Knockcross, Bowness-on-Solway: Rediscovered but Still Lost

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APPROXIMATELY 0.5km due east of Bowness-on-Solway the name is 'Knockcross' marked on maps (NGR 322987 562765) from the nineteenth century onwards, without explanation. In itself the place-name appears to denote a site of some archaeological and historical interest. Antiquarian discoveries infer that there was activity there over a considerable period and the location has been identified as the site of a Roman temporary camp associated with Hadrian's Wall.[1] However, as far as what is published is concerned there is seemingly no record of an actual cross from which the name derived. The chance discovery of an early illustration of the site shows that there was indeed a cross there, which fits with other documentary records of a cross from Bowness-on-Solway. This rediscovery adds another early medieval cross for consideration to the list of known examples, providing valuable information for the otherwise elusive Early Medieval period in Cumbria.

The relevant published summary of what was known about the site remains that summarised by W.G. Collingwood in 1923.[2] This demonstrates that the earliest description is seemingly Clarke's of 1787, which states that 'Knock's Cross' '*is only an upright stone, yet standing amidst the ruins of the Picts' wall*'.[3] The tithe map of 1838 does not apparently show a cross,[4] although it is badly damaged in this area and it has been described elsewhere as doing so.[5] Later, Mannix and Whellan report, in 1847, that '*the hilt of a sword with part of the blade, was found a few years ago*' at the site.[6] Whellan later added that there was a mound '*resembling an ancient British Barrow*' at 'Knock's Cross', although it had been encroached upon by the road, and that the proverb, said to be common throughout Cumberland, "As old as Knock's Cross", derived from this site.[7] By the time the first Ordnance Survey map of the area had been published, in 1868, all that is shown is an area named 'Knockcross'; no mound, and no cross.[8] Subsequent references are very sparse. It is mentioned in passing in connection with the movement of St Cuthbert's relics, the suggestion being that a cross might have been erected because '*the numerous intervening halts would each, by ancient custom, be marked by a cross*'.[9] It was also suggested that the place-name is derived from the mound, Knock coming from the British word for a low hill: 'cnoc', something that is essentially bourn out by modern scholarship.[10]

A perhaps more pertinent piece of information is that supplied by R.G. Collingwood, a few years after his father's summary: '*Knock's Cross does not appear to have yielded Roman objects; we were told locally that certain monks were buried beneath the mound, and that it was erected by "John Knox's men". These traditions, however, wanting in literal accuracy, at least suggest some archaeological significance for the site*'.[11] The suggestion that the name derives from someone called Knox is not otherwise substantiated, although the record in 1279 of a Leo de Knock perhaps demonstrates that someone was named after it.[12]

There the sum of our knowledge about the site might remain if it wasn't for a remarkable body of work by one of Cumbria's arguably lesser known mid-19th century artists,

Thomas Bland (b.1798-d.1865) of Reagill near Crosby Ravensworth. A detailed account of Bland's life and work has been published elsewhere so it is not necessary to describe this in detail.[13] His greatest achievement was arguably the construction of a somewhat idiosyncratic 'Sculpture Garden' at his house at Reagill, but he was a prolific artist and produced several hundred illustrations of historic buildings, particularly churches, and other sites of archaeological interest (and often at that critical moment before they were subject to late Victorian 'improvement'), which are now held in collections at Tullie House, Kendal Local Studies Library, Rose Castle, and Carlisle Library.[14] Amongst the drawings held at Carlisle Library is a landscape view entitled '*Knock Cross near Bowness on the Solway Frith* [*sic*] *Cumberland*'. This very clearly shows a cross, presumably stone, of wheel-head type with a square shaft stood on a tiered base of two steps that in turn is located on a small hillock (Figs. 1 and 2). The accuracy of Bland's drawings has been seen elsewhere to be tolerably reliable[15] and it would seem reasonable to assume that this is an accurate image of the appearance of the cross at Knockcross, indeed the only known image, assuming it is not a work of Bland's imagination.[16]

