



Rosemary Cramp

On celebrating the stone sculpture of the Anglo-Saxons

Rosemary Cramp is Professor of Archaeology Emeritus at Durham University. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2006.

Is there anything in your background that would have suggested you would pursue a career in archaeology?

I come from a very deeply rooted farming background. My father was a farmer, my grandfather was a farmer, my great-grandfather was a farmer, and so on. I lived in the country at a place called Glooston, near Market Harborough in Leicestershire.

When I was about 12, I became an archaeologist – or I thought I did – because we found a Roman villa on our land. To be strictly truthful, my sister said she had found some nice things for the floor of the little house which we were building, as children do in the country. She had found the *pilae* tiles of a Roman building. At least I thought it ought to be Roman. I only had a children's encyclopaedia, and I looked it up there. Then I went to see the rector, as the most learned person in the village. Like most rectors, he took away part of the Roman things and put them in his garden.

I thought I ought to report this find to somebody else.

The only archaeologist I had ever heard of was Kathleen Kenyon, who had been digging in Leicester. She sent me back the first typewritten letter I had ever received, saying, 'This is evidence, and you must not destroy it. You must stop what you're doing, report it to a museum and leave it for the moment.'

So we dispensed with the rector, and the site lay fallow until I was about to go to Oxford University. Then an aged man came, saying he was a real archaeologist – he had dug with Mortimer Wheeler. We dug another wavering trench into the site, and found more wall. And this was reported in the *Market Harborough Advertiser*.

When I got to Oxford, I received a note from the Ashmolean Museum saying, 'Dear Miss Cramp, Will you come and visit me? M.V. Taylor.' I thought, 'Now, I am an archaeologist.' Miss Taylor had been assistant to F.J. Haverfield, and was now an elderly woman. When I went to see her, I saw to my slight embarrassment the *Market Harborough Advertiser* spread in front of her, with this picture of me leaning on a spade and the caption: 'She is going to Oxford.' Miss Taylor said, 'You think you

have found a Roman villa. What makes you think it is a villa?’ I didn’t know there was anything except Roman villas, so she destroyed that thought. She asked if I had been taught to survey? No. Could I draw sections? No. She went through everything an archaeologist ought to be able to do, and then said, ‘I think you had better be trained.’

So I went on a training course to Corbridge, and spent all my leisure time with the Oxford University Archaeological Society. We had a brilliant Society at that time, with many people involved in it going on to be professional archaeologists.

But your degree wasn’t in archaeology, was it?

I hadn’t known whether to read History or English at Oxford – I liked both – and in the end had plumped for English. At the end of my first year, I was taught by Dorothy Whitelock. She told me I should specialise in ‘Course II’, which ranged from primitive Germanic to Spenser. And when I was 21, I turned from being a disorganised undergraduate to being a disorganised young don, teaching Anglo-Saxon at St Anne’s College, Oxford.

I realised that my interest in archaeology and my interest in Anglo-Saxon were coming together. I taught my students a lot about the historical background and the archaeological evidence. In those days, there weren’t many people bringing those two together. And then, working with Christopher Hawkes, I started a B.Litt.

thesis which had the catchy title ‘Some aspects of Old English vocabulary in the light of recent archaeological evidence’. My first paper, on ‘Beowulf and Archaeology’, came out of that.

How did you come to move to Durham University?

A rather strange job came up in Durham. It required you to be able to teach History, English and a fledgling Archaeology group. On Christopher Hawkes’s advice, I applied rather half-heartedly, got it, and a bit reluctantly came north.

After a few years, we started an Archaeology course on its own, and then broadened that into what became, I’d like to think, a great Archaeology department.

You have been at Durham ever since. And it is an area rich with Anglo-Saxon possibilities.

It was certainly a great thrill living so near to where Bede was, and Durham itself is a town that is steeped in Anglo-Saxon history. I have stayed and been very happy here.

I was extremely lucky to have fall into my lap the excavations at both sites of the double monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow. Although at both Monkwearmouth and Jarrow there are still the churches that date – in part, anyway – from the 7th century, there



Part of an early 8th-century frieze showing a plant-scroll inhabited by men and a beast, built into a wall in the church of St Paul, Jarrow. A male figure is shown in profile, naturalistically striding over the branches, and appears to be bare-footed. His hair falls in a lock behind his ear. His features are conveyed lightly, his eye by a single punch mark. He is dressed in a short kirtle with what seems to be a fold around the waist which passes over his shoulder and flies out behind him.

*Photo: T. Middlemass,
© Corpus of Anglo-Saxon
Stone Sculpture.*



is nothing left of the monastic buildings on either site. Indeed, no one knew where they were. We know a certain amount from Bede about the Monkwearmouth-Jarrow monastic community, and people used to say to me, 'It must be nice for you digging a site that Bede has talked about'; but he tells you nothing about how it was laid out.

