

VII.—TWO FRAGMENTS OF PRE-NORMAN  
CROSS SHAFTS FROM OVINHAM  
CHURCH, NORTHUMBERLAND.

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Towards the end of October 1945 Mr. W. A. Cocks of Ryton noticed some interlaced work on a stone built into the bottom course of a retaining wall at the entrance to the boiler house of Ovingham Church. The stone was thickly covered with moss and slime, but when this was cleared away there was no doubt that it was of a pre-Norman type. On November 2nd the fragment was extricated without damage to the carving, which was found, as expected, on the other sides of the stone. The stone appears to have been used twice as building material, once bedded in dark hard, and once in soft white, mortar; there is also some evidence of burning. Mr. Cocks spent some hours in scrubbing with water and carefully picking out the mortar with which it was encrusted; then it was clear that the stone formed part of the shaft of a standing cross of pre-Norman date.

In February 1946 the vicar paid a visit to the ringing chamber in the tower, into which an improved system of lighting had just been introduced, and noticed in the west wall a building stone the face of which showed interlacing. This stone has since been extracted and proves to be a section from the shaft of another standing cross. This second stone has been subjected to heavy burning before use as a building stone; it exhibits interlacing on three

sides. It is possible, though not probable, that the fourth side has always been uncarved, in which case the cross may have been originally set up with its back to a wall as in the case of the well-known Norman standing cross at Kelloe in co. Durham; but this is by no means certain; it may simply have had the remains of the carving trimmed away to obtain a better bedding in the wall.

## I.

The larger fragment is carved in a rather coarse-grained grit containing visible crystals of quartz; it is  $15\frac{1}{2}$  inches high by  $11\frac{3}{4}$  tapering to 11 inches broad, and 8 tapering to  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches thick, the arrises are rounded. This has been the uppermost section of the shaft of a free standing cross; remains of the necking from which the cross-head sprung can be seen on plate v, figures 1 and 2.

The decoration has been in panels within a border about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide on the broader faces, while on the narrower sides the panels appear to have had a double border.

On the front (plate v, fig. 1) the greater part of one panel survives. Within the rounded border mould is an arched canopy; the supports of the arch are not clearly defined, but round them twine stems (possibly a reminiscence of the stems of the vines so often found on Anglian cross shafts) which appear to terminate in leaf-like ornaments in the upper spandrels. Beneath the canopy is a standing figure; the features are almost obliterated, but the head is of the long oval shape with the shoulders rounded, as is so often the case in later Anglo-Saxon sculpture, e.g. the shaft from Gainford figured in the Durham Catalogue, no. xxxi. The Saint, if we are to accept Collingwood's dictum that "an arch usually means a saint underneath," wears a kirtle reaching below the knees, the folds and pointed ends of which call to mind figures on cross shafts from Aycliffe and Gainford; the broad and well-defined belt is also reminiscent of Aycliffe. The hands are raised in prayer. Above

the right shoulder is a much worn conical object, the nature of which we do not venture to define.

The panel is separated from the lower limb of the cross-head by a cable moulding above which can be discerned indications of carved ornamentation within a rounded moulding which probably followed the outline of the cross.

On the back (plate v, fig. 2) of the shaft we find one panel complete except for a small break which has removed the lower part of the legs of the dexter figure. Although the details are by no means clearly defined, the main features of the scene represented are quite certain. Two figures—the dexter shown in profile and the sinister in full face—have between them an animal, almost certainly a hound, straining at the leash held by the man on the dexter side; above the hound is a round object possibly intended to represent the sun. The man appears to be bearded and his hair ends in a curious double curl seen also in a figure on the great cross in Leeds parish church. The figure on the sinister side is clad in a long tunic reaching almost to his feet and carries a large hunting horn which rests upon his left shoulder; the features are almost completely obliterated, but the head is of the same long oval shape as that of the saint on the face of the stone.

The subject of the carving is a hunting scene to which we have not succeeded in finding an exact parallel. At first it may seem somewhat startling to find such a scene on a memorial cross; it is true that on the early crosses when figure subjects occur they almost invariably relate to sacred persons or subjects, the only exception that we have noticed being the figure of the man with a hawk on the Bewcastle Cross. Towards the close of the Anglo-Saxon period, however, there would seem to be a tendency not to confine the sculpture on the shafts of memorial crosses to subjects of a strictly religious aspect. At Sockburn, co. Durham, there is a shaft upon which is carved a horseman with hawk on fist; perhaps a better example to quote would be a shaft at Staveley in West Yorkshire figured by Collingwood (Y.A.J.,

XXIII, p. 241, fig. c). Here we see on the upper part of the shaft a man in a loose kirtle blowing a horn, above him is a bird, below is a bearded man in helmet and belted kirtle holding a spear in his hand, in front of him a beast (? a wolf) turning away from him. This too looks as though it might be a hunting scene, though Collingwood makes the suggestion that "we might be prepared to believe that they were meant for Heimdal and the Ravens and Odin and the Wolf." At Lythe in the North Riding the "Wrestlers" shaft might be an example of a sporting subject.

