

The Hexham Carved Stones

The upper photograph shows the stones "full-face" while the lower one shows them obliquely in order to indicate their depth, particularly the depth of carving of the angel's wing. Both photographs include a scale of inches.

### III.—REDISCOVERY OF IMPORTANT ANGLO-SAXON SCULPTURE AT HEXHAM

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Important fragments of early Anglo-Saxon sculpture were found in March 1907 during excavations in preparation for the building of the present nave of Hexham Abbey. They were described by Savage and Hodges as forming two "terracotta plaques" of which one represented a crucifixion while the other represented an ecclesiastic vested in a chasuble.<sup>1</sup> These writers, who had been directly concerned with the discovery of the fragments "in a hole about 4 ft across, about the centre of the nave, and near its west end", said that each plaque would have been originally about 2 ft 6 in. high, about 1 ft to 1 ft 8 in. wide, and about 3 in. thick. Later, the sculptures were described by Hodges and Gibson as being carved on oolite slabs that showed traces of paint.<sup>2</sup> They mentioned the same sizes as had been mentioned in the earlier description and they compared the crucifixion (as had Savage and Hodges) to a drawing in the Durham Cathedral Manuscript A. II. 17.<sup>3</sup> In this later account the authors said that there were ten fragments of which two be-

<sup>1</sup> E. S. Savage and C. C. Hodges, *A record of all works connected with Hexham Abbey* (Hexham, 1907), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Hodges and J. Gibson, *Hexham and its Abbey* (Hexham, 1919), p. 84. The present survivals are definitely carved on oolite, and there is no trace of paint now to be seen. That they were interpreted as terracotta in 1907 (as recorded in the text referred to in note 1) suggests that at that time the stones were covered in paint.

<sup>3</sup> In both volumes the authors wrongly call the manuscript the "Durham Cassiodorus". It is in fact a Gospel book. Its date may be taken as not later than the eighth century. O. K. Werckmeister, "Three problems of tradition in pre-Carolingian figure style", *Proc. Royal Irish Academy*, 63 C 5 (1963), pp. 167-189, regards the Durham Gospel Book A. II. 17 as having been executed in the same scriptorium and probably by the same scribe as the Echternach Gospels, about 700 A.D., see specially pp. 179 and 184-5. The crucifixion is illustrated in Plate XXXIII of that paper.

longed to the crucifixion. The earlier description had been even more precise, saying that the largest fragment showed the expanded base of the cross and the greater part of the feet, while there was in addition a smaller piece carrying the upper part of the dexter arm of the cross and also a third piece with the termination of an angel's wing which met a raised margin of curved shape. The writers therefore compared the composition of the picture closely to that of the Durham Gospel, where the cross has a pair of angels in the spaces above the arms and where it has an expanded base closely matched by the surviving fragment.

The earlier account by Savage and Hodges described the remaining stones (presumably therefore seven in number) as seeming to have "borne a figure of St Wilfrid". They said that only the central part remained, 11 in. long and  $7\frac{1}{2}$  in. wide, and they said that the chasuble was of the same form as that embroidered upon the stole made to the order of Queen Aelflaed (d. 916) for Bishop Frithestan (Bishop of Winchester, 909-931).<sup>4</sup>

Neither of these first two accounts of the carved stones gave any illustration of them, but drawings were later published by Collingwood.<sup>5</sup> It should, however, be particularly noted that Collingwood showed only a crucifixion, and not an ecclesiastic vested in a chasuble; moreover, although the earliest account by the finders recorded that the crucifixion consisted of two fragments, with a third for the angel's wing, Collingwood's drawing shows five stones in the crucifixion and a sixth for the angel's wing. Finally, Collingwood's collection of six stones (in place of the ten originally recorded) did not include the "upper part of the dexter arm of the cross" as recorded by the original finders, and it indicated that he thought of the arms as of plain

<sup>4</sup> The chasubles shown on these pieces of tenth century embroidery are on the maniple rather than on the stole; see *The Relics of St Cuthbert*, ed. C. F. Battiscombe (Oxford, 1956), Plates XXXIII and XXXIV.

<sup>5</sup> W. G. Collingwood, "Early carved stones at Hexham", *Archæologia Aeliana*, 4th series, Vol. I (1925), pp. 65-92; and *Northumbrian Crosses* (London, 1927), p. 27, fig. 36.

rectangular shape whereas the finders referred specifically to "the expanded terminations typical of the period".

