

Latin, Runes and Pseudo-Ogham: The Enigma of the Hackness Cross

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‘Of all the very numerous but more or less fragmentary monuments of the Anglo-Saxon period in Yorkshire,’ wrote Gerald Baldwin Brown in 1930, ‘none possesses a higher claim to attention than the sadly imperfect and mutilated specimen in the Church of Hackness near Scarborough.’¹ The Hackness Cross—now heavily weathered and broken into two fragments—is only a portion of its former glory. Despite its present condition, the remains preserve inscription panels in Latin, Anglo-Saxon runes, *hahal*-runes and a script resembling ogham. Writing played an important role in the monument’s programme, thus providing the opportunity to examine the individual commemorated. When the inscriptions are analysed in combination with the historical and cultural context in which the Hackness cross was erected, it is possible to glean information about the monument’s patrons, their ambitions and the intended audience of the cross.

The Hackness cross was discovered before 1848 in one of the two outbuildings of Hackness hall.² Local tradition suggests that it was discovered in the 1830s in use as a gate-post, which is confirmed by damage to the stone.³ The fragments are from the top and bottom of the cross. They were cemented together in the nineteenth century and placed in the south aisle of the church at Hackness.⁴ The cross-head is missing, as well as a considerable amount of the middle portion. The fragments are 1.5 m high, though it is likely that the original height of the monument was between 3 and 4.5m (between 9 and 14 feet).⁵

Context: the site of Hackness

Hackness was the site of an Anglo-Saxon monastery. The first reference to the ecclesiastical site at Hackness is recorded by Bede in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In a chapter concerning miraculous events surrounding St Hilda’s death, Bede informs us that Hilda had founded a monastery at

¹ G. B. Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, vol. 6, pt. 1 (London, 1930), 52.

² G. A. Poole & J. W. Hugall, *The Churches of Scarborough, Filey and the Neighbourhood* (London, 1848), 44. Cf. Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture III, York and Eastern Yorkshire* (Oxford, 1991), 135: where it is also noted that local tradition suggests the Hackness Cross was found in the village pond.

³ J. Winterbotham, *Hackness and its Church: A Brief History* (2000), 7. See Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, 55.

⁴ T. Whellan, *History and Topography of the City of York and the North Riding of Yorkshire*, vol. II (Beverley, 1859), 905: indicates that in 1859 this cross was under ‘a glazed frame’.

⁵ R. Sermon, ‘The Hackness Cross Cryptic Inscriptions’, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 68 (1996), 101; Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, 54.

Hacanos (Hackness) in the same year as her death: Hilda died in 680 AD.⁶ At Hackness on the night of Hilda's death, a nun named Begu saw a vision of Hilda being borne up to heaven. After receiving this vision:

Rising at once in alarm she ran to Frigyth, who was Prioress at the time, and with many sighs and tears told her that their Mother the Abbess Hilda had departed this life ... When she had heard the nun's story Frigyth roused all the sisters, and when she had gathered them into the church, she enjoined them to pray and recite the psalter for the soul of their Mother.⁷

On the following morning brothers arrived from Whitby to bring news of Hilda's death, but the nuns at Hackness explained they were made aware of Hilda's passing through divine revelation. Bede concludes, 'Thus with fitting harmony the mercy of heaven ordained that while some of her Community attended her death-bed, others were made aware of her soul's entry into eternal life, although these monasteries are about thirteen miles apart.'⁸ Bede's final statement about the distance confirms that Hackness is the correct identification. In this passage Bede uses the phrase *dormitorium sororum* 'the sisters' dormitory', which suggests Hackness may have been a double-house.⁹

The monastery of Whitby was destroyed by Danes in 867, and Hackness probably shared the same fate: Hackness does not appear in the written record again until the *Domesday Book*.¹⁰ Bede's account and the destruction of Whitby provide us with a relatively secure timeframe for the creation of the Hackness cross: it must date from between 680 (the foundation of Hackness) to 867.

The Hackness Cross: Iconography

Interpreting the remaining iconographic programme of the Hackness Cross is difficult because we do not know how much is missing. Another issue is the monument's reconstruction. It is generally assumed that the fragments were cemented together in the correct alignment, but we have no real

⁶ For the etymology of Hackness, A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire*, *English Place-Name Society* vol. 5 (Cambridge, 1928; repr. 1969), 112.

⁷ Bede, *HE*, IV.23.

