

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SCULPTURE

INTRODUCTION

The general documentary, archaeological and onomastic evidence for the region has been analysed by Gelling (1992), Higham (N. 1993b; 2004a), Kenyon (1991) and Thacker (1987; 2003). These studies can be supplemented by a recent archaeological resource assessment (Newman, R. M. 2006) and the detailed examinations of place-names by Dodgson (1970–97), Gelling (1995) and Fellows-Jensen (1985; 1997).

Though the pre-1974 counties of Cheshire and Lancashire figure in the title of this book, it is important to make clear that ‘Lancashire’ did not exist as a distinctive and separate entity in the Anglo-Saxon period; the present county was divided administratively between York and Cheshire before the Norman Conquest. By contrast, Cheshire did form a recognisable administrative region by the end of the pre-Norman era, and was probably a creation of Edward the Elder in the period 920–23 (Higham, N. 1993b, 115–19). First recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C) for 980 as *Legeceasterscir*, its northern boundary lay far into the southern area of modern Lancashire (Thacker 1987, 237; Gelling 1992, 141). In what follows the terms ‘Lancashire’ and ‘Cheshire’ are therefore used purely for ease of geographical reference and refer to the pre-1974 boundaries of those counties (see Table 1). Sculpture from those parts of Lancashire which formed ‘Lancashire North-of-the-Sands’ was published in the second volume of this Corpus series.¹

TOPOGRAPHY

The region covered by this volume comprises the lands south of Cumbria, between the central Pennines and the Peak District to the east and the Irish Sea to the west; the southern boundary, where Cheshire borders Wales, Staffordshire and Shropshire is topographically less well marked (see Higham, N. 2004a, figs. 2, 4, 6).

The coastline is heavily indented, with a series of wide estuaries flanked by extensive mudflats and marshes whilst broad tidal sands are exposed at low tides, notably around Morecambe Bay; sea levels may well have been higher within the pre-Norman period than they are now (Newman and Brennand 2007, 90). The uplands to the west are all visible from the coastal lowlands. Those bordering the Peak District in the south of the region rise to over 550m, and have few east–west breaks within them. Further north, the fells rise to over 600m and their western outliers reach far into central and southern Lancashire to form the Forests of Rossendale and Bowland. Here the rivers, running east–west, flow through deep, heavily eroded, valleys whose upper reaches provided major trade and communication routes across the Pennines.

Most of Cheshire forms part of a great plain which extends across the north-west Midlands; drained by the Dee and Weaver, it is broken by the loamy soils of the sandstone Central Cheshire Ridge. The Mersey Basin to the north is low-lying and poorly drained; its associated mosslands formed a prominent barrier in the Middle Ages. Free-draining soils suitable for agriculture are, indeed, at a premium throughout the region, particularly in Lancashire: a narrow central belt and parts of Lonsdale are virtually the only areas to offer extensive areas for cultivation. Elsewhere mossland, marsh and peat deposits, their growth encouraged by heavy rainfall, inhibited both settlement and travel.

THE ROMAN PERIOD

The Roman period saw the establishment of forts and associated civil settlements at sites like Chester, Middlewich, Northwich, Manchester, Castleshaw, Ribchester, Kirkham and Lancaster (for general summary see Philpott, R. 2006). Many of these were to experience a revived life in the Anglo-Saxon period.

1. Aldingham 1 and Urswick 1–2 (Bailey and Cramp 1988, 48–9, 148–51, fig. 1, ills. 21, 560–6, 568–9).

More significantly for later centuries, Roman rule also saw the construction of the major roads which linked those sites and their industrial and farming dependencies (Margary 1973; Petch 1987, 215–22; Kenyon 1991, fig. 2.5; Higham, N. 1993b, fig. 2.4; Buxton and Shotter 1996, fig. on 76). Essentially there were two main north–south routes: (a) from Chester to Lancaster, utilising King Street whose southern extension runs from Wilderspool to Middlewich and then on to Chesterton via Sandbach; (b) from Manchester along the western Pennine edge to the Lune valley. Crossing these were three important east–west routes. The first connected Chester to Manchester and then ran onward to Buxton or York, whilst a second linked the Ribble estuary and York, via the Aire valley; a third route also led to York from the Lune valley. In addition there were a number of local roads associated with these routes; no less than seven of them converge in the vicinity of Middlewich. These