Collingwood did not record where he saw the stones, nor where they were kept for safe storage; and although I made repeated enquiries at Hexham Abbey between 1938 and 1961 I was unable to discover anyone who had knowledge of their whereabouts.

In September 1965 in correspondence with Mr. C. A. Thomas of Edinburgh University about ornamentation of early churches I was told by him of the statement which I had previously overlooked in the book by Hodges and Gibson to the effect that the ten stones were kept in a box in the vestry.<sup>6</sup> I immediately wrote to Hexham; and by the kind offices of Mr. S. P. Harrold and of the Rector, The Reverend R. Lemmon, I was enabled not only to see but to take away for detailed study the six stones that still survive, namely the six illustrated by Collingwood in 1925 and 1927. We could find no trace of the other four which presumably had been lost by the time Collingwood saw the stones in 1925.

Detailed study of the stones convinces me that Collingwood was wrong in assembling them all into a single composition. In fact the crucifixion scene now consists only of two stones of which one shows the base of the cross and Our Lord's feet, while the other shows the border of the panel, and the tip of the angel's wing. The remaining four stones represent a separate composition which seems with little doubt to be the chasuble of an ecclesiastic, as originally reported in 1907.

Before describing in more detail the arguments that lead me to this conclusion, it is important to point out once more the very striking similarity reported in 1907 between the base of the cross and that in the Durham Gospel. The widened foot (and the widened arm referred to by the finders but now lost) are important factors in assigning an early date to this sculpture, for they occur not only in that eighth century

<sup>6</sup> C. C. Hodges and J. Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

Gospel Book but also in other early sculpture.<sup>7</sup> The two fragments which survive from the Hexham crucifixion are rather too fragmentary to justify a reconstruction of the original sculpture. But if one may make a bold assumption that the sculpture was closely similar to the Durham manuscript (as is suggested by the shape of the base of the cross) then it becomes possible to make a reconstruction as shown in my Fig. 5. It will there be seen that the surviving fragments allow us to determine the size of the whole composition as having been about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  ft tall by 3 ft wide, i.e. appreciably larger than was suggested in the first instance by Hodges and Savage.

It should next be explained why I so confidently assert that of the six surviving pieces four belong to one sculpture of an ecclesiastic in a chasuble while the other two represent the base of the cross and part of an angel above the arm of the cross. First we may note that the panel of the crucifixion consisted of a thin background (varying from 1 to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. in thickness) surrounded by a frame which stood about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in. in total thickness from the back of the panel and which still survives on the fragment that carries the angel's wing. The cross itself stands forward from the background about  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. and the surviving parts of the feet stand forward a total distance of about 3 in. so that in the manner so common in Anglo-Saxon carving the whole sculpture seems to have been made by cutting back a flat slab so as to leave the carving itself in relief surrounded by a border that stood forward almost exactly the same amount. By contrast with this *intaglio* character of the crucifixion, the four other stones showing drapery are bounded by well dressed faces on their two sides so that they represent a panel 8 in. wide, of an almost uniform thickness of 3 in., with a very slightly raised

<sup>7</sup> For example, at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth, see W. G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses*, fig. 19; or in the bronze plaque found at Athlone in County Westmeath, see F. Henry, *L'Art Irlandais* (La-Pierre-qui-Vire, Yonne, 1963), Vol. I, pl. 46. A similar formation is shown on the arms of the early cross inscribed upon a rough stone on the island of Duvillaun, F. Henry, *op. cit.*, pl. 51.

border up each side. The well dressed faces run parallel up the two sides of the carving, and they extend from the front to within 1 in. of the back of the stones, so that this carving must have represented a pilaster or vertical feature bounding or dividing a series of other panels of sculpture. This character of a pilaster is made particularly clear by the way in which the small flat fillet or border runs up each of the side faces of this group of stones.

My support of the interpretation by Hodges and Savage, and my consequent disagreement with Collingwood, does not depend, however, only on this evidence of the character of the stonework. The garment represented by the four stones in question seems to me very clearly to be the hanging front of a chasuble rather than the folds of drapery that are shown on such draped figures of the crucifixion as are known to me. The closest analogue in stone that I can advance for this sculpture of a chasuble is the ecclesiastic on the back of the crucifixion at Cashel in County Tipperary, Eire. Fig. 2 shows for comparison drawings of that ecclesiastic; Fig. 1 is an outline copy of the drawing of Pope Sixtus as shown on the tenth century Durham maniple;<sup>8</sup> and Fig. 6 shows my reconstruction of the panel determined by the four Hexham stones.

