

Northumbria in Stone: Material Evidence and Tenth Century Politics

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The dominant narrative surrounding the history of Anglo-Saxon England features the House of Wessex as the primary catalyst in the formation of an English state. Northumbria, on the other hand, usually plays the obstacle to such unity. In these works Alfred the Great, and the Wessex kings put the disparate English kingdoms, in the ninth and tenth century, on the path to unification through retaining independence, reforming royal administration, and town planning. Thus winning the game of chess played in Northumbria against various rival kings of Viking descent. Sir Frank Stenton declared that King Alfred of Wessex's ability to defend and expand his dominion in the face of Viking invasion was "the achievement of a new stage in the advance of the English peoples," and "expressed a feeling that he stood for the interests common to the whole English race."¹ Whereas the feats of Alfred's progeny illuminate our knowledge of Wessex, our understanding of Northumbria is comparatively fragmented. The reason for this north-south disparity is due to the fact that the only surviving records were produced by ecclesiastical writers who were indelibly linked to the Wessex monarchs.

Our primary guide to tenth century England is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a series of copied texts that survive in a handful of different forms, each with its own particular interests and caveats. These documents are largely concerned with events happening within Wessex and occasionally mention important events elsewhere. Many questions surrounding the Northumbrian kingdom, however, are left unanswered. For example, an entry for 941 devotes a few sentences to the death of King Aethelstan of Wessex and announces his heir and ends with a final sentence: "This year the Northumbrians abandoned their allegiance, and chose Anlaf of Ireland for their king."² Such a remark raises a number of questions concerning the political and cultural makeup of tenth century Northumbria. To further complicate matters, chronicle writers refer to the inhabitants of Northumbria as Northumbrians as well as Danes, often interchangeably.³ Anlaf, whose

¹ Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 259.

² James Ingram, trans. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Lmtd, 1938), 217.

³ Clare Downham, "Hiberno-Norwegians' and 'Anglo-Danes': Anachronistic Ethnicities and Viking Age England," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 19 (2009): 145.

name corresponds to the Norse Olaf, was a prominent leader of the Norse-Gaels of Dublin. Did a clear ethnic distinction exist between Danish Vikings inhabiting Northumbria prior to Anlaf's arrival and newcomers from Dublin's Norse-Gael population? What was Anlaf's relationship to the Northumbrians that they would willingly choose him as king? Finally, how does this convoluted episode of Northumbrian-Viking relations fit into the bigger picture of English unification? This paper will illustrate how different forms of evidence provide disparate answers regarding the political situation in tenth century Northumbria. The results from such an exploration point towards the existence of a particular hybrid culture developing in northern England and practiced by individuals throughout the British Isles for much of the tenth century leading to the Norman Conquest. While combining Scandinavian, Celtic, and traditional Anglian sensibilities, the political culture was essentially Northumbrian.

The great distance between tenth century Northumbria and the present is often accentuated when looking at the fate of individual pieces of evidence. In 1870 at All Saints Church in Kirkby Hill, fragments of a peculiar stone sculpture were found in a nave. This stone, probably part of a cross originally, contained an L-shaped ribbon dragon whose body is pierced by a sword. By comparing this iconography to other found works, art historians can deduce that this work was commissioned sometime in the tenth century. The knots of the dragon's torso can be seen in similar carvings found at York Minster; in Buskerud, Norway; as well as on a Viking-Age axe in Russia. On the Russian example, the sword is shown in the exact same manner, without the appearance of a hand.⁴ The Kirkby Hill stone depicts a popular scene that appears in a number of Scandinavian inspired works of art throughout Europe: the Viking and Old Germanic hero *Sigurðr* slaying the dragon *Fáfnir*. This stone was clearly reused and its original purpose remains unclear. To complicate matters, it currently only survives in the form of drawings as the piece has been missing since 1974!⁵ Regardless of its original form, however, this stone was probably commissioned by a secular leader to be used as a graveyard monument. There exists a tremendous amount of similar sculpture found throughout the churchyards of northern England. Some carvings display Christian iconography, while others display secular images of hunting and warfare. A few, like the Kirkby Hill

⁴ James Lang, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture: Vol. VI Northern Yorkshire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),133.

