

V.—BISHOP ACCA AND THE CROSS AT HEXHAM¹

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In the search for some discernible pattern of development in the seemingly often confused wealth of Pre-Conquest sculpture, art historians have almost invariably had recourse to three pieces for which historical contexts have been at different times postulated: the Bewcastle and Reculver Crosses, and the so-called Acca Cross from Hexham. But serious doubt must be cast on the real chronological value of any of these pieces. Of that part of the Bewcastle inscription which was supposed to refer to the Deiran *subregulus* Alcfrith, very little seems now to be legible,^{1b} while Dr. Taylor has recently questioned the architectural premiss which was thought to indicate an early *terminus ante quem* for the Reculver Cross.² It is perhaps timely therefore to reconsider the true character of the Hexham Cross, ascription of which to the grave of bishop Acca is, viewed with proper scholastic rigour, mere assumption.

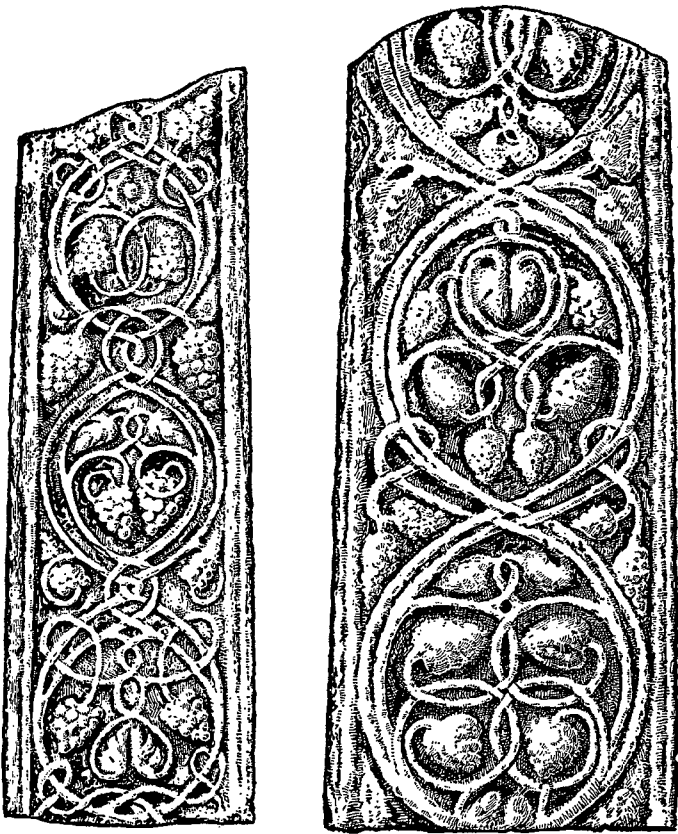
What remains of this Hexham cross are three fragments of a local fine-grained Millstone Grit^{2b} which together represent the greater part of a tall standing cross originally almost 14 feet high. Some 2½ feet of the upper shaft and three parts of the cross-head are missing. The central part of the shaft (fig. 1) was found as a result of the demolition of the eastern chapels of the abbey church of St. Andrew in 1858. The uppermost part of the shaft and lower cross-arm was found later in 1870 when digging foundations on the site of Wilfrid's third Hexham foundation, the church

¹ For general comments and advice I am grateful to Miss R. J. Cramp.

^{1b} Cf. R. I. Page, "The Bewcastle Cross", *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, IV (1960), 36-57.

² H. M. Taylor, "Reculver Reconsidered", *Archaeological Journal*, CXXV (1968), 294.

^{2b} For geological information I am indebted to Dr. G. D. Nicholls.



After W. G. Footitt

Fig. 1. The Hexham cross-shaft. St. Andrew's fragment. (1/7)

of St. Mary, some fifty yards to the south-east of the original St. Andrew's. The large bottom-most part of the shaft was subsequently recovered from Dilston, a mile or two to the east, where it had been in use as the lintel of a cottage door, reduced in thickness by having had one broad face cut away by between 3 to 5 inches.

