ASPECTS OF VIKING-AGE SCULPTURE IN CUMBRIA

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Exactly 100 years ago Dr Charles Parker despatched his coachman with brush and bucket to the top of the Gosforth cross. Parker may have been skilled in obstetrics but even he could not have realized that this was a pregnant moment in the history of Viking studies. As the lichen was brushed away the significance of the carving became apparent: here was depicted the story of Ragnarok, the tale of that final struggle between the monstrous forces of evil and the gods of Scandinavian mythology. Parker's companion that day was the Reverend W. S. Calverley and he must have experienced a certain mild jubilation. Only a few months earlier he had argued for precisely this interpretation of the sculpture but his audience of visiting antiquarians had given his paper a sceptical reception. Now there could no longer be any doubt that this cross, which had stood in a Christian graveyard for over 900 years, was covered with the images of pagandom.

This startling discovery aroused national interest. Professor G. F. Browne claimed that it was 'not too much to say that this year has seen a revelation of the language of these stones which no one had dreamed of before'.2 Parker and Calverley were thus encouraged to continue their work, and turned their attention to other carvings which were then emerging in some quantities as a by-product of enthusiastic church restoration. In 1883 Parker's dedication was rewarded by his discovery of the so-called 'Fishing Stone', depicting Thor and Heimdallr, a find which precipitated a memorable visit to Gosforth by the redoubtable Professor George Stephens of Copenhagen. Parker went on to publish monographs on the Gosforth carvings and other Eskdale antiquities whilst Calverley began to gather together an illustrated collection of all the pre-Norman sculpture in the diocese of Carlisle. In the course of this work he met W. G. Collingwood, an artist and a scholar who had returned to the Lake District to act as secretary to John Ruskin.³ Collingwood already had an interest in the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings through his links with the William Morris circle but it was Calverley who drew him to the study of pre-Norman sculpture and it is for his work in this field that he is now chiefly remembered. Beginning with his editorial work on Calverley's posthumous papers (published in 1899) he was to spend the rest of his life in the collection and elucidation of these carvings and it is largely through his energies that they became known to a national and international audience.

Other scholars⁴ have since given us a clearer idea of the place of Cumbrian sculpture in the evolution of English and European medieval

art, but all their studies ultimately depended on the Cumbrian triumvirate of Parker, Calverley and Collingwood. The forthcoming volumes of the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture,⁵ a project sponsored by the British Academy, will merely mark another stage in the work on which these three embarked so long ago.

When the *Corpus* is complete the significance of the sculpture should be clear. Many of the carvings are fragmentary and all now lack the polychrome appearance of their original painted surfaces. Yet they provide a considerable range of information about a period when other sources fail us. Few documents refer to Viking-age Cumbria, settlement sites still await identification and finds of metalwork and graves are sparse. By contrast, with some 115 Viking-age carvings scattered across 36 sites, the sculpture clearly offers a large body of evidence, and one which is only exceeded in quantity and geographical spread by the place-names. It is relevant to many fields of study. Sculpture is an immobile medium and thus gives us access to the tastes of patrons and artists at that village level which so rarely leave any trace in the historical record. It offers insights into smallscale cultural and economic groupings. It can reflect the status of settlements. It records religious beliefs. It depicts the state of Scandinavian mythology centuries before the stories achieved the written form in which they now survive. Above all, these carvings provide one means of assessing the interplay of Scandinavian and native English traditions in Cumbria during the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Some of these issues are discussed at greater length in my Viking-age Sculpture in Northern England (1980); what follows is a summary of several conclusions and speculations based on this material.

SURVIVAL AND ADAPTATION OF AN ANGLIAN SCULPTURAL TRADITION

The very fact that we have stone sculpture of any kind from the Viking period in northern England is significant. The Scandinavians who settled in Britain had no tradition of carving in stone. By contrast there had been a long history of Christian carving in England before the Viking raids began. It follows that the existence of tenth-century sculptures is evidence for the persistence of a characteristic insular element in the culture of Anglo-Scandinavian Northumbria. That tradition, moreover, seems to have taken on fresh life with the Scandinavian settlement. What had been primarily a monastic art now found a new lay public and sculpture became more popular (in both senses) than it had ever been. One crude statistic will make the point: we know of 25 pre-Viking carvings from Cumbria compared with 115 which survive from the tenth and eleventh centuries.

