

## A Late Pre-Conquest Carving from Corbridge (Roman Site)

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**A** FRAGMENT of moulded sandstone now in the stone park at Corstopitum (Corbridge Roman Site) is carved on one face with a seated figure (CO1836/0162087). The moulding is Roman, but the style of the seated figure indicates recarving of the fragment in the Late Anglo-Saxon period.

### DESCRIPTION

A standard format for recording Anglo-Saxon sculpture was established in the British Academy Corpus (Cramp 1984—Introduction) and is adopted here; a general discussion follows.

Corbridge (Roman site).

1. Small reused fragment of Roman plinth base (figs 1, 2 and 3).

Present Location

Corbridge (Roman site), stone park to the rear of museum.

Evidence for Discovery

Excavated from the Corstopitum site in 1913 and described as “a small stone incised very rudely with a sitting figure, probably a ‘jeu d’esprit’” (Forster and Knowles 1914, 308). The figure was first identified as being post-Roman by the author in June 1992. H. 300 mm (11.8 in) W. 172 mm (6.8 in) D. 229 mm (9 in).

Stone Type

Medium-grained massive yellow sandstone.

Present Condition

Weathered and abraded.

Description

Originally a plinth base, one narrow face of which has been recarved.

A (front moulding) (fig. 2): A moulded face comprising (from top to bottom) a cyma which drops into a single roll moulding and fillet.

B (side face): Roughly dressed with oblique pick marks.

C (core): Damaged

D (side face) (fig. 1): A punch-carved figure with a rough, slightly rounded appearance fills the face. A crudely carved roll moulding borders the right hand side of the face, and an angular punched frame highlights the relief of the figure’s head, curving out towards an out-stretched arm until made indistinct by surface abrasion. The other arm is reduced to a shoulder stump by damage. The figure’s face appears to be three-quarter turned with a prominent nose, ovoid eye and a full beard. The man is seated in profile facing to the left, one leg overlying the other with a certain disregard for the niceties of perspective and anatomical form. He is seated on a chair constructed in three main sections, the base of which follows the gradient of the adjoining moulded plinth face. The chair-back, decorated with a semi-circular indentation, terminates just below shoulder level.

E (top): Damaged.

F (base): Roughly dressed with oblique pick marks.

Date

Late ninth or tenth century.

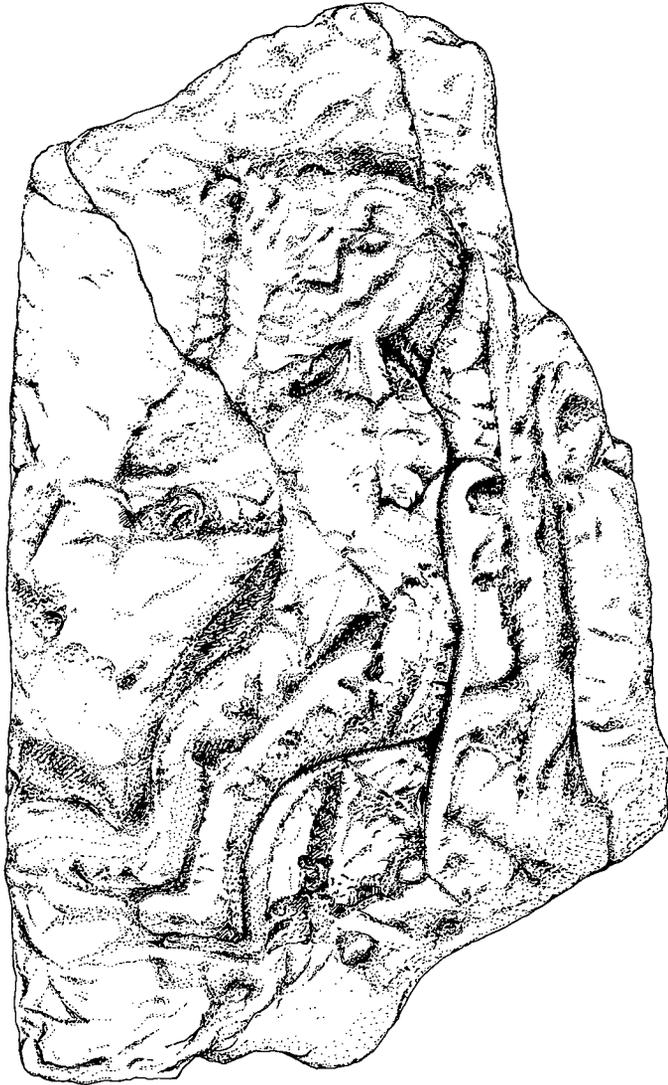


Fig. 1

### DISCUSSION

The moulding sequence on Face A corresponds closely with others found *in situ* on the Corbridge Roman site, and implies that the original plinth base is Roman. However, the punch-curved figure on Face D belongs to a different tradition. The location of this figure on one of the narrow dressed sides of the plinth

base confirms this, for it would have been obscured from view if the stone were in its original position, being carved on the face of a joint. From this it follows that the carved figure post-dates the stone's life as a plinth base.