⁵ Lang, *Corpus*, 133.

stone, undoubtedly point to a pagan influence. The patron of this stone was a man of wealth and status, and leads inevitably to the question of what sort of meaning would a funeral stone showcasing a Viking hero hold for tenth-century Northumbrians?

Stone funerary sculpture suggests a Viking presence that is already accounted for in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Revealing patterns emerge when looking at carvings, such as the missing Kirkby Hill stone, within the greater context of sculpture production in tenth century Northumbria. Compared to the preceding Anglian period, sculpture finds in the Viking Age double and the total number of carvings increase by a factor of five.⁶ Many of these Northumbrian carvings contain the warrior iconography utilized in the Kirkby Hill stone; others display zoomorphic carvings and themes that were popular in Denmark and Norway. The most popular form of monument, however, remained the free-standing cross.⁷ Interestingly, the ring- and plate-headed cross, which was very popular in tenth-century Northumbria, ultimately hails from Celtic derivation.⁸ It is also important to remember that while Irish and Scandinavian art styles influenced large numbers of stone sculptures produced in tenth century Northumbria, very traditional Anglian motifs and iconographies were used throughout the period, sometimes in tandem with Irish and Scandinavian tastes.

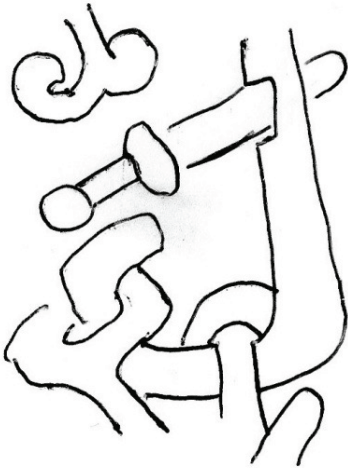


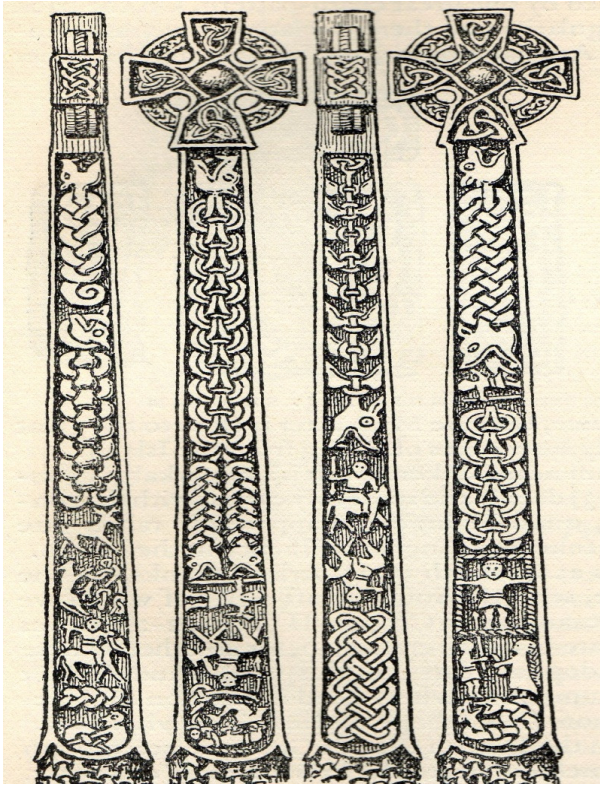
Figure 1. Sigurd̄r pierces a dragon as depicted on a stone in Kirkby Hill, North Yorkshire.

Drawing based on Richard N. Bailey (1980). Redrawn by Shawn Hale.

⁶ Richard Bailey. "The Chronology of Viking Age Sculpture in Northumbria," in *Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Art in its Context*, edited by James Lang. (Oxford: BAR, 1979), 174.

⁷ James Lang, *Anglo-Saxon Sculpture*. (Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire: Shire Archaeology, 1988), 9.

⁸ Lang, *Corpus*, 26.



