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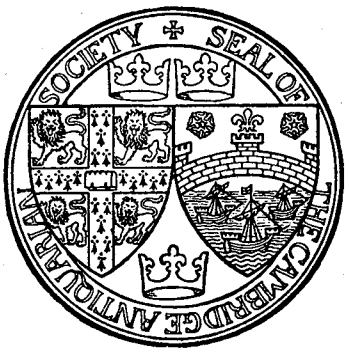

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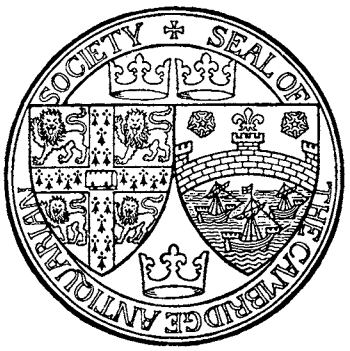

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EXCAVATION OF A MEDIEVAL BRIDGE AND TWELFTH-CENTURY CROSS SHAFT AT KINGS RIPTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE IN 1983

DAVID HAIGH

With a report by Dr. C. L. Forbes

SUMMARY (Figures 1 and 2)

Kings Ripton lies almost five miles north-east of Huntingdon on a low boulder-clay-covered ridge. The road from Huntingdon to Ramsey passes through the village and crosses a small stream immediately to the north of the village by way of an eighteenth-century brick bridge. During the summer of 1982, trenching in preparation for the laying of moledrains in the field to the east of this road revealed part of a stone wall buried 0.7 m below the surface of the field some 30 m to the north of the stream (TL 26147681). Two fragments of a decorated stone cross shaft of mid twelfth-century date were also discovered some 15 m to the north. These finds were immediately brought to the attention of the County Archaeologist Alison Taylor by the landowner W. R. Collett of Manor Farm, who has

