

THREE FRAGMENTS OF A SCULPTURED CROSS OF ANGLIAN
TYPE NOW PRESERVED IN ABERCORN CHURCH, WEST
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In 1934 two large fragments of the shaft of a sculptured cross were added to the collection of similar relics already preserved in a room off the vestry at Abercorn Church. Prior to that date these had been utilised as cope-stones in the parapet of the bridge over the Midhope Burn¹ in front of the entrance gates to the sixteenth-century castle of that name which lies half a mile south-west of the church. Their removal to their present quarters probably brings the stones nearer home to the original site which the cross had graced in the precincts of the early monastic settlement there—the seat of the Anglian Bishop Trumwin towards the end of the eighth century.²

When in the bridge, carving was to be seen only on one side of each stone, the ornamentation on the other two exposed sides having been destroyed in the dressing-down to suit the requirements of the coping. The under sides, however, which had been covered up in the mortar of the joints, retained well-preserved panels cut in relief with rich inter-laced and zoomorphic designs. The good state of the carving on these seems to imply that the ornamentation on the other faces had likewise been in good condition before they were mutilated. On this account it is all the more distressing to contemplate the spirit of vandalism in the drastic treatment of what has undoubtedly been an admirable piece of work.

That the cross had been a handsome one will be seen from the photographs (fig. 1), and from the conjectural restoration which it has been possible to make from a study of the details that fortunately remain (fig. 2). In building up the finished outline advantage has been taken of the opportunity to record a third fragment of sculpture which also lies with the rest at the church. It represents the boss of a cross-head, and although it may or may not actually belong to the shaft that is under review, its inclusion answers the purpose as it may be appropriately ascribed to a sculptured cross of similar class and period.

¹ *Inventory of Ancient and Historical Monuments, Midlothian and Westlothian*, p. 188 (No. 285); facing p. 180, fig. 211.

² W. Douglas Simpson, *The Celtic Church in Scotland*, p. 42.



Fig. 1. Front and side views of fragments of Shaft and obverse and reverse of Boss of Cross-head.

The fragments have been inserted in the drawing (fig. 2) in the relative positions they occupied originally, and the combined height of shaft and head as reconstructed shows that the cross has stood at least 14 feet high. The shaft has tapered approximately from 16 by 12 inches at the base to 11 by 9 inches at the top.

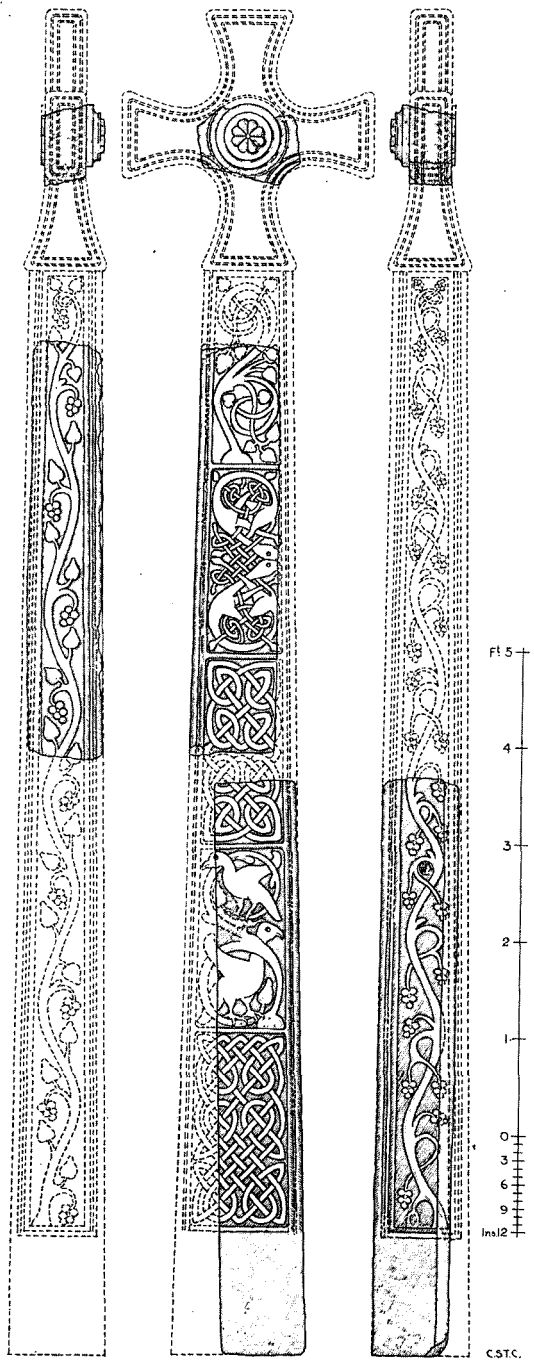


Fig. 2.—Front and side views of Cross restored.

It so happens that the panels which remain on the two portions of the shaft have once adorned the same face of the cross so that an interlaced pattern common to both can be connected up with great certainty. Altogether there are five imperfect panels running end to end along this face, and their well-executed enrichment stands out boldly. Each has measured almost 2 feet in length, and the lowest begins above a plain base 1 foot 3 inches high. It is filled with an interlaced design composed of two interwoven ribbons, as detailed in fig. 3. The panel above symbolises the "Tree of Life"¹ in a vine, which branches into two open spiral scrolls, one in the upper and one in the lower half of the field. Each of these scrolls is tipped with a leaf, and within each convolution a relatively large bird is carved. The birds, which appear to have hooked beaks, are perched to face in opposite directions, and are displayed with outspread wings. A simple interlacing of only one ribbon appears in the broken mid-panel which follows. The most intricate and elaborate design of all is carved in the panel above that again. It is zoomorphic and contains a fret of some complexity in the middle. In the upper and lower halves of the field respectively are the very attenuated bodies of two whippet-like animals with limbs and tails intertwined. The limbs and tails are further complicated by the addition of two interwoven ribbons, distinguished from the animals drawn in black in the detail in fig. 3 by being left white. Actually these ribbons may represent extended lappets, as one end of each starts from the back of an animal's head. A panel having a great resemblance to the above is to be found on the fragment of a cross-shaft which originally came from Aberlady, but is now preserved in Carlowrie House, Midlothian.² Two animals, identical in appearance with those at Abercorn, are displayed also with intertwined limbs. The style and execution of both panels is so remarkably similar that not only do they seem to belong to the same school, but it is probable that the work has been done by the hand of the same carver. Also the intertwined animals in a panel on the fragment of a cross from Lindisfarne are markedly similar to those just described, while there is a distinct resemblance in the detail of the interlaced work to that of the Abercorn shaft in another panel of the same cross.³ The symbolic vine is the sole feature of the topmost panel, and instead of birds in its two convolutions, both are filled with subsidiary branches interlaced and tipped with leaves or fruit.

¹ Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age*, p. 39, chap. vi.

² Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, pt. iii. p. 428, fig. 448A, and *Inventory of Ancient and Historical Monuments, Midlothian and Westlothian*, p. 213 (No. 350); facing p. 229, fig. 288, front.

³ *Archæologia*, vol. lxxiv., facing p. 265, pl. lii., figs. 1 and 2 of cross-shaft ii.

The panels have been separated lengthwise by a single bead moulding, and their sides have been framed by roll-and-bead mouldings running along each edge of the shaft. On the existing edge of the front the roll-and-bead moulding measures $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide, but on the edges of the side faces the moulding measures $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches in width. The

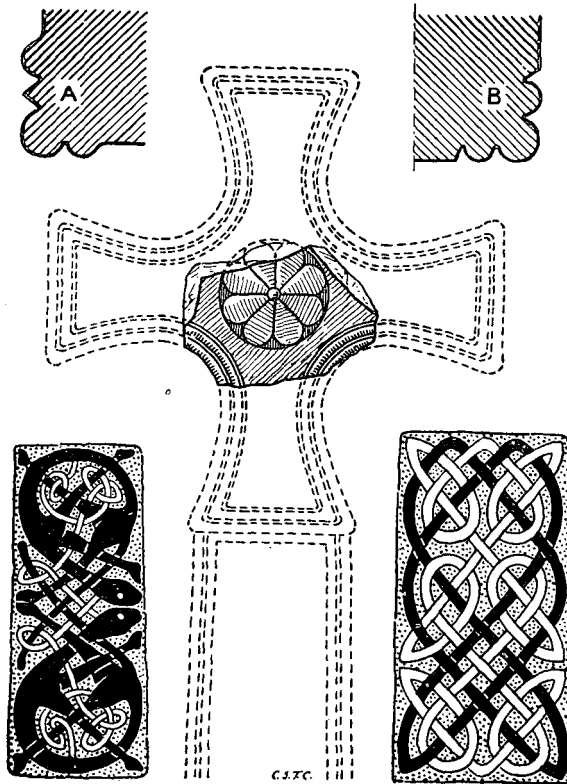


Fig. 3. Reverse of Boss of Cross-head; Zoomorphic and Interlaced panels. A, marginal moulding of Shaft; B, marginal moulding of Cross-head.

increase is due to an extra V-shaped fillet which is interposed between the angle roll and the bead as detailed at A on fig. 3.