*Figure 2. Ring-headed cross at Gosforth, Cumbria, containing both Christian and pagan iconography.
Drawing by W. G. Collingwood, 1927.*

In terms of innovation the most unique feature of tenth century Northumbrian sculpture was the hogback. A recumbent monument with a curved ridge, hogbacks feature prevalently throughout northern English churchyards. These sculptures are similar to other tenth century Northumbrian carvings in that they contain a synthesis of Anglian, Irish, and Scandinavian influences; often in seemingly contradictory fashion. Different theories have been proposed regarding the stylistic origins of the hogback, but it remains a unique feature of the hybrid culture of tenth century northern England.⁹ Hogbacks,

⁹ Dawn Hadley, *Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 222-3.

however, do not exist in isolation within the traditional boundaries of Northumbria. They are found with some uniformity within the Viking Age trading network radiating from the Irish Sea. Hogbacks in Cumbria, Northumbria, Scotland, and the English Midlands display regional variations but also borrow heavily from each other. Ireland has only one hogback, but in Ireland sculpture production remained a strictly monastic art. While hogbacks contain secular iconography and were commissioned by local leaders, many still display Christian symbols and iconography and many have been found *in situ* over graves in churchyards. While iconographically suggestive, the message imparted on the stones is still presumed to be of a Christian milieu.¹⁰

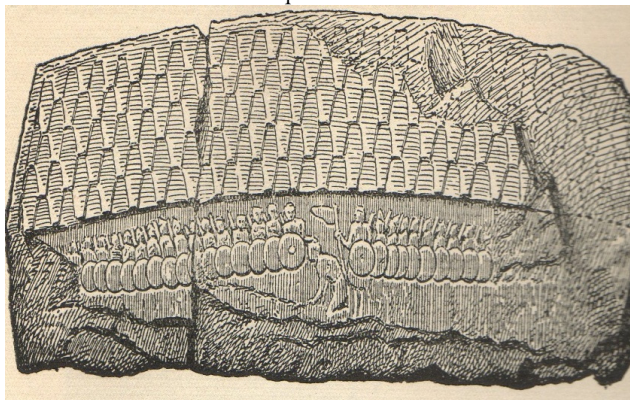


Figure 3. Hogback at Gosforth, Cumbria.
Drawing by W.G. Collingwood, 1927.

Some scholars have used the distribution of hogbacks and other monumental sculptures to trace the “skeleton of a medieval parochial system,” where secular leaders would patron the building of a church where their remains would lie, memorialized in stone.¹¹ This pattern can be corroborated by the popularity of placing inscribed sundials on churches to commemorate patrons, such as the sundial in Skelton-in-Cleveland, North Yorkshire. The carving pattern of the sundial link it to the twelfth century and appear to honor the patron, whose name is obscured by both the condition of the stone and the literacy on the

¹⁰ Richard Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England*. (London: Collins Archaeology, 1980), 131-2.

¹¹ Aleksandra McClain, “Local Churches and the Conquest of the North: Elite Patronage and Identity in Saxo-Norman Northumbria,” in *Early Medieval Northumbria: Kingdoms and Communities, 450-1100*, edited by S. Turner and D. Petts. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishing, 2011), 9.

carvings themselves. The language displayed on the stone is heavily influenced by Old Norse.¹² The Skelton-in-Cleveland sundial is further proof that this Northumbrian culture lingered on even after the unification of the English kingdoms.

The distribution patterns also hint at the existence of a network of sculptors in the Viking dominated areas of northern England who serviced the tastes of elite Northumbrians. While hogback styles differ by region the variety displayed by some hogbacks illustrate that perhaps craftsmen were itinerant and sculptures could blend various regional developments. At Bedale, southwest of Brompton in North Yorkshire, a hogback fragment was found of the enriched shrine variety. This model is most popular in Eastern Yorkshire and frequently contains zoomorphic and abstract ornament. The enriched shrine model is remarkably absent in Northern Yorkshire, except for eight found at Lythe. On its long-face, below the pitched roof is a vertical side with a peculiar image that can only be *Völundr* the Smith. Indeed, it matches the iconography of others sculptures at Leeds, West Riding, and Sherburn in the East Riding. Like *Sigurðr*, *Völundr* has Germanic roots and features prominently in the written myths of twelfth century Iceland. According to these sources, *Völundr* was a powerful smith who was captured and hamstrung to produce works of wonder against his will for a rival king. *Völundr* enacts his revenge by building himself wings, slaying his rival's sons and seducing his daughter. This overtly secular and Viking-inspired symbol, much like *Sigurðr*, hints at the potential meaning for contemporary Northumbrian viewers. The ornament on face C of the monument, has a "very Anglian appearance and demonstrate[s] the tenacity of the tradition in the Viking Age."¹³ Here we have a funerary monument in a parochial churchyard in Bedale, containing conservative ornament and ribbon-beasts with the image of a pagan hero. The carving owes more artistically to pieces found in Yorkshire proper than the northern milieu in which it belongs, illustrating the complex and regional web of art style transmission. The Bedale stone, and the greater Northumbrian sculpture corpus, are remarkably different than those carvings produced contemporaneously in Wessex. In the South, funerary sculpture was less prevalent, carving was monastic, and architectural expressions were the more popular medium of expression.