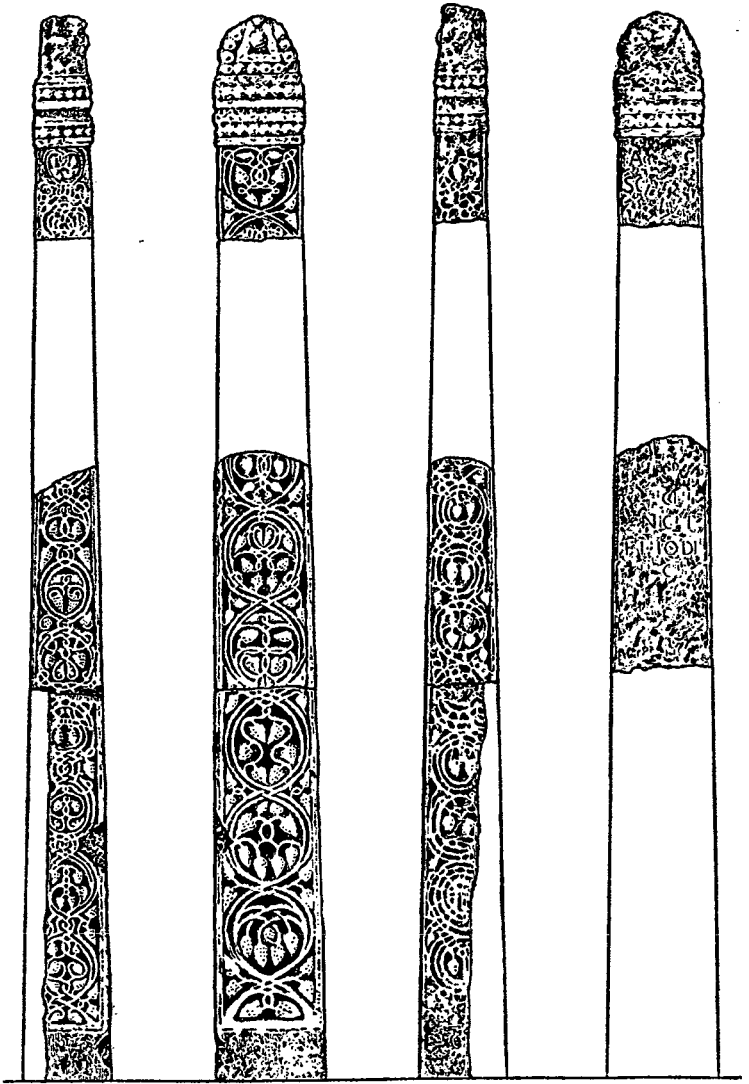
As it stands reconstructed in the south transept of St. Andrew's (fig. 2) it clearly represents the remains of an important artistic monument. The cross-head itself has a

familiar Northumbrian profile and is superimposed by the group of five or seven bosses that, especially in iconoclastic times, was used to represent the stigmata of the crucified Christ. The slender shaft rises to 11 feet, rectangular in section, and tapering from $10\frac{3}{4} \times 14\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the base to $7\frac{1}{4} \times 11$ inches below the head-moulding. The character of the stone seems to indicate that the shaft was made in two sections, joined at some point in the missing length. The two narrow sides and one broad face are covered with a singularly delicate vinescroll tracery. The vinescroll, perhaps best seen in its "inhabited" form on the Ruthwell Cross, is one of the most familiar of early medieval religious motifs, referring to the words *Ego sum vitis vera* . . . (John XV 1-7), a symbol of Christ in union with his church. This Hexham vinescroll, however, a complex and sophisticated abstract form, is far removed from its ultimate Mediterranean prototypes. Differently composed on each face, but executed with enormous restraint and free from any of the usual encumbrances of contemporary Hiberno-Saxon art, it represents a distinctive insular innovation. With no identifiable antecedent, it is clearly the work of a highly confident master, whose Hexham school was to exercise considerable influence over those parts—especially of trans-Pennine Northumbria—not directly under the influence of Jarrow-Wearmouth to the east or of Lindisfarne further north.³

Much, and perhaps all, of the alternate broad face seems once to have borne an inscription, cut in horizontal lines of square capitals, which apparently, as at Bewcastle, decreased in size from top to bottom so as to be read more easily from below. In 1876 Hübner remarked simply *litteris quam maxime evanidis*,^{3b} and very little is legible now. Almost

³ Cf. W. G. Collingwood, "Early Carved Stones at Hexham", *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4S I (1925), 65-76; R. Cramp, *Early Northumbrian Sculpture*, Jarrow Lecture, 1965, pp. 7-8.

