

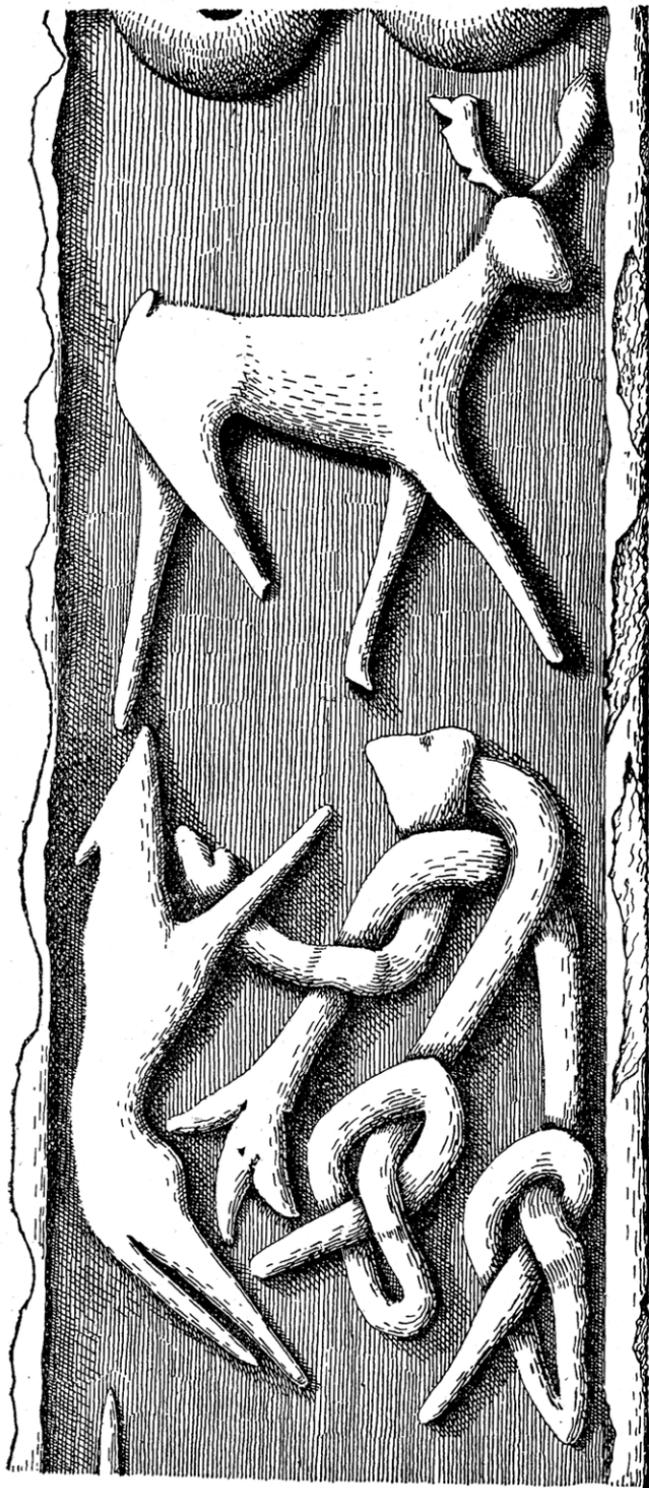
ART. IX.—*A reconsideration of Gosforth Cross.* By C. A. PARKER, M.D., F.R.C.S.E.; and W. G. COLLINGWOOD, M.A., F.S.A.

Read at Carlisle, April 26th, 1917.

THE first attempt to explain Gosforth Cross appeared thirty-five years ago, at a time when the comparative study of such monuments, especially those of England, was not very far advanced. As knowledge accumulated, various papers were written at different dates by authors not in communication with each other, and the interpretation has never been entirely satisfactory. This paper is an attempt to restate a few points in the light of further experience; for those who have been long engaged in the study would not be candid if they did not offer the results of recent investigation even when it leads to reconsideration of their own previous theories.