At Monkwearmouth, they were doing a development and were going to pull down houses near to the church. Somebody said that perhaps we ought to see if there was anything left of the monastery of the Venerable Bede. When I worked on the south side of the church, the houses were still occupied, and I was digging in people's backyards; it was sometimes difficult to get access to them, but eventually you were nobody unless you had a trench in your yard. We recruited small children to look after the trenches at night. As a reward they were allowed to trowel through the barrows of excavated soil to see if any bit of pot had been missed and tipped in with it; sometimes they found them. And when they had done three years of that, I had a special trench in which they could learn how to trowel properly. I have always involved the local communities in my digs. You can show them the past and make them enthused about it, part of it and willing to protect it, all of which is important.

I did find buildings that were the heartland of the monastery. However, I had not finished Wearmouth when I started Jarrow and, for two or three years, I dug both at the same time in the summer, which probably was not a sensible thing to do.

Left

A stone grave-marker, dating from the early to mid 11th century, from the Old Minster, Winchester. It was discovered in the archaeological excavation north of Winchester Cathedral, in 1965. The arcade may be a representation of the building around the Tomb of Christ in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The lamp hanging in the central arch between curtains, and with rays shining from it, may symbolize the resurrection and eternal life.

Photo: © P.M.J. Crook.

At Jarrow, the Ministry of Works had restored the existing buildings and made them safe, and then wanted to date them. That was all I was asked to do. I started with a couple of trial trenches. And then the next year – in 1965 – I dug inside a building and found, underneath the walls, another stone structure and one with an *opus signinum* floor, which I knew would be Anglo-Saxon. Nothing stopped me after that. I dropped the idea of just dating the standing buildings, and went for trying to find the plan of the monastery.

Over the years, we dug a huge building there – it was 90 feet long. The last dig we did at Jarrow being in 1984: it was a large part of my life, and hundreds of students went through this experience.

That same year, 1984, saw the first fruit of the major endeavour that you have been working on ever since, the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, which is a British Academy Research Project.

The idea of recording the pre-Conquest stone sculpture of England came up when I was still teaching in Oxford. V.E. Nash-Williams had just published his book on *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*, and he came to lecture in Oxford. He said, 'Something like that needs to be done for England. You should try it.' As soon as I got to Durham, I looked around for a research project that would be suitable. We do have in this region an extensive collection of carved Anglo-Saxon stones, and I decided that – with the help of my first two research students, Richard Bailey and Jim Lang – we would try to record these.

In my hubris, I thought that I should do the whole of England, so I went to the British Academy and asked for money. We got some starter funding, and from that period onwards the British Academy has supported us. I am desperately grateful because, without the Academy's support, the project would never have lifted off.

The three of us made a start – myself on the counties of Durham and Northumberland, Richard Bailey on Cumbria, and Jim Lang on the East Riding of Yorkshire. South-East England, including Professor Martin Biddle's excavations at Winchester, was completed. We recruited other authors from both the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments and English Heritage. But everything was controlled from Durham, with myself as General Editor, and with first Eric Cambridge and then Derek Craig as the publication editors.

In 2018 we published Volume XIII, on the Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture of *Derbyshire and Staffordshire*. At the moment I am working to finish Volume XIV, which will include Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. We will then have completed Northumbria, Wessex and

Mercia. For the final two volumes in the series, we move into East Anglia, where there isn't a lot of sculpture, I'm afraid. But the series wasn't meant just to publish the grand pieces which everybody knew about. It publishes the small pieces which contribute to building up the overall picture.

Has the *Corpus* project identified a lot of previously unknown sculpture?

In the late 19th century, they were aware of about 167 sites containing Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture. Sir Thomas Kendrick FBA found some more, working for the Britain Museum. But to date we have recorded 3,528 stones from 1,101 sites – an extraordinary wealth of material.

We first look at written records, to see if we can find things that have been written up long ago and forgotten. Then there is fieldwork, which usually takes many years for each volume. In some areas, every medieval church has been looked at, to make absolutely certain nothing has been missed. It has been a remarkable effort by my colleagues, because they are only paid their travel expenses, and they normally give up their holidays. Once the project is known, people do ring you up and ask, 'Do you know about this?' And this can be very helpful. We also answer a lot of queries from the curators of sculpture sites.

The sad thing is that a lot of this sculpture is in a secondary context. After the Norman Conquest, because the Normans – so miserably, I think – despised Anglo-Saxon architecture, pieces were built into walls and they have emerged later. At the Reformation, a lot were destroyed, as Popish monuments. So, many sculptures are shattered fragments. This contrasts with Ireland, where so many crosses are still standing in their place.

Is the stone cross a special British and Irish phenomenon?

It is. Where it began in stone is a moot point. I still think it probably is Northumbria. I put this forward as a theory and I still believe it: when people like Benedict Biscop at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, or Wilfrid at Hexham, imported stonemasons from France to build their churches, these trained English masons. The native masons were then capable of replicating the idea of wooden crosses in stone, and that is how you get some of the really grand, early 8th-century crosses that everybody knows about, like Ruthwell and Bewcastle. The grandest crosses tend to be put up on the borders of the Anglo Saxon kingdom – the early ones are meant to impress. Some of them are meant to educate as well, via



the scenes that are on them. They are the source not just of sermons but of inspiration, I suppose, and meditation.

