

Merseyside in the Dark Ages

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An assessment of the situation in Merseyside in the Dark Ages epitomises the difficulties inherent in all such assessments. The term Dark Ages in itself, although now outmoded, is the only one readily available to avoid a wordy circumlocution. The nature of the evidence is two-fold, archaeological and documentary, and is necessarily fragmentary. In many cases of this kind, of course, it is possible to assume that the fragmentary evidence can be extrapolated, by the use of such methods as comparison with that from neighbouring areas, and a reasonably secure picture produced. This cannot be said to be the case in our present enquiry.

The reasons for this are quite simple: there is comparatively little archaeological evidence, and virtually no documentary evidence. This conclusion may make the exercise sound like a case of making bricks without straw, but, as in the case of the first people known to have been put in that position, we must see what can be done.

The effects of the ending of what we know as Roman Britain are extremely difficult to imagine, in terms of their local impact — that is to say, what they meant to those on the ground. We have learnt long ago not to think of Romans sailing away in 410 AD, and complacently chuckle at those who still show signs of thinking in those terms. We say, wisely, that it was Roman rule and Roman administration which broke down in the late fourth century, and that by then everyone in the island of Britain south of Hadrian's Wall was a Roman anyway, and would not have understood the concept of Romans leaving Britain. All that is easy, but what do we replace it with? We know little enough of the 'native inhabitants' of Roman Britain in this part of Britain at any period within that of Roman rule, and to imagine the impact of the withdrawal of Roman administration referred to above is difficult.

We can presume that, for most of the Roman period, a cardinal factor in the life of the civilian in north Britain was the impact of the Roman army as an economic factor. That army will always have needed large quantities of agricultural produce, and the provision of those goods, however equitable or otherwise the conditions of their supply to the army may have been, will have been a matter of great importance. This should have meant an increase in agricultural efficiency, since the farmers still had to produce enough for their own and their families' subsistence. If this was the case, and we cannot demonstrate it, the gradual removal of the market represented by the legionary fortress at Chester and the various auxiliary forts of the region should not have had too great an adverse effect on the 'natives', as we may call them for the want of a better word.

If we return to the history we were taught long ago, the Roman period was succeeded by the Anglo-Saxon. Again, but less securely, we think we now know better. Nevertheless, if we look at even modern historical atlases

we find that various activities are suggested for Cumbria, in the form of interaction between the Cumbrian people and such others as are represented by Strathclyde or the Northumbrian successors of Bernicia and Deira. Equally, though less precisely, activity is suggested for Wales, on the other side of our area. Between lies what used to be the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire, from parts of which Merseyside was created. That, our atlases tell us, was part of the kingdom of Northumbria, within which detail fades out towards the west coast. What, if anything, did the inhabitants of what we now call Merseyside know of Northumbria in the sixth to the ninth centuries? One suspects the answer is 'very little', and the lack of recognisably Anglo-Saxon artefacts from that area appears to support that answer. And yet the picture is not quite as simple as it seems. We think we know about Anglo-Saxon Northumbria as represented in its prosperous north-eastern areas, and indeed we know something about its monasteries and its tribal centres (if that is what is represented by Yeavinger and its analogues). But we know remarkably little about the base of the economic pyramid represented by that small top layer (Richards 1999, 44). Given that our area was always on the periphery of Northumbria, and did not, apparently, have any sites of ecclesiastical or administrative importance similar to those further north and east, there is no surprise in our lack of perception of the lower strata of society.

But there were indeed people and settlements. The place-name evidence tells us that people whose language was Old English were naming settlements (Ekwall 1922 and Dodgson 1972 for those areas originally parts of Lancashire and Cheshire respectively). As always, we lack the detailed evidence because all our place-name sources are relatively late, but that a proportion of the place names were given by speakers of Old English necessarily implies that they were present in the area, even if we cannot 'see' them archaeologically (fig. 1.).

That statement immediately raises the question of how they might be visible, and its answer presumably implies that inhabitants at this time were mostly, if not all, at a low economic level. If we presume, for a moment, that any such inhabitants lived in ephemeral buildings; that they were either aceramic or that any pottery was handmade rather than wheel-thrown; that their metalwork was largely of iron and that they had little in the way of decorative metalwork; we have described a culture which will leave little in the way of archaeological traces, and that would certainly not attract the attention of casual discoverers who were without archaeological background. It may be objected that all this presumption is unsatisfactory, but it, or something like it, must be evoked to explain the twin facts of the presence of OE place-names and absence of archaeological evidence. This, of course, is again not a situation unique to Merseyside. Even the comparatively numerous group of pre-Conquest ironwork from Cumbria published by the present author (Edwards 2002) would probably not have been reported had it not been accompanied by a



Fig. 1. Map to show places with Norse and partially-Norse derived names and also sites producing Viking period archaeology.

fairly spectacular piece of ornamental copper alloy. Metal detectorists often specifically discriminate against iron, ignoring signals identifiable as such on the grounds that they are so common and so seldom recognisable.