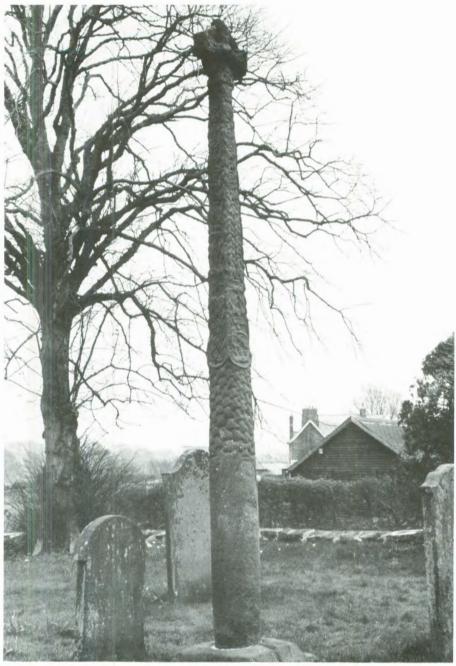
That this flourishing tradition was capable of responding to the fashions of the new political and social order is clear from the carvings which are decorated with ornament suited to Scandinavian taste. What is more, at least some of the patrons who commissioned monuments depicting the

mythology or the zoomorphic art of Scandinavia must have been members of the new Viking aristocracy, adopting and adapting the practices of the communities in which they had settled. The sculpture thus gives us evidence for that same spirit of compromise and mutual adjustment of interests between natives and settlers which is indicated by the documentary and numismatic material at York.

It is important to stress that there is a strong Anglian element in the decorative repertoire of England's Viking-age sculpture. General surveys of this art have naturally focused on carvings which are more Scandinavian in character, but these are the exceptions. It is true, as we shall see, that we have depictions of Scandinavian heroics at Gosforth and Lowther. At Muncaster and Crosscanonby we have a local variant of the Scandinavian Borre-style ring-chain.6 At Great Clifton the swelling, contoured, ribbon animals reflect the Jelling style, whilst Workington provides a rare English echo of Mammen art. 7 Such pieces, however, account for less than 10 per cent of Cumbria's Viking-age sculpture. Much more characteristic is the 'Giant's Thumb' at Penrith, whose vegetable decoration is blatantly derived from the vine-scroll ornament which recurs so frequently on pre-Viking crosses like those from Bewcastle and Lowther.8 On the tenthcentury shaft from Waberthwaite are two birds which were hatched in the same nest as the late eighth-century pair on the Gandersheim casket. Even the animals at Brigham, Crosscanonby and Aspatria, whilst they may nod in the direction of Jelling art, are essentially beasts drawn from the ninthcentury menagerie of pre-Viking England. 10 Such traditional motifs cause endless problems in dating these carvings, 11 but they are a significant indicator of the Anglian contribution to the culture of tenth-century Cumbria. This sculpture may be of the 'Viking-age', but when it contains such a vigorous English element it cannot reasonably be described as 'Viking'.

DISTRIBUTION OF VIKING-AGE SCULPTURE

We have seen that sculpture survives in some quantity from Viking-age Cumbria. It is logical to interpret its presence at a site as evidence for the existence of a certain degree of local economic wealth. We must, of course, remember that there are controls on the distribution of carvings which are not directly linked to the economics of tenth-century England. The vagaries of modern discovery can distort the pattern and it is, for example, a salutary reminder of the operations of chance that it was not until 1980 that a cross-shaft was noticed in the church fabric at Aldingham in Furness despite the fact that it must have been visible for over a century. Geology can also confuse distribution maps — as was illustrated recently in the claim that the lack of Viking-age hogbacks on the Isle of Man was evidence for the island's relative isolation from northern England. ¹² It is much more likely that their absence is to be explained by the fact that the slate stone of Man is ill-suited to the production of such three-dimensional monuments.



 $Plate\ VI$ Viking-period cross, Gosforth, West Cumbria: the best-preserved of its type in West Cumbria. Its mixture of pagan and Christian symbolism has been the subject of many interpretations.

With such *caveats* in mind I would like to offer speculations on some matters of distribution. The first point to emphasize is that sculptural activity during the Viking period is very much centred on the southern part of the Cumbrian peninsula. ¹³ North of a line drawn (approximately) from Penrith to the River Ellen hardly any tenth or early eleventh-century carving has been recorded. This distinction between northern and southern Cumbria is not one which is apparent in the Anglian period and presumably reflects some later historical divergence. I have attempted to explain this divergence in terms of differing settlements, arguing that the Carlisle plain came within the orbit of Strathclyde's expansion and was also subject to a Scandinavian land-taking which was unlike that in the southern part of the peninsula. Clearly this suggestion must now be assessed by place-name specialists. On the evidence of the sculpture, however, it is clear that *some* kind of cultural division existed between north and south Cumbria in the late pre-Norman period.