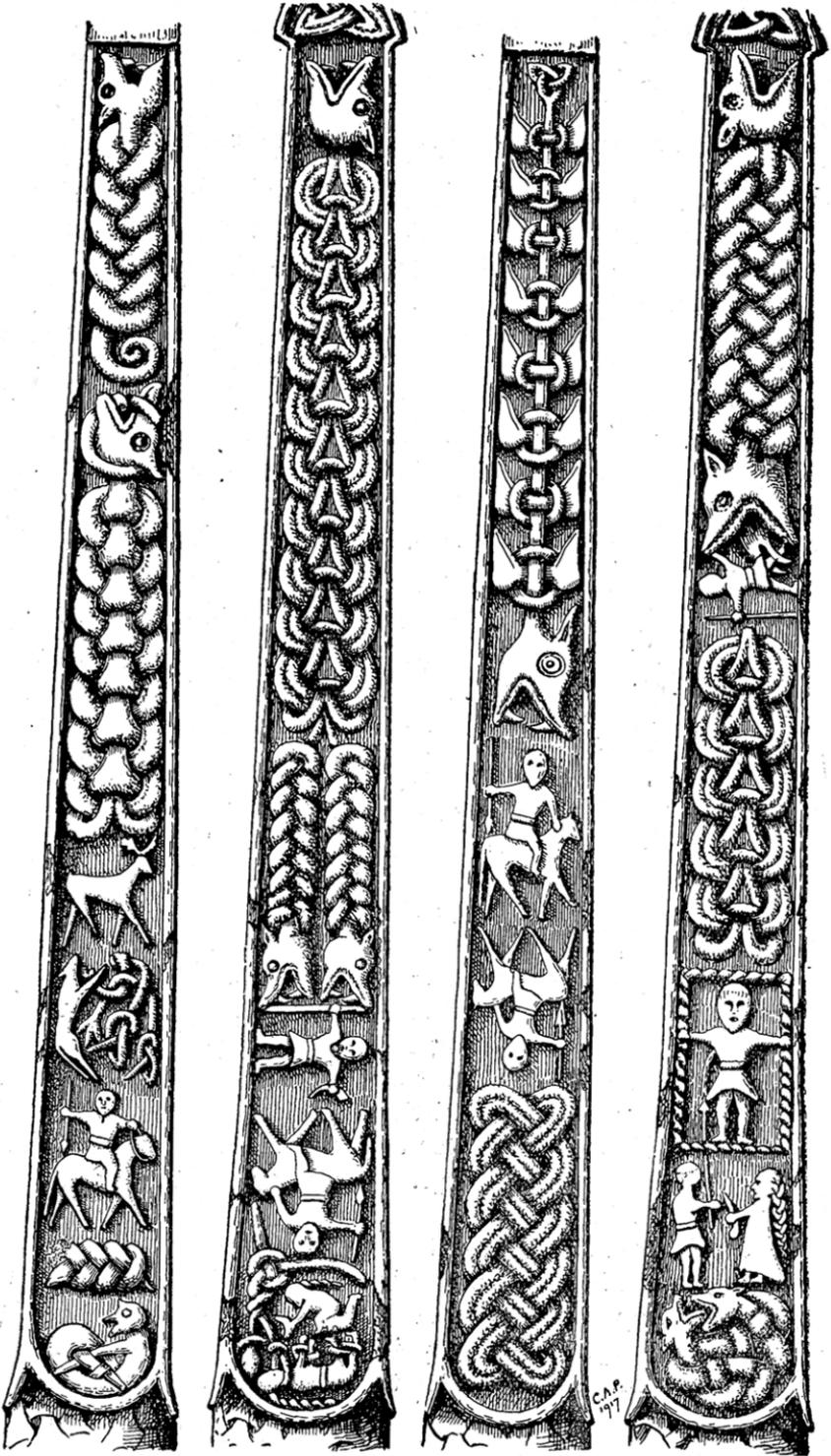
To begin with, we notice some details of the carving, hitherto we believe insufficiently recorded. The drawings here reproduced have been carefully made from the cross itself, and give all the visible detail except the wheel-head, simply ornamented with *triquetrae*, and the foot of the shaft, partly covered with "Scandinavian" vertebral or chain-plait.

Fig. 1, south side. The snake under the horse is not headless; its head droops like that of the snake on the "Fishing stone," and part of the convolution above the head is broken off. The horseman has no beard; he wears a kirtle and belt; his left arm holds the bridle, and from its shortness is probably intended to be bent horizontally—an unusual effort of naturalism in early relief-carving. This is the best drawn horse on this cross and the only bridled one; the hoofs have been carved with care.



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2. THE WOLF AND HART,
South face of Gosforth Cross.



