

a. The north side of the Saxon wall underlying the later screen-platform. Note plaster adhering to the tooled face of the wall stone which bridges the passage and the lewis hole on the adjacent cover stone.

b. The Saxon wall in the south-west corner of the excavation. In the foreground is the offset underlying the wall and the mortared rubble between the crypt-passage and the wall.



V

EXCAVATIONS OVER ST. WILFRID'S CRYPT AT HEXHAM, 1978

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with a contribution by D. J. Rackham

INTRODUCTION

NO ARCHITECTURAL historian can enter the nave of Hexham Abbey with any sense of equanimity, for the problems posed by this part of the church are notorious.¹ Most writers have been happy to identify the crypt with the subterranean chambers described by Eddius, St. Wilfrid's eighth-century biographer,² and there is also general agreement that the main church of the Anglo-Saxon monastery was on the site of the modern nave.³ Further than this, everything is controversy and speculation, the fruits of the meagre archaeological harvest reaped in 1907/8 when the present nave was erected. Medieval walls and foundations were undoubtedly revealed during those years, and in the earlier clearance of the site, but they were not systematically investigated and the record of what was found has now to be pieced together from a few contemporary photographs, the fitful correspondence of local antiquaries, the (often ambiguous) statements of guide-books, and a composite plan and section traced in 1923 by the architect C. C. Hodges. Understandably, therefore, there has been a great deal of variety in interpreting this information. To make matters worse the documents describing post-Norman building on the site have never been properly assessed: this deficiency is now remedied by Mr. Eric Cambridge in the accompanying paper.

In recent years the possibility of archaeological re-investigation seemed remote. It would have been difficult to justify excavation in a building which was in active liturgical use and there was even less reason for proposing disruptive work when there were widespread doubts as to whether the 1908 builders had left any recoverable evidence of their medieval predecessors. In 1978, however, this frustrating situation changed.

In March of that year the Abbey's architect recommended to the P.C.C. that an area of uneven and fractured paving in the south-east corner of the nave should be lifted and relaid on a new bedding. This proposal was designed to provide a level surface in the nave and to take pressure off the roofing slabs of the south crypt-passage, in which cracks had begun to appear. With the encouragement of the Abbey and Diocesan authorities it was agreed that the work should be preceded by an archaeological excavation and this was carried out in June 1978. A subsequent detailed survey of the crypt revealed traces of further cracking in the roofing slabs of the

