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A Recent Viking-age Sculptural Find from Tynemouth Priory

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THE identification in December 1990 of a small fragment of pre-Norman sculptured monument built into one of the monastic buildings at Tynemouth Priory brings the number of this class of monument recorded from the site to eight.¹

DESCRIPTION

As a format for recording sculpture is already established in the *British Academy corpus* (Cramp 1984—Introduction) this will be adopted here, followed by a general discussion.

(TYNEMOUTH 8 A–B.) Small sub-rectangular fragment

8. Part of cross-shaft or architectural feature (figs. 1 and 2).

PRESENT LOCATION Built into the lowest course of a reredorter wall at the north-east end, partly overlain by an incomplete masonry course (Hadcock 1986, 16–17).

EVIDENCE FOR DISCOVERY First noted in 1990 by the author. H. 290 mm (11.5 in) W. 292 mm (11.5 in) D. 125+ mm (5.0+ in).

STONE TYPE Medium- to coarse-grained yellow-green sandstone.

PRESENT CONDITION Very worn and broken. Only two faces are visible.

DESCRIPTION Only one of the faces appears original. Decoration punch cut in relief technique; heavily worn.

A (broad): The surface decoration is divided into two areas, neither of which appears complete. The area to the south (40%) comprises an unbordered interlace of irregular medially-grooved strands of rounded-profile (28–35 mm wide). The strands return into the weave. The regular layout of the pattern is interrupted by two deep pits, areas damaged subsequent to

carving. The area of interlace is less abraded than the northern (left) section of the fragment (60% area) whose worn carving is only visible under a raking light. Next to the interlace area stands a profiled or three-quarter turned human figure facing to the left; his feet are visible and the knees are slightly bent. The lower left arm crosses his torso and seems to hold a horn-like object which curves across his body below the waist to terminate against the interlace panel; its upper, broad end is very worn. The right arm, full-sleeved, is extended and appears to touch an object at shoulder height held by the second figure in the scene. The head, lost at the top, has long hair or a pigtail at the back. Near the straight left (N) edge of the fragment, a second figure, visible only partially in outline, appears facing to the right, sitting at ground level. The line of his head, with protrusion for the nose, and back are clear but the leg area is made indistinct by a third pit of damage. This seated figure appears to be holding an object in front of him set at an angle of 60 degrees. This object, which is touched by the figure to the right, appears to widen towards the top although the upper edge is lost in damage under the mortar along the edge of the stone. One other grooved line, perhaps the base of a cut, is also visible running in the same oblique direction along the axis within the area of the object.

B (narrow): No visible decoration.

DATE Late tenth or early eleventh century.

DISCUSSION

The recovery of the fragment from a secondary context is unhelpful for dating except in so far as its re-use, probably in the twelfth century, provides a *terminus post quem non* dating



Fig. 1. Tynemouth 8a.

horizon. The medial-grooving technique used on the strands is, however, an Anglo-Scandinavian (Viking-age) fashion which does not seem to have been widely adopted north of the Tyne, appearing altogether twice at the sites of Carham and Norham.² South of the Tyne the technique is more popular, particularly at the Anglo-Scandinavian sites of Sockburn, Gainford and Chester-le-Street but also in small numbers at eight other sites.³ Distributionally it is clear that the majority of the 44 examples south of the Tyne occur in or near the Tees Valley corridor with a second, smaller group further north focused at Chester-le-Street. Otherwise, examples appear in isola-

tion; there being one at Jarrow, two at Hexham together with those at Carham and Norham. The lack of a panel border between the discrete areas of slab decoration supports this dating argument as it too appears to be a marker of the Anglo-Scandinavian sculptural tradition, as found for example on the York Minster shafts (Pattison 1973, pls XLVI-XLVII). In some related areas, the Isle of Man for instance, Viking-age monuments have dispensed with the panel border almost completely (Kermode 1907). What evidence survives, therefore, points to a date for the carving in the late tenth or early eleventh century.