South

West

North

East

3. THE FIGURED PART OF GOSFORTH CROSS-SHAFT.

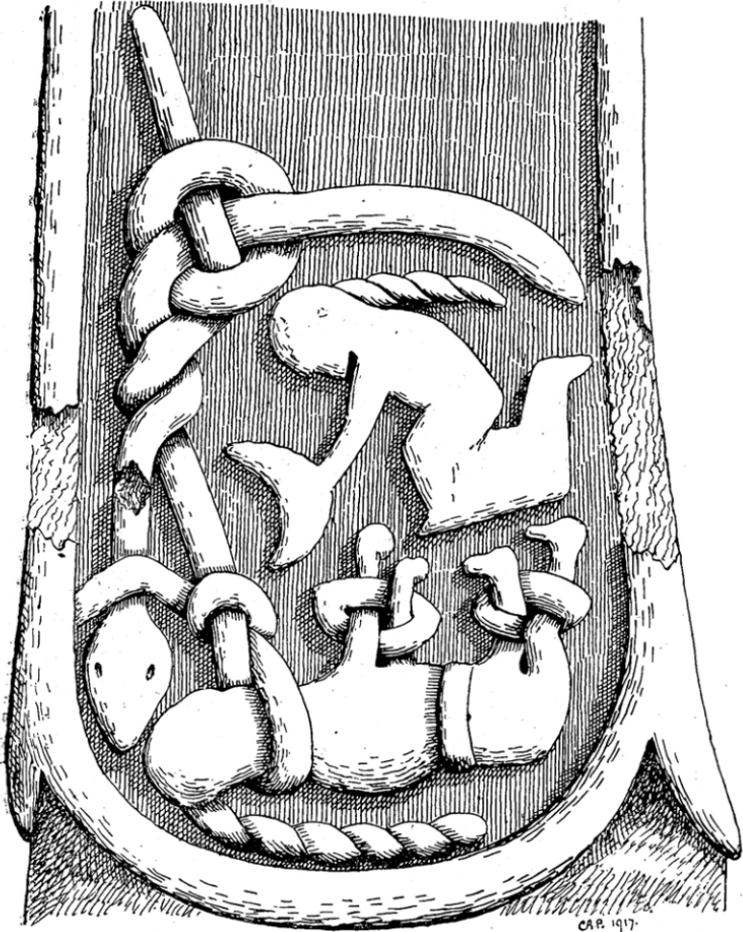
Fig. 2. The tangle below (or beside) the feet of the wolf is in two pieces, each tied in a loose knot, with a jagged end. It is not a serpent. The stag has delicate hoofs and well drawn antlers.

Fig. 3, west side. The dragon at the top has teeth; all the heads have the common (anatomical) error of the upper canine locking in front of the lower. One of the descending dragons has its convolutions wrongly set out; they do not form a true plait of three. Heimdal has no beard; the opening of the tunic at the neck shows clearly, and some markings which look like his teeth can be made out. The reversed horseman is a heavy man, kirtled and apparently bearded, on a heavy horse, with the hoofs visible.

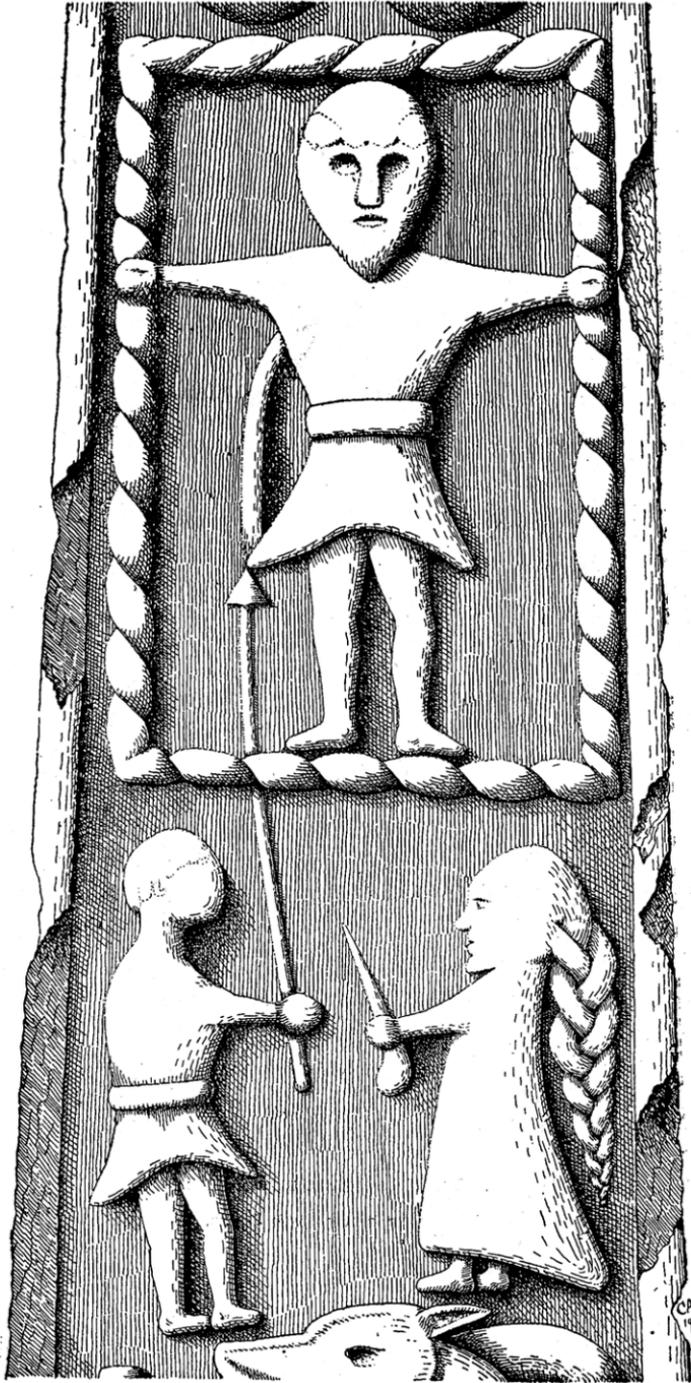
Fig. 4 gives the Loki panel in detail. The upper curve is the body of the snake, whose tail does not touch the arris-moulding. After passing the ring-knot the snake twists once round the suspending rope, which is then knotted round Loki's neck, the end passing away to the left. The cable below is Loki's long hair. Sigyn's chin is long and pointed.

