822. It is said that these were destitute of inscription or written character. A considerable part of the armour was partially corroded, the alloy having been eaten away as if by some weak acid, exactly after the manner of that employed in certain operations of modern silversmiths. The bullion in this case was much more pure than in those cases where it remained solid and untouched. It was, in fact, reduced to the state of porous, brittle, spongy silver. The parts chiefly affected in this way were those lowest down, which seem to have suffered from long exposure to some subtle corrosive. The upper portions were fresh, compact, and entire. In them the silver was nearly the same as our present standard.

These are nearly all the facts which have as yet been obtained from trustworthy sources respecting the Norrie's Law Armour. The conclusions attempted to be deduced from them must assume the form of queries and conjectures rather than inferences.

The well known scarcity of the precious metals in Scotland, and the consequently high value set upon them in early ages, must lead to the conclusion that the person with whom so large a

value of them, so elaborately carved, could be interred, must have been one of the highest distinction, and that his sepulture must have been matter of great and general notoriety, while much superstitious reverence alone could have saved his tomb from violation. The circumstances connected with an event necessarily so notable, must have been known over an extensive district of country, and preserved for a long period of time by the voice of tradition—supposing written records of it to have been wanting, as we know they both must have been—before the exercise of the pen of the systematic historian. This of itself carries us back to a period of very remote though ill-defined antiquity—one not more recent certainly than that of the latest Danish invasion. In this dark and distant period, then, have we to seek for light from other quarters in reference to the history of these fragments, with which the fragments themselves no longer supply us.

The importance which must have been attached to the celebrated cross-stones, both as to the time and space over which it extended, their profusion and elaborateness equally demonstrate; while in the utter neglect and oblivion into which, by the 10th century, they had fallen, they and the fragments before us share a common fate.

Are we—from the slight but striking circumstance of the present coincidence of this single but most remarkable symbol on both classes of relics—to conclude, that in their character, the time, or the source of their existence, there is anything in common? Our ignorance of both precludes a precise decision either positive or negative.

It is to be feared that in reference to the Largo Armour, the amount of fragments, as of information, which may yet be received, permits but little hope of illumination from this source.

The cross-stones still present a very ample field, which has scarcely yet been touched upon. It has already been stated that they had fallen into disrepute before the end of the 13th century, fragments of them being found as building stones in the walls of churches known to have been erected at that period; and we may conclude, therefore, that at least three centuries must have elapsed from the time in which they were held in estimation. From the cross uniformly represented on them, their date appears to be subsequent, though not much, to the introduction of Christianity; and, from these and other circumstances, the date may probably without much error be ascribed to the third or fourth century. At this period we have every reason to believe that the people of Northern Europe were sunk into a state of the deepest barbarism. The sculptures on the cross-stones manifest the very infancy of art, elaborate in execution, and defective in design, yet they give representations of circumstances widely different, and the details of battles and of hunting scenes conducted on the most luxurious and complicated scale, while the costumes represented on Sueno's Pillars, on the Duplin Cross, and, above all, on the St Andrews Coffin, are gorgeous to an extent which—visible as it is, through the infantile sculptures which detail it—the magnificence of the Largo Armour itself does not surpass.

