

## IX

### Museum Notes, 1989\*

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#### 1. The Miracle Scene on the Rothbury Cross-Shaft

Fragments from a great Anglo-Saxon cross which once stood at Rothbury are now divided between the village church and our Society's collection in the Joint Museum. The high quality of its ornament has attracted much art-historical discussion, most recently by Professor Cramp, but the iconography of individual scenes has not been extensively explored.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that at least one of the scenes has been wrongly identified.

The scene, consisting of three figures, is found at the top of the shaft now on display in the Joint Museum (Pl. XII). Current orthodoxy interprets these figures as depicting two separate events. The left-hand and upper figures are supposed to show The Healing of a (seated) Blind Man, the two characters involved being turned through ninety degrees from the vertical; the woman on the right has been identified as The Woman with the Issue of Blood. There are, however, several objections to these suggestions.

Crucial to the usual interpretation is the notion that two scenes have been presented without any panelled division between them. Yet from what remains of the other scenes on the cross it would seem that all other individual events were separated from each other by border mouldings, as they are on other Anglo-Saxon cross-shafts such as those at Ruthwell, Bewcastle and Auckland St. Andrews. Thus the portrait of Christ in Majesty and the crowd of heads (found at the top of

the shaft) are clearly separated by an inner roll moulding from the carving in the lower arm of the cross-head. Similarly, the scenes at the base of the shaft are set within an inner moulding, just as the plaitwork, also at the base, is contained in a round-topped frame.

Given the fragmentary condition of the cross, a totally panelled arrangement cannot be proved without doubt, but it does seem highly unlikely that two scenes, whatever their identity, would be placed together in the manner proposed for the figures under discussion. It seems probable, therefore, on organisational grounds, that the three figures are all part of a single scene and that all three have been turned through ninety degrees. But to which single scene do they belong? One answer to this question is clear: the Rothbury arrangement does not fit easily with the iconography of either the episode of The Blind Man or with that of The Woman with the Issue of Blood.

In the Bible, Christ is credited with the healing of some half-dozen different blind men, none of whom however, is described as being both seated on his own and healed by the touch of Christ's hand. Generally the blind are described in pairs, following Christ, or seated together by the roadside, and healed by the power of his words.<sup>2</sup> The iconography of the miracle, as it eventually emerged, did not follow these biblical accounts very closely; as seen at Ruthwell it presented a general scene characterised by Christ touching a single figure, or holding up his hand before him in speech. However, there was no pictorial or biblical tradition which featured a blind man, heavily swathed, and seated in a chair as the usual interpretation of the Rothbury scene demands.

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Miracle scene from the Rothbury Cross. Photograph: Audio Visual Unit, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Indeed, the very identification of the chair, claimed as a seat for the blind man, is doubtful. There do not seem to be any examples in early Christian art of high-backed chairs which have a plain arm and a seat decorated with vertical ribbing, or which enclose the figure in the way depicted at Rothbury. When compared with other scenes on the cross-shaft, it seems more likely that the "chair" is in fact a cloth wrapped round the uppermost figure which passes behind his head and falls away at the front; the "arm of the chair" is in fact a fold of cloth. Its heavy ribbing in particular is characteristic of the drapery worn by other figures on the cross; the apostles in the Ascension scene at the base of the shaft, the Majes-

tas Christi, the figures in the arms of the cross-head, and indeed the other two figures in this scene all wear clothing which is marked by heavy tubular parallel ribbing.

Compared with *The Healing of the Blind*, which was one of the most commonly depicted of Christ's miracles, *The Healing of the Woman with the Issue of Blood* was rare in early Christian art. The scene generally showed the woman crouched or kneeling behind Christ and grasping his robes in her hands, while he sometimes turned back to look at, or touch her. What identifies the scene iconographically is the woman grasping Christ's robes. The event is admittedly sometimes featured in the same context as *The*

Healing of the Blind Man; they are found, for example, on the early Italo-Gallic sarcophagi which have a continuous and undivided layout of the scenes. However, the two events are never combined into a single scene as is called for by the orthodox interpretation of Rothbury.

It seems, therefore, that what is depicted on this Cross is a single scene (probably a miracle involving Christ's touch), which includes Christ, a swathed male figure and a woman who appears to be crouched. The only single scene in Christian art which combined three such figures is *The Raising of Lazarus*.

