

The stone sculptures of Anglo-Saxon England

The publication of the 'Cheshire and Lancashire' volume of the British Academy's 'Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture' brings this important series closer to completion. The Corpus has significantly increased the number of known Anglo-Saxon monuments. The General Editor, **Professor Rosemary Cramp FBA**, explains how the Corpus volumes have encouraged debate and set in motion new ways of assessing these sculptures. Then **Professor Richard N. Bailey** explains the significance of one particular stone – the Bidston hogback – featured in his 'Cheshire and Lancashire' volume.

ANGLO-SAXON stone sculptures are often now seen as possessing a fluidity of meaning and context, but the discussion of possible reasons for their construction and location, how they functioned in their time, their meaning to contemporary and later viewers remain live research questions.

Stone crosses

Stone crosses of the 7th to 11th centuries are a form of Christian monument unique to Britain and Ireland, and the achievement in their production was huge – particularly in the 7th to 9th centuries. Anglo-Saxon art had been Picasso-like in its fragmentation of the human form and reformation into puzzling combinations of human and bird or animal elements, and this was reflected mainly on personal and portable objects in fine metalwork. As a migratory people the Anglo-Saxons had no monumental art, but within three generations of their acceptance of Christianity they had produced sculptures with classical and elegant figures combined

with inventive and varied animal vegetable and abstract ornament, unsurpassed anywhere in the western world of their time.

Although both simple wooden and elaborate metal crosses may have served as inspiration for stone high crosses it is most likely that it was the introduction of stone architecture (with the accompanying masonry skills), at some 7th-century ecclesiastical sites, that inspired these wood-using people to create elaborate stone monuments. The importation of books, reliquaries, ivories and icons to enhance the new churches provided new artistic models, and travel to the continent opened the eyes of some of the clerics to the legacy of the Roman world in their homeland. Roman monuments as well as buildings may have influenced these early carvers although, unlike on many Roman monuments, lay individuals were not depicted until the 9th century.

The functions of Anglo-Saxon crosses as field monuments were various, as foci for prayer and devotion, and indeed for theo-

Figure 1. Shaft of a stone cross at Bewcastle, Cumbria. Photo: Rosemary Cramp, copyright Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.



logical instruction and conversion, and even, as has been suggested more recently, some could have played a part in the liturgy of the church. Many were commemorative, as their inscriptions show, and some, even with religious figures, have been seen as providing a statement of territorial power or status for those who raised them. Support for one function does not rule out another, but the siting of high crosses could be indicative. It is reasonable to assume that resources to design and execute elaborately carved monuments lay, at that period, in the monasteries, but the sites at which they were raised were not necessarily monastic.

Many of the finest of the 7th-8th century crosses were found in liminal positions where they could make a statement: Bewcastle (Figure 1) and Ruthwell on the border with the Britons, Abercon and Aberlady on the border with the Picts, and the Peak District crosses on the border between Mercia and Northumbria.

Regional styles

Now that the *Corpus* publication is complete for the sculptures from the ancient

kingdoms of Northumbria and Wessex, it is possible to determine different regional and chronological styles and also to appreciate how Anglo-Saxon carvers developed their own iconography, often prompted by texts rather than imported images.

The discovery of paint on sculptures in the surveys of most regions, has reinforced the links with metalwork, particularly on crosses which are not decorated with figures. It is of interest to note also how clearly the cultural divide between the north and south in the 10th and 11th century has been illustrated in the *Corpus* publications. The artistic talents in the south at that period were directed to architectural sculptures produced from major centres, whilst funerary monuments were more mass-produced and plain, with recumbent grave slabs predominating. These, as the Lincolnshire volume has illustrated, extend into eastern counties where painstaking field-work has revealed how many must have been produced particularly from the Barnack quarries.

In the north, as the Yorkshire and Cheshire and Lancashire volumes demonstrate, the

new Scandinavian overlords and settlers were converted to (and possibly by) the high crosses in their new territories, but quickly adapted them to Scandinavian taste in ornament and figural scenes. They retained crosses as their main funerary monuments, but these were smaller and more crudely carved in local workshops. They also confidently presented secular figures on the crosses and introduced new forms of monument, such as the hogbacks. Richard Bailey discusses one example from his new *Corpus* volume on *Cheshire and Lancashire*.

In the British Academy Medieval Week session on 'Monuments in motion', held on 15 November 2010, Dr Barbara Crawford delivered a presentation by Professor Rosemary Cramp FBA on Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture, and then in her own right spoke about Anglo-Scandinavian hogbacks. An audio recording can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary

Figure 2. *The Bidston hogback. Photo: Ross Trench-Jellicoe, copyright Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.*

Professor Bailey discusses the Bidston hogback

The *Cheshire and Lancashire* volume well illustrates the significance of these carvings for our understanding of early medieval Britain – particularly for those areas where documentary evidence is thin or non-existent. Long ignored as a source of information, these sculptures provide a vital index of cultural and political links at regional and local level because, unlike the more mobile arts of metalwork and manuscript illumination, the carvings were produced at the sites where they now stand. This security of provenance enables us, for example, to recognise the importance, and comparative wealth, of the Lune valley in the 9th century with its string of ambitious carvings emerging from sites like Heysham,



Lancaster, Halton, Hornby and Gressingham. Similarly it is only through the complex figural art of the crosses at Sandbach in Cheshire that we know that northern Mercia was fully conversant with Carolingian iconographic themes whose existence is otherwise not attested in Anglo-Saxon England.