It is against this background, if such it can be called, that the evidence for what followed the Anglo-Saxons must be viewed, and it is this background which explains why that evidence, relatively slight in itself, is viewed with such enthusiasm. We are, of course, referring to the arrival of people of Scandinavian extraction — Norsemen or, more romantically, Vikings.

The background to the recognition of this phenomenon in north-west England is well known. It began in Cumbria, and, although stimulated by the visit to England of J.J.A. Worsaae in 1846-47 (Henry 1995, Introduction), was at first an idea largely supported by some very unscientific place-name identification. The lists of names of both settlements and, more frequently, natural features, of allegedly Scandinavian origin were the basis of the work of Ferguson (1865), but as he lacked data and analysis for his place-name attributions, so he did for studies of archaeological material. It was not until quite late in the nineteenth century that it was respectable to postulate a 'Viking invasion' of north-west England.

When, however, it became clear that artifacts with Scandinavian affinities were indeed to be found in the area, and some of the less-probable 'Scandinavian' names had been eliminated from the lists, then the theory took firm hold. In particular, the identification of some stone sculpture as having Scandinavian affinities, pioneered by W.S. Calverley and W.G. Collingwood (Calverley, ed. Collingwood 1899), led to the acceptance of the idea of a wave of settlers here, parallel to that for which both documentary and archaeological evidence existed in the east of England.

Merseyside had, it became clear, stone sculpture of the requisite kind from at least four sites; it had a coin hoard discovered at a very early date but very well recorded for that time; and it had a site producing miscellaneous metalwork including some that appeared to be Norse; and, it eventually became clear, it even had that rarity, a documentary reference.

These, then, are our main raw materials: sculpture from West Kirby, Hilbre Island and Bromborough; the Harkirke coin hoard; the metalwork from Meols; and 'Ingimund's Invasion' (fig.1). Mention will be made briefly of sculpture at Winwick and Neston, both of which lie just outside the county boundary.

The collection of pre-Norman sculpture from West Kirby and Hilbre Island, much of it in the museum attached to the church at West Kirby, had been variously commented on previously, but the definitive account is that by W.G. Collingwood in John Brownbill's account of the parish and island (Collingwood 1928). Collingwood described four cross fragments and a hog-back at West Kirby and a further cross fragment from Hilbre in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester. He also described two grave slabs, one complete from Hilbre and another

only partially preserved; both are at West Kirby. There was no doubt that the affinities of the three cross heads represented lay with the sculpture from Chester itself, represented chiefly at St. John's Church in that city. These are characterised by being wheel-heads; that is, the head is surrounded by a continuous ring joining all four arms. But, in the case of the Chester school, unlike most other wheel-heads, the spandrels — the spaces between the arms of the cross — are not pierced but merely recessed. The arms of the cross appear to pass behind the wheel and emerge on its periphery as stubs.

Bailey (1996, 31-32 with further references) has pointed out the links between the Chester (St. John's) school of sculpture and the wheel-heads of the Cumbrian coast, while also indicating the differences (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 31). In Cumbria the spandrels of the crosses are almost always pierced, while in Cheshire this is seldom the case (the only known exception is the cross at Bromborough). The Chester school also employs small bosses in the 'armpits' of the crosses. A word should here be said about the use of the term 'school' in this context. What can be demonstrated in the case of the Wirral fragments and the Chester pieces, together in fact with pieces in Anglesey and Flintshire, is a common repertoire of artistic elements not elsewhere found together. This kind of grouping, which has been shown to exist elsewhere must imply some degree of common derivation, which can be labelled by such a word as 'school'. It may, but does not necessarily, imply a common workshop. Bailey (1996, 30) suggests as much for St. John's church, Chester, on the basis of unfinished carvings there. It, and similar artistic identities and dissimilarities can be used to indicate lines of apparent interconnection, and their absence to indicate lack of connection. This is graphically shown in Bailey's figure 3 (1996, 32). What such connections and disconnections imply in real terms is much more difficult to suggest. Bailey himself makes the obvious point that Chester's known trading importance must be relevant.