This scene, found on early Christian sarcophagi, ivories and manuscripts, is usually characterized by Lazarus in his shroud standing beside Christ who summons him from the tomb with either a short sceptre or an outstretched hand. Martha, sometimes joined by her sister, is frequently shown kneeling at Christ's feet. The scene at the top of the Rothbury Cross thus has all the basic elements which make up the iconography of the Lazarus scene: Christ, on the left, with Martha kneeling at his feet, commands Lazarus, at the top of the shaft, to rise from the dead. Only the lack of a tomb would seem to tell against this interpretation, yet this feature is also absent from other Lazarus scenes depicted both in early Christian art of the Continent, and in Anglo-Saxon sculpture, such as the small fragment found at Great Glen (Leics.).<sup>3</sup>

There are three other features which need closer examination in the light of this interpretation: namely the awkward arrangement with overlapping figures in differing planes, the fact that Christ touches Lazarus' eyebrow, and the arrangement of the grave-clothes.

The first of these, the disposition of the figures sideways-on to the panel, probably results from an attempt to depict the scene (which normally requires a broad panel), within the narrow confines of the top of the cross-shaft. The solution chosen was to turn the scene through ninety degrees and show it on its side, disposed up the length, rather than across the width of the shaft. One of the side-effects of this rather radical rearrange-

ment was the depiction of Christ with his head half-hidden behind the inner roll moulding. Although unusual this is but one example of the "window-frame" technique used consistently by the Rothbury sculptor throughout the cross-shaft. It is employed, for example, with the crowd of heads at the top of the shaft, for the heads of the angels, and some of the apostles in the Ascension scene, and for one of the crowns held by a figure in the cross-head above the Lazarus scene.

None of this re-arrangement, of course, would have arisen if it had not been felt necessary to include the figure of Martha. It follows that her presence at Rothbury was thought to be important and this is further supported by the way in which she is depicted crouched alongside Christ instead of before or behind him. The thin plain moulding which runs from Martha's head round the outline of her shoulder, has the effect of placing her in the foreground; she appears to be carved on a plane somewhat in front of, and beside, Christ. The manipulation of the scene to highlight her in this way suggests that Martha's presence was deliberately invoked; a point to which I shall return later.

In *The Raising of Lazarus* Martha, when she was present, was normally shown crouched between Christ and Lazarus, and from the sixth century onwards, she was also usually shown kneeling upright and in profile. However, the particular arrangement here at Rothbury suggests that it was based on a fourth- or fifth-century type which showed Martha crouching behind, and partially obscured by Christ, with her head turned up towards him.<sup>4</sup> The Rothbury sculptor (or his model), attempting to highlight Martha, has set her against Christ, but preserved the half-turned face of his early Christian model.

Also unusual is the way Christ touches Lazarus' forehead with his index finger. Generally in such scenes his right hand is held out towards the dead man in a gesture of speech or blessing, and sometimes the hand is positioned so that it appears to touch Lazarus' face,<sup>5</sup> but Christ is never shown touching the dead man's eyebrow with his index finger in

the manner of the Rothbury scene. Elsewhere on the cross-shaft, however, the long index finger is deliberately used to emphasise a particular detail. Thus the *Majestas* figure uses his finger to highlight the importance of the book he holds. This suggests that while the position of Christ's hand touching Lazarus may have been the result of bringing the figures into such close contact within the confines of the shaft, the use of the extended index finger was in fact being deliberately employed to emphasize Lazarus' *closed* eyes; these are in marked contrast to the other eyes on the shaft which, like Martha's, are well modelled and drilled with a deep hole for the pupil.<sup>6</sup> As with the highlighting of Martha, this deviation from the expected iconography suggests manipulation for a specific purpose.

This may also have been the principle which guided the depiction of Lazarus' shroud. Although the dead man was usually shown swathed in grave-clothes they are not elsewhere shown falling away from him, as depicted at Rothbury. Even in later Medieval art of the eleventh- and twelfth-century, where Lazarus is sometimes shown with a bandage trailing from his body, there is nothing which compares with the depiction of the grave-clothes in the Rothbury scene.<sup>7</sup> It would appear that the sculptor adapted a swathed figure of Lazarus to emphasize the fact that he is literally rising from the dead as the trappings of the grave fall away from him.

