

# The Acklington ‘Warriors Stone’: early medieval or modern?

*Richard N. Bailey*

## SUMMARY

*The discovery of a carved stone at Acklington, Northumberland, the decoration of which closely resembles that on an Anglo-Saxon slab from Lindisfarne, poses intriguing problems of date and provenance.*

## DISCOVERY

THE STONE (fig. 1) WAS FIRST NOTICED BY GILES EYRE-TANNER who found it in a drystone wall in the garden of the former vicarage of St John’s church, Acklington, at some date in the 1990s. The house (NU 227019), which is Grade II listed, was built in 1871 (Grundy *et al.* 1992, 123) but had not been used as an ecclesiastical residence since the Second World War, during which it had been occupied by service personnel. Mr Eyre-Tanner cleaned off the mud and some of the cement adhering to the stone; it then remained in a sheltered position in his garden until he left Acklington in 2010. Before leaving the village he passed the carving to John Davison who reported its existence to the regional Finds Liaison Officer of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, Rob Collins, in early 2011. He, in turn, asked the author for his opinion. This account provides an illustration of the work that is done to assess artefacts that are brought to the attention of the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

## DESCRIPTION

The red sandstone slab is decorated in flat relief on one broad face only. Originally roughly squared, parts of the upper left corner have been (deliberately?) cut away, whilst the incomplete nature of the decoration suggests that some of the sides and base of the decorated face have also been lost. At some stage in its history the stone has been broken into three pieces which were then mortared together; a further repair, using a brown mastic, is visible in the upper right section of the curving frame. In its present state the carving is 41 cm broad, 36.5 cm high and 5.5 cm deep.

The decorated face carries an arched frame whose vertical members only survive fragmentarily to the left. Set within this frame is a procession of seven warriors, seen in profile and facing right. The heads, which lack any facial features, are crudely depicted and the bodies are apparently clad in garments which reach to their bent knees; where visible, each figure has a single arm. The feet and lower legs have been broken away. Figures 2, 3 and 4 — numbering from the left — hold above their heads their swords, the blades of which run into the frame, whilst figure 5 flourishes a (partially surviving) battle-axe. Though the relevant area is now damaged it is probable that figure 6 was similarly equipped with a battle-axe. Figure 1 waves a large hand over his neighbour’s head whilst the diminutive figure 7 equally appears to have had no weapon, though details of any arm have now been lost.



Fig. 1 The  
Acklington Stone  
(photo: author)



Fig. 2 The  
Lindisfarne stone  
(photo: courtesy of  
the Corpus of  
Anglo-Saxon Stone  
Sculpture,  
Durham, and  
English Heritage)

## DISCUSSION

It was immediately obvious that the warrior scene was closely related to the military procession on a well-known late ninth/early tenth century slab from Lindisfarne (fig. 2; Cramp 1984, I, 206–7; II, illus. 1132–4). Each has a line of seven warriors, facing right, set under an arch. On each stone, figures 2, 3, and 4 brandish swords whilst figures 5 and 6 carry battle-axes. Figure 1 on both stones is seemingly unarmed but with a raised large hand whilst both figure 7s are set close to the frame; at Lindisfarne this latter figure has arms crossed over his body. A further link between the two stones lies in their similar dimensions: the Lindisfarne stone is 42 cm wide at the base and 28 cm high.

There are, however, obvious differences between the two carvings. The relationship between the heights of the figures differs, and the Acklington warriors are noticeably more elongated than their Lindisfarne equivalents thanks to a lack of distinction between the lower edge of their garments and the legs beneath. The angles of the swords vary between the two carvings and, at Acklington, the ends of the weapons run into the frame, in contrast to their treatment at Lindisfarne. More significantly, at Lindisfarne the warriors are given lentoid eyes and dressed in garments whose lower parts are ribbed to suggest armour; the Acklington figures lack any equivalent facial features or garment definition. This absence of surface detail might be thought to be attributable to later wear but, if so, it seems strange that no trace whatsoever has remained. The impression left by the Acklington carving is, rather, that it is a rough-out which has not been worked up to a final modelled stage, and this suggestion is further supported by the manner in which the sword hilt grasped by figure 3 is not cut free from his head. Another distinction between the two stones points in the same direction: the top of the Lindisfarne stone is formed by a curved framing moulding whilst a similar curve appears to have been attempted in the upper left corner at Acklington but then abandoned.