There is, of course, a danger in getting interested in the artistic details of such sculpture as we have been considering without making any real use of the result in the proper end-product of archaeology — an understanding of how people lived. Collingwood saw this, and concluded his paper on the West Kirby and Hilbre stones with a section called 'History from the Monuments'. In this he used the Cumbrian evidence he knew so well, together with such matters as the dedication of West Kirby church to St. Bridget, to suggest that '...all the coast from Dee to Solway shows ninth-century Anglian churches and tenth-century churches attributable to Norse-descended settlers from Gaelic regions'.

Before we leave West Kirby it is necessary to say something about the hogback tombstone there. Hogbacks are recumbent monuments the general shape and, particularly, the line of the upper ridge of which have been thought to bear some resemblance to a recumbent hog. This name has not yet suffered the fate of some



Fig. 2. Plan, adapted from the 1st edition 1:2500 plan to show the relationship of Little Crosby Hall and the Harkirke Chapel

others of respectably ancient coinage. 'Tortoise' brooches and 'thistle' brooches have been sent to oblivion as names on the grounds that their makers were not attempting to represent tortoises or thistles. No-one has ever suggested that they were, or that hogbacks were an attempt to portray hogs. In fact, on the additional basis of the plan of some, but by no means all, hogbacks and the presence, again on some, of what appear to be tiles or shingles, they have been derived from bow-sided buildings, and particularly those known from sites like Trelleborg in Denmark.

The West Kirby hogback is very interesting in this respect. Collingwood describes unequivocally (Collingwood 1928, 18-19) a descent from 'house-shaped Roman tombs with tiled roofs, as seen at York' via various monuments of the succeeding centuries to 'the close of the pre-Norman period, when coped recumbent gravestones replaced the hogback'. Few would perhaps travel the whole way with him today, but we may accept that 'the West Kirby hogback is obviously later than most' and 'the forms intended for tiles are carved on a vertical face, so that they do not tell their tale, but look like big drops running down the wall'. That the other patterns on the damaged stone

are poorly designed and crudely executed is also true.

Perhaps most interestingly, Collingwood, in a footnote (Collingwood 1928, 21, n1) describes attempts to locate the source of the sandstone of which the hogback was made. Expert opinion rejected Wirral itself and inclined to a source near Ruabon on the Welsh side of the Dee estuary, though a caveat was entered by Professor Bowell, of Liverpool University, to the effect that he would 'not care to rule out North or North-East Lancashire as a possible source of similar material', a suggestion which might well be geologically acceptable but seems highly improbable in geographical terms. The mention of geography is also the occasion to point out the isolation of the West Kirby hogback; one has to travel to Heysham and Bolton-le-Sands, both in the north of (post-1974) Lancashire to find others.

The cross of which only parts survive at Bromborough appears to belong to the Chester school, but was apparently somewhat taller than the majority of the known examples. In its restored form it stands in the churchyard. The site is of further interest because it yielded, besides one or two other similar fragments, the remains of one or two small grave markers of which examples are thinly scattered