Three details in this scene (the deliberate inclusion of Martha, the emphasis placed on Lazarus' eyes and the literal arrangement of the grave-clothes) are therefore unusual. A reading of the Church Fathers, however, shows that these were the very elements of the story which were commonly highlighted to bring out the significance of the event as a reference to both the Resurrection of Christ and the future Resurrection of the Dead.

Thus in his commentary on *The Raising of Lazarus*, Augustine built on the biblical account of Christ re-assuring Martha of the Resurrection,<sup>8</sup> to describe her as an example of the faith necessary for salvation and eternal life. He also described Christ's miracle as

proof of the Resurrection, and went on to declare that while Lazarus was dead, he was in fact to be regarded only as sleeping, as is all mankind before the Final Resurrection. Augustine described how, through Christ's intervention, Lazarus was awakened from death and came out of the tomb shedding the bonds of sin. The action was one which demonstrated the need for confession; only after this could one be cleansed from sin and able to enjoy eternal life.<sup>9</sup>

To later Anglo-Saxon writers these same notions were still important. Bede's commentary on *The Gospel of St. John* follows Augustine's explanation of *The Raising of Lazarus* in all its essentials, while at a later date, the *Blickling Homilist* and *Aelfric* developed similar themes. For both, Lazarus' shroud was specifically associated with the bonds of sin that were unbound at Christ's command. They also saw the redemption of the individual from the darkness and bondage of sin, both as dependent on continuous confession, and as a precondition of the Final Resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

Thus it is fairly clear that the iconographic deviations found in the Rothbury depiction of *The Raising of Lazarus*, are all aimed at highlighting these canonical issues; they express the commonplace, orthodox, interpretations of the event. The picture is a commentary in stone on the Resurrection and its implications for mankind within the Church. Lazarus is shown literally being awakened into the light of the living world, from the darkness of death. As he rises the grave-clothes which bind him fall away and he is released, through Christ's intervention, from the burden of sin which entombed him. Mankind is similarly redeemed by Christ, and purged of sin through confession.

It must be noted that while the iconography of this scene stands on its own, it was also part of the larger, overall, iconographical programme of the entire cross-shaft, and this does need further examination. But even now it is clear that the Rothbury sculptor was not only technically competent but was the product of a highly literate and sophisticated Northumbrian milieu. JANE HAWKES

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A full discussion and bibliography of the Rothbury Cross is provided by Cramp (1984, i. 217–21, ii. pls. 211–15).

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 9.27–31; 20.29–34; Mark 8.22–6; 10.46–52; Luke 18.35–43.

<sup>3</sup>Another possible Anglo-Saxon Lazarus scene can be found at Heysham (Lancs.).

<sup>4</sup>See Milburn (1988, pls. 34, 36–9) for C4th. examples of Martha behind Christ, and crouched at his feet with her face half-turned. See Schiller (1971, pl. 566) for the Lazarus scene in the C6th. Augustine Gospel, which shows her kneeling upright and in profile.

<sup>5</sup>Eg. the C9th. Homilies of St. Gregory Nazianzus (Rice 1963, ills.70).

<sup>6</sup>Normally Lazarus' eyes are shown open in scenes of his Raising but on an early C4th. Roman sarcophagus he is found with his eyes apparently closed (Schiller 1971, pl. 561). Thus, if this detail at Rothbury is the result of copying from a model, the iconography of the source was probably of the same date and provenance as that which inspired the positioning of the figures and Martha's crouched posture.

<sup>7</sup>C11th. wall painting at Monte Cassino; C12th. Barbarini Ps. (Schiller 1971, pls. 577, 568).

<sup>8</sup>John 11.20–7.

<sup>9</sup>Augustine "Tractate 49" (*P.L.* 35, 1756–7). See also Hilary of Poitiers "De Trinitate VI.47" (*P.L.* 10, 195) and Ambrose "De Excessu Fratris sui Satyrii II.77–9" (*P.L.* 16, 1395–6).