I have had the stones carefully examined and it is reported that they are oolitic limestone of Jurassic age, almost certainly from a British locality. The place of origin of such stone in Britain lies in a belt extending roughly from the north-east of Yorkshire in a south-westerly direction through Northamptonshire to Bath and Portland.<sup>9</sup> Thus the stone is not indigenous in the Hexham area but might have come, as was suggested by Hodges and Gibson, from Northamptonshire where St Wilfrid had other possessions.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It will be remembered that when the stones were first discovered in 1907 Savage and Hodges compared the garment represented on these stones to the chasubles shown in this Durham needlework.

<sup>9</sup> The geological report on the stone and its possible place of origin was provided by Dr. F. W. Cope, Professor of Geology in the University of Keele.

<sup>10</sup> C. C. Hodges and J. Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

It should, however, be emphasised that this is not in any way proven by the facts as known at present.

As to the date of the carvings, the most striking evidence in favour of an early eighth century period is given by the expanded foot of the cross which compares so closely with the Durham manuscript A. II. 17 and with the plaque from Athlone.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that this would be consistent with the suggestion made by Hodges and Gibson that the stones probably formed part of the contribution made to the church by Acca (bishop of Hexham 709-732) who "ennobled the structure of his church, which is dedicated in honour of the blessed Apostle Andrew, with multifarious adornments and marvellous works".<sup>12</sup>

### POSTSCRIPT

Since this note was written I have become convinced that two further small fragments belong to the Crucifixion, perhaps both as parts of the border or perhaps one as border and one as part of an end of the cross. I have therefore mounted them for display with the Crucifixion, making four stones for it and four for the cleric. I also think that traces of a reddish brown paint are to be seen on the faces of some of the stones, and that this may explain why the original finders at first described them as terracotta.

<sup>11</sup> The Athlone plaque and the Durham manuscript A. II. 17 are both included by Dr. F. Henry in Vol. I of her *Art Irlandais*, i.e. they are placed by her before 800. See also my note 3 for a recent opinion that the Durham manuscript was executed *early* in the eighth century.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Book V, ch. 20. See the translation by D. Whitelock, *English Historical Documents* (London, 1955), p. 680.

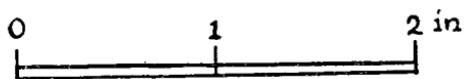
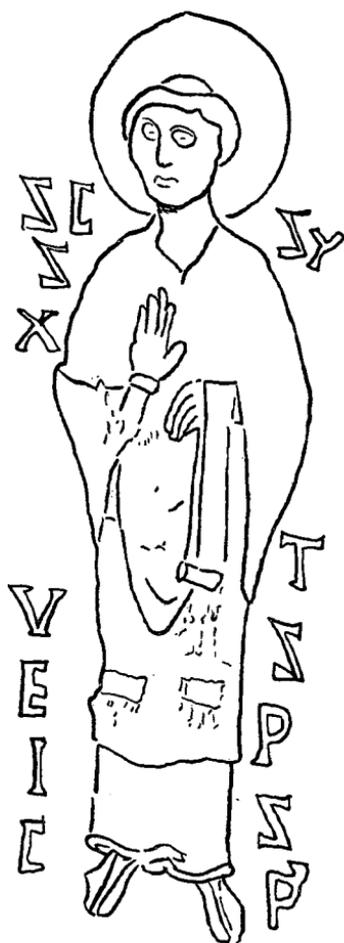