What, then, is the relationship between the two scenes? It is clear that they are exclusively linked in some way: not only is the total composition without close parallel elsewhere in Britain but the number of warriors and the pattern of their weapons are exactly matched. What is more, both scenes lack a clear lower frame. But do they derive independently from a now-lost common exemplar or is one a copy of the other? It is obviously unlikely that Lindisfarne copies Acklington, given the unfinished nature of the latter carving. Whilst we cannot rule out the possibility of a common ancestor for both — though it seems implausible that a hypothetical model would also lack a lower frame — it seems more likely that Acklington is dependent on Lindisfarne. This suggestion is supported by the fact that the relative heights of the figures and their accompanying weapons are carefully adjusted to the arched frame at Lindisfarne whilst Acklington has a much less graded organisation. In addition the swords carried by figures 2 and 3 at Lindisfarne have a distinct curved pommel which corresponds to known ninth and tenth century types whilst no such detail was attempted at Acklington (for pommel types, see: Graham-Campbell 1980a, 67; Bone 1989). Finally, the Holy Island scene is part of a sophisticated iconographical statement about Doomsday, as one might expect from a major monastic site with far-flung links (Bailey 1980, 162–4; see also Henderson 1980, 12–13); Acklington is not woven into any such scenic combination.

If Acklington does copy Lindisfarne then what was the date of its production? To answer this question we need first to summarise our knowledge of the modern discovery, exhibition and publication of the Lindisfarne stone. Its first notice and illustration came in 1924 from Sir Charles Peers after he had supervised clearance and consolidation work at the Priory site

during the first quarter of the twentieth century (Peers 1924, 269–70, pl. lvi.1–2). It may have been found during that work or, just possibly, in the archaeological activity initiated by Sir William Crossman in the 1880s (O'Sullivan 1989, 125, 129). Though it could presumably have been seen by visitors to the site museum after Peers's excavations, the stone seems to have attracted little wider interest for some thirty years following his initial publication: Collingwood, for example, gave it only a passing reference in his great work on *Northumbrian Crosses* and, though a photograph was published in 1932, this was in a survey of archaeological discoveries which was not widely circulated (Collingwood 1927, 106; Kendrick and Hawkes 1932, 344, pl. xxx). After the war it figured, without any commentary, in the austere 1949 Ministry of Works guidebook to Lindisfarne Priory (Thompson 1949, pl. facing p. 11), and was then subsequently included and illustrated in a few popular books and guides emerging over the next twenty years (Brøndsted 1960, 31; Foote and Wilson 1970, 276, pl. 1.a; Rowland 1973, 51, 18). It was only in the years around 1980, when it was included in Viking exhibitions in London and York, that images of it became ubiquitous in books and television documentaries (e.g., Bailey 1980, pl. 48; 1981, pl. 2; Graham-Campbell 1980a, no. 1; 1980b, 26; Graham-Campbell and Kidd 1980, 13). In the next decade it was frequently illustrated, usually in association with commentary concerning the Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793 (e.g., Magnusson 1984, 127–8; Richards 1991, pl. 3).

With this background of discovery and publication in mind, we have two possible periods of production for this — probably unfinished — Acklington stone: (a) at some date in the late ninth/early tenth century when the Lindisfarne carving was executed; or (b) after its discovery and publication in 1924, and its subsequent exhibition in the Lindisfarne museum.

Adjudication between these two possibilities is difficult but one conclusion is certain: at neither of these dates is it likely that the stone originated in Acklington itself. And this for two reasons. Firstly, if it were an early medieval carving, then the known history of Acklington township and parish does not suggest that it provides an appropriate background for medieval sculptural production. Such sites tend to be of secular or ecclesiastical prominence. No such status attaches to Acklington (*NCH* 5, 362–76). When it first emerges into recorded history in the post-Conquest period it is as a township within the barony of Warkworth and as part of Warkworth parish. It remained as part of that parish until 1859 when it was given parochial status in a local ecclesiastical re-organisation; the present church was dedicated in 1861. There is therefore nothing in the implied history or status of pre-Conquest Acklington to suggest that it would have produced early medieval sculpture. A second reason for rejecting an Acklington provenance at any date is based on the fact that the carving is in red sandstone, a stone not found in the immediate Acklington neighbourhood but one much exploited in north-east Northumberland in the Doddington/Bamburgh/Holy Island area. Whether early medieval or modern it follows that this stone must have been brought to the vicarage from another site.

But brought at what date? And carved when? On balance, the answer to both those questions is probably 'twentieth century'. It cannot be pure coincidence that the Acklington stone lacks a lower border and its warriors are without feet — and that it is seemingly broken off in nearly the same place as the Lindisfarne stone. The explanation must lie in the fact that the Acklington sculpture depended on the Lindisfarne model in its excavated and damaged state, and was not imitative of its earlier, complete, medieval form. It is therefore the work of a modern hand, commissioned by an enthusiastic admirer of one of Northumberland's more

striking medieval compositions and, given its awkward inaccuracies, probably based on sketches and measurements made in the museum rather than on published photographs.

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Richard N. Bailey, 22 Ridgely Drive, Ponteland NE20 9BL.

rnbpont@hotmail.com

