

ART. VI.—*A bracelet for St Bega.* By L. A. S. BUTLER.

Read at Kendal, April 2nd, 1966.

IN CW2 lvii (pp. 30-32) Mrs D. R. Fyson suggested that the bracelet of St Bega was the inspiration for a group of grave-covers in Cumbria.¹ She drew attention to the design of a broken circle on them and deduced from its occurrence throughout Northern England the extensive influence of the Holy Bracelet.

It is not possible to maintain this theory of artistic influence emanating from the remote priory of St Bees. Fuller examination of this branch of monumental craft has shown that St Bees did not hold any position of supremacy nor was it the initiator of the patterns found on mediaeval gravestones in the northern half of England.² In place of this destructive approach a positive contribution to the history of the bracelet is now offered. By examining the legend of St Bega and the miracles associated with her it may be possible to reach satisfactory conclusions about the existence of this saint and the authenticity of her bracelet.

Legend relates that St Bega was an Irish princess who escaped from an unwelcome suitor by sailing to Cumbria and who landed near the place now known by her name.³ The gift of an arm-ring, or bracelet, from a handsome stranger in a dream before her voyage was interpreted as a sign of divine guidance or even espousal. For many years she lived a hermit's life until pirate raids drove her from the district, possibly to seek greater solitude on the isle of Little Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde.

¹ See also Mrs Fyson's "Some Early Northern Grave Covers", AA4 xxxiv (1956) 213-216.

² L. A. S. Butler, "Some Early Northern Grave Covers — A Re-assessment", AA4 xxxvi (1958) 207-220.

³ *Vita et Miracula Sancte Bege Virginis* in *The Register of the Priory of St Bees* (Surtees Soc., vol. 126, 1915) 497-520. This Life seems to have been written in the last quarter of the 12th century.

Although Collingwood doubted the existence of St Bega and classed her with St Alkelda as a mythical person, the legend can be shown to have a historical basis and is feasible, as Canon Last has argued.⁴ The name was current in the early Christian centuries; it is encountered not only in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* as a friend of St Hilda (which misled the writer of the *Vita Sancte Bege*) but also in association with St Guthlac of Crowland (*ob.* 714). The sequence of events suggested by Last is quite probable in its three essential details: the intention of her father to give her hand in marriage to the son of a Norwegian king, her escape to the Cumbrian coast from Ulster rather from the more intensively settled Dublin region, and her safety "in the wooded district of St Bees", until in fear of pirates she left the district. For all these events a mid 9th-century date has been convincingly argued by Last. Travels along the western seaboard of Britain were a common feature in the early Christian period and the honour accorded to hermits continued even into the 12th century, as is shown by the lives of St Godric, the founder of Finchale, and Serlo, the hermit of Dale. The earliest possible date for a saint who fits this historical sequence is not among the early missionary activity but within the later interplay of hermits and monastic reformers; the hermits seldom left a trail of dedications in their wake, but instead were remembered only by the community at the church they founded. This indeed suits the holy virgin Bega who is commemorated in Cumbria only at St Bees, Ennerdale and Bassenthwaite.

In support of the legend the bracelet then becomes the most essential piece of evidence. It is the only tangible proof of the saint's existence. Without her bracelet the saint is a shadowy insubstantial figure; the bracelet is valueless as a relic if it lacks the saint's authority. It

⁴ Canon C. E. Last, "St Bega and her bracelet", CW2 lii (1953) 55-66.

is consequently important to examine such evidence as is available about the bracelet to discover whether its description strikes a discordant anachronistic note or whether the bracelet can fit the historical context.

The only description of the bracelet is that given in the 12th-century *Vita Sancte Bege*, to be found in *The Register of St Bees*. In it a divine stranger "gave to her an arm-ring having the sign of the holy cross plainly shown on the top of it".⁵ The material of the armlet is nowhere mentioned. It was presumably a precious metal and was suitably housed, because at least one thief was tempted to steal the costly cloth covering the bracelet.⁶ The description of "a cross plainly shown on the top of it" would suggest that the bracelet in its relic case was permanently displayed with the cross uppermost and that the writer of the *Vita* had actually seen it in this position.