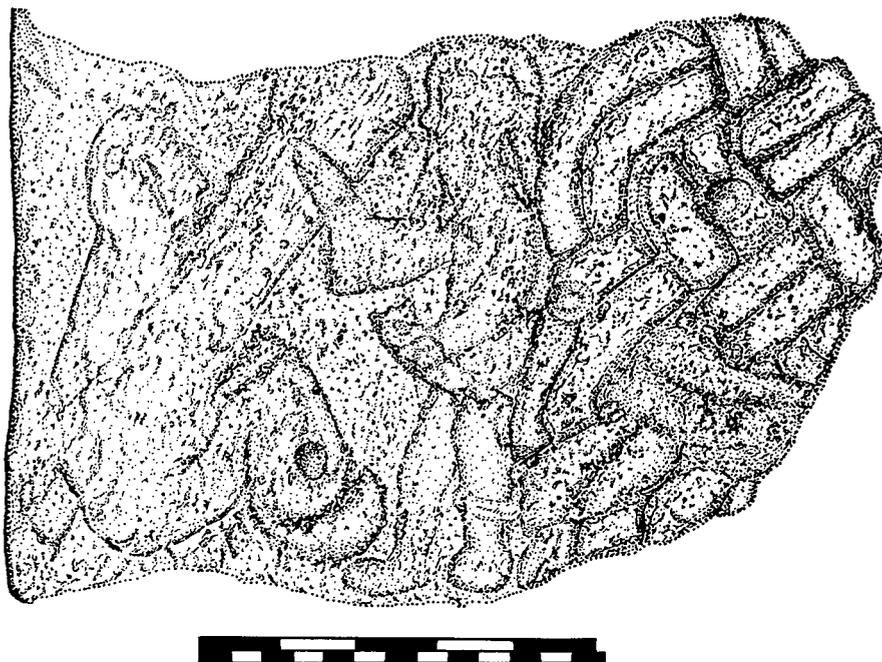


Fig. 2. Tynemouth 8A—interpretative drawing.

The Figural Scene (figs. 1 and 2)

The northern, left-hand area of the fragment is obviously the more interesting but more difficult to interpret. Two figures, one standing (apparently carrying a horn) one sitting on the ground, face each other separated by an object, lying obliquely across the field, which appears to be held by the figure to the left and is touched by the right-hand figure. A possible approach to an interpretation of the scene involves the identification of the object as a lyre; the general shape, disposition and the shallow groove running lengthways strongly suggests the reading of the surviving features as an asymmetrical or round-topped lyre. A very

close analogue for the overall disposition can be found at Sockburn on cross shaft 6A (where it is again combined with medially-grooved interlace). Here the man, first identified by Bailey (1980, 155, fig. 36) “playing a lyre-like musical instrument” (Cramp 1984, I, 137–8 (fig. 3), unlike the figure from Tynemouth, sits enthroned on a low chair, but the attendant standing figure can now be identified as also touching the round-topped lyre. Furthermore in an area of extensive damage near his chest the Sockburn figure may also hold a horn in his left hand although the pose differs from that of the Tynemouth example. Cramp (1984, I, 138) assigns the Sockburn stone to the first half of

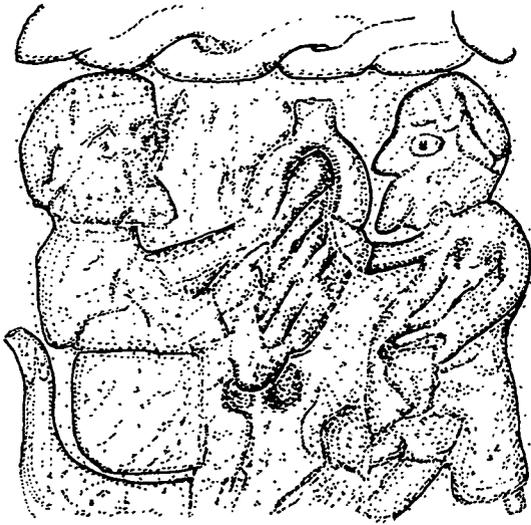


Fig. 3. Sockburn 6A, lower panel.



Fig. 4. Kirk Michael slab—MIC1:130(104)A.

the tenth century but it might perhaps more satisfactorily be assigned to the second half of the century.

For the Tynemouth scene a second, more significant (though still not identical) parallel, occurs on the Isle of Man at Kirk Michael on cross number MIC1:130 (No. 104A in Kermode 1907, pl. LIV) where a lyre player, sitting on the ground in a manner almost exactly similar to that of the Tynemouth fragment, faces a second figure who holds a horn (fig. 4). The asymmetrical lyre in the Manx scene is distinctively Irish and can be closely paralleled on the west face of the tenth-century Cross of St. Patrick and Columba at Kells (Buckley 1990, pl. IX) and probably also on the east face of the South Cross (Muredach) at Monasterboice (Roe 1981, pl. XI; A Buckley, pers. com. 19.11.91). The shape of the Manx example is similar to that on the Tynemouth fragment. The profiled figure to the right in the Manx scene is cramped in beneath the lyre but he too is portrayed standing and he touches the neck of the horn with his right hand. A later tenth-century date would be acceptable for the Kirk Michael slab. The Tynemouth composition, therefore, forms one of a group of sculp-

tures, displaying a near-identical iconography, which hints at links between Ireland, Man and north-east England in the Viking period.

