

XX.—A PRE-CONQUEST CROSS SHAFT AT NUNNYKIRK,
NORTHUMBERLAND.

By MABERLY PHILLIPS, F.S.A.

[Read on the 25th August, 1897.]

A short time ago, the Rev. E. J. Bell, rector of Alderley, Cheshire, drew my attention to a carved stone that had lately been shown to him in the grounds of Mr. William Orde, at Nunnykirk. Finding that several of our members, whom I consulted, had no knowledge of it, I took an early opportunity of examining it with a friend. Fortunately, Mrs. Orde was at home, and we were soon shown the object of our visit, of which we took rubbings and measurements. The stone proved to be the shaft of a Saxon cross. Its base is said to be about ten inches in the ground. From the base to the first moulding it measures two feet ten inches. Above this moulding there is a projecting band six inches deep, and above that an uneven and broken surface of about seven inches. The face of the shaft above the base measures sixteen and a half inches across, tapering to fifteen inches under the projecting band; the ends are eight inches across. All four sides of the stone are beautifully carved. Upon what I take to be the principal side, a beautiful scroll of vine leaves and fruit divides the field into two panels; in the upper, two birds are nibbling at the fruit, and, in the lower, two quadrupeds are similarly engaged. A cable-moulding runs down the sides. The other face is entirely covered with a vine scroll, the stem worked into two small panels, the centre of each being a leaf or bunch of fruit. Upon the sides, the same vine scroll is displayed, but the pattern is varied. Above this, upon the face of the projecting band, a row of bosses is chiselled, five on each face and four upon each side. Above this projecting band, on the faces and sides, the vine is shown, but in some cases the carving is much defaced.

Many details upon the stone will be clearly seen on the rubbings now exhibited. I submitted these to the Rev. Dr. Greenwell. He considers the stone to be a beautiful example of early Saxon work, and suggests the date as the eighth century, or possibly the seventh. Under his guidance I carefully examined the valuable collection of Saxon stones



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(From photographs by Mr. W. S. Corder, of North Shields.)



in the chapter library at Durham. On several—notably the Hexham ones—the vine is displayed, but there was no example so perfect or profuse in the working of the pattern.

In some respects the birds and animals feeding upon the fruit correspond with one of the faces of the renowned Saxon crosses at Bewcastle and Ruthwell. Upon this matter the Rev. G. F. Browne, now bishop of Bristol, in his interesting little work, *The Conversion of the Heptarchy* (p. 191) says that the east face of the Bewcastle cross ‘has a conventional trunk or branch of a tree (Prof. Stephens calls it a grape-bearing vine) running in graceful curves from bottom to top, passing across nine times, and each time throwing off a spiral tendril to occupy the semi-ellipse, ending in fruit *at which a beast or a bird is nibbling*. The whole is drawn in a very bold and skilful manner, and the animals and birds are full of life. Leaves and seeds and tendrils are thrown off freely in alternate directions, so as completely to occupy the field with ornament. . . . It represents, in all probability, the idea of a tree of life. The animals and birds are peaceful and happy. This is in sharp contrast with similar representations on pre-Norman stones of later date.’ The writer then quotes several cases in support of his argument, and continues: ‘The whole idea of peace has perished (p. 192) in the idea of sport or of slaughter.’ I would submit that many of his remarks upon this feature of the work upon the Bewcastle and Ruthwell crosses (which are known to date from 670) would apply with equal force to the stone in question.

To one other feature I would call attention, namely, the bosses, five on each face and four upon each side; they are very boldly cut and fairly well preserved. We could find no exact example of this work in the collection at Durham. Upon the top stone of the Acca cross a boss ornament is introduced, but in a very modified degree.

The monument at Nunnykirk is a monolith of four feet six inches, including the base. The top is much jagged and broken. There can be little doubt that the arms and head of a cross surmounted it, all traces of which have been unfortunately lost.

When complete the whole would stand about six feet or six feet six inches, and was most probably a memorial cross erected in honour of some distinguished personage. The value of such monuments

cannot be over-estimated. Bishop Browne says :—‘ The fifty-fifth parallel of latitude passes near the present or original home of all the three greatest monuments of the kind which we English possess, and no other nation in Europe has such. They are the great cross at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, once Northumbrian, the great cross at Bewcastle in Cumberland, and Acca’s cross at Hexham in Northumberland, now at Durham.’ Although the monument in question cannot lay claim to a place alongside these three lordly crosses, still I think it may rank as a humble member of the same family. The question naturally arises, where was this cross originally erected? Was it at Nunnykirk, or was it brought there from some other locality?