On each of the side faces a long narrow panel, bearing a sinuous vine-scroll along the whole length of its field, has been enclosed by the larger moulding, and fortunately the patterns of both scrolls have been preserved, one on each fragment. These, however, have suffered badly from exposure, and there is now some uncertainty as to whether the

wasted tips of the branches terminate in fruit or foliage. In the drawing (fig. 2) the design on one side shows all the tips bearing bunches of grapes, and on the other they are depicted with a combination of alternate fruit cluster and leaf, but both details are typical.

The fragment of the cross-head, which is 5 inches in thickness, is adorned on the obverse with a circular boss, projecting $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches from a plain surface in three stages of decreasing rings or discs, measuring respectively 8, $5\frac{5}{8}$, and 4 inches in diameter (figs. 1 and 2). The boss is contained within an incised ring, $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, and the uppermost disc has been cut and incised to the shape of a conventional eight-petalled flower. A flatter single disc, $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter with a projection of only $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch above the face, occupies the central position on the reverse (figs. 1 and 3). It is also carved with a similar ornament, which is a device frequently used on Anglian cross-heads, but with a varying number of petals. The crosses with similar petalled decoration illustrated by Collingwood range, in his opinion, from dates in the eighth-ninth century to the middle of the eleventh.¹

At the intersections of the arms the margins of each face have been worked with a roll-and-bead moulding (fig. 3) which has evidently been carried along all the edges of the head. The intersections are hollowed, and the arc so formed in each "armpit" was a controlling factor in the restoration of the design. It seemed best suited to fit the "pectoral" ² type that is shown. Not solely on that account, however, has this kind of head been chosen, but also because it is typically Northumbrian in style, "all Anglian crosses that have any heads left" being "free-armed" with "rounded armpits." ³ Other variations may easily be adapted to the arc, and a probable alternative design is that of the "spatulate" head with double-curving arms like those of the Ruthwell Cross or the one at Rothbury.⁴

All the details of the fragments correspond with the Anglian ornamentation on similar Northumbrian crosses, which series seems to begin about A.D. 670, the date suggested by the inscription on the Bewcastle Cross.⁵ Clapham, writing of the Abercorn and Aberlady examples already known, states that they "should, in all probability, date from the short episode of the Anglian See at Abercorn (681-685).⁶ But there is also the probability that this cross had been carved later, as a strong

¹ *Northumbrian Crosses*, p. 54, fig. 68; p. 58, fig. 72; p. 82, fig. 99; p. 176, fig. 218.

² *Ibid.*, p. 82 and fig. 99, a to f.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84, fig. 101; p. 77, fig. 95.

⁵ Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest*, p. 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Northumbrian influence may well have survived Bishop Trumwin's short reign. Besides, Clapham's date places the Abercorn cross he describes in a time very nearly at the beginning of the art, whereas the sculpture detailed here, compared with other carvings, appears to exhibit a more advanced stage of development. On the other hand, Collingwood¹ attributes the same Abercorn shaft to the tenth century, while his illustration of Waberthwaite, "which may be ninth century or later,"² shows a vine-scroll of much the same style as the Abercorn shaft now being described.

Apparently the opinions quoted above have not been shared by either Baldwin Brown or Reginald A. Smith. The former in alluding to Abercorn remarks "that there is accomplished Anglian work dating probably to the VIII" (century).³ The latter states in general that "scrolls springing from a central stem, the sprawling reptile, winged creature (bird or dragon) with interlacing, pair of dragons confronted and interlaced and a nondescript animal with interlacing" were "suggested also by their occurrence on the Brunswick casket" as "stock figures of the eighth century."⁴

The diversity of authoritative opinion as to the period of the Abercorn work already recorded leaves more speculative the conclusion to be reached in regard to the dating of the fragments now being dealt with. All things considered, they seem to belong to an earlier rather than to a later phase of the art, and may, with most probability, be ascribed to the first half of the eighth century.

I desire to thank the Rev. Johnstone Oliphant, B.D., for permission to photograph and record the fragments, and also for his ready assistance during my visit.

¹ *Northumbrian Crosses*, pp. 182, 185.

² *Ibid.*, p. 112, fig. 134 c.

³ Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, vol. vi. pt. ii. p. 209.

⁴ *Archæologia*, vol. lxxiv. p. 247.