

## VII

# The Early Churches at Lindisfarne

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THE parish church of Lindisfarne stands immediately west of the late 11th-century priory church, on almost the same alignment and axis. Recent research at other sites has shown that the axial juxtaposition of two churches is characteristic of important Anglo-Saxon minsters, and that the rebuilding of one church for conventual use in the Romanesque period, leaving the other as a parish church, is also a recurrent pattern.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion that the standing churches and associated minor features at Lindisfarne reflect the influence of formal pre-Conquest planning was made in 1984 by Warwick Rodwell.<sup>2</sup> The idea, which is not considered in Deirdre O'Sullivan's recent discussion of the monastic precinct at Lindisfarne,<sup>3</sup> is worth developing further. The architectural and topographical evidence provides a strong suggestion that the early monastery contained two churches, roughly aligned on a west-east axis which also included a well and one or two standing crosses.

### THE EASTERN CHURCH (St. Peter)

Bede says that Bishop Finan (651–61) built at Lindisfarne “a church suitable for an episcopal see”, though of timber not stone, which was dedicated to St. Peter by Archbishop Theodore (668–90) and encased in lead by Bishop Eadberht (688–98).<sup>4</sup> St. Aidan's body, initially buried in the monastic cemetery, was translated into this “greater church” and placed on the right side of the altar (*cum fabricata esset ibi basilica maior, atque in honorem beatissimi apostolorum principis dedicata, illo ossa eius translata, atque ad dexteram altaris . . . condita sunt*).<sup>5</sup> In 687 St. Cuthbert's body was also buried in St. Peter's, in a stone sarcophagus on

the right side of the altar, and was raised up over the same spot eleven years later.<sup>6</sup> Bede mentions a square pit marking the spot where the water from washing Cuthbert's body was poured away, “near the church in which his body rests on the south side” (*iuxta aecclesiam in qua corpus eius requiescit, ad partem meridianam*).<sup>7</sup> The phrase “greater church” (*basilica maior*) can probably be interpreted as meaning “the greater of two”, and the fact that Bede felt it necessary to specify “the church in which his body rests” also suggests that there were at least two churches in the monastery.

The 10th-century *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* says that Bishop Egred (830–45) moved a church which had been built by St. Aidan in the time of King Oswald (i.e. between 635 and 641) from Lindisfarne to Norham, and rebuilt it there.<sup>8</sup> Since this church was portable it must have been timber-built; presumably it was either Finan's church, mis-dated by the *Historia*, or a slightly earlier church which had co-existed with Finan's. In either case its survival for two centuries suggests that it had been deliberately preserved as a relic, perhaps inside a later stone building, and it tells us nothing about the arrangements on Lindisfarne beyond again suggesting a multiplicity of churches there.

Between the 1090s and 1140s the main church at Lindisfarne was rebuilt to a Romanesque design, in some respects a small-scale imitation of Durham Cathedral.<sup>9</sup> Reginald of Durham's statement that the monk Edward built a splendid new church in honour of St. Cuthbert (*novam ecclesiam in Beati Cuthberti honorem infra predictam Insulam a fundamentis erexit, quam de lapidibus tabulatis, miro dispositionis ordine, . . . venusto artificum opere consummavit*), almost certainly refers to this building.<sup>10</sup> It is an important

question whether it stands, or at least was believed to stand, on the site of the main 7th-century church in which Cuthbert had originally been buried. Reginald refers to it as St. Cuthbert's church, not St. Peter's, but this fact itself suggests that it contained Cuthbert's former grave: the apostolic patrons of 7th- and 8th-century minsters were frequently supplanted in common parlance by the Anglo-Saxon saints enshrined there.<sup>11</sup> Continuity of site seems to be confirmed by Reginald's statement that the church contained a "tomb of St. Cuthbert" (*Beati Cuthberti tumbam que infra ecclesiam est*),<sup>12</sup> evidently one of the cenotaphs marking Cuthbert's successive resting-places at Lindisfarne, Norham, Chester-le-Street and Durham.<sup>13</sup>