⁸ Bede, *HE*, IV.23.

⁹ A. Hamilton Thompson, 'The Monastic Settlement at Hackness and Its Relation to the Abbey of Whitby,' *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 27 (1923), 388-9.

¹⁰ *ASC* 867. Whitby was rebuilt in 1078. Thompson, 'The Monastic Settlement at Hackness,' 389. *Domesday Book*, Yorkshire pt. 1: 323a, 13N3. The *Domesday Book* records that there were three churches in Hackness with Suffield and Everley; part of the land in Hackness is recorded as belonging to St Hilda's (i.e. Whitby). Two of these churches are accounted for in charters (i.e. St. Mary's and St. Peter's).

way of knowing for certain. Furthermore, the sizes of the panels are not identical on each face (cf. the bottom of Face A).¹¹

The Hackness Cross is frequently compared with the Anglo-Saxon crosses at Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire and Bewcastle, Cumberland. Indeed, the importance of inscriptions on both Ruthwell and Bewcastle is a considerable comparison with Hackness. The Ruthwell Cross has inscriptions in Latin and Anglo-Saxon runes, passages of which are similar to the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*. The Bewcastle Cross also has inscriptions in Anglo-Saxon runes, including an entire panel in a runic inscription. On the Bewcastle Cross, Christ is portrayed as a full-frontal figure treading on two beasts: this motif is similarly shown on the Ruthwell Cross. The motif of Christ treading on two beasts is not especially common in Late Antique and early medieval iconography. The figure-head and fragmentary beasts on Face B of the Hackness Cross have been suggested to represent this design, assuming that the now missing middle portion contained the body and feet of Christ.¹² Gerald Brown estimated that the height of the figure could have been nearly five and a half feet, which is considerably larger than this motif on both Ruthwell and Bewcastle.¹³ Collingwood's theoretical reconstruction is more conservative, however.¹⁴ Contrary to this, it has been pointed out that the head occupies most of the width available in this panel and is not haloed (as is Christ on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses), and therefore it is equally likely to have been a portrait-head and not a full-length figure.¹⁵ In the absence of evidence we can only speculate about the missing iconography, but comparison with the remains of the Hackness Cross suggests that it may have had a similar motif complex to a number of prestigious ornamental crosses erected in Northumbria between the late seventh and mid-ninth centuries. In addition to the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, Hackness is comparable with: Collingham (WRY) which has full-figures, vine scrolls and interlace; Ilkley (1) and (2), the first of which depicts a full-frontal figure (possibly Christ) in a panel above two interlaced-beasts (which may reflect a later development of the motif attested on Ruthwell and Bewcastle); Easby (NRY), which has portrait heads engraved in a Classical style with intricate vinescrolls, and Otley (WRY), which has figure-heads in a Classical style, a highly ornate griffin or beast and vine scrolls comparable with both Bewcastle and Easby.¹⁶

¹¹ Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴ W. G. Collingwood, *The Ruthwell Cross and its Relation to Other Monuments of the Early Christian Age*, pl. 8.

¹⁵ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture III*, 140.

¹⁶ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture III*: Easby 98-102; E. Coatsworth, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, VIII *Western Yorkshire* (Oxford, 2008), Collingham (1 and 2) 117-22, Ilkley (1-3) 167-2, Otley 215-9.

The fragmented creatures on the bottom panel of the Hackness Cross have long toes, and the forelegs cross in front of each animal.¹⁷ Confronted animals are attested on Lindisfarne and Jedborough, and in illuminated manuscripts such as the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.¹⁸ The vine or foliage scroll found in two of the panels is also very common in Anglo-Saxon sculpture work. Close parallels for this simple type of vine scroll can be found on crosses at Hexham and Northallerton.¹⁹

The Inscriptions

The Latin letters on the Hackness Cross have a ‘Roman flavour’ about them, and with the exception of the letter G, lack distinct Insular forms.²⁰ They closely resemble the pre-Viking inscriptions from York.²¹ The form of N used on this cross is rare in pre-Viking inscriptions, though it is attested at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, and also on York Minster (21).²² The O’s on the Hackness Latin inscriptions are rectangular, which is not widely attested in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. Rectangular O’s are found on inscriptions from Hartlepool, Co. Durham, York (21), probably Whitby (34), and in display script of Insular manuscripts.²³ The A’s in these inscriptions have a Classical form and are not seriphed, which is very uncommon on Anglo-Saxon inscriptions and display script (cf. with the A on York 21). The G seen in the lower panel of face D is also not attested on any other inscription in Anglo-Saxon England, though this type of G is seen in the display script of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Echternach Gospels*.²⁴ The letter S is angular (‘reversed Z’), which is not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions and in Insular display script.²⁵