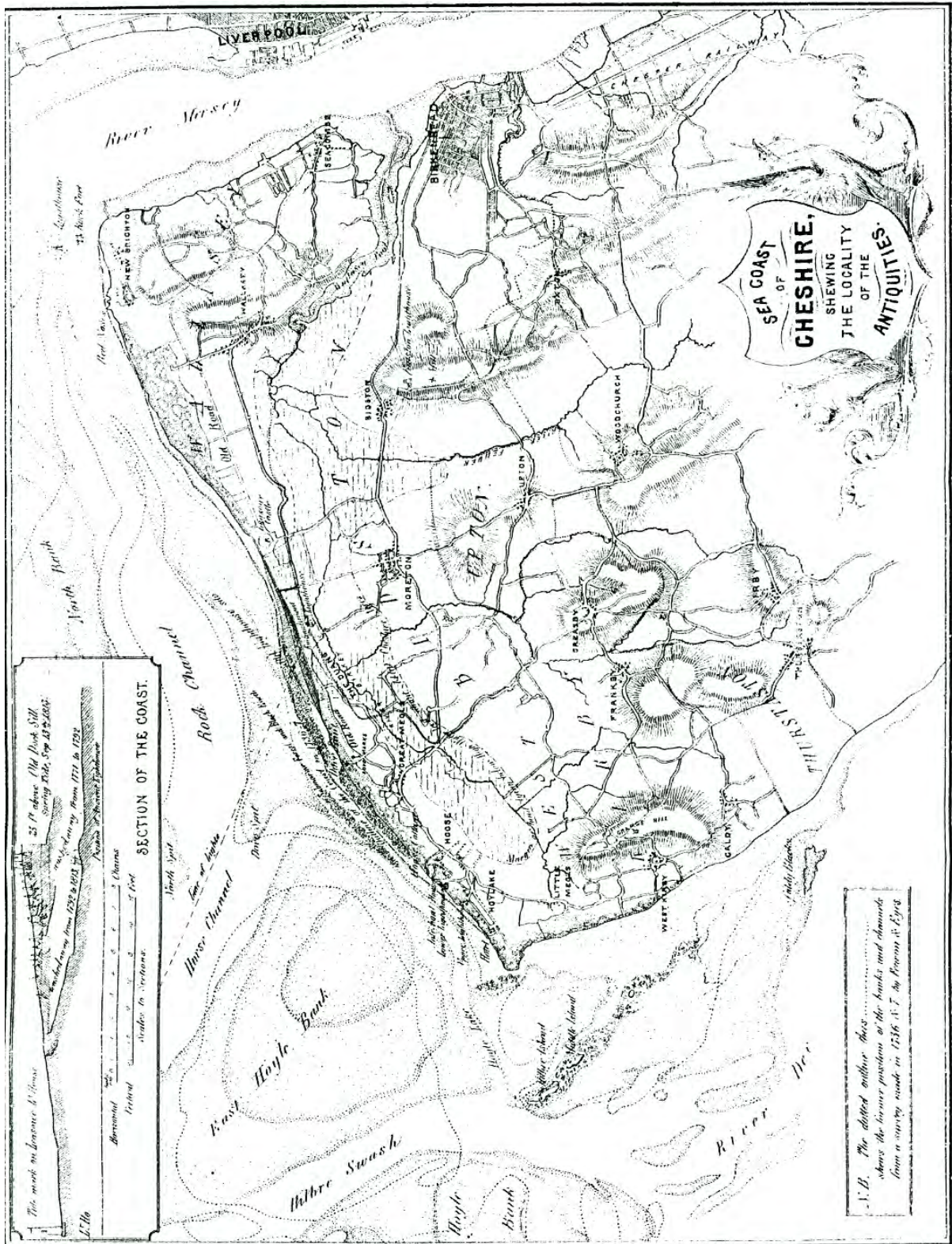


Fig. 3. Map from Hume's Ancient Meols (1863)

in north west England and which deserve further study.

At Neston, just south of the county boundary, a number of fragments conform again to the general type of the Chester school, but here, as Bu'Lock put it (Bu'Lock 1972, 82) 'a local variant added figure-subjects to the repertoire', and the angel, priest in mass vestments and fighting figures illustrated in his figure 17 have now been joined by another cross showing figures fighting on horseback (already known in the nineteenth century) a hart and hound motif and parts of other figure subjects (White 1986).

Winwick church has, preserved by the accident of its use as a gravestone in the eighteenth century, the transom, that is the two horizontal arms and the central boss, of what must have been the closest thing this side of the Irish Sea to a High Cross. Much of the decoration on the side bearing the eighteenth century inscriptions has gone but the other side and the ends of the two arms are in good preservation and Bailey (Bailey 1996, 29 and Bailey 1980, 159-161) has elucidated them brilliantly. He drew attention to the juxtaposition of secular and Christian scenes at, for example, Neston, and then turned to the ends of the Winwick cross. Here, as he says 'On one end-panel is a priest dressed in alb and chasuble [cf. the Neston priest], surrounded by the tools of his trade: bell and holy-water bucket, cross and (probably) portable shrine. At the other end of the cross, two men stand on either side of a third who is suspended upside down by a rope. They appear to be sawing him in half with a bow-saw.' This, Bailey shows, is almost certainly a depiction, unique in pre-Norman Britain, of the martyrdom of Isaiah, a theme known to early writers including Bede.

These fragments of sculpture, preserved in most cases by accident, often because of their use in an unsentimental age as building stones, can only hint at their heritage of learning, piety and artistry. While we must deplore their scarcity, we must never neglect what the hints referred to imply in terms of sophistication in a society which we all too readily think of as coarse and brutal. Equally, we must bear in mind the economic basis which allowed the development of schools of sculpture, whatever exactly that term may imply.

If sculpture survives by accident, so too do other forms of evidence such as coin hoards. That hoards of precious metal, usually coinage but often including other elements such as jewellery or ingots, were hidden in Norse times is readily demonstrated. With suitable adjustments as to contents, this has been a reaction to troubled times whenever and wherever treasure existed. What is not always remembered is that what we today can use as evidence is only a small portion of what was buried. Much, of course, was recovered by its owners when the threat which caused its burial had passed; much else remains in the ground awaiting discovery or has been irretrievably dispersed by later activity. The threads by which such evidence hangs are shown by the story of the Harkirke hoard of 1611 (For this, see Edwards 1992; detailed references to this account

will not be included in the succeeding paragraphs).