It is next necessary to examine the possible source and date for a bracelet fitting this mediaeval description. The most distant possibility is a Bronze Age penannular bracelet.⁷ Few are of sufficient size, but those of the type found in a hoard on Cathedral Hill, Downpatrick, are large enough and would readily be recognized as a bracelet (Fig. 1, A). None would bear "a cross plainly visible", but that could be added by a mediaeval forger at the monastery of St Bees or elsewhere in order to provide an "authentic" relic.

It is extremely unlikely that the venerated bracelet came from an Iron Age or Roman context. Few bracelets were broad enough to provide room for a cross decora-

⁵ *Register* (as in note 3), p. 500: "dedit ei armillam habentem signum sancte crucis in summitate eius evidenter expressum".

⁶ *Register*, p. 515: "peplum preciosum".

⁷ For a full review of these bracelets, both in gold and bronze, see V. B. Proudfoot, *The Downpatrick Gold Find* (Archaeological Research Publications (Northern Ireland), 3, 1955) and C. F. C. Hawkes and R. R. Clarke, "Gahlstorf and Caister-on-Sea: Two finds of Late Bronze Age Irish Gold", in *Culture and Environment, Essays in Honour of Sir Cyril Fox*, ed. I. Ll. Foster and L. Alcock (1963), 193-250. For Early Bronze Age flat strip armlets see *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* xxx (1964) 426-429.