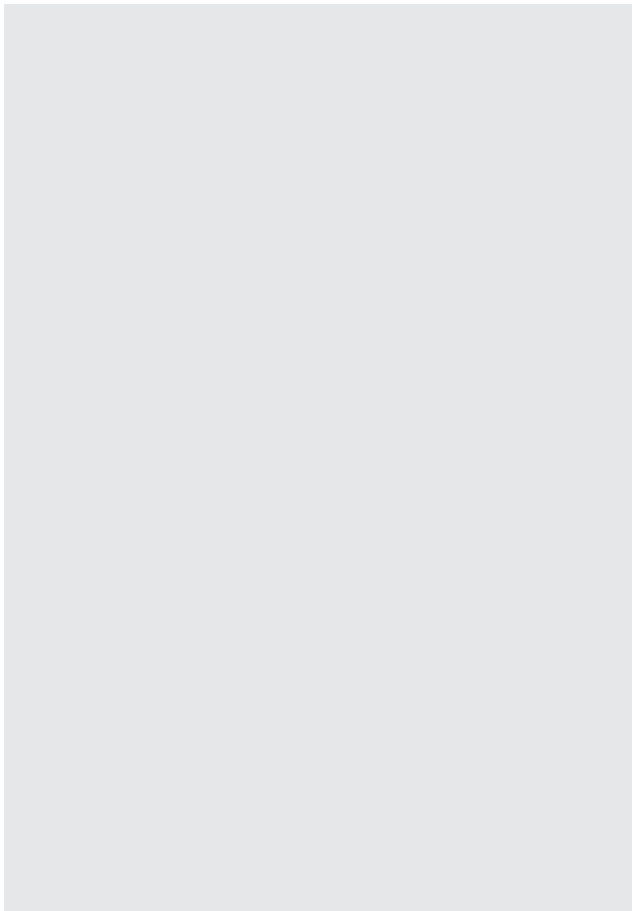


FIGURE 3
Roman roads in Cheshire and Lancashire (after Brennand 2006)

roads were to become key means of communication far into the Middle Ages, particular importance attaching to the link from Chester to York through Manchester and Slack, and the Ribble–Aire route further north.

ANGLO-SAXON SETTLEMENT

POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL BOUNDARIES AND AFFILIATIONS

There is little archaeological indication of the presence of an Anglo-Saxon culture, still less Anglo-Saxons, in this region before the seventh century. Two urns from Red Bank, Manchester and Ribchester (Myers 1969, 143; Edwards, B. 1973, 12–13; Holdsworth 1983), a bead from Hilbre Island, a small-long brooch from Irby/Heswell and a quoit brooch from Meols, provide the only seemingly unequivocal evidence (Thacker 1987, 244; Newman, R. M. 2006; Semple 2007, 377–8). Other finds which have been cited in the past, like a fragmentary inhumation burial at Withington, could be as late as the eighth century whilst the large timber structure at Tatton seems to belong to the sub-Roman period (Wilson, D. 1981; Higham and Cane 1999; Newman, R. M. 2006, 98). By the early seventh century, however, parts of the area were becoming familiar with some of the more aggressive aspects of Anglo-Saxon power: witness Æthelfrith's victory at the Battle of Chester and the subsequent slaughter of monks from Bangor on Dee in *c.* 616; skeletal material at Heronbridge may well represent the legacy of these events (Mason 2006). Slightly later, Edwin's subjugation of Anglesey and the Isle of Man suggests at least temporary Anglo-Saxon control of this region (Bede 1969, 140, 162, II.2, II.9; Thacker 1987, 239). Neither of these events, however, need imply a permanent presence or a lasting political domination to the west of the Pennines. Nevertheless, the place-name evidence (with a strong British element which contains late sound changes) suggests that the region *did* come under Anglo-Saxon control in the course of the first half of the seventh century (Dodgson 1967). The British element is more evident to the north of the Mersey, though — significantly perhaps from the point of view of the distribution of early sculpture — absent from the Lune valley (Fellows-Jensen 1985, 262; Kenyon 1991, 87; Higham, N. 2004a, 25). The early *ham* names, which are scattered along riverine and coastal locations in a belt from the Wirral to the Dane, the surroundings of Manchester and the low-lying area between the Ribble and the Lune, suggest land-taking

which inherited existing units of territorial management (Fellows-Jensen 1985, 265, 267–9; Thacker 1987, 242, 268; Kenyon 1991, 81–97; Higham, N. 1993b, 178–8). The long history of such estate structures in this region is supported by the fact that the *eccles* names, which are concentrated between the Mersey and Ribble, markedly coincide with the later Domesday hundreds (Thacker 1987, 239; Kenyon 1991, 95–6).

By the second half of the seventh century, the region covered in this Corpus was already divided in its political and ecclesiastical links. This is well exemplified by the two earliest surviving references to ecclesiastical land-grants and foundations in the area. Both are associated with St Wilfrid. The first is provided by the dedication ceremony of the church at Ripon in the 670s when the saint was granted lands to the west of the Pennines which ‘the British clergy had deserted when fleeing from the hostile sword wielded by the warriors of our own nation’ (Colgrave 1927, 36–7). Among these was *in regione Dunutinga*, which has been variously located as an estate centred on Ingleborough or on the river Dent (Jones, G. 1995, 29–30; Higham, M. 1999); a second grant *iuxta Rippel* clearly refers to land somewhere on the Ribble (Jones, G. 1995, 30, though see Sims-Williams 1988). At least parts of the north of the region, around the Ribble and Dent, were therefore linked across the Ribble/Aire gap to eastern Northumbria.

By contrast, though the Cheshire plain had experienced Northumbrian aggression in the early seventh century, it eventually was to become part of Mercia. This is signalled by the other early record, though one which has been transmitted through secondary sources. These refer to a lost work by Giraldus Cambrensis which claimed that the foundation of St John’s, Chester was the work of the Mercian king Æthelræd, fl. 674–704, in association with a ‘St Wilfric’, who presumably can be identified with St Wilfrid in the Mercian phase of his stormy career (Christie 1887, 11; Hawkins 1848, 86; Thacker 1982, 200–1; id. 2003, 16). Though a late record, there is no doubt that St John’s was subsequently an important secular college belonging to the bishop of Lichfield, with a dean and seven canons, all factors pointing to an early foundation (Higham, N. 1993b, 99; Thacker 1987, 268; see also Scull *et al.* 2006). The fact that the bishop of Lichfield had considerable land holdings in Cheshire before 1066 further strengthens the argument that this part of the region was administratively linked to the south from an early date (Thacker 1987, 269–73). Additional support for this southerly orientation is provided by the claims made by the *Tribal Hidage*, a ninth-century document using material which dates back to the seventh century, that Mercia included the group of

peoples called *Wreocensæte* (Featherstone 2001, 27, 31). Though its precise boundaries are uncertain, there is general scholarly agreement that this group occupied a region extending northwards into Cheshire (Davies and Vierck 1974, 230, 236; Hooke 1986; Higham, N. 1993b, 70–7; for a contrary view see Gelling 1992, 83–5).

