

THE WOLVERHAMPTON CROSS-SHAFT

By MICHAEL M. RIX

The cylindrical cross-shaft which stands in the parish churchyard of St. Peter's, Wolverhampton, Staffordshire has long been a source of dispute among students of pre-Conquest sculpture. It deserves a distinguished place in any catalogue of Anglo-Saxon art by virtue both of its scale and the quality of its decoration. Its position is also focal in any study of the fifty and more cylindrical-shafted carved crosses of this period. On these grounds a fresh assessment of its date and a discussion of the possible source of its inspiration would seem worth while.

Early writers tended to attribute it to the Norman period and it was only between the wars that a pre-Conquest date was suggested. About 1877 a plaster cast of it was made which is preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Pl. XB). In 1913 an extended drawing based on this cast was published in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries (Pl. XI). In 1885 the Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society published an article on the font at Wilne which included an illustration from a rubbing of a section of the Wolverhampton shaft. No reference is made to it in Dr. J. Brøndsted's pioneer study *Early English Ornament* published in 1924. W. G. Collingwood does not mention it in his *Northumbrian Crosses of the pre-Norman Age* which appeared in 1927; in this book he reproduces drawings of twelve round-shaft crosses to support his theory that the design of the High Cross originated with the timber staff rood of the early missionary which was planted as a rallying point where converts could attend services. The chief weakness of Collingwood's thesis is that he can quote no really early round shafts; only three of those that he lists—Dewsbury, Masham and Collingham—are pre-Danish, and none of these rivals in age the rectangular-section crosses at Ruthwell and Bewcastle, which are generally accepted as belonging to the late seventh century. One of Collingwood's arguments in favour of a timber original is the central boss which appears on many of the cross-heads and which he would derive from the nail needed to attach the cross-bar to the shaft.

The first discussion of the Wolverhampton cross in a pre-Conquest context occurred in the 1930's when Sir Alfred Clapham¹ interpreted the use of acanthus in its decoration as dating it to the post-Danish period; as a result he equated it with the foundation of Wolverhampton parish church as a minster in 994 by the lady Wulfruna. This grant was confirmed by King Ethelred and the Archbishop of Canterbury in a document of which copies survive though the original is lost. Similarly Baldwin Brown² assigns a late tenth-century date to the Wolverhampton shaft; but it must be borne in mind that this concluding

¹ Sir Alfred Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest* (1930).

² Baldwin Brown, *Arts in Early England* (1937), VI pt. 2.

volume of his *magnum opus* was published posthumously, some five years after his death, and the section dealing with cylindrical cross-shafts shows signs of scrappy treatment.

T. D. Kendrick¹ was the first to claim a pre-Danish date for the Wolverhampton shaft; in 1938 he assigned it to the middle of the ninth century, describing it as 'the noblest monument' of its kind that has come down to us. In a more recent volume published in 1949² he gives the most comprehensive treatment yet available of post-Danish round-shaft crosses and their derivatives; these he correctly establishes in an English rather than a Viking context. His weakness here is his failure to mention the Wolverhampton shaft and its influence on the design of these later crosses. He is dissatisfied with the staff rood theory of origin put forward by Collingwood, but is unable to suggest an alternative.

Another very detailed account of the subject is to be found in T. Pape's article on 'The Round Shafted pre-Norman Crosses of the North Staffordshire Area'³. It contains a conscientious tabulation of all the known information concerning late round-shaft crosses in the area. His omission of the Heaton shaft on the Staffordshire-Cheshire border suggests that he has done little original field work, and his failure to refer to the Wolverhampton cross is another serious oversight. His final section dealing with dating needs to be read with reserve.

The problem that has to be settled in establishing a date for the Wolverhampton shaft turns on the use of acanthus, but before discussing this it is necessary to consider the detailed appearance of this monument. It stands near the south door of St. Peter's parish church, which occupies a commanding position above the western scarp of the south Staffordshire plateau. The shaft rests upon a circular base varying from 6½ to 7 feet in diameter, and 1 ft. 8 ins. high; above this it rises to a height of 14 feet carrying a collar 9 ins. deep, thus giving a total height above the ground of 16 ft. 5 ins. Its lower diameter is 30 inches lessening to 22 inches at the top. It is badly weathered, especially on its western face, and the industrial soot of the last hundred years has done much to deface the decoration. Fortunately the cast of it in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows much of the detail considerably better preserved than at present. The extended drawing based on this cast is reproduced here (Pl. XI) with the different bands of decoration lettered and numbered as in the description below. It should be borne in mind that in this drawing the carving is interpreted through the eye of the artist, and that as certain features are repeated regularly, the decoration on badly weathered sections is liable to be an imaginative reconstruction (the west face occurs at the edges of the drawing).

¹ T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (1938), referred to as Kendrick I.

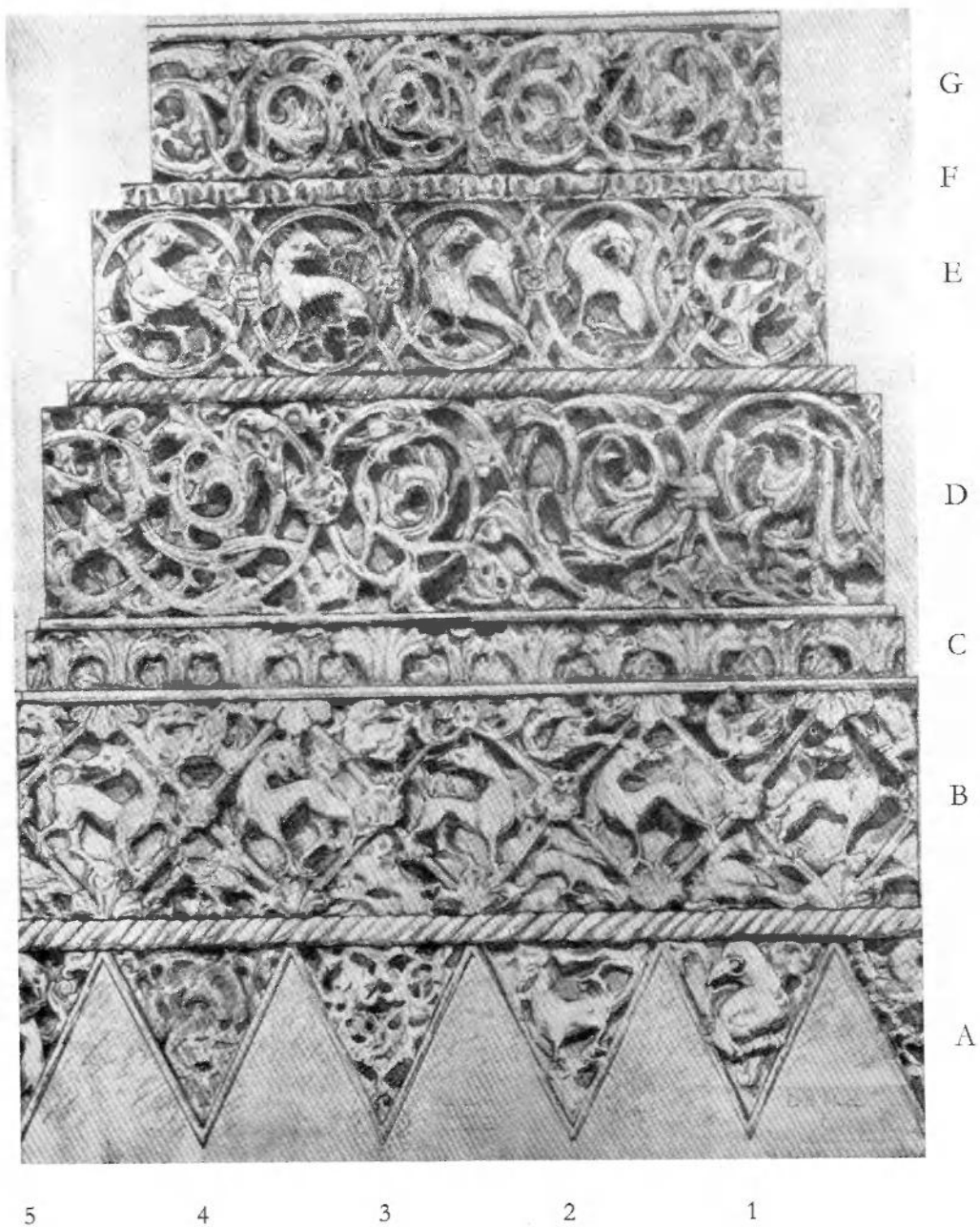
² T. D. Kendrick, *Late Saxon and Viking Art* (1949), referred to as Kendrick II.