A fragment from Whitby (34) preserves interlace and part of an inscription which may be a mixture of Latin letters and runes; the same type of interlace is found on face C of Hackness, also in the same position above the Anglo-Saxon runic inscription.²⁶ One discernible letter on the Whitby fragment is a rectangular O (or possibly Q), like the O on the Hackness Cross. ‘Whitby 34,’ in the words of James Lang, ‘seems therefore to represent a different tradition from that of the plain crosses

¹⁷ Ibid., 137.

¹⁸ R. Cramp, *Studies in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture* (London, 1992), 342. Compare with the griffins from the Otley cross.

¹⁹ Collingwood, *The Ruthwell Cross and its Relation to Other Monuments of the Early Christian Age*, 24, 31.

²⁰ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 138.

²¹ See Lang, *ibid.*, 46 & 62-3 (York 20), 63-4 (York 21), 64-6 (York 22), 75-6 (York 42).

²² Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 138 & for York (21), pp. 63-4 (Illus 86). Note, the A on York 21 are similar to the Hackness inscription, but the O is ovalar unlike the rectangular O of Hackness.

²³ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 138 & 63-4; J. Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, vol. VI: *Northern Yorkshire* (Oxford, 2001), 251-2.

²⁴ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 138.

²⁵ Cf. Coatsworth, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, VIII: Thornhill 1, pp. 256-7 (Illus 727).

²⁶ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, IV: 251-2 (34) Illus, 1021-2.

with inscribed heads that have been found at Whitby.²⁷ The close connections between Whitby and Hackness, parallels with Whitby 34 and the Hackness Cross may suggest that they were products of the same artisans or workshop, and that they represent a particular artistic phase within this community. The close connections between Whitby and York may also explain the Classical-style Latin inscriptions on the Hackness Cross.

Latin inscription I

The Latin inscription on the top of the A face of the cross reads:

[.....]A
[SE]MPER
TE MENT
MEMORES
[..]OMVS[.]TV

[.]TEMATE <R>
AMANTIS
SIMA

Four words that can be read are SEMPER, MEMORES and MATER AMANTISSIMA: ‘...for ever...mindful...most loving mother’. The R of MATER has been incised in the border outside of this panel: this may suggest the carver was illiterate and this mistake only corrected after the panel was finished.

Latin inscription II

The second Latin panel is on the bottom fragment of the A face. This part of the cross is heavily damaged, though parts of four lines remain. It reads:

[.]TREL[---]OS
A[....]A[.]ISSA
OEDILBVRGAOR
ATEP[-----]

²⁷ Ibid. p. 252.

In comparison with the remainder of the Latin inscriptions, the second line probably read ABBATISSA; the word RELIGIOSA can be reconstructed in the first line. The third and fourth lines might have read OEDILBVRGA ORATE, and the final P probably began the word PRO. The inscription would mean something like: ‘...religious abbess, Oedilburga, pray for...’.²⁸

Latin inscription III

On the top fragment of face C is a ten line Latin inscription. The top line is the opening of the text, and the letters decrease in height to about 3 cm in the last line: this panel may have contained one additional line of lettering at the bottom.²⁹ The inscription reads:

OEDILBV[.]
BEATA:[.---]
EM[P]ERT[-]
[.]OLA[--]
[--]I
[---]
LE[—]EM
V[--]S[--]
[--]ND[--]
[--]RV

What can be read and reconstructed is: OEDILBURGA BEATA [AD S]EMPER ‘Oedilburga blessed for ever’.³⁰

Anglo-Saxon runic inscription and Hahal-Rune Inscription Panel

On the top fragment of face D is a panel containing three types of inscriptions: the first two lines are in Anglo-Saxon runes, lines three to five are in *hahal*-runes, and the sixth line is half *hahal*-runes and ends in three Latin capitals ORA.