The actual line of the boundary between Northumbria and Mercia in the pre-Viking period may well have varied at different dates in what has always been a frontier zone (Atkin 1997; Higham, N. 2004a). But the evidence suggests that it focussed on the Mersey (Higham, N. 2006, 412–17). This certainly was where a boundary was established by Æthelflæd of Mercia and Edward the Elder in the early years of the tenth century, as they responded to Scandinavian settlement in northern England by building a series of *burhs* which brought the Mersey and its crossings firmly under their control: Runcorn in 915, and Thelwall and Manchester in 919 (Griffiths 1995; id. 2001a). But these fortifications on the Mersey were probably only re-marking the long-standing boundary of Mercia and Northumbria. This broad marshy river, with extensive flanking peat mosses, had after all formed a frontier of provincial status in late Roman Britain (Higham, N. 1993b, 77). What is more it marks the northern boundary of distinctively Mercian place-names (Ekwall 1922, 230–1; Dodgson 1967, 13–15) and it divides a variety of forms of place-naming (Atkin 1997; Higham, N. 2006, 415–16). Significantly its name, derived from (*ge*)*mæ̅r ēa*, mans ‘boundary river’, and this is a rare English form among the river names of the area — and there is no reason to believe that it is a late coinage.

This conclusion is supported by a variety of forms of documentary evidence. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (D/E), for example, describes the 798 Battle of Whalley as taking place in Northumbria, not Mercia (Kirby 1965). More crucially, as nearer to the Mersey, the *Chronicle* (A), in describing the 919 fortification of Manchester, refers to the site as *Mameceaster on Norphymbrum*.

Most important of all is the testimony of the Domesday Survey. At first sight it seems to contradict claims for the Mersey being the line of the Mercian/Northumbrian divide because its organisation is based on an administrative division along the Ribble: Preston and the large area of Amounderness consequently form the southern extremity of western Northumbria, whose lands are assessed with the Yorkshire folios of the Domesday Book. Between the Ribble and the Mersey — *inter Ripam et Mersam* — was an area regarded as part of the Mercian earldom (Demarest 1923; Sawyer 1979, no. 1536; Atkin 1997, 10–11; Higham, N. 2004a, 36). The fact that the Ribble represents an *extended* boundary,

however, is reflected in additional notes and the foliation of the text. First, the Ribble–Mersey area is treated as an appendix to the Cheshire folios of the Survey and not as an integral part of Cheshire. And secondly, though lands to the south of the Ribble are assessed for taxation purposes into hides whilst lands to the north of the river are assessed in the Anglo–Scandinavian unit of carucates, yet a note at the end of the West Derby hundred implies that these (now) south Lancashire lands had previously been assessed in units similar to those used for northern Lancashire. The reign of Edward the Elder, after his 919 establishment of the *burh* at Manchester, is probably the period at which the Ribble/Mersey region was detached from Northumbria; the king may, indeed, have established a *burh* on the Ribble at Penwortham (Higham, N. 1992, 21, 28; id. 1993b, 114; id. 2004a, 36; id. 2006, 417). This secular control brought southern Lancashire into the diocese of Lichfield where it was to remain until the foundation of the see of Chester in 1541 (Higham, N. 1992, 28; id. 1993b, 114).

In summary, the Mersey was almost certainly the boundary between Mercia and Northumbria throughout the late seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. Within the Viking period the Ribble took on more significance as a frontier; it had probably earlier represented a significant boundary defining the southern extent of a pre-Viking land unit approximating to Amounderness — and was long to remain as a noticeable linguistic frontier (Ekwall 1922, 231–2; Kenyon 1991, 139; Higham, N. 1992, 21).

Beyond this general north–south binary division, the details of political control, patterns of land holdings and ecclesiastical provision in this region in the pre-Viking period are all difficult to establish, though there have been bold attempts to identify administrative units from later developments (Thacker 1987; Kenyon 1991; Higham, N. 1993b; id. 2002; Lewis and Pepler 2002).

