

VIKING-PERIOD SCULPTURE AT NESTON, CHESHIRE

by R. H. White

Introduction

The church of St. Mary and Helen at Neston has had a significant collection of pre-conquest sculpture since 1874 when the much dilapidated Norman church was largely pulled down and rebuilt. Four fragments of standing crosses were found in the foundations (Smith, 1875). These are described and illustrated in this article. Another fragment was noted in the belfry, acting as the lintel for the west window. Also found in the same reconstruction were three complete medieval grave covers, one an elaborate example with settings for brass or glass letters and the others with simple incised decorative motifs (Bidlake, 1936, 2-4, 16).

In 1985, the Parkgate and District Society together with the Neston Civic Society sought to display the stones properly within the church and engaged the author to write an article on them. Whilst on a preliminary visit to the church, the author and Dr. A. T. Thacker in company with Mr. G. W. Place of the society, viewed the stone in the belfry and saw that, although used as a lintel, it was not an integral part of the wall and could be safely removed for display. In addition, it was noted that at least half as much again of the stone was embedded in the wall, and that, together with the likelihood of the other three sides being carved, prompted a request for permission to remove the stone. Mr. Place, acting for the society, applied for a faculty and the stone was removed in January 1987. On cleaning, the carving described and discussed in this article was revealed. It is uncertain when the stone had been placed in the largely Norman tower but there is a possibility that the windows were altered in the fourteenth century (Richards, 1947, 256).

Description

Five fragments of circle-headed standing crosses are represented at Neston church. All are in a Storeton-type red sandstone but one stone, 2, has a lighter streak running through it. The description uses the typology of sculptural patterns established by Professor Cramp in the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Cramp, 1984).

