

ART. VIII.—*A pre-Norman Shaft, recently found at Great Clifton Church.* By ROBERT M. LIDBETTER, Workington.

Read at Durham, June 20th, 1901.

THIS stone was found at Great Clifton Church, which stands in a commanding position above the Marron, a tributary of the Cumberland Derwent, about three and a half miles from Workington. For many years this Chapelry was in a very dilapidated condition, and last year the work of restoration was completed. In August, 1900, during the demolition of the walls, which were composed of loose stones held together by material no stronger than clay, a doorway was found concealed under the lime with which the walls were dashed; and serving as the lintel, this shaft, lying on the carved face, was found about 6 feet from the present ground level. The other sides and edges appear to have suffered greatly from the mason's chisel, as only a small portion of the original work remains. No other stone of the same character was found, though strict injunctions were given by the architect (Mr. James Howes) should any more be found, to place them on one side.

Measurement and reference to the photographs, for which I am indebted to Mr. W. L. Fletcher, of Stoneleigh, Workington, give the following dimensions:—length, 57ins.; width at base, 14ins.; width at top, 12ins.; thickness at base, $6\frac{3}{4}$ ins.; at top, 6ins. That which remains on the other side (Fig. 1) shows only 29ins. of the same class of elaborate work as on the best face. One edge is completely cut away, as is also about one half of the other, leaving only about 24ins. of work (Fig. 2). The arris descends on one side much further

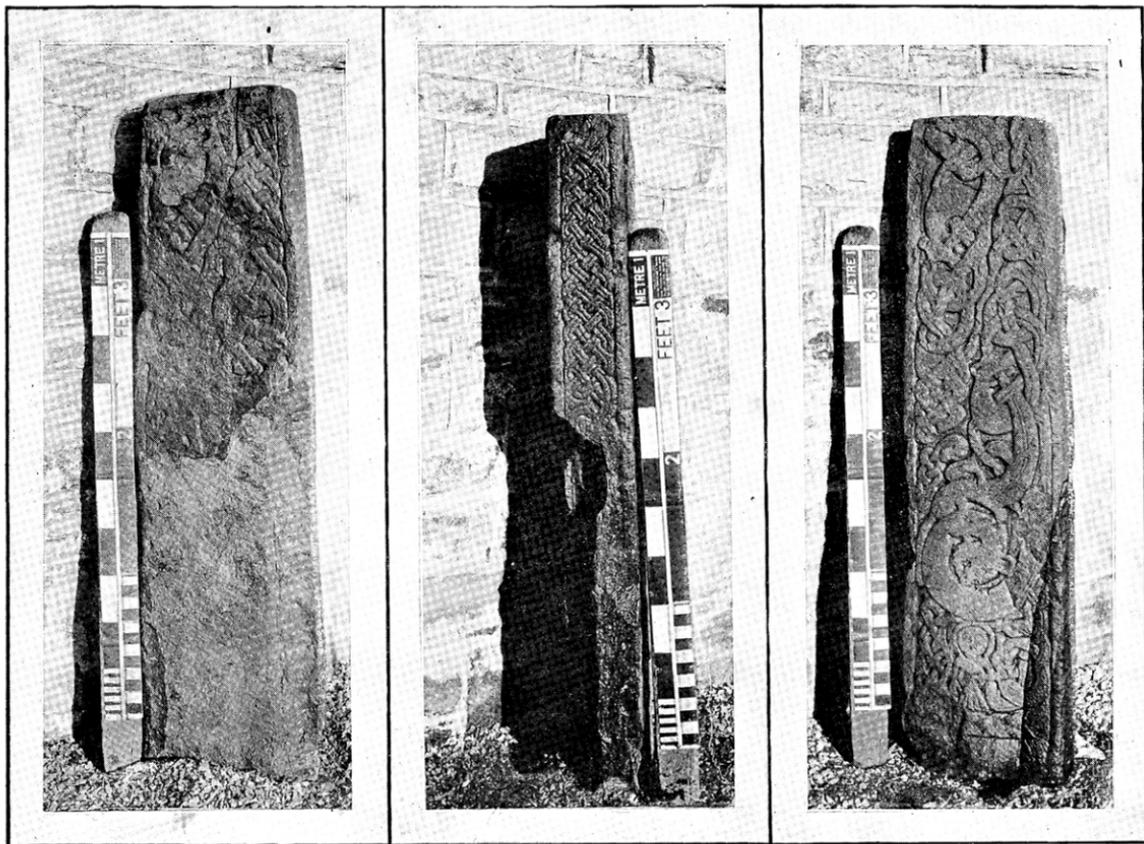


FIG. 1.

FIG. 2.

FIG. 3.

PRE-NORMAN SHAFT TOWARD GREAT GLEATON, CUMBERLAND.

TO FACE P. 109.

than 24ins., but how far exactly it is not easy to find. Though the edges and one side are much defaced, sufficient remains to exhibit very finely plaited work and to afford some idea of the beauty and symmetry of the monument in the days of its entirety.

