

ART. V – *A possible merels board incised on the pre-conquest cross-base at Addingham St Michael's Church, Cumbria*

By M. A. HALL

THE St Michael's Addingham cross-base is a rather prosaic piece of sculpture, the simplicity of which makes it difficult to date with precision. It is, however, an object with some potential in terms of the understanding of medieval cognition thanks to its dual functionality. Having been modified at a later date by the incision of a probable gaming board into its upper(?) surface, it can be said to have a social life or rather it can inform us of the social life of its makers and users (a conscious recognition that my approach is informed by Appadurai, 1986; Renfrew & Scarre, 1999 and Knez, 1997). I am seeking to flesh out the cultural biography of this cross-base by exploring more fully the chapter of its life concerned with its use as a gaming board. This is not an attempt to tell the whole story of the cross-base along the lines of that attempted for the Crieff Burgh Cross (Hall *et al.*, 2000) and I am aware that the case is perhaps not straightforward and requires some subtle shading – this is often the case in dealing with the more ambiguous examples of gaming material, or indeed any material (see Hall & Leahy, 1996; Hall, 1998; 2001 and forthcoming (b)).

### **Description and discovery**

The cross-base is currently housed in the new parish church of Addingham, St Michael's at Maughanby. It sits against the north wall of the nave, at its junction with the chancel.

The base is a rectangular block pierced through its middle by a rectangular socket hole. It measures 0.27 m (high) x 0.72 m (wide) x 0.59 m (deep), with the socket measuring 0.26 m x 0.12 m x 0.27 m. It is in unworn condition and composed of St Bees type red sandstone. *The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* describes it thus: "Only one face . . . the upper . . . is decorated – with incised ornament. At each of the corners, a little in from the edge of the stone, are prominent deep punch marks, and similarly around the socket. The dots are linked by fine straight lines to form a frame, and the inner and outer corners are linked diagonally. Two apparently secondary lines bisect the dimensions of the long sides". (Cramp, in Cramp & Bailey, 1988: 47). The cross-base originally belonged to the old parish church of St Michael's Addingham which, along with its village, Leigham, was washed away by the river Eden. The history of this church and its presumed abandonment between the mid-14th century and the end of the 16th century, due to the action of the river, is detailed by the Rev. Gordon (1914: 331-2). In his paper, Gordon describes how a drought in 1913 allowed the examination of the surviving church remains in the river, the retrieval of some of the stones and sculptural remains, and their removal into the new parish church at Maughanby (*ibid.*: 328-36).

### Original Function

The initial identification as a cross-base was made by Gordon (1914: 334) and this was subsequently confirmed and elaborated upon by Bailey (1974: ii, 8 & 20; Cramp in Bailey & Cramp, 1986: 47). Its function as a cross-base is not in question here. Suffice it to note that Professor Cramp suggests that used as a cross-base it would not support a stone cross unless sunk in the ground and was possibly used as a “framing and steadying device for a wooden or stone cross which would be driven into the ground” (Cramp in Bailey & Cramp, 1986: 47). Prof. Cramp (*pers. comm.*) also agrees that the base could have been stepped or composite, i.e. composed of two stones, one above the other (like Bewcastle). There may have been a local Cumbrian tradition for such socketed bases, similar examples can be found at Beckermeth and Brigham (*op. cit.*) though we should also remember that there are stepped bases in Yorkshire (R. Cramp, *pers. comm.*). The Addingham example has been dated to the 7-10th century.