The text of the Anglo-Saxon runes has an introductory cross. The letters certainly appear to be in runic form, though it has been suggested that some letters look non-runic.³¹ They are likely to be highly stylised Anglo-Saxon runes, and these characters are also attested on the runic inscriptions

²⁸ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 136.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

from the Ruthwell cross. Other examples of Northumbrian name-stones marking graves in Anglo-Saxon runes can be found at Whitby, Hartlepool, Lindisfarne, Kirkheaton, and Thornhill (2-4).³² A recent, though cautious reading is:³³

+emc[--]ræ
gn[--]æ[.]

The next four and a half lines of inscription are *hahalruna* (*hahal*-runes), also known as tree- or twig-runes. There are 10 runes on each line, and five in the last line. This type of script is extremely rare. Examples of *hahalruna* can be found at Kirk Andreas in the Isle of Man and also at Maes Howe in Orkney, but most are indecipherable, even though *hahalruna* is not ‘in itself a cryptic script’.³⁴ In the ninth-century *Isuna Tract*, *hahal*-runes are described as: ‘*Hahalruna* [that] is the name given to those [secondary runes] which indicate the number of the group on the left-hand side and the number of the letter of that group on the right.’³⁵ *Hahalruna* represent the two numerical equivalents of the rune, by dividing these along a stem, where the left mark indicates the number of the rune-group in which the rune occurs in the *futhorc* and those on the right indicating the runic letter within that group. ‘The problem with *hahal*-runes,’ according to Raymond Page, ‘is that we do not know the full order of runes in the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* (with its additional letters), nor do we know the numbering of the individual rune groups.’³⁶ To add to the complexity, this panel is heavily weathered, and ten of the 35 *hahalruna* are not visible.³⁷ The remainder of the final line is three Latin letters: ORA, presumably from the Latin *orare* ‘to pray’.³⁸

The Ogham-like Inscription

On the bottom fragment of face C is a most unusual panel, and one that has caused much debate and considerable headache for anyone who has been brave or foolish enough to attempt deciphering it.

³² Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, VI, 251-2; Coatsworth, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* VIII, 189.

³³ Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* III, 136. Cf. R. Sermon, ‘The Hackness Cross Cryptic Inscriptions’, *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 68 (1996), 107: a suggested interpretation, generated by computer programmes used in an attempt to decipher the inscription, is that this is an anagram for ‘Oedilburg gnoew me’ [Oedilburg knew me], but this is very conjectural.

³⁴ Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, 68; Sermon, 105.

³⁵ D. Mcmanus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth, 1991), 9-10; Sermon, 105.

³⁶ Lang, *Corpus* III, 139.

³⁷ Sermon, 106: Sermon attempted to use computer programming to decipher these, but stated: ‘the program generated 48 possible readings... none of which appeared to form any intelligible pattern.’

³⁸ Lang, *Corpus* III, 136.

This panel contains what remains of five lines in a script with ‘slight similarity to Ogham’, and there are no parallels in Anglo-Saxon sculpture.³⁹ The panel is fractured at the top, so the inscription must be fragmentary.

The incising technique of this panel is slightly different to the remainder of the stone. The deep lines are not neatly incised. Furthermore, when myself and a colleague were examining this stone, we realised the top left character has been reconstructed.⁴⁰ The panel, however, must be original. The size of the characters decreases towards the bottom, which is paralleled in the other inscription panels. The difference in the carving skill may indicate that there was more than one craftsman working on this monument.

This inscription presents a number of difficulties. It bears a slight resemblance to ogham. This was first publicised by the antiquarian Rev. D. H. Haigh in 1858.⁴¹ Haigh also suggested that this inscription has a greater resemblance with manuscript ogham, because the stem-line is lacking.⁴² Ogham requires that the characters be written on a stem-line: on monuments the stem-line is generally the edge of a stone and the inscriptions are typically read from the bottom up. The Hackness panel does not have a stem-line. It is also unclear which direction the inscription was to be read. Reading it in traditional ogham letters on an imaginary stem-line left to right from the top produces a string of consonants, and reading it right to left from the bottom produces more vowels but no discernible words. The inscription may have been boustrophedon, that is, a two-directional text (e.g. like a field ploughed by an ox). It has also been assumed that this inscription was in Irish because the characters look like ogham, but we do not know this for certain. The message could have been in Old English or Latin, if a coherent message was intended. In 1992 a computer programme was used in an attempt to decipher the ogham-like inscription.⁴³ Unfortunately the results were unsatisfactory, but, the experiment did indicate, that the ogham panel appears to contain pronounceable syllables.⁴⁴ Cryptographic analysis suggest that the vertical lines are likely to represent vowels, and the horizontal lines consonants; this was even noted by Haigh in 1858.⁴⁵ Regardless of this, a translation is still elusive and this panel remains an enigma.

³⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁰ This was also noted by the antiquarian Rev. D. H. Haigh in his engraving of 1858. D. H. Haigh, ‘Cryptic Inscriptions on the Cross at Hackness, in Yorkshire,’ *The Journal of the Kilkenney and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society*, New Series, 2, no. 1 (1858), 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., 170.

⁴² Ibid., 194. See Mcmanus, *A Guide to Ogam*, 3.

⁴³ Sermon, ‘The Hackness Cross Cryptic Inscriptions,’ 104. Of the 1440 possible readings, Sermon managed to produce one with a tantalizing Irish reading, and suggested that the final line contained the name of the cross’s artisan, a certain Oengus. This interpretation should be regarded with caution.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁵ Haigh, 194.

The artisans probably attempted—perhaps at the direction of their patrons—to convey a message in a script that they were unfamiliar with, or the artist who designed this panel may have had a basic knowledge of the ogham characters, but did not fully understand the system. They did not realise that ogham is primarily read on a stem-line, and instead they attempted to fit this inscription into a panel in keeping with the other inscriptions on this cross. Though this inscription is in Yorkshire, the early medieval history of this region has a strong Irish link and the ruling dynasty of Northumbria in the seventh and eighth centuries had many connections with Ireland and Scotland. Viewed in this light, it is not entirely surprising that an ogham-like inscription appears on the Hackness Cross.

Historical Background: Irish Connections

In the seventh and eighth centuries there was considerable interaction between the Northumbrian and Irish churches, notably between the *familia Columbae* and Iona. Lindisfarne, for example, was a daughter-house of Iona founded by Aidan in 634. Lastingham, which is near Hackness, was a daughter-house of Lindisfarne, and the Irish custom was observed there. Whitby, the mother-church of Hackness, also played a key role in the ecclesiastical relations between Ireland and Northumbria. Whitby was the site of the famous synod of 664, in which Oswiu, king of Northumbria, decided the Northumbrian churches would abandon the customs of Iona and adopt the Roman tonsure and calculation of Easter. The Northumbrian secular and ecclesiastical nobility who are associated with Whitby in early records also had many connections with Ireland, western Scotland and Pictland, especially king Aldfrith of Northumbria (685-704), Oswiu's bastard son. His mother was Irish and a member of the Cenél nÉogain. In genealogical tradition Colman Rímid, Aldfrith's maternal grandfather, was the father of Bishop Fínan of Lindisfarne.⁴⁶ Aldfrith was probably buried at Whitby. His father Oswiu was also buried at Whitby, as was Oswiu's wife Eanflæd and their daughter Æfflæd.⁴⁷ The body of Edwin, king of Northumbria c. 616-633, father of Eanflæd, was translated to Whitby sometime between 680 and 704.⁴⁸ Trumwine, the first bishop of Abercorn, was also buried at Whitby. Furthermore, the Hackness Cross belongs to the school of sculpture-work that flourished in the royal Northumbrian monasteries, particularly sites associated with holy women who

⁴⁶ B. E. Crawford, *Rex Doctissimus: Bede and Aldfrith of Northumbria* (Jarrow Lecture, 2009), 9.

⁴⁷ Lang, *Corpus*, VI, 52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 52.

belonged to the Northumbrian royal family, notably Hilda, Eanflæd, and Ælfflæd.⁴⁹ The Hackness Cross rune and Latin letters are similar to others found at Hartlepool, Lindisfarne and Whitby.

Abbess Æthelburg

The Latin inscriptions on the Hackness Cross preserves the name of the individual this monument was erected to commemorate, OETHILBVRGA (Æthelburg), and they provide important details about her. From the inscription on face A we can ascertain that she was a ‘religious abbess’, and from the fragment on face C that she was *beata* ‘blessed’. Though other personal names may have been included in the runic and ogham-like inscriptions—and there is the possibility that other names were recorded in the missing sections of the cross—the fact that Æthelburg’s name is inscribed in two panels confirms that she is the person the monument was erected to honour. The names of women are not especially common in Anglo-Saxon sculpture-work, though there are at least four examples from nearby Whitby.⁵⁰ The sheer scale and craftsmanship of the Hackness Cross indicates that Æthelburg was a very important woman. It has often been suggested that she was an abbess of Hackness, but we do not know if Hackness, as a daughter-house of Whitby, was significant enough at such an early date to have an abbess of its own. In Bede’s account, it is clear that Hackness had a prioress, not an abbess, in 680.⁵¹ There are a number of Anglo-Saxon holy women who bear the name Æthelburg. It has been suggested that she should be identified with Æthelburg (*d.* 647), abbess of Lyminge in Kent, the daughter of Ethelbert of Kent (the first Christian king of Kent), but this identification cannot be correct.⁵² She is more likely to be identified with the Abbess Aethelburg recorded in § 59 of the *Life of St Wilfrid*.⁵³ This passage concerns King Aldfrith’s death, and on his

