The Hartlepool stones. St Hilda’s Church, Hartlepool, and Black Gate Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne. Fig. 30.

Several small sepulchral slabs were found in 1833 on the site of an early Northumbrian monastic cemetery at Hartlepool, Co. Durham. As some of these were discovered under the skulls in the graves they are sometimes known as ‘pillow-stones’ or, more generally, as ‘name-stones’. Similar stones have been found at Lindisfarne, another ancient Northumbrian monastic site. The cross design marks the stones as Christian although the use of pillow-stones dates back to Anglo-Saxon heathendom. Some of the stones bear inscriptions in insular lettering; of two stones with runic inscriptions one, stone no. 2, is illustrated in Fig. 30.

The latter stone measures 8\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. by 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. by 2\(\frac{7}{8}\) in. The runes are ei\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 2\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 3\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 5\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 7\(\hat{\text{a}}\) hildig y\(\hat{\text{u}}\), a female personal name, more properly hildig y\(\hat{\text{u}}\); the d-rune appears duplicated in error, while the g-rune is added above the word between i and y.

The other runic stone, no. 1, measures very nearly 11\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. square by 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. and bears the symbols for ‘Alpha’ and ‘Omega’ followed beneath by the runes ei\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 2\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 3\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 5\(\hat{\text{a}}\) 7\(\hat{\text{a}}\) hildipry\(\hat{\text{u}}\), again a female personal name.

The names are presumably those of nuns buried in the respective graves. The monastery was originally founded about A.D. 640; by 686 it had become a nunnery. As it was sacked by the Danes around 800 the stones most probably belong to the eighth century. This dating also conforms with the retention of final -i in hildi-, later Old English -e as in Hildeburh, the name of Finn’s queen (Beowulf, 1071, 1114).

Of the two forms of the d-rune, \(\daleth\) and \(\aleph\), the first is the more common in Anglo-Saxon usage; the second is the more archaic and occurs in several early inscriptions, such as the Scanomodu and Pada coins. Characteristic of normal Anglo-Saxon usage are the shapes of the \(\beta\) and \(\gamma\) runes.