¹² Lang, *Corpus*, 195-6.

¹³ Lang, *Corpus*, 62.

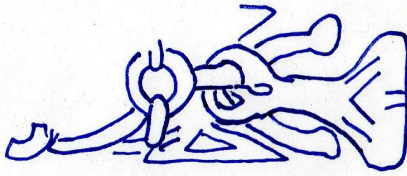


Figure 4. *Völundr* depicted hamstringing on a hogback stone in Bedale, North Yorkshire. From Lang, (2001). Redrawn by Sharon Hale.

The production, distribution, and carving styles hint at how Northumbrian political culture was fundamentally distinct from Wessex. These sculptures are evidence for what was happening in Anlaf's time. As politically volatile as Northumbria was in the tenth century, the elite subscribed to cultural sensibilities that hinted at an amalgamation of Anglian, Irish, and Scandinavian tastes. Perhaps it is not so puzzling that the Northumbrians would take Anlaf as king in 941, they identified with him more than the distant kings of Wessex.

The details of Anlaf's life are handed down to us in several medieval records. The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, a late medieval translation of a lost Irish chronicle, charges that Anlaf came to England in 940 and a relative was sent to rule Dublin in his place.¹⁴ The Irish chronicles describe Anlaf and his greater family as belonging to the *Uí Ímair*, or descendants of Ivar. Ivar was one of the original leaders of the Great Heathen Army that terrorized the British Isles in the second half of the ninth century. A direct connection between Ivar and the Viking kings at Dublin have been explored but direct proof does not exist.¹⁵ Regardless, the *Uí Ímair* is easily recognized in the written record. The popularity of certain *Uí Ímair* names, such as Anlaf/Olaf, Sictric/Sygtrygg, Ragnall/Ragnvald, and Godfraid/Guðrøðr, have led some historians to see this line of Norse-Gaels as dynastic and chart the influence of the family throughout the medieval period.¹⁶

Anlaf, like his father Sictric, ruled both Dublin and Northumbria at York intermittently. By the time the Northumbrians chose Anlaf as king in 941 power had already exchanged hands between the House of Wessex and select Norse-Gaels from Dublin for nearly twenty years. Whether Anlaf recognized this himself or not, Viking power in the

¹⁴ Dennis Murphy, trans. *The Annals of Clonmacnoise*. (Dublin: University of Dublin Press, 1896), 151-2.

¹⁵ Clare Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland: The Dynasty of Ivarr to A.D. 1014*. (Edinburgh: Dunedin Press, 2008), 48-9.

¹⁶ Benjamin Hudson, *Viking Pirates and Christian Princes: Dynasty, Religion, and Empire in the North Atlantic*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

region was on the verge of decline. Between 941 and 954 King Edmund of Wessex and his brother Eadred fiercely contested control of Northumbria from Anlaf and rival Vikings, in particular an individual named Erik Bloodaxe. While some discrepancies exist between different copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, they are unanimous in detailing a very rapid exchange of brief kingships between Anlaf and King Edmund. In 946 Edmund's brother Eadred ascended the throne and Northumbria submitted to him. Again, the reign was brief and by 947 the Northumbrians "had taken Erik as king".¹⁷ The E-text of the *Chronicle* states that in 949 Anlaf re-entered Northumbria at York and no record exists of Eadred retaliating. Political stability remained elusive, however, and the annals relate that the Northumbrians drove out Anlaf in 952 and Erik in 954.¹⁸ Afterwards, events relating to Northumbria become less frequent in written entries. England would not have another king linked to Scandinavia until Cnut the Great's reign over a more consolidated English state in 1016. This survey of the documentary evidence paints a startling picture for tenth century Northumbria. Power changed hands regularly and while occasionally a chronicle mentions a battle, our knowledge of the more common Northumbrian people is stark. An investigation of the stone sculpture suggests a synthetic cultural cohesion in tenth century Northumbria where the documentary evidence suggests cultural volatility. Many historians have turned to medieval coinage to help make sense of the puzzling political situation of tenth century Northumbria. While numismatics cannot inform the historian of the political sympathies of the people who used the coins, they can illuminate a great deal of information regarding the people who minted them.