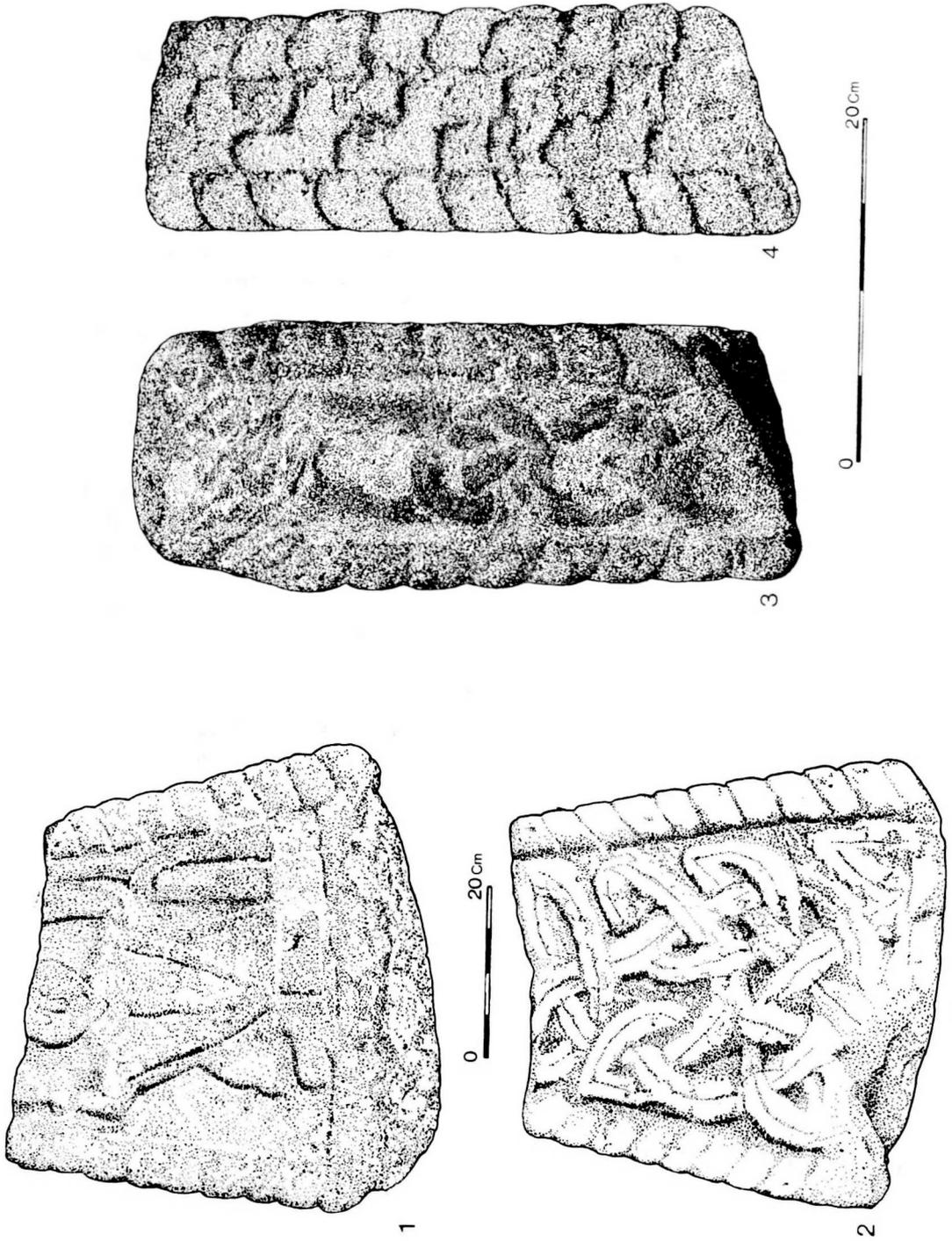


Fig. 1 — Cross fragment 1. 1 — Face A; 2 — Face B; 3 — Face C; 4 — Face D

Cross Fragment 1.

Dimensions: 500 mm. (max. width); 490 mm. (max. height); 160 mm. (depth). The lower half of a cross shaft broken at approximately mid-point and with the base lost. The design is badly worn on both sides.

Face A: (Fig. 1.1) standing figure of a priest with arms upraised. He wears an alb over which is a pointed chasuble embroidered at the edges, around the neckline and down the front. In his right hand, he holds a chalice and knotted on to his left wrist is a long, tasselled maniple. The face is plainly carved with mouth, eyes, nose and beard being detailed. The feet are turned outwards with the heels together.

Face B: (Fig. 1.3) a narrow panel of simple ring chain interlace between cabled borders.

Face C: (Fig. 1.2) a well executed two-strand interlace covers the entire face as it survives. Despite the careful execution, the pattern is not symmetrical.

Face D: (Fig. 1.4) a narrow panel of well executed Step 2 line pattern between cable borders.

Cross Fragment 2.

Dimensions: 360 mm. (max. width); 300 mm. (max. height); 140 mm. (depth). A small trapezoidal fragment from the top of the shaft, shown by the survival of part of the circle head. The broad faces are badly worn and the fractured base has had two substantial holes drilled into it.

Face A: (Fig. 2.1; plate) figure of an angel placed horizontally. The facial features are carefully carved as with the priest on cross fragment 1, with the difference that the hair is represented as a skull cap, or perhaps a halo. The torso is triangular and meets a pleated 'skirt' at the waist. No arms are shown but the wings are sharply drawn with deep linear parallel grooves to represent feathers. The feet are shown as on cross fragment 1, Face A. Above the angel is a cable moulded arc which is part of the circle-head. Within the arc, cable moulded bars mark the position of one of the arms.

Face B: as cross fragment 1.

Face C: (Fig. 2.2; plate) Two men fighting. The left hand figure is represented with his right arm above his head and his left hand gripping the hair of his opponent. In his right hand he holds a knife. His left foot rests on the right foot of his opponent, but his own right foot is missing. The figure on the right has both arms upraised. The left hand grips his opponent's hair while the right hand holds a dagger. The right leg is bent at the knee. Both men are dressed in broad 'kilts' which are presumably jerkins or tunics. Above their heads, there is a Step 2 line pattern enclosed within plain bands. These form an arc of the circle of the cross head.

Face D: as cross fragment 1.