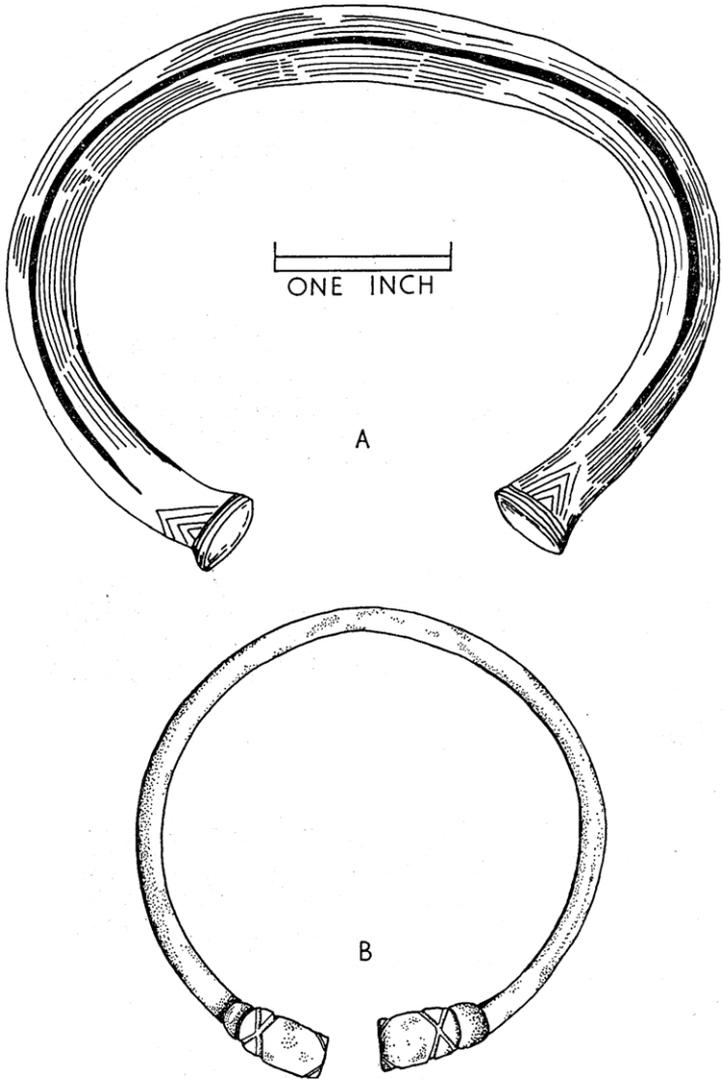
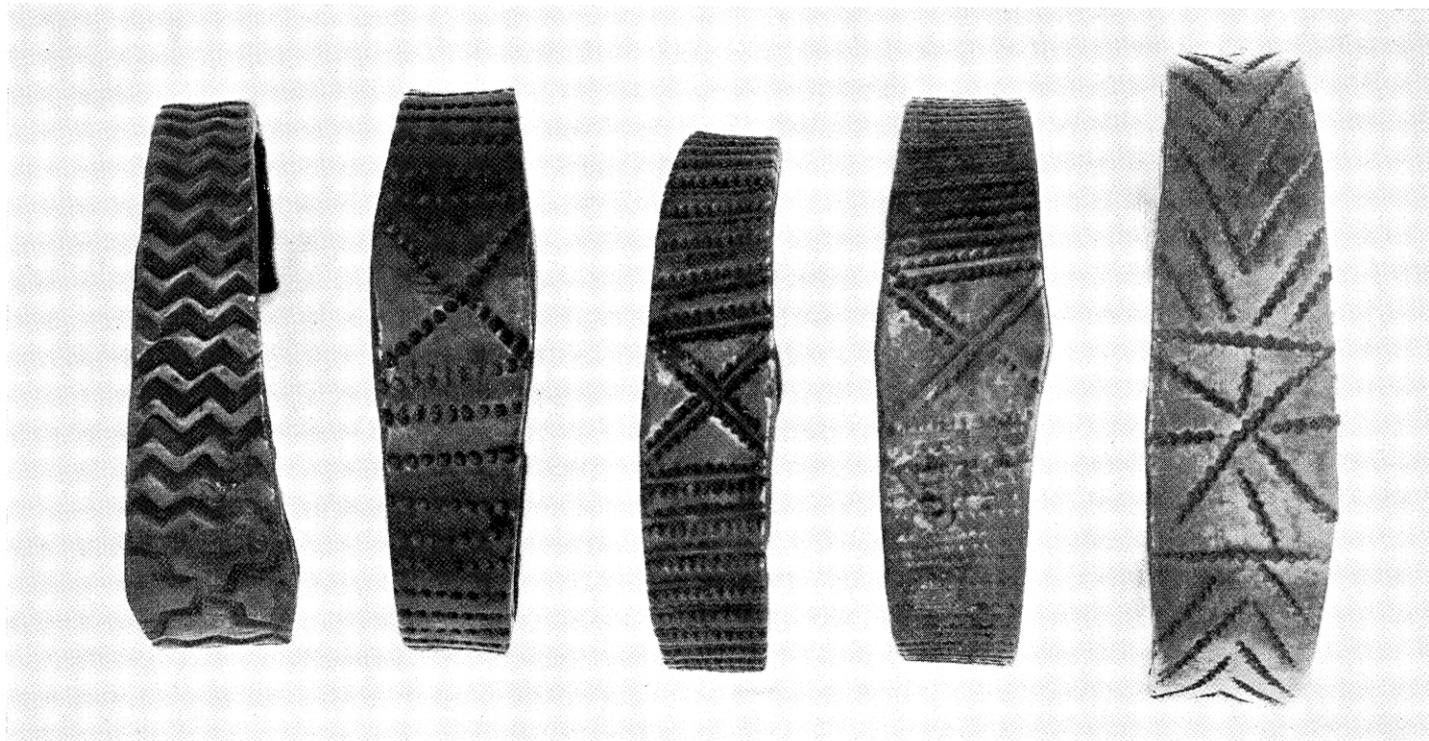


FIG. 1.

A. Gold Bracelet, Downpatrick, Ulster.

B. Brooch, Bifrons, Kent (tongue missing).



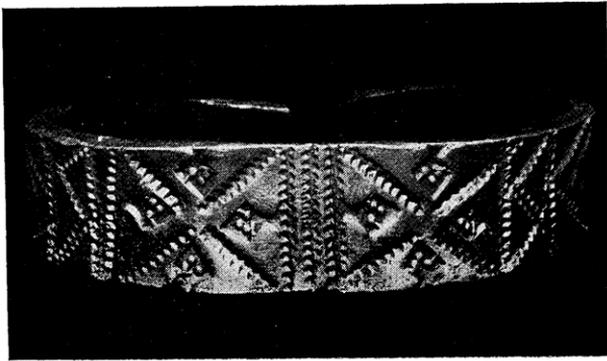
(Copyright: National Museum of Ireland)

PLATE I.—Five bracelets of St Andrew's Cross design, not closely provenanced, Ireland.