On the north side (fig. 3) the horseman group is much weathered, which makes the horses look light. The upper horseman has a very long body and wears a kirtle; his head is long and pointed; perhaps he had a helmet and beard, but weathering has destroyed the features. The horse has hoofs and ear and a very long tail. The lower horseman wears a kirtle, and has a long, pointed head but his chin is shorter than the other horseman's. The spearhead is very large. The horse has hoofs and ear, but the tail has gone.

On the east side (fig. 3) the dragon-head has only one tooth, which is in the upper jaw; the stone has flaked, giving the appearance of more teeth. Vidar's foot passes between the split or forked points of the dragon's tongue. His heel is broken off, but the toe remains on the dragon's



4. THE PUNISHMENT OF LOKI ;
West face of Gosforth Cross.



5. THE CRUCIFIXION ;
East face of Gosforth Cross,

jaw. No features are visible on his face, and he has certainly no beard. At the foot of the design the two serpents or dragons have ears but no teeth; the eyes are snake-eyes; both tails are tucked away out of sight.

Fig. 5 gives the Crucifix group in detail. A rubbing of the head of the Crucifix shows traces of hair and short beard; the features have been carefully carved but are much worn. A single stream (not forked) issues from the right side. The spearhead is nearly an equilateral triangle. A rubbing of the head of Longinus shows traces of clustering hair, the ear-lobe, and a kind of fillet round the head, which may be the rim of a helmet. The Magdalen has abundant hair, both on the top of her head and hanging down in a plait of three. Features can be made out dimly, the chin long and pointed. The *alabastron* is bulbous, with a long tapering neck, suggesting a glass bottle of fabric not familiar in the north.

It may be noted that there are three kinds of dragons on the Gosforth cross:—(a) on the south and west the bodies are made of vertebral or chain pattern, like the "Yggdrasil" pattern on the lower part of the shaft, on the Dearham cross, Crosscanonby hogback, etc.; (b) on the south, west and east are dragons with plaited bodies, in the last two cases obviously the evil powers opposing Heimdal and Vidar; and (c) on the north is a unique creature with eight rings and eight pairs of wings, which suggest a decorative allusion to the dragon-ships of the Vikings. Pieces of pattern other than figures on this shaft are (a) on the north a double-strand plait of three at the foot of the panel, and (b) on the east a piece of vertebral pattern without the head required to make it a dragon, between the Crucifix and Vidar. This, of course, might mean a decapitated dragon; but the head is not shown as Regin's head is shown, severed from his trunk, on the Halton "Sigurd" shaft (fig. 6). In all Viking Age crosses in England there are such pieces of patterns, filling spaces;

to seek a symbolism in them is perhaps pressing interpretation too far.

The dragon in the middle of the south side has a ring round its head, with a knob which was formerly taken as the hilt of the sword thrust into the Fenris wolf's mouth (*prose Edda*), but this is hardly certain. The ring may be simply the survival of the frequent motive of a strap, sometimes the animal's tongue, encircling its head.