<sup>10</sup>Bede "Expositio in S.Joannis XI" (*P.L.* 92, 777–8); Blickling Homily 2 (Morris 1967, 75); Aelfric "Dominica Prima Post Pasca" and "Dominica XVII Post Pentecosten" (Thorpe 1844, 234, 496, 498).

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## 2. A Roman Bronze Openwork Buckle from Corbridge

The subject of this note came to my attention whilst I was examining the Roman military metalwork housed in the Department of Archaeology's storeroom, Newcastle University.<sup>1</sup> The buckle and an associated object, possibly the tongue (fig. 1), were contained in an envelope, on which it was recorded that they were found in the south extension of Site XLVII, Corbridge, on the 5th of July 1956.

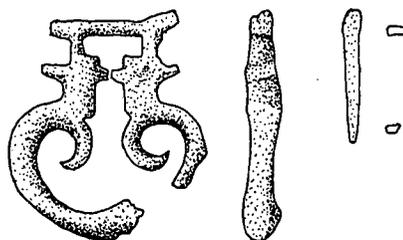


Fig. 1. Openwork buckle from Corbridge. Scale 1:1.

The buckle (Acc. No. 1906.20), which is of cast bronze, has a length of 30 mm, a maximum width of 26 mm, and a maximum thickness of 5 mm. It has a semi-circular openwork loop, inside of which two scrolls curl outwards from the base. Projecting centrally from the rear of the loop is a rectangular extension, from which four knobs protrude. The detached ?tongue is 17 mm long, with a maximum width of 2.5 mm, and a maximum thickness of 1 mm.

Exact parallels for this buckle appear to be lacking, although in both size and general style, many comparable examples can be cited, comprising three distinct groups: those with a rectangular extension from the semi-circular loop: Pfunz,<sup>2</sup> and Vindolanda;<sup>3</sup> those with a triangular extension: Zugmantel,<sup>4</sup> Chester,<sup>5</sup> Osterburken,<sup>6</sup> Weissenburg,<sup>7</sup> Dura Europos,<sup>8</sup> Thamusida,<sup>9</sup> South Shields,<sup>10</sup> Silchester,<sup>11</sup> and Saalburg;<sup>12</sup> and those with a T-shaped extension: Brigetio,<sup>13</sup> Exeter,<sup>14</sup> Chester,<sup>15</sup> Wroxeter,<sup>16</sup> and South Shields.<sup>17</sup>

As can be seen from the above list, the latter two types constitute the most common forms of this buckle, and it is interesting to note that different styles appear concomitantly on the same site.

The essential difference in detail between all the above examples and the one under discussion, is that they lack knobs protruding from the extension. It may, however, be possible to identify two examples of this type from Corbridge,<sup>18</sup> and South Shields,<sup>19</sup> although due to their state of preservation, neither can be positively recognised as a direct parallel. The buckle from Corbridge has two knobs protruding from the upper section of the rectangular extension, and it is possible that the lower two have been subsequently broken off, leaving only a slightly raised bump, which with optimism, can be said to exist on either side, although these marks might simply be due to corrosion. The South Shields example comprises only a fragment of one side of the extension, with the remains of what appears to be two knobs.

As previously stated, in size and pattern of design, many buckles can be categorized with the one from Corbridge. It may be possible to conclude, therefore, that in their utilization they served similar functions, although exactly what this was remains uncertain. Bushe-Fox, commenting on the example from Wroxeter, writes that in some cases they may have served as pendants, citing as evidence the example from Corbridge, which was found attached to a flat openwork plate, which he described as a brooch.<sup>20</sup> It is more probable, however, that this particular item formed the decorative terminal of a narrow belt, for otherwise it would be difficult to explain why a buckle complete with tongue, would have been added if it was to serve no functional purpose as a fastening.

The date of the buckle from Corbridge is uncertain, although it is possible to conclude from the cited examples, that this general type appears to have been in use from the second to the fourth century A.D. Furthermore, this style seems to have had a wide distribution, extending from Britain to Dura Europos, with only slight variations in detail.

It would therefore appear that the Corbridge buckle belongs firmly to a well established style, the only distinction being the extra embellishment on the extension, which as previously mentioned, does appear to exist to a lesser degree on two other examples; that all three buckles occur in the north of England, would suggest a local variation possibly restricted to this area.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>My thanks go to Lindsay Allason-Jones for allowing me access to the storeroom, and for her subsequent kindness and advice.

