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Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:
1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
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Archaeological Journal

Publication details, including instructions
for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raij20>

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Published online: 15 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: the Rev. G. F. Browne B.D. (1887) Brief Precis of the
Description of the Early Sculptured Stones of Cheshire, *Archaeological
Journal*, 44:1, 146-156, DOI: [10.1080/00665983.1887.10852260](https://doi.org/10.1080/00665983.1887.10852260)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00665983.1887.10852260>

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BRIEF PRECIS OF THE DESCRIPTION¹ OF THE EARLY
SCULPTURED STONES OF CHESHIRE.

By the REV. G. F. BROWNE, B.D.

At West Kirkby, at the mouth of the Dee, there is a curious stone the character of which has not been understood. It is in fact a nearly complete example of the hog-backed stone*. The lower part is covered on both sides by rough interlacing bands and the middle and upper part with scales, the top being ornamented with a row of oblong rings on each side with a band running through each row of rings. This work at the top, which looks like a row of buckles, is very unusual, but resembles in several of its features the work on the font which is known as King Ethelbert's font, in St. Martin's Church, Canterbury. It is not known on any hog-backed stone or other memorial of the date to which this stone may be attributed. The interlacing work is not unusually found in this position on hog-backed stones: there is an example at Bondgate*, near Appleby, which has only been discovered this year and has not been represented as yet, and on the hog-backed stone at Dewsbury, and elsewhere. The scales occur on several of the limited number of hog-backed stones so far discovered. They may represent the tiles or shingles of a roof, the original idea of this kind of tombstone being that it was the roof of the last dwelling place of the departed man. There are fine examples on some classical sarcophagi* and on some of the small Latin *Cineraria**. The Germans describe this method of ornamentation as the fir-cone pattern, from the resemblance which each member bears to one of the leaves plucked

¹ Given in the Antiquarian Section, at the Chester Meeting, August 11th, 1876.

[*Outlined rubbings of the stones marked * were shewn.*]

out from the fir-cone. One of the earliest mentions of Christian Anglo-Saxon interment is that of Bishop Acca, when a *parva capella* was placed over him (possibly the hog-backed stone now in Hexham Church), and this suggests that there was a representation of tiles upon it. The scales, however, on some sculptured stones do not represent tiles but scales of monsters. At Govan there are hog-backed stones covered with the scaly skin of a monster, and at Meigle there is a very fine stone* covered with scales which are evidently those of a monster. The stones* placed between the two pillars in the churchyard at Penrith, which have been totally misrepresented in so many engravings, are covered with scales exactly like those at Meigle. In the crypt at Canterbury there is a pillar* the beauty of which is not generally recognised; the pillar appears to be covered with semi-circular scales, but when it is carefully examined it is found that each of the scales represents a feather. The stone at West Kirkby is of a material which is harder than any stone in the neighbourhood, and it has no doubt been brought from some distance and has been the memorial of some important person. Canon Eaton has it locked up in an outhouse, and it is very safe in his care, but it would be well to have it in some more accessible place.

The hog-backed stone took in some districts another form, flat-topped, with vertical sides and ends. In Acton Church, near Nantwich, several stones*, used as the riser of a stone seat along the wall of the south aisle, have apparently formed the sides of such a tomb. There are signs of late date about them, the heads of the figures being much more round and trim than the heads on Anglian sculpture. One of the figures, who has evidently been an important Saint of the neighbourhood, is upside down. The basket-work shewn on one of the sides is of late appearance. It will be observed that the figure on the spectator's right of the vesica encircling our Lord's figure holds a large key; reference will be made again to this when the Sandbach crosses are described. Stones of the form to which these fragments may have belonged are found solid at Gainford* and at St. Alkmund's* Derby; at Meigle there are some very remarkable examples*, with the sides covered with animals marvellously

drawn and sculptured, and with a flat top covered with elaborate interlacing work. One feature which has not been noticed in the Meigle stones is that a hole is sunk in one end of the top, probably to serve as the socket of a cross. This cross may have been of stone or it may conceivably have been of wood or wicker-work. The rock-cut graves at Heysham have each of them a hole cut at the head, probably for the same purpose.