The significance of what is shown cannot be understated. The cross appears to be a wheel-head form with a small central boss, of the type seen across much of the northern part of Cumbria and the west coast, extending southward into Cheshire.[17] These are typically 'Viking-period', probably flourishing in the 10th century, and part of a wider school of carving that includes stop-plait and spiral-scroll decoration.[18] However, what is noticeable is that the arms of the cross at Knockcross seem to terminate at the outer ring rather than crossing it, and so in this regard it is perhaps closer in style to the 10th century 'Whithorn School' of crosses, the known distribution of which is confined to the north side of the Solway.[19] The shaft of the cross at Knockcross is also noticeably not decorated according to Bland's sketch, which is significant and might suggest it is actually somewhat later than other wheel-head crosses.[20] The understanding of the Early Medieval period in Cumbria generally very limited due to lack of information, both documentary and archaeological, so monumental crosses of this type, which are found in many parts of the county, are crucial. If it was indeed considered a genuine cross of the 10th century and of the Whithorn school this too would have major implications about the area this influenced and the nature of the political situation in North Cumbria at that time.[21] It also potentially indicates that there is some continuity of activity at the site from its origins as a Roman temporary camp into the Early Medieval, something that would also be of great interest, although only demonstrable through archaeological investigation.

What happened to the cross after Bland recorded it is uncertain. Bland's drawing must predate his death in 1865 and also the surveying of the Ordnance Survey map of 1868, in 1866, by which time it had seemingly disappeared. A clue might be found in the catalogues of items held on display at Lowther Castle. One of these, from 1879, includes what is unhelpfully described as a '*Stone fragment from Bowness, Cumberland*',[22] while a later list includes '*Cross, from Bowness, Cumberland*';[23] since there is only one Bowness in Cumberland this must be referring to Bowness-on-Solway. The ultimate fate of the cross held at Lowther is uncertain; many items were evidently sold some time before the great dispersal of the estate in 1947,[24] but if it is the same as the one

previously known as 'Knockcross' or 'Knock's Cross' it presumably passed into private hands. Perhaps the current owner of the cross will recognise the drawing produced by Thomas Bland over 150 years ago.

FIG 1: Thomas Bland's illustration of Knockcross, entitled 'Knock Cross, Bowness, Cumberland on the Solway Frith [*sic*]'.
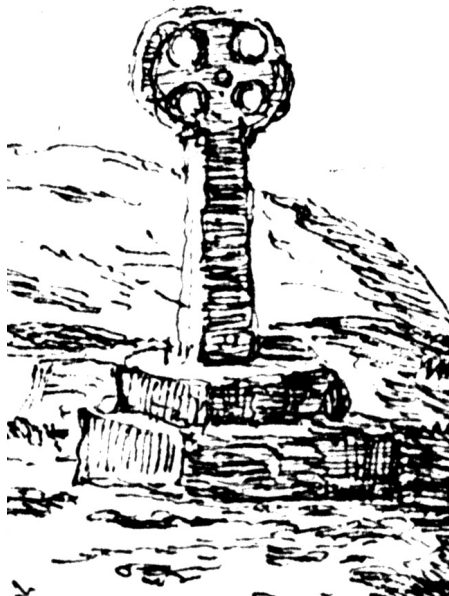

FIG 2: Detail of the cross shown in Bland's illustration.

References

1. R.G. Collingwood, 'Roman Signal-Stations on the Cumberland Coast', *CW2*, xxix, (1929), 138-165; Ordnance Survey, *Historical Map & Guide Hadrian's Wall*, (1989); see the Pastscape entry for Knockcross at: http://www.pastscape.org.uk/hob.aspx?hob_id=10086&sort=#4&search=all&criteria=knockcross&rational=q&recordsperpage=10#aSt

2. W.G. Collingwood, 'An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Cumberland', *CW2*, xxiii, (1923), 236.

3. J. Clarke, *A Survey of the Lakes of Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire, Together with an Account Historical, Topographical and Descriptive of the Adjacent Country*, (London 1787), xxviii.

4. CAC(C) DRC 8/24, 1838, Plan of the Parish of Bowness in the County of Cumberland.

5. Oxford Archaeology North, *Solway Coast, Wastewater Treatment Improvements, Cumbria: Desk-Based Assessment*, (unpublished report, 2004).

6. Mannix and Whellan, *History, Directory, and Gazetteer of Cumberland*, (Beverley, 1847), 180. The expression "as old as Knock Cross" was also used in reference to a place in Westmorland of the name Knock; J. Hodgson, *A Topographical and Historical Description of Westmorland*, (London, 1810), 86.