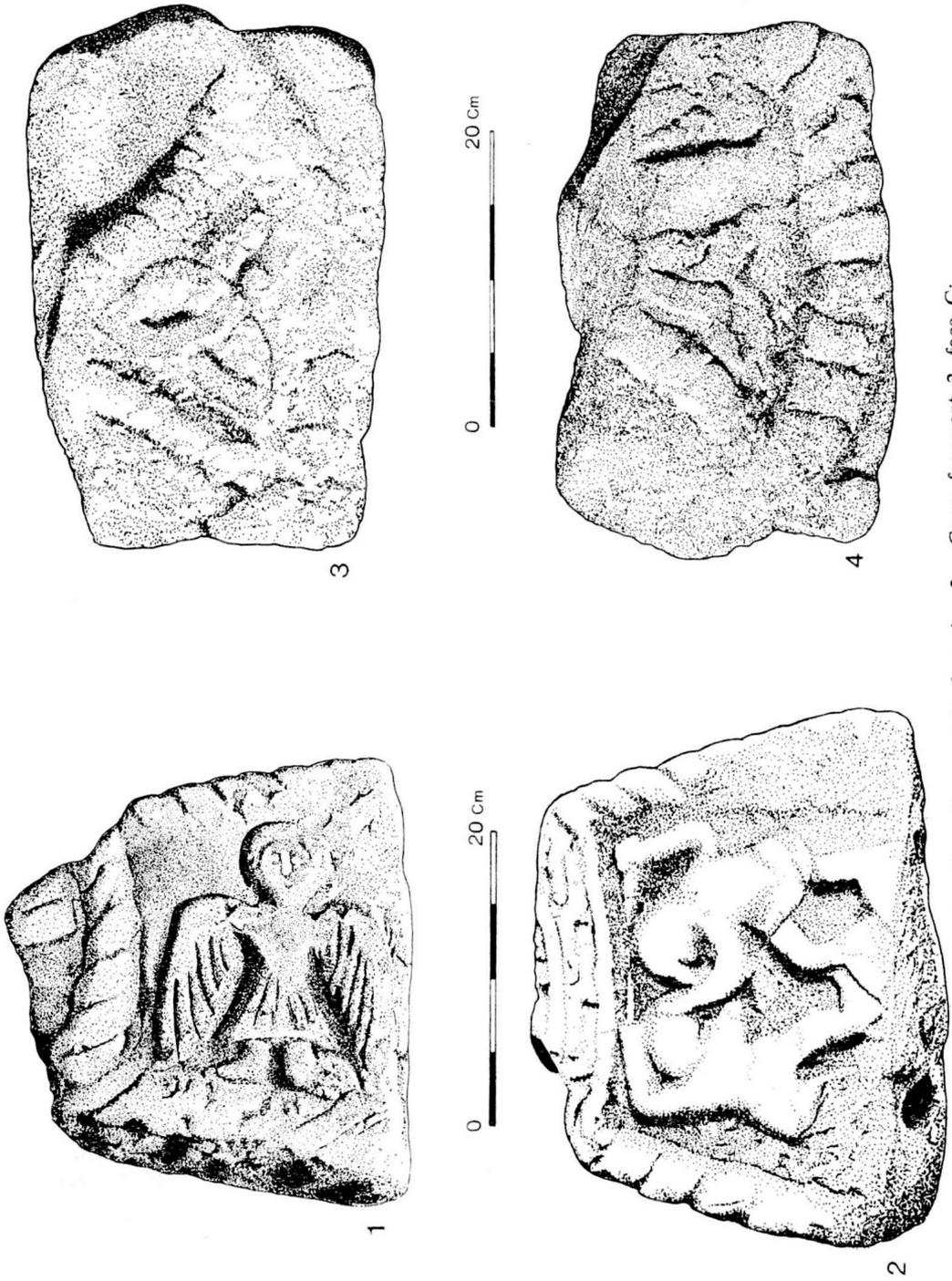


Fig. 2 — 1— Cross fragment 2, face A; 2— Cross fragment 2, face C;
3— Cross fragment 4, face A; 4— Cross fragment 4, face C.

Cross Fragment 3.

Dimensions: 480 mm. (max. width); 750 mm. (max. height); 190 mm. (depth). An irregular fragment from the foot of a substantial cross shaft. More than half of both sides is taken up by the plainly dressed foot. The carvings are deep and, on the whole, well preserved.

Face A: (Fig. 3.1) most of the face consists of a dressed area forming the foot of the cross, above which is six-strand plaitwork executed with much care.

The plaitwork occupies a panel 400 x 300 mm.

Face B: this has been drilled or chiselled away in antiquity.

Face C: (Fig. 3.2) most of the face consists of the plain dressed foot but there is a small fragment of interlace similar to that on cross fragment 1, Face C.

Face D: as cross fragment 1.

Cross Fragment 4.

Dimensions: 380 mm. (max. width); 230 mm. (max. height); 145 mm. (depth). A fragment from the head of a cross. It has been broken off on all four sides to form an irregular rectangular block.

Face A: (Fig. 2.3) at the base is a cabled arc, part of the outer ring of the circle head. Two lines of cable run at converging angles to form a triangular arm of the cross head. Within the arm thus formed is a plain triquetra knot.

Face B: this has the remains of a design as cross fragment 1.

Face C: (Fig. 2.4) as face A with the addition of a second, smaller, triquetra knot to one side of the arm.

Face D: the beginnings of the Step 2 line pattern can be made out on the shaft but the side is otherwise damaged.

Cross Fragment 5.

