

Annual Sue Margeson Memorial Lecture, Saturday 1 March 2014

by Professor Howard Williams of the University of Chester ; speaking about Anglo-Scandinavian iconography with a presentation entitled ***Valorising Viking Valhalla? Rethinking the Hogback Tombs.***

Prof. Williams explained that his lecture concerned Viking-Age commemorative practices but not necessarily in Norfolk. Hogback stones were mainly tenth-century northern British monuments associated with the funerals of elites during the tenth century AD.

In order to provide a context for understanding these intriguing monuments, Professor Williams sketched a range of burial practices from Viking Scandinavia in which the dead were afforded substantial architectural spaces, including chamber-graves and chambers within boat-graves. This suggested that the graves were created residences for the dead and installed as memorable landmarks in the landscape.

Against this Norse background, the hogback monuments of northern England and southern Scotland were introduced. James T. Lang, in his publication "The Hogback. A Viking Colonial Monument", *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 3 (1984), showed that a huge variety existed in and they were not a coherent artefact. Still, the implied sense of architecture as a space for the dead to 'reside' in the grave, is a connecting theme for these monuments.



These recumbent monuments, generally have a curved ('hogbacked') ridge, often with outwardly curved sides and decorated 'shingles' on either side of the central ridge. They often have end-beasts, serpentine beasts of muzzled bears or serpentine end-beasts. They are thought to be stylised 'houses' for the dead.

In St. Thomas Church Brompton, Yorkshire.

They have a tight distribution mainly in Cumbria, Lancashire, and North Yorkshire but few exist in Northumbria, Lincolnshire and the Midlands. There are also a series of Scottish monuments focusing on the Clyde. Disappointingly none have been found in Norfolk or anywhere else in East Anglia.