The block of stone out of which the shaft was cut, was quarried from the New Red Sandstone so often used for a similar purpose in ancient and modern times. This particular specimen consists of two distinct varieties of stone—the white and red, naturally blended. The white kind, of which the block mainly consists, is overlaid in parts by the red of varying thickness, which imparts to this stone a character peculiarly its own. Why the artist should have selected such a block does not appear, but probably he considered variation in colour imparted some quality of beauty to the work he had undertaken. The point is, however, an interesting one. It seems most probable that the stone was obtained from the quarries at or near the mouth of the Derwent, where there is a small outcrop of the New Red Sandstone. If this be so, its genesis would be the same as that of the relics preserved in St. Michael's Church, Workington, and that of the Brigham fragments.

The workmanship displayed on this shaft bears close resemblance to that on the Workington and Brigham fragments, one point being the absence of drill-holes so conspicuous on one of the Beckermets (St. John's) stones. The tool used would seem to have been a large chisel, followed by a smaller one for finishing off and for carving the finer work; a conclusion concurred in by an expert.

Fig. 1 shows the back of the stone, on which is a portion showing interlaced work similar to that on the front (Fig. 3) and on the edge more strikingly. On one side of this face, at the top, a strap is cut into four bands doubled over and plaited together with a loose band inserted, each band consisting of two strands. Lower down are larger plaits still, some consisting of two and

some of three strands. This plait is more open, showing the sunk ground, and the curves are larger and elliptical in shape. The other portions of this side are much defaced and weather-worn, the lower half having been cut down to suit the requirements of the masons when fixing the block in the wall.

Figure 2 fully displays the work of the edge: only 24ins. remain, the rest having been completely cut away. Here the strap pattern of interlacing is well developed and shows very careful and skilful workmanship. The plaits consist of four bands interlaced throughout, and each plait has two strands. The arris is notched at irregular intervals 1½ins. and 2ins. apart, giving a suggestion of cable-moulding. The plaiting on the edge is so close as to reveal little or none of the ground; but at a point a little above the fracture in the stone is an interruption in the continuity of the plait. If this, as is not unlikely, marked the half-way between the top and bottom of the carved edge of the monument, it would give a total height of 60 inches to the shaft in its original form; to which must be added the height of the head.

The best face contains very fine sculpturing (Fig. 3). Beginning at the top are noticed two dragonesque figures, each interlaced with another: a naked figure is riding on the neck of the larger. A second similar combination is seen a little below the middle of the shaft. Both serpent forms are provided with short feet near the head. The middle and lower portions of both serpents are intricately involved, the convolutions running down the shaft with remarkable parallelism, the head of one appearing at the tail of the other, and near the naked figures both monsters are considerably increased in bulk. The open work shows a good deal of the ground in the upper portion and about half-way down on the left hand assumes the regular pattern of the edge. Just below this portion and above the lower riding figure is a human head rising out of a simple worm-twist, which commences

its folds from a confined space formed by the head of the lower monster and the arris. Throughout the folds a line is drawn down the middle of the plait, which in the thicker portion of the lower monster is double. Below the head and neck of this serpent is another strange form, partly encircling a wolf-headed creature possessing a cunning and vindictive eye, suggestive of a cruel nature. Underneath all this is an aureoled figure of a human being robed and bound up with twisted snakes, which the hands appear to be grasping. A snake head may be seen to the right above the aureole. The carving here runs into that part of the stone consisting of the red stone. Below this there is no further sculpture work: the panel appears to have been carefully finished off.

There are instances of figures riding on snakes to be seen on the "Saint's Tomb" at Gosforth, and an interesting comparison may be made between the similar figures on this stone and those on the capital at the west end of Torpenhow Church. The figure at the base is comparable to that on the cross-head over the porch door of Brigham vicarage, and also to a similar device on the pre-Norman cross-shaft at Burton in Kendal. The large sweep of the lines at the bottom in general effect remind us of the great circular group in a like position on the Aspatria standing cross. Among the known crosses of this district, there does not appear on any of them work exactly like that along the edge; the nearest to anything of the kind being on a fragment at Beckermeth (St. John's) where the arris is also more regularly notched.

There is nothing Anglian or Cumbrian about the work on this shaft, all the resemblances pointing to its having been carved during the Scandinavian period of the history of Cumberland, and, from the apparent degraded type of the figure at the base, rather late in it.

As regards symbolism perhaps the less said the better; but there seems to run throughout, the thought of the triumph of the Cross over the Paganism of the Norseman

and the idea of overcoming the powers of evil seems to be taught in the position of the figures on the snakes' heads.* The figure at the base may suggest the struggle between the "Seed of the Woman" and the Old Serpent of Bible Story.

In complete form it was presumably similar to the Dearham Cross, and probably stood at the head of the grave of some noted local person.

At present it stands in the vestry, but shortly will be placed in a permanent position within the Sacrarium of the Church.

* See Prof. G. Stephens, "*Prof. S. Bugge's Studies on Northern Mythology critically Examined*" (1883), page 40 of the *Rider*, for an illustration of a twelfth century sculpture from the church of Limé, Denmark, representing a naked figure riding on the back of a monster *and tearing its mouth*: which connects these figures riding on monsters at Torpenhow, Great Clifton, and on Gosforth hogback, with Vidar rending the dragon-wolf's jaws on the Gosforth Cross, and with the Christian idea of the conquest of the serpent. Additional examples are given by Dr. H. Colley March in "*Rending the Wolf's Jaw*," 1894.—ED.