FIG. 1. POPE SIXTUS, AS SHOWN ON THE  
10TH CENTURY DURHAM MANIPLE

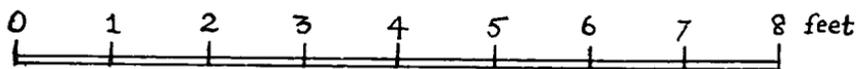
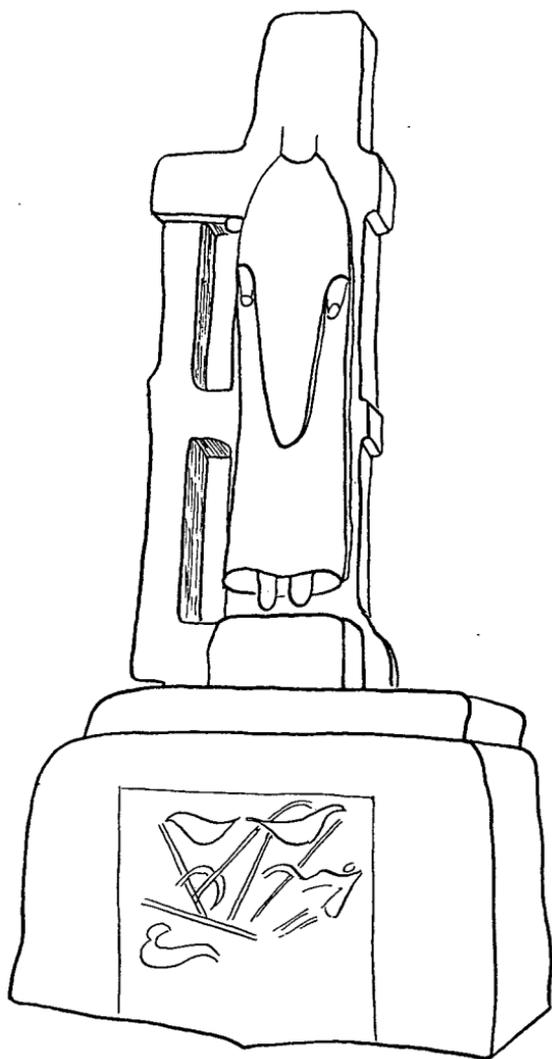
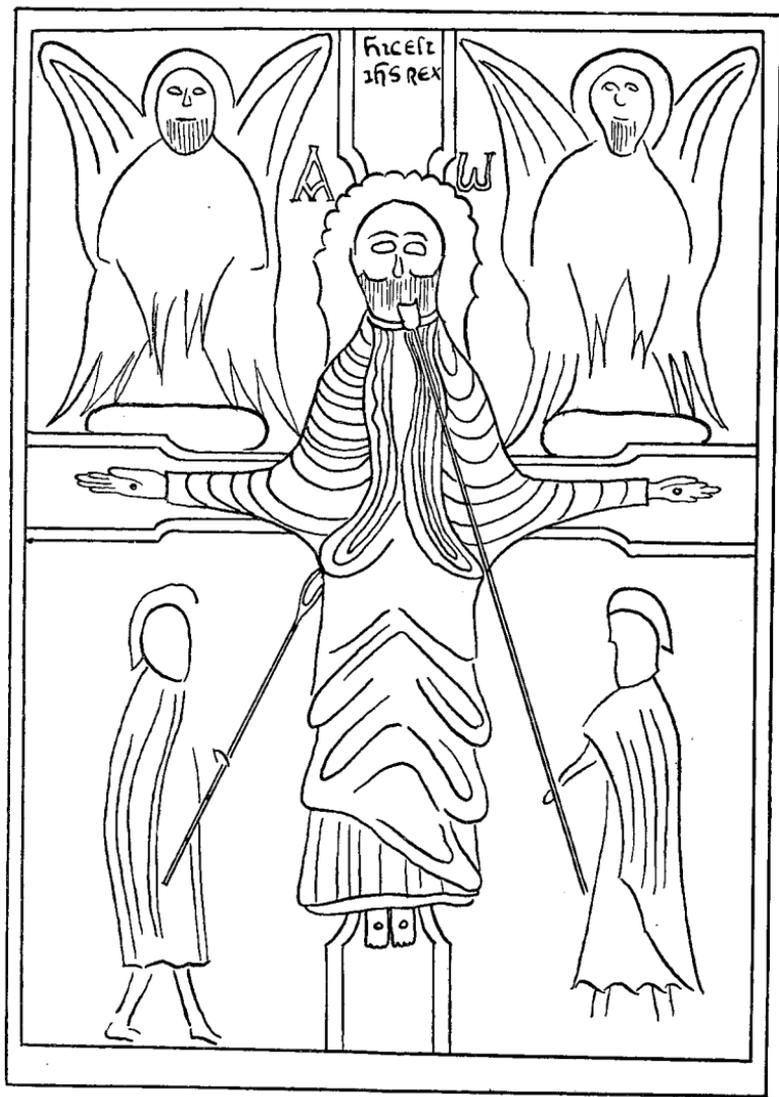


FIG. 2. ECCLESIASTIC, COMMONLY REGARDED AS ST. PATRICK, ON THE BACK OF THE CROSS ON THE ROCK OF CASHEL, CO. TIPPERARY.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 in.