Blackburn's numismatic assessment of York coinage provides a sequence of coin types spanning the changes of control between "Danish, Norse, and English kings."¹⁹ That the coins present a distinction between Danish and Norse power is contested. The first issues emanating from the Viking area are imitative coins bearing similarities with Wessex and Mercian issues before 895. The next phase of coin minting is regal, displaying the names of Sigeforth, 895-900; Aethelwold, 900-902; and Cnut, 900-905. This group of coinage is remarkable in that it provides us with names of political leaders when they are absent from written sources. The York coinage also contrasts

¹⁷ Dorothy Whitelock, trans. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 72.

¹⁸ Dorothy Whitelock, trans. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 75.

¹⁹ Mark Blackburn, "Coinages at York and in the Five Burroughs, c. 885-954," in R.A. Hall *et al.* *Anglo-Scandinavian York* (York: York Archaeological Trust, 2004):325-6.

with coins issued from Wessex and Mercia in that uniformity is not pursued. Some forty designs and combinations of obverse and reverse designs appear; chosen carefully, many illustrating the name of both the moneyer and the mint location.²⁰ This coinage was also distinct from Wessex issues in that they contained the names of saints rather than rulers. This has led some to speculate that perhaps it was ecclesiastical centers, rather than kings, producing coinage for Northumbria.²¹ Historically, however, Anglo-Saxon kings oversaw coin minting and gave portions of yearly re-minting proceeds every year to the church. Viking and Norse-Gael overseers would likely do the same. Indeed, if ecclesiastical centers controlled coinage one would expect literacy on the coins to be much improved.

That foreign rulers who came from regions that lacked coin economies perpetuated them in their new kingdom is instructive. Much like the distribution of stone sculpture, coin issues hint at the complex relationship between secular and ecclesiastical leadership. At first it seems puzzling that Viking overseers at York would mint coins containing the names of saints, but it must be remembered that secular leaders commissioned the building of parishes featuring stone sculpture erected in their honor. More examples exist highlighting this give-and-take relationship between secular and ecclesiastical leaders. A twelfth century manuscript from the monk and chronicler, Symeon of Durham, records that a vision of St. Cuthbert appeared to his community of monks and instructed them to find a Viking slave named Guthfrith and make him king in 883.²² Likewise, during the tenth century when power was switching hands in Northumbria between Wessex and the Norse-Gaels, a certain Archbishop Wulfstan was precariously able to retain his post throughout the power struggle. There are several instances where he would appear to acquiesce to Wessex overlordship, only to abandon his pledge and side with a Norse-Gael, like he did with Anlaf when the two barely escaped the clutches of King Edmund in the aftermath of a battle at Tamworth in 943.²³ While these episodes help illuminate the seeming reciprocal administrative relationship between secular and ecclesiastic officials in tenth century Northumbria they do not explain them. For instance, why would Northumbrian ecclesiastical leaders side with incoming Norse-Gael kings? First, Vikings had settled the region since the late ninth century. The relationship between the Vikings who already settled in Northumbria and the

²⁰ Mark Blackburn, "Coinages at York and in the Five Burroughs, 329.

²¹ Hadley, *Vikings*, 49.

²² Joseph Stevenson, trans. *The Church Historians of England: The Works of Symeon of Durham*. (London: Bread Street Hill, 1855), 664.

²³ Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 72.