### THE WESTERN CHURCH (St. Mary) (fig. 1)

A story set at Lindisfarne in the episcopate of Hugh du Puiset (1153–95) describes a miraculous appearance of St. Cuthbert. The witnesses heard music coming from St. Mary's church; Cuthbert and his entourage then entered the main church by the great west door, celebrated mass, and returned to St. Mary's by the same route.<sup>14</sup> A parish church distinct from the priory church, presumably St. Mary's, existed by 1146, when a papal confirmation includes *ecclesiam de Halieland*.<sup>15</sup> Neither text provides more than a *terminus ante quem*, and there is no reason why the church should not have existed long before the 12th century. The dedication, so far as it goes, is consistent with an early origin: many if not most of the larger 7th- and 8th-century English minsters included subsidiary churches dedicated to the Virgin, reflecting the normal practice of Merovingian Gaul.<sup>16</sup>

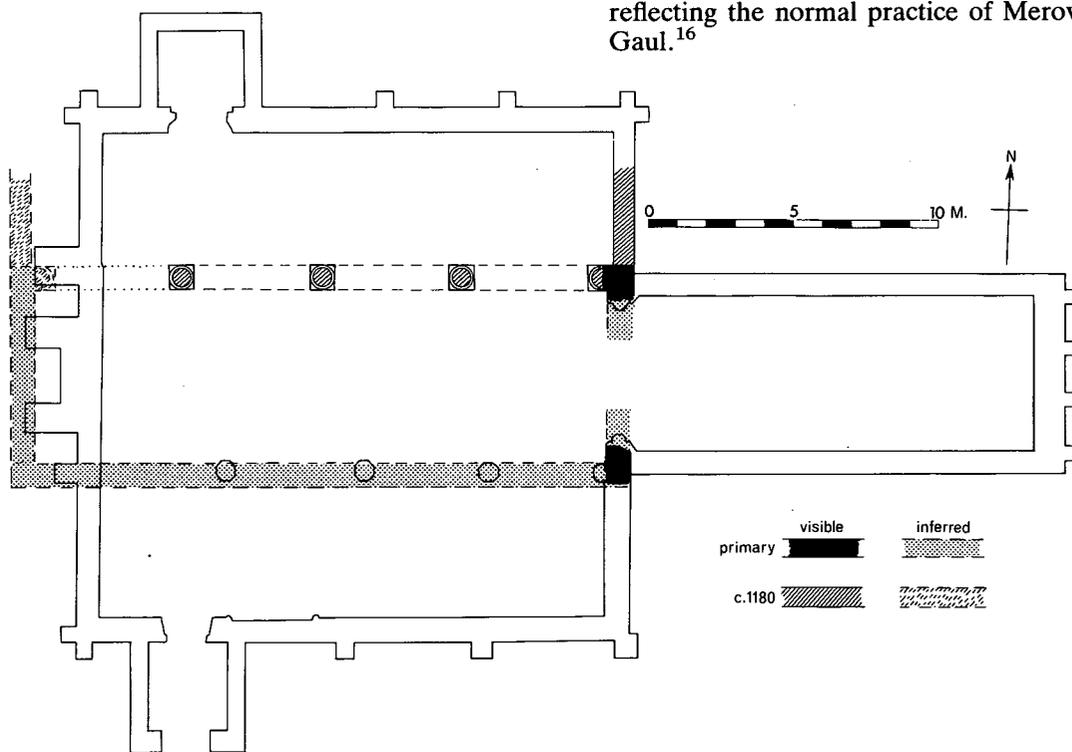


Fig. 1. St. Mary's Church, Lindisfarne: interpretative plan of the primary and late 12th-century phases, with later walls in outline. (Survey by John and Sarah Blair, 1989.)

The chancel, south arcade and external walls are 13th-century. Three bays of the north arcade, of round arches on cylindrical columns, survive from an aisle of c. 1180–1200, the east wall of which remains embedded in that of the wider and taller 13th-century aisle. The fourth (westernmost) bay of the north arcade is narrower than the other three, and has a 13th-century arch resembling the south arcade. Pevsner's interpretation of this bay as a westwards extension of the nave<sup>17</sup> is unsatisfactory, for the last column of the 12th-century arcade is in no way different from the other two, and was clearly built to be free-standing. The real explanation is almost certainly that the nave was shortened slightly in the 13th century, and the end bay of the north arcade consequently rebuilt. Assuming that this bay was originally the same size as the other three, the internal length of the nave in the late 12th century can be calculated as 19.5 metres.

