Art. X. – *Excavations at Dacre, 1982-4: an Interim Report.*

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Background History

IT has long been thought that there was an Anglian monastery at Dacre and yet the existence of it was known only from Bede. Writing in the early 8th century on the miracles wrought by the relics of St. Cuthbert, Bede mentioned a monastery 'which being built near the River Dacore has taken its name from the same'.[1] Since he was describing a contemporary establishment, and because of supporting detail, including the names of the abbot and two brothers, considerable reliance can be placed upon this single reference. Dacre was still evidently a place of some importance in A.D. 926, when Athelstan received the submission of the kings of Strathclyde and Scotland, following the successful completion of his campaigns in the north. The son of Constantine, King of the Scots, was to be summoned and baptised: this possibly took place in the monastery referred to by Bede.[2] These events were probably contemporary with those recorded for A.D. 926 in the Worcester recension of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in which Athelstan met these kings at Eamont, possibly the modern Eamont Bridge, only seven miles to the north-east of Dacre.

In Bede's time, a monastery at Dacre would have been within the kingdom of Northumbria, but it could quite possibly have had its origins at an earlier date when the region was still under Celtic rule. At a later period, Dacre would have ceased to be within Northumbria, becoming instead a part of the kingdom of Strathclyde, in which it remained until 1092, when it again became part of England.[3]

Several archaeological discoveries pointing to the existence of an early church of some importance have come from Dacre. In 1875, part of a Viking age sculptured cross was found during the rebuilding of the east end of the church.[4] About 1900, part of an earlier cross-shaft of pre-Viking age was discovered close to the church, whilst excavating a water pipe trench to a nearby cottage.[5] A stone-lined drain, which bifurcates on the north side, possibly to serve two buildings south of the church, was found in 1929 on the south side of the churchyard. The sides of the drain were of reused moulded stone blocks.[6] This evidence has led to the conclusion that Bede did indeed refer to Dacre in Cumbria, rather than Dacre near Ripon in Yorkshire. The latter has provided no archaeological evidence for an ancient church. Apart from Carlisle, Dacre is thus the only site within the region referred to in documents of the pre-Viking period.

The opportunity to investigate the site archaeologically arose in 1982, when a house was to be built immediately to the west of the church. It was then also recognised that a churchyard extension to the north, commenced in 1950, was slowly destroying any archaeological evidence that remained close to the church. Excavations have now been carried out over three years, directed by the authors for the Cumbria and Lancashire Archaeological Unit, of the University of Lancaster. The work has been funded principally by the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission (English Heritage), but with much valuable assistance from the British Academy, the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, the Lake District Special Planning Board and

