

# Wirral's Vikings — cultured and Christian

Tenth century sculptured gravestones of Wirral provide clear evidence of the culture and Christianity of the early Viking settlers. A careful look at the scattered fragments in churches and local museums throws an interesting light on Wirral's Scandinavian colony.

A prize exhibit must surely be the West Kirby hog-backed grave cover, which is housed with other stones in the Charles Dawson Brown Museum alongside St. Bridget's Church. The stone is six feet long and is one of a number of hog-backs found in the various parts of Northern England which were inhabited by Norsemen.

Experts believe that the design of these stones may represent contemporary 10th century Viking buildings. The "roofs" of the stones have a distinct curve and appear to be covered with tile-like plates of split wood known as shingles. Their walls also curve to give the slab a slight elliptical shape.

In some cases designs on the sides of the stones have suggested that Norse settlers constructed buildings from wattle and daub, which consisted of interwoven twigs plastered with mud.

The West Kirby hog-back does have a shingled roof and an interlace on the sides could be a representation of wattle and daub construction. In the absence of physical remains of settlements does the hog-back provide a clue to the appearance of those Viking farmsteads of West Kirby, Greasby, Frankby, Irby, Pensby, Raby and Whitby?

## Revealed

Excavations in various parts of the Viking world point to a variety of possibilities for house design but there are at least some interesting parallels to be drawn.

Danish excavations at the fortresses of Trelleborg, Aggesborg and Fyrkat Viking

Viking buildings at Hedeby in Denmark and, of particular relevance for Wirral, at Dublin. In both cases, however, the buildings were not bow-shaped but more rectangular in design.

A bow-shaped building is currently being excavated at Ribblehead in Yorkshire but it has not been clearly identified as Viking. The archaeological evidence is inconclusive and no positive remarks can be made about the possible design of Wirral's Viking farmsteads. Further excavations in Northern England may help to solve the mystery. At the moment the West Kirby hog-back gives the only clue to their appearance.

R. N. Bailey's recently published book, "Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England," argues that hog-back grave covers may have been derived from the early English practice of covering the bodies of saints with a house-like structure and cites the case of St. Chad's remains being placed in a tomb made into the form of a little house.

## Mystery

This, in turn, can be traced back to the building of sarcophagi in the early Christian Mediterranean world. Wirral's Norsemen were among the host of Scandinavian colonists who took over the practice and adapted it to their own circumstances. Mystery surrounds those individuals buried beneath the graves.

The fact that there are several examples of 10th century hog-backs in Northern England suggests that they had ceased to be the markers of saints' graves. There are far too many of them within the limited period of their production.

It seems likely that those buried were the political and religious leaders of the early Scandinavian settlers who had been converted to Christianity. The Viking who lay beneath the West Kirby hog-back would have been one such leader but his identity is not known.

Further South an interesting relic can be seen inside Neston Parish Church. Two stone fragments, stored with others of a later period, once formed a single grave-cross of unusual design.

A rather naive representation of an angel adorns the part of the cross above the priest's head. Although the design is not particularly original it does at least reveal that Scandinavian religious thought no longer revolved around the hammer of Thor.

Smaller fragments of Norse grave-crosses have been found at Wallasey, Woodchurch, Bromborough, Frodsham and Hilbre Island. The Hilbre fragment has been housed in the back-rooms of Chester's Grosvenor Museum, but a collection of similar cross fragments is to be seen inside St. John's Church, Chester. There seems to be some agreement among experts

that a mason's workshop was originally sited at St. John's and this was almost certainly the source of the Hilbre stone. Wirral's Vikings were part of a host of colonisers of Northern England who enthusiastically embraced the idea of carving stone monuments and added their own motifs of Scandinavian design. By the

11th century the Viking homelands had themselves accepted Christianity and celebrated their conversion by use of the carved grave-cross.

A traditional image of the Vikings has been that of a pagan and barbaric hoard who destroyed all of value as they swept through the land. There were violent attacks upon monasteries and

priests and considerable plundering did take place, but not all Vikings can be "tarred with the same brush". Many left their original homelands because the growth of royal authority stifled their creativity. Once they had escaped they gave full reign to their talents, thereby enriching the culture of the recipient country. This type

of Viking did not abolish all that stood before him. He seized upon that which kindled his imagination and fused it with his creativity.

References:

- Bailey R. N.: "Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England" 1980.
- Brownbill J.: "West Kirby and Hilbre" 1928.
- Bullock J. D.: "Pre-Norman Crosses of West Cheshire" TLCAS v.68 (1958) and "Pre-Conquest Cheshire 383-1066" 1972.

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The original monument was roughly triangular in shape and combined Saxon, Scandinavian and Irish features of sculpture. The fragments, therefore, attest not only to the Christianity of the settlers but to considerable fusion of artistic skills and tastes.

## Violent

The Neston cross receives a mention in J. D. Bullock's "Pre-Conquest Cheshire 383-1066", where the details of the design are interpreted. A Standard Viking contribution to the cross is the Borre-type interlace, carved on one side. Above this two figures are depicted in violent combat. They are almost certainly biblical in origin. Dr. Bullock suggesting the possibility of Cain and Abel.

On the other side, the picture of a priest wearing a pointed chasuble over an alb provides interesting evidence of tenth century Mass vestments. A mysterious object can be seen hanging from the left hand of the priest. Again Dr. Bullock provides the suggestion that this is an Irish book-sash of tagh. Thus the Irish influence, evident in Wirral's place-names and the Meols finds, has a parallel in the sculpture.

To \*

Ancient history master DAVID HEALEY continues his fascinating look at the Viking influence on Wirral. Mr. Healey, who teaches at Calday Grange Grammar School, lives at Little Neston.

In the penultimate article of an absorbing four-part series, he reviews the culture and Christianity of the early Viking settlers.