Within the northern area lies Carlisle, and Carlisle presents a problem. 14 In the Anglian period we have documentary evidence that it was the site of a monastery and that the town had some kind of urban organization. It was a centre for ambitious and literate sculpture. Yet (even if we enlarge the definition of 'Carlisle' to include Stanwix) there is no sculptural sign that Carlisle functioned as an influential centre in the tenth century. The contrast with York and Chester is instructive. 15 In the Viking period both of these cities had populations which were sufficiently large and wealthy to justify the existence of large masons' yards, producing standardized funereal carvings for the local urban graveyards. Their finest art was imitated with varying degrees of competence in the surrounding countryside. There is no indication that Carlisle played any similar role in the north-west. To judge from the sculpture surviving, the city lacked the wealth one might have expected if it had any thriving commercial role, and its lack of cultural impact on the surrounding area must imply that by the tenth century Carlisle had lost any political importance it may once have possessed.16

Whilst thinking in such negative terms attention might also be drawn to the Kent valley. Here, in the Anglian period, there had been a monastery at Heversham and the village church still contains the remains of a ninth-century cross which was carved by the same hand as produced the large shaft from Lowther now in the British Museum. There is the valley we also have a fragment of a once-substantial cross at Kendal. We we have no trace whatsoever of any tenth-century carving from the area. This is rather strange, since virtually every other site which produced Anglian carving has also produced evidence of sculptural activity in the ensuing period. We are driven to speculate that the settlement of the Kent valley may have been socially more disruptive than elsewhere in the peninsula, and it may not be coincidence that the tenth-century Historia de Sancto Cuthberto records Abbot Tilred's departure from Heversham in the context of an Anglian noble travelling eastwards across the Pennines, fugiens piratas. 19

CULTURAL LINKS: EAST OR WEST?

I turn from such narrow and negative concerns to broader issues. Two features characterize the general run of Viking-period sculpture in Cumbria. The first is that its contacts, inspiration and influence are largely to be found in the lands around the Irish Sea and not across the Pennines to the east. Secondly, when this art is not looking westward then it characteristically looks in on itself.

The latter tendency reflects the changed political and religious situation in northern England. Before the Viking settlement the centres of cultural innovation lay to the east in places like Lindisfarne, Jarrow/Wearmouth, Ripon and York. The political unity of the country and, perhaps more significant, the network of monasteries with their associated houses and scattered land-holdings, all facilitated the flow of books, ideas and artistic motifs across wide geographical distances. The final decay of the monastic system in the late ninth century, coupled with political fragmentation, changed all this. Sculptural patronage and masonic skills were no longer confined within the monastic vallum. A new public was available, but often its masons no longer had access to the kind of national art which had inspired their Anglian predecessors. The flow of new motifs ceased. They were forced to develop their own parochial and idiosyncratic forms of ornament, endlessly repeating the same decoration. Occasionally they sought their inspiration in the ornament of some great earlier monument within their area. Thus the once-impressive ninth-century cross from Beckermet St Bridget spawned a great school of imitative sculpture along the coastal strip of Cumbria in the Viking period.²⁰ Repetition and incompetent imitation abound. A sense of cultural fragmentation and isolation is everywhere apparent in tenth-century carving.

If Cumbrian artists did raise their eyes to wider horizons, then they looked to the west and not to the old eastern centres of inspiration. The tenth-century Scandinavian settlement turned the area once more into an Irish Sea province. So it was from the Celtic west that the notion of the ring-head was introduced via Cumbria to northern sculpture in the Viking period.²¹ It is along the western seaboard that we find the circle-headed form which links Viking-age settlements in Cumbria, Cheshire and North Wales.²² The Isle of Man and Cumbria may have differed in their traditional forms of monument but their exclusive use of certain zoomorphic, knotwork and figural motifs betrays a link between them.²³ And across the Solway in Galloway the sculpture shares numerous features with Cumbrian carvings — ornamental layout, stopped plait, a taste for encircled crossings, incised crosses and swastikas.²⁴ The seaward links can be pursued round to Carrick where a carving from Colmonell repeats exactly the eccentric motifs and organization of sculptures from Dearham and Aspatria. 25 Still further north we reach Govan where a large hogback combines the slim proportions of this type of monument in north-west England with the stopped plait which is the trademark of a local Cumbrian school.²⁶ Such western links were not a feature of Anglian Cumbria.