The carving is all in relief, with the chisel, leaving a flat-ground. That is to say, it is technically in advance of the hacked sketching common in the tenth century, for instance in the Jellinge style,* which Dr. Haakon Schetelig dates to the later part of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries. The crucifix of the Gorm stone at Jellinge (c. 980) is so different from the Gosforth crucifix as to put direct Danish influence out of the question, if the monuments are contemporary; and the Gosforth ornament is more severe than that of the later Jellinge style. Nor can this cross in general form be equated with any Manx or Scottish cross; it relates more nearly to the Northumbrian work of the Viking Age. The figures (much more simple and less ambitiously grouped than those of Monasterboice) are somewhat like the figures of the Halton "Sigurd" (fig. 6), the Bilton hogback fragment (*Y.A.J.* xxiii, 140), the West Witton cross-head fragment (*Y.A.J.* xix, 406), and the Kirklevington helmeted man (*ibid.* 353). The cross-head is of the commonest type of the Northumbrian Viking Age, characteristic of the tenth century, rather than later. The peculiar shaft is also English; it seems to originate in the cut-off (not bevelled) arrises of the Collingham "Apostles" shaft (*Y.A.J.* xxiii, 156) and the second Dacre stone (these *Transactions*, N.S. xii, 157), both probably early ninth century. The developed form is seen

* For a short account of the Jellinge, Ringerike and Urnes styles in Denmark and Scandinavia, later tenth and eleventh centuries, see *Proc. Soc. Ant.*, ser. 2, xxiii, 397-402, and xxvi, 61-72, papers by Mr. Reginald A. Smith, F.S.A.



r s HALTON t u
 FIG. 6.—HALTON: "SIGURD" SHAFT.

TO FACE 106.



FIG. 7.—ST. ANDREW'S, AUCKLAND.



FIG. 8.—SHEFFIELD CROSS SHAFT,

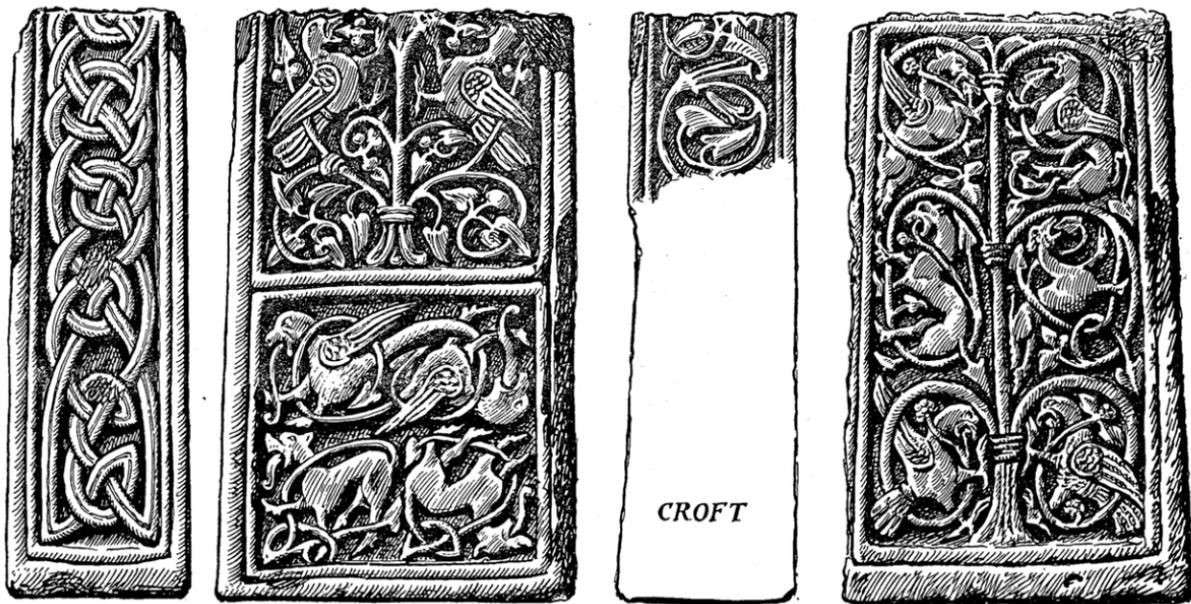


FIG. 9.—THE CROFT SHAFT.