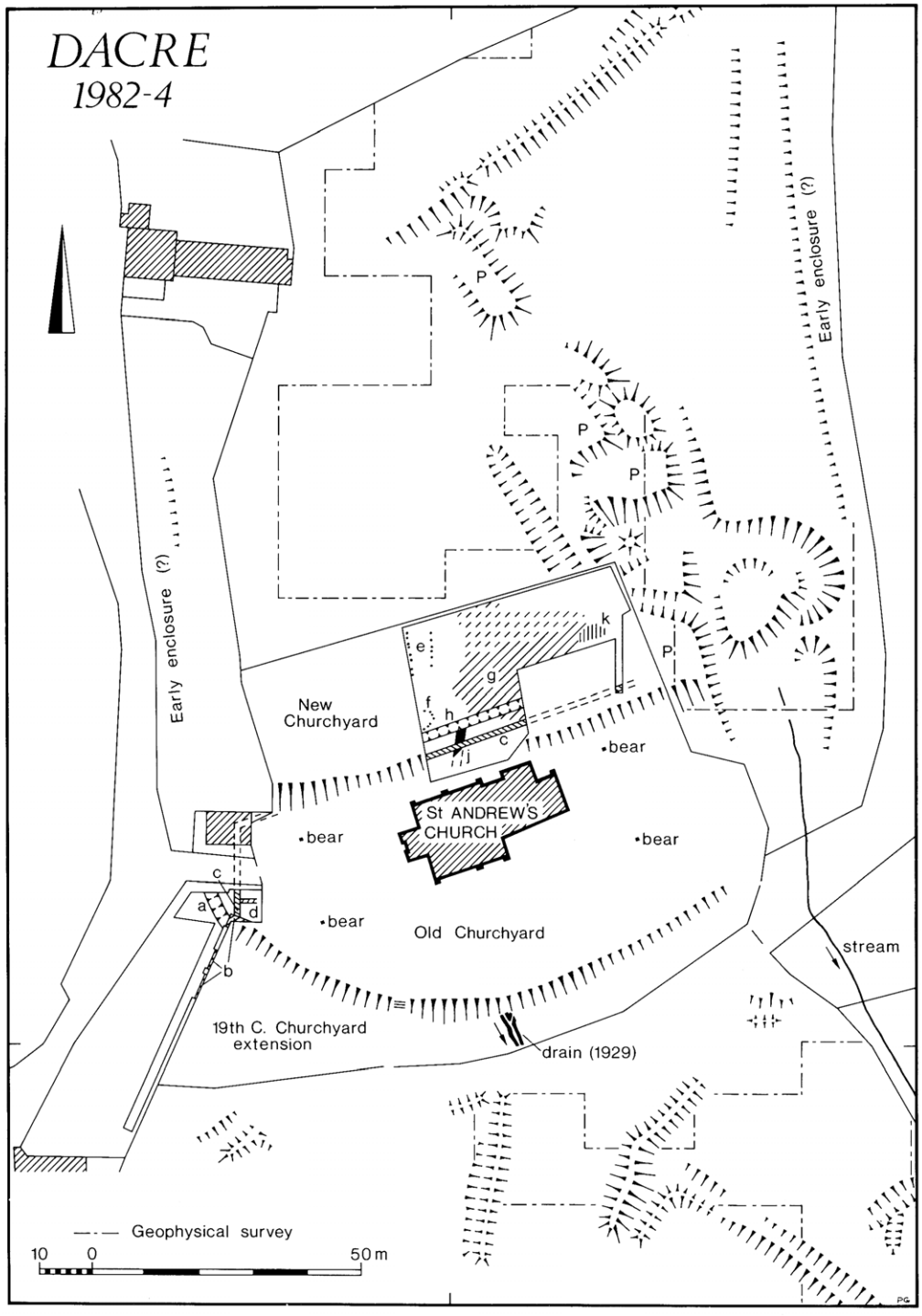

FIG. 1. – The Dacre Project, 1982-4: Excavation and survey areas.

the Society of Antiquaries of London. Especial thanks are owed to the Vicar of Dacre, the Reverend Kenneth Smith, and to the Dacre Parochial Church Council for permission to undertake the excavations within the churchyard.

The initial aim of the excavations was to investigate the origins and development of the early Anglian monastery. It was hoped also that the excavations would identify the potential of the site for providing environmental data. Additionally, a survey of the site would provide plans of the numerous earthworks already recognised north and south of the church and a geophysical survey would provide further indications of buried structures and occupation. The investigation of a site of this period was seen as being of major importance in the north-west, where until recently remains from a few isolated contexts at Carlisle, dated by dendrochronological examination of preserved timbers, were the only identifiable post-Roman and pre-Norman archaeological deposits in the entire region.

The Excavations (Fig. 1)

Survey and excavations around the churchyard have shown that the church stands on a terrace, apparently one of a series naturally created by a stream to the south. The excavation to the north of the church revealed elements of two terraces, divided by a steep scarp. The lower terrace had been largely hidden by a substantial accumulation of hillwash. The upper terrace was cut by an irregular series of trenches, possibly the result of cultivation. These were overlain by hillwash layers containing numerous artefacts, especially of iron. No pottery, apart from one hand-made sherd which may be of middle Saxon date, was found within the trenches. Graves were discovered within this area (g), but they appeared in all cases to be later than this supposed cultivation. It may be that this apparent agricultural activity is very much earlier than other features on the site. Almost all the flints from the excavation were from this upper terrace area, although these cannot be relied on for accurate dating. It is possible that these trenches were bounded on the west by a shallow ditch, terminating on the south-east with a curved lobe, filled with large glacial erratic boulders. A semi-circular gully was identified within a rectangular posthole structure to the west of the enclosure ditch, possibly representing part of a small hut. This gully also produced a flint flake.

Archaeological deposits of the Anglian, pre-Norman conquest period have been found. These are largely aceramic but scatters of artefacts, which include iron tools, window glass and loomweights, have been recorded. Other objects of similar date from the site now include a quernstone, two *stycas* of *c.* A.D. 848-55, three bronze pins, one silver pin and a silver clasp (Plate 1), as well as fragments of at least two more stone crosses of Viking-age date. A more closely structured sequence for the site may come from C14 dates and from further analyses of the distribution of artefacts.

