

## AN ANGLO-VIKING CROSS SHAFT FROM THORNTON LE MOORS, CHESHIRE

by Marilyn M. Brown and D. B. Gallagher

with a discussion of the inscription by J. Higgitt

In April 1982, a trench designed to prevent rising damp, was dug around the exterior foundations of St. Mary's Church, Thornton le Moors (SJ 441745); the work was carried out under a Manpower Services Commission scheme for the young unemployed. During the Easter holidays that year the present writers visited the church and saw several ashlar blocks in the open trench on the North side of the chancel. These had been unearthed during the excavation of the channel and replaced in the approximate position in which they were found. They may have formed part of a foundation, preceding the present 14th century chancel. One of the stones was recognised as part of a cross shaft of the Anglo-Viking period, and was removed into the church. No other decorated fragments were visible.

This slightly tapering block (Plates 1-4 and Fig. 1) is of a grey sandstone similar, but not identical, to that from which the church is constructed. It measures 0.40m by 0.16m in section by 0.36m high and it is decorated on all four faces. Each side is framed by plain vertical borders and the broad faces are divided into panels bearing figure scenes in relief. The rough reshaping of the shaft for a building stone means that none of the latter have survived intact, and damage to the surfaces has obscured their form. The most complete panel (Plate 1) contains three standing figures in long tunics; the one in the centre has outstretched arms, while that on the left has one arm raised towards the central figure; there is an area of rough tooling on the lower left hand side. Parts of two panels survive on the other broad face (Plate 2). The upper panel bears a figure in a short flared tunic, with feet which overlie the border dividing it from the panel below. A plain band on the left of the figure was apparently intended as part of an internal frame. The lower panel is decorated by an animal head, with interlace emerging from its jaws to form, in the surviving portion, a cross within a ring. The animal head has a double outline and a well defined ear and eye. Of the two narrower faces, one (Plate 3) is decorated in relief with interlace in the form of a running Stafford knot (O'Meadhra, 1979, 14), while the other (Plate 4) is carved with an incomplete inscription, preceded by a cross; this is discussed below.

The quality of the stone carving on this fragment from Thornton le Moors is inferior in technique to the better work of the Anglo-Viking period, with its higher

relief, sharper outlines and more rhythmically articulated interlace. Although no trace of pigment is now visible, the clarity of the design would probably have been improved by painting. Considerable use has been made of the drill; many incised lines and the edges of the recessed areas were formed by drilling holes at short intervals and removing the intervening stone with a chisel.

## DISCUSSION

The panel containing the three standing figures (Plate 1 and Fig. 1) is insufficiently well preserved and iconographically distinct to allow a firm identification of its subject. It does, however, probably represent the Arrest of Christ, a scene depicted in a highly elaborate form in the *Book of Kells* on folio 114 *recto* (Henry, 1974, pl. 45), where the figures wear long tunics. A parallel for its inclusion in sculpture at this period is provided by the group of three figures, two of which carry swords, on the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice (Sexton, 1946, fig. 17) on the other side of the Irish Sea. Other groups of three figures on the same cross and on the West cross at Monasterboice are believed to represent the Apostles (Sexton, 1946, figs. 18, 19, 26 and 27). Similar scenes are known from Castledermot, Clonmacnoise and Durrow (Sexton, 1946, figs. 5, 44 and 49). A less accomplished version of a panel containing three figures comes from Penmon in Anglesey (Nash-Williams, 1950, 65-67 and pls. XXXII and LXX, 2), for which an identification with the Temptation of St. Anthony has been suggested. The single figure in a short tunic (Plate 2 and Fig. 1) may be compared with those on many Viking sculptures which are thought to depict contemporary dress. The well executed shaft at Kirklevington, Cleveland, has a figure with its feet overlapping a plain border in the same fashion (Bailey, 1980, pl. 57). The cross shaft from Bardsey Island (Nash-Williams, 1950, 86 and pl. XXXV), which has an inscription in a similar position to that of the Thornton le Moors fragment, bears a figure in a flared pleated tunic. The beast's head with its double outline resembles that from Levisham, North Yorkshire (Bailey, 1980, pls. 17 and 18). As so little of this panel survives, it is difficult to predict the development of the interlace. One side panel (Plate 3 and Fig. 1) has interlace in the form of a running Stafford knot, a form which has a mainly Cumbrian distribution (Bailey, 1980, 194).