Dimensions: 550 mm. (max. width); 750 mm. (max. height); 160 mm. (depth). A substantial portion of a cross shaft with tapering sides. One of the lower corners has been broken off. Both sides are well preserved and are carved in fairly low relief. The lower third of the cross has been dressed to form the foot.

Face A: (Fig. 3.3; plate 1) the entire face is taken up with one scene of some complexity. At the bottom left hand corner is a stag shown with large antlers and a short tail. It stands with all four hooves on the ground and has a lightly drilled eye and open mouth. In front of it is a dog-like animal which rises on its hind legs to leap at the stag's throat. Its tail is curled and the ears are laid back. Above and to the left of the stag is a man wearing a long tunic with pleats or creases which is perhaps belted. He holds a spear vertically

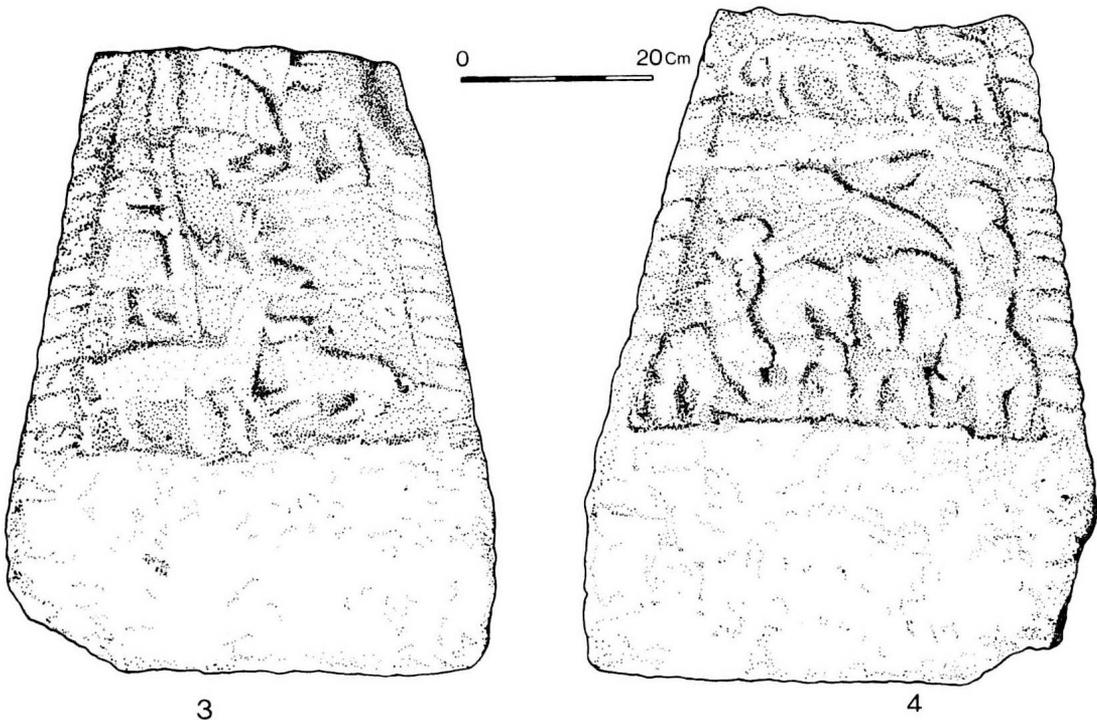
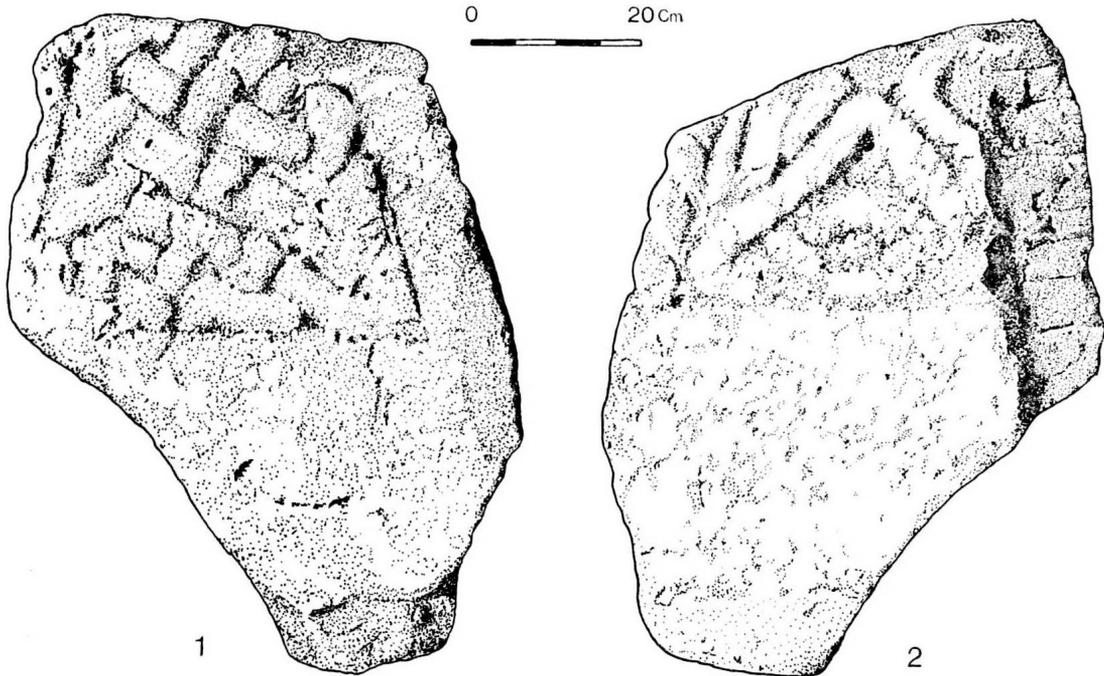