Regarding the modern history of the stone, Mrs. Orde writes :—‘ I regret that I have been able to get no more definite information for you about the cottage from which the stone was removed. It was on the site of one of the present cottages, and those who remember it being pulled down say it was “very old and tumbling down.” It was taken down about forty years ago and the stone was built *visibly* in the outside corner. It was even then asumed to be connected with the nunnery, but not much interest appears to have been taken in it, and it was left lying where I found it eighteen months ago when we returned here to live, *i.e.*, in a corner of the stack yard, perhaps fifty yards from the site of the cottage. I suppose we should feel thankful that it was not broken up for road mending.’ I was also informed that during its sojourn in the stack yard it was used as a sharpening stone. Mrs. Orde had it removed to the ‘mossy walk,’ and has since my first visit kindly had it placed in a better position for the purposes of photography.

For many years the estates of Nunnykirk have been in the hands of the Ordes, who inherited them from the Wards of Morpeth. The Wards purchased the estates from the representatives of the Grey family, who received them by grant from the crown in 1610. In 1138, Newminster abbey was founded upon the banks of the Wansbeck, not far from Morpeth, and at some subsequent date Nunnykirk was comprised in Ranulph de Merley’s grant of Ritton to Newminster. Hodgson, the historian of Northumberland, writing about 1830, says :—‘ The Abbot of Newminster, with the love for seclusion and taste for sweet river-side scenery, which were common to his order,

built a chapel, tower, and other edifices here (Nunnykirk), all traces of which are now entirely gone, and of which no book or record I have seen has left a description. Underground remains of buildings have, indeed, been found, and human bones dug up lately in sinking for new foundations, and when the crown granted it in 1610 to sir Ralph Grey, the letters patent described it as a tower and other buildings called Nunnykirk.'

In the present day the only memorials of the ecclesiastical occupation are the fish-ponds and the abbess's well. The cartulary of Newminster abbey has been printed by the Surtees Society.¹ In the appendix the editor quotes the assignment by Richard Tyrrell to sir Thos. Grey of the site of Newminster abbey and other lands belonging to it for a term of years, in which Nunnykirk is described as 'all that Grauge called Nonnykyrke together w^t a Towre there, and w^t all lands, medowes & pastures to the seyd Grauge p'teynyng in the seyd co'ntyte to the seyd late Monast'y belongyng & p'teynyng.'

Although from this we have clear evidence that Nunnykirk from soon after 1138 to the dissolution of the monasteries was in ecclesiastical hands, we gather no solution of the presence of the stone monument in question, which appears to have been chiselled some centuries prior to the foundation of Newminster.

Can the cross have been brought from any other quarter? No doubt, in many cases, such stones were removed considerable distances for building or other purposes. One writer 'hazards the conjecture' that the Ruthwell cross formerly stood at Bewcastle, and that the two crosses really form one monument. Part of the Acca cross was found over a door at Dilston, some distance from Hexham, where it was originally erected. So far as I am aware, Rothbury is the only place within reasonable distance where Saxon crosses have been discovered.² Various fragments that have been found there were broken up and built into the early church. Their date is ascribed to a later period, the tenth or eleventh century.

Hodgson gives various spellings of Nunnykirk, but quotes nothing earlier than 1542, when it was written Noniche Kirke, in 1568 Nunny Kyrke, in 1592 Newin Kirke, in 1610 Nunkirke, and in 1663 Nunnakirke. He adds, 'I can give no satisfactory derivation of the word.'

¹ 66 Surtees Soc. Publ., p. 311. ² Fragments of pre-Conquest Crosses have been discovered at Bothal. See *Arch. Ael.*, vol. XVI. p. vi., and Proc. III. 234.

In the face of these difficulties, considering the early date of the monument under consideration, may I 'hazard the conjecture' that the name of the place may be taken literally, Nunnykirk, the kirk of the nuns, and that at some very early period in the history of ecclesiastical houses, perhaps contemporary with Hartlepool (641) and Whitby (658), a religious house was established upon the banks of the Font, all traces of which have been entirely lost, except in the name, and that the monument in question is a testimony to this suggestion. I simply throw out the idea, trusting that others more versed in the matter will do justice to the stone and its origin.

I feel that our thanks are due to the Rev. canon Bell for drawing attention to the monument, and to Mrs. Orde for having rescued it from oblivion and having so readily afforded every assistance in the investigation of the matter. Since writing this account I have had another opportunity of visiting Nunnykirk. My friend Mr. Walter Corder accompanied me, and to him we are indebted for the admirable photographs from which the illustrations have been prepared.