(Copyright: The British Museum)

PLATE II.—Two bracelets bearing crosses,
“found in Scotland”.



(Copyright: National Museum of Wales)

PLATE II.—Bracelet, Llanfihangel Din Silwy, Anglesey.

tion sufficiently large to be plainly visible.⁸ If the relic had been a spiral torc, it would surely have excited the admiration of the writer of the *Vita* and have elicited a comment such as "a bracelet of curious workmanship".

Within the early Christian period the likelihood of finding a suitable armlet increases. Although it has been described as an *armilla* (arm-ring or bracelet), the relic could originally have been made as a brooch. In a grave in the Saxon cemetery at Bifrons, Kent, a penannular brooch which had lost its tongue was buried after a period of use as an armlet (Fig. 1, B).⁹ At this period there are also to be found brooches with a flange broad enough to bear a cross (as a later addition): one example of such a brooch is that from County Roscommon with an effective internal diameter of 3 in. (Fig. 2, C).¹⁰ Another Irish brooch, this one from the neighbourhood of Athlone, has an internal diameter of $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. and its broad flanges provide a large area for decoration. At the junction of the ring and the flange there are lines incised in a cross-like form.¹¹ If a 4th-century date is accepted for the Athlone brooch, then it is necessary to find examples where the cross is more likely to be Christian in inspiration. A brooch from County Westmeath displays an expanded arm cross at the end of each terminal.¹² Brooches of similar form were relatively common in eastern and central Ireland in the 6th century and later. However, the internal diameter of these brooches seldom

⁸ For a selection of Roman bracelets: British Museum, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain* (1951), 14, fig. 7, nos. 6-8 from Cirencester; J. P. Bushe-Fox, *Second Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent* (1928), 50, pl. xxii; R. E. M. and T. V. Wheeler, *Report on the Excavation in Lydney Park, Gloucs.*, 82-83, fig. 17.

⁹ E. Fowler, "Celtic Metalwork of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D.", *Archaeological Journal* cxx (1963) 103 and n. 11, fig. 6, no. 7.

¹⁰ R. A. Smith, "Irish brooches of five centuries", *Archaeologia* 65 (1913-1914) pl. xxv, no. 4. Type H and Type H/F in the classification of Fowler (as in note 9) have flanges broad enough to permit decoration, and both these types are found in Ireland.

¹¹ H. E. Kilbride-Jones, "The evolution of penannular brooches with zoomorphic terminals in Great Britain and Ireland", *Proc. R.I.A.* xlili (1935-37) 379-455, esp. 408-409, no. 22. For modification of dating see Fowler (as in note 9) under Type H.

¹² Kilbride-Jones (as in note 11), 427, no. 52.

exceeded one inch and it is unlikely that they would be mistaken for arm-rings, even though the observer might be swayed by religious emotion. Scarcely larger is the brooch fragment from Kenfig Burrows, Glamorgan, with a Maltese cross on the terminal or that from Brayton, Cumberland, with an elongated cross among triquetra ornament (Fig. 2, A, B).¹³

From these simple patterns evolved the magnificently decorated series in Ireland of which the Tara brooch and the Hunterston brooch are the finest examples. These are obviously too elaborate to be strictly comparable to the bracelet enshrined at St Bees, although the St Ninian's Isle Treasure showed that brooches were not out of place in an ecclesiastical context. They might simply be articles of adornment or else possess greater significance as relics or as ceremonial badges of office.¹⁴

In advancing the claims of brooches to be the bracelet of St Bega, three difficulties have to be overcome. Usually the brooches are too small in diameter to serve as a bracelet; in the majority of cases the decoration on the flange is duplicated to ensure a balanced design, and, finally, to become a "bracelet" any brooch must have suffered a considerable degree of wear to have lost its tongue completely. These difficulties are absent when the flat ribbon-type of silver bracelet is considered.