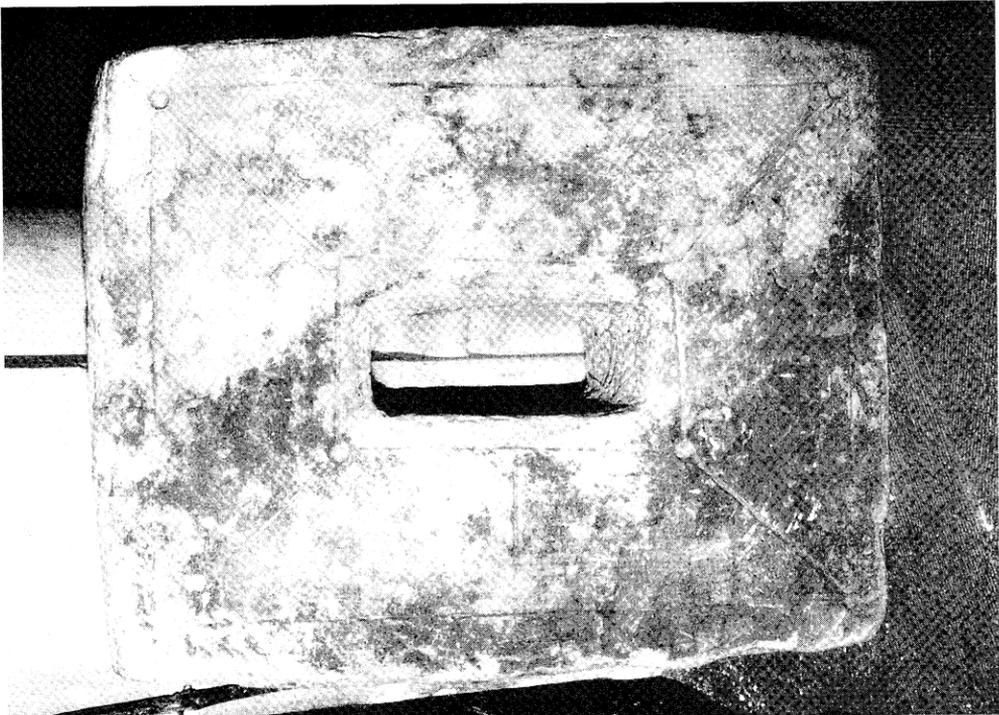


PLATE 1. Possible meels board incised on Addingham St. Michael's cross base.  
(Photo courtesy the author).

### The Merels Board

I now turn to examine the design on the cross-base to ascertain whether it is a gaming board and if so to consider when it might have been executed and what implications it has for the re-use of the cross-base. The design on the cross-base has attracted identification as that for a gaming board since its first publication by Gordon who described it thus:

This stone . . . may have been incised for the game of “Nine-holes” or “Nine Mens Morris”, in later times after removal or destruction of the columns, the ninth hole in this case being the mortice hole in the centre. (Gordon, 1914: 334-5).

Gordon has correctly deduced the class of game involved, for nine mens morris is one of the commoner variations of merels, however he is rather confused in his understanding of the game. Nine holes is part of the same group of games but is not equivalent to nine mens morris. Nine holes simply requires nine holes arranged in a 3 x 3 grid, with no connecting holes. A fine example can be seen on one of the Norman pillars of the lower chamber of the old Burton Agnes Hall (of 1173), in East Yorkshire. Gordon’s counting of the mortice holes as the ninth hole of the game is an error – it is both impractical as a hole used in play and it does not help to form the necessary 3 x 3 grid for nine holes. He has also equated the nine of nine holes and nine men’s morris – the former refers to the number of holes in the game, the latter the number of playing pieces each player has. The mortice hole could have been used as the central prison area for captured pieces. Strictly speaking the game is not nine mens morris. This is often used loosely as a term synonymous with mill or merels when it is in fact but one variant of the game. The general class of game requires two players using nine, six or three playing pieces on an appropriate board of three “squares”, two “squares”, or one “square”, respectively, each with connecting lines (see Murray, 1952: 37-41; Parlett, 1999: 109-120; Hall, 1998: fig. 3). Players alternately place a piece onto the board until all are on. The players then try to make a line (or mill) of three pieces. Each mill made allows the removal of an opponent’s piece. The game is lost when a player has less than the three pieces needed to make a mill.

Bailey’s thesis on the Viking period sculpture of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire north-of-the-sands, catalogues the Addingham cross-base but makes little of the design in gaming terms (Bailey, 1974 ii: 8, 20). Its most recent publication is by Professor Cramp (in Bailey & Cramp, 1988: 47). Here there is a brief, circumspect analysis of the design and the problems in identifying it as a gaming board: that it is not identical to any known boards (following Murray, 1952: 37-41) and that the total number of peg holes was not completed, with Professor Cramp concluding:

On the whole it seems reasonable to assume that the design on the base was originally one that linked the extant holes, and that someone at a later date was struck by the fact that to add two horizontal lines from the long side would convert it to a form of Morris board. (Cramp, 1988: 47).