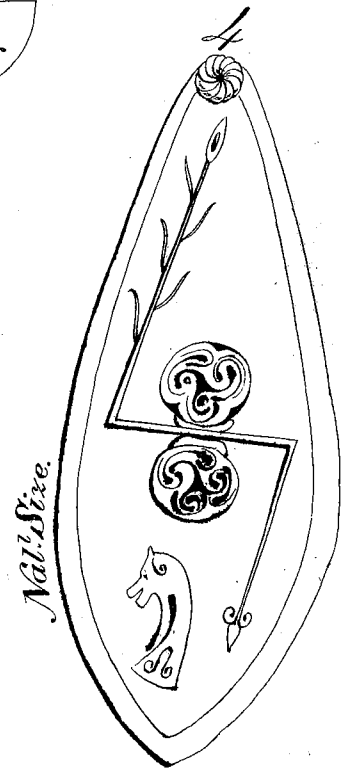
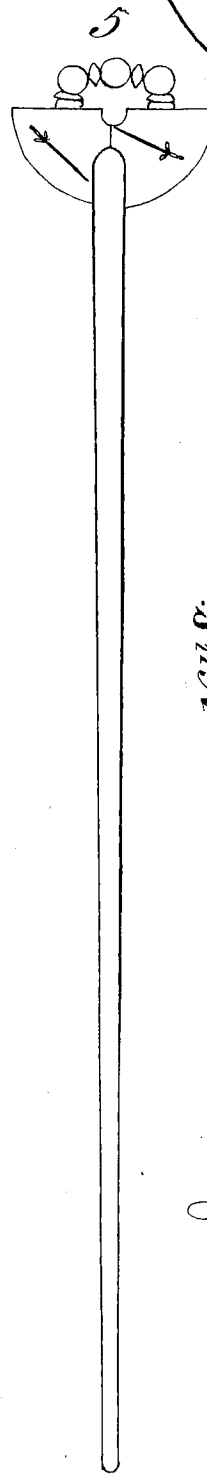
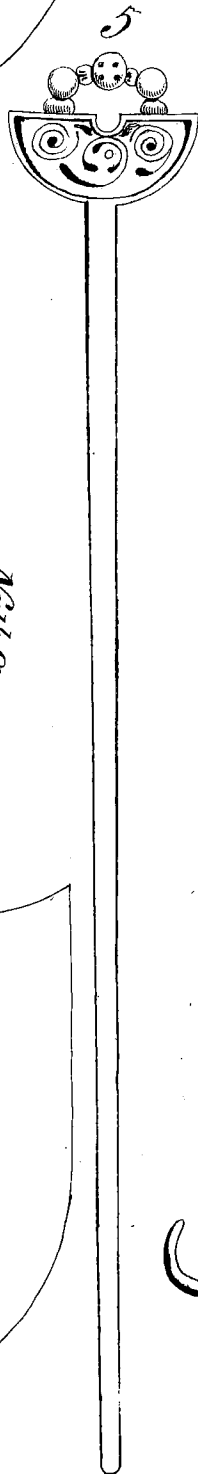
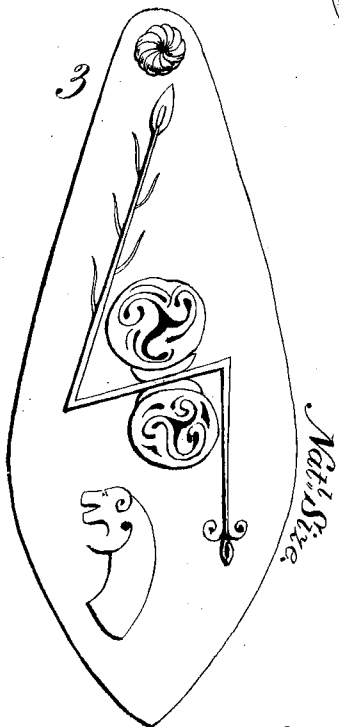
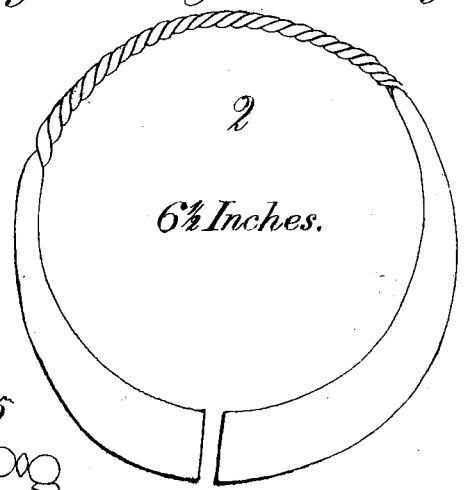
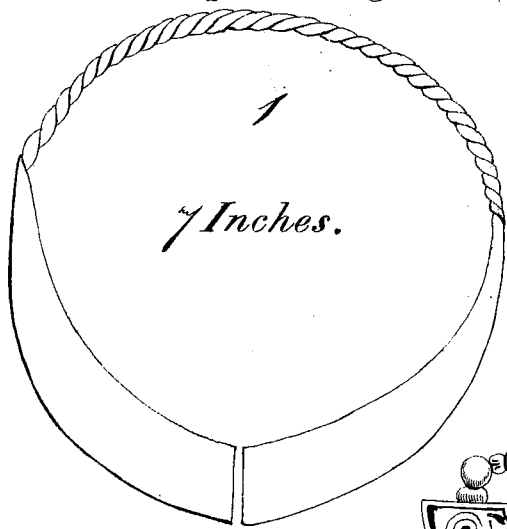
May not these works—perhaps of native artists—represent scenes and subjects not native?

The greater part of the fragments of the Largo Armour are, as formerly mentioned, cut with a delicacy and precision of art, which the workmanship of modern times cannot surpass. May not these be a collection of foreign fragments procured for some purpose of State or superstition, by a people who were themselves unwilling to want, yet unable to imitate them.