One area alone among those bordering the Irish Sea fails to show any contact with the sculpture of Cumbria, either as donor or recipient. This is Ireland. I have reviewed elsewhere the alleged Irish elements in Cumbrian sculpture and attempted to show that they can be explained in other ways. ²⁷ Given that Irish sculpture remained a monastic art throughout the tenth century and showed no trace of any adjustment to the tastes of the Scandinavian settlers (who in any case were largely confined to coastal trading centres like Dublin and Cork), this lack of influence is not perhaps a matter for surprise. If traces of any contact do eventually emerge in the sculpture then they are likely to be confined to the *end* of the Viking period. This is not to deny an Irish involvement in the settlement of Cumbria. All that I claim here is that the sculpture shows no traces of that involvement — nor would it be expected to do so.

THE 'PAGAN' ELEMENT

I turn finally to my starting point, the pagan element which Parker and Calverley first recognized in this sculpture.

Here we must step carefully. Not everything which seems pagan merits that label. At Aspatria, for example, there is a carving in the vestry which appears to show the lower half of a small (and phallic) figure. Calverley, who was vicar there, must have known it well. In his description he suggested that 'to heathen minds it might be a victim hurled to Odin'. ²⁸ But a rather less exciting explanation emerges when we reverse the stone so that it stands the right way up. The figure then becomes the upper part of an *orans*, set beneath a cross, the 'phallus' being a badly-weathered head placed between the upraised arms of a Christian at prayer!

Other seemingly pagan themes are also susceptible to Christian explanation. Scandinavian mythology may seem to provide a plausible inspiration for the men struggling with monsters on carvings at Gosforth, Penrith and Great Clifton.²⁹ But Christian commentators frequently visualized the horrors of Hell in these terms and saw the battle between Christ and the Devil as one involving a serpent/dragon. Monsters had a firm place in Christian teaching and the pages of the Bible contain some splendid examples — the giants of *Genesis*, the Leviathan and dragons of *Isaiah*, *Job* and the *Psalms*, together with the terrifying beasts of the *Apocalypse*. These chthonic themes may have appealed to Scandinavian tastes weaned on the tales later recorded by Snorri Sturluson, but the essential point remains that such carvings could have carried a Christian meaning. If Great Clifton's monster struggle is 'pagan', then why do we accept unquestioningly an analogous motif on the pre-Viking cross at Rothbury as a depiction of Christian Hell?³⁰

One whole class of Viking-age monuments has recently been discussed as exemplifying the pagandom of the Viking settlement. These are the hogbacks, which Dr A. Smyth has described as being 'non-Christian in character' and 'thoroughly pagan in conception'.³¹ If this were true then

the fifteen hogbacks from Cumbria would make a very substantial contribution to the evidence for pagan activity in the peninsula.

I do not believe, however, that Dr Smyth's argument can be sustained. In form the hogback represents, as I have argued elsewhere, a modification of the Anglian shrine-tomb, the earlier monument being remodelled so as to take on the shape of a contemporary Viking house.³² They were carved, as is clear from the evidence at Aspatria, by the same masons as produced the crosses. The so-called end-beasts which frequently decorate their gables need have no more pagan significance than the animals who perch in similar positions on the metal shrines of Christian relics in Italy, Germany or Ireland.³³ There is, in short, nothing pagan about their form.

Nor is their decoration, in medieval terms, pagan.³⁴ Let us, for example, take the Cumbrian evidence. Twelve of the fifteen hogbacks from the peninsula carry ornament. On three of them (two from Penrith and one from Brigham) we have a vine-scroll motif and this, if it has any significance, implies a Christian interpretation. On the Gosforth 'Saint's Tomb' there is a crucifixion; on the Crosscanonby stone an orans. Most of the rest (Aspatria, Penrith (2), Lowther (1), Plumbland) are decorated with animals or knotwork — and this kind of ornament occurs in the most Christian of contexts in pre-Viking England, witness the Lindisfarne Gospels.

We are thus left with a residue of three hogbacks with any claims to classification as pagan art. These are two of the stones from Lowther and the 'Warrior's Tomb' from Gosforth. It must be admitted that they carry no overt Christian symbolism. Nor is there any doubt that their battle scenes can be paralleled in the pre-Christian art of Gotland, and I strongly suspect that their artists were using models in such perishable media as tapestries, metalwork, wood-carving and shield paintings. These models may well have been produced in pre-Christian Scandinavia. But do these facts turn the Lowther and Gosforth stones into 'pagan' monuments?