HEXHAM - HODGES' PLAN

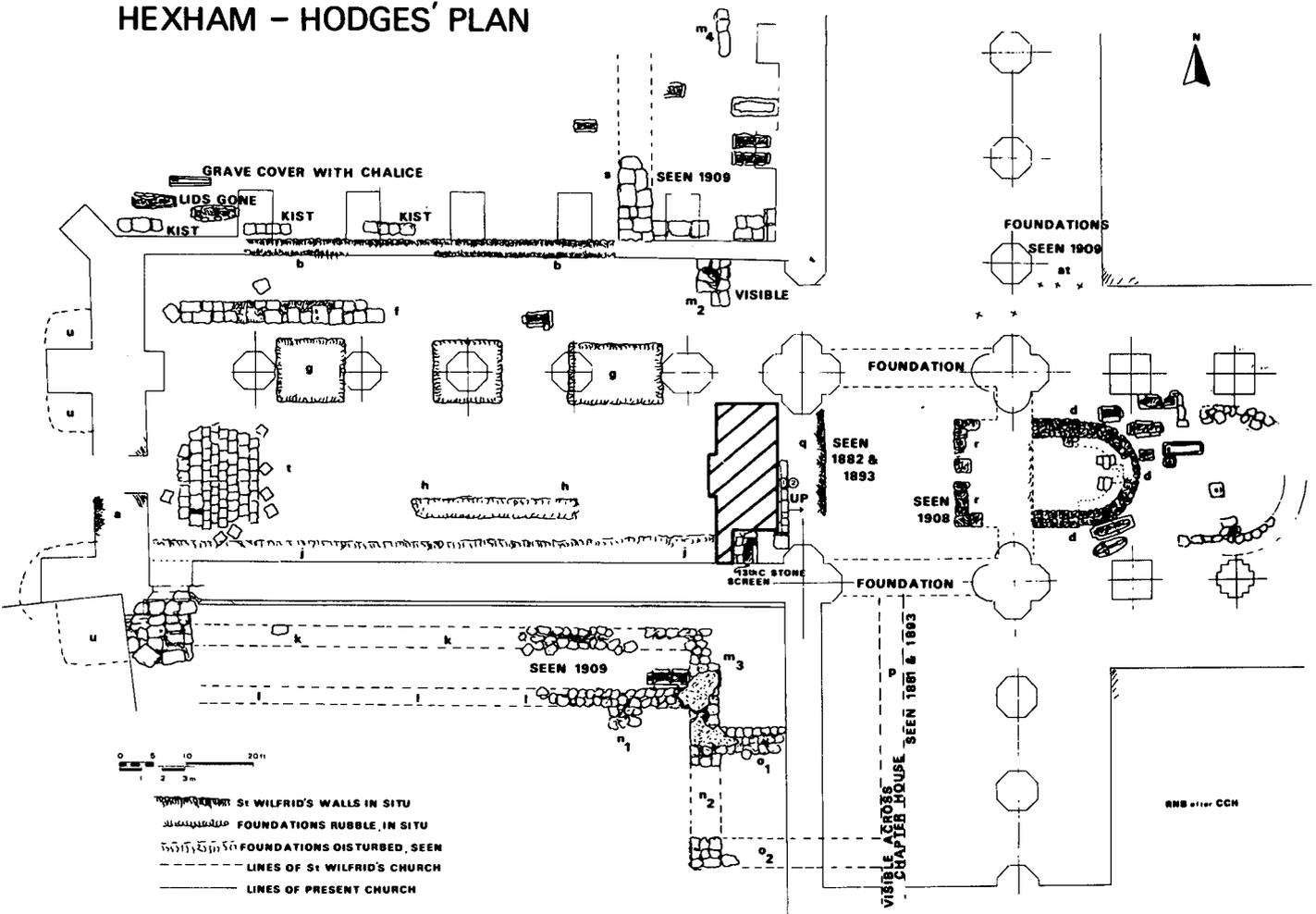


Fig. 1. St. Andrew's Hexham: the excavated area (hatched) in relation to the standing structure and the foundations recorded by Hodges.

north passage as well as signs of movement and falls of plaster in the main crypt-chamber. In order to assess the reasons for this deterioration it was decided to clear the area above and so a second phase of excavation took place in September. Both excavations were funded by the Department of the Environment through the University of Durham and this Society; the work was carried out by the authors and Mr. Eric Cambridge, together with the welcome assistance in September of Mr. Richard Halsey from the Department of the Environment.

The area investigated is shown as hachured in fig. 1 where it has been plotted in relation to the standing structures and the features recorded in the composite plan of 1923.⁴ Effectively the work involved stripping an area across the entire width of the nave between the crossing-step and the front pew. Our excavation was necessarily subject to two limitations which were agreed with the architect: (a) the need to avoid undermining standing walls and piers in a part of the church which has a worrying history of structural failure and (b) the desire to avoid disturbance or destruction of medieval work, both above and below the present ground level. These entirely reasonable restrictions must be borne in mind when reading the following account.

THE EXCAVATIONS

As can be seen from fig. 2 much of the excavated area was covered by a thick raft of modern mortar which incorporated the footings of the 1908 pews.⁵ This raft could not be removed without threatening the stability of the crypt below but it was, nevertheless, possible to investigate on its north side where the mortar thinned and where it has already been cut through in 1974 during repairs to protect the "Geta" inscription.⁶ More important, the raft did not extend to the east of the main crypt-chamber nor to the south of the centre-line of the church: excavation in these sections was naturally more fruitful.

As explained above, the initial reason for excavation was the condition of the paving stones lying around the thirteenth-century screen platform. This paving was generally believed to be of seventh-century date.⁷ After they had been numbered, planned and lifted it was possible to see that the slabs had lain on two distinct types of bedding material (fig. 3). Most of them were set in a fine yellow sand containing modern glass and nails but those marked "ancient paving" on fig. 3 rested on a fine medium brown sandy loam containing mortar and both human and animal bones. This latter group could be identified with the slabs discovered and photographed during the building of the nave in 1907;⁸ the other stones represented modern infilling.

The sandy loam bedding extended to the north of the ancient paving (fig. 3) though here it had been disturbed by the insertion of a modern gas-pipe and covered with recent mortar and rubble. The same bedding appears in the section (fig. 4) as level 19 and some of its associated paving is also preserved there, marked as the heavily hachured 20. The isolated rectangle of sandy loam bedding adjacent to stone 18 marks the position of a large paving stone which is visible in the photograph of 1907.⁹ This slab was presumably preserved in the 1908 floor, enclosed within an angle of

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ROOF OF SAXON CRYPT

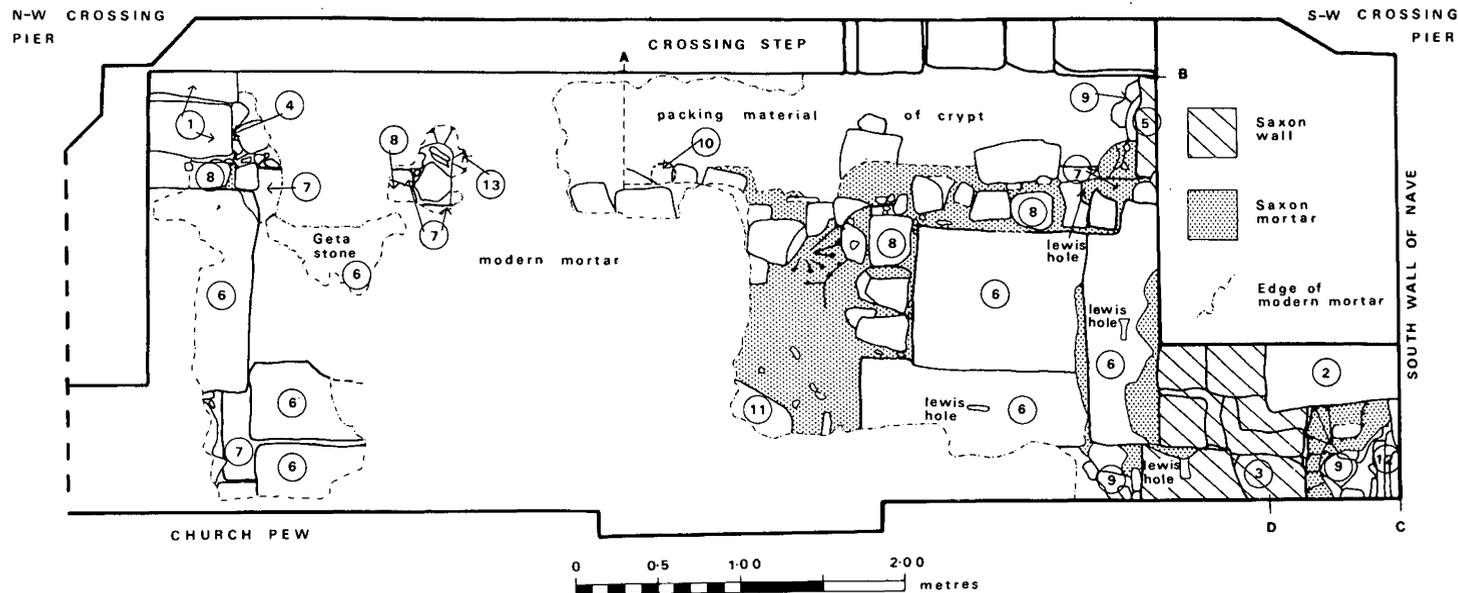


Fig. 2. General plan of excavation.

Key: 1. Roman decorated stones; 2. part of the medieval screen-platform; 3. Saxon wall; 4. foundations of crossing-pier; 5. offset of Saxon wall; 6. roofing slabs of passages; 7. passage walls; 8. mortared packing of roofing slabs; 9. foundations of Saxon wall; 10. post-hole; 11. exposed curve of vault; 12. footings of nave wall.

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STONE PAVING

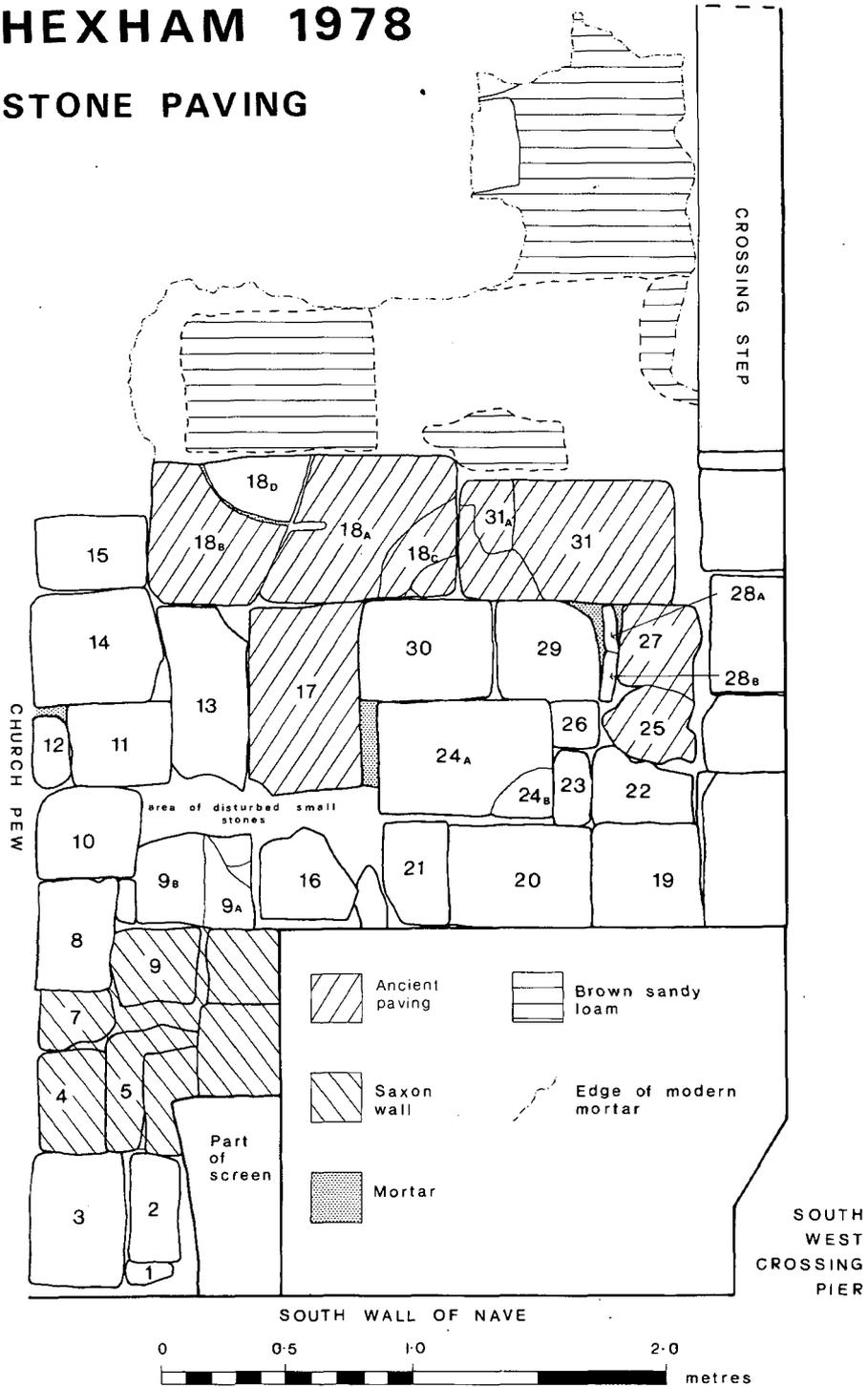


Fig. 3.

the mortar raft, only to be removed at a later date – probably when its uneven surface became a hazard to traffic up and down the nave.

Beneath the sandy loan bedding there was a layer of mortar extending across most of the accessible excavated area: it appears in the section as feature *21ab*. This was relatively thick towards the centre of the nave but only survived vestigially across the roofing slabs of the south crypt-passage. This is presumably the mortar described by Hodges in 1907,¹⁰ but it is important to stress that we found no evidence for his belief that the paving was directly bedded into it.

Three of the roofing slabs of the south passage were revealed within the excavated area (fig. 2 feature 6 and pl. XII, a). One of these slabs covers the turn between the easterly and southerly legs of the passage and was surrounded on two sides by small mortared packing-stones lying on top of the passage wall (feature 8 of fig. 2). The adjacent slab on the south side was marked by a lewis hole. The third roofing slab, set against the lowest course of the screen-platform, also carried a lewis hole but differed from the others in having a convex upper surface which rose some 5 cm to the top of the curve; its eastern edge had been fractured in antiquity.

The most unexpected discovery came with the removal of paving slabs 1, 2 and 3 (fig. 3). It then became apparent that the northern part of the medieval screen-platform was standing on the remains of an earlier stone wall, 0.9 m broad, which ran east-west through the whole of the excavated area (see fig. 2 feature 3, fig. 3 and pl. XII). Where visible the southern face of this wall lay 0.55 m north of the present nave wall. Its sole surviving course had formed part of the paving between the screen and the front pew whilst its north face (still carrying its Roman tooling) had acted as the lower course of the north side of the screen-platform.¹¹

In the western part of the excavation the wall rested on an offset stone (with a lewis hole) which extended 11 cm north from the line of the wall (pl. XII, b). No equivalent offset was found on the south side: here the wall was set directly on massive mortared foundations (fig. 2 feature 9). At the point where the wall passed under the screen-platform these large foundation stones were not only set *under* the wall but were also packed *against* it and spread southwards: it is likely that this can be explained as reinforcement around the turn of the crypt-passage between its southerly leg and its eastern exit.

The wall passed over the southern leg of the crypt-passage on a bridging stone which is stepped up from the adjacent curved roofing slab. Wall and coverstone were linked by a thick layer of plaster/mortar which is carried down the north face of the wall and skimmed across the curved slab. To the east of the crypt passage another offset is visible beneath the wall (figs. 2 and 4 feature 5): this extends the same distance northwards as the other offset but is 17 cm lower.

Because of the restrictions on excavation outlined in the introduction only two areas were available for a deeper investigation of this new wall and of its relationship to the surrounding structures: (a) between the excavated wall and the present nave wall (whose lower courses are medieval) and (b) between the crossing-step, screen-platform and passage. In the former area the modern nave wall was found to rest on three plinth-courses set above foundation stones (fig. 5). These plinths and founda-

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section A-B under crossing

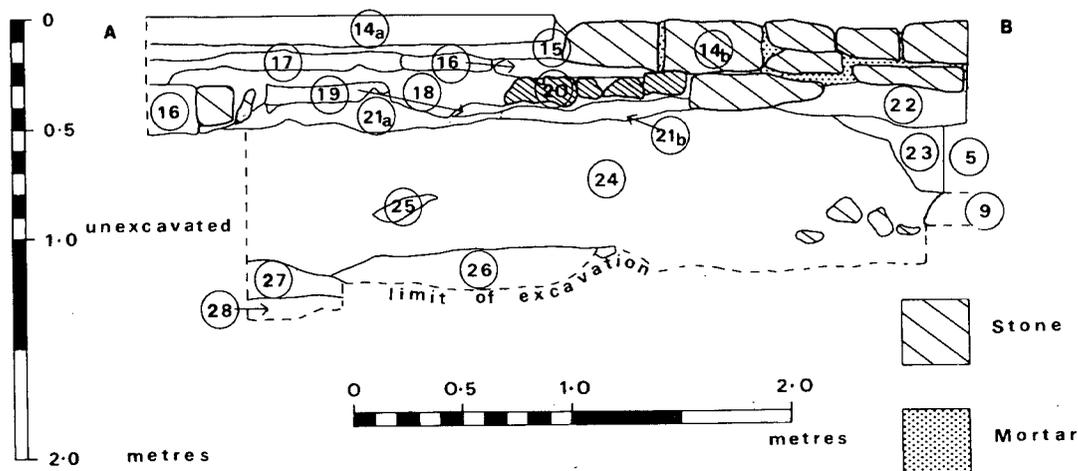


Fig. 4.

Key: 5. offset of Saxon wall; 9. foundations of Saxon wall; 14a. crossing-step, modern; 14b. crossing-step, medieval; 15. concrete facing/bedding; 16. modern concrete; 17. loose modern mortar; 18. loose modern mortar and rubble; 19. fine light/medium brown sandy loam with mortar and bones; 20. paving stones; 21a. loose grey/brown mortar; 21b. loose grey/light brown mortar; 22. light brown sandy loam with small stones and mortar flecks; 23. chocolate-brown sandy loam; 24. stony yellow-brown loamy sand and gravel with mortar; 25. lens of medium brown soft clayey silt; 26. pack of compact medium brown loam, mortar and stones; 27. slightly stony yellow-brown sandy silt loam with mortar; 28. yellow-brown stony sand and gravel.

tions ran alongside, and marginally cut into, the mortared foundations and packing associated with the newly-discovered wall. The fact that the foundations of the present nave wall are later than those of the new wall is confirmed by the fact that both the plinth courses and the foundations of the nave wall stop against the southward spread of the mortared foundations: beneath the screen-platform the lowest course of the existing nave wall mounts over this southward spread.

The area to the east of the south passage could be excavated to a depth just below the foundations of the new wall. Between the passage wall and the crossing-step there was a deep layer of packing material (feature 24 of fig. 4) consisting of a stony, yellow-brown, loamy sand and gravel containing mortar and sandstone chippings.

With its removal it was possible to examine the relationship of wall and passage. The following features were noted (see figs. 2 and 4):

- (a) The offset (5) of the wall was set on foundation stones (9) which rested on the yellow-brown packing (24). The offset butted against the wall of the crypt-passage and was mortared to it by a layer of mortar which passed between the two, over the top of the passage wall (7), beneath and around the packing stones (8) and under the curved roofing slab (6).
- (b) The foundation stones (9) ran against the top course of the passage wall but penetrated below the overhang between this course and the one immediately below.
- (c) A stone-free cut (23) reached from the top of the yellow-brown packing to the top of the foundations (9).

From these observations it is logical to deduce that the wall is of the same build as the crypt-passage which it bridges. Crucial to this interpretation is the fact that the wall's foundations penetrate below the overhang of the top course of the crypt passage. The mortar bonds support this interpretation. The evidence suggests that the building sequence was:

- (a) The building of the passage walls with a progressive back-filling of yellow-brown packing. The foundations of the main east/west wall were laid in position on the packing before the top course of the passage was completed.
- (b) The top course of the passage was laid, partly over the foundations of the main wall and partly against them; the packing was then further raised.
- (c) The edge of the packing was cut back to insert the offset course (thus accounting for the stone-free cut 23) before offset, passage wall and cover stones were all mortared together. It is possible, however, to explain feature 23 as a later disturbance.

The surviving course of the new east/west wall formed part of the paving which was visible when the excavation began (fig. 3 and pl. XII, b). This suggests that the rest of the paving found and photographed in 1907 belonged to a phase later than the crypt-passage and its accompanying wall. We have, however, two possible interpretations. The first is that the surviving section of wall was the threshold of a doorway flush with the contemporary paving adjacent to it. But if this were the case then it would be difficult to explain its highly uneven surface and the lack of wear one would expect if it had served this function. Our first explanation is thus more attractive: the paving *is* later than the wall. The remains of a floor-level which preceded the paving may have been preserved to us in the underlying mortar shown in the section as 21 (fig. 4).

One other feature should be recorded from the area around the south passage. In the mortared foundation/packing between the passage and the offset of the newly-discovered wall there was a fragment of fused clay with a vitrified surface: this represents the only evidence which was recovered for any form of industrial activity on the site.

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section C-D between wall footings

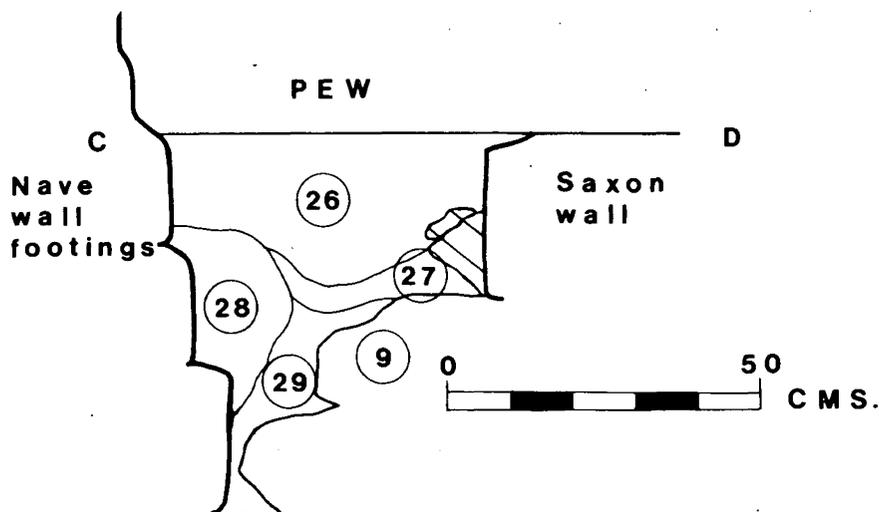


Fig. 5. Section looking west—footings of Saxon wall marked as 9

Because of the mortar raft it was difficult to excavate around and over the north passage, but the outline of some of the cover stones could be planned and the mortar was cut through at two critical points to establish the lines of the passage walls and to determine the relationship between those walls and the surrounding features. As on the south side there were traces of mortared packing stones extending across the top of the passage walls to butt against the side of the roofing stones. To the east of the east wall of the passage there were also traces of the same yellow-brown fill which had served as reinforcement against the south passage. In the north-west corner of the excavation both the mortared stone packing and the yellow-brown packing had been cut through by the foundations of the present north-west crossing pier. These foundations now (and presumably originally) incorporate two large Roman stones decorated with foliate and chequer motifs closely resembling other carvings still to be seen in the Abbey.¹²

To the east of the main crypt-chamber it was possible to excavate to a depth of 1.2 m. Here the main feature was a mass of heavy mortared rubble which apparently buttressed the eastern wall of the main crypt-chamber and the north-east angle of the south passage. This rubble was itself surrounded and covered by the yellow-brown packing. Since the yellow-brown layer was interleaved with mortar trails which extended from the buttressing it seems likely that the packing was added progressively as the crypt-chamber and its support were built up. The section (fig. 4)

shows two layers underlying the yellow-brown packing: as they contained bone and mortar they can also be interpreted as part of the back-fill packed around the subterranean structure.

The mortar of the buttressing merged westwards with a thick creamy mortar which filled the space between the curving vault of the crypt and the north wall of the south passage. A small section of the top of the vault was visible where it had been exposed by the builders in 1908 (feature 11 of fig. 2).

Some Implications

This excavation was the first modern archaeological examination of one of the most important buildings in medieval Europe. Even from the small area which was accessible a great deal of information has been obtained and this demands a fundamental re-assessment of previous interpretations of the early church.

First, the evidence we have assembled suggests that the newly discovered wall and the crypt-passage were of the same build. Since, on documentary grounds, we know that the crypt was built by Wilfrid it follows that this wall gives us our first clear evidence of the seventh-century building. Secondly, a completely new arrangement for the crypt-exit on the south side must also now be envisaged. After turning southwards within the passage the pilgrim or priest would pass under a substantial wall whose lowest course formed the roofing slab over his head. At the point where the passage is now blocked he would turn east towards the exit and the wall on his left-hand side would be formed by the south face of the newly discovered wall. He would therefore emerge outside the main body of the church, either in a separate porticus or in the open air.

We can now establish the ground-level of Wilfrid's period—at least in the area excavated. This cannot have been below the level of the foundations on the south side of the Saxon wall: we conclude that the present nave floor is approximately at the Wilfridian level.

The Saxon wall is 0.9 m wide and its foundations are quite distinct from those of the present nave wall. The position of the foundations suggest that they can be identified with foundation "j" of Hodges plan (fig. 1). If this is the case then we are faced with two alternatives: either this foundation took a more northerly line at its eastern end (since the lewis-hole offset extends beyond the north side of "j" as plotted by Hodges) or, more worryingly, Hodges' plotting in 1923 was inaccurate. We suspect that Hodges was in error and Mr. Cambridge has pointed to other anomalies in the traced plan which suggest that it is not completely reliable in its details.

The excavation raises once more the whole contentious issue of the superstructure on the line of foundation "j" and the relationship between this foundation and the line of foundations conventionally designated as "g".¹³ If the new wall does belong with "j" then it would seem that there was a continuous wall on this line and not an arcade; the nave was thus solid-walled and not basilican.¹⁴ In the accompanying paper Mr. Cambridge shows that Hodges' record is inconsistent in its treatment of

the width of "j";¹⁵ all that we need to stress here is that our excavated evidence confirms Hodges' first conclusion as expressed in 1907.¹⁶ What this means, in effect, is that foundation "j" did *not* underlie the present nave wall and thus can never have been of a width comparable to foundations "g". If we now put together the new information about the Wilfridian ground-level, about the height and width of foundation "j" and about the continuous nature of the wall on that foundation, we can no longer justify any attempt to match "g" and "j" as belonging to the same period. There are thus good grounds for assigning foundations "g" to a post-Wilfridian (and probably post-Norman) phase of building as explained by Mr. Cambridge in his accompanying article.

Though our excavations could not reach natural it is clear that the eastern part of the crypt complex (to generalize no further) was built in a large hole whose eastern edge lies beyond the present crossing-step. There was no trace of a cut close to the crypt-walls such as was found in the other Wilfridian crypt at Ripon.¹⁷ The Hexham hole was progressively back-filled against the rising passage walls and mortared buttressing. Almost as surprising as this (seemingly) uneconomical method of construction is the fact that the main south wall of Wilfrid's church crossed the crypt hole on made-up ground.

Some earlier interpretations of the crossing-step must now be abandoned. The section (fig. 4) shows that the northern part of the step is modern. The southern half is clearly older but nevertheless post-dates the paving (20) and its associated loam bedding (21). We have seen that this paving does not belong to the first phase of building at Hexham: it might be attributed to Eilaf's eleventh-century activity but all we can say with certainty is that it belongs to a period when burials were disturbed in the course of obtaining bedding material. This does not help greatly in dating the older part of the crossing-step but it cannot be part of the seventh-century church¹⁸ and it can certainly never have formed the eastern wall of Wilfrid's building:¹⁹ this must lie somewhere under the crossing.

One final discovery should be highlighted. This is the post-hole, marked 10 on fig. 2, which penetrated some 26 cm from the top of the yellow-brown packing. It could be interpreted as the remains of a scaffolding pole which had once been set against a (hypothetical) east wall. If so, it is strange that no others were found on the same line. Lack of associated holes might also be felt to rule out the possibility of its being part of a ciborium.²⁰ Since the hole is on the centre line of the crypt, and thus presumably also on the centre-line of Wilfrid's church, it seems reasonable to suggest that it once held the shaft of a cross placed behind the altar. The altar would, of course, most fittingly have stood directly over the relics in the crypt and thus to the west of this hole.²¹

A full report on the various mortars will be published at a later date. Plans and notebooks will eventually be deposited in the Joint Museum in Newcastle.

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APPENDIX

Report on skeletal material by D. J. Rackham

<i>Level no.</i> (see fig. 4)	<i>Species</i>	<i>Bone</i>	<i>Side</i>	<i>Part</i>	<i>Age</i>
19	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	metatarsus V		right complete in 2 pieces	Adult
19	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	2nd phalanx		complete	
19	? <i>Homo sapiens</i>			fragment in 2 pieces	
19	? <i>Homo sapiens</i>			(texture of bone suggests human)	
19	large animal	mandible		fragment of lateral plate (?ox)	
19	<i>Bos</i>	maxillary	left	roots broken, medium wear shaft fragment	> 1¼
19	Large ungulate	rib			
21b	<i>Bos</i>	1st phalanx		complete proxima epiphysis present	< 1½-2
21b	<i>Bos</i>	intermediate carpal	left	complete	
21b	<i>Bos</i>	sesamoid		complete	
21b	?Ox	axis		posterior haft, very small specimen	juvenile
21b	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	partial skeleton		} Young woodmice, little wear on teeth	
21b	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	partial skeleton			
28	?Ox	tibia	right	fragment of anterior proxima shaft	

NOTES

¹ The main early discussions are: C. C. Hodges, *Ecclesia Hagustaldensis*, 1888; E. S. Savage and C. C. Hodges, *A Record of all Works Connected with Hexham Abbey*, 1907; C. C. Hodges and J. Gibson, *Hexham and its Abbey*, 1919. For modern treatments see: H. M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, 1965; E. Gilbert in (ed. D. P. Kirby) *St. Wilfrid at Hexham*, 1974, 81–113; R. N. Bailey, "The Anglo-Saxon church at Hexham", *AA*⁵, IV, 1976, 47–67. These are all abbreviated in recognizable form in what follows.

² (ed. B. Colgrave) *The Life of Bishop Wilfred by Eddius Stephanus*, 1927, ch. 22.

³ There is disagreement, however, about how far it extended eastwards.

⁴ The plan is taken from *Bailey 1976*, 49.

⁵ See *Savage and Hodges 1907*, plate XXVIII for plans to carry the pews to the crossing-step.

⁶ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, 46.

⁷ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, 40: they have been followed by most writers since with the exception of *Gilbert 1974*, 94.

⁸ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, plate XLIII.

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, 40.

¹¹ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, plate XLIII—this

shows that most of the upper course of the screen-platform is modern.

¹² *Hodges 1888*, plate 39A.

¹³ The various views about this relationship are summed up by Bailey in *The Archaeological Journal*, CXXXIII, 1977, 199–200.

¹⁴ This agrees with the view put forward by *Gilbert 1974* though the criticism of his argument expressed in *Bailey 1976* remains valid and we do not agree with his interpretation of this wall as containing a passage.

¹⁵ See pp. 165–6 *infra*.

¹⁶ *Savage and Hodges 1907*, 39 and 64.

¹⁷ R. Hall, "Recent excavations in the crypt of Ripon Cathedral", *Yorks. Arch. J.*, XLIX, 1977, 61.

¹⁸ *contra Hodges and Gibson 1919*, 42.

¹⁹ *contra Bailey 1976*.

²⁰ For traces of this feature at Winchester see M. Biddle, "Excavations at Winchester 1969", *Antiq. Jour.*, L, 1970, fig. 13 and H. M. Taylor, "The position of the altar in early Anglo-Saxon churches", *ibid.*, LIII, 1973, 53–4.

²¹ H. M. Taylor, "The position of the altar in early Anglo-Saxon churches", *Antiq. Jour.*, LIII, 1973, 52–8.