THE VIKING SETTLEMENT

Until the last decade of the ninth century, Viking raids and settlement probably had little effect on the southern part of this economically-backward zone, though a charter of *c.* 855 referring to ‘pagans’ in the province of the ‘Wrekin-dwellers’ shows that it was not left untouched by events better chronicled to the east of the Pennines (Higham, N. 1992, 23). The 873–6 partition of Mercia, which eventually resulted in the emergence of the ‘Five Boroughs’ did not immediately impact on Cheshire: the region’s comparative immunity from disturbance at this

time is suggested by the later chronicler’s belief that St Werburgh’s remains were translated to Chester from Hanbury in the 870s (Higham, N. 1993b, 105; Thacker 1987, 251–2; though see Thacker 2003, 19, claiming that this is more likely to be dated to 907). Initially, until 877, this area of the north-west came under the control of a Mercian puppet king called Ceolwulf, but by 883 Alfred of Wessex was ruling through his brother-in-law, ealdorman Æthelræd. The latter had campaigned in the Conway in 881, which must imply a continued — or revived — Mercian grip on the Dee estuary area (Higham, N. 1993b, 106) and in the later years of the ninth century Chester was showing signs of urban expansion (Higham, N. 1993b, 106; Thacker 1987, 250; id. 1982, 200; id. 2003). In 893, however, a Scandinavian expedition organised from a base in Essex seized the city, which seems to have been temporarily deserted, and remained there over the winter before going into Wales and finally returning home via Northumbria (Thacker 1987, 249; Higham, N. 1992, 24). This occupation marks the beginning of three decades of increasing Viking disruption and settlement for the whole region.

The threat came from two directions. On the one hand Danish penetration from the east of the Pennines is attested by place-names in eastern Cheshire, as well as down the Lune, Calder and Ribble valleys (Thacker 1987, 259; Higham, M. 1995, 197; Fellows-Jensen 1985, 288, 411; id. 1986, 633–4; id. 1992, 40; id. 1997, 79, 91). From the opposite direction came raids and settlement by Hiberno-Norse groups from around the Irish Sea. The consequent disruption is reflected in the Ingimund story discussed below and by a cluster of hoards: Cuedale, *c.* 905; Harkirke, *c.* 910; ‘Lancashire’, *c.* 915; Chester, *c.* 915–918; Carnforth, *c.* 920; and the early-tenth-century Huxley hoard (for summaries see: Graham-Campbell 2001a; Newman, R. M. 2006, 112–13, fig. 4.21).

The best documented Scandinavian settlement in the area involved Hiberno-Norse groups from the west and a land grant in the Wirral to Ingimund, expelled from Dublin in 902, who afterwards was involved in an unsuccessful attempt to take over Chester (Wainwright 1948; Dodgson 1957; Thacker 1987, 249, 254–7; Fellows-Jensen 1983; id. 1985, 266–73; id. 1997). This initially consensual land-transfer seems to have resulted in a distinctive jurisdiction within the northern Wirral, whose legacy can be seen in both place-names and the later post-Conquest pattern of land tenure (Dodgson 1957, 310–12; id. 1972; Thacker 1987, 256; Harding 2007; Coates forthcoming).

It is this Ingimund narrative which has often been invoked as the explanation for the Anglo-Saxon building programme of fortified *burhs* along the Mersey and Dee mentioned above, beginning with Chester in 907. Griffiths (2001a, 180) has, however, recently argued that an Æthelflæd/Edward policy of expansion — rather than Viking containment — and consequent problems with Northumbria and the Welsh, were equally relevant motivations. As we have seen, this programme was subsequently extended by Edward the Elder to Thelwall and Manchester in 919, possibly as a response to the Hiberno-Norse re-capture of Dublin in 917 and its political union with York in 919. It was probably as part of this last phase of fortification that the West Saxon dynasty extended its boundary to include those lands between the Mersey and Ribble in the take-over discussed above (Thacker 1987, 252; Higham, N. 1992, 28; id. 2004a, 36).