At this point it is useful to retreat to pre-Viking England and to a stimulating essay published in 1978 by Patrick Wormald in which he examined the milieu which gave birth to the Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf. 36 He gathered together a formidable amount of evidence to show that many monasteries and leading ecclesiastics in the eighth and ninth centuries clung to the secular aristocratic ideals of the warrior world which lay outside the monastic vallum. What is more, they celebrated those ideals through the performance and recording of narratives woven around the deeds of a real or imagined heroic past. Bede was worried by this element in Christian England and Alcuin fulminated against it, demanding to know what Ingeld had to do with Christ. Such protests, however, merely emphasize the fact that at the very core of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, there was an interest in the noble deeds of heroes. The survival of *Beowulf* in written form is but one indication of this clerical fascination with a past which was recognized as being pagan. In another medium the Franks Casket, on which Weland the Smith flanks the Magi and the Virgin, reflects similar literate, monastic tastes. In certain Christian circles, therefore, the myths which encapsulated the ideals of a secular society were not only tolerated but were actively disseminated. A similar situation can be found on the continent where, for example, Rudolf of Fulda's account of the relics of the house of Wildeshausen is prefaced by a description of the deeds and glories of pagan Saxon kings.

With this background in mind we return to Lowther and Gosforth. Certainly these are not Christian scenes. But neither are they pagan. They are in fact secular, and Wormald's evidence shows that such themes were embraced by medieval Christianity long before the Viking settlement and in areas they never disturbed. The changes in sculptural patronage (consequent on the decline of the monasteries and the settlement) merely brought to the visual arts secular themes which had long been accepted in the oral and written literature of Christian England. If any doubts remain about the non-pagan nature of these secular myths within medieval Christianity, then we need only refer to twelfth-century churches in Norway whose entrances are flanked by carvings of Sigurd and Fafnir.³⁷

We may now seem to be in danger of losing all our sculptural evidence for pagandom into the all-consuming maw of medieval Christianity. But two carvings still remain whose scenes cannot be explained in terms of secular heroic ideals. One is the 'Fishing Stone' discovered by Parker, and the other is the large Gosforth cross whose meaning was first elucidated by Calverley.³⁸ Here we are undoubtedly dealing with the pagan gods of Scandinavian mythology. To call these stones 'half-pagan', however, is to misunderstand the function of their iconography. If I interpret them correctly, they are making a very Christian point. They explore the parallels and contrasts between Christian teaching and pagan myth. By patterning the Christian crucifixion against scenes from Ragnarok the sculptor of the churchyard cross has managed to explore the nature of three worlds — the world of the pagan gods, the world redeemed by Christ's death and the world which will end at Doomsday. Pagan scenes have been used to celebrate a Christian truth. The 'Fishing Stone' shows a similar subtle patterning and so also, we may surmise, did the second large cross at Gosforth whose remains now survive behind a wooden screen in the church. Even Gosforth's art, therefore, is only pagan in a most Christian manner.

Twenty-five years ago Professor Stone suggested that there was little purpose in cataloguing or analysing the efforts of tenth-century Northumbrian sculptors.³⁹ Even the issues briefly outlined in this paper may suggest, on the contrary, that the exercise is not without its rewards.

Notes

Footnotes have been kept to a minimum; references to illustrations are to their most accessible publications. The following abbreviations are used:

Bailey : R. N. Bailey, Viking-age Sculpture in Northern England (1980). Calverley

: W. S. Calverley, Early Sculptured Crosses, Shrines and Monuments in the Diocese of Carlisle (1899).

Collingwood: W. G. Collingwood, Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age

(1927).

Lang : J. T. Lang (ed.), Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Sculpture (1978).

¹ Most of the material in this and the following paragraph is drawn from: Calverley, W. S. Calverley, The sculptured cross at Gosforth, West Cumberland, in Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (1883) VI. 373-412; C. Parker, The Ancient Crosses at Gosforth, Cumberland (1896).

² Calverley, 140.

³ For a memoir see Lang, preface.

- ⁴ Notably: J. Brøndsted, Early English Ornament (1924); T. D. Kendrick, Late Saxon and Viking Art (1949); H. Shetelig, The Norse style of ornamentation in the Viking settlements, in H. Shetelig (ed.), Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland (1954) VI. 115–50; D. M. Wilson and O. Klindt-Jensen, Viking Art. 2nd edition (1980).
- ⁵ Editors: R. J. Cramp, J. T. Lang, C. Morris and the writer.