Fig. 3 — 1 — Cross fragment 3, face A; 2 — Cross fragment 3, face C;
3 — Cross fragment 5, face A; 4 — Cross fragment 5, face C.

with the head downwards. The spearhead passes behind, or perhaps through the back and chest of the stag and is shown piercing the ground level just behind the front legs of the animal. The area above the dog and to the right of the spearman is roughly dressed to the level of the background but is otherwise plain. Above this area are the lower halves of a man and a woman, the woman being on the left. She wears a long, pleated skirt below which her feet are shown. She has her arm around the man who is shown in the characteristic triangular short 'kilt'. Below this, the feet and calves are shown. Behind the woman is a long vertical bar consisting of a tassel with a knot above and the beginning of plaitwork. This is presumably the woman's pigtail.

Face B: as cross fragment 1.

Face C: (Fig. 3.4; plate 2) is divided into two unequal panels by a narrow bar which represents ground level for the upper panel.

Lower panel: two men on confronted horses are shown with large rounded heads which may represent mail hoods, and wearing long jerkins, probably mail coats. Both men have long spears under their right arms with leaf-shaped heads which are crossed over the heads of the horses. The left arm of the right hand man is shown holding the reins but the left arm of the left hand man is hidden by his body. There is no sign of either saddles, stirrups or shields.

The horses are represented in foreshortened perspective with the right hand horse being larger than the left hand one. The forelegs of the right hand horse are shown galloping but the back legs are straight. On the left hand horse the legs show some movement which is probably representative of galloping. The necks of the horses are strongly arched and the noses and foreheads are almost touching. The tail of the left hand horse is shown but not that of the right.

Upper panel: two quadrupeds run across the panel from left to right. The left hand animal, which is dog-like, has eyes, jaws, ears and curled tail but is shown as static with all four paws on the ground rather than running. The right hand animal has a short, stubby tail and a long neck which is strongly arched back over its shoulder so that the animal looks at its pursuer.

Face D: as cross fragment 1.

The stones have been carved with chisels working from a dressed surface. The figures and interlace are generally, therefore, in flat relief although detail has been added in some cases with a drill or gouge. The background has been left roughened, perhaps to facilitate the application of a layer of gesso.

Discussion

From the detailed descriptions already given, it is evident that there are three fragments with interesting figural decoration. The figure on cross fragment 1 has long been recognised as a priest (Allen & Cox, 1893, 31-2) although when first

published, despite its beard, it had been identified as a female saint. (Smith, 1875, 89). Although a rare subject, other priests are known: from Winwick, Lancs., and Brompton and Nunburnholme, Yorks. (Bailey, 1980, 231-2). The chalice held by the priest is of a well known Insular type with hemispherical bowl and a conical foot separated by a hollow knop and joined together by a rivet which passed through all three parts. The example from Hexham is close both in style and date to that depicted here (Bailey, 1974, 150-155, pl. XXIX,a). The alb and chasuble are well depicted and show in some detail the vestments of a priest of this period as outlined by Mayo (1984, 27-31). Of particular interest is the long tasselled maniple attached to the upraised left wrist. This had formerly been interpreted as a pair of forceps (Smith, 1875, 89), a book (Allen & Cox, 1893, 31a) or a bucket (Allen & Cox, 1893, 32) as depicted on the cross at Winwick, but a parallel for a long maniple with tassels is known from Brompton (Bailey, 1980, pl. 55).