FIG. 3. LINE DRAWING OF THE PRINCIPAL FEATURES OF THE CRUCIFIXION, FOLIO 38 (3<sup>v</sup>) IN THE DURHAM GOSPEL BOOK (A. II. 17). THE SIZE OF THE PAGE IS SPECIFIED IN THE CATALOGUE AS 13½ IN. BY 10½ IN. (344 MM. BY 265 MM.), WITH THE TEXT COVERING AN AREA 10.2 IN. BY 7.7 IN. (257 MM. BY 195 MM.) (SEE P. MCGURK *Latin Gospel Books from A.D. 400 to 800*, p. 29)

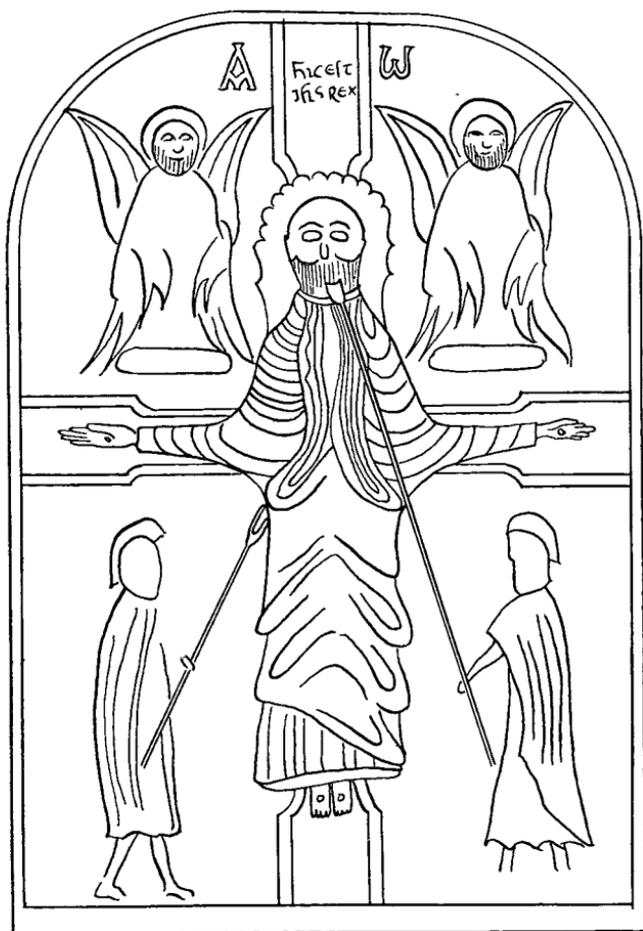


FIG. 4. MODIFIED RE-DRAWING OF FIG. 3 TO GIVE ROUNDED SHOULDERS TO THE PANEL

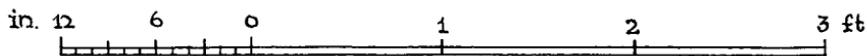
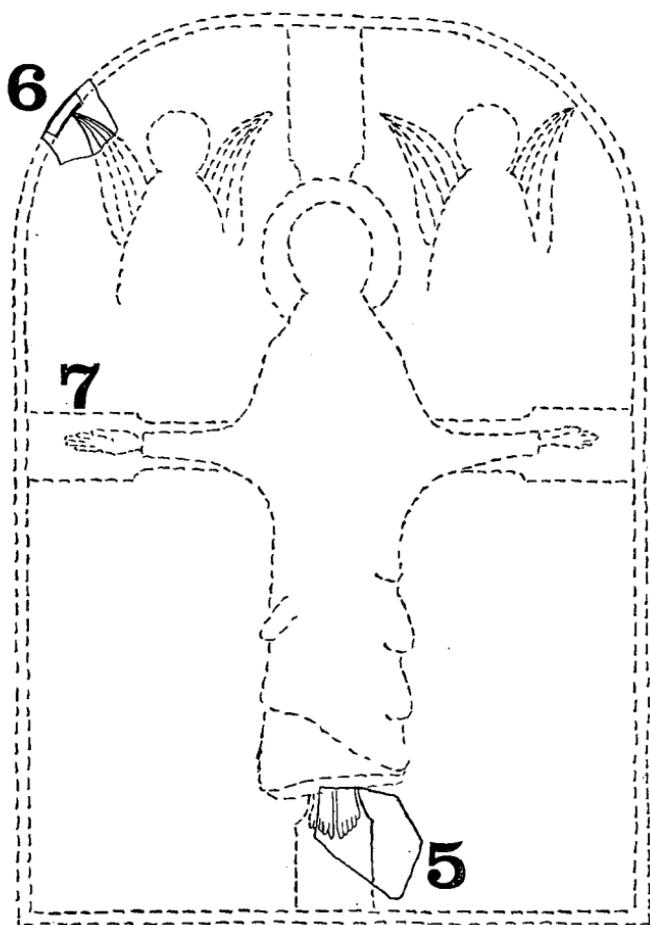