6 Bailey, plate 2; Calverley, plate facing p. 103.

⁷ Collingwood, fig. 186; Calverley, plates facing pp. 282 and 283.

⁸ Compare Collingwood, figs. 135 and 162.

9 Bailey, fig. 8.

10 Collingwood, figs. 142, 178; Calverley, 72 (fig. D).

- ¹¹ I have considered the problems of traditionalism and dating in *Lang*, 173–85 and *Bailey*, 45–75.
- 12 A. P. Smyth, Scandinavian York and Dublin, Vol. 2 (1979) 272.

13 Bailey, 223-29.

- ¹⁴ The historical and archaeological evidence is summarized in P. F. Gosling, Carlisle, an archaeological survey of the historic town, in D. W. Harding (ed.), *Archaeology in the North* (1976) 165–66, 172–73. Excavations conducted by Mike McCarthy have now modified this picture.
- 15 J. T. Lang, Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in Yorkshire, in R. A. Hall (ed.), Viking Age York and the North (1978) 11-20. J. D. Bu'Lock, Pre-Norman crosses of west Cheshire, in Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society (1959) LXVIII. 1-11.
- ¹⁶ This assertion may need modification if a recently discovered fragment proves to be of tenth-century date and not (as I believe) part of a twelfth-century font. I am grateful to Mike McCarthy for allowing me to see this piece in advance of publication.
- ¹⁷ Collingwood, fig. 47; R. J. Cramp, Early Northumbrian Sculpture (1965) plate 11.
- ¹⁸ W. G. Collingwood, An Anglian cross fragment at Kendal, in *The Reliquary* (1903) 1x. 204–05.
- ¹⁹ F. M. Stenton, Pre-Conquest Westmorland, in D. Stenton (ed.), *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England* (1970) 214-23.

²⁰ Bailey, 196-206.

- ²¹ See my comments in Lang, 178-79; Bailey, 70-71.
- ²² Bailey, 177-82.
- 23 Bailey, 216-23.
- 23 Bailey, 223-29.
- ²⁵ Compare Calverley, figs. facing pp. 18, 127, with the Ayrshire fragment illustrated in R. S. G. Anderson, Three crosses in south-west Scotland, in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1927) LX. 266–68.
- ²⁶ See J. T. Lang, Hogback monuments in Scotland, in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (1976) CV. 212-13.
- 27 Bailey, 229-31.
- 28 Calverley, 18.
- ²⁹ For this material see *Bailey*, 138–42.
- 30 Collingwood, fig. 94.
- 31 Scandinavian York and Dublin, Vol. 2 (1979) 273.
- 32 Bailey, 84-100.
- 33 See Bailey, plate 27; J. Hubert et al., Carolingian Art (1970), plates 193-94.

³⁴ Most of the hogbacks are illustrated in Calverley, Collingwood and Bailey. For the Brigham fragment see H. Schmidt, The Trelleborg house reconsidered, in Medieval Archaeology (1973) XVII. fig. 29b.

35 Bailey, plate 23 and figs. 27–29 with discussion on pp. 136–37.
36 P. Wormald, Bede, Beowulf and the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, in R. T. Farrell (ed.), Bede and Anglo-Saxon England (1978) 32-95.

37 Bailey, 117-19.

³⁸ Bailey, 125-32.

39 L. Stone, Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages (1955) 30.

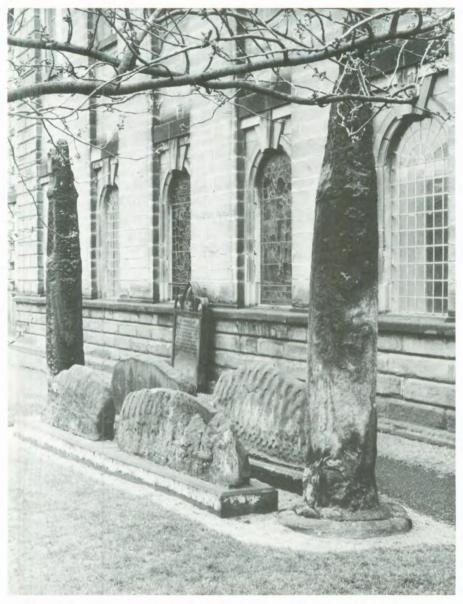


Plate VII Viking-period hogback tombstones and cross-shafts. The Giants Grave, Penrith.