^{3b} E. Hübner, *Inscriptiones Britanniae Christianae*, Berlin and London, 1876, p. 73. Dr. Elisabeth Okasha has been kind enough to inform me that she also regards the inscription to all intents and purposes illegible (cf. No. 54, Hexham III in her forthcoming *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, Cambridge).



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Fig. 2. The Hexham cross-shaft reconstructed (1/25)

certainly, however, the panel began with some version of the title A ET Ω given to Christ in *Revelation* I 8, and which commonly accompanied the cross at a time when direct portrayal of Christ was reticent. It is found thus on funerary slabs from Hartlepoons and Kirkmandrine. On the Reculver Cross a figure of Christ himself was apparently labelled EGO SUM ALPHA ET Ω.⁴ Possibly here it occurred in the form described by Hrabanus Maurus:

In cruce namque quae iuxta caput eius posita est sunt tres litterae, hoc est, A, M, et Ω, quod significat initium et medium et finem ab ipso omnia comprehendi.⁵

The second line began SC .. but nothing else can be read until halfway down the shaft where a few letters in what are probably the seventeenth and eighteenth lines might be thought to correspond with a phrase from the Nicene creed, [U]NIG[ENITO] FI[L]IO D[E]I. An extract from the creed is similarly included in the identifying inscription that fills the framework of the Durham Gospels crucifixion.⁶ Certainly a short credal statement of the nature of Christ and the church would have been highly appropriate to this monument, just as the inhabited vinescroll of the Ruthwell Cross is aptly illustrated by extracts from *The Dream of the Rood*, presenting thus both visually and verbally a formal meditation on the power of Christ and his relationship to Creation. The Hexham Cross might thus represent, as a didactic monument like the Ruthwell Cross, a highly integrated artistic whole.

It is easy enough to trace the identification of this Hexham cross with that which the Symeon interpolator described standing at the head of Acca's grave (cited below p. 165). The link was first made by W. H. D. Longstaffe in notes from a field meeting held at Hexham in 1861, shortly after

⁴ G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, VI, London, 1937, p. 169.

⁵ *PL*, CVII 154.

⁶ Durham Cathedral MS. A II 17, f. 38,; cf. C. H. Turner, "Iter Dunelmense", *Journal of Theological Studies*, X (1909), 535.

the first piece was found,⁷ a deduction quite in accordance with nineteenth century eagerness to ascribe artistic monuments to known historical persons. In the same year Haigh had repeated his supposition that the Ruthwell Cross came from the foot of Alcfrith's grave at Bewcastle.⁸ It was commonly supposed that all crosses of this period were memorial crosses, and this beautiful fragment clearly had at one time borne an inscription, so that Longstaffe "can hardly resist the conclusion that we have here the exquisite cross which denoted Acca's burial". It was found, so far as he knew, in just the right place; the St. Mary's fragment had not yet come to light. Longstaffe's remarks are stylistically perhaps a little cavalier; and certainly scholars like Raine and Stuart writing shortly afterwards in the 60s treated his statement with due caution.⁹ But in course of time what may have been intended by Longstaffe simply as a striking hypothesis, was taken up with rather less discrimination by other antiquaries. Hodges, for instance, thought there was little doubt but that the first word of the inscription had been ACCA, and supposed that another Hexham cross—elsewhere said originally to have come from Warden¹⁰—had been that which stood at the foot of Acca's grave.¹¹ The main attribution was subsequently subscribed by such authorities as Hinds, Browne and Greenwell,¹² and so survived as an assumption into the twentieth century.¹³ It

⁷ "Hexham Church", *Archæologia Aeliana*, NS V (1861), 153.

⁸ D. H. Haigh, "The Saxon Cross at Bewcastle", *Archæologia Aeliana*, NS I (1857), 176; *The Conquest of Britain by the Saxons*, London, 1861, p. 37.

⁹ J. Raine, *The Priory of Hexham*, Surtees Society, XLIV (1863), p. xxxiv; J. Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, II, Edinburgh, 1867, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Archæologia Aeliana*, NS V (1861), 158.

¹¹ C. C. Hodges, *Ecclesia Hagustaldensis*, Edinburgh, 1888, p. 50.

¹² A. B. Hinds, *A History of Northumberland III, Hexhamshire I*, Newcastle and London, 1896, pp. 181-2; G. F. Browne, *Theodore and Wilfrith*, London, 1897, p. 258; F. J. Haverfield and W. Greenwell, *A Catalogue of Sculptured and Inscribed Stones in the Cathedral Library, Durham*, Durham, 1899, pp. 53-9.

¹³ Cf. H. H. Howarth, "The Great Crosses of the Seventh Century in Northern England", *Archæological Journal*, LXXI (1914), 56; J. Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament*, London and Copenhagen, 1924, pp. 33, 43; C. R. Peers, "English Ornament in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XII (1926), 50.

gained particular currency through the work of W. G. Collingwood who declared that if this were not Acca's cross it would be "most extraordinary, because none other is forthcoming ... to take the place". And Collingwood, like Hodges, went one step further in identifying another Hexham cross—this time one from the site of St. Mary's, bearing a rather coarser version of the Hexham vinescroll—as that "seen by Symeon" at the foot of Acca's grave.¹⁴ And, stated with varying degrees of care by, for instance, Clapham and Kendrick, this attribution is still generally accepted at the present day.¹⁵

The best account of Acca occurs in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* V 20. Acca seems to have been on the closest of terms with Bede, a frequent correspondent, and the historian's *dilectissimus ac desiderantissimus antistes*.¹⁶ Trained in the school at York, the young Acca early fixed his loyalties in bishop Wilfrid—his constant companion during the long years of exile from Northumbria, and at Rome, where it was, no doubt, that he imbibed his master's taste for ecclesiastical magnificence. Later, once more in England, Acca was to succeed to Hexham, first as abbot and then, on Wilfrid's death in 709, and apparently at Wilfrid's electing voice, bishop. Acca's seems to have been an active episcopate, maintaining Hexham as an important centre of religious learning. He formed there what even Bede described as a particularly large and noble library, and seems to have been an assiduous patron of letters—for whom Eddius Stephanus wrote his *Vita Wilfridi*¹⁷ and

¹⁴ *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age*, London, 1927, pp. 29, 32; *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4S 1 (1925), 76, 78; and cf. "A Pedigree of Anglian Crosses", *Antiquity*, VI (1932), 37-40.

¹⁵ A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest*, Oxford, 1930, pp. 64-5; T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900*, London, 1938, p. 134; N. Åberg, *The Occident and the Orient in the Art of the Seventh Century I*, Stockholm, 1943, p. 51; A. Gardner, *English Medieval Sculpture*, Cambridge, 1951, p. 29; L. Stone, *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages*, London, 1955, p. 16; and most recently cf. E. Mercer, "The Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses", *Antiquity*, XXXVIII (1964), 268.

¹⁶ *PL*, XCI 500.

¹⁷ *MGH, Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum*, VI, 193.

to whom Bede dedicated the poem *De Dei Iudicii* and at least nine theological works.¹⁸ But he seems to have been equally concerned with the fine arts—especially where they directly affected the order and ceremonial of his church. He is said to have completed the three Hexham churches founded by Wilfrid,¹⁹ enlarging St. Andrew's and "adorning it with various marvellous works", and going to great lengths to acquire relics of the saints, setting up special altars to their memory in purpose-built chapels within the main church. He also took care over liturgical regularity, maintaining Wilfrid's interest in singing, and like Wilfrid introducing a Kentish singing-master, and providing the holy vessels, lights *aliaque huiusmodi quae ad ornatum domus Dei pertinent*.

Some time between 731 and 733²⁰ Acca seems to have been driven from his see, to be replaced by Fritheberht—an event perhaps connected with political uncertainty about the time of Ceolwulf's deposition, and possibly due to the same sort of political indiscretion that brought about Wilfrid's own expulsion almost half a century earlier. We know nothing of the events of Acca's exile. William of Malmesbury comments simply *incertum an regressum*.²¹ Perhaps, as Richard of Hexham suggests,²² he visited the new westerly see of Whithorn before dying some time between 737 and 740, when his body was brought to his old church of St. Andrew's for burial *iuxta secretarium suae*. This Hexham tradition is expanded by the interpolator of Symeon of Durham's *Historia Regum*. After a lengthy quotation

¹⁸ Cf. *Opera Historica*, ed. C. Plummer, Oxford, 1896, p. xlix.

¹⁹ Richard of Hexham, ed. J. Raine, *The Priory of Hexham*, Surtees Society, XLIV (1863), p. 18.

²⁰ 731 in the *Baedae Continuatio*, 732 in Symeon of Durham and 733 in Richard of Hexham and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles D, E and F. Similarly Acca's death is placed in 737 by Florence of Worcester and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, and in 740 by Symeon. For such chronological confusion cf. K. Harrison "The beginning of the Year among Bede's Successors", *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, XLII (1968), 193-7.

²¹ *De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum*, ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton, RS, LII (1870), p. 255.

²² Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

from Bede's account of the life of Acca, and before embarking on an account of *plurima vero miracula de sancto Acca etiam vulgo narrantur*, he adds:

Sustollitur sanctus de praesenti seculo xiii Kal. Novembris, cuius perducitur spiritus ab angelis ad bravium supernae felicitatis, corpus vero eius ad orientalem plagam extra parietem ecclesiae Haugustaldensis, quam xxiv annis pontificali rexit dignitate, sepultum est. Duaeque cruces lapideae mirabili celatura decoratae positae sunt, una ad caput, alia ad pedes eius. In quarum una, quae scilicet ad caput est, literis insculptum est, quod in eodem loco sepultus sit.²³

However, although his remains were later to be revered at Hexham together with those of other early bishops, there is no evidence to suggest that Acca was considered a saint at the time of his death. The dissension of at least one clerk reported in the *De Sanctis Ecclesiae Haugustaldensis* attributed to Aelred of Rievaulx may well preserve a quite alternative tradition. Certainly, as Aelred's clerk was not slow to point out, Acca's name appears in no early calendar or office.²⁴

By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period at least, the position of Acca's burial was not considered particularly honourable. Alchmund (767-80), of whom little is known, was believed to have been buried next to him in the churchyard, but unlike other of his eighth century successors, Fritheberht (733-66) or Tilberht (780-9), he was not buried inside the walls of his church, and, unlike Eata who was buried outside the church on the south side, no chapel was raised over his body.²⁵ And it was the obscure Alchmund rather than Acca who was said to have appeared in a vision

²³ *Symeonis Monachi Opera*, ed. T. Arnold, RS, LXXV (1882-5), II, pp. 32-3.

²⁴ ed. Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

²⁵ Cf. Aelred, ed. Raine, *op. cit.*, pp. 196, 199-200; *Miscellanea Biographica*, Surtees Society, VIII (1838), p. 124.

some time in the eleventh century angrily demanding to be moved to a position of honour inside the church.²⁶ Perhaps it was incidental to this that the neighbouring remains of Acca were first translated. They were translated a second time in 1155 when, together with those of Alchmund, Fritheberht, Tilberht and Eata, they were moved to a richly decorated table near the high altar.²⁷ It was from this time that the local *cultus* seems to have arisen.

Now the ascription of this Hexham cross to Acca's grave rests on a series of rather large assumptions, each of which is open to serious question. Symeon's *Historia Regum* is a late work, compiled some four centuries after Acca's death, while the *locus criticus* is itself the interpolation of a Hexham propagandist writing some time between 1113 and 1155, probably concerned to refute Symeon's claim in the *Historia Dunelmensis Ecclesia* that Durham possessed some of the relics of Acca and Alchmund.²⁸ There is no indication of what may have lain behind this particular account. While both Richard and Aelred seem to have been familiar with the material used by the Hexham interpolator, neither mention Acca's cross. That such a graphic detail should have escaped the attention of Aelred, who makes so much of the Alchmund and Acca stories, is particularly surprising. There is no independent evidence of any interest in either Acca or the site of his grave before the twelfth century translation, when monks throughout the length and breadth of England were concerned to identify the remains of their revered founders, and so incidentally to raise the status of their foundations. It was at this time that monks at St. Albans were led by a vision of the Roman St. Alban to discover the remains of his companions in martyrdom, just as with equal confidence others at Glaston-

²⁶ Symeon. *op. cit.*, p. 48.