This particular type of bracelet has been found in relatively large numbers in Ireland and appears elsewhere in the British Isles. The requirement that St Bega's bracelet should bear a cross is also satisfied. The National Museum of Ireland contains eighteen examples where a St Andrew's cross is placed in the centre of the arm-band, which often broadens at this point (Plate I).¹⁵

¹³ Kenfig Burrows, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 1928, 200-201, fig. 2 (Fowler's Type H); Brayton, *VCH Cumberland* i 283.

¹⁴ D. McRoberts, "The Ecclesiastical Significance of the St Ninian's Isle Treasure", *PSAScot.* xciv (1960-1) 301-314, esp. 305-306; also *Antiquity* xxxiii (1959) 241-268. A similar relic was the collar (*torquis*) of St Cynawg, which may have been a Tara-type brooch.

¹⁵ H. Shetelig (ed.), *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland* iii 113-122, 125-127, 135-136. See also E. C. R. Armstrong, *Proc. R.I.A.* xxii (1913-1916) pt. 1, 288-293, pl. xxv, nos. 2, 5, 7.

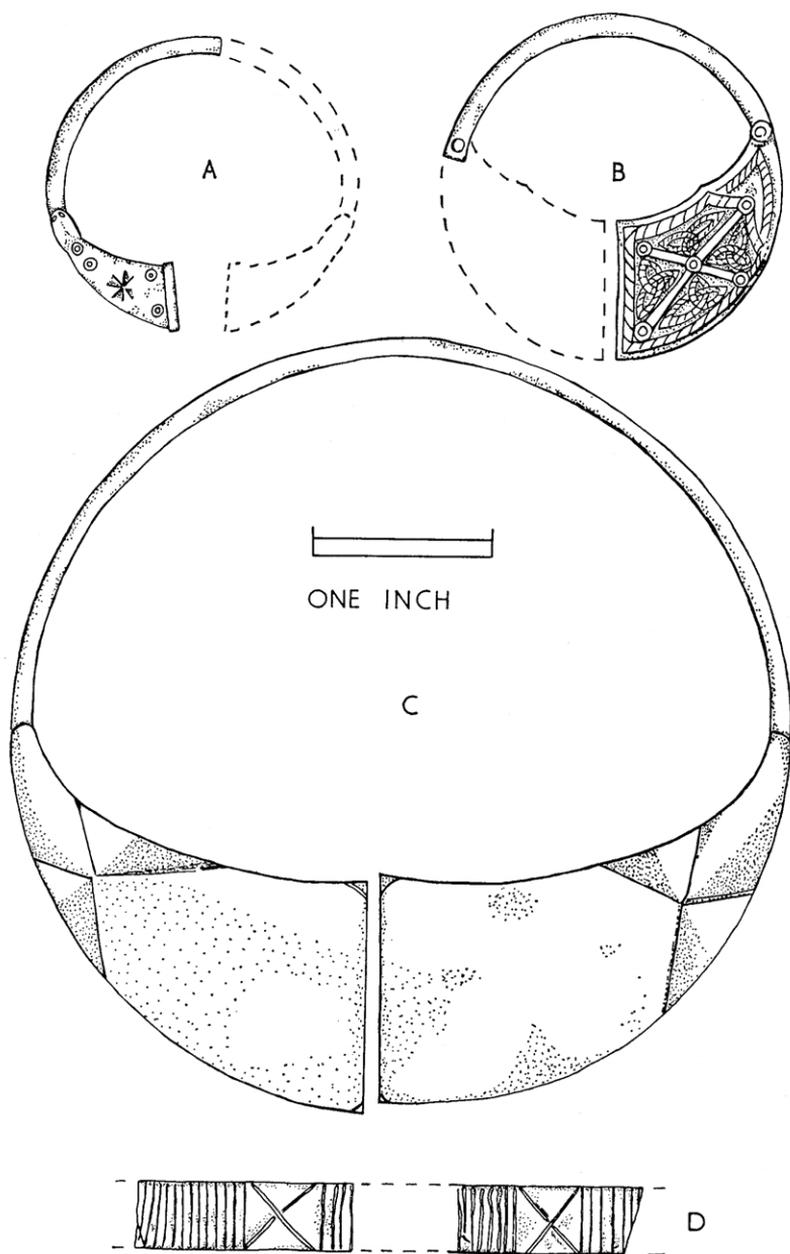


FIG. 2.