It has now been shown that an enclosure, within which the churchyard partly lies, dates from this aceramic period. The 1982 excavation west of the church was undertaken especially to test this hypothesis and although the area available for excavation was restricted, much valuable data was obtained. A silted up ditch (a) was excavated, which seemed to follow the same line as the curving ancient south boundary of the churchyard. It was sealed by the corner of a stone-built structure (b), lying almost wholly within the churchyard as redefined *c.* A.D. 1200. The major part of the area excavated to the north

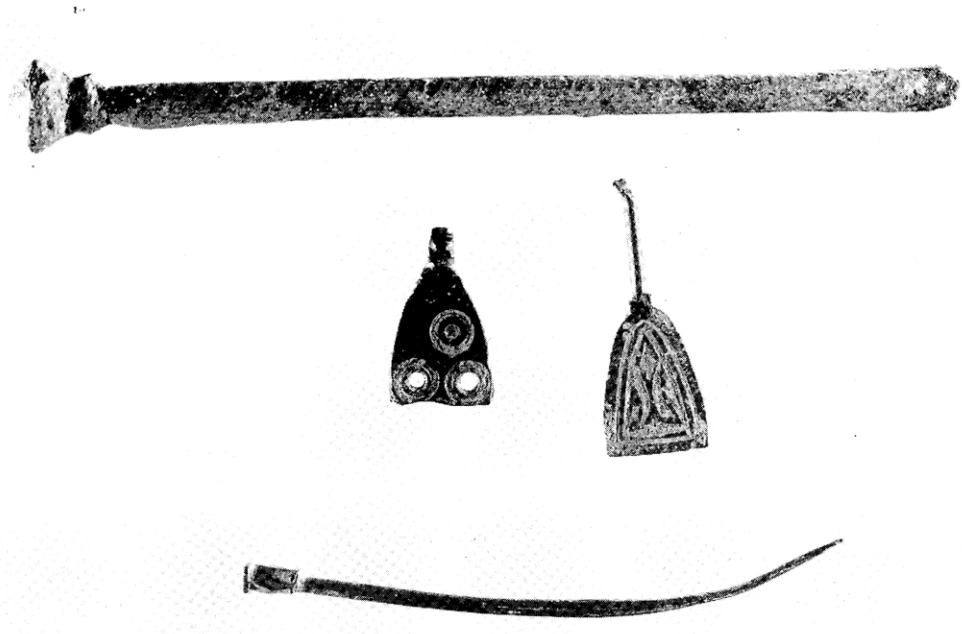

PLATE 1. – Bronze pins, silver pin, with incised decoration on head, and silver clasp. Scale approx. 1·3 to 1.

of the church possibly lay within a larger enclosure, but was separated from any buildings on the lower terrace, including perhaps the church, by a ditch and bank which lay under the wall constructed *c.* A.D. 1200 to redefine the churchyard. Field survey of the earthworks to the north and east of the churchyard indicated the probable limits of the enclosure on the west and east.

Within the area excavated north of the church, traces of timber buildings belonging to the aceramic pre-Norman conquest phase were uncovered. One structure, defined by two rows of postholes, lay on the upper terrace (e); although such structures have been widely recorded in Saxon and early medieval context elsewhere, this is the first building of its type to have been excavated in north-west England. Centrally placed within this building was a rectangular pit containing a discarded sculptured stone, with key ornamentation and a backward turning beast, and identified by Richard Bailey as of Viking age. A further timber building (f), defined by a circular setting of postholes, was discovered immediately north of the boundary ditch (h). This structure seemed to have been erected on a platform, partially cut back into the natural terrace edge to the north, which separated it from the posthole building described above, which lay on the upper terrace. No firm dating evidence related to it, although some Romano-British coarseware found at the same level nearby suggests that it might date from either the later Roman period or the era following. The building was clearly sealed by an occupation area with a centrally placed hearth, which in its latest phase reutilised a quernstone (Plate 2) (any parallels for this particular type of quernstone will be gratefully acknowledged). The soil layer defining this area of occupation contained nine fragments of window glass, two

sherds of Samian ware and a middle or late Saxon loomweight, but no medieval pottery. A more precise dating of this phase should come from C14 dates from the charcoal in the hearth.