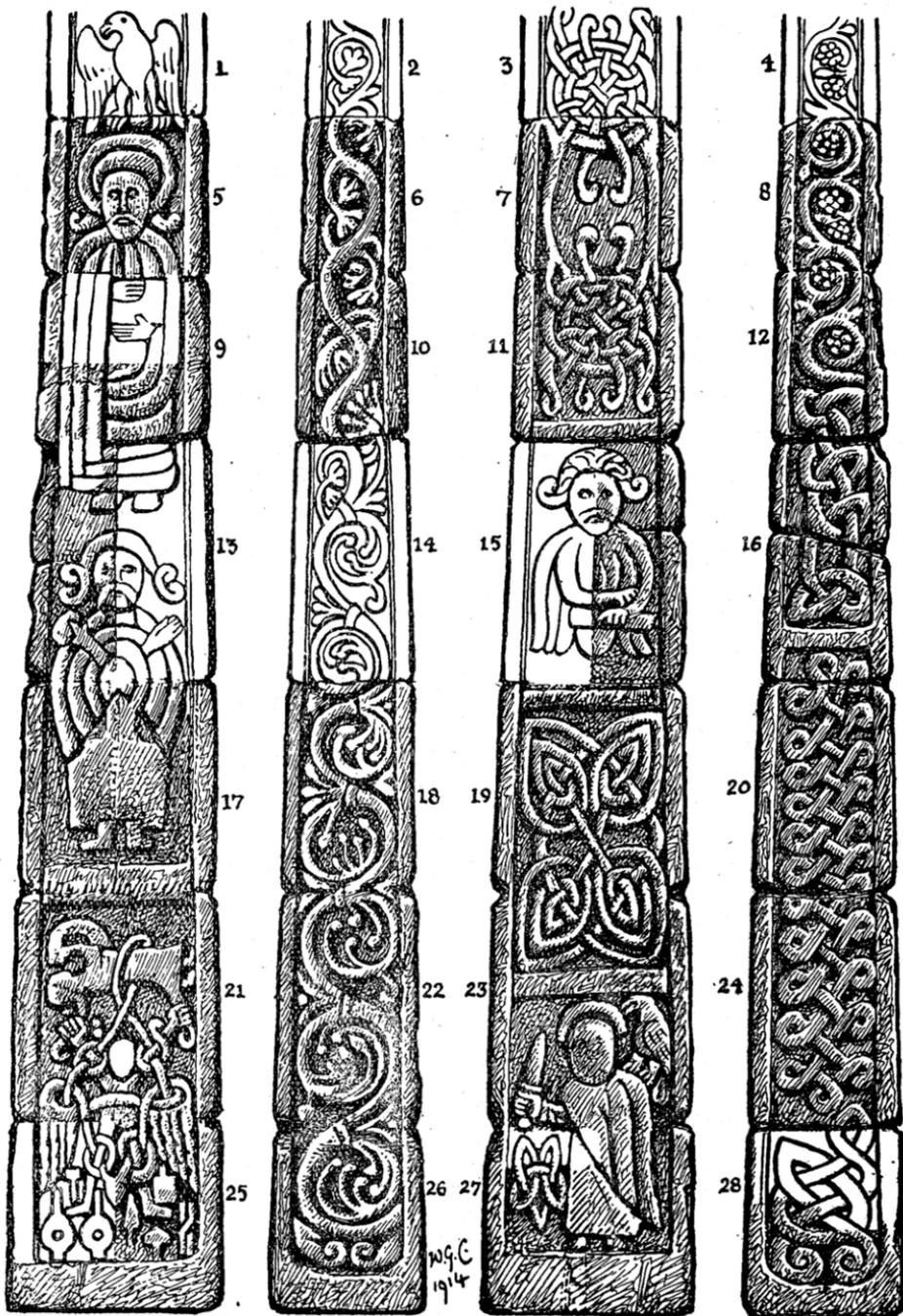


FIG. 10.—LEEDS CROSS.

at Gilling West (*Y.A.J.* xix, 323) of the pre-Viking style, or late ninth century: thence travelling southward to Cheshire (a group at Macclesfield and Lyme), Ilam (Staffs.), Stapleford (Notts.) and the pillar of Eliseg (Denbigh); and north-west, to Penrith, Gosforth and Beckermest; all these seem to be of the late tenth and eleventh centuries. For the date of Gosforth cross we have to remember that the hogbacks, similar in style and cutting, were built in as foundations to the twelfth-century church, and must be of considerably earlier age. But if, as we now wish to point out, the literary subjects illustrated on the shaft are taken from the Edda poem of the *Völuspá*, they cannot be earlier than the end of the tenth century. And though the literary subject is Norse, the artistic character of the monument is English.

One of the most striking features of this cross is the irregularity in position of the figures; dragons head-upwards and downwards, figures upright, transverse and upside down. This is not without analogy in late pre-Norman monuments. For instance, the archer at St. Andrew's, Auckland (fig. 7) on an early Anglian stone, bends back from an upright position to aim at the creatures above him; but the Sheffield archer (fig. 8)*, on a late Anglian shaft, was evidently drawn without forethought, while the stone lay on the ground, and when it was set up he appeared to be "shinning" up the panel in an impossible attitude. The Croft stone (fig. 9), appears to give the earliest English instance of unnatural placing in animal-forms; this is probably of the eighth century and the design is intentionally decorative. But in later work, Northumbrian, Welsh, Scottish and Manx, we find many instances of a carelessness as to result, in design which must have been sketched while the stone lay on the ground, without regard to its ultimate erection; e.g. at Forcett, Ilkley, Kildwick and Mirfield (*Y.A.J.* xix,

* Block kindly lent by the Yorkshire Archæological Society.