- A. Brooch fragment, Kenfig, Glamorgan.
- B. Brooch fragment, Brayton, Cumberland.
- C. Brooch, co. Roscommon, Eire (tongue omitted).
- D. Bracelet fragment 12, Cuerdale hoard, Lancs.

Questions of dating and distribution of this type in Ireland have been fully discussed by Professor O'Riordain.¹⁶ He examined the possibility that the St Andrew's cross was not originally Christian but was a motif adopted within the Norse-Irish repertoire in the mid-9th century from Arabian Spain. It is not finally settled whether the presence of this type of bracelet in the Cuerdale, Lancs., hoard, which was deposited in or shortly after 905, means that the bracelets can be firmly dated to the late 9th-early 10th century.¹⁷ Only two bracelets from the Cuerdale hoard bear the St Andrew's cross (Fig. 2, D) and there is only one fragment of this type in the Goldsborough, Yorks., hoard, which was deposited *ca.* 925.¹⁸ Other hoards which contain a number of bracelets have been found at Douglas, Isle of Man (coins ranging from 925-975) and Skail, Sandwick, Orkney (latest coin 945); however, at Douglas quadrangular-section bracelets were the only type found, while at Skail there were both twisted and highly punched bracelets. This might suggest that the St Andrew's cross type was no longer popular by the mid-10th century. Although its distribution favours the south and west of Ireland, two examples of the type have been found in County Down. From around the Irish Sea have come a small hoard of five bracelets from Llanfihangel Din Silwy, Anglesey (Plate II, lower), one from Blackerne, Kirkcudbright, and two from an un-

¹⁶ S. O'Riordain, "Acquisitions from Co. Donegal in the National Museum", *Proc. R.I.A.* xlii (1934-5) 174-182. He describes three bracelets from Carrowmore: one plain, one decorated with an incised herringbone pattern and the third with a central St Andrew's cross and vertical lines at either side. His distribution map shows 14 sites of Viking silver finds in the south and west of Ireland against 7 in the north and east. Dr J. Raftery, Keeper of Irish Antiquities, National Museum of Ireland, has kindly drawn to my attention the fact that a small hoard from Cushalougourt, near Westport, Co. Mayo, contained two bracelets of St Andrew's cross type.

¹⁷ E. Hawkins, "An account of coins and treasure found at Cuerdale", *Arch. Journal*, iv (1847) 111-130, 189-199. The bracelets are nos. 12 and 21, possibly no. 13, while no. 93 (p. 190) is a brooch terminal with a roughly incised cross. Fig. 2 D shows no. 12. The most recent examination of the dating evidence for this hoard is G. Gastler, "Cuerdale fundet og de danske vikingekonger i 9 århundrede", *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og historie*, 1962, 1-36.

¹⁸ Shetelig (as in note 15) iv 30-31.

known Scottish site (Plate II, upper).¹⁹ Bracelets of the St Andrew's type do not appear to be represented in Scandinavian hoards.²⁰

Bracelets of this flat ribbon-type were current in the late 9th century. Assuming that the flight of St Bega took place from some point on the east or north-eastern coast of Ireland at a date *circa* 840 or perhaps a little later, this is the type of bracelet she would be most likely to bring with her. Only within this half-century is there reasonable concurrence between the period postulated for the saint's departure from Ireland and the existence of a bracelet in the prevailing fashion with a cross carved on top of it.