There is at West Kirkby a flat slab* on the face of which a cross is sculptured. This is very unusual in England. There are also carefully sculptured fragments of the shaft of a cross* and portions of a cross" with triquetrae in the arms exactly resembling in character the crosses to be described at Chester. At Hilbree, the island immediately off West Kirkby, there is a cross of like character; a portion of another cross was taken from Hilbree some years ago to Liverpool, but has recently been restored and placed in the Grosvenor Museum at Chester*.

Among the large collection of fragments of stone in the crypt of St. John's, Chester, there are several crosses and portions of crosses and other stones which may be attributed to a pre-Norman style. There are at least four stones* more or less complete, with circular heads from which the keys of a cross project, and with shafts covered with interlacing work. The keys and the cross contain triquetrae and other like ornamentation; the wheel connecting the keys is ornamented on its face and on its edge with the key pattern, the Z pattern, and interlacing patterns, and the edges of the shaft are similarly ornamented. It is more easy to describe these crosses negatively than positively. They are un-Anglian, un-Scottish, un-Irish, un-Scandinavian. They resemble most closely a head of one of the few great crosses left in Wales, known as the Maenachwynfan, and the fragments and the head of a cross at Diserth; the resemblance is much too close to be accidental. The Maenachwynfan is in the middle of a number of places which take their names from some great catastrophe of the past. These names all point to this locality as the scene of some prolonged disaster to the British arms, and there seems no doubt that the stone must be of British character. If this is so, the question of

the period at which the St. John's crosses were made becomes a very interesting one. Professor Freeman in his admirable paper on the ancient history of Chester believed that the Brets left Chester absolutely deserted from the time of their great defeat by Ethelfrith. The British character of these crosses would rather point to the Brets having taken heart and to a certain extent occupied Chester again, before the time when they were altogether driven out of this part of England in the year 903. It is, perhaps, not unreasonable to suppose that they fled from Chester into Flintshire, and that the survivors of the series of battles which took place as they fled, set up on the scene of the last catastrophe a stone of the same character as those they had been accustomed to set up in Chester.

There is in the same collection a remarkable stone* of triangular shape, resembling in its work the details of the shafts and crosses described, but apparently having ended in the vertex of a triangle and not in a cross head. It has on it scales, as have also some of the shafts of the crosses, and this is a feature which has not been observed on any stones other than hog-backed stones. The presence of these scales on the Chester stones is thus very remarkable. They resemble very much the scales on the armour of St. Michael on the curious early statue dug up in Monmouthshire and shewn in Strutt's *Habits of the Anglo-Saxons*, forming what Sir S. Meyrick has described as 'tegulated armour.' There are also fragments of two beautiful sculptured shafts of crosses which must have been as fine in their work as any of the pre-Norman monuments left in England. Finally, before leaving Chester, it may be worth mentioning a flat stone* with an inscription round the edge *Hic requiescit B. Renthuna sanctimonialis*, 'here rests the good nun Renthuna'. This stone is only mentioned here because of the great rarity of any inscription to a nun; the only other example in the experience of the writer being the well-known stone in the Chapel of Jesus College, Cambridge, with the inscription to a member of the Society of nuns which preceded the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, *Moribus ornata jacet hic bona Berta Rosata*. The *bona* in Jesus College Chapel may interpret the *B* at Chester. Possibly our phrase 'the good ladies' is a hint that this was the epithet ordinarily applied to nuns.