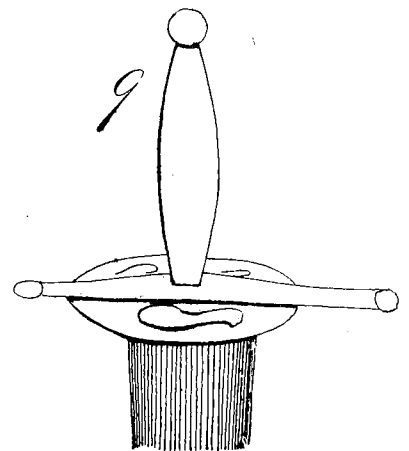
In the preceding pages it has been desired to propound no theory. The reporter has been anxious to record a set of facts but little known, and to preserve others hitherto only kept in the insecure treasury of oral tradition. The subject is most interesting but obscure—referring as it does to a period of our national history, in reference to which the voice of written annals and of tradition are alike silent, which, if it ever be cleared up, must be so through the medium of existing monuments, to which the above remarks are meant to call attention. Something has already been done, yet much more remains to be effected; and, should these remarks stay in any instance the war of extermination which has hitherto so ruthlessly taken the place of rational investigation, they will have done something to preserve the most precious of the records of our early national antiquities, till the awakening eye of the antiquary be turned in a direction from which it has hitherto scarcely ventured to look for information.

Plate 1.

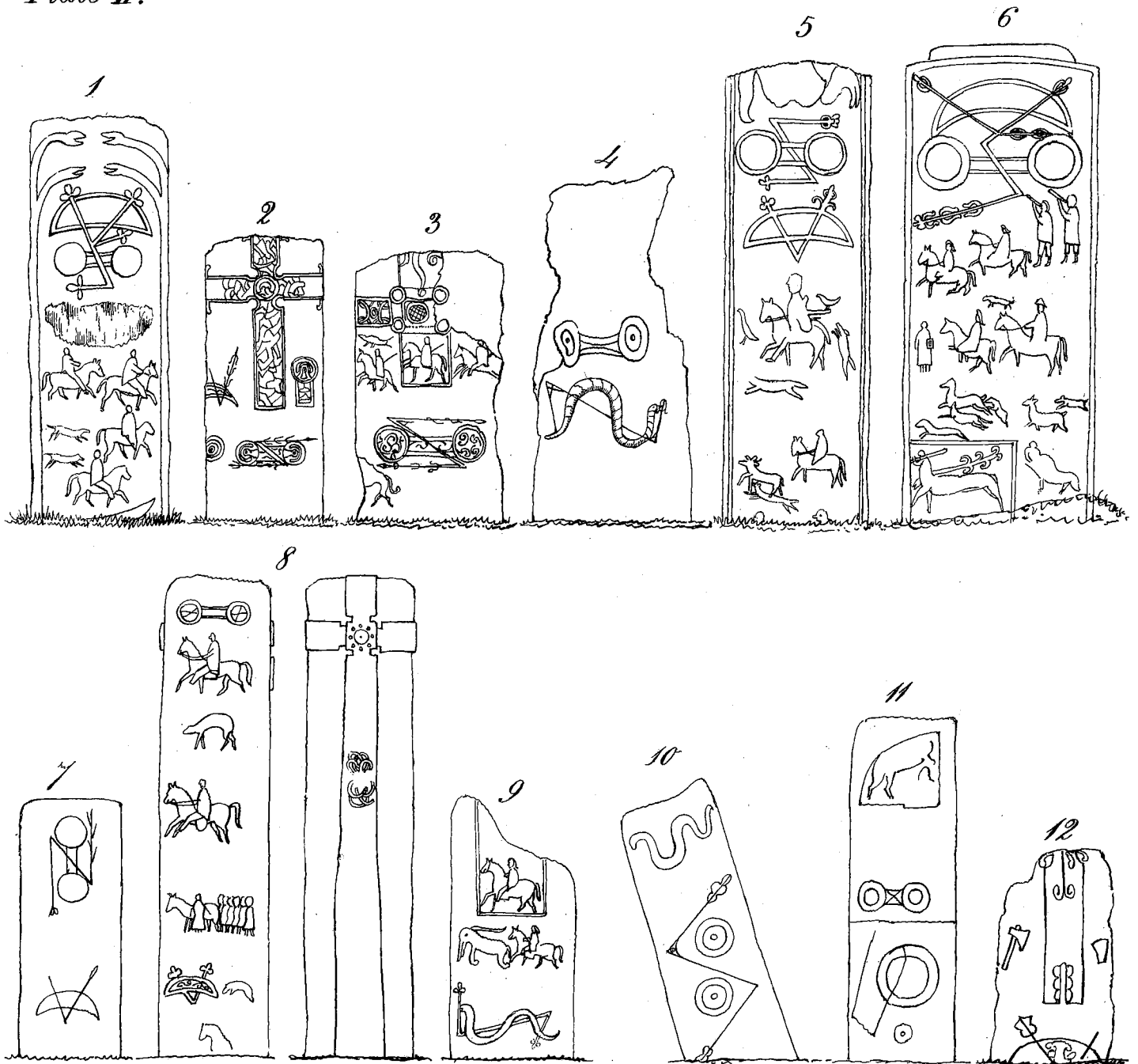
Fragments in the possession of General Durham, Largo, of a magnificent suit of silver armour found at Norrie's Law, 1819.