This fragment of a cross shaft may be placed in the Anglo-Viking tradition of the latter half of the 10th or the early 11th century. It is the only piece as yet known from this church, the existence of which, however, is recorded in *Domesday Book* (Tait, 1916, 183). Other pieces of Anglo-Viking sculpture are known from North West Cheshire, including a fragment of a cross shaft bearing figure scenes at Neston (Bu'Lock, 1972, fig. 17). This discovery provides another element in the picture of late Saxon settlement in the Wirral area after the arrival of Ingimund and his followers from Ireland in the early 10th century (Wainwright, 1948, 167-69), and it reinforces the position of this area as a bridge between the Viking settlements around the Irish Sea and those centred on the kingdom of York to the East.

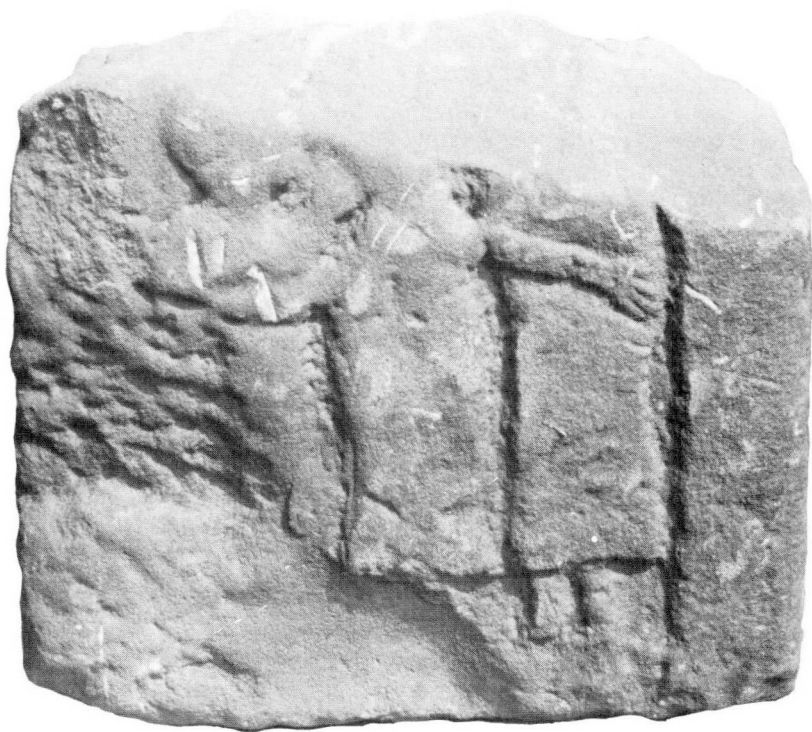


Plate 1 — Thornton le Moors cross shaft: three standing figures.



Plate 2 — Thornton le Moors cross shaft: fragmentary figure and animal ornament.



Plate 3 — Thornton le Moors cross shaft: running Stafford knot.