<sup>2</sup>ORL no. 73, Taf. XIII, 33; Oldenstein, J., 1976, "Zur Ausrüstung römischer Auxiliareinheiten. Studien zu Beschlägen und Zierat an der Ausrüstung der römischen Auxiliareinheiten der obergermanische-raetischen Limesgebietes aus dem zweiten und dritten Jahrhundert n. Chr.", *Bericht römisch-germanische Kommission*, Vol. 57, Taf. 76, 1018, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup>Bidwell, P. (1985). *The Roman Fort at Vindolanda*, Archaeological Report No. 1, HBMCE, Fig. 41, 29, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup>ORL no. 8, Taf. X, 55, 63; Oldenstein op. cit., Taf. 76, 1017, p. 277.

<sup>5</sup>Lloyd-Morgan, G. (1987). "Professor Robert Newstead and Finds of Roman Military Equipment from Chester", in: M. Dawson (ed.): *Third Roman Military Equipment Seminar: The Accoutrements of War*, BAR International Series 336, pl. III. A, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup>Lindenschmit, L. (1889). *Das Römisch-Germanische Central-Museum in Bildlichen Darstellungen aus Seinen Sammlungen*, Mainz, Taf. XXI, 14.

<sup>7</sup>ORL no. 72, Taf. VI, 27; Oldenstein op. cit., Taf. 76, 1012, p. 277.

<sup>8</sup>Rostovtzeff, M. I. (et al.) (eds) (1949). *The Excavations at Dura Europos Final Report IV: Part IV: The Bronze Objects*, New Haven, pl. IV, 40, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>Callu, J.-P., Morel, J.-P., Rebuffat, R. and Hallier, G. (1965). *Thamusida I*, Supplement 2 of *École Française de Rome Melanges D'Archeologie et D'Histoire*, pl. CXLII, 1-5, pp. 227-9.

<sup>10</sup>Allason-Jones, L. and Miket, R. (1984). *The*

*Catalogue of Small Finds from South Shields Roman Fort*, Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, Monograph Series No. 2, 3.616, 3.622, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup>Boon, G. C. (1969). "Belgic and Roman Silchester: Excavations of 1954-8 with an Excursus on the Early History of Calleva", *Archaeologia*, Vol. 102, fig. 5, 11, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup>Jacobi, L. (1897). *Das Römer Kastell Saalburg bei Hamburg vor der Höhe*, Taf. 54, 2, 7, p. 487; Oldenstein op. cit., Taf. 76, 1011, 1014, p. 277.

<sup>13</sup>Bónis, E. B. (1986). "Das Militärhandwerk der Legio I Aduitrix in Brigetio", *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms III*, Vorträge des 13. Internationalen Limeskongresses, Aalen, Stuttgart, Abb. 2, 1.

<sup>14</sup>Bidwell, P. (1979). *The Legionary Bath-House and Basilica and Forum at Exeter*, Exeter Archaeological Reports: Vol. 1, fig. 73, 15, pp. 235-6.

<sup>15</sup>Lloyd-Morgan, op. cit., pl. III, A. p. 90.

<sup>16</sup>Bushe-Fox, J. P. (1913). *Excavations on the Site of the Roman Town at Wroxeter, Shropshire*, in 1912, Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London No. 1, pl. XXI, figs. 1, 2, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup>Allason-Jones and Miket, op. cit., 3.619, p. 194, and 3.620, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup>Unpublished. Corbridge Site Museum, Accession Number 75.614. My thanks go to Georgina Plowright for allowing me access to the Corbridge material and for her kindness and willingness to help.

<sup>19</sup>Allason-Jones and Miket, op. cit., 3.618, p. 194.

<sup>20</sup>Bushe-Fox, op. cit., p. 32; for the object see: Knowles, F. S. A. and Forster, R. H. (1909). "Cor-stopitum: Report on the Excavations in 1908", *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 3rd series, Vol. V, fig. 29, p. 105. For locating this object my thanks go to Hazel E. Moore, Nell Stirling-Lee and Kathy Dance.