This fragment has usually been shown together with cross fragment 2 but the connexion is improbable as fragment 1 has only one figural side whereas fragment 2 has two. A far better case may be made for joining cross fragment 2 with cross fragment 5 (below).

The scenes on cross fragment 2 have also been the subject of varied interpretation. Face C has been taken to represent two wrestlers and from this it has been concluded that it is a representation of the contest between Jacob and the angel (Allen & Cox, 1893, 31; Bailey, 1980, 155). There are difficulties with this interpretation however. Wrestling scenes such as those on the market cross at Kells, Co. Meath (Henry, 1933, pl. 84,3) show two men with shoulders touching and clasping each other around the waist. In the Neston scene, however, the two men grip each other by the hair only and their right hands are free to wield what appear to be triangular knives or daggers. I am thus inclined to accept Bu'Lock's view that a knife fight is being depicted rather than wrestling (1959, 7). There is unfortunately no exact parallel for this type of scene on other crosses.

The angel on face A is rather easier to parallel, however. In many details, such as the pleated skirt, triangular body and the style of the wings, it has close affinities with the angel depicted on the crucifixion cross slab from Kirk Michael, Isle of Man (Kermode, no. 129; Cubbon, 1977, 24). Somewhat puzzling up to now has been the horizontal placing of the angel but the reason for this may become clearer when the slab is placed with cross fragment 5. The justification for this step is two-fold. First, both sides have figural carving, secondly, when the two fragments are seen together the whole produces a complete narrative, despite the loss of about 10-15 cm. between the two fragments.

The carvings on cross fragment 5 are probably the most important of the group. On face A is a scene of some complexity which may be paralleled in some of its details by earlier or contemporary carvings but for which there is no parallel as a single assemblage. The stag hunting scene in the left hand corner with both



Plate 1
Neston Cross Fragments 2 and 5 — suggested reconstruction
(Face A)

(Photo: R. H. White)



Plate 2
Neston Cross Fragments 2 and 5 — suggested reconstruction
(Face C)

(Photo: R. H. White)

spearman and hound is one that is particularly familiar in Dark Age sculpture. There are close parallels on the market cross at Kells (Henry, 1933, pl. 37,6) and the stone at Hilton of Cadboll, Highland (Allen & Anderson, 1903, fig. 59), though it is noticeable that in both these examples the hound is depicted on the back of the stag and not at its throat as at Neston. The Kells panel does, however, show the same standing spearman. Indeed, the hound on the back of the animal is the more usual mode of portrayal and may be seen on numerous examples of Pictish and Norse-period sculpture from Britain (e.g. Dacre, Cumbria; Bailey, 1980, pl. 47). I am inclined to believe that in moving the animal around to a more naturalistic position at the stag's throat, the artist was attempting to fill the wide base of the cross by slightly varying a common motif. A similar effect was achieved by the sculptor of stone no. 7 at Burghead, Grampian (Fig. 4.3).

The figures above the hunting scene are sadly damaged but their lower halves suggest that the cross originally commemorated a man and his wife. The arrangement may have been similar to that of the 'hunter' scene depicted on the cross of the Anglo-Danish period from St. Mary Bishophill Junior, York (Collingwood, 1927, fig. 147). The possibility that the woman has a pigtail is given weight by the appearance of pigtails on Viking women at Gosforth, Cumbria (Bailey, 1980, 143 pl. 32) and Kirk Michael, Isle of Man (Garth Cross, Kermodé, no. 123; Cubbon, 1977, 30). This latter carving also has the pleated skirt of the Neston cross. If cross fragment 2 is placed above the man and the woman, then the horizontally placed angel can be interpreted as being shown flying over the heads of the deceased. There is little indication beneath the angel of the missing heads of the man and woman but there is a scar on the stone below the head of the angel which may be the result of the removal of the man's head or helmet. The stone has, however, been heavily dressed at this end. The blank panel to the right of the hunting scene may have originally held a painted commemorative inscription, but there is no evidence for this. The combination of a hunting scene with that of a man and wife with angel above is difficult to parallel. There is, however, an apparent link with other crosses with hunting scenes such as the Hilton of Cadboll stone and Sandulf's cross, Kirk Andreas, Isle of Man (Manx Museum, 131; Cubbon, 1977 22-23). Both appear to demonstrate the worldly success of the deceased and her husband in much the same way as the Neston cross. Certainly, complex hunt scenes of this character appear to be a widespread Viking trait (Firby & Lang, 1981, 21-22).