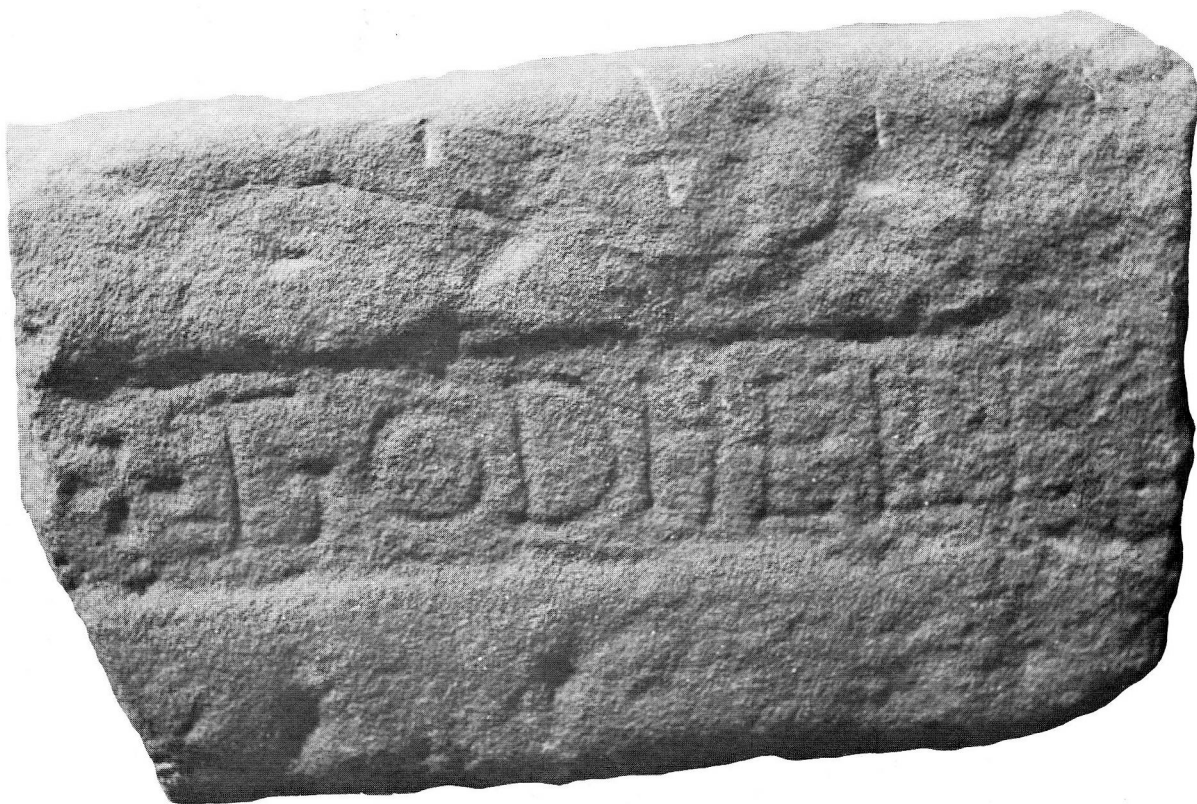


Plate 4 — Thornton le Moors cross shaft: inscription.