Did the bracelet actually exist? The only evidence for the bracelet is in the *Vita* and in a few charters contained in *The Register of St Bees*. Although sufficient was known about the saint at the time of the priory's foundation in *circa* 1120 to identify her as feminine (*sancte virgini Bege*), another century elapses before the first mention of the bracelet. This is the deed by which Robert de Veteripont, first Lord of Westmoreland, grants land to "the church of St Mary the Virgin in which the bracelet of the blessed virgin Bega is kept".²¹ The memory of the holy virgin Bega was reinforced by a list of miraculous events recounted in the *Vita*. In so far as they can be associated with definite people, all these events date from the first half of the 12th century, that is the first few decades of the priory's existence.²²

¹⁹ Llanfihangel Din Silwy: *Antiquaries Journal* viii 359, and Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire, *Anglesey Inventory* (1937), pl. 17; Blackerne (which is nearer Castle Douglas than Crossmichael), *PSAScot.* x (1872-4) 586 (not certainly of St Andrew's cross type). Two other armlets "found in Scotland" in 1851 are in the British Museum, Shetelig (as in note 15) ii 111, fig. 57.

²⁰ There are cross-incised armbands of a different type from Herrvide, Stnåga and Öster Ryftes, Fole, both in Gotland, H. Stenberger, *Die Schatzfunde Gotlands der Wikingerzeit* ii 207-208, fig. 136, no. 4 and 63-64, fig. 191, no. 15; see also Lille Hammars, Lokrume, *op. cit.*, ii 138-139, fig. 11.

²¹ *Register*, p. 96, Deed 65 of 1203-28: "ecclesie sancte Marie virginis in qua armilla beate Bege virginis est reservata".

²² Last (as in note 4), p. 64.

It is quite credible that the memory of the holy virgin Bega survived some two and a half centuries from her arrival in Cumberland until the formal establishment of the Norman monastery. What is surprising is that the relic survived unharmed and that an unbroken succession of guardians was able to hand down the bracelet, first received by the community which the saint had founded, and was able to protect it from Viking raiders. Yet it was accredited as a relic in the early 13th century with a fairly convincing pedigree of miracles, and there are six 13th-century charters referring to the bracelet. The terms used in them are specific and show that this was not an empty gesture or a meaningless, outdated formula. Three deeds in particular refer to the donor "having seen and touched the holy relics", and in the three other deeds the donor has "sworn upon the arm-ring".²³

Accepting this relic as genuinely ancient and accurately described by the writer of the *Vita*, it could be a silver bracelet of the St Andrew's cross type actually brought to Cumberland by St Bega. If such a close association with the saint is rejected, then two other possibilities should be considered. It could be that a genuine 9th/10th-century bracelet was found within the territory of St Bees some time after the priory's foundation and was first regarded as a relic, gradually obtaining sufficient authenticity to be later sworn upon as The Relic. It could not have been found in a grave because an essential part of the story is that St Bega is buried elsewhere. On the other hand its chance discovery alone or along with other objects in a small hoard buried at

²³ *Register*, p. 346, Deed 342 of 1227: "tactis sacrosanctis sancte Bege"; *ibid.*, p. 469, Deed 474 of *circa* 1250: "juravit super armillam sancte Bege"; *ibid.*, p. 314, Deed 304 of *circa* 1260: "tactis sacrosanctis et super armillam sancte Bege"; *ibid.*, p. 360, Deed 362 of *circa* 1265-75: "inspectis et tactis sacrosanctis reliquiis beate Bege"; *ibid.*, p. 480, Deed 488 of 1279: "juravit super armillam sancte Bege"; *ibid.*, p. 403, Deed 399 (late 13th cent.): "juravi super reliquias sancte Bege". To these deeds may be added the miracles associated with St Bega in which Walter de Spec swears on the bracelet (*Register*, p. 513) and Adam, son of Ails, touches the bracelet and swears upon it (*ibid.*, p. 514).

the time of Viking incursions or during later Border raiding would suit the theory adequately. It is quite likely that such a chance discovery could have been made within the monastic possessions in Copeland, or indeed within the monastic precinct itself. The Cuerdale hoard near Preston and the find at Blackerne, Kirkcudbright, show that such objects were in transit along the western coast.