Face C shows a much more rigid degree of spatial organisation than the face just discussed. Here, with the addition of the relevant face from cross fragment 2, there are three panels of differing size. Presumably, but not certainly, each was separated from the other by a horizontally placed bar representing ground level. The lowest scene is undoubtedly the most intriguing. It shows what appears to be a 'joust', a most unusual scene at this date. One possible parallel is provided by the two opposed horsemen on cross no. 2 at Aberlemno, Tayside (Fig. 4.1), but

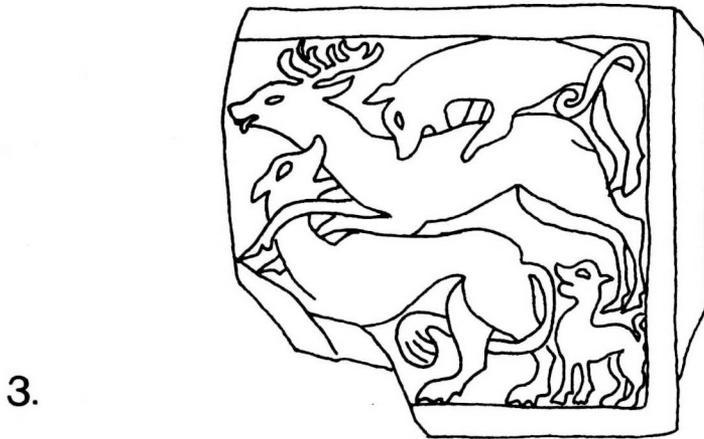
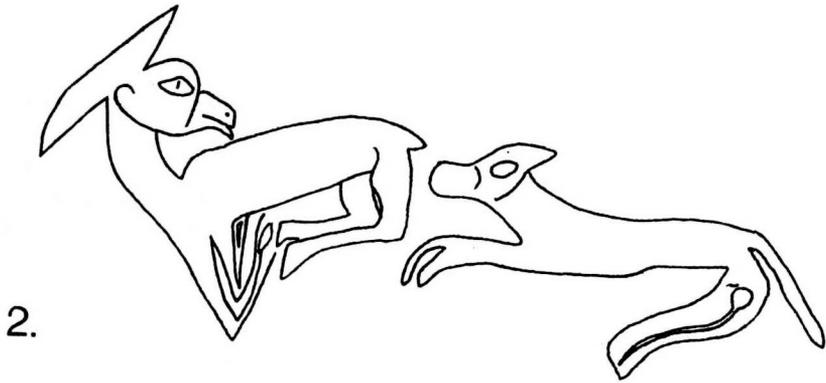
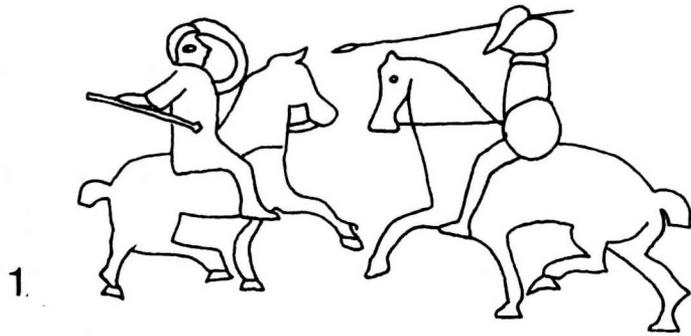


Fig. 4 — Sculpture comparable at Neston
 1 — Aberlemno, cross no. 2; 2 — Inchbrayock, cross no. 1;
 3 — Burghead, stone no. 7. (After Allen, 1903, figs. 138,
 227b, 235)

that is a more naturalistic representation of a fight than the rather formalised Neston example. Two horsemen with spears and high-backed saddles are shown on a hogback from Sockburn, Co. Durham, but these are depicted riding in line with their spears at rest (Bailey, 1980, fig. 69). Bailey has demonstrated that the use of cavalry was not unknown in the period and it is useful to have further confirmation that mounted horsemen used spears (*ibid.*, 234-5).