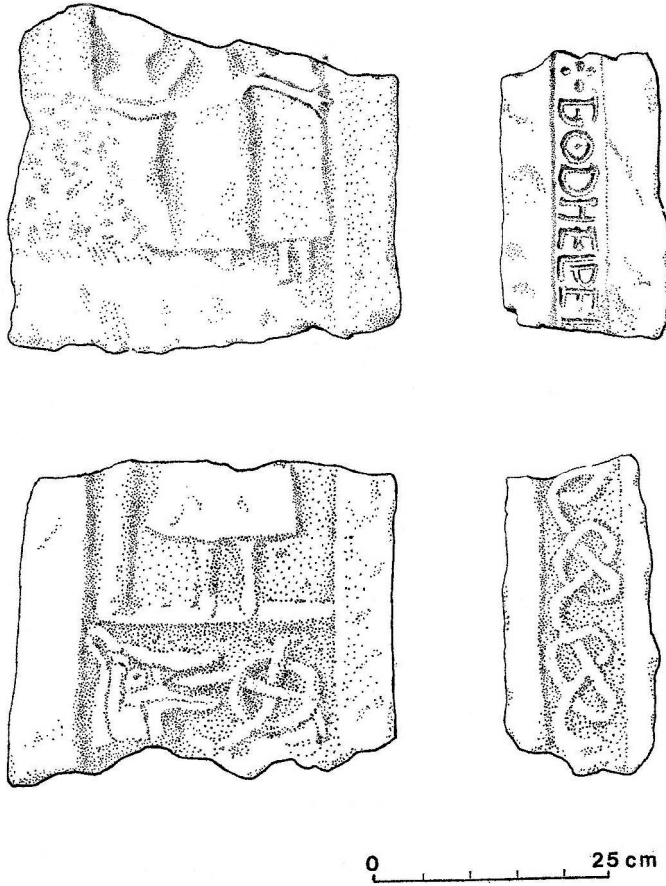


Fig. 1

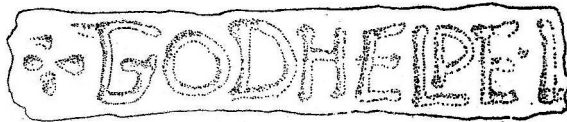


Fig. 2.

## THE THORNTON LE MOORS INSCRIPTION

by J. Higgitt

The inscription on the Thornton le Moors fragment (Plate 4 and Fig. 2), although incomplete, is less enigmatic than the figure panels. The writer accepts the approximate dating to the Viking period argued above on art historical grounds by his co-authors, and hopes to show that the inscription is consistent with their conclusions.

The inscription runs down one of the narrow faces of the stone. It is rather roughly incised within a slightly sunken panel framed by broad bands. This panel is about 0.06m across and the letters vary in height from between about 0.03 to about 0.04m. The inscription is in Roman lettering and appears to read thus:

$$+GODHELPE \left[ \begin{array}{c} \vdots \\ \vdots \\ \vdots \end{array} \right] -$$

Okasha's system of transcription (1971, 45) is used. These letters form part of a text in Old English (+ GOD HELPE . . .), which in modern English may be rendered as:

+ May God help . . .

## DISCUSSION

The vertical placing of the inscription is highly exceptional amongst surviving Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in Roman lettering (Okasha, 1971). For example, the sculptor of the pre-Viking cross fragment in Lancaster preferred to use several very short horizontal lines for the inscriptions even on the narrow faces of the cross, where a vertical format might have been thought to be more convenient (*ibid.*, no. 68). The arrangement of the inscription at Thornton Le Moors may indicate therefore the influence of some other epigraphic tradition. One possibility, in West Cheshire, might be that this is a Welsh feature. The vertical placing of Latin inscriptions on stone had been common in the Early Christian period in Wales and has been explained as an imitation of vertically arranged ogam inscriptions (Nash-Williams, 1950, 7). Vertically aligned inscriptions continued to appear, although less frequently, for several centuries in Wales, for example, as mentioned above, on the cross fragment on Bardsey Island (Nash-Williams, 1950, 27, 42 and 86). This feature is not, however, restricted to Wales. It occurs also in Ireland and the West of England (Macalister, 1945-49), and most interestingly in a number of places near the Irish Sea, where Anglo-Saxons and Vikings are likely to have been in contact with Celtic traditions. On the Isle of Man inscriptions in Norse runes normally run in vertical lines ascending the stone, a feature which Kermode long ago tentatively

associated with the ogam tradition (1907, 89, n.2). At Whithorn an inscription in Anglo-Saxon runes was carved down the edge of a cross slab (Collingwood, 1927, 63 and fig. 80). The two lines of Anglo-Saxon runes on the pre-Viking stone fragment from Overchurch in the Wirral seem also to have run down the edge of the stone (Bu'Lock, 1972, 48-49, fig. 10 and pl. 9). The vertical placing of some of the runic and Latin inscriptions on the 8th century cross at Ruthwell may also be related (Allen, 1903, 442-49 and figs 467-68).

The inscription is incomplete. Something could have preceded what remains; and one or more words, now represented only by a fragmentary letter, are lost at the end.