A close parallel to the Corbridge figure appears on the upper panel of a fragmentary late Pre-Conquest cross-shaft from Lindisfarne (Cramp 1984, I, 195-6, II, Ills. 1050-1). A pair

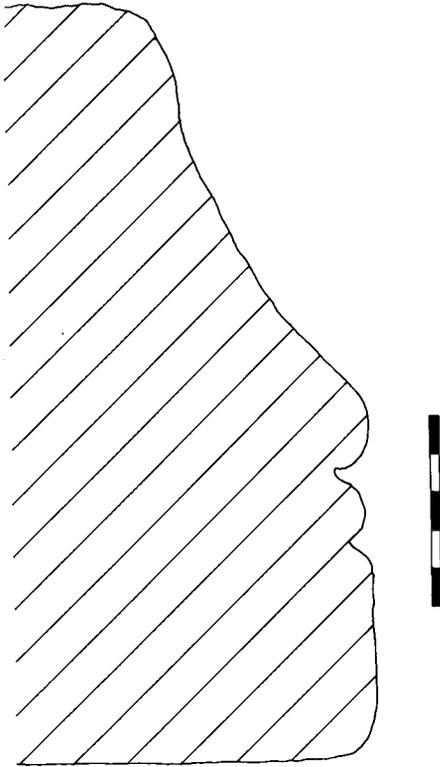


Fig. 2

of seated figures at the base of this panel display the same idiosyncratic treatment of overlying legs. The chairs are likewise of a similar form, though the legs on the Lindisfarne shaft are more finely delineated than the block-like divisions of the Corbridge example. Both the Lindisfarne figures and the Corbridge man have crooked arms extending at right angles from their torsos; those from Lindisfarne support what appear to be upturned trumpet-like horns, the possible object supported at Corbridge being obscured by damage. Within the northern Insular tradition of sculpture, paired, seated figures executed in a similar style to the above, frequently represent St. Paul and St. Anthony; single figures the harpist David. However, with no further iconographic clues the identification of the Corbridge figure remains conjectural. Although the heads of the Lindisfarne pair appear clean-shaven and en-face the comparison with the

Corbridge man is not thereby negated, for a pair of standing figures in the upper quadrants of the same Lindisfarne cross shaft, have sharply profiled heads sporting fine beards. The Lindisfarne figures fit neatly into spaces provided between the arms of the cross, mandorla and surrounding rectangular moulding on the cross slab. The Corbridge man is likewise confined to a frame of sorts, though this is limited to a vertical roll moulding and an angular frame around his head which then curves towards his outstretched arm, following much the same line as the Lindisfarne mandorla. However, the frame can never have extended beyond the edge of the stone, the adjoining dressed face being the base of the original moulded plinth block. The horizontal base line for the Lindisfarne figures is not repeated at Corbridge where the base and chair-back have an instep in line with the concave outline of the original moulded stone. The graded levels of the Corbridge chair-base confirm that the figure post-dates the moulded face. This presents something of an enigma, for the reused stone could never have been intended as a free-standing upright, its narrow moulded base with an arc cut out of one corner making balance impossible. Moreover, despite its partial frame, it seems inconceivable that the figure could have belonged to a larger figural scheme such as that depicted on the Lindisfarne shaft: original dressed faces terminating the scene both to the side and below. On the grounds that the figural carving could never have stood freely in an upright position, it is proposed that the figure was either executed whilst the fragment was located in a secondary rebuild, with the original moulded face bedded below, or that it was a trial by an apprentice sculptor, possibly for a larger iconographic scheme; the reused moulded Roman stone being chosen because it would neatly accommodate the figure.

The close identity of the Lindisfarne figures with that on the reused Corbridge stone suggests a common cultural and temporal context. The Lindisfarne cross shaft has been dated by its interlace and figural scene to the late ninth/early tenth century, though there seems no reason to exclude the later tenth century



*Fig. 3 Carving from Corbridge. Photograph by Neil Askew, English Heritage*

(Cramp 1984, I, 195–6). Lindisfarne, the original home of the St. Cuthbert community, continued to support stone carvers after the community's departure, as witnessed by sculpture post-dating the Viking raids. Lands belonging to the community stretched across Northumbria to Cumbria, with Corbridge and its river crossing providing an important communication link (Cramp 1984, I, 4 and Morris 1981, 223–44). The recovery of Anglian jewellery from Corstopitum confirms post-Roman activity at Corbridge Roman site, though the excavation of the figural stone and a further moulded Roman stone bearing Anglo-Saxon interlace need not be interpreted as evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement on the Roman site itself (Forster and Knowles 1909, 407–8 and 1913, 272–3, fig. 21). The main focus of this Anglo-Saxon settlement appears to have been located between the bridge and the church of St. Andrews, around which the present town of Corbridge has developed. Early surviving fabric in the nave and chancel of St. Andrews probably belonged to the eighth-century monastic church referred to in the Northumbrian Annals (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 172–3). The west porch also dates from this period, but is capped by a tower of tenth/eleventh-century date built largely of reused Roman stone (Cramp 1984, I, 240). It seems likely that the figural carving recorded at Corstopitum would have been associated with this nearby Anglo-Saxon settlement focused around the church. This community no doubt drew upon the Roman site as a source of ready dressed stone. With no evidence for a Late Anglo-Saxon settlement at the Roman site, it seems most probable that the two reused Roman stones displaying secondary Anglo-Saxon carving were carved on the Roman site and then abandoned, rather than being transported to the nearby Anglo-Saxon settlement.

In light of northern Insular parallels to the Corbridge figure, particularly Lindisfarne 3A, the secondary carving can be ascribed to the early medieval tradition of Christian sculpture, rather than to the Roman period. Its presence on a Roman plinth base points to the Anglo-Saxon recarving of ready dressed, moulded

stone, a practice repeated at nearby Warden where a large figure of probable eleventh-century date adorns a slab clearly cut from a Roman altar (Cramp 1984, I, 229–30, II, Ill.1281).

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