One recently discovered sculpture characterises the kinds of information which can be wrung from even the most unpromising of these carvings (Figure 2). It comes from Bidston, near Birkenhead on the Wirral peninsula, and was discovered in the 1990s, lurking in a rockery at the former vicarage. Measuring 47 cm long and 26 cm

high, it carries decoration on both of its main faces. A large open-jawed beast with raised paw and powerful shoulders dominates both ends of the stone, knotwork issuing from the tongue of the animal on the right and returning to join its lower jaw. On the better-preserved face the lower part of the stone carries three inter-linked triquetra whilst, in equivalent position on the other side, there is some form of scrollwork. That worn face also carries, at the bottom of the stone, traces of the rear legs of the flanking animals.

The carving can be readily identified as a hogback, a Viking-age form of funereal monument whose shape is based on that of a contemporary building with its curved roofline and bombé ground plan. This type of memorial was developed by the Hiberno-Scandinavian elite of northern England in the first half of the 10th century, and represents a secular adaptation of the solid building-shaped shrines of pre-Viking England such as the so-called Hedda's tomb in Peterborough Cathedral. The striking large end-beasts may have acquired new symbolism for their Viking-age patrons, but ultimately derive from the guardian animals which decorate the ridges of metal shrines of earlier Insular art. Now that we have a complete *Corpus* coverage for the English north, we can see that this kind of carving is largely restricted in its distribution to northern Yorkshire and to the Eden valley and coastal strip of Cumbria; we can also now distinguish regional varieties of this type of carving.

Bidston obviously lies far from the main centres of hogback production. It is, in fact, one of only four such carvings to the south of the Cumbrian peninsula; the others are at Bolton le Sands and Heysham in Lancashire together with a third at West Kirby in Wirral. All of these sites, like Bidston, are on or near the coast and appear to represent the memorials of Viking traders operating around the Irish sea. Like many hogbacks, the Bidston carving carries Christian symbolism in its Trinitarian linked triquetra and its worn scroll work.

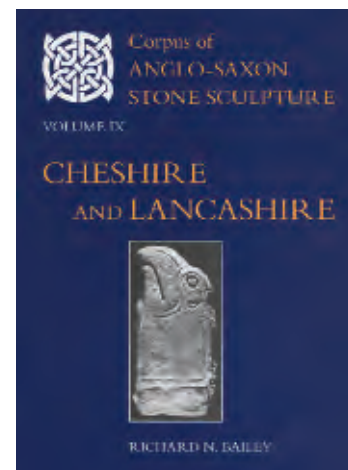
This hogback is important for (at least) two reasons. Firstly, it is one of a group of 10th-century carvings which are concentrated in the northern part of Wirral where they form an arc around the beach market at Meols – a site which is now beyond the sea defences but which we know, from 19th-century finds, was a long-existing trading centre which had a marked revival in the Viking period. This limited distribution suggests that Wirral's wealth in this period, with a consequent ability to commission stone carvings, was concentrated in the northern part of the peninsula and was dependent on trade rather than agricultural exploitation of the land.

Even more intriguing is a second deduction. The lay-out of the decoration on the Bidston sculpture is in marked contrast to that of the other Wirral hogback at West Kirby. Like the hogbacks at Bolton le Sands and Heysham, the West Kirby stone is tall and narrow. It has tegulation (shingling) on the upper 'roof' of the carving and, below, an interlacing decoration in which the strands are broken into abutting sections of 'stopped plait'. This is the characteristic shape – and decoration – of hogbacks in Cumbria and, further north, in the Clyde valley; these identities presumably reflect trading and cultural contacts along the east side of the Irish Sea. Bidston's carving is totally different: it belongs with a group which we can conveniently label as the 'extended niche' type in which the upper, 'roof', part of the face carries a horizontal run of interlace whilst the lower decoration is set within a curved niche. This class also has large end-beasts with both front and hind legs.

This is not a type of shape or decoration which is found in Cumbria. But it is a form which characterises York and its hinterland, with Brompton providing the best parallels; Brompton indeed is particularly relevant because it also preserves a hogback which had the same miniaturised proportions as the Bidston carving. The implication is that the Bidston sculptor, or his patron, was familiar with the decorative tastes and

monument preferences of 10th-century Yorkshire. In death the family of a Bidston trader chose to make a symbolic statement of his identity with a Yorkshire-based elite.

The York-Dublin axis was a major feature of political and commercial activity in the first half of the 10th century. Thanks to the discovery of the Cuerdale hoard, scholarly attention has hitherto focussed on linking routes between the two capitals via the Ribble and Aire valleys. Bidston's hogback is a useful reminder that other routes were available for exploitation. And that at least one Yorkshireman realised these opportunities.



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Richard Bailey is Emeritus Professor of Anglo-Saxon Civilisation, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. For more on his *Cheshire and Lancashire* volume in the British Academy's *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* series, see www.britac.ac.uk/pubs

The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture project has recently been awarded £10,000 by the Pilgrim Trust, to further research work on the Anglo-Saxon sculpture of Norfolk. The project's website is at www.dur.ac.uk/corpus