The hart and hound scene above the joust is more familiar and has many parallels in Viking-period carving (Bailey, 1980, 72 & 174), although, as will be discussed below, there is no need to place a Christian interpretation on the scene as has justifiably been done elsewhere. The animal on the right with its abnormally positioned head and neck has parallels on the stone from Dacre already discussed and on Stone no. 1 at Inchbrayock, Tayside (Fig. 4.2), but the carving is strangely awkward compared with the rest of the Neston group. The hound is very similar to that shown on face A. Allied with the knife-fight scene above, these three panels form a most unusual counterpoint to face A both in subject matter and in organisation. Indeed, a Christian interpretation for all three panels would be difficult to substantiate. It is more likely that they should be seen in a secular light, given the interpretation offered for Manx stones of the same date, namely that such scenes commemorate episodes from the life of the deceased (Margeson, 1983, 99, 105). The scenes on my conjectural reconstruction of the cross are clearly secular with the exception of the angel placed over the heads of the deceased. This entirely accords with the view that Viking-period sculpture was used to commemorate the wealth, status, and worldly preoccupations of the dead rather than as a religious tool, as in earlier Anglo-Saxon England (Bailey, 1980, 80-184). Even the carving of the priest on fragment 1 may also be seen in this light; not so much a depiction of a religious scene but rather the illustration of a man accompanied by the tools of his trade and hence indicating his role within a newly-Christianised community. Viewed in this way, the chalice and maniple would be easily understood as symbols of power to the converted Vikings.

Having assessed the character of the carvings and their parallels, it is now necessary to date and place them in their historical background. The Neston crosses have long been recognised as being of the Norse period, this being particularly clear from their relationship to a group of circle-headed crosses distributed within the Irish Sea province from Cumbria to North Wales (Bu'Lock 1959) and from their common use of such motifs as running chain interlace and Step 2 line patterns. As has already been seen, the parallels for the figural details are closely related to Viking-period sculpture in England and on the Isle of Man. In addition, the sculpture has some elements in common with both Pictland and Ireland, an indication that the sculptor was able to draw on a wide range of motifs. Also typical of this period is the crowding of animals and figures into several planes as seen on cross fragment 5, face A. This trait can be detected in both Viking and Pictish sculpture (Bailey, 1986, 99, pl. 1, fig. 4; Allen & Anderson, 1903, fig. 227b).

The Neston group of sculpture in particular has for many years been closely linked with that at St. John's church at Chester (Bu'Lock, 1959, 7). Despite the close similarity in the overall shape of the crosses from the two sites there is, however, enough significant variation between the two groups to conclude that they were carved in different workshops and possibly by different workmen. Most obvious among the differences is the lack of figural carvings on the St. John's crosses, but it is also noticeable that the form of the head is slightly different as well. The Chester school crosses are characterised by Bailey as having a pelleted or line-patterned circle superimposed on the arms of the cross (1980, 179-80). While this type of decoration can be seen on cross fragment 2, face C, it is clear that the other face had a simple cable moulded ring in keeping with the decoration of the edges of the shaft. This thin decorative ring replaces the thick pelleted band normally found on crosses of this type as is shown by the fact that the arms begin immediately within the cable ring. The only other head fragment, 4, shows the same simple cable-moulded ring with the solid spandrels of the Cheshire circle-headed crosses and the triquetra decoration of the arms which may also be seen on the St. John's crosses. This link in decorative style reinforces a close affinity with the Chester group, despite the difference in the head formation which I have described. This is reinforced by the occurrence of an identical pattern of interlace on cross fragment 3, face C, with one from St. John's, Chester (Bu'Lock, 1959, Fig. III). The nature of the carvings might perhaps also suggest that the sculptors were themselves Viking. As we have seen, they were able to draw on parallels from Irish, Pictish, Manx and Cumbrian work but the growing evidence of cultural continuity from pre-Viking to Viking-period sculpture, demonstrated for example by shared methods of laying out the designs on the stones, suggests that a local, native, workshop cannot be ruled out (Lang, 1986, 155, 159). Given the quasi-historical record of the settlement in the Wirral of Norse Vikings from Dublin after 901, this group of stones may be safely assigned to the period from about 930 to about 1020 (Wainwright, 1975, 139-144, 153-157). This would coincide with the dating of the Manx crosses which these stones closely parallel (Wilson, 1983, 185) and with the possibility that the Isle of Man may have formed a stepping stone for the Viking settlers of the Wirral between their expulsion from Dublin and their arrival and settlement in the Wirral (Fellows-Jensen, 1983, 48-50). The Neston school of circle-headed crosses thus seem to point, along with other archaeological evidence from Meols and place-name evidence from the area, to strong Irish Viking settlement (Chitty & Warhurst, 1977, 20; Chitty, 1978, 8-10). The settlement certainly appears to have been both peaceful and prosperous with evidence from the stone carvings for the rapid adoption of Christianity. Indeed, it appears that Neston church formed the *caput* of an estate, much like the church at Eastham (Thacker, 1987, 263-4). Certainly, this group of sculpture provides strong evidence for a prosperous community and established church in Neston and this is reflected in the Domesday survey where the parish already had a priest (Bidlake, 1936, 4-5).

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