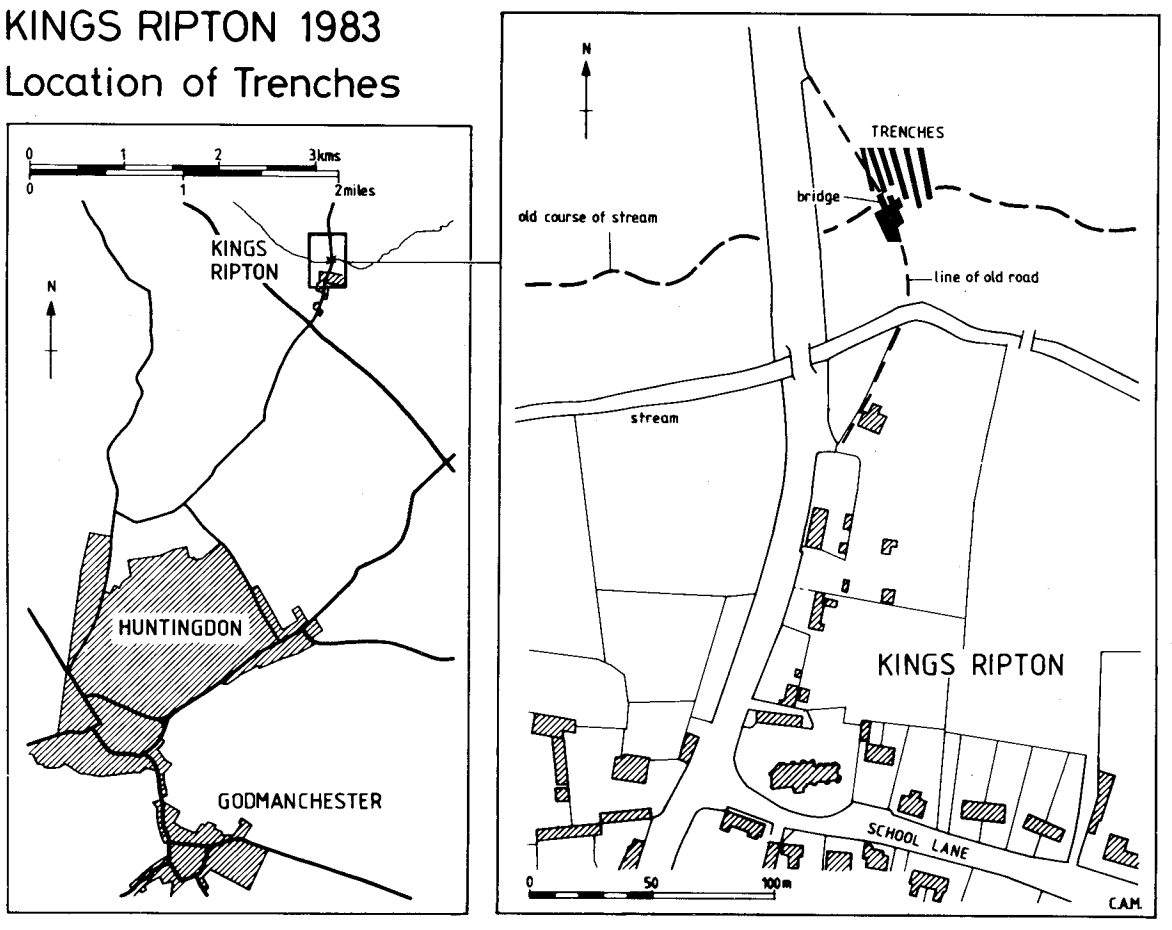


Figure 2. Kings Ripton Site plan.

presented the cross shaft to the Norris Museum in St Ives. An exploratory excavation was carried out by the author as part of an archaeology project funded by the Manpower Services Commission in conjunction with Cambridgeshire County Council. This excavation revealed that the stone wall formed the pier of a small bridge over the earlier course of the stream. Both the course of the stream and of the road passing over it here were altered, almost certainly when the village was enclosed in 1773. The bridge was then demolished and the former course of the stream filled in with clay subsoil which had been brought from the course of the new stream which ran some 30 m to the south.

THE EXCAVATION (Plate 1)

The bridge consisted of a single pier and an abutment set 2.20 m apart. Both were *c.* 0.5 m thick and were 3.4 m long. The pier was built into the southern bank of the stream 1.75 m below the point where it started to slope gently down to the stream bed. The abutment on the north side was built