⁴⁹ R. Cramp, *Studies in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture*, 36: ‘Nevertheless before one is rash enough to assign the Ruthwell style to one particular monastic house, one must stress that in the eighth century, though less in the ninth, Bernicia and Deira were closely linked. We have no early work from York but the great houses of Yorkshire such as Whitby, Lastingham and Hackness were capable of producing beautiful stone carving. There is no doubt that in the ninth century Southern Northumbria was the more inventive area, and more open to new influences from the continent and from Mercia.’

⁵⁰ E. Okasha, ‘Anglo-Saxon Women: The Evidence from Inscriptions,’ in J. Higgitt, K. Forsyth & D. Parsons (eds.), *Roman, Runes and Ogham: Medieval Inscriptions in the Insular World and on the Continent* (Donington, 2001), 81: there are approximately 4.5 male names to every female name. For Whitby, see Lang, *Corpus* VI, 52.

⁵¹ *HE*, IV.23.

⁵² Æthelburg, daughter of Ethelbert, accompanied Paulinus who converted and baptized Edwin of Deira’s household. Æthelburg married Edwin: their daughter was Eanflæd, who became the abbess of Whitby after Hilda. She was in turn succeeded by her daughter Ælfflæd. During Aldfrith’s reign Edwin was promoted as a saint at Whitby. See Crawford, *Rex Doctissimus*, 17.

⁵³ Eddius Stephanus, *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, ed. & trans. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* (Cambridge, 1927), LIX, pp. 126-9: Haec verba fidelissimi testes audierunt nobisque indicaverunt, ex quibus est Aelfleda abbatissa et sapientissima virgo, quae est vere filia regis, necnon et Aethelburga abbatissa, et multi alii testes haec firmaverunt. [These words were heard by most faithful witnesses and told to us. Of these, one is the abbess and most prudent virgin Ælfflæd, who is indeed the daughter of a king, and another is the abbess Aethelburg; and it has been confirmed by many other witnesses.]

deathbed Aldfrith promises that his successor should make amends with Bishop Wilfrid, and those who witnessed this account were Abbess Ælfflæd ‘herself a king’s daughter’ and Abbess Æthelburg. We are given no further information about Abbess Æthelburg, but she is not described as a king’s daughter. She was contemporary with Ælfflæd. Perhaps during the reign of Aldfrith, Hackness was substantial enough to have an abbess of its own; the Abbess Æthelburg of the *Vita Wilfridi*, may have been abbess at Hackness. Another possibility is that Æthelburg was an otherwise unattested abbess of Whitby. After Ælfflæd (d. 714) there are no records about Whitby or its abbesses. Stephan, the author of the *Vita Wilfridi*, which was composed between c. 709 and 720, may have called her Abbess Æthelburg to reflect her contemporary position.⁵⁴

But Æthelburg was more than an abbess—she became a local saint and was venerated at Hackness. A later reference in a list of resting places of the saints by Hugh Candidus of Peterborough records, *Et in Hacannessa sancta Ethelburga*.⁵⁵ This also indicates that Æthelburg’s corporal remains were at Hackness, and therefore, Hackness was her cult-site.

Heritage, Audience, Patrons and Environment

The Hackness Cross was a prestigious monument. The investment, level of craftsmanship and emphasis on writing are a testament to the noble, cultural and intellectual heritage of the Whitby and Hackness community. This monument is just as much a statement about the ambitions of its patrons as it is a memorial to a women who held an esteemed position within this community. In the cross’s artistic programme language and the spectacle of writing played an unusually important role. The Latin inscriptions, carved in Classical style, indicate a high level of education, whereas the Anglo-Saxon runes conform to regional standards. The *hahal*-runes and ogham-like script, however, go beyond the artistic conventions of this region and display a transnational awareness. Writing was used to impress the audience of the Hackness Cross, just as much as it was used to record information. The surviving inscriptions are not only a testimony to the memory of Æthelburg, they are a testament to the importance of language and literacy in the Whitby and Hackness communities—a high-status aspect in this period.

Women were very likely involved in the commissioning of this cross. Whitby was ruled over by abbesses, and the abbess and nuns of Whitby and Hackness were probably involved in the planning of this monument. If it were the case that women did play a key role as patrons, then the

⁵⁴ But note, Bede does not refer to Æthelburg in *HE* (c. 731), which is peculiar as she was a local saint.

⁵⁵ Hugh Candidus, *Chronicle*, ed. W. T. Mellows, *The Chronicle of Hugh Candidus a Monk of Peterborough* (Oxford, 1949), 64. J. Blair, ‘A Saint for Every Minster? Local Cults in Anglo-Saxon England,’ *Local Saints and Local Churches*, 472; eadem, ‘A Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Saints,’ *Local Saints and Local Churches*, 506.

Hackness Cross is a testament to female literacy and education within this community.⁵⁶ The Hackness Cross inscriptions demonstrate an awareness of three cultures and possibly three languages: Latin, Anglo-Saxon and potentially Irish.⁵⁷ Given the close connections between the Irish church and Whitby, it is even possible that an Irish audience was anticipated by the commissioners, and the ogham panel designed to impress them. The inscription panels suggests that the Hackness Cross was commissioned to astonish both a local and foreign audience.

The rune and ogham panels on the Hackness cross have frequently been described as ‘cryptic messages’ that were ‘private’ in nature.⁵⁸ I see this monument in a different light, however. The Hackness Cross was designed to impress its viewers. This must have been a significant monument located within the monastic landscape of Hackness, and the numerous inscription panels on this cross are a testament to the multi-cultural knowledge and heritage of this community. The cross probably stood at nearly four or more metres in height and was likely painted (otherwise the top inscriptions would have been difficult to read). The most immediate audience was certainly the Hackness community and the members of the mother-house at Whitby, but because Æthelburg became a saint it is likely that local followers from the region visited Hackness. It is possible that the Hackness Cross served an important cult function.

The dimensions of the cross would have also conditioned the audience’s experience of the monument. In order to appreciate the inscription panels the audience would have had to revolve around the monument. This level of physical interaction was likely considered by the patrons and the artisans, and details of this may be gleaned from the Latin inscriptions. The letters of the Latin inscriptions decrease in height, and this may have been done as a conscious decision to emphasise important words. For example, in the inscription on face C the first word is the name OEDILBVRGA, the commemorated, and the letters are 4.5 cm in height and they descend to 3 cm in the last line; similarly, in the inscription on face A the letters descend from 4.5 to 4 cm, and though only one letter survives from the first line (an A), from context it was almost certainly a personal name.⁵⁹ A similar format is retained on the bottom panel of face A, where the letters descend from 4 cm in the first line, 3.2 in the second, but are larger (3.8) in the third line which preserves the name OEDILBVRGA.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ C. Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1984; repr. 1986), 114.

⁵⁷ Cf. Bede, *HE*, I.1: ‘At the present time there are in Britain, in harmony with the five books of the divine law, five languages and four nations—English, British, Irish, and Picts. Each of these have their own language; but all are united in their study of God’s truth by the fifth—Latin—which has become a common medium through the study of the scriptures.’

⁵⁸ Lang, *Corpus III*, 138.

⁵⁹ Lang, *Corpus*, III, 136.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 137.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the iconographic programme, notably the inscriptions, of the surviving fragments of the Hackness Cross reveal a wealth of information about the individual the monument was designed to commemorate and the patrons who sponsored or assisted in the design. Close analysis also reveals further information about the intellectual heritage and aspirations of the community, and how this was memorialised in stone to display to contemporary and future audiences. The beatification of Æthelburg also indicates that the monument's audience was larger than just the Hackness and Whitby ecclesiastical community, and probably included nobles and local laymen and women. The emphasis on language and script also indicates that the patrons may have anticipated a foreign audience, and that language was used as a spectacle to impress the audience. The Hackness Cross is a truly unique and fascinating Anglo-Saxon monument, and I hope that future research will shed more light on the history of this cross and the early medieval monastic complex at Hackness.