The eastern part of the County of Cheshire is particularly rich in circular pillars, cut at the top into four flat faces. It has always been a question whether these pillars ended in crosses or not, but the question may now be taken as having been solved. There are three* of these pillars in the Public Park at Macclesfield, brought from various sites in the district which was formerly the great parish of Prestbury. There are some of them yet *in situ*, one at Upton, another at Clulow. One that was at Wincle has been removed to Bagstones in Staffordshire. With regard to some of the pillars mentioned it is certain that the four faces into which they were cut at the top were never ornamented; in one or two cases it is doubtful; but in the case of one of those at Macclesfield the ornamentation is quite clear*. The ornamentation in this case follows the rule observed in the Staffordshire examples of this class of pillars, at Leek*, Ilam*, Stoke*, and Chebsey. Some years ago, two crosses*, one a good deal smaller than the other, were dug up at Disley and placed in the grounds of Lyme Hall. They are carefully figured in Mr. Earwaker's book on Eastern Cheshire (ii, 313), and the conclusion I came to from examining the engraving in Mr. Earwaker's book was that they were the tops knocked off two circular pillars such as are under consideration. A visit to Lyme made this perfectly certain. They have been broken off just below the point at which the circular column was cut into four flat faces, and above the place where the fillet usually on these pillars ran. Instead of being cruciform, the head of each of these stones is of a peculiar form, and if that had been their true form they would have been unique in this respect. But an examination on the spot shews that not only has the pillar been broken off below the point where the faces commenced, but another blow has smashed the cross at the top of the pillar. The two stones at Lyme Hall have both of them lost the centre and the two arms of the cross-head; and the top key of the cross has since their re-discovery been fitted on to the place from which the centre and arms should have sprung.

There remains the question of the peculiar form of cross which must have belonged to the Lyme stones,—as though two large thumbs projected below the cross. A

cross was some time ago found in the restoration of Cheadle Church, in the same district of Cheshire, and it found its way into the keeping of a very zealous archaeologist who has a large number of early Anglian stones under his charge. He has provided me with a rubbing* of the outline of the cross, and this makes it quite clear that the Lyme stones are, as has been said, incorrectly pieced together, the centre part of the cross having been lost in their case but having been found in the case of the Cheadle Cross. The Cheadle Cross was broken off higher than the Lyme Crosses, about half way down the ornamented faces. It has the same curious projections below the head. In the account of the discovery of these fragments (Earwaker, *East Cheshire*, i, 185, 186), it is said that 'a circular column was found in a field near them, six to seven feet long, of the same character as those existing in Cheshire, with regard to which there is a doubt whether they ever had a cross-head or not.' It may now be taken that the Cheshire pillars had cross-heads, and that the form of them is that shewn by the cross at Cheadle.

On the Staffordshire pillars it is found that one of the faces has the key pattern, another a stiff leaf and flower scroll, and the others interlacing bands of the usual Anglian description; if none of the faces bear the leaf and flower scroll, it occurs on the fillet. The Lyme crosses have neither of them any leaf and flower scroll on their faces, and the guess may therefore be hazarded that if the two pillars belonging to them are ever found, the fillets will be found to have leaf and flower scrolls, like that of the fillet of the small pillar in Ilam Churchyard.

With regard to the date of these pillars, there is one pillar of the kind which is dated to a certain extent. The faces probably do not in that case shew any sign of ornament, but the raised parts of the stone which mark the boundary of the four faces, and also the raised bands of the fillet, are cable-moulded instead of being plain. Some archaeologists would say this is an indication of more recent date than the plain bands; if so the plain band pillars must have a very early date, for the cable-moulded pillar is no other than the pillar of Eliseg* beyond Vale Crucis Abbey, visited by the Institute this morning, and bear-

ing an inscription which no one has been able to put later than the ninth century. This pillar has thus a very important bearing on the date of the Cheshire and Staffordshire pillars.

The two tall stones* in the Churchyard at Penrith are, when they are carefully examined, examples of pillars of this description, only more elaborately sculptured. They are usually engraved as covered with an unintelligible mass of holes, but a careful investigation makes out almost all the patterns upon them, and some of the patterns are very curious and unusual. There is a pillar* at Stapleford, in Nottinghamshire, which is covered from top to bottom with interlacing patterns, comparable with the very best work on Scottish stones or in Hibernian MSS.