Introductory crosses are very common in Anglo-Saxon and other early medieval inscriptions. Crosses are also used on occasion within the body or at the end of inscribed texts. In Anglo-Saxon and Welsh examples, crosses within the text seem to be intended to mark either subdivisions or the opening of a new section of text (Okasha, 1968, 331-32; Okasha, 1971, nos. 64, 94, 111 and 145; Nash-Williams, 1950, 27 and nos. 62 and 182). The cross in the Thornton le Moors inscription therefore probably, but not certainly, marks the beginning of the text.

The first two words on the fragment are not separated, but there is a slight gap and a probably intentional dot slightly above the middle of the line to mark a division between the formula *God helpe* and the following word. There could have been a second dot in the abraded area below the surviving one. Such word division is common in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions (Okasha, 1968, 331).

The inscription is in capitals that are close in form to the standard 'Roman' types. There are no purely Insular forms. The letters become increasingly worn towards the end but are legible, except for the final damaged letter, from which a vertical stroke still survives. The one clear variation on 'Roman' forms is the angular version of G, which seems to be intended at the beginning of the text. Angular variants of G are common in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. This is not a closely datable phenomenon, although the majority of examples given by Okasha belong to the later Anglo-Saxon period and there is only one that is likely to date from as early as the 8th century (Okasha, 1968 and 1971).

The shallow dot in the centre of the O, if not accidental, was a modest but deliberate ornamental feature. Such dotted Os occur in England on the probably 10th century censer cover from Pershore and fairly certainly also on the pre-Viking cross fragment in Lancaster referred to above (Okasha, 1968, 325 and 327; Okasha, 1971, nos. 68 and 100). There are apparently no examples amongst the early inscriptions of Wales (Nash-Williams, 1950, 223-34).

The placing of the P over the horizontal of the L in *helpe* may be viewed either as a space saving device or as an embellishment. It reflects a practice found in rather more sophisticated inscriptions, for example, in the 8th century at Jarrow or in the 11th in an inscription from Deerhurst (Okasha, 1971, nos. 28 and 63).

The quality of the design and cutting of the letters is distinctly mediocre. The surface is also abraded. It is therefore difficult to know whether there was any

consistent use of serifs, although slight projections or dot like deepening of the strokes occur in several places where a serif might be expected. The sculptor seems to have intended to decorate the letters with what Okasha has called 'dot seriffing'. Dot seriffing of the late Anglo-Saxon period is rare but can be seen on a piece of metalwork found at Sandford in Oxfordshire and very probably on the stone sundial at Bishopstone in Sussex (Okasha, 1968, 331-32; Okasha, 1971, nos. 12 and 106).

Inscriptions composed largely of 'Roman' capitals occurred throughout the Anglo-Saxon period in England (Okasha, 1971), but in Wales capitals were already giving way to half uncials by the 7th century (Nash-Williams, 1950, 12-13). The lettering of our inscription conforms therefore to what was Anglo-Saxon, but no longer Welsh, practice during the Viking period.

The language of the inscription is Old English. It is standard in its forms, but that is not significant in so short a text.

The inscription seems to be a plea for God to help a named individual. The formula is not now known in any other Anglo-Saxon inscriptions on stone, but it was probably not unique. An amplified version of the formula does, however, occur on a comb found at Whitby. The comb bears a text in Anglo-Saxon runes, the relevant part of which has been read as '*god aluwaludo helipæ cy-*' ('may Almighty God . . . help Cy-') (Page, 1966, 10-15). Page suggests that Cy- was the owner or maker of the comb and he thinks that the inscription is likely to be contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon monastery at Whitby (mid 7th to second half of 9th century) (Page, 1973, 168). The inscription on the comb is presumably amuletic or apotropaic. It is certainly unlikely to have been memorial. Perhaps therefore the Thornton le Moors cross shaft commemorated someone still living, perhaps the patron or the craftsman, although a memorial function cannot be ruled out.