To put it another way, Professor Cramp accepts that the design underwent a secondary use to convert it to a merels board but suggests that the initial design was not for a gaming board. It will not be disputed here that the design has two phases but I will consider more fully that the whole of the design is gaming-related and when the two phases may have taken place, against the background of medieval gaming between the 7th and 16th centuries.

If we postulate that the first phase of the design – the two rectangles or “squares”, with or without the peg holes – is contemporary with the use of the stone as a cross-base, does this stand up? I have already suggested that if the stone were the lower piece of a composite base, the design – being hidden – would not have marred its sacred usage, i.e. its ecclesiastical function as a Cross. In this scenario, the

maisons (?) who carved it did so before it was in position as a base. They would be aware that when it was in use as a base the design would not be seen because a stone above it, forming a stepped base, would obscure it, or because the design-face was to the ground or because it was painted over. The design composition of only two rectangles suggests that the variation of merels desired was six or five mens morris. The peg holes are not essential, the game can be successfully played with or without them, but the absence of lines connecting the rectangles is more critical. We can circumvent this fairly readily (too readily perhaps?) by suggesting that the board, in its first phase, remained incomplete. This problem of incompleteness has been addressed by the present writer with reference to a probable gaming board from Ormiston, Newburgh, Fife, Scotland (Hall, 1998: 145-9). This board has both orthogonal connecting lines and one of the lines of the outer square absent. It was observed that such anomalies occur with more certain boards and the example of the Gloucester Cathedral cloister-benches was cited. By the same token, boards can sometimes appear over-elaborate. Trade and other contacts took the game of merels to Novgorod, Russia (Rybinos, 1992: 283). One graffiti wooden board found there – for nine mens morris – has very unusual markings for the points (*ibid.*, 1992: fig. VI. 3: 13). These point markings are both variable (i.e. non-standardised) and elaborate beyond the point of point-marking. This may, in part, be a Viking tradition. The Gokstad-ship board of c.A.D. 900 has similarly elaborate points defined by ornamental scroll patterns (Cubbon, 1960: 69). The board from Toftanes, Faroes (Rosedahl & Wilson (eds.), 1992: 311, cat. 321) varies in other ways. It has much simpler point markings and lacks the connecting lines linking the squares. Our perception of there having been standardised board designs can be misleading, not least because it is based on the relatively small sample of surviving examples.

What do we know of Anglo-Saxon gaming from the surviving evidence? The most thorough over-view remains that of Youngs in her analysis of the Sutton Hoo gaming pieces (Youngs, 1983: 853-73). Based on the evidence of counters, other pieces and fragments of boards, Youngs suggests the possibility of three games being commonly played: *Duodecim scripta* (later *alea* or *tabula*) and *latrunculi* were Roman games (see Austin, 1935) known through the Empire and surviving after its demise, whilst *tafl* or *hnefatafl* is a game known from early medieval contexts in Scandinavia (Youngs, 1983: 864) and also in Ireland and Scotland (Ritchie, 1987: 60-3). Whilst some of the simpler counters encountered could be used on merels boards there is no strong suggestion of this evidence being indicative of merels being played in early medieval Britain. The conventional view is that the game came to Britain with the Normans but the Vikings (from whom, of course, the Normans were descended) knew it, and certainly on the Continent it is known from the Roman period (Austin, 1935: 79-80; Holliger, 1984: 17-18). Accepting the conventional dating of the game let us then look at the later medieval period, from the 12th-16th century. It is certainly to this time span that most of the known boards, incised on bone, wood and, most commonly, stone, are known. A brief list would include Tintagel, Cornwall (Thorpe, 1989: 70-2); Wharram Percy, Yorkshire (Beresford & Hirst, 1990, pl. 6; Austin & Tompkins, 1988: 26), Old Sarum, Wiltshire (Saunders & Saunders, 1991: 174, fig. 51); Jedburgh Abbey, Roxburgh (Gallagher, 1995: 108-9), Castle Acre Castle, Norfolk (Hinton, 1982: 260-1); Whithorn, Wigtownshire (Nicholson, 1997: 449); various sites on the Isle of Man (Cubbon, 1960: 60-70;

Freke, 1985: 4 & 19) and Finlaggan (Hall, forthcoming (b)). Broader discussions are also to be found in Croft (1987), Shireff (1953: 110-15), Robertson (1967: 321-3) and Micklethwaite (1892: 319-28). Though incised on different types of stone these boards exhibit common features: a shared use of raw material, incised graffiti designs of an ephemeral nature and a variety of stages of completion. By ephemeral I mean that the ready availability of stone as a raw material in a variety of contexts meant it was often the most expedient or economically viable resource (see for example Bradley, 1995). Stone as a raw material is clearly permanent but it could be used in an ephemeral way for a temporary activity. The merels board from Wharram Percy church resulted from short-lived recreational activity by the masons building the church (Atkin & Tompkins, 1988: 26).