While these pillars give a character to the original parish of Prestbury, Prestbury itself has two fragments* of sculptured stones, one of them shewing bold interlacing work, the other exceedingly poor work of a very unmeaning description, about as bad as any work that can be found on sculptured stones. The Vicar has taken the greatest care of these stones and has placed them literally under a glass case; but one of them has been cemented on the top of the other as if they belonged to one another, which they never can have done.

The two great crosses* at Sandbach are worthy of a lengthy monograph to themselves, and I had arranged with Dean Howson four years ago to spend some time with him at Sandbach and prepare such a monograph. This intention was frustrated at the time, and has now been put an end to by his greatly lamented death. I spent two or three days there last Easter, and rubbings of all the important parts are now shewn. To describe them in detail would be too lengthy for the present purpose. I hope that some Society, or some person in Cheshire, will undertake the publication and description of every panel of each of these most marvellous stones, which do not yield in size and importance and interest even to the Ruthwell cross, except that they have no inscriptions. An account of a visit paid to Sandbach in Queen Elizabeth's time, says that in that time there was an inscription on one of the crosses which could only be read by a

person holden with his head downwards, and that the meaning of the inscription was as follows:—

At Sandbach in the sandy ford
Lieth the ninth part of Dublin's hord.

In those days the word "horde" for a mass of barbarians had not been introduced into the English language, and the word in this connection must have meant 'treasure.' The same account says that three metal chests were dug up in the little stream that runs below the churchyard of Sandbach, with curious inscriptions on them, but empty; it is almost impossible to doubt that there was some connection between these chests and the loss of the Dublin hoard. Whatever may have been the fact with regard to the existence of an inscription on one of these crosses—and there may well have been an inscription on some one of the parts which are wanting—it is very remarkable that the tradition of the country with regard to the real or proposed inscription should have made mention of Dublin, at a time when probably no one living, however learned, had an idea that there was any connection between the inland parts of Cheshire and Ireland. It is only comparatively lately that even well read Englishmen have been aware that the Danish rulers of Northumbria were also Kings in Dublin of a portion of Ireland, and passed through Cheshire every time they went from one of their kingdoms to another.

There are one or two matters of detail connected with these remarkable Sandbach stones to which reference must be made. The description given in Ormerod's "Cheshire" (ed. 1882, vol. iii, pp. 98, &c.), and that given in the fly sheet which is circulated in Sandbach itself, are not in all respects what could be desired. The portions remaining of the crosses are roughly 17 and 12 feet high.

The west side of the smaller cross has been in its main features a reproduction on a smaller scale of the east side of the larger. There is on both a figure which may represent our Lord, carrying a cross (with perhaps a fish across the stem) and having a bird at the left ear; on either side a smaller figure, one with a book, the other with an instrument, probably a key or a pair of keys,

presumably St. Peter and St. Paul. I do not know this particular form of key, which looks more like a pair of curling tongs than anything else, on any stone except these two and one at Halton near Lancaster. There is also on both a crucifixion, though on the smaller only the very top of the scene is left, a sun and moon, the heads of two of the evangelistic symbols, and the head of our Lord; the part below is erased, but there is room for the whole of the beautiful subject which is found on the larger cross. The north edge of the smaller is a reproduction of the north edge of the larger, still on a smaller scale of course, and in this case with a curious variation. The scene is evidently the descent of the Holy Ghost on the Apostles, and the great boldly conceived dragon with triple cloven tongue on the larger becomes two delicately designed dragons, with tongues gracefully woven into good patterns of interlacing work. The topmost figure shewn in Ormerod on the smaller cross exactly corresponds to the second figure on the larger; above it can be detected on the smaller, on careful examination of the stone itself, a figure bending over, exactly like the topmost figure on the larger. The fragments of the two heads of the crosses shew that the design has been the same in the two cases, viz., a human figure in each key of the cross contained within the circular head. The head of each figure has been towards the centre, so that the figure in the top key looks as if standing on its head. I only know of one other example of this, the very remarkable cross-head at Bilton, near Tadcaster, where all the four figures in the four keys are quite complete. There is one marked difference between the two crosses, viz., that the edges of the larger are plain cable-work, whereas the borders of the east and west faces of the smaller are ornamented with skilful and beautiful running patterns, figures of eight on a single band and double figures of eight on a double band. The only other pillar I know in England with this latter characteristic is one as yet undescribed by anyone, so far as I can discover, at Rothley in Leicestershire. The same pattern is found in the same position on the faces of a white marble well-head of the ninth century in the South Kensington Museum, brought from Mantua.