The formula may have developed out of ecclesiastical usage in the vernacular. It is comparable to the '*God ure helpe*', with which the Anglo-Saxon homilist Wulfstan ended two of his sermons (Bethurum, 1957, 191, 266, 275 and cf. 220). The usage, which may have developed spontaneously, has parallels in biblical calls for God's help (e.g. Psalms 78.9 and 108.26 and Matthew 15.25).

The Thornton le Moors formula is reminiscent of the Greek formula ('Lord, help thy servant X'), which is often used to record patronage in Byzantine art (e.g. Underwood and Hawkins, 1961, 192). There appears, however, to be no directly comparable formula in Latin inscriptions.

There is now only one other inscription on stone of the Anglo-Saxon period in Cheshire, that on the fragmentary monument from Overchurch in the Wirral. The decoration of the stone points to an earlier (pre-Viking) date than that of Thornton le Moors (Bu'Lock, 1972, 48-49, fig. 10 and pl. 9). On the Overchurch stone the language is also Old English. The inscription makes it clear that the monument is funerary. The monument is called a '*becun*' and the reader is asked to pray for a named individual (Page, 1973, 56-57), a common Old English memorial formula.



The Overchurch inscription uses Anglo-Saxon runes for its Old English text, whilst the somewhat later, Viking period inscription at Thornton le Moors uses Roman lettering, as do most of the later Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in Old English.

### CONCLUSION

The decoration of the Thornton le Moors cross shaft places it firmly in the Viking period. The fragmentary inscription is in Old English. The formula, which was probably not funerary, seems to follow a type that was already established in English epigraphy before the Viking period. The 'Roman' capitals are typical of many Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, but they cannot be used to date the inscription more precisely. The use, however, of Roman lettering rather than runes for texts in Old English is likely to indicate a date in the later Anglo-Saxon period. The vertical arrangement of the lettering has parallels in the Irish Sea area and is very probably Celtic in origin. The inscription, unlike the decoration, shows no obviously 'Anglo-Viking' features, except, perhaps, an openness to influences from the West and the mediocre skill of the carver.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are very grateful to Mr. I. Fisher, Dr. F. E. Colman and Professor A. McIntosh for their comments on specific aspects of this paper. They would also like to thank the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society for sending information on the Whitby comb.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, 1903 J. R. Allen, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 1903
- Bailey, 1980 R. N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in the North of England*, 1980
- Bethurum, 1957 D. Bethurum, *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, 1957
- Bu'Lock, 1972 J. D. Bu'Lock, *Pre-Conquest Cheshire: 383-1066*, 1972
- Collingwood, 1927 W. G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age*, 1927
- Henry, 1974 F. Henry, *The Book of Kells*, 1974
- Kermode, 1907 P. M. C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses*, 1907
- Macalister, 1945-49 R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, 1945-49
- Nash-Williams, 1950 V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*, 1950
- Okasha, 1968 E. Okasha, 'The non-runic scripts of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 4, 1968, 321-38
- Okasha, 1971 E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon non-runic Inscriptions*, 1971
- O'Meadhra, 1979 U. O'Meadhra, *Early Christian, Viking and Romanesque Art: Motif-pieces from Ireland*, Stockholm, 1979
- Page, 1966 R. I. Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Runic Comb', *Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Annual Report*, 1966, 10-15
- Page, 1973 R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 1973
- Sexton, 1946 E. H. L. Sexton, *Irish Figure Sculptures*, Portland, Maine, 1946
- Sylvester and Nulty, 1958 D. Sylvester and G. Nulty, eds., *The Historical Atlas of Cheshire*, 1958
- Tait, 1916 J. Tait, ed., *The Domesday Survey of Cheshire*, Chetham Society, 2nd series, 75, 1916
- Underwood and Hawkins, 1961 P. A. Underwood and E. J. W. Hawkins, 'The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia at Istanbul: the Portrait of the Emperor Alexander', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 15, 1961, 187-217
- Wainwright, 1948 F. T. Wainwright, 'Ingimund's Invasion', *English Historical Review*, 63, 1948, 145-69