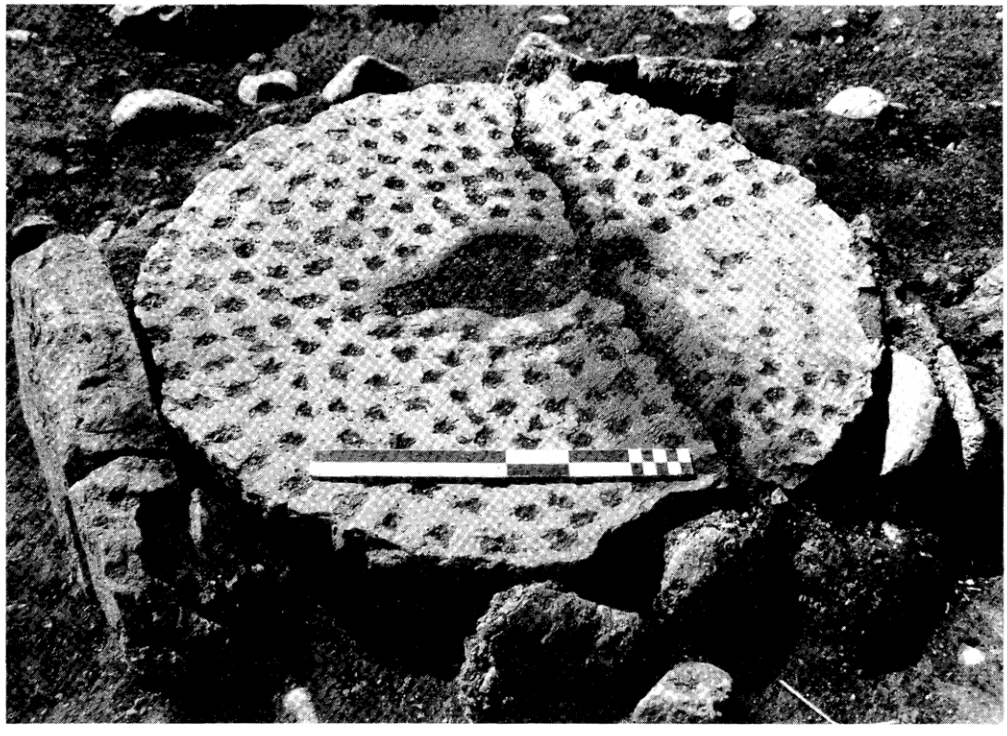

PLATE 2. – Quernstone re-used as hearth, in situ during excavation.

Several phases of activity were also found within the boundary features to the south. The earliest remains comprised a well-built wall (j), faced with angular masonry and with a core of small rounded river cobbles. It was aligned approximately true north-south, in contrast to all other major features which lie parallel to the church, with an axis slightly north of due east-west. The wall had been curtailed by later features to both north and south, although there was a slight hint that it turned eastwards at its northern end. Half a melon bead was found in the general level immediately to the east, but there was no dating evidence directly associated with it. A spread of angular rubble lay over this wall and to the west, presumably as a result of its demolition or as a levelling process prior to the construction of the later boundary features above.

A cemetery containing at least seventy graves was discovered to the north and east of this wall (g). Bone preservation was minimal, but enough survived in two graves to demonstrate that the bodies were laid supine, their heads to the west, with no grave goods. There is thus every indication that these burials were Christian. Only one grave contained material of any sort, a millefiori bead, and no medieval pottery was associated with any of the cemetery levels. The graves were overlaid by a medieval occupation layer in the eastern part of the trench and by a rubble spread containing material of the 12th and 13th centuries to the west. This stratigraphical evidence, combined with the

lack of medieval material associated with the graves, suggest that the cemetery belongs to the aceramic, pre-Conquest period. There was no evidence to suggest that the graves had been marked in any way, although some enigmatic postholes were found within this area, apparently cut from a higher level. Further excavation may demonstrate whether these form any structures. No physical boundaries were found on the north and west sides of this cemetery, although the graves did not extend to the edges of the trench, so that it is probable that it was unenclosed. The eastern and southern extents of the cemetery were not established, though the density of graves was obviously decreasing in both directions. It was clear that to the south the graves lay beneath later boundaries, some of which are presumed to be pre-Conquest in date. Three definite phases of burial could be seen within the cemetery, many graves being cut into others. One phase of graves, apparently the earliest, lay at a slightly different angle to the others and also to the church and churchyard boundary. They were on an axis more truly east-west, at right angles to the early wall.