The interlacing work on the south side of the large

pillar is particularly good, a really good pattern of a good period. The birds and beasts in the scroll into which it develops are in some cases rude; it is a puzzling question whether they are of early rudeness or of late rudeness, but on the whole I would rather maintain the early view. The large dragons are throughout designed very skilfully, and the details of their organism, are admirable. We must hope some time or other to stumble upon some facts about the careful study of dragon-drawing, which undoubtedly was carried on among the Angles. Meanwhile we may content ourselves with remarking on the skill with which graceful curves and bold outlines and vigorous life are given to these great dragons, while side by side with them are human figures of a comparatively wooden description. I say comparatively wooden, because the Sandbach men are by no means so wooden as some that might be named.

Several sculptured fragments are placed round the stone platform on which these great monuments stand. On one of these certainly, and I think on two if not more, is an example of what I have called basket-work men in a paper read before the Society of Antiquaries, which is appearing in *Archæologia*. I discovered a number of basket-work men on the shafts at Checkley and Ilam in Staffordshire, a year or two ago; up to that time nothing of the kind had been suspected. There is one example in a MS., viz., in the "Irish Psalter" in the Library of St. John's College, Cambridge. In two or three other cases there is something of the kind in the pictures in pre-Norman MSS., but it seems probable that the intention is only to represent dresses made of striped material. I have discussed the meaning of these remarkable representations of the bodies of men composed entirely of interlacing bands, in the paper referred to; the published illustrations of the paper were not shewn to me, and they misrepresent the stones in some important particulars.

As to the date of these two crosses, the local belief is that they commemorate the conversion of the Prince of Mercia to Christianity, about 653. Considering the date indicated by one of the runic inscriptions on the Bewcastle cross, and the date now allowed for the runic inscriptions on the Ruthwell cross, there seems no reasonable

bar to the supposition that some great memorials of this kind were erected in Mercia in the lifetime of the first Christian King. But I must confess to a grave hesitation as to the subjects on these Sandbach crosses, and their treatment, being of that very early date. Still, each new piece of evidence which I have been able to collect on the general question of sculptured stones goes to make more certain the early as compared with the late view of their origin and date; and there are at least as great difficulties in the way of a post-Norman date, or a date between the ninth century and the Norman time, as there are in the way of an eighth century or perhaps even a seventh century date.

A very curious question is raised by the existence of these two great pillars, one considerably larger than the other, standing side by side. Those who know the N.E. part of Cheshire well, will know that in that part the same question is raised by the sockets of pairs of pillars, which are still to be found, and by one actual pair of pillars, socket and all, which remain just outside Lyme Park, and are known as the Bow Stones.¹ The Bow Stones have certainly been round pillars of the same character as those already described in this *précis*; they have each of them an ornamental fillet, and the indications of four ornamented faces. The pair of elaborate pillar heads, as they are now ascertained to be, at Lyme Hall itself, raise, perhaps, the same question; but they, like the Penrith pillars, may very probably have stood at the head and foot of some great Mercian's grave. I am inclined to think that this was once the case with the Sandbach crosses; if that was so, the Bow Stones, and the sockets for like pairs of stones found in Cheshire, are a problem to themselves. Various theories can be constructed on the subject, but no one view seems to me to stand out beyond all others as clearly the best; and I must leave unanswered the question suggested more than 3,000 years ago, "What mean these (pairs of) stones?"

¹ Earwaker's *East Cheshire*, ii, 285.