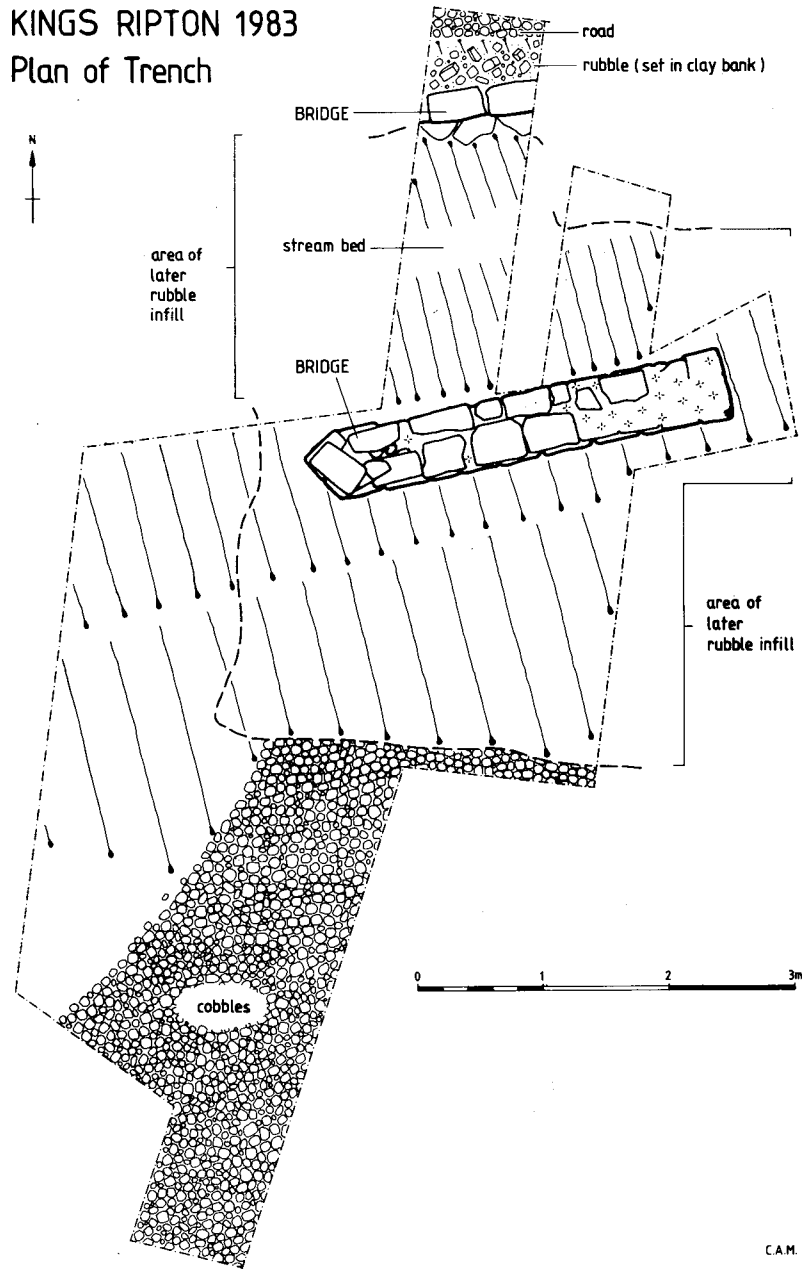


Figure 2. Kings Ripton Site plan.

directly against the more steeply sloping bank here. The southern pier consisted of a double row of dressed rectangular stone blocks which were set in a coarse sandy mortar ((Munsell 2.5Y 6/6). Four courses of this pier survived *in situ*, and it is probable from the number of tumbled blocks that lay scattered amongst the clay and rubble fill of the stream bed that an additional course existed. From the height of the road surface on either side of the bridge, it is unlikely that the pier had more than five courses.

The upstream (western) end of the pier had been reduced to a single width of stone. In contrast to the rest of the masonry of this pier, only two of the corner stones here were correctly dressed, and the upper courses used a single rectangular block set at a slight angle. This suggested that some of the stone here had been re-used, and had not been reshaped. This may be the explanation for what appears to have been a string course on the south side of the pier. The third course of dressed blocks on the south side of the pier were only 0.8 m thick and projected 0.05 m beyond the dressed face of the pier. It is unlikely that this was a deliberate architectural feature such as a plinth, as it was 0.08 m above the bank of the stream. It seems more probable that these stones were inserted at this level to compensate for the use of unusually thick stones in the adjacent course of the masonry.

The abutment consisted of a single thickness of dressed blocks set on a foundation of larger poorly dressed stones which lay flush with the sloping clay bank of the stream. Only two courses of masonry survived above this foundation, which was built against the side of the stream. The space between the dressed stone face and the clay bank behind was filled with a mixture of rubble and clay.

The masonry of the freestanding southern pier would have been inadequate to support the weight of a stone arch, and it is probable that there was a simple horizontal timber framework spanning the gap between the two supports. This would have extended on either side of the stream for 1.9 m to the south and 0.35 m to the north, where the adjacent road surfaces stop, giving a total distance of 5.5 m. There are clear signs that the road on either side of the bridge had been extensively used, with several new layers of cobbles and gravel being added as the road surface wore down.

DISCUSSION

It is not clear precisely when the bridge was constructed, but a sixteenth-century date seems probable. One of the samples of stone from the pier was of Alwalton Marble, which was almost certainly quarried between 1180 and 1220. This particular stone is a hard blue shelly limestone of high quality. A second sample proved to be Oolitic limestone from one of the Somerset quarries. The quality of these two pieces of stone and the expense involved in bringing this stone to the site, rather than using local stone, makes it unlikely that they were quarried specially for this bridge. It has already been suggested that the masonry consisted of stone re-used from other sites, and this theory is supported by the extent to which some of the stone from the core of the pier has weathered. It is unlikely that the stonework exposed for the first time when the bridge was demolished and then buried would have weathered significantly. However, the samples both show heavy weathering, and it is suggested that they came from other, possibly religious buildings in the area, almost certainly after the Dissolution. It is suggested that the bridge was constructed during the later sixteenth century.

Demolition of the bridge can be more closely dated. Rubble infilling in the old course of the stream and covering the demolished remains of the bridge contained fragments of brick identical to that used in the new bridge 50 m to the south-west. It is suggested that the course of the stream was straightened when the new line of the road north from the village was laid out at the time of enclosure in 1773. Unfortunately, there are no surviving pre-enclosure maps of the village, although Jeffrey's 'Map of Huntingdonshire' seems to show the road running on the former course. The only surviving documentary evidence of the enclosure of the village is the award which states:

> The said commissioners do set out and appoint one public turnpike road to be and to remain of the breadth of 60 feet at least between the ditches, leading from... the north of Kings Ripton into the Lordship of Broughton towards the Town of Ramsey.

The award also states that where:

> any fence is known, ordered and diverted, a proper and sufficient ditch... shall be made.

This does not confirm that the bridge was rebuilt at this time; however, it is unlikely that such major

Plate 1. The Medieval Bridge at Kings Ripton
a. Section showing road surface and bridge pier, (looking east).
b. View of bridge pier with abutment beyond, (looking north).

alterations were carried out here during the eighteenth century independently of the enclosure of the village.

After the initial levelling of the bridge and stream, a soil profile formed before it was decided to build up the ground further. An additional layer of clay subsoil was added, perhaps when the first attempt at draining the field was carried out early in the twentieth century. The field was then used for pasture until 1982, when it was re-drained and then ploughed.

THE CROSS SHAFT

Two fragments of a carved Barnack stone cross shaft were recovered from some 15 m to the north of the bridge, when the field was first ploughed in 1982. A series of trenches were excavated in the vicinity of this spot during September 1983, but no further fragment from the shaft or its base was found. The two fragments fit together to form a single section of the shaft, which is broken at both ends and is badly weathered. The dimensions of this fragment are *c.* 0.4 m × *c.* 0.32 m × 0.88 m, and it appears to taper slightly towards the top. All four faces of the shaft are carved in the same style, and they are illustrated in Figures 3–6.

Face 1 (Figure 3)

Repeated stylised leaf and geometrical pattern in flat relief. Similar stylised geometrical floral patterns occur locally at Ely on the Monk's Door, dated to the first quarter of the twelfth century (Zarnecki, 1979, p. 39), at Castor, and Warmington in Northamptonshire ((Zarnecki, 1958, p. 22), dated to 1120–1130, and on the cross of Fletton dated to *c.* 1180 (RCHM, Hunts, 1922, p. 97). More distant parallels are found in both Southern England and the Midlands (Stone, 1972, pp. 56–72).

Face 2 (Figure 3, Plate 3)

Roundel or medallion in flat relief with what appears to be a sheep portrayed within it. This has been heavily weathered and it is impossible to tell whether it had a plain or decorated rim. Similar roundels are found on the cross shaft at Fletton (RCHM, 1922, p. 97), and on the Prior's Door at Ely (Zarnecki, 1975, p. 22), and are common during the earlier twelfth century. Traces of further carving occur above the roundel, but too little remains for this to be identified.

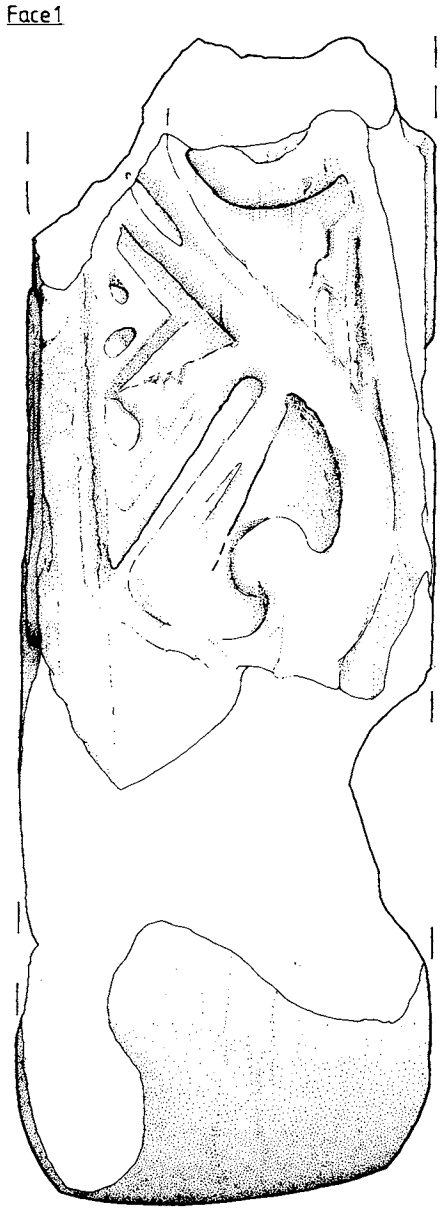
Face 3 (Figure 4, Plate 4)

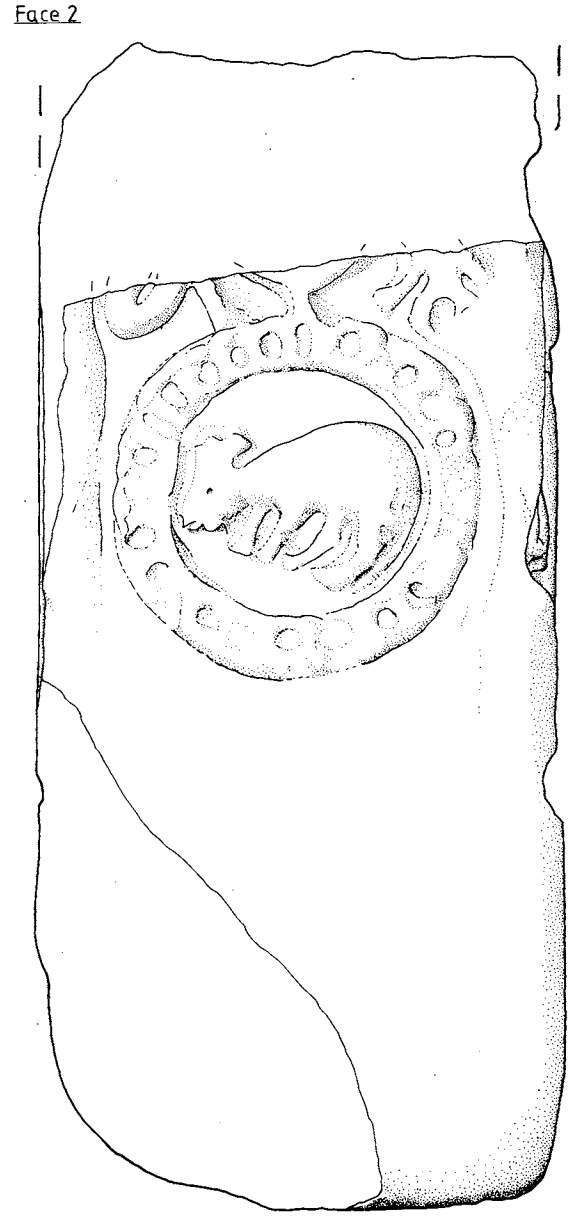
Full-length figure carved in flat relief, although slightly more boldly than the other faces. A female figure holding a staff or rod broken at both ends now, and possibly holding a small object which may be an orb in her right hand. It is likely in view of the precise way in which the right hand is damaged that the figure has been deliberately mutilated. The clothing is similar to that worn by the male figures depicted on the font at Wansford dated to *c.* 1120 (Zarnecki, 1951, p. 33), although this figure is clearly female. It is possible that this is a representation of the Virgin Mary portrayed in majesty, holding an orb in her right hand.

Face 4 (Figure 4)

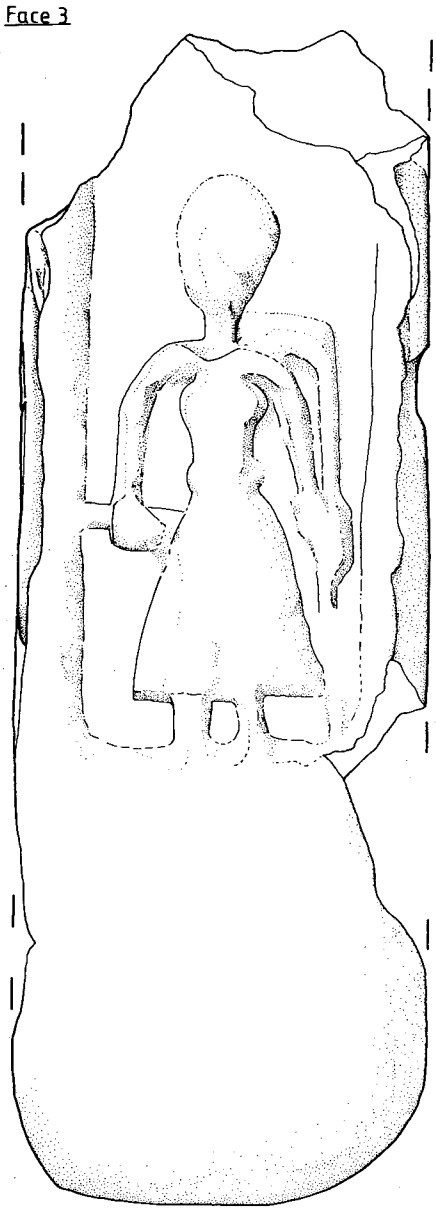
Only part of a figure similar to that shown in face 3 is visible.

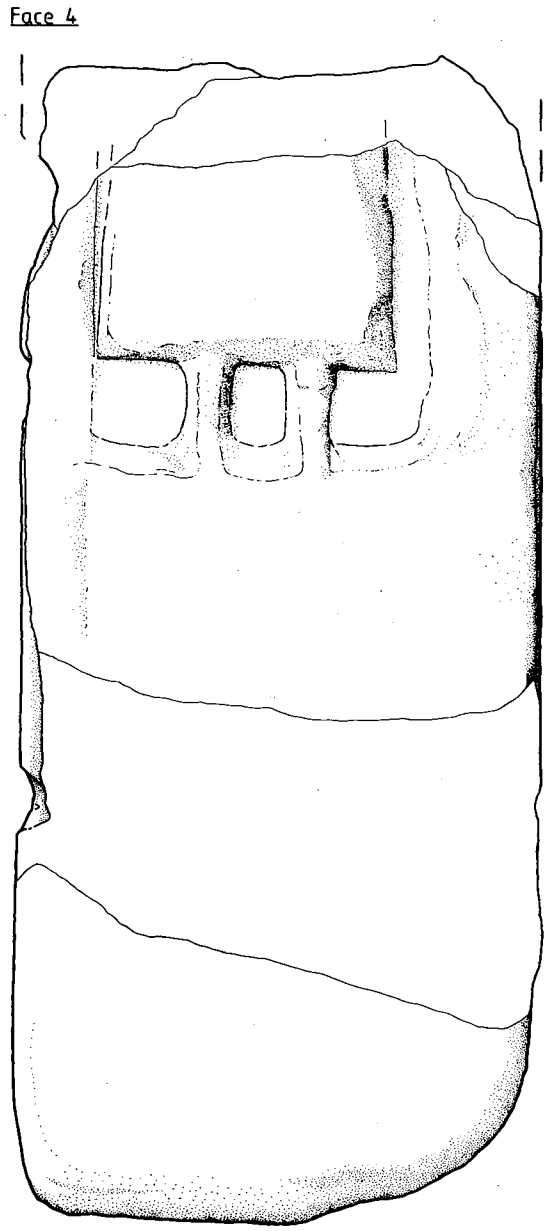
There can be no doubt that stylistically this cross belongs to the mid twelfth century, and that it was carved by a sculptor who followed a local tradition. Zarnecki has suggested (1958, p. 22) that the similarity between carvings done on Barnack stone at Ely and in both Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire is not merely accidental, and that sculptors in this area may have been trained, initially at least, at the Barnack quarries. It is probable therefore that this cross shaft was carved at some date during the second quarter of the twelfth century, perhaps in response to a commission from Ramsey Abbey which acquired the manor of Kings Ripton between 1135 and 1143 (Hart & Lyons, 1886, I, 108, 273; II, 82).





Figures 3, 4. The Cross shaft, Kings Ripton.
1. Stylised geometric pattern
2. Agnus Dei





3. Female figure
4. Fragment of figure

REPORT ON STONE SAMPLES

By Dr C. L. Forbes, Sedgwick Museum, Cambridge

Three samples have been examined and compared with material of known provenance in the Building Stones and Marbles collections at the Sedgwick Museum.