The second possibility is that the findspot was in Ulster in view of the greater frequency with which these bracelets have been found in Ireland. Two bracelets are known from that part of County Down close to Stranford Lough and Dundrum Bay which was an area of Norman settlement in the last quarter of the 12th century. In 1178 a cell of St Bees was founded by John de Courci at Nendrum, an island in Stranford Lough. In this same decade the death of Thomas Becket at Canterbury brought prestige and prosperity to his shrine. At the end of the century the murder of the pilgrim, William of Perth, brought similar offerings of the faithful to Rochester. In the latter part of the same century the Life of St Bega was written, telling of her flight from Ireland with the holy bracelet and detailing the miracles worked by this relic only two generations ago. The raw material for an entirely spurious bracelet would be available from the silver-lead mines at Poyntzpass, County Armagh.

The final question to be answered is how long did the bracelet remain at St Bees. Canon Last drew attention to the Scots raid of 1216. While King Alexander II was besieging Carlisle, his followers, both Scots and men of Galloway, laid waste the surrounding countryside. The Chronicle of St Mary's, York, suggests that the bracelet was captured in battle at Eaglesfield (where it might have been carried as a talisman in battle, as was the Orriflamme or was the Standard of St Cuthbert). However, the next sentence reads: "afterwards all were slain through a

certain lay brother of Holm'' (Cultram).²⁴ The phrase is ambiguous: it might mean that all the defenders of St Bees were killed through the treachery of a lay brother or, as seems preferable, all the Scots were killed by semi-religious intervention in retribution for their impious act. Canon Last has suggested that the bracelet was permanently lost by the retreating Scots when they were crossing the Solway incautiously. The chronicle account throws doubt on this conclusion. The fact that the majority of deeds referring to the arm-ring were written after the date of its presumed loss adds to this uncertainty.²⁵

If the bracelet was removed from St Bees during the border warfare, then it is necessary to suggest a later incident. Certainly after 1300 no further deeds are sworn on the holy bracelet, and by 1375 they are instead sworn upon the Gospels; as Canon Last has noted, the bracelet was not among the priory's possessions at the Dissolution in 1536. The most likely occasion for the bracelet's removal is the raid of James Douglas in 1315. The circumstances were remarkably similar to the previous episode. While Robert Bruce was besieging Carlisle, the followers of James Douglas burnt two manors in Coupland and carried away into Scotland the movable goods and all the church vestments of St Bees.²⁶ Until evidence can be found that a bracelet fitting the description of "bearing a cross plainly visible on the top" was given to a Scottish abbey or church by a member of the Douglas family, the story of the bracelet must end here.

²⁴ *The Chronicle of St Mary's Abbey, York, 1258-1326* (Surtees Soc., vol. 148, 1933) 76. Since St Bees was a daughter house of St Mary's and on three occasions supplied the mother house with abbots, this Chronicle is likely to record local events in Cumberland with a fair degree of accuracy, especially after 1298.

²⁵ Last (as in note 4), p. 65. The only deed which specifically mentions the bracelet and which could have been written before 1216 is Deed 65 (see note 21, above). *Register*, p. 98, Deed 67 of early 13th-century date, endows a lamp to be kept burning day and night "coram reliquiis dicte ecclesie". It is possible that the benefaction of Alan, son of Roland, Lord of Galloway and Constable of Scotland (1200-34), was made after the raid of 1216 in expiation for the action of the men of Galloway (*Register*, pp. 71-72, Deed 42).

²⁶ *Chronicle of St Mary's York* (as in note 24) 68.

The nature of the evidence means that the conclusions can be only tentative. However, in the mid-to-late 9th century, and at that period only, there is adequate concurrence between the historical background for St Bega and the artistic evidence for her bracelet. Within the period 850-900 the popular type of bracelet was that decorated with a St Andrew's cross amid other incised or punched ornament. This is the only type of bracelet available which qualifies for the description "bearing a cross plainly visible" and which does not place too much strain upon credulity. Whether a bracelet of this type came from Ireland to St Bees and by whom it was brought, and when and where it went from that priory must remain unsolved.