

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVIII

1978

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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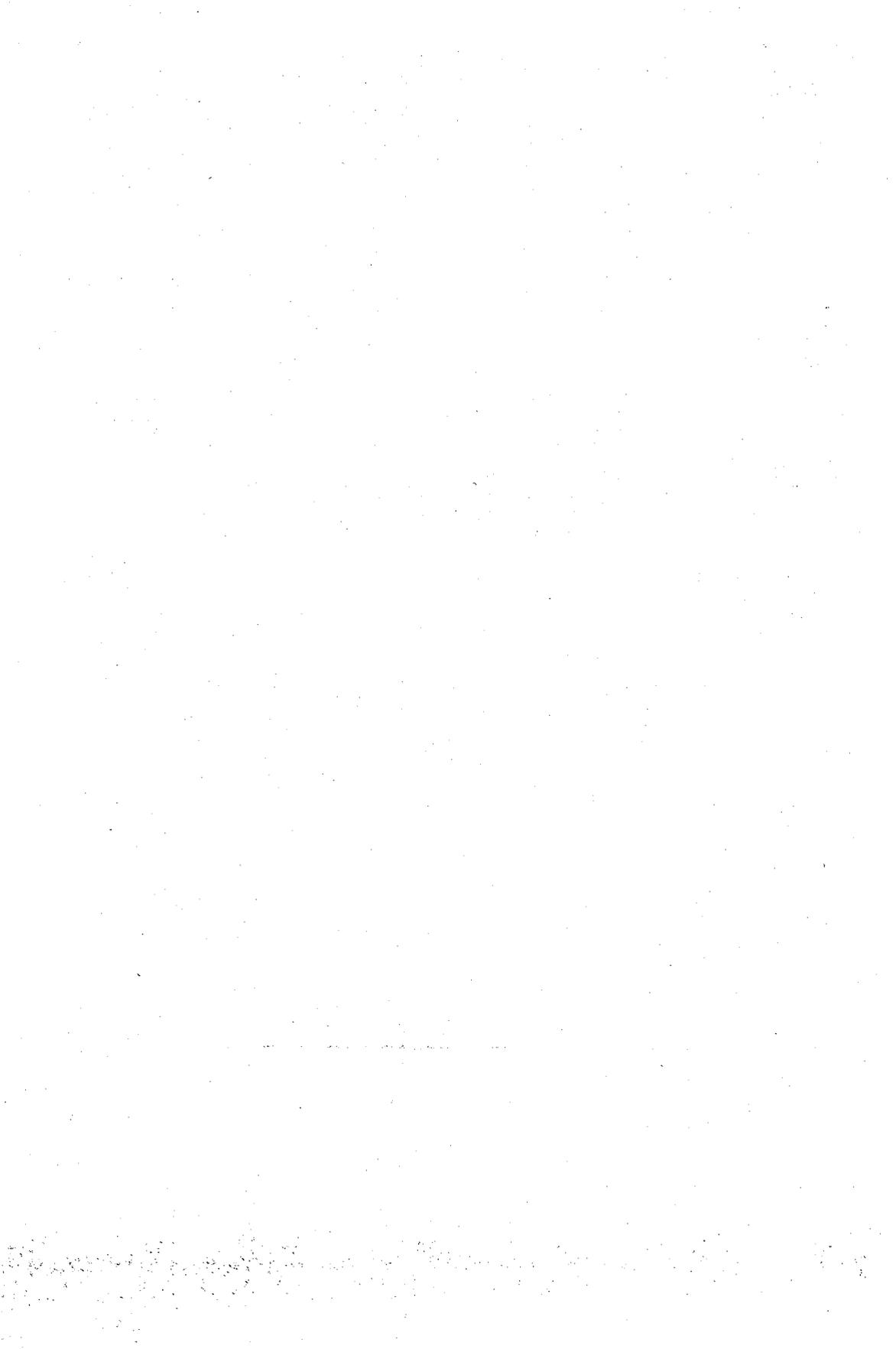
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A FRAGMENT OF PRE-CONQUEST SCULPTURE FROM BALSHAM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE.¹

Dominic Tweddle

In 1932 Fox published a pre-Conquest grave slab from Balsham.² Recently, during repairs to the upper part of the church tower, a second fragment of pre-Conquest sculpture has been discovered.³ It is now at the west end of the south aisle together with the grave slab.

The newly found fragment is triangular, and of oolitic limestone (P1.1). The faces have been trimmed except for the longest face, which is rectangular and decorated. The decoration, within a rectangular field, is incomplete, but consists of double-band ribbon interlace in relief forming an Allen knot type A⁴ facing outwards to the left.⁵ The upper band of the knot is carried across the field to form one loop of a figure-of-eight interlace, the second loop being formed by a band developing from the right. The loose end of the first loop is carried off the upper edge of the stone to the left, at the same point where the lower band of the knot is also carried off. The left-hand edge of the decorative face is rounded.

The decorated face is 46 cm long, 16 cm wide to the right, and 17 cm wide to the left. The depth of the stone at its apex is 15 cm.

The stone is unusual among the pre-Conquest sculpture of the area as it does not appear to belong to the group of monumental sculpture from the Cambridge region defined by Fox.⁶ The simplest way to reconstruct the stone is to suggest a second knot to the right, similar to that on the left. Such a reconstruction is supported by the symmetrical nature of the surviving decoration, and by the damaged, oblique ridge running across the upper right-hand corner of the decorated face, which may represent the band of a knot to the right being carried off the upper edge of the stone. A second ridge at right angles to this, and to its right, may represent the loose end of the loop of the figure-of-eight interlace which develops from the right, but the extent of the damage makes the interpretation uncertain.

The form of the surviving interlace - a narrow band - suggests that the loose ends at the upper edge of the stone to the left formed part of a similar narrow interlace zone, and a third zone of interlace could be suggested to the right. These would then have framed a field which was probably filled with further interlace, as the simplest way to reconstruct the inward trending band at the surviving end is as a diagonal.

The rounded edge to the left of the decorated face suggests that the stone was not intended to be built into a wall, and that at least one other face was originally decorated, although the rounding may be a secondary feature. In its present form the stone is the right size and shape for use in an architectural context, as an impost for

example, but the reconstruction precludes such a use, unless it were secondary. A secondary re-use of pre-Conquest sculpture has been suggested for the abaci and imposts of the chancel arch at Selham, Sussex.⁷

The suggested reconstruction could be completed by postulating that the original stone formed a panel some 60 cm square and 15 cm deep, in the manner of the panel at Bradford-on-Avon,⁸ the rosette decorated panel at Hexham,⁹ or the panel from Monkwearmouth.¹⁰ It might then have formed part of a screen with the rounded edge flanking the opening, or forming part of its upper edge.

Alternatively the fragment may have formed part of a large cross shaft. The lack of a detectable taper on the decorative face would, however, seem to contradict such a suggestion, but the face is narrow, and the damage to it may have disguised a taper.

Perhaps a more reasonable reconstruction of the fragment is as part of a cubic cross base, similar in form to that at Hexham.¹¹ This accounts for the rounded edge, a feature which is also seen on the Hexham fragment. If the faces of the base can be reconstructed as about 60 cm square, then the stone would be the right size to support a cross shaft. The largest fragment of cross shaft in the region - at Elstow, Bedfordshire - is 30 cm across its broadest face.¹² The form of the small memorial crosses in the area suggests that cross bases were known in this region. The cross at Stapleford, Cambridgeshire, has a rectangular base sculpted as a single piece with the shaft, possibly in imitation of larger monuments.¹³

The interlace does not allow the stone to be reliably dated.

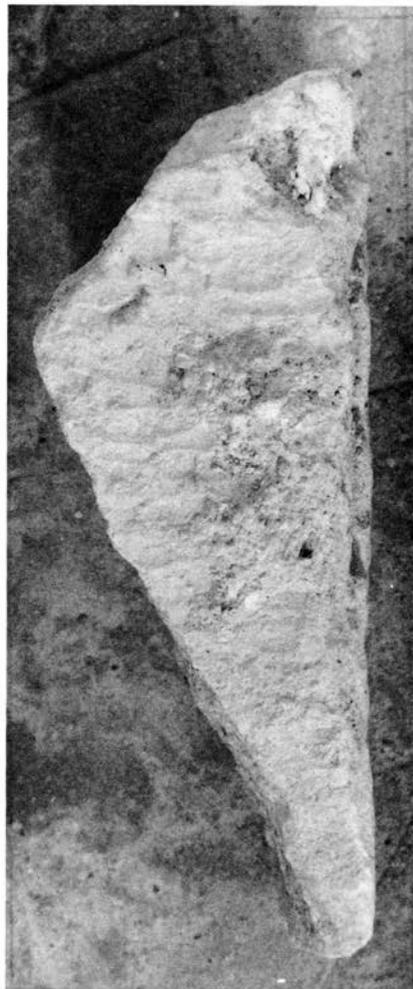
NOTES

1. My thanks to the churchwardens for permission to publish the sculpture, and to Dr. D.M. Wilson for discussing this note with me.
2. C.Fox, 'Saxon grave slab: Balsham, Cambridgeshire,' *Proc. Cambs. Ant. Soc.* xxxii (1932), 51.
3. I am grateful to Rev. J. D. Hunter, formerly Rector of Balsham, for this information. In June 1976 he described the stone as found "about two years ago."
4. J.R. Allen, 'Analysis and classification of Celtic interlace ornament,' *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, N.S. v (1882-3), 243-5, fig. 83.
5. It is unclear which way up the fragment was originally; the decorated face is described as shown in plate I.
6. C. Fox, 'Anglo-Saxon monumental sculpture in the Cambridgeshire district,' *Proc. Cambs. Ant. Soc.*, xxiii (1920-21), 15-45.
7. H.M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, (Cambridge 1965), 537.
8. G.F. Browne, 'Early sculptured stone at West Camel church, Somerset,' *Proc. Somerset Arch. & Nat. Hist. Soc.*, xxxvi (1890), 77-8.
9. R. Cramp, *Early Northumbrian Sculpture*, (Jarrow 1965), 3. and 'Early Northumbrian sculpture at Hexham' in D. P. Kirby (ed.) *St. Wilfrid at Hexham*, (Newcastle-on-Tyne 1974), 125-6, pl. VIIa. In the later Cramp regards the panel as Roman.

Pl. I. Pre-Conquest sculptural fragment from Balsham, Cambs.



a. Decorated face
Length overall 46 cms., width 16-17 cms.



b. From above
Max. depth 15 cms.

10. R. Cramp, *Early Northumbrian Sculpture*, (Jarrow 1965), 3, pl. 2.
11. R. Cramp, 'Early Northumbrian sculpture at Hexham,' *op. cit.* in note 9, 132, pls. XXI a-c.
12. D. Baker, 'Excavations at Elstow Abbey, Bedfordshire, 1966-9, 2nd interim report,' *Beds. Arch. Jour.*, iv. (1969) 30 - 1. pl. Ib.
13. C. Fox, *op. cit.* in note 5, 16, pl. I

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