The name Harkirke, meaning, presumably, 'grey or hoary church', can be shown to be of medieval ancestry. It is located in the parish of Little Crosby, to the north of Liverpool (fig.2), and the name itself may well have influenced the recusant William Blundell when he decided to make a burial ground for his co-religionists otherwise denied burial in sacred ground. That a boy driving cattle found coins scattered by the marking out of the boundary of the new burial-ground and that Blundell himself heard of the discovery are themselves accidents. That Blundell then recorded as many different types among the coins as he could find, and recorded them accurately enough for modern identification, adds to the improbability. We then have to take cognisance of the following facts; the coins themselves were sent away from Crosby for safety at the time of the Civil War and they were thus lost. The records of them made by Blundell in two separate documents survive, however, and so, too, does an engraving on copper of Blundell's drawings.

All that might be regarded as improbable enough, but there is yet more (Edwards 1998, 44-45). There was allegedly a chalice made from the Harkirke silver in the Chapel at Little Crosby Hall, but it was stolen in the nineteenth century. There was certainly a pyx bearing an inscription by Blundell at Little Crosby R.C. church in the twentieth century. This, too, was stolen, but after a record was made of its appearance, and after the silver of which it was made had been analysed sufficiently precisely for the analyst to state that its composition did not conflict with that of tenth century silver. The inscription itself, stating that the object had been made of 'silver from the burial ground' suggested that there might well have been ingots present as well as coins.

It was stated at the outset that the evidence available was slight and open to varied interpretation. That, at least, has surely been proved. No mention has been made, however, of the sole documentary source which was described as relevant. This was well-known to all the earliest writers who, between them, made the fact of the Norse incursion into north-west England academically respectable. The document itself, however, was always regarded with suspicion, finally gaining general, though not universal, acceptance as a result of its treatment by F.T. Wainwright (Wainwright 1948b, Finberg (ed.) 1975, 131-161). As Wainwright himself said (Finberg (ed.), 1975, 138) 'O'Donovan [the original publisher of the document concerned] had before him only a copy of a seventeenth century copy of a manuscript about which [virtually nothing] is known.' Because it fits well with other documentary evidence, such as that of the expulsion of the Norse from Dublin, it has gradually become accepted, and its slightly dubious origin ignored. There is not, and never has been a suggestion that O'Donovan or anyone else fabricated the fragmentary manuscript (Wainwright 1948c). It nevertheless behoves all those who want to make use of the evidence of the manuscript and of the conclusions others have drawn from it, to

read Wainwright's careful assessment in full, and to make up their own minds. It is, however, certain that the document has meant that, all too often, the arrival of all Norse influence in north west England has been hung on it. The beginning of the tenth century has been seen as the beginning of the Norse invasion, incursion, arrival or whatever word one chooses to use. This is not probable, and there are hints in the archaeological record that it began earlier, and, as Wainwright himself suggested (Wainwright 1948a, Finberg 1975, 181-227) that it was relatively peaceful.

We can only hope, in this as in many other cases where the archaeological evidence for a given area and period are very scanty, that new techniques will enable us to flesh out a very skeletal picture.

It remains to say something about the site on the Wirral coast at Meols recently re-assessed in the publication by Griffiths and others (Griffiths *et al* 2007). Attention was first drawn to the fact of the discovery of many artefacts, mostly but not entirely of metal, by the publication of a book on the site (Hume 1863, see fig. 3 for a copy of his map). This, and various less lengthy additions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to a mid-twentieth century reassessment (Bu'Lock, 1960) and thus, via some work reported in this Society's Journal (Chitty and Warhurst 1977), to a consideration in the context of Irish sea trading (Griffiths 1992). It still seems most likely that the finds from Meols are the result of open-beach trading, as opposed to a formal port, throughout a long period.

It may seem, after reading the above, that comparatively little is known of Merseyside in the Dark Ages, and also that comparatively little has been added to that stock of knowledge in the very recent past. This, to some extent, is true. On the last occasion on which a synthesis of the present type was presented (O'Hanlon 1991), the author concluded that the 'Merseyside region should certainly repay further investigation by archaeologists . . .'; there is no doubt that this is a fair summary, and also no doubt that some investigations, both begun and to come, will, with the aid of techniques not even in existence ten or fifteen years ago, yield information which will make the task of the next compiler of such a summary both easier and more fruitful.

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Abbreviations

Chet. Soc.; Chetham Society.

JMAS; Journal of Merseyside Archaeological Society.

THSLC; Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire.