

Notes and News

A RUNIC FRAGMENT AT LEEK (PL. XVIII)

Leek is the 'capital' of the north Staffordshire moorlands, an ancient silk town rich in historical associations. Among the early treasures of its mainly 14th-century parish church, dedicated to St. Edward the Confessor, are a tall round-shafted cross in the SE. corner of the churchyard—the finest specimen of its kind in this part of Staffordshire—and an interesting, if rather crudely carved, Calvary-stone fragment which is kept beneath the pulpit. Further carved cross-pieces are built into the outside W. wall of the porch close to the ground.¹

A few paces from the rose window on the S. side of the church stand the remains of the decorated rectangular Anglo-Saxon cross which the *Guide* to the church dismisses rather bluntly as 'a poor example of pre-Conquest carving'.² This cross-shaft, originally in three fragments and shown as such in Sleigh's illustration,³ was set up in its present position in 1885 by Sir Thomas Wardle and it has since been examined and described by several noted antiquaries and scholars. It is all the more surprising that the remains of a runic inscription on the N. face, perhaps the principal claim of this cross-shaft upon our attention, have only recently been discovered.⁴ If these runes are not some modern practical joke but are indeed genuine,⁵ then there must have been good reasons for their remaining so long undetected.

There are indeed several reasons: in the first place, the N. side of the cross-shaft faces the church wall which is only a few paces away; secondly, the surface on this side is almost completely worn away and the runes are so near to the base that the whole side is easily dismissed as not worth looking at; thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, the runes are practically invisible during sunshine, just when most people are most likely to inspect the cross-shaft and attempt to take photographs. But perhaps the genuineness of the runes is best proved by the fact that the carving here was in fact noticed as early as 1906 by G. Le Blanc Smith, but not recognized as runic. Le Blanc Smith thought that the N. side here retained 'some key-patterns',⁶ a suggestion echoed as recently as 1947 by T. Pape: 'The north side carving is almost completely obliterated, but a few inches at the extreme base may be meant for a sort of key pattern.'⁷

It is worth mentioning that the earliest reference to the re-erected shaft calls it 'the re-erected Runic shaft in the churchyard on the south side of the church',⁸ but

¹ I wish to record my gratitude to the Ven. G. Youell, archdeacon of Stoke-upon-Trent and vicar of Leek, for his kindness and help in making the publication of these notes and of the photographs possible, and to Mr. C. Russell Towns for his skill and patience in taking the photographs.

² N. W. Waton, *Guide to Leek Parish Church* (Manchester, n.d.), p. 3.

³ J. Sleigh, *History of the Ancient Parish of Leek* (London, 2 ed., 1883), pl. xiv.

⁴ In April 1959 by me, in the company of Professor Hertha Marquardt of Göttingen who has since included the Leek cross in her *Bibliographie der Runeninschriften nach Fundorten*, pt. 1: *Die Runeninschriften der Britischen Inseln* (Göttingen, 1961), p. 90.

⁵ Dr. R. I. Page examined the runes and wrote that they 'looked genuinely runic' (in a personal letter of 28 April, 1959).

⁶ G. Le Blanc Smith, 'Some pre-Norman crosses in Staffordshire,' *The Reliquary and Illustrated Archaeologist*, n.s. xii (1906), 244.

⁷ T. Pape, 'The rectangular-shafted pre-Norman crosses of north Staffordshire,' *Trans. N. Staffs. Field Club*, lxxxii (1946-47), 39. In a letter of 2 May, 1959, Mr. Pape explained that when he examined the cross, made sketches, and took photographs, he 'used no artificial light and that side of the cross was very dark'. I am grateful to Mr. Pape for his kindly interest and comments.

⁸ *Trans. N. Staffs. Field Club*, xxx (1889-90), 48.

doubtless the word was here used, as quite frequently in the 19th century, with reference to the interlacing ornament without any awareness of the presence of an inscription.

The inscription (PL. XVIII, E) is today no more than a fragment consisting of a few characters, but quite possibly originally it might have run down and up the entire N. face. The fact that it runs down and up the shaft instead of, in lines; across it, is of interest. The latter is the normal practice on Anglo-Saxon runic crosses, although there are exceptions, as on the cross-shaft of St. Oswald's Church at Crowle in Lincolnshire; the former practice is particularly frequent on later Scandinavian stone-inscriptions.

What remains at Leek is in two lines, carved inside a panel just over $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide. The lower line of the panel corresponds almost exactly to the lower lines of the carved panels on the W. and S. faces of the cross-shaft. The carving on the E. face does not reach quite as low. The right (or upper) line of the inscription preserves three symbols very clearly, *i s a*, and a portion of a fourth, all facing downwards. A trace of the mortar used to cement the three cross-fragments together in 1885 has apparently remained embedded in the *s*-rune in this line. The *a*-rune is the most easily recognizable and is nearly $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. in height. The left (or lower) line has traces of perhaps nine runes, facing upwards, before it breaks off at the crack which separates the lower from the centre fragment of the cross-shaft. Above the crack the original surface of the cross is completely worn away and no traces of further runes remain. A tentative reading of the first five runes in this line, reading from right to left (going upwards) is: *þ* (=th) *b i b æ*. What remains of the inscription may be the end of one Old English word *-isath*, and the beginning of another, *bibæ-*.

The presence of the runic inscription lends weight to the suggestion that this cross-shaft is 'the oldest Christian relic in Leek';⁹ at the same time it suggests a somewhat earlier date than 'the late ninth century' proposed by S. A. Jeavons.¹⁰ Mr. Jeavons noted the close resemblance of the interlacement on the S. face of the Leek cross to that of the W. side of the Collingham runic cross in the West Riding of Yorkshire, which Brøndsted 'with no slight degree of certainty' dated 'about 875'.¹¹ But Collingham shows influence of Scandinavian ornamentation,¹² from which the Leek cross is quite free, as far as one is able to judge from what remains; on the other hand, the Leek Calvary stone shows Scandinavian influence in the intertwined beast's body on the dexter side. Kendrick has dated the Collingham shaft somewhere in the mid 9th century,¹³ and Page's comments on the form *swipi* in its inscription do not, it seems, wish to rule out a fairly late (? 9th-century) date.¹⁴ Other comparable Anglo-Saxon crosses with runic inscriptions belong mainly to the 8th and early 9th century, although it is wise to remember Page's warning in the article just referred to that our evidence for dating Anglo-Saxon inscriptions is not always wholly reliable. With all due caution a date in the first quarter of the 9th century might be proposed for the Leek runic cross; such a dating certainly confirms the earlier suggestion that this cross is the oldest of the several Anglo-Saxon relics at Leek.

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TWO 9TH-CENTURY STRAP-ENDS FROM YORK (PL. XIX)

During August, 1961, an extension was added to *The Brewer's Arms* on the corner of Tanner Row and Tanner Street, York. In clearing and preparing the site a number

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ S. A. Jeavons, 'Anglo-Saxon cross-shafts in Staffordshire,' *Trans. Birmingham Archaeol. Soc.*, LXVI (1945-46), 117. I am grateful to Mr. Jeavons for his comments to me in a letter of 17 May, 1959.

¹¹ J. Brøndsted, *Early English Ornament* (London & Copenhagen, 1924), p. 225.

¹² Cp. Brøndsted, *op. cit.* in note 11, p. 193, and G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, VI, pt. 2 (London, 1937), especially pp. 154-6.

¹³ T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London, 1938), p. 201.

¹⁴ R. I. Page, 'Language and dating in OE. inscriptions,' *Anglia*, LXXVII (1959), 399 f.