(1) Part of the cross shaft. Coarse pale brown limestone containing shell fragments, ooliths and a few rounded pebbles of very fine-grained limestone. Identified as Barnack stone from 21 miles north-north-west of Kings Ripton, quarries worked from the seventh century till early in the fifteenth. (See D. Purcell, *Cambridge Stone* (1967), chapter 3.)

(2) Fragment of bridge pier. Brown limestone with blackish flecks consisting almost entirely of a crushed mass, firmly cemented, of small (25 mm) oyster shells and their fragments. Identified as Alwalton Marble from parishes in the Nene Valley, 15 miles north-north-west of Kings Ripton. According to Purcell (1969), pp. 71 ff., this stone was worked only from about 1180 till about 1230, but the heavily weathered character of the sample suggests that it is a piece of waste such as might have been got from overburden or spoil for use as rubble or hardcore at any date.

(3) Fragment from bridge pier. Cream-coloured limestone composed mostly of pellets about 0.5 m diameter and shell fragments in great variety, some re-crystallised and well rounded by abrasion, set in a compact intergranular cement, more resistant to weather than the grains themselves. Identified as Bath stone, from about 120 miles south-west of Kings Ripton. Bath quarries have been in use since

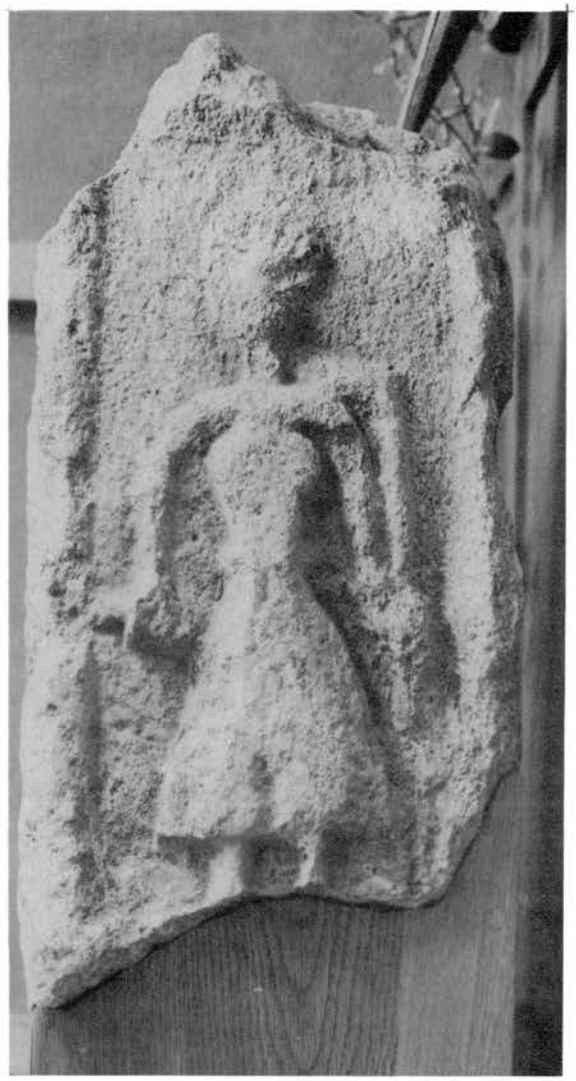


Plate 2. Cross shaft, Kings Ripton

face 2 'Agnus Dei' face 3 Figure.

Roman times and stone similar to this sample is still quarried there today. Bath was however very rarely used in eastern England before the railway age; Northamptonshire, Rutland, Lincolnshire and imports from France have provided enough limestone of excellent quality even for building cathedrals. Bath may perhaps have acquired an aura of sanctity from its association with St Aldhelm who, according to tradition (Purcell (1967), pp. 76 ff.), advised the opening of a new quarry at Haslebury in Box for the building of his church at Bradford-on-Avon in the seventh or eighth century. Whether for this or for some other reason, it is occasionally encountered outside its expected area of use; for instance in the figure of Bishop Losinga in Norwich Cathedral in or about the eleventh century. Occurrence at Kings Ripton thus perhaps indicates the re-use of medieval stone from ecclesiastical work. Part of the sample has been retained in the Sedgwick Museum Building Stones collection with reg. no. 1151.

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