³ *Trans. N. Staffs. Field Club*, LXXX (1946).



A. The Copenhagen Fragment
(height 6 inches)
(By Permission of The National Museum,
Copenhagen)

B. Wolverhampton cross-shaft.
Cast in Victoria and Albert Museum
(Crown Copyright)



Extended drawing of the ornament on the Wolverhampton cross-shaft
 (Reproduced by permission of the Society of Antiquities, from *Proc. S.A.*, XXV, 2nd. ser.)

The design is divided into five main zones, A B D E G, and two minor ones C F, each of the main zones displaying five panels of decoration.

(A) At a distance of about 7 feet from the base, that is to say half way up the shaft, a cable moulding about $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep encircles the column; below this are five pendent triangles 18 inches deep outlined by a narrow moulding and containing animals or foliage decoration.

(B) The zone immediately above contains five lozenge-shaped panels about 19 inches deep, each occupied by an Anglian beast. These panels are also outlined by a narrow moulding, and decorated at their junctions with rosettes. Bird-like creatures occupy the ten triangular spaces between the lozenges.

(C) A band of formal acanthus leaves 7 inches deep, bordered by a plain moulding above and below.

(D) A zone 19 inches deep containing five scrolls of boldly cut conventional foliage surmounted by another cable moulding.

(E) The next zone 16 inches deep contains five circular panels enclosed by a plain moulding linked by rosettes. Each rosette is enclosed by a mandorla-shaped plain moulding that runs the full depth of the zone: each circular panel contains an animal arranged bird, beast, bird, beast, bird, each with its body pointing towards the left and its head turned back.

(F) A narrow enriched fillet.

(G) Finally, a zone of scrolls similar to zone D and 13 inches deep surmounted by a plain moulding carries the design to the top of the shaft.

The foliage in zone C is clearly acanthus, probably based upon a Carolingian original, and the luxuriant foliage of the scrolls in zones D and G clearly derives from the same influence, while also harking back to the vine scroll on English crosses. The animals in zones A, B and E deserve a detailed examination. Nearly all of them have their heads turned back in the Anglian beast tradition. The chief exception is the sprightly bull in triangle 2 of zone A. His head faces the same way as his body, while his tail trifurcates gaily to fill the rest of the panel. Triangle 1 contains a large crow or raven, its body turned outwards and its head to the left. The other three triangles appear to contain foliage, but this is by no means certain. The two animals just described are distinct in their individual treatment from the others depicted on the shaft. The five lozenges in zone B are inhabited by arched-back beasts with snapping jaws; three with their heads turned to the left and two to the right. The ten triangles that complete this zone are also inhabited by bird-like creatures while the frames of the lozenges spring from acanthus sprays. The circles in zone E are inhabited by three birds and two beasts, all with their heads turned to the right. The beast in circle 2 appears to be seated and has its head turned very far back as if to bite itself. The bird in circle 3 shows a fully extended wing very reminiscent of work at Breedon-on-the-Hill. The beast in circle 4 is very similar to those in

zone B while the bird in circle 5 resembles that in circle 1. The manner in which the birds and beasts in this zone overlap and obscure the formal framework of mouldings is very reminiscent of the second style of Breedon carving referred to by Kendrick.¹

The origin of the form and decoration of the Wolverhampton shaft requires to be considered next: in so doing we follow the accepted practice of comparing it with other works of art in other materials. This comparison brings to light a striking number of similarities to metalwork and especially to metal objects of a particular kind. The undecorated lower part, the pendent triangles, the horizontal bands of decoration, the swelling collar, all are reminiscent of a processional cross. The typical processional cross consists of a plain shaft of wood, its upper part enclosed in decorative metalwork which starts with pendent triangles and horizontal bands of decoration, rises to a swelling knop and is surmounted by a cross.²

An examination of the Wolverhampton shaft, feature by feature, will help to show its relationship to metalwork originals and in particular to three pre-Conquest examples—the Copenhagen fragment, the Trewhiddle Hoard and the Beeston Tor brooches. The Copenhagen fragment (Pl. XA) is dated by Mlle. Françoise Henry to the first half of the eighth century³; A. Mahr would prefer a late seventh-century date.⁴ This is clearly a piece of Viking loot from some Celtic christian site in Ireland and belonged to a crozier or pastoral staff. The lower rim of this pre-Danish metal shaft is clearly seen to consist of a series of pendent triangles.

The Trewhiddle Hoard from Cornwall dates from the third quarter of the ninth century and includes drinking horn mounts⁵ decorated with beasts in triangular fields which are closely related to the Wolverhampton bull (pendent triangle A2). Metal tags from Whitby dated before 875 show a similar animal style.⁶

Most closely related of all are the two Staffordshire brooches from Beeston Tor cave in the Peak District⁷ which, on coin evidence, were buried between 871 and 874. The larger is decorated with circles and mandorlas reminiscent of zone E and lozenge-shaped panels reinforced at the corners reminiscent of zone B. The smaller brooch is also circular but with a cruciform decoration. The creatures in the arms of the cross are reminiscent of birds and beasts in the triangles of zones A and B of the Wolverhampton shaft. In particular the beast by the tip of the pin has a trifurcating tail as has the bull in pendent triangle A2.

¹ Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, 172-3.

² Cf. the Cross of Cong, National Museum, Dublin, illustrated in A. Mahr and J. Raftery, *Christian Art in Ancient Ireland* (1932-41), Pl. 97.

³ Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the early Christian Period* (1940), Pl. 43, where it is published upside down.

⁴ Mahr and Raftery, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, 58 and Pl. 27.

⁵ Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, Pl. 78.

⁶ C. A. R. Radford, in *Archaeologia*, LXXXIX, Pl. 28.

⁷ Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, Pl. 78.

Further consideration of pendent triangles shows them to be frequently used in the metalwork of the pagan Anglo-Saxon period as mounts on buckets and drinking-horns. Both the Copenhagen fragment and the Cross of Cong show convincing examples of how such decoration helps to attach the metal to a wooden staff. In addition to this the zoomorphic nature of the Cross of Cong triangles is admirably paralleled on the Leek column and the Sockburn cross. An early translation into stone is seen on both the Sandbach crosses in Cheshire and the cross fragment at Stanwick in Yorkshire.

Lozenge motifs appear on tortoise brooches from an early date in Scandinavia. The ground, apart from the lozenge frame, is cut away and the animal pattern left in open-work. The junctions of the lozenge frames are marked by bosses, which seems to indicate that originally this was metal appliqué work, which would accord well with the appearance of zone B of the Wolverhampton column, where rosettes mark the joins. Further examples of such decoration in metalwork can be seen on the head of the pastoral staff of Bishop Flambard at Durham. Its translation into ivory is particularly well illustrated on an incomplete tau-head at the Victoria and Albert Museum. An early translation into stone is seen on the smaller of the Sandbach crosses.