We venture to suggest, therefore, that the interpretation of this Ovingham subject as a hunting scene is, at least, a possible one.

The cable moulding which, on this side of the shaft, separates the head of the cross from the shaft, is much damaged; but there appears to be in the centre the remains of the feet of a figure which must have been carved on the cross-head. If this was the case, we may envisage a crucifix on the head of a type similar to those on cross-heads at Lancaster and Great Ayton figured in Collingwood's *Northumbrian Crosses* (figs. 128 and 122).

On each of the narrower faces of the stone (plate VI, fig. 1) there is a panel of interlacing within a double moulding; this consists of a series of Stafford knots set in two vertical rows (No. 601 in Romilly Allen's classification). The pattern is a common one, widespread in Durham and Yorkshire, and is generally found on stones of the later periods. Of seventeen examples noted only two belong to the pre-Danish invasion period. This example is rather heavy in character, and though the workmanship is better than that found on many stones that might be quoted, yet it fails to reach the high standard of the earlier Anglian work.

To sum up: the sculpture contains elements both in subject and style which seem to be derived from the Danish period; but on the other hand the technique and skill shown in the carving might well be an example of that Anglian

revival which Collingwood attributes to the late tenth century. It would therefore seem reasonable to attribute this piece to the second half of the tenth century. In the present state of our knowledge any attempt at closer dating would be dangerous.

## II.

The second fragment (plate VI, fig. 2) is of the same coarse grit as the first cross, but it has been subjected to very heavy burning which has changed the colour to dark red, and has made the stone very friable.

On one face only is the carving intact, but sufficient remains on the two narrower sides to show that the design was identical with that on the face; on the back of the stone no trace of carving remains.

The fragment is a section from a squarish shaft with rounded arrises; it is 9 inches broad by 7 inches thick and  $13\frac{1}{2}$  inches high.

The only decoration consists of rather coarse interlacing, loosely knit, but boldly and deeply cut. The pattern of the interlacing consists of "figure-of-eight" knots placed vertically (No. 568 in Romilly Allen's classification). This is not an uncommon form and occurs on stones of all the pre-Norman periods. Examples of this form may be found at Hexham, Wycliffe, Ellerburn, Gargrave, Hackness, Sinnington and numerous other Yorkshire sites. In the earlier examples—Wycliffe, Otley, Ellerburn, etc.—the knots are formed of rounded cords, double at Wycliffe and Ellerburn; but they become flattened and strap-like in the Danish period; then, with the revival of Anglian tradition and workmanship, the edges of the straps are rounded off, as in this example. We conclude then, that, as in the case of the larger fragment, this specimen is to be dated to the latter half of the tenth century.

The writers wish to acknowledge gratefully help given by Major J. D. Cowen and Mr. B. Colgrave in compiling this account.

Since the above account was written Major J. D. Cowen has called our attention to a fragment of a cross shaft from Tynemouth<sup>1</sup> preserved in the Black Gate Museum (plate VII), on one face of which the carving (plate VII, fig. 1) bears a striking resemblance to that on the face of the shaft from Ovingham illustrated on plate V, fig. 1. So striking is the resemblance, both in design and material, that we are tempted to suggest that both shafts came from the hands of the same carver or, at least, from the same workshop.

This Tynemouth fragment certainly throws considerable light on some of the points which seemed rather doubtful when writing our description of the Ovingham fragment.

The dimensions of the shaft are almost identical with that from Ovingham. The faces have been divided into panels by a cable moulding between two rolls. From one of the narrower faces the carving has been cut away, but the other bears an interlaced pattern similar to that on the sides of the Ovingham shaft. On the principal face is carved the figure of a saint standing on the heads of two dragons; the hands are upraised, as at Ovingham, and hold a book. On either side is a tree, with trunk and branches clearly shown (plate VII, fig. 1), the branches meet overhead and form an arched canopy over the head of the saint. Though there are differences in detail and in treatment, it seems certain that the carver of the Ovingham shaft intended that the setting of his figure should be similar to that on the shaft from Tynemouth.

That the fragments both at Ovingham and Tynemouth are closely related to the work of the "Aycliffe School" is clearly shown by the Tynemouth example. On the back is carved (plate VII, fig. 2) a centaur whose right hand grasps a spear while the left arm is extended to grasp its tail, as on one of the cross shafts at Aycliffe.

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Ael.*<sup>2</sup> xxv, p. 119, fig. 1.



Fig. 1.

CROSS SHAFT FROM OVIINGHAM CHURCH

Fig. 2.







Fig. 1.

CROSS SHAFTS FROM OVINHAM CHURCH



Fig. 2.





Fig. 1.

CROSS SHAFT FROM TYNEMOUTH. IN BLACK GATE MUSEUM



Fig. 2.