The situation north of the Ribble is not well documented. Higham (N. 1992, 24) has argued that the area was already under Scandinavian control by 893. He has further suggested that Agmundr the ‘Hold’, killed at Wednesfield in 910/11, was the same Agmund whose name survives in Amounderness and that he had been given responsibility by the York Vikings as their lord in central Lancashire (see also Fellows-Jensen 1989 and 1992, 40, for a slightly different interpretation). More certainly, the Cuerdale hoard, deposited in 905, implies that the Ribble had early acquired a vital role in the Hiberno-Norse axis between Dublin and York which so dominated northern politics for the first two decades of the tenth century (Graham-Campbell 1987; id. 1992). Amounderness was later purchased by Æthelstan *a paganis* in c. 934 and granted to the archbishops of York, thus restoring its earlier ecclesiastical jurisdiction from a centre to the east of the Pennines (Sawyer 1968, no. 407; Whitelock 1955, 505; Kenyon 1991, 112–14).

Throughout the rest of the tenth century, sites in this frontier region were the scenes of crucial encounters: there was seemingly a revolt of Mercians and Welsh against Edward the Elder centred on Chester in 924 (Higham, N. 1993b, 119); the Battle of Brunanburgh was almost certainly fought on Wirral in 937 (Dodgson 1957; Cavill *et al.* 2004); King Edgar received the submission of the British kings at Chester in 972, whilst a raid on the city in 980 heralded the Second Viking Age and may have precipitated the sudden decline of the Chester mint (Dolley and Pirie 1964; Higham, N. 1993b, 182; Thacker 1987, 261–2; id. 2003, 22).

THE ORIGINS, DISTRIBUTION AND DENSITY OF VIKING SETTLEMENT

Both the extent and the make-up of the Scandinavian settlement in this region have been much debated in recent years. Unfortunately, documentary record is slight and the archaeological evidence is not very enlightening on this issue (Edwards, B. 1992; id. 1998; Hadley 2001), whilst conclusions drawn from studies of place-names have proved highly controversial. As a result there are at least two models of settlement available. On the one hand there is the ‘minimalist view’, advocated by Higham, which argues that settlement from the west was limited to the Wirral and an adjacent area on both banks of the Mersey estuary, together with an arc of sites within 12 miles (20 km) of the coast, only extending inland in the Lune and Ribble valleys (Higham, N. 1993b, 107–10; id. 2004a, 31–5, fig. 14; id. 2004b). By contrast other place-names scholars such as Gelling and Fellows-Jensen, in more detailed studies, have taken a less restrictive view (Gelling 1992, 132–4; id. 1995; Fellows-Jensen 1983; id. 1985, 48–50; id. 1992; id. 1997). Whatever their numbers (and whilst acknowledging the presence of Danes from Yorkshire and a wider variety of origins than previously recognised) all commentators are, however, agreed that the bulk of the settlers in Lancashire and Cheshire came from the west and were predominantly Norwegians whose linguistic forms had been affected by varieties of Goidelic, though whether that admixture occurred in western Scotland, Man or Ireland is still in dispute.

The Ribble marks the southern boundary of names which betray typically Norwegian linguistic features (Fellows-Jensen 1985, 365; id. 1992, 40). As far as the modern county of Cheshire is concerned there is a consensus that, outside of the Wirral, together with the area adjacent to Helsby and Whitby — and Chester itself — there is little trace of Scandinavian presence apart from some Danish penetration in the north-east of the county (Gelling 1992, 134; id. 1995; Thacker 1987, 254–9; Fellows-Jensen 1985, 366–73; id. 1992, 39; id. 1997). The southern area of modern Lancashire also shows little trace of such settlement either, apart from the north bank of the Mersey immediately adjacent to the Wirral where the Scandinavian-named (West) Derby hundred contains a cluster of names (Gelling 1995, 189, 193–4; Griffiths 2004, 136). Though this Wirral/Mersey group of names is often associated with Ingimund’s recorded settlement, Fellows-Jensen’s detailed analysis shows a strong Manx-derived element in its nomenclature (Fellows-Jensen 1983; id. 1985, 48–50; id. 1992).