Whom do these figures represent? They must relate to some extent to the David iconography transmitted from the early Christian period which appears in Insular manuscripts and on sculpture. There are a variety of representations, some involving a cycle which embraces a series of linked narrative Biblical scenes based on the life of the King. One possibility suggests that the Tynemouth, Sockburn and Kirk Michael scenes can plausibly be grouped with an iconography of David as a musician and composer of the psalms (for a discussion of Insular parallels see: Roe 1949; Henderson 1986), where David with a lyre is surrounded by a group including scribes and musicians, some of whom play horns. This iconography was well-established in pre-Viking Britain and Ireland.

David with a lyre appears in Anglo-Saxon sculptural art as early as the beginning of the ninth century, when he can be found in a scene showing the King flanked by three figures in the uppermost complete surviving arcade of a shaft now in the churchyard at Masham, York-

shire North Riding. The composition of the Masham scene of "the Choir of David" is not exactly parallel with the Tynemouth representation because the left-hand figure, as at Sockburn, sits on a high-backed chair. The angle of the figure, however, and of the instrument are similar (Bailey 1972, pl. XXa; Lawson 1981). Likewise the David, illustrated playing the lyre in the early eighth-century *Vespasian Psalter* also holds his head and the lyre at a similar angle (Wright 1967, fol. 30v).

Among the range of assuredly David scenes there is an intriguingly close parallel for the Tynemouth scene in north-western Italy on the west façade of the twelfth-century church of S. Michele, Pavia, in a town, which like nearby Vercelli, is on the ancient route from the British Isles to Rome. In this example a seated David has been identified playing a harp decorated with a beast's head while a long-haired figure in profile touches the harp in a manner very reminiscent of the scene from Tynemouth (Porter 1931, 92) (fig. 5). It seems possible that this example is a reflex of Insular iconography.

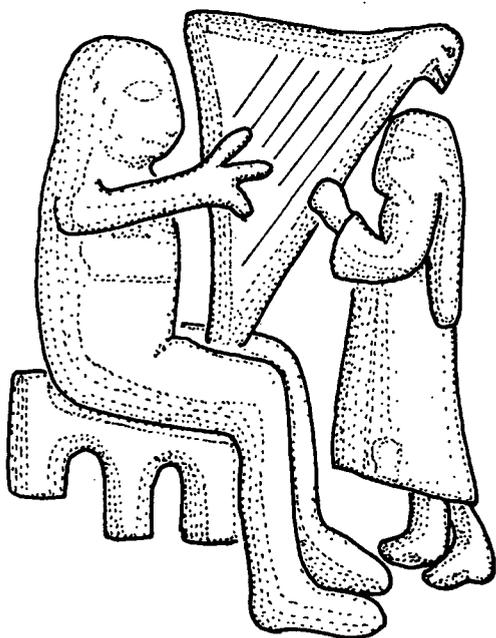


Fig. 5. S. Michele, Pavia—west façade (after Porter 1931, fig. 148).

The evidence from the scenes at Tynemouth, Kirk Michael and probably also Sockburn is, however, not completely consistent with the iconography embodied in the scene of David and his musicians because their depictions portray the second figure carrying a horn. Although horns appear in other Davidic scenes as musical instruments their representation here suggests that they functioned as containers for liquid. This element of the scene is intriguingly consistent with another David iconograph, which depicts the anointing of (the youthful) David. Roe (1949, 40–1) notes that the Biblical reference is to the "inspired selection" of David from amongst his brethren (I Samuel, xvi, 1ff), where the prophet Samuel took a horn of oil and anointed him. Although the literal meaning of the scene recalls David's youth it also carries the symbolic meaning of Christ's anointing by His Father and is therefore a redemptive and also a regal motif.

If the Tynemouth, Sockburn and Kirk Michael scenes are accepted as anointing depictions then they are unusual in so far as they portray David playing his lyre⁴ in an iconograph where it has hitherto not intruded. This may perhaps be explained as a Viking-age borrowing of that element from the more readily recognized figure of David appearing with his musicians in order to render the figure more easily identifiable. The raised hand at Tynemouth must originally have signalled the anointing but it is possible that the original significance was lost when the present scene was conflated and the abbreviation of the scene directed the hand to rest apparently on the lyre.

Irish versions of the anointing scene exist in which Samuel holds a horn, as on a Romanesque doorway at Freshford, Co. Kilkenny, and on the Duleek Cross, Co. Meath (Roe 1949, 41–2) (figs. 6a and 6b), but they lack the lyre.⁵ More relevant to the proposed Tynemouth/Sockburn/Kirk Michael programme is another Irish version of the anointing of David on the Kinitty Cross, Co. Offaly (fig. 6c), which does include a lyre but replaces the horn with what appears to be a small bucket (Roe 1949, 41). In Scotland a single potential example of the same



Fig. 6. *The Anointing of David:*

- a. Romanesque doorway, Freshford, Co. Kilkenny
- b. North Cross, Duleek, Co. Meath
- c. High Cross, Kinity, Co. Offaly (after Roe 1949).



