



XVIII.—SCULPTURED ANGLIAN MASONRY IN THE TOWER OF CORBRIDGE CHURCH.

BY G. W. D. BRIGGS, G. GRAHAM AND D. PARSONS.

Part I: Description of the remains. By G. W. D. Briggs and
G. Graham.

There is at the present time a fairly general agreement that the lower part of the tower of Corbridge church may be assigned to the seventh century, and that it represents a western porch subsequently heightened into a tower.¹ In its west wall there is a blocked archway, and above this there is a relieving arch. These arches are shown in the accompanying photograph.

Hodges had apparently noted the presence of carved ornament on this masonry in 1893,² and there is a passing reference in the *Northumberland County History* to the existence of a "rude ornament resembling a saltire".³ These observations have received little further attention, probably because it is now very difficult to detect any artificial marking of the stones. For example, Gilbert, who examined the masonry carefully in 1946, wrote "there is little sign of saltire ornament on either arch today", although he added that if the carving had in fact existed, it could possibly have been of original date.⁴

As will be seen from Plate XXXIII, it is still possible to detect this ornament when the masonry is illuminated by a strong, low, side light. It appears on the relieving arch, and

¹ G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England* ii (2nd ed., 1925), 142ff., also citing C. C. Hodges; E. C. Gilbert in AA⁴ xxiv (1946) 162.

² C. C. Hodges, *The Reliquary* (1893), quoted by Baldwin Brown, *op. cit.*

³ NCH x (1914) 187.

⁴ AA⁴ xxiv 162f.

not on the main arch. There are nine stones in this arch, counting the doubtful "keystone", and if they are numbered clockwise from the left, the saltires appear distinctly on nos. 1, 2, and 9, and more doubtfully on nos. 3 and 8. The ornament is incised and rather coarsely executed.

In view of the very early date of this monument, and the present uncertainty about the sculpture due to its advanced state of weathering, we feel it desirable to record its existence, and as far as possible its form, so that a more detailed assessment of its architectural significance can be made.

Part 2: Discussion. By D. Parsons.

From the typological point of view there is nothing from the Saxon period with which to compare the saltire ornament, so the problematic dating must depend entirely on the evidence presented by the fabric which includes the stones in question.

Three possibilities suggest themselves for the origin of the ornament:

(a) the saltires may have been carved with the stones already *in situ*, since they are incised and not in relief;

(b) the stones may have been deliberately carved for use in this position, either as a band of decoration pure and simple or as a decorated relieving arch;

(c) the stones may represent decorative material carved previously and used elsewhere, and included in the fabric after removal from its original position.

Suggestions (a) and (b) seem to be invalidated by the structure of the arch. With its extremely wide mortar joints, it hardly lends itself to any sort of ornament in a continuous band, which the saltire by its very nature seems to require, as, for example, on the reconstructed chancel arch at West Lilburn,⁵ of early Norman date. Thus the stones *in situ* would not invite this kind of treatment, nor would one expect

⁵ Illustrated in AA⁴ x plate XV, facing 222.

a mason to carve deliberately a series of saltires only to separate them in this rough manner. Further, it is unlikely that the stones have any structural significance in themselves: the lack of care in the shaping and fitting of them speaks against their having been intended as a relieving arch. In their loose connexion they can hardly be said to perform this function, nor do they penetrate the wall to any depth. On the interior of the tower there is a segmental arch above the line of the smaller blocked arch shown in Plate XXXIII, but this does not correspond in shape or position with the arch on the exterior.⁶ The core of the wall appears to be random rubble.

Suggestion (c) poses the question of why and when the re-used material was included in the present structure. Examination of the tower has convinced me that the stones are part of a filling inserted when the lower arch was fitted, presumably as a W. door, and the upper line of the carved stones represents the extrados of a previous and larger W. entrance arch. The reduction in size of the W. entrance I believe to have been necessitated by the fitting of an upper floor at a level (indicated by the blocked doorway in the N. wall of the tower) which would have interfered with the larger opening. Assuming that the rebuilding took place at some time in the Saxon period, the re-used material can only be assigned to an earlier Saxon or a Roman date.

That the stones are of Roman origin is quite possible in view of the amount of Roman material incorporated into the Saxon fabric,⁷ and we can only ask the experts in this field for possible parallels for this type of ornament. I am inclined to accept a Saxon date for the saltires, and suggest that the stones may be material from the original W. doorway made available by the reconstruction; I am encouraged in

⁶ G. T. Rivoira, *Lombardic Architecture*, Oxford, 1933, vol. ii, p. 159, fig. 573. This illustration shows the interior of the tower before the fitting, sometime after 1917, of the modern window. The segmental arch is visible immediately below the sill of the single-splayed window; the facing stones and arch below this have now been removed.

⁷ G. Baldwin Brown, *op. cit.*, 142-3.

this belief by the rough sculpture on the ends of the horizontal arms of the finial cross, of uncertain Saxon date, which is now kept in the S. transept of the church.⁸ The decoration here may provide a parallel to the carving under discussion, since it consists of a rough saltire formed of narrow parallel incisions, which do not, however, meet at the centre, leaving a baulk similar to the ones visible on the stones in the W. wall. If these stones had been similarly treated, then it is possible that the narrow ridge between the incisions has weathered to form the broader grooves of which the saltires now consist.⁹

Thus the dating of the saltires depends on the date of the original construction and the chronology of the rebuildings of the complex tower. These dates, sometimes implied or assumed in the past, are called into question by the consideration of the saltires, and it is obvious that a complete re-assessment of the Saxon elements in the building is needed. We must be grateful to the writers of the first part of this note for drawing attention in this way to what promises to be a most interesting problem, and I hope to have the opportunity of attempting to re-assess the structure and substantiate my theories at a later date.

⁸ Figured in C. C. Hodges, *op. cit.*, p. 14, and *NCH* x (1914) p. 193, fig. 8.

⁹ Since completing this paper, my attention has been drawn by Miss Rosemary Cramp to a cross-shaft fragment from Bothal, Northumberland, to which she would give a tenth-century date. One face of this fragment, which is now in the Museum of Antiquities, Newcastle, shows one and a half panels of incised saltire ornament.