Nat. Size.



16 Inches, by 10.



1. Glamis, Forfar-shire.

2. Dyce, Aberdeen-shire.

3. Fordun, Mearns-shire.

4. Newtown, Banff-shire.

5. Elgin, Moray-shire.

6. Crosstown, Forfar-shire.

7. Muir of Rhyrie, Aberdeen-shire.

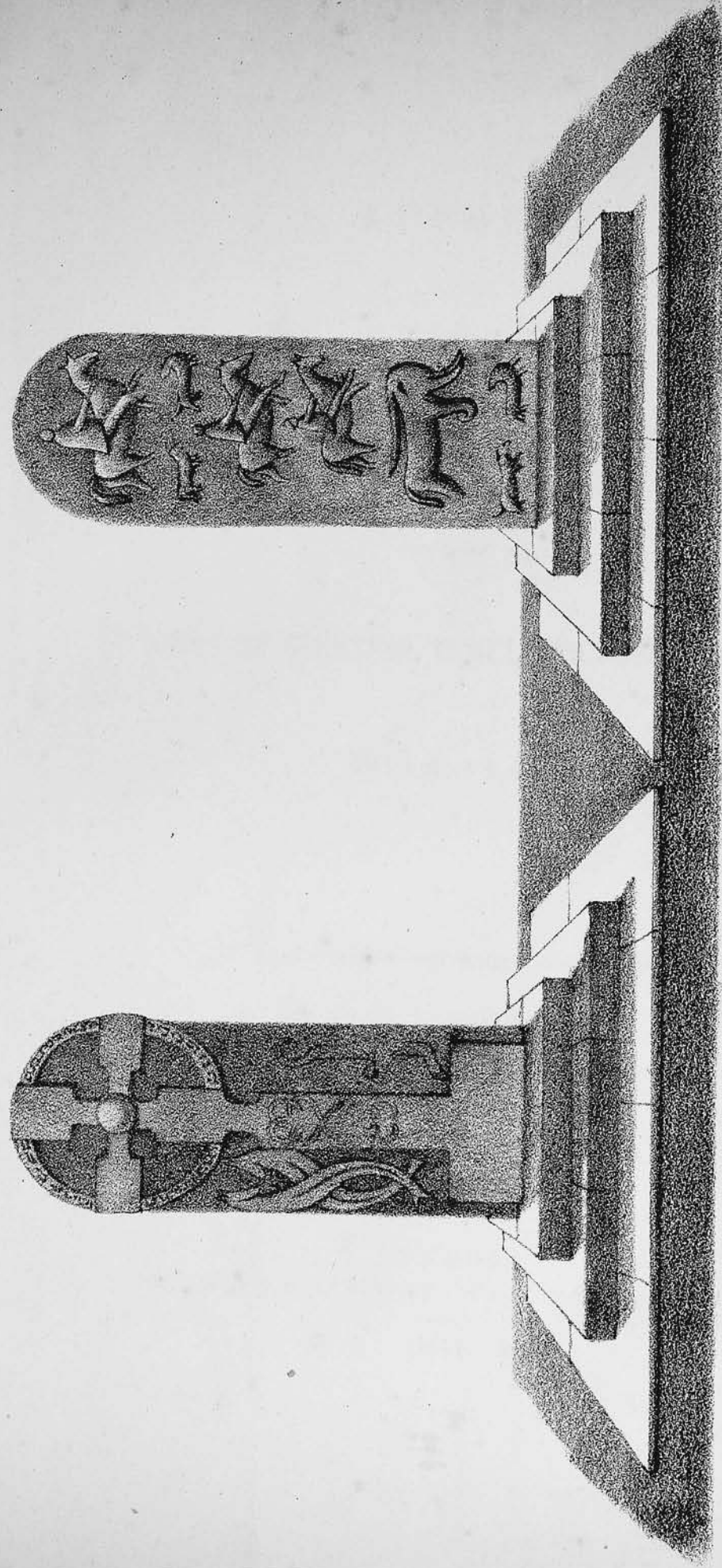
8. Foulis Wester, Perth-shire.

9. Balkello, Forfar-shire.

10. Crosstown, Forfar-shire.

11. Baldourie, Stathmore.

12. Abernethie, Perth-shire.



Largo Cross.

One of the class of monuments called Runic, or Danish, and believed to belong to the fourth century, and to have been the earliest christian monument in this country.