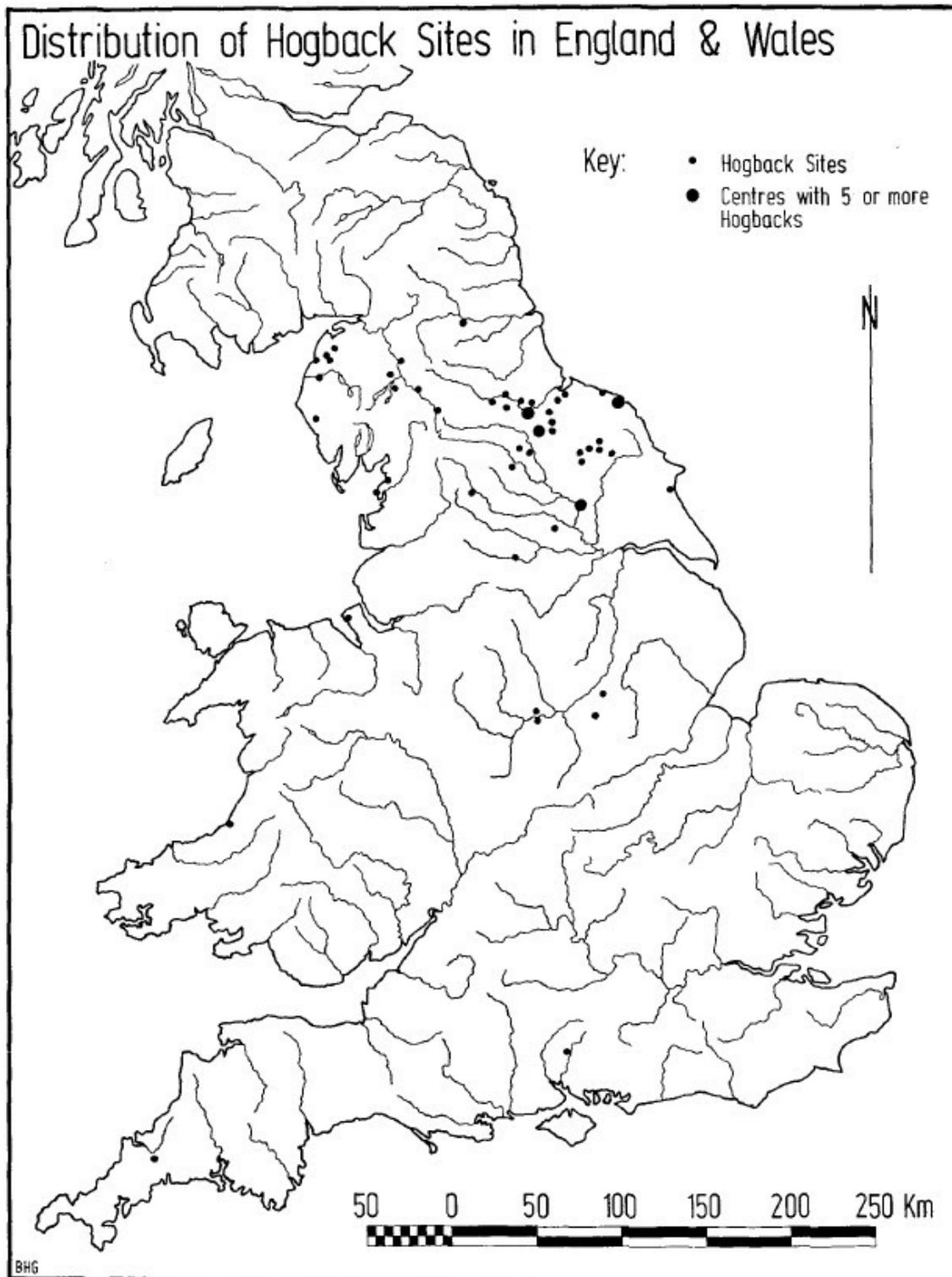


FIG 1

Professor Williams argued that interpreting hogbacks as marks of Norse settlement is unsatisfactory; some areas of probable Norse settlement have no hogbacks and few hogbacks are overtly 'Norse' in their design. Professor Williams showed photos of different types particularly those of the famous Brompton collection. The end-beast is an abstract decoration whilst the centre is the roof of a hall, mimicking the design of the traditional Viking-Age longhouse.



The Hogback tombstone, St Peter's Church, Heysham (left), found in the churchyard, is a Viking stone of the 10th century. This side depicts, in 'strip cartoon' form, the story of Sigmund and his escape from wolves. Lowther, Gosforth, and Sockburn hogback stones, are also decorated with Norse mythological scenes and symbols running along the side, some of them quite obscure in meaning. Yet these are the minority, and the decoration of most need not be exclusively 'Norse'.

Hogback stones are thought to be grave markers but no hogback has been found in association with a grave. Assuming they were mortuary monuments, Professor Williams questioned whether the hall idea is an adequate explanation of the bow-shaped roof and walls. Shrine-tombs, halls, churches, boat-houses may have all provided architectural inspirations. Meanwhile, the Middle Anglo-Saxon chest burials at Ripon are but one manifestation of the idea of inhabited space in the grave that was already established prior to the Viking Age. The tombs of saints were another; and indeed, hogbacks might be seen as secular transfer of the shrines already being constructed over the graves of the very special Christian dead. In this sense, hogbacks cited elite pagan Norse death-ways and elite Christian mortuary commemoration simultaneously.

One key idea pursued by Professor Williams is that hogbacks may have been skeuomorphs of permeable spaces. The hogback known as the Saint's Tomb at Gosforth, Cumbria might represent a tent or canopy, and the same might apply for the possible representations of ropes and drapery on the Brompton hogbacks. The side niches could be entries for access – a portal into the tomb. Thus we have a solid space with a protective covering – implying access to the dead who are locked in but capable of coming out through the solid stone.

Professor Williams felt we need to stop looking at hogbacks in isolation. They drew their inspiration from a range of artefacts, materials and architectures familiar to both the Norse and the Insular worlds, and straddling both sacred and secular spheres. He suggested that this mutivocality might explain the striking adoption of this eclectic but striking form of mortuary monument in areas of Norse settlement and influence. In summary, he argued that:

1. Hogbacks don't represent just halls but a wider set of artefacts. They are innovative but make most sense when set against a backdrop of a network of beastly buildings found in architecture and artifacts in both the Viking and insular worlds
2. Hogbacks served as residences for the elite dead as with animal guardians.
3. Their power derived from their form giving the allusion of solid, inaccessible spaces existing within the stone; they served as perishable membranes in stone.

4. This suggests that the dead were regarded as an active force in memory; affording power, authority and lordship.

5. They were not tombs built in isolation: at sites where a number are found, they together served to create a genealogy in stone and thus honouring particular lineages within Viking-Age northern Britain.

The President, Helen Paterson, thanked Professor William for an intriguing talk and invited comments and questions from the large audience of seventy-five people. Suggestions were made as to the diamond pattern on the Saint's Tomb from Gosforth being similar to fishing nets; the scenes of animals being similar to those found on Saxon fonts and whether hogbacks were fashioned locally or imported from elsewhere. Mention was made of David Stocker's view that hogbacks result from a distinctive, hybrid, religion practised by the Scandinavians which was characterised by incorporating Christian figures into Norse paganism. Professor Williams was sceptical about the Trent Valley monuments being true hogbacks, and thought those at West Kirby, Cheshire, may have come from Lancashire or North Wales.

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