320 ; xxiii, 195, 198, 223), Andreas (Kermode, *Manx Crosses*, pl. LIII), Kilmory of Knapdale (Stuart, *Sculpt. Stones*, ii, pl. xxxiii), Maen-y-chwyfan (Westwood, *Lap. Walliae*, pl. 88) are beasts which do not stand on their feet unless seen sidewise. In the Leeds cross (fig. 10)*, the lame Wayland Smith, tied up in his artificial wings, is supposed to be snatching at Bödvild as she runs away ; but the effect of the clumsy design is to suggest that she is floating over his head. Other instances of inversion are at Crofton and Bilton (*Y.A.J.* xxiii, 161, 140) : these two may be intentional, but the sidewise and inverted figures of Gosforth are not unique, and they suggest that the design was drawn on the stone as it lay, roughed out and ready for carving, without preliminary working-drawings.

In trying to reconstitute the designer's intention, we seem to see him going along the side of the lengthy narrow stone, sometimes a-straddle across it, filling in figure after figure with his chalk, and almost necessarily losing hold of the vertical position intended for the cross. When he had to draw two horsemen fighting, he would treat them as Wayland and Bödvild on the Leeds cross, with an inexperienced attempt at opposition ; and when the shaft was reared, one of them came out upside-down. In grouping Vidar and Heimdal with their surroundings he forgot that they would ultimately seem to be lying down ; but they are obviously meant as parts of a group. In drawing Heimdal he had the head of the cross to his left hand ; in drawing Vidar the head was to his right. The dragon on the north side was done with the cross-head to the designer's left hand ; the uppermost dragon and the wolf on the south side were drawn with the cross-head to the right hand, though the lower dragon turns the other way. This seems to mean that the south side was drawn from what now appears as the bottom

* Block kindly lent by the Thoresby Society.

upwards ; the stone was then turned over, and the west was drawn in from the top downwards ; then the north, upwards ; and the east, downwards. We take the sides in that order because, if there were any intention of a consecutive story (and the evidently illustrative character of the groups makes such an intention probable) the sides would be meant to be read as the spectator went round the cross with the sun, rather than "wither-shins," which would be unlucky. And the whole story seems to lead up to the Crucifix, which would be the last group in the series.

Taking the groups separately, where do we find the sources of the incidents they represent ?

Heimdal blowing his horn occurs in the *Völuspá*, 46 ; but in *Grimnismál*, 13, he drinks mead from it. Here he simply holds it out, ready to blow, and appears to be attacked by the horseman with his spear, while he holds back the dragons in his character of Warder of Heaven, *Völuspá*, 42, 46.

Loki tended in Hel by Sigyn is fully described in the prose epilogue to *Lokasenna* in the poetic Edda, and in Snorri's prose Edda ; but the "Sitting of Sigyn" is mentioned in *Völuspá*, 35.

Vidar, in *Völuspá*, 54, and in *Vafþrúdnismál*, 53, cuts the wolf's jaws with his sword ; it is only in the prose Edda, 51, that he rends them with his foot, as on Gosforth cross. But in the prose Edda Snorri was writing down traditions, and the bit of ritual folklore he relates (about throwing out scraps of leather for the Gods to gather and make into thick boots for Vidar against the hour of need) is surely pre-Christian. It implies a variant of *Völuspá*, as we have it, current in the tenth century, before the conversion of the north.

The Crucifix can hardly be construed otherwise than as a Christian interpretation of "The One who is to come," mentioned in *Völuspá*, 65, and *Völuspá en Skamma*, 17.

Some confused equation of the Crucified with Balder smitten to death by the blind Hödr, or Odin hanging in the Tree of Life, may—perhaps must—have occurred to the people of the time; but this Gosforth group is distinctly the Christian scene of the Crucifixion; the whole monument is surmounted with the usual Christian cross-head; and the shaft is of a form common to Christian monuments in England. It is impossible to regard this as a purely heathen monument; it is Christian with certain heathen allusions.

The Hart and Wolf (or Hound) is also a common Christian symbol of the age, usually interpreted as meaning the passion of Christ or the trials of the Christian, an emblem much used on Christian grave-stones of the Viking Age. The reason that it was a favourite with converted Vikings is probably that the animals so grouped were already familiar in their older mythology. The wolf occurs *passim* (*Völuspá en Skamma*, 17; *Völuspá*, 39, 44, 49, 51 (Fenris wolf), 53, 58) as the enemy of the powers of light. The hart, Eikthyrnir ("oak-thorn") in *Grimnismál*, 26, and the prose Edda, 39, stands over Valhöll and drips from its horns the rain that makes all the rivers of earth and the underworld. This source of healing waters may have suggested the fountain of the water of life (St. John, iv, 10, etc.) and connected the hart with Christ; and though *Völuspá* in the form we have it, does not name the hart, it says "Yggdrasil, a high tree sprinkled with shining drops; dew comes therefrom which fall in the dales" (st. 19), plainly referring to Eikthyrnir. In the *Sólarljód* the hart symbolises Vidar, the solar stag, and gives further evidence of the ease of transition from pagan to Christian symbolism. The tangle at the feet of the wolf (not a serpent) may here signify the burst bonds of the Fenris wolf, rushing at the god who is ultimately to slay him (*Völuspá*, 54).