Fig. 7. *David the harper:*

- a. North Cross, Graiguenamanagh, Co. Kilkenny
- b. North Pillar, Carndonagh, Co. Offaly
- c. West Cross, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly
- d. West Cross, Kells, Co. Meath (after Roe 1949).

fusion occurs on a cross shaft from Monifieth, Forfarshire (Allen and Anderson III, fig. 275a; Henderson 1986, 91).⁶ Here two horn-carrying men appear in the panel immediately above an enthroned harper (the horns are represented as

cups rather than musical instruments) but the separation of the scene onto two panels and the presence of two hornbearers makes a David identification unlikely. The lack of close Scottish⁷ and other pre-Viking period English

parallels for the amalgamation of the anointing and musician scenes, combined with the fact that they are juxtaposed in Ireland and linked to the fact that some Irish harpers also sit on the ground in a pose very suggestive of the Manx and Tynemouth examples (Graiguenamanagh North Cross, Co. Kilkenny (fig. 7a), and Carndonagh North Pillar, Co. Donegal (fig. 7b)—Roe 1949, 58), suggest that Ireland probably provided the source from which Viking-age migrants could have derived their models to generate the scene found in north-east England and on Man.

Although Lang (1972, 235–48) has demonstrated that some scenes on contemporary Sockburn monuments carry references to pagan mythology and Scandinavian legend, there is no compelling need to invoke such an interpretation for the Tynemouth scene; it fits well into a Christian set of Davidic scenes, apparently fusing two vital episodes in the life of the King.

Further evidence from the carving also suggests that Tynemouth 8 should be dated within a bracket roughly contemporary with the majority of other Tynemouth monuments, thus strengthening the evidence of continuity of use of the site during the tenth and eleventh centuries (albeit perhaps under lay rather than monastic patronage), a use which can also be paralleled at other Anglo-Saxon monastic sites in north-east England at Jarrow, Hexham and Lindisfarne.

It is hoped to have the fragment removed from its present position for conservation and to permit further examination which may clarify its function.

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NOTES

¹The other seven monuments are listed and illustrated in Cramp 1984: part 1, 226–9.

²Cramp 1984: Carham 2D and Norham 8B, both dated to late tenth or eleventh century.

³Cramp 1984: Auckland—St. Andrew 3A, Aycliffe 5A, 12D, 13A/D, Billingham 4, Chester-le-Street, 1A/C, 3A–D, 4A, 6A/C, 7A, Dinsdale 3A/B, 4B, 6A, Gainford 1A–C, 2B–D, 3B, 4D, 5A/D, 8A, 10A, 12A/B/D, 16A/B, 19A, 22A/C, Haughton-le-Skerne 3D, 10A, Hexham 11A/B, Hurworth 17B, Jarrow, 3A, Sockburn 2A, 3A–D, 6A–D, 7C. These are also almost exclusively dated to the tenth and eleventh century.

⁴The form of the lyre on Sockburn 6A is of different design from those at Tynemouth and Kirk Michael. The most distinctive features are the protrusions visible at the upper and lower ends. These can, at least in part, be paralleled on Irish examples of David playing the harp (for a discussion of the Irish organological evidence see: Buckley 1990) which appear on the West Cross at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly (fig. 7c) and the West Cross at Kells, Co. Meath (fig. 7d) (Roe 1948, 58). The upper protrusion may be a reduced form of the bird which appears on the upper edge of some Irish harps (South Cross, Kells, Co. Meath; South Cross, Castledermot, Co. Kildare; South Cross, Monasterboice, Co. Louth (Roe 1949, fig. 12,47; fig. 12,46; fig. 11,38)). Perhaps the earliest example of David the harper sitting on the ground appears on St. Oran's Cross, Iona, which should probably be dated early in the bracket A.D. 750–800 (Roy Com Anc Hist Mons Scotland 1982, 195, fig. A, 196, fig. B). It is tempting to see this as the ultimate Insular model for the David on Tynemouth 8A.

⁵These examples may perhaps be paralleled by other badly worn earlier examples on St. Oran's and St. Martin's Crosses, Iona (Roy Com Anc Hist Mons Scotland 1982, 197A, 207A).

⁶Monifieth is now in Angus, Tayside, in the revised counties of Scotland.

⁷David may be sitting on the ground playing his harp on a large slab now at Ardchattan Priory, Argyll (Roy Com Anc Hist Mons Scotland 1975, 111, fig. 99). Robertson (1976–7, 260, fig. 1) has recorded a possible example of an enthroned harper at St. Andrews, Fife. Another appears at Dupplin, Perthshire (now Perth and Kinross, Tayside—Allen and Anderson 1903, III, fig. 334B).

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