²⁷ Aelred, *loc. cit.*

²⁸ On the character and possible motive for the Acca and Alchmund interpolations see P. H. Blair, "Some Observations on the 'Historia Regum' Attributed to Symeon of Durham", in *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. N. K. Chadwick, Cambridge, 1963, pp. 87-9, *et passim*.

bury identified by means of an inscribed cross the graves of Arthur and Guinevere!²⁹ While it is clear that some crosses certainly were erected in pious memory of a dead religious, like that Æthelwald set up at Lindisfarne in memory of Cuthbert, the great majority will have been preaching crosses of the type erected by Cuthbert in his lifetime.³⁰ At this time in Northumbria's Golden Age—at least in the north and east of the kingdom—it was customary to identify graves by small "pillow-stones". And while inscribed standing crosses were by no means unusual, such fine examples as those at Ruthwell or Rothbury seem to have been essentially didactic monuments, bearing extracts from religious works or simply descriptive labels. What little remains of the Hexham inscription might be thought to be more instructive than memorial in character. But whatever the Hexham monks may or may not have taken for a memorial to Acca, they thought so little of it that they allowed it to be broken down and destroyed at the very height of the *cultus*, perhaps during one or another of the eastward extensions of the twelfth century.³¹ Normally said, inaccurately, to have been found "at the east end" of the church, it has been assumed that this one fragment of the cross was found *in situ*, since Longstaffe used it as the basis for deductions as to the supposed position of the east end of Wilfrid's St. Andrew's. Subsequent excavations have proved this deduction quite inaccurate, however. The most exact account of the fragment's discovery describes its position as on the line of the present east wall.³² This is some 45 yards from the original east end of St. Andrew's, and 30 from what may possibly represent the east end of Wilfrid's second Hexham foundation, St. Peter's—the two churches

²⁹ Matthew Paris. *Chronica Majora*. ed. H. R. Luard, RS, LVII (1872-83). II. n. 302 f; Giraldus Cambrensis. *Opera*, ed. J. S. Brewer et al., RS, XXI (1861-91). IV. p. 47. VIII. pp. 126-7.

³⁰ Symeon. *op. cit.*, I. n. 39; Bede. *PL*. XCIV 777.

³¹ Compare the care taken to preserve "Cuthbert's" cross. Symeon. *loc. cit.*

³² C. C. Hodges. "Anglo-Saxon Memorial Cross". *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle*. 3S X (1921-2), 293.

lying on a single axis, as at Jarrow.³³ The find-spot could hardly be said to have been *iuxta secretarium* of either. But in any case, the fact that one fragment of the cross was found in the earth at the present east end by no means implies that this was the original location of the entire upright monument. By the same token the monument might be said originally to have resided at St. Mary's. But then, the St. Mary's discovery was not made until long after Longstaffe's conclusion was taken for granted. The largest piece of all—the base of the shaft from Dilston—was probably taken long before any nineteenth century rebuilding of St. Andrew's east end, and is much more likely to have been taken from St. Mary's, which had stood ruined and robbed at least since the seventeenth century, than from the still used and sanctified St. Andrew's. But even assuming that the entire upright cross originally stood at this point, there is nothing to indicate either that this was a memorial cross, or that if it was, that it was Acca's.

Of the large number of sculptured fragments remaining at Hexham, there can be little doubt on stylistic grounds that some, including the so-called "Acca Cross", might belong to the middle years of the eighth century. And certainly, this fine monument might well have befitted the grave of some dignitary. But however attractive speculation may be, in view of what depends upon the conclusion in this case, the utmost circumspection is necessary.

³³ Cf. H. M. and J. Taylor, "The Seventh-Century Church at Hexham: a New Appreciation", *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4S XXXIX (1961), 103-134. However, there remains Richard of Hexham's assertion that St. Peter's stood at a rather greater distance (*aliquantulum remotior*) from St. Andrew's than did St. Mary's (Raine, *op. cit.*, p. 15).