The east wall of the late 12th-century north aisle abuts the north-east corner of an earlier aisleless nave, the irregular squared quoining of which is visible externally.<sup>18</sup> Recent plaster-stripping revealed the fabric of the east wall of this nave, above the 13th-century chancel arch.<sup>19</sup> The wall, some 7.5 metres high, is of varied construction, courses of thin stones alternating with large blocks. The top of an earlier, round-headed chancel arch is outlined by thin strips of stone, with traces of disturbance immediately above suggesting that the arch was itself an insertion into the primary fabric. High up above the arch is a flat-topped doorway, its jambs faced with irregular quoining. The arch and doorway are both centrally placed, from which it may be inferred that the internal width of the nave was originally, as now, 5.8 metres. The east wall, and by inference the north wall, are 82 cm. thick. The roof-line of an earlier chancel, c. 1 metre taller than the present, 13th-century one, is visible on the face of the chancel-arch wall.

All that can reliably be said about this nave is that it was built before the late 12th century. The details are not distinctively early, but neither are they incompatible with the kinds of work found in the earliest Northumbrian

churches. It is worth noting that the basic dimensions (19.5 by 5.8 metres) are very close to those of the nave of the main church at Jarrow (20 by 5.5 metres).

In 1985 a dowsing survey claimed to locate the plan of an earlier church underlying St. Mary's, comprising a slightly shorter nave, apsidal sanctuary and multiple flanking *porticus*.<sup>20</sup> This plan was not validated by excavation, and is not shown on the present figures. Since it conforms to the axis of the standing nave, its future validation would not affect the present argument beyond confirming that this axis was indeed established at an early date.

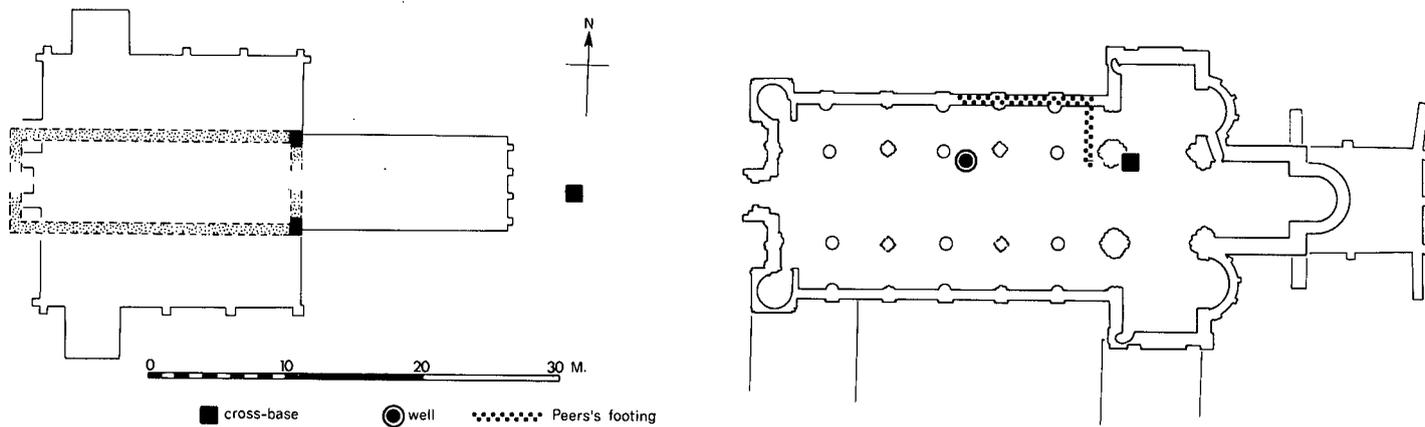
#### THE CROSS-BASES AND WELL (fig. 2)

Three structures to the east of St. Mary's, two of them inside the priory church, lie near the prevailing axis of the site:<sup>21</sup>

(a) A plain stone cross-base immediately east of the 13th-century chancel of St. Mary's. There are no early records of its position, but equally nothing to suggest that it has been moved.<sup>22</sup>

(b) Another plain stone cross-base, underlying the north-west crossing pier of the priory church. It is flat-bedded, set square to the axis of the building, and Peers believed it to be *in situ*, though such limited archaeological evidence as we have suggests rather that it was re-laid as part of the 12th-century footing.<sup>23</sup> This question cannot be settled without further excavation.

(c) A stone-lined well, on the north side of the nave of the priory church between the third and fourth piers of its north arcade. This must almost certainly pre-date the 12th-century rebuilding. A well would never have been dug in the nave of a monastic church for utilitarian reasons: either it had some ritual function, or it existed before the church. Likewise, its off-centre position suggests that even if its original purpose was ritual, its original setting was not the building which now contains it.