FIG. 5. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HEXHAM CRUCIFIXION PANEL, BASED UPON FIG. 4. THE SURVIVING STONES, MARKED 5 AND 6, ARE SHOWN IN FIRM OUTLINE. THE RECONSTRUCTION IS DOTTED, AS ALSO IS THE LOST STONE 7 WHOSE SIZE IS NOT KNOWN

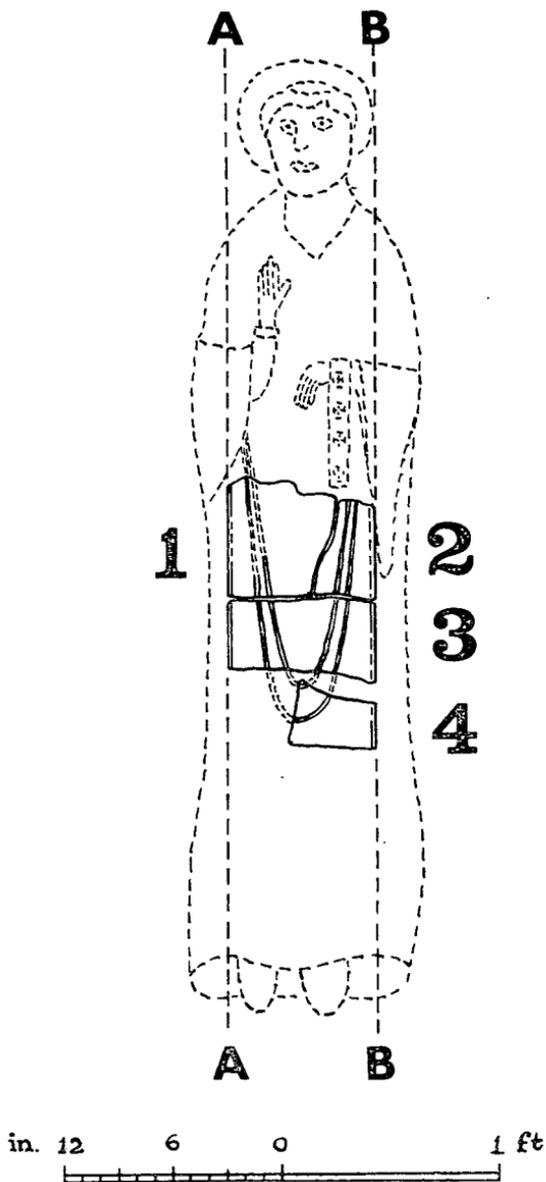


FIG. 6. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HEXHAM ECCLESIASTIC. THE SURVIVING STONES MARKED 1, 2, 3, AND 4, ARE SHOWN IN FIRM OUTLINE. THE RECONSTRUCTION FOLLOWS CLOSELY ON THE DRAWINGS OF THE DURHAM MANIPLE (FIG. 1) AND THE CASHEL CROSS (FIG. 2). NOTE THAT THE HEXHAM PANEL IS BOUNDED BY THE LINES AA AND BB WITH A SMALL FLAT FILLET OR BORDER RUNNING ALONG THE EDGE OF THE PANEL ON EACH OF THESE SIDES. IT MUST THEREFORE HAVE BEEN A PILASTER OR A BOUNDARY OR JUNCTION STONE FOR A SERIES OF PANELS SUCH AS THE CRUCIFIXION