7. W. Whellan, *The History and Topography of the Counties of Cumberland and Westmoreland*, (Pontefract, 1860), 151. He also mentions that Fisher Cross, to the west of Knock Cross and later lost during the development of Port Carlisle, also had a barrow. An unpublished account of 1746 also refers to the mound at Fisher's Cross, although it is named 'Phisga-Cross', on which there is '*the vestige of an Old Cross, wch appears to have been a Roman altar but obliterated*' (*An Account of Mr Smith's Survey of the Coast of Cumberland, by Order, on Monday 25, 1746*, Carlisle Library Local Studies Collection ref C498).

8. Ordnance Survey, *Cumberland Sheet* 14, (surveyed 1866, published 1868), 1:10,560.

9. T. Lees, 'An Attempt to Trace the Translation of Saint Cuthbert Through Cumberland and Westmorland', *CW1*, ii, (1876), 19.

10. J. Maughan, 'On the Stations Olenacum and Virosidum Along the Roman Wall, in Cumberland', *CW1*, i, (1877), 210. 'Cnuc' is a British word for a low hillock: R. Coates and A. Breeze, *Celtic Voices English Places: Studies on the Celtic Impact on Place-Names in England*, (Stamford, 2000), 349.

11. Collingwood, (1929), 150.

12. A.M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F.M. Stenton, and B. Dickins, *The Place-Names of Cumberland Part I Eskdale, Cumberland and Leath Wards*, English Place-Name Society xx, (Cambridge, 1950), 126.

13. T. Longville, 'A Terrier at History's Rabbit Holes – Thomas Bland and his Image Garden', *Cumbria Gardens Trust Occasional Papers*, 2, 65-113. See also T. Longville, 'The Bizarre World of Thomas Bland, *Cumbria Life*, 76, 60-63.

14. Several of his illustrations of churches were reproduced in the recent *Church Notes of Sir Thomas Glynn for Cumbria (1833-1872)*, L. Butler (ed), CWAAS extra series XXXVI, (Kendal, 2001). The drawings held at Carlisle Library can be viewed via the Cumbria Image Bank: http://www.cumbriaimagebank.org.uk/index.php The drawing of 'Knock Cross' has the reference ct33913.

15. Greenlane Archaeology and PCC St Cuthbert's Church Kentmere, *St Cuthbert's Church, Kentmere, Cumbria: Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment*, (unpublished report, 2015).

16. Among the collection of Blands drawings at Carlisle library is one of the church at Dearham with the cross in the foreground (ref. ct04678) and another of the cross in detail (ref. ct22717), both of which depict it with remarkable accuracy. He was clearly familiar with such monuments and there is no particular reason to assume that his drawing of Knock Cross is a work of fiction.

17. D. Griffith, *Vikings of the Irish Sea: conflict and assimilation AD 790-1050*, (Stroud, 2010), 146-149.

18. R.N. Bailey and R. Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Volume II Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands*, (Oxford, 1988), 31-34.

19. C. Crowe, 'Early Medieval Parish Formation in Dumfries and Galloway', in M. Carver (ed), *The Cross Goes North: processes of conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, (Woodbridge, 2005), 197-200.

20. Rosemary Cramp pers comm.

21. Something that has seen considerable new discussion in as far as it relates to the expansion of Strathclyde during this period: T. Clarkson, *Strathclyde and the Anglo-Saxons in the Viking Age*, (Edinburgh, 2014); F. Edmonds, 'The Emergence and Transformation of Medieval Cumbria', *The Scottish Historical Review*, Volume XCIII, 2: No. 237 (2014), 195-216; F. Edmonds, 'The Expansion of the Kingdom of Strathclyde', *Early Medieval Europe* 23(1), (2015), 43-66.

22. CAC(C) DLONS/L23/1/20, 1879, Pictures of Statuary etc.

23. CAC(C) DLONS/L23/1/27 1899, Pictures, Prints, Drawings, Statues, Bronzes, Marbles, Casts, Coins, Medals, Gems, China and Ornaments Made Heirlooms, by William 2nd Earl of Lonsdale.
24. Greenlane Archaeology, *The Sculpture Gallery, Lowther Castle, Penrith, Cumbria: Archaeological Building Recording*, (unpublished report, 2012).