*Fig. 2. The two churches at Lindisfarne, illustrating the suggested pre-Conquest arrangements. The outline plan of the priory church is based on A. Hamilton Thompson, Lindisfarne Priory. The foundation noted by C. Peers is shown, schematically, in accordance with his description. For the alignment of the two churches see footnote 21.*

Taken as a group, these features give a strong impression that a west-east alignment of ritual structures existed on the site before the building of the Romanesque church.<sup>24</sup>

#### WHERE WAS THE ORIGINAL CHURCH OF ST. PETER?

Reasons for thinking that Cuthbert's church of St. Peter lay on approximately the site of the Romanesque priory church have been given above. Independent of this deduction is one piece of archaeological evidence which at least suggests some earlier church on the site, albeit of stone not timber. During site clearance Peers found "a foundation underlying the north aisle wall. This seems to have belonged to a plain rectangular building, whose east wall was a little to the west of the east end of this aisle; but its south and west walls have left no trace".<sup>25</sup> If the north wall of this earlier church underlay that of the Romanesque north aisle, its south wall must (assuming a normal width) have lain near the central axis of the Romanesque nave.

It is a fair assumption that St. Cuthbert's cenotaph in the new church was thought to mark his original grave in the old one, on the right (i.e. south) side of its main altar: in other words, in accordance with what has emerged as a familiar pattern, the grave site would have remained static even if the church moved slightly.<sup>26</sup> The site of the cenotaph from the late 11th century is unknown, but it is possible to suggest a sequence of development which fits neatly with the available evidence and is consistent with analogous cases. If the footings found by Peers represent a church which had St. Cuthbert's grave on the south side of its altar, that grave must have come very close to the Romanesque central axis. If the late 11th-century builders deliberately positioned their church so that the grave would occupy the axial position conventional for shrines in the high middle ages, the fact would perfectly explain the new church's slight re-alignment southwards.<sup>27</sup>

Since the east wall of Peers' church was "a

little to the west" of the crossing-piers, the eastern cross-base would have been positioned immediately outside it. This would place Cuthbert's cenotaph towards the east end of the Romanesque nave. It also implies that the well was inside the original church of St. Peter, but it cannot necessarily be assumed (in the absence of evidence in either direction) that this was an unusual Anglo-Saxon arrangement.<sup>28</sup>

The alignment of buildings and structures proposed above may well have been established in the 7th or 8th century. It need not be assumed, however, that it remained static; the sculpture at Lindisfarne attests continued religious activity on the island during the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries,<sup>29</sup> and the monastic complex itself may well have developed through the addition of new buildings and standing crosses. At least there are strong grounds for thinking that the Durham monks who re-colonized Lindisfarne found a good deal more than ruined walls and memories of ancient sanctity.

I am very grateful to Richard Bailey, Sarah Blair, H. Denis Briggs, Eric Cambridge and Warwick Rodwell for their comments on an earlier draft.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a general survey of these phenomena see J. Blair, "Anglo-Saxon Minsters: a Topographical Review", in J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, Leicester U.P., forthcoming. Earlier discussions are W. Rodwell, "Churches in the Landscape: Aspects of Topography and Planning", in M. L. Faulk (ed.), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement*, Oxford University Department for External Studies, 1984, 1-23; S. R. Bassett, "A Probable Mercian Royal Mausoleum at Winchcombe, Gloucestershire", *Antiquaries Journal* 65 (1985), 82-100; J. Blair, "St. Frideswide's Monastery: Problems and Possibilities", *Oxoniensia* 53 (1988), 256-8.

<sup>2</sup>Rodwell op cit. note 1, p. 18; also Idem, *Our Christian Heritage*, 1984, 63.

<sup>3</sup>D. O'Sullivan, "The Plan of the Early Christian Monastery on Lindisfarne: a Fresh Look at the Evidence", in G. Bonner et al. (eds.), *St. Cuthbert, his Cult and Community to AD 1200*, 1989, 125-42.

<sup>4</sup>*Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, ed. C. Plummer, i, 1896, 181 (*Hist. Eccl.* III.25).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 160 (*Hist. Eccl.* III.17).

<sup>6</sup>*Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert*, ed. B. Colgrave, 1940, 288, 292-4 (*Vita Cuth.*, chs. XL, XLII).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 290 (ch. XLI).

<sup>8</sup>*Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, ed. T. Arnold, i, Rolls Ser. 75.1, 1882, 201.