If we assume that the design on the Addingham base is entirely secondary we need not repeat the foregoing explanations for its incompleteness. We do however need to explain the context of its production. This is made more problematical by how little is known of the history of the church-site where the cross-base appears to have originally stood, thanks to its destruction by the river Eden (Gordon, 1914: 331-2). We could broadly suggest the destruction or re-use of the cross supported by the Addingham base during the 12th to 16th century. It may, of course, already have been destroyed or re-used prior to the 12th century, and we have to allow that if the design was incised onto a standing cross then it could date to any time after the cross was raised. It is dangerous to go beyond this in view of the absence of evidence but if we accept the 12th century and the 16th century as broadly reforming eras – the former in terms of parish formation and solidification, the latter in terms of the Reformation – then they are perhaps the most likely times during which the unfinished design was executed. The design need not be of more than one phase: the clear difference between the two horizontal lines and the rest of the much neater and sharper design may be explained if the slighter lines are marking out lines or test lines for the final design (though this then begs the question of an apparently illogical or at least unnecessarily complex approach to the initial and final designs). Re-use at the time of the Reformation, a time when such an attitude to monuments was effectively sanctioned (in this case perhaps doubly so if the Church had already been abandoned) could also explain the relatively unworn appearance of the design – it would soon be in the river. That said, two aspects remain problematical: the fineness of the design and the size of the board. Both are atypical. The only other exception, in terms of neatness, is the fragment of the wooden board from the Gokstad Viking ship (Cubbon, 1960: fig. 4). The material and the size are different to the Addingham example but the Gokstad board is very neatly executed in comparison to other wooden boards. If the Addingham example is a gaming board I know of no other example quite so large. This factor is perhaps slightly less problematical if we accept that it is a case of the opportunistic use of a convenient piece of stone. The uniqueness of these two attributes – size and neatness – with respect to the Addingham base do not in themselves prove that the design does not represent a gaming board. They do, however, suggest caution and remind us of Prof. Cramp's suggestion that the design may initially have been an integral part of the cross-base, though equally this is not proven by the uniqueness of the neatness and size of the design.

## Conclusion

I have tried to put forward something of a best case scenario for this admittedly difficult piece of material culture. My position could be summarised thus: a cross-base of 7th-10th century date has at a later date been incised with a design for the board game merels. The most likely variant depicted is six or five mens morris. It is incomplete as far as convention dictates and it was probably incised between the 12th and the 16th centuries, with the later date perhaps the most likely. Its apparent incompleteness and the length of time it spent in the river account for its good condition. The examination of the broader contexts of evidence for the use of the stone as both a cross-base and a gaming board have not, in the end, solved the ambiguity of the sequence and dating of these uses. The examination though has shown that much material culture has an inherent ambiguity because of the partial survival of evidence. The examination of the gaming design was made in the light of what is known about medieval gaming practice, but this is itself based on what games we know were played and modified, countless other games are now completely lost to us. As Youngs observed: “. . . tabula and latrunculi . . . could well have formed the basis of games played in later centuries, *perhaps with local and chronological modifications*”. (Youngs, 1983: 863-4) [my emphasis]. With this particular board as with so many we are also dealing with only part of the evidence – the playing pieces being absent (compounded by the absence of any set of rules with each game). Many of these “. . . almost certainly pass undetected because of their informal character. Small pebbles or shells were probably used more extensively than the deliberately manufactured pieces . . .”. (Ritchie, 1987: 60). I have explored elsewhere the difficulties of placing unfinished, unique or variant pieces of gaming equipment into the pattern of the known evidence (Hall & Leahy, 1998; Hall, 2001 and forthcoming (b)). The Addingham St Michael’s cross-base is equally ambiguous but still informative on the human desire to play, and on the changing identity of material culture – a key reflection of human thinking.

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