By the Viking Age, you get many more crosses merely put up in memory of individual people, and here you get pictures of secular figures, sometimes armed, not only Christ or the Apostles.

What is particularly striking about the sculpture of Anglo-Saxon England?

It is a sign of achievement if you look at Europe as a whole. My Italian friends are absolutely amazed by Anglo-Saxon sculpture. In Italy and in parts of France, professional carvers carried on working after the Roman period, and they kept on turning out the same stuff. But in England there is a real break, and a true vernacular in stone carving develops, producing a much greater variety.

We can also see influences from one English kingdom to another, depending on which was in the ascendant. In its heyday, Northumbria influenced areas right down into northern Mercia. When Wessex became the dominant kingdom at the end of the period, in the Midlands you can see something changing and becoming more Wessex-like or using Wessex imagery. So you can see it as an influential art.

There are also interesting links between the iconography in the sculpture and that used in manuscripts and metalwork.

Can you detect different schools or even hands?

I wish one could. Sometimes you can detect particular hands. Only the other day I was thinking that two pieces which are located very near to each other must be by the same person.

But we are still not absolutely certain where the carvers were. There is no doubt that, to begin with, they were in monasteries. Whether the kings later had their own carvers is something that I think still has to be thought about, and probably will never be proved. Certainly by the 10th or 11th centuries, you seem to have carvers who were itinerant and were doing lesser work, turning out monuments for parvenu Vikings who wanted new memorials.

To what extent is the *Corpus* producing a permanent record of sculpture that is at risk?

It is an unfortunate fact today that items in churches seem to be much more at risk than they were. And there have been cases – just a few – where things have gone. When I first began the work with sculpture, I started looking down in the South West and worked my way northwards. When I came back to writing my *Corpus* volume on South-West England, I was looking at places that I had visited many years before and, in several places, pieces had gone and my photograph of what had been there before was the only thing I could include.

You can also have the situation where a church has a leaking roof, a diminished congregation and a huge debt, and it is tempting to sell the sculpture. This is rare, but I have had to try to stop it in a couple of places. There are at least two pieces of sculpture which are still at risk in England now.

At least the *Corpus* is making a record of it all. Of course, that does draw attention to things, but I think that is a lesser evil. We do get a lot of enquiries from the general public. And we help churches to produce displays that show their stones off well. That makes them value them more.

The *Corpus* is heading for completion, with just three volumes left to be published. But a lot of the content is also available online.

The printed books remain important, quite apart from the fact that I think they are rather beautiful objects in themselves. There is still a convenience in flicking through a book to find a comparable image.

But the catalogue photographs and descriptions of the first nine volumes are all now available online. This

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A stone cross, dating from the first half of the 9th-century, in St Paul's churchyard, Irton, Cumbria.

Photo: T. Middlemass, © *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*.



is particularly useful for students abroad, who use the material extensively.

At the end of the project, we will deposit the *Corpus* records with the Archaeology Data Service. But we will keep copies in Durham University Library, so that they will remain accessible for people to do further work on them in the future.

And we will conclude with a programme of workshops, organised by the Co-Director of the project, Professor Sarah Semple, which will show the world what we have done, and sum up the achievement.

Have you enjoyed your life in archaeology?

Yes, I have – and I still am enjoying it.

My life wasn't anything planned. It emerged in the shape that it did. When I first went to Oxford, I would not have thought I would finish up as a professor in Durham. But here I have been able to have an input into all sorts of things in the region, and that is one of the nice things about a university like Durham.

Perhaps because I was the first female professor of archaeology – happily there are now plenty of them – I was asked to serve on lots of committees, and I did get an enormous education out of that. For over 25 years I was on the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, which was very enjoyable. I was a Trustee of the British Museum for 20 years, and that was fascinating too. I was also one of the first Commissioners for English Heritage. And I served as President of both the Council for British Archaeology, and later the Society of Antiquaries.

Finally, I am glad that Anglo-Saxon England is seen as what it is: the beginning of everything that was English. So much of our laws and our statutes started there. Our parishes and our settlement patterns were laid down then. And in spite of the Norman Conquest, vigorously and rigorously people continued to speak and write in English, and maintained what had been some of the earliest vernacular literature in Europe.

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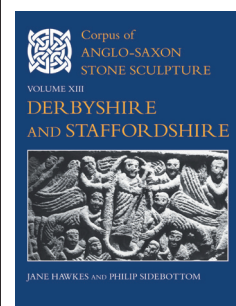
The so-called Hedda stone, in Peterborough Cathedral, is from the late eighth or early ninth century, probably from the earlier Anglo-Saxon monastery. On this face are represented Christ, the Virgin and four other figures.

Photo: © Joanna Story.

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Further reading

Information about the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* can be found via ascorpus.ac.uk



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