<sup>9</sup>A. Hamilton Thompson, *Lindisfarne Priory*, HMSO 1949, reprinted HBMCE 1986.

<sup>10</sup>*Reginaldi Monachi Dunelmensis Libellus*, Surtees Soc. i, 1835, 44-5. Such language at this date must surely refer to an ambitious Romanesque building, and Thompson's suggestion (op. cit., note 9, p. 5) that Reginald is describing the parish church to the west has little to commend it.

<sup>11</sup>St. Oswald at Gloucester, St. Werburgh at Chester and St. Frideswide at Oxford are examples among many.

<sup>12</sup>*Reginaldi . . . Libellus* op. cit. note 10, 45-6.

<sup>13</sup>H. Briggs, E. Cambridge and R. N. Bailey, "A New Approach to Church Archaeology", *Arch. Ael.* 5th ser. 11, 1983, 92-3.

<sup>14</sup>*Reginaldi . . . Libellus* op. cit., note 10, 117-18.

<sup>15</sup>*Papsturkunden in England*, ed. W. Holtzmann, ii, Berlin, 1935, No. 51.

<sup>16</sup>Blair, "Anglo-Saxon Minsters", op. cit. note 1; J. Hubert, "Les 'Cathédrales Doubles' de la Gaule", repr. J. Hubert, *Arts et Vie Sociale de la Monde Antique au Moyen Age*, Mém. et Doc. de la

Société de l'Ecole des Chartes, Geneva, 1977, 97-117.

<sup>17</sup>N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North-umberland*, 1957, 188.

<sup>18</sup>Discussed H. M. and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*, i, 1965, 398-9, but with an inconclusive verdict.

<sup>19</sup>First published by P. F. Ryder as a photograph in *Popular Archaeology* June 1983, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup>R. N. Bailey, E. Cambridge and H. D. Briggs, *Dowsing and Church Archaeology*, 1988, 83-5, 149.

<sup>21</sup>The current OS plan shows the two churches on precisely the same alignment, but this is incorrect, as Mr. H. Denis Briggs has kindly pointed out to me. The relationship between the two churches shown on the present Fig. 2 is based on a collation of the first edition 25" OS map (1862), the aerial photograph published in D. Knowles and J. K. St. Joseph, *Monastic Sites from the Air*, 1952, 41, and compass-bearings taken by Mr. Briggs.

<sup>22</sup>R. Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, Lindisfarne No. 21.

<sup>23</sup>C. Peers, "The Inscribed and Sculptured Stones of Lindisfarne", *Archaeologia* 74 (1923-4), 269 and Pl. LV Fig. 2; Cramp op. cit. note 22, Lindisfarne No. 20. However, O'Sullivan op. cit., note 3, p. 130, cites a photograph which "seems to indicate that the piers of the nave were constructed on a continuous foundation, which would have removed all pre-existing stratigraphy. This implies that the cross base is simply one of a number of stones used in the construction of the foundations".

<sup>24</sup>Dr. Warwick Rodwell (pers. comm.) suggests a regular division of the west-east axis into units of 4 northern rods (1 Nrod = 5.03 m): length of original St. Mary's nave = 4 rods; distance between chancel arch of St. Mary's and first cross-base = 4 rods; distance between the two cross-bases = 8 rods.

<sup>25</sup>Peers op. cit. note 23, 257. O'Sullivan op. cit. note 3, 131 note, mentions the recent rediscovery of Peers' plan. I have been unable to obtain access to this, and the foundation marked on Fig. 2 is based simply on Peers' published description.

<sup>26</sup>Examples are collected in Blair, "St. Frideswide's Monastery", op. cit., note 1, 249-51.

<sup>27</sup>This would be the reverse of what happened to other Anglo-Saxon shrines, moved by Romanesque rebuildings from axial to non-axial positions: see Blair, "St. Frideswide's Monastery", op. cit. note 1, 249-51.

<sup>28</sup>Mr. Briggs has kindly sent me a copy of a dowsing survey which he conducted in 1990, and which he believes to have identified an early church with apse, aisles or *porticus* and a western annexe,

underlying the western part of the nave of the priory church. This has not been either validated or disproved by excavation.

<sup>29</sup> Apart from the grave-markers, which are main-

ly 8th-century, most of the Lindisfarne sculpture dates from the 9th to 11th centuries: Cramp *op. cit.*, note 22, Lindisfarne Nos. 1-9, 11-19, 37-43.