These identifications all occur in the *Völuspá*; no

other Edda poem mentions them all. The nearest literary source for this cross is the *Völuspá*, in whatever form it was known in Cumberland towards the year 1000, the epoch at which, it was generally believed, the current "dispensation" was to end and a new age was to begin. This is the main theme of the poem, and roughly fixes its date; for after the crisis was past, its prophecies would fall on deaf ears. We cannot suppose that the poem which we possess, written down by Sæmund of Oddi (1056-1133) or some other Icelander at a much later time, is exactly that which was sung towards the end of the tenth century; still less can we expect that it could be illustrated in a full and complete set of pictures of its incidents, even in book-illumination of the early middle age. On a cross, with all the limitations of space and technical requirements, no more than a few allusive figures can be expected; but if we take the four faces of the Gosforth cross and set them down, side by side with the four parts or periods of the poem, we get a strong suggestion that the designer had the poem in mind, much as the design of Ruthwell cross was inspired by Cynewulf's *Dream of the Rood*. A name or incident in the poem gave the hint for a figure on the cross, and the sequence is preserved in a remarkable degree. And remembering that the intention of the *Völuspá* is to show how all previous history, though seen from a strictly pagan point of view, led up to the regeneration of the world by the One who should come, the "White Christ," we can recognise its acceptability to the Christian of that age as a plea for the new faith, and we can understand, more clearly than before, the reason why it was chosen for illustration on the Gosforth cross.

GOSFORTH CROSS.

I. SOUTH SIDE.

- Snake-dragon raising its head ;
Plaited snake ;
- Horseman (? Odin, the ruler of
the cosmos).
- Wolf and Hart (Eikthyrnir).
- Vertebral dragon, its head
ringed, pursuing plaited
dragon.

II. WEST SIDE.

- Vertebral dragon.
- Two plaited dragons attacking
Heimdal, Warder of Heaven.
- Heimdal with staff and horn.
- Horseman.
- Loki beneath the snake ; Sigyn
sitting over him, and empty-
ing the poison from her cup.

III. NORTH SIDE.

- Plait.
- Horseman (? Surt) attacking
Horseman, also attacked by

THE VÖLUSPÁ.

I. CREATION AND THE
GOLDEN AGE.

- 2-4, Birth of the Jötuns ;
4-6, Ordering of the heavenly
bodies ;
7, 8, The Golden Age ;
9-16, Creation of the Dwarfs ;
17-18, Creation of Man.
19, "the high tree sprinkled
with shining drops"
(Eikthyrnir).
20, The Norns that "speak the
doom of the sons of
man."

II. THE EARLY WARS OF
THE GODS.

- 21-27, War with the Vanir about
Goldendraught (the witch
who taught greed of gold
and sorcery). Victory
of the Vanir ; Frey and
Freyja come to Asgard.
25, 26, War with the Jötuns, who
had carried off Fréyja,
ended by the breaking of
pledges :—
27-34, The three pledges :
(a) Heimdal's hearing,
(b) Odin's eye,
(c) Baldr's life taken by
Loki.
35, Loki's punishment in Hel ;
the sitting of Sigyn ;
36-41, Description of Hel.

III. RAGNARÖK.

- 42-49, Signs of the doom ; de-
generacy of Society, and
warnings of the gods.
50-52, Gathering of the de-
stroyers :—

winged dragon (? ship of Hel).

- (a) Jötuns from the east ;
- (b) Loki and the ship of Hel from the north ;
- (c) Surt, the fire-god from the south.

53, The gods' last fight.

IV. EAST SIDE.

Two dragons plaited together ;
the lower one's jaws rent by
Vidar.

Vertebral pattern.
The crucifix ; Longinus and
Mary Magdalen.

Two snakes beneath.

IV. THE NEW WORLD.

54-58, Vidar, the only god who
survives, slays the Fenris
wolf ; end of the old
world.

59-61, The new world.
62-65, The promise of Baldr's
re-birth ; " Comes from
on high to the great
assembly
The Mighty Ruler who
orders all."

66, " Fares from beneath a dim
dragon flying
Nidhögg."