It may be conjectured that this cemetery is totally discrete from the medieval and later cemetery to the south. Certainly, at some later stage in the pre-Conquest period, a boundary running east-west and formed by a bank with a ditch to the north (h), was constructed across the site, apparently through the outer limits of the cemetery and over the wall aligned north-south (j). Along its excavated extent, the bank lies directly beneath the churchyard wall of *c.* A.D. 1200 (c). The bank was evidently constructed of upcast from the ditch and had been added to at intervals when lengths of the ditch had been recut. The material within the bank was varied, ranging from metalwork of the 8th to 10th centuries, to 11th to 12th century pottery, which suggests that this boundary was maintained until the wall was constructed on top.

Numismatic and ceramic evidence demonstrated that the boundary wall (c) was constructed between A.D. 1200 and 1250. This appears to be broadly contemporary with the building of the chancel of the present church, dated by its late Romanesque architecture to *c.* A.D. 1200. Both contain substantial quantities of worked red sandstone, clearly reused from some earlier structure. It must be presumed that a substantial stone building, which was ruinous or being demolished around this time, existed in the near vicinity. The most obvious contenders for this are an earlier church or perhaps even elements of Bede's monastery, either of which possibly related to the large drain to the south of the church.

Medieval activity was identified to the north of this boundary wall, apparently associated with one of the building platforms (p) noted in the field to the north and east of the modern churchyard extension. An occupation area (k), formed by a laid surface of stones, together with at least one posthole, was excavated and produced material of the 14th to 15th centuries, presumably representing a secular presence close to the churchyard. A medieval occupation area (d) was also identified abutting the inner side of the churchyard boundary of *c.* A.D. 1200 (c), to the west of the church.

Conclusions

The excavations have revealed the first associated deposits and structures of the post-Roman to pre-Norman period in north-west England outside Carlisle. No monastic structures of the Anglian period such as were seen in excavations at Monkwearmouth

and Jarrow have been found,[7] but it should be noted that the excavations there were on the south side of the churches. The pre-Norman structures now recognised to the north of the church at Dacre were possibly secular in function. They lay, however, within a precinct defined by a roughly oval enclosure, tentatively identified in field survey, but were separated from the claustral buildings to the south; these would have included a church, possibly on the site of the present building. There would have been sufficient room for a courtyard and two buildings, comparable to buildings A and B at Jarrow, to the south of this, possibly served by the drain discovered in 1929.

In *c.* A.D. 1200 the central part of the possible monastic site was totally subsumed within a churchyard, utilising as its southern boundary (until the mid 19th century), the line of the more ancient enclosure ditch, but with a new stone wall defining the north side and thus truncating the earlier precincts. Within the churchyard, the many hundreds of burials will have destroyed most archaeological data relating to earlier periods. To the north of the redefined churchyard shallow archaeological deposits of the proposed monastic phase were sealed by up to two metres of hillwash and ploughsoil, producing material deeply buried but not necessarily well preserved. Ceramic evidence suggests that this hillwash built up against the bank and medieval churchyard wall, masking the natural terracing of the site, from the 11th to 12th centuries until about A.D. 1500, when the process ceased abruptly. Documentary evidence confirms this, as estate books at Dalemain show that the area to the north was turned over to pasture early in the 16th century.

Excavations at Dacre have thus shown that the history of the church site is more complex than previously supposed. Evidence of prehistoric occupation to the north of the church has now been recognised. Structures broadly contemporary with the postulated monastery have been identified and clear sequences of pre-Conquest material have been found. The lack of secure dating evidence, however, makes it extremely difficult to link material from separate parts of the site. Areas of later medieval activity close to the churchyard are now also identifiable and hypotheses concerning the later use of land around the ancient church can begin to be formulated. A potential prehistoric phase is also proposed. It is hoped that excavations in 1985 will clarify the phasing and lead to a more complete picture particularly of the pre-Conquest history of the site.

References

[1] Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), iv, ch. 32.

[2] J. A. Giles (trans.), *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London, 1876).

[3] D. P. Kirby, 'Strathclyde and Cumbria: a survey of historical development to 1092', CW2, lxii, 77-94.

[4] Canon Mathews, 'The Dacre Stone', CW1, xi, 226-29.

[5] W. G. Collingwood, 'Anglian Cross-shafts at Dacre and Kirkby Stephen', CW2, xii, 157-63.

[6] F. Hudleston, 'The recent find in Dacre Churchyard', CW2, xxxii, 75-7.

[7] R. J. Cramp, 'Excavations at the Saxon monastic sites of Wearmouth and Jarrow, Co. Durham: an interim report', *Medieval Archaeol.*, 13, 21-66.