Norse-Gael Vikings is unclear but there is little evidence to suggest they were antagonistic towards each other. Also, submission to Wessex might infringe on the power of Northumbrian bishops. Like Symeon of Durham's account of the St. Cuthbert community choosing a Viking as king in 883, it was likely beneficial for Viking leaders and bishops to work together in retaining Northumbrian autonomy. Indeed, one instrumental way Edmund and his kin eventually gained a foothold in Northumbria was by controlling the appointments of clerical leaders, placing bishops with Wessex sympathies inside the Northumbrian bishopric at York.²⁴ The coordinated findings from the documentary, sculptural and numismatic evidence illustrate a cooperative relationship between secular and ecclesiastical administration, providing more evidence for a distinct Northumbrian political culture. Certainly Wessex monarchs had their own relationship with southern bishops. The northern material evidence, however, hints at distinctive Northumbrian administrative practices and celebrated symbols of power. Perhaps the most suggestive symbol was not found on a sculpture, but on a coin.

Coin issues from 919-927, and again from 939-944, contain assertive cultural expressions. The images used in these issues mirror the distinctive Northumbrian symbols present in the sculptures. The most striking cultural icon present in the coins is not an image of *Sigurðr* or *Völundr*; it is a raven. The writing on the coin is not in Latin or Old English, but in Norse. The coinage belonged to a certain king, a man named Anlaf.

Now this Anlaf could be the man chosen by the Northumbrians as king in 941, or a cousin of his who was also active in the region who died around the same time. While the raven has associations with Odin, the prominent god of the Norse pantheon, others have pointed to a Christian connection as well. The saint-king Oswald, who allegedly had his right arm retrieved by a raven from a stake on which it had been impaled, was a celebrated seventh century Northumbrian king.²⁵ Ravens, however, were popular symbols in the Viking world. Their images can be seen in Vendel era weaponry in Sweden, and on banners identified on the Bayeux Tapestry and other Anglo-Saxon era coinage. Ravens also feature in all sorts of medieval Norse poetry and literature. Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* described two pet ravens that belong to the Norse god Odin; the ravens were responsible for relaying information

²⁴ Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest: A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 54-5.

²⁵ David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500-1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 226.

to their master.²⁶ An 878 entry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions a Viking defeat in Devon where “the banner which they call Raven,” was captured.²⁷ Much like the sculpture, the ravens on Anlaf’s coins remind us that Norse symbols of power appealed to the cultural sensibilities of a vast swathe of elite Northumbrians.



Figure 5. Raven coin of Anlaf as catalogued by Charles Francis Keary, 1887.

When comparing the political situation in tenth century Northumbria and Wessex some historians have noted that Northumbrian history at this time was lamentably obscure.²⁸ A brief exploration of the sculptural, numismatic, and documentary evidence, however, is fruitful in illustrating key differences between the two tenth century kingdoms. While tenth century Wessex churches were intrinsically connected to West Saxon monarchs and nobles, Northumbria had its own model featuring wealthy secular patrons who worked with ecclesiastical leaders in the building of churches. These parishes contained a significant number of funerary monuments that bear iconographies, symbols, styles, and forms unseen in Wessex and southern England. Likewise, coin mint images in tenth century Northumbria appealed to the tastes present in the sculpture. While borrowing from traditional Anglo-Saxon methods the coins were distinct from Wessex issues in their weight, variation, and use of both overt Christian and pagan themes.

²⁶ Anthony Faulkes, trans. *Edda, Snorri Sturluson*. (North Clarendon, VT: Everyman Press, 1987), 33.

²⁷ Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 49.

²⁸ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon*, 262.

The sculptural and numismatic evidence demonstrates the polyphyletic culture developing in tenth century Northumbria. This political culture was an amalgamation of second-generation Viking settlers, Norse-Gael Vikings from Dublin, and native Northumbrians who viewed Wessex involvement in their kingdom derisively. These disparate groups of people cohabited and intermarried. The material record shows that they borrowed heavily from each other in terms of how they lived, what they wore, and how they chose to honor their dead.²⁹ Styles, symbols, and techniques from these works point towards earlier Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, and Irish developments but are displayed in unison and should be viewed as fundamentally Northumbrian. The chronicled exploits of Anlaf and the images of Viking heroes and ravens present in their material culture may not reveal the entire political situation but they certainly hint at a Northumbrian culture that celebrated its own symbols and autonomy. While the historical focus of Anglo-Saxon England traditionally lies with steps towards a unified English state, the northern material evidence demonstrates that a window existed in the tenth century when the Northumbrians raised constant doubts as to whether they would assimilate.

²⁹Richard Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology*. (Oxford: Shire Archaeology Publications, 2010), 22.