The five roundels in zone E of the Wolverhampton shaft have every appearance of having been copied from a metal original. Each circular frame would appear to have been made from a double strand of silver wire—in fact filigree linked by rosettes. The manner in which the subsidiary decoration consists of segments of circles which, if completed, would be concentric with the panels, points again to the silversmith's indulgence in geometrical patterns.

The rosettes already mentioned appear at the junctions of panels in zones B and D as well as E. They are very reminiscent of filigree technique, as in the Kirkoswald ornament.¹

The cable moulding between zones A and B, and D and E, although a common enough carved motif, is very reminiscent of the silversmith's multiple strands of wire wound together.

The collar on the Wolverhampton shaft, which may now be considered, has a striking resemblance to the knop on such examples of metalwork as the Cross of Cong and a number of staves from Limoges. This by itself would not be sufficient evidence for a metal prototype, but taken in conjunction with the foregoing arguments it only serves to strengthen them. Examination of the Cross of Cong shows that the knop has a similar appearance and occupies a similar position to that of the Wolverhampton cap and there seems little doubt that the Wolverhampton sculptor was following a metal prototype. Further confirmation of this is provided by an examination of the post-Danish round shafts, especially Leek.

All of the metal prototypes and parallels so far considered, together with similar objects in ivory such as the Brunswick Casket and the Victoria and Albert

¹ *Ibid.*

tau-head, show a fussy system of decoration divided up into small panels containing stylised animals and formal patterns, which accords well with the character of the carving on this shaft.

Another animal parallel that is worth mentioning, although it does not apply directly to the Wolverhampton shaft, is the rectangular cross fragment from Sockburn, Co. Durham.¹ It shows pendent triangles in the form of animal heads (like the Cross of Cong) and at the corners animal heads carved in the round which are paralleled on Limoges pastoral staves.

A further general examination of the Wolverhampton shaft in relation to metalwork suggests, as has already been mentioned, that the more deeply carved decoration looks like appliqué openwork silver.² This indicates that the processional cross prototype that the Wolverhampton sculptor was copying from may have been decorated with pierced metal sheets.

In deriving the Wolverhampton shaft from a processional cross the question arises as to what evidence we have for such a piece of church equipment in the ninth century. According to Leclercq³ the earliest mention of a processional cross is Carolingian which accords well with the possibility that an exchange of gifts between Charlemagne and Offa might account for the introduction into this country of the sort of metalwork treasure that could act as a prototype for the Wolverhampton column. We certainly have evidence for the secular use of such standards as the Romans carried into battle: for example the Sutton Hoo standard, dating from the mid-seventh century; also the standard carried before Edwin (d. 633) and the standard erected by Oswald at Heavenfield (635), both according to Bede. The Copenhagen fragment (Pl. XA) is material evidence.

Now to examine the question of dating the Wolverhampton shaft: the majority of the features in its decoration can be equated with a pre-Danish date. As has been stated in considering metal prototypes many details fit in. Pendent triangles can be paralleled in the Copenhagen fragment which is attributed to the late seventh or early eighth century. Beasts on the shaft are reminiscent of those on the Trewhiddle hoard mounts and on the smaller Beeston Tor brooch (both of which are dated by coin evidence to the third quarter of the ninth century). The larger Beeston Tor brooch displays circle, mandorla and lozenge all of which are found on the Wolverhampton shaft.

If we consider stone carving parallels, the birds and beasts on the Wolverhampton shaft have an Anglian gaiety that can be associated with Breedon-on-the-Hill sculptures which Clapham dates to the first half of the ninth century. Other pre-Danish carvings in the West Midlands have this same gaiety, especially the Cropthorne cross-head which might well be the form that surmounted the Wolverhampton shaft; also the Wroxeter and Acton

¹ Kendrick II, *op. cit.*, Pl. 62.

² Cf. the bronze plaque from Whitby, published by Haseloff in *Ant. J.* XXX, 170.

³ F. M. Cambrol, *Dict. d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, &c. (pub. F. C. & H. Leclercq, 1920-27), III, 3102.

Beauchamp fragments, the Lechmere Stone, and the twin crosses at Sandbach which, with their pendent triangles, roundels and lozenges, clearly have a close affinity with the Wolverhampton repertory of decoration. Elsewhere in the Midlands this period—between Offa (757-796) and Alfred (871-901)—also represents the time of richest output for sculpture. To the east are Breedon, unrivalled throughout Britain for quantity and variety, Castor (Northants.), Fletton and the Hedda Stone at nearby Peterborough, South Kyme (Lincs.), Rothley (Leics.), the cross-shafts from St. Alkmund's Church, Derby and the Wilne font in the same county.

Further afield are the three great cylindrical cross-shafts of this period in Yorkshire, at Masham, Dewsbury and Collingham—at Masham the lowest of the four horizontal zones is decorated with beasts very similar to those on the Wolverhampton shaft. Also from Yorkshire comes the Hovingham slab, the lower part of which is decorated with a frieze of scrolls in which animals disport themselves—birds and beasts which correspond well with those of the Wolverhampton shaft.

The only piece of carving from this period that seems to belong to a cross closely related to this shaft is the font at Wilne near Derby. It is identical in measurement with the central carved area of the Wolverhampton column, having a diameter of 26 inches, but only a section 23 inches high survives. It is decorated with a horizontal band of sculpture containing six rough roundels inhabited by beasts and opposed birds, above which are six pairs of feet suggesting a group of human figures similar to those on the uppermost portion of the Masham shaft. A likely date for the Wilne fragment is mid-ninth century, for the twin bird theme is to be found on the gold ring of King Ethelwulf (d. 858) preserved in the British Museum¹. Wilne is not unique in having a section of a cylindrical cross-shaft hollowed out as a font, the famous font at Deerhurst (the decoration in which is ascribed to the late ninth century) is also probably part of a gigantic cylindrical cross-shaft. The same is true of the font at Melbury Bubb, Dorset.²

The only theme that does not accord at first glance with a mid-ninth century date is the acanthus ornament which occupies zone C and influences the decoration in zones B, D and G. Acanthus occurs most commonly in English works of art of the tenth and eleventh centuries and this accounts for both Clapham and Collingwood dating the shaft to after 994. But it is worth bearing in mind that the revival of the use of acanthus themes in north-western Europe is the work of the great eighth to ninth-century renaissance labelled Carolingian. Continental manuscripts, metalwork and ivories of that date frequently bear acanthus decoration. The friendly relations between Charlemagne and Offa make an exchange of gifts between them possible and it is certain that there was extensive trade between the two countries at that time. Alcuin's attachment to the court of the Emperor need not have been the only clerical

¹ Illustrated in Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, 184.

² R.C.H.M. *Dorset* I (1952), Pl. 15.

migration from one country to the other. It is worth remembering also that the Mercian king was the only European monarch whom the Emperor treated on terms of equality.

The fact remains, however, that acanthus is very rare in pre-Danish Saxon work in England; yet a search for it at this period is not altogether fruitless. It is to be found in securely dated manuscripts of the eighth and ninth centuries: for example in folios 5b and 8a of the *Codex Aureus* at Stockholm which is attributed by Zimmermann to Canterbury,¹ also in the British Museum Cotton Vespasian A. I. folio 30.² But the best proof is the Gospels B. M. Royal I. E. VI where acanthus is used in the frame of folio 30 much as in the Wolverhampton shaft zone C³; this is a manuscript written in Mercia or Kent at the end of the eighth century⁴ and clinches the matter. Manuscript evidence for the use of acanthus can be reinforced by its use on such portable objects as the Tassilo Cup⁵ and the Wallingford sword.⁶

The fact that acanthus decoration on a work of art is no barrier to a ninth-century date means that the Winchester shaft⁷ can be accepted as contemporary with the Wolverhampton cross and a date of about 850 is correct.

The form of the upper part of the cross-shaft and the destroyed head must remain a matter for speculation. Collingwood's reconstructions of the crosses at Masham, Dewsbury and Collingham are as likely as any. He uses the double curved cross-heads as at Ruthwell and Rothbury and such a head survives complete in the West Midlands at Cropthorne (Worcs.)⁸ which could well have been the twin of that at Wolverhampton. Evidence is to be found in South Wales, for at Llandough near Cardiff there survives a remarkable fragment in the form of a great cross-shaft with an enormous central knop.⁹ This indicates that the pre-Conquest artist was prepared to run the shaft clean through the knop. A likelier piece of evidence, from North Staffordshire this time, is the almost complete stone cross standing in Leek churchyard; it is of post-Danish date and has pendent triangles below a knop (decorated with interlace) from which rises a rectangular section shaft decorated with three zones of interlace.

An examination of the other post-Danish round shafts in the Peak district shows that the Wolverhampton collar survived in a debased form. Every one of them that is sufficiently complete for a cross-head to be inferred has in fact a transition to an upper rectangular cross-section. At Leek it is a projecting horizontal band of interlace, at Ilam a roll moulding, and at Brailsford a double cable moulding. Further north, at Penrith in Cumberland, it is a collar of

¹ *Vorkarolingische Miniaturen*, Pls. 281 and 286.

² *Ibid.*, Pl. 286.

³ J. O. Westwood, *Facsimiles of the miniatures & ornaments of Anglo-Saxon and Irish Manuscripts* (1868), Pl. XV.

⁴ E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini antiq.* (1934-50), II, 214.

⁵ Baldwin Brown, *Arts in Early England* (1937), VI, pt. 1, 84.

⁶ Actually found at Abingdon: Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, Pl. 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Pl. 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Pl. 80.

⁹ V. E. Nash-Williams, *Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (1950), 36, Pl. 45 and fig. xi.

interlace, whilst at Beckermest in the same county it takes the form of three roll mouldings. It is significant too that the only features that ultimately survive in the final degeneration of the round-shaft crosses to Kendrick's Peak Plain series as at Clulow, are the collar, usually in the form of a roll moulding, and the squared-off upper parts, both of which are distinctive features of a processional cross.¹

Evidence for the form of the upper part of the Wolverhampton cross might at one time have been obtained from the socket in the cap. Unfortunately the cap has been split, probably by water accumulating in the socket and freezing, and in repairing it the socket hole has been filled with cement.

The material of which the shaft consists is sandstone and its probable source is the Roman city of Viroconium less than 25 miles to the west of Wolverhampton where fragments of columns and bases provide evidence for the use of pillars exactly the size of the Wolverhampton shaft.

An excavation was carried out in 1949 in order to discover the form of the complete base and whether it was erected on undisturbed soil. Accumulations of earth due to centuries of burials on the south side of the church had raised the ground level around the shaft. The excavation established that the base still stands upon a circular flight of four stone-built steps below the present ground level and that these steps rest upon undisturbed soil. The conclusion was that the column has the distinction of standing upon its original base as erected some eleven centuries ago. At that time the ground level was some four feet lower so that the cross must have stood up even more impressively than it does today.

As we have seen, the Wolverhampton shaft is an outstanding monument surviving from the pre-Conquest period. In studying the question of its date we have reached the conclusion that it is pre-Danish and probably belongs to about the year 850 A.D. The answer to the question of from what prototype it was copied would seem to be a metal processional cross. But whatever the answers to these questions there can be no doubt that the Wolverhampton sculptor was not only a master of his craft but also an artist of distinction.

Reconstruction

In preparing a reconstructed drawing of the Wolverhampton cross I have taken as a model for the top the cross-head found at Cropthorne in Worcestershire only thirty-four miles from Wolverhampton²; it is one of the very few pre-Danish cross-heads that survives virtually complete. It is distinct from all other such fragments in having a curved outline to the end of each arm (if produced they would trace a circle). The upper shaft is based on Collingwood's reconstruction of the cross at Masham, Yorkshire which is attributed to about the same date as the Wolverhampton Cross.³

¹ Kendrick II, *op. cit.*, Pls. 46 and 47.

² Kendrick I, *op. cit.*, Pl. 80.

³ W. J. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the pre-Norman Age* (1927), fig. 13.

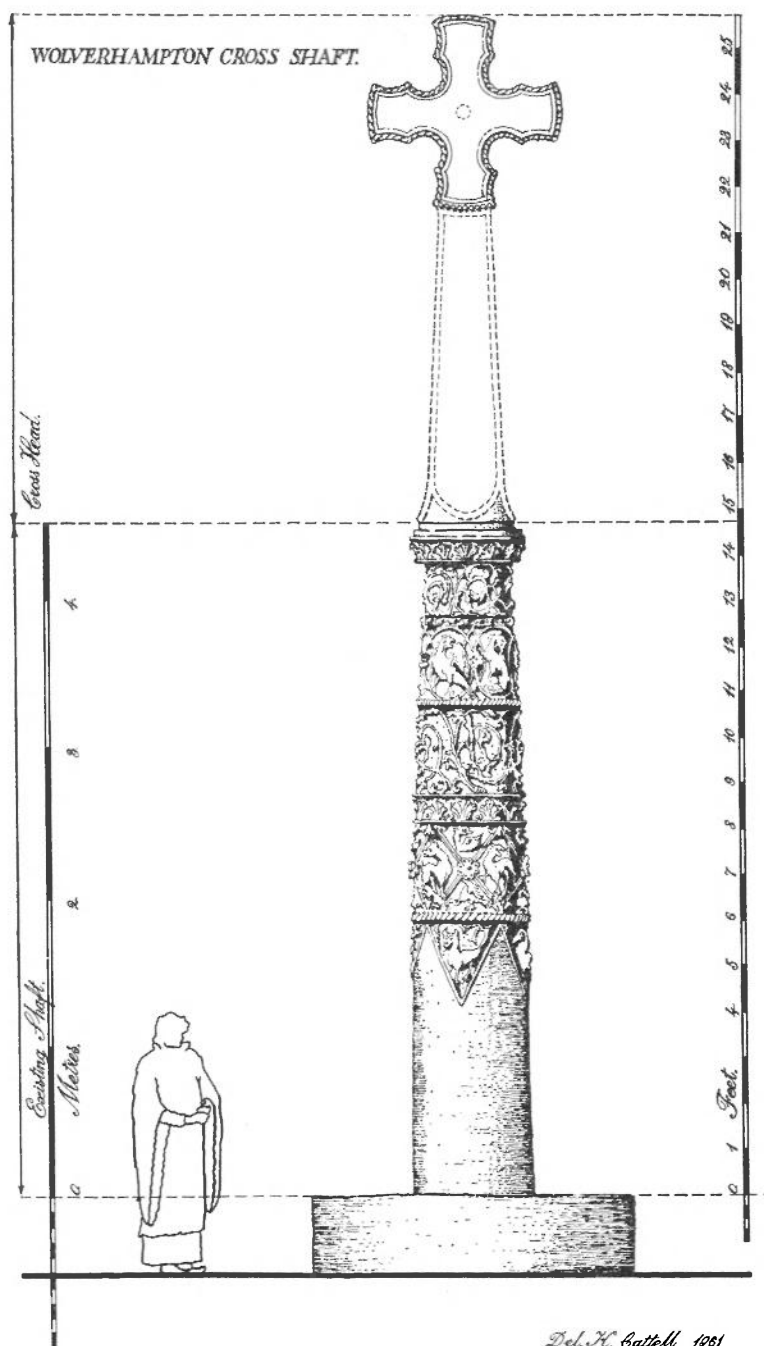


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the Wolverhampton cross

For the relative position of the collar I am bearing in mind the cross-shaft at Llandough, Glamorganshire while for the proportions of the whole I am indebted to the cross-shaft at Leek, Staffordshire. Although Leek is post-Danish in date it has pendent triangles and a collar which make